

---

Lowell Ewert, Director of Peace and Conflict Studies, Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario

Thomas P. Scheck. *Origen and the History of Justification: The Legacy of Origen's Commentary on Romans*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008.

In the lively and sometimes rancorous debate over justification that has rippled throughout the Christian world, all roads, it seems, lead back to the sixteenth century. Since the 1999 joint Roman Catholic-Lutheran Declaration on Justification by Faith, new energy has poured into the conversation.<sup>1</sup> Even before that, descendants of the Anabaptists likewise engaged the theme. Dutch Mennonite theologian Sjouke Voolstra wrote that “Anabaptists always interpreted justification in the light of sanctification.”<sup>2</sup> J. Denny Weaver and Gerald Mast recently reflected on the views of justification of Denck, Hut, Hubmaier, and Marpeck, asserting that Sattler “affirms Lutheran justification by faith but also, in line with Catholic thought, stresses that faith will result in good works.”<sup>3</sup>

Thomas Scheck's book makes the case that all who think this conversation matters must travel much further back in the Christian story. Indeed, he argues that Origen's *Commentary on Romans* has influenced Christian thought on justification into the 16th-century Reformation and beyond. Further, the third-century Alexandrian's readings of Romans were both close to Paul and remarkably relevant to 21st-century discussions.

As the first English translator of Origen's Romans commentary,<sup>4</sup> Scheck carries the credentials to back up his argument. In clear and readable prose, he makes accessible not only to patristics scholars but also to other theologians, biblical scholars, and interested lay readers the exegetical questions at stake and the history of reception that marks Origen's influence down through the centuries. (Noting that virtually our only access to Origen's great commentary is through the Latin translation of the fourth-century Rufinus, Scheck usually provides the Latin in text or footnote for

those who find that helpful.)

In chapter one Scheck lays out Origen's definition of justification with a "Trinitarian stress": "From the fullness of the Spirit, the fullness of love is infused into the hearts of the saints in order to receive participation in the divine nature" (CRm 4.9.192-98). Unity and synthesis of faith and works seem "to be an overriding theme" of the commentary. While the good thief of Luke 23 was justified by faith alone, because he "had no opportunity to be justified by his subsequent good works," for the most part good works must be visible "as the necessary fruit of justification."

Subsequent chapters demonstrate the borrowings from Origen and the debates with him of Pelagius, Augustine, William of St. Thierry (a 12th-century Cistercian monk), Erasmus, Luther, Melanchthon, and several post-Reformation theologians. In chapter two, Scheck notes that Origen and Pelagius both accepted what has become part of scholarship's "new perspective" on Paul: that Paul's great letter reflects his awareness of a dispute between Jews and Gentiles in Rome.

Although each chapter has its own fascinating insights, many readers will be most drawn to Scheck's discussion of Augustine and the 16th-century reformers. Chapter three tackles the question of Augustine's use of and challenge to Origen's commentary. The Pelagian controversy late in his life turned Augustine's reading of Romans to original sin, human powerlessness, and predestination in ways that have shaped much later Western Christian thought. However, according to Scheck, both Origen and Augustine "appeal to James as a means of correcting a false understanding of Paul" on faith and works, agreeing that faith is "a foundation on which works are built." Likewise, chapter five notes that Erasmus's devotional work *Enchiridion* "was infused with citations" from Origen's commentary, and his comment on Romans 6:4 echoed Origen: "Dead to our former sins and living now the new life, let us follow in the footsteps of piety."

Scheck notes, on the other hand, that Melanchthon made "Origen's doctrine of justification an integral part of his decadence theory of Church history." Since descendants of the Anabaptists have sometimes been tempted by that same theory, Scheck's book is a must-read for anyone who may have agreed with Menno (quoting Luther) that Origen was "the falsest explainer of the Scriptures."<sup>5</sup> Rather, readers considering this work will hear echoes of

Origen in Menno's call for biblical readings assuming a full-orbed practical understanding of justification.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The complete text of the joint declaration is available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_31101999\\_cath-luth-joint-declaration\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html). See also Trevin Wax, compiler, "The Justification Debate: A Primer," in *Christianity Today* 53:6 (June 2009), 34-35; N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 246-52.

<sup>2</sup> Sjouke Voolstra, "Free and Perfect: Justification and Sanctification in Anabaptist Perspective," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 5.3 (Fall 1987): 225.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald J. Mast and J. Denny Weaver, *Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House, 2009), 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., Thomas P. Scheck, trans. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001-2002).

<sup>5</sup> Menno Simons, "Christian Baptism," in *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* [CWMS] (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 279.

<sup>6</sup> Menno, "True Christian Faith," in CWMS, 333.

Nancy Heisey, Bible and Religion Department, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia

Miguel A. De La Torre. *Liberating Jonah: Forming an Ethic of Reconciliation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007.

Miguel A. De La Torre, who is on the faculty of Iliff School of Theology in Denver, has written a challenging, provocative volume based on a reading of the book of Jonah and includes an engaging, brief contemporary social analysis in order to place this reading in the modern context.

De La Torre was once asked if any reading of Jonah considers Jonah's message from the perspective of "the margins of society" (ix). His work attempts to respond to his observation that he knew of no such work. In the introduction, he lays out one of his primary arguments: Jonah is a book about reconciliation. His reading presents this as reconciliation in a context of unequal distribution of power – as exemplified by the Israelite, Jonah,