

The following is an excerpt from **Monarchianism and Origen's Early Trinitarian Theology** —by Stephen Waers ||| see <https://brill.com/>

Brief observation: The author correctly notes the liveliness of Monarchianism in the early third century and brings to life the Trinitarian theology of Origen and others in that same period. Still, it is worth adding the presence of and liveliness of the thoroughly Trinitarian Maps of, for example, both (1) Irenaeus as per <https://metachristianity.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/excerpt-from-irenaeus-on-the-trinity-by-jackson-lashier-via-brill-dot-com.pdf> and (2) the early church at large as per <https://metachristianity.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/logos-born-twice-excerpts-from-grace-and-christology-in-the-early-church-oxford-early-christian-studies-by-donald-fairbairn-pdf.pdf> and so on.

Edit note: There are 10/ten numbered footnotes marked (bold superscript) throughout the text which have been relocated at the end of the excerpts.

Begin Excerpt:

This book rests on the methodological assumption that to understand Origen's Trinitarian theology properly, it is necessary to offer a detailed reading of that theology within its contemporary context in the early third century.¹ Any attempt to understand his theology requires a consciousness of the theological debates of Origen's time. Furthermore, the more detail we can provide about the theological positions Origen opposed or sought to correct, the better.²

Based on these methodological commitments, this book has focused on a small part of the vast corpus of Origen's work: *ComJn* 1–2. In an evocative passage from these two books, *ComJn* 2.13–32, Origen gives an account of the relationships among the Father, Son, and the rest of creation that functions as a corrective to what he views as a pious but misguided theology: monarchianism. A methodologically sound reading of this passage requires as detailed an account of monarchianism as we can provide. Prior to my work in this book, however, such a focused attempt to understand monarchian theology did not yet exist in English-language literature.³

The first part of this book was an attempt to provide a thorough and fulsome account of monarchianism as a theological movement. There are no surviving works of monarchian theology from the early third century, so any reconstruction relies on second-hand and often hostile witnesses to this understudied theological movement. Using the available sources, I offered an account of monarchianism that demonstrates that it had a stable core of theological commitments and development during the brief period of time I study. The monarchians shared with other streams of Christianity two non-negotiable theological commitments: **(1)** there is only one God; and **(2)** Jesus (or the Son) is God. The tension produced by these two commitments led the monarchians to what I consider their characteristic conclusion that the Father and Son are “one and the same.”⁴ With this assertion that the Father and the Son were the same, the monarchians opposed distinction between the Father and the Son, which they viewed as imperiling the uniqueness of God.

Monarchianism was popular at the beginning of the third century, probably because of its unabashed affirmation that Jesus was God and its staunch commitment to defending the uniqueness of God. Despite its popularity, monarchianism did not go unchallenged. Soon some notable theologians produced antimonarchian treatises.

Part two of this book considered Origen alongside those other theologians who wrote against the monarchians. Origen likely wrote books one and two of *ComJn* at the height of the monarchian controversy, shortly after returning to Alexandria from Rome, the epicenter of the monarchian controversy. My reexamination of *ComJn* 1–2 alongside other antimonarchian writers and against the backdrop of monarchian theology brings into stark relief some of the key features of Origen’s Trinitarian theology. Both Origen and his contemporary antimonarchian counterparts shared the two core theological commitments of the monarchians; they too wanted to affirm both that there is only one God and that Jesus is God. They could not, however, accept the conclusion that this meant that the Father and the Son were “one and the same.” Therefore, they had to articulate theologies in such a way that allowed them to affirm that Jesus is God, that there is only one God, and that the Father and Son are in some meaningful way distinct.⁵

This is precisely what Origen attempts to do in *ComJn* 1–2. In *ComJn* 1, he develops and emphasizes a Wisdom Christology so that he can argue that the Son, as Wisdom, was a distinct agent or actor alongside the Father “from the beginning.”⁶ Where one would expect him to devote all of his attention to the occurrence of *Logos* in John 1:1, we instead see him turn his focus to Wisdom as an important title for the Son. Furthermore, Origen’s emphasis on the Son as Wisdom allows him to use scriptural texts like Proverbs 8:22 to argue that the Son was alongside the Father prior to creation.⁷

In the passage I consider at the greatest length, *ComJn* 2.13–32, Origen’s response to the monarchian claims is even clearer, especially since he signals that he is responding to their theology in 2.16. In this passage, Origen argues that the Father is “the God” and that the Son is “God” by participation. He uses several devices to argue that the Father is truly God or “God himself.” This emphasis allows him to demonstrate that he, too, believes that there is only one God. By claiming that the Son is God by participation, Origen is also able to affirm that the Son is God without claiming that they constitute a coordinated pair of two Gods. The framework of participation that Origen employs to make this argument leads him to claim that the Father transcends the Son, that the Father is greater than the Son. In their antimonarchian writings, Tertullian and Novatian made similar arguments. Both argued that although the Son was God, he was somehow less than the Father. This allows them to say that the Son is not “the same as the Father,” for something cannot be less than itself. Instead of emphasizing that the Son is less than the Father, Origen focuses on the transcendence of the Father over the Son. Origen’s argument varies slightly from that of Novatian and Tertullian, but the result is the same. What is greater than something else cannot be the same as that which it is greater than.

Because of their contention that the Son is less than the Father, the theologies of Tertullian, Origen, and Novatian have been labelled as “subordinationist” by scholars at different points.⁸ Scholars who label these theologies as “subordinationist” often imply or explicitly state that they are deficient. This negative evaluative judgment of early third-century “subordinationism” is based on an anachronistic imposition of post-Nicene definitions of Trinitarian orthodoxy onto these earlier authors. For Origen, as also for

Tertullian and Novatian,⁹ a subordinationist understanding of the Father and Son enabled a cogent response to the appeal of monarchianism.¹⁰ Origen's subordinationism allowed him to argue that there is only one God, that the Son is God, and that the Son is not the same as the Father. This book enables an appreciation of the theological force and function of Origen's subordinationism by demonstrating how he intentionally utilized it to combat monarchian teaching.

1 This book is not, then, interested in the *Nachleben* of Origen's thought in the Nicene and post-Nicene debate, as important and interesting as it may be.

2 Recall my note from the introduction that this book is a long-form version of what Michel R. Barnes calls a "dense reading," a term I define there.

3 Furthermore, the examinations of monarchianism that did exist were not focused on reconstructing the broad contours of it as a theological movement.

4 In the surviving accounts that we have, the monarchians do not make this statement more precise. They are not reported as saying, "The Father and the Son are one and the same X

5 See my brief summary of the key terms and means they used to describe the distinction of the Father and Son at the beginning of chapter five. Another way to define "distinct" in the context of the anti-monarchian writers is "not one and the same." Although these authors never use a phrase this unobscure, this is what they need to prove. The anti-monarchian theologians must walk a tightrope and affirm that the Father and Son are one without allowing that they are "one and the same." For this reason, they cast about for various ways to distinguish the Father and Son without completely separating them.

6 I say "agent or actor" here because I do not think that Origen's vocabulary for speaking of different individuals had stabilized this early in his career.

7 As I argued in chapter four, the existence of the Son prior to creation is important for two reasons: (1) it places *another* alongside the Father prior to creation; (2) this *other* (the Son or *Logos* or Wisdom) has existence "from the beginning" or eternally. See, for example, *DePrin.* 1.2.2 and *ComJn.* 2.9. The "two stage" *Logos* theologies would have been problematic for Origