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DID ORIGEN APPLY THE WORD HOMOOUSIOS TO THE SON?

This essay will try to convince the reader that the answer to the question which forms its title must be a decided No. It is a source of satisfaction to the author that so great an authority as his Eminence Cardinal Daniélou, in whose honour these essays are gathered together, should have declared himself decisively in favour of this view ¹.

I

The question of whether Origen could have used the word *homoousios* of the Son, or would have used it, is one that has been much debated. On the affirmative side are H. Crouzel ², and J. N. D. Kelly ³, on the negative (as has been already indicated) J. Daniélou and M. Simonetti ⁴. Bethune-Baker appeared to incline to the affirmative ⁵. This essay will confine itself to the strictly historical question as to the evidence, not that Origen could have used the term, but that he did use it. The case will here be argued that several prominent and able Origenists avoid the use of the term before the Arian controversy made it a controversial one, and that it is most unlikely that they should have done so had their master Origen used it in a Trinitarian context, even once. The argument will continue by examining the one alleged occurrence of the word in Origen's works and showing the extreme implausibility of the passage and suggesting that Jerome's explanation of how it came to be cited is in all probability substantially correct. It is the view of the author of this essay that the remarks upon the subject of the compatibility of Origen's views with the doctrine of the consubstantiality of the Son of M. Simonetti are most judicious. He points out that though the concept is not incompatible with Origen's ideas about the relation of the Son to the Father, the question is complicated by Origen's use of *ousia* to mean individual reality (elsewhere expressed by *hypostasis*), and that Origen preferred to describe the unity of Father and Son as a unity of love, of will and of action. There can be little doubt that Origen believed that the Son was of the same nature as the Father, but this would not have prevented him from saying that the Son's *ousia* is distinct from

1. J. DANIELOU, *Origène* (Paris 1948), p. 258, "Entre le Fils et le Père, il ne reconnaît pas seulement une différence de personne, mais de nature", which I take to be incompatible with the view that Origen could have used *homoousios* of the Son.

2. *Théologie de l'Image de Dieu chez Origène* (Paris 1955), pp. 98-110.

3. *Early Christian Doctrines* (London 1958), p. 130: "Whether or not the term *ὁμοούσιος* is original in this

passage (there seems to be no cogent reason why it should not be), the idea expressed is authentically Origenist."

4. *Studi sull' Arianesimo* (Rome 1965), p. 125, n. 76; and see the references to his comments in the *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* below.

5. *The Meaning of Homoousios in the Constantinopolitan Creed* (Cambridge, Texts and Studies, Vol. VII, No. I, 1901), pp. 26-27.

that of the Father. A further complication is introduced by the unreliability of Rufinus' translation of those passages in the *Περὶ Ἀρχῶν* which refer to this subject ⁶. This question cannot be decided simply from a consideration of the text, in original Greek or Latin translation, of Origen's surviving works. Apart from the one controversial passage where the epithet *homoousios* does appear to occur, Origen leaves the question quite undecided, except perhaps inasmuch as there is only this one Trinitarian use of the word ⁷. Whatever else may be said, we can be sure that *homoousios* was not a favourite nor frequent term as applied to the Son in Origen's thought.

If we now follow the line of argument mapped out for this essay above, we shall examine the attitude of Origen's disciples and admirers to this word in the period before the outbreak of the Arian controversy had made it a word to which everybody was bound to refer. The first of these is Dionysius of Alexandria. The evidence concerning the attitude of Dionysius of Alexandria to the word *homoousios* as applied to the Son is scanty and in parts is quite obscure. The following facts, however, are clear. In a letter to bishops Euphranor and Ammonius of the Libyan Pentapolis, directed against the Sabellianism which was prevalent in those parts, Dionysius made use of two expressions, comparing the relation of the Son to the Father to that of a vine to its planter and a ship to its builder, which aroused the alarm of Dionysius' namesake of Rome. His perturbation was increased by the fact that in this letter Dionysius of Alexandria had said that the word *homoousios* is found nowhere in the Bible, and had therefore presumably rejected it as an unsuitable word to use in Trinitarian contexts. As a consequence, Dionysius of Rome wrote two letters, one to the church of Alexandria expounding the correct attitude to Sabellianism, and another to Dionysius of Alexandria himself. In reply to the second letter Dionysius of Alexandria wrote a work called *Ἐλεγχος καὶ Ἀπολογία*, parts of which are extant because Athanasius quoted them in his *De Sententia Dionysii*. The relevant passage in Dionysius' reply to his namesake of Rome runs thus ⁸:

