

A Modern Origen¹

The strong point about all Dr. Abbott's writings is their independence, their originality, their close and accurate scholarship, and the profusion of subtle and ingenious ideas to which they give expression. On the other hand, their chief drawback is the difficulty of selecting among these ideas, just because of their extreme subtlety and ingenuity, and of transplanting them into the context of another mind. There is no writer, either ancient or modern, of whom Dr. Abbott reminds us so much as Origen.² He will not, we think, deprecate the comparison. Origen is evidently one of his own favourite writers; and by no means the least valuable part of his various works is that derived from the great Alexandrian scholar. Allow for the difference between one who is writing in his own native tongue and is commenting upon books written in his own native tongue, and one who is reconstructing the history and ideas of a distant past, and the close resemblance between the two minds will, we believe, be apparent. There is the same extraordinary fertility of ideas, the same scholarly accuracy in their presentation, and the same difficulty for the rest of the world in deciding what can be assimilated and what cannot. The main difference — though that, again, is not complete — is in the attitude. The ancient writer starts from the Christian tradition, and he is always trying his utmost to harmonize his own conceptions with it. The modern writer is not indifferent to the Christian tradition; at times one can easily see that he, too, is trying to bring his thought into line with it. But he seems to feel an obligation to build up his own mental system for himself; and he does this, sometimes in agreement with the tradition and sometimes diverging from it. We should be inclined to say that the criticism to which Dr. Abbott is most exposed is that in the relation in which he thus stands to the tradition there is a certain element of inequality. Sometimes he seems to be making the most of his own differences and sometimes to be minimizing them. His attempts at reconstruction seem to us to be not so very surprising. Perhaps we are all more or less in the same boat. All we mean is that it is not exactly in this direction — in the broad, balanced, coherent, and consistent movement of thought as a whole — that we should look for Dr. Abbott's highest excellence, but rather in the keenness, freshness, learning, and accuracy of his close study of detail. There must be few scholars in the country who make a more admirable use of the full opportunities of leisure.

¹ From an unsigned review of *Notes on New Testament criticism. (Diatessarica, part VII)* in the *Times*, April 9, 1908.

² Origen (185 – 254) was the most important theologian and biblical scholar of the early Greek church. His greatest work is the *Hexapla*, a synopsis of six versions of the *Old Testament*.