πλὴν ἐγὼ γενητὰ τινα καὶ ποιητὰ τινα φήσας νοεῖσθαι, τῶν μὲν τοιούτων ὡς ἀχρειοτέρων ἐξ ἐπιδρομῆς εἶπον παραδείγματα ἐπεὶ μήτε τὸ φυτὸν <ταυτόν> ἔφην τῷ γεωργῷ, μήτε τῷ ναυπηγῷ τὸ σκάφος. εἶτα τοῖς ἰκνουμένοις καὶ προσφευεστέροις ἐνδιέτριψα καὶ πλέον διεξῆλθον περὶ τῶν ἀληθεστέρων, ποικίλα προσεπεξέυρων τεκμήρια, ἅπερ καὶ σοὶ δι' ἄλλῆς ἐπιστολῆς ἔγραψα· ἐν οἷς ἤλεγξα καὶ ὁ προφέρουσιν ἐγκλημα κατ' ἐμοῦ ψεῦδος ὄν, ὡς οὐ λέγοντος τὸν Χριστὸν ὁμοούσιον εἶναι τῷ θεῷ. εἰ γὰρ τὸ ὄνομα τοῦτο φημι μὴ εὐρηκεῖναι μηδ' ἀνεγνωκεῖναι ποῦ τῶν ἁγίων γραφῶν, ἀλλὰ γε τὰ ἐπιχειρήματά μου τὰ ἐξῆς, ἃ σεσιωπήρασι, τῆς διανοίας ταύτης οὐκ ἀπάδει.

A little later Dionysius says his opponents throw "these two unsuitable expressions" (τοῖς δυοῖ ῥηματίοις ἀσυνθέτοις) at him like stones ⁹. Dionysius is, of course, making the best of his case here; Athanasius in his *De Sententia Dionysii* tries to defend him by the implausible suggestion that his doubtful expressions referred to Christ's human nature, not his divinity. A clearer light is cast on the matter, however, by Basil of Caesarea, who had read (as we have not) all Dionysius' letters and works in connection with the subject ¹⁰. Basil is much more open and honest about the heterodoxy of Dionysius than was Athanasius. He accuses Dionysius of Alexandria of having sown the seeds of the doctrine that the Son is unlike the Father (*anomoion*). The reason for this, he says, was that Diony-

6. M. SIMONETTI, *I Principi di Origene* (Turin, 1968), pp. 139, n. 35, 154-5, n. 51, 156, n. 60, 542 n. 7, and *Studi sull' Arianesimo*, p. 125 n. 76.

7. It is scarcely necessary to add that Origen uses the word in non-Trinitarian contexts, which do not in fact tell us much about the sense which he attached to it, e.g. *Commentary on John* (ed. H. E. Brooke, Cambridge 1896), 13.25 (272.17), 19), 20.20 (64.3) and 24 (70.16, 19),

all reproducing the use of the term by Gnostic heretics.

8. This passage is from Athanasius, *De Sententia Dionysii*, 18; it can be found conveniently printed in C. L. FELTOE, *The Letters and Other Remains of Dionysius of Alexandria* (Cambridge 1904), p. 188.

9. FELTOE, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

10. BASIL OF CAESAREA, *Letters*, ed. Y. Courtonne (Budé Series, Paris 1957), I.9.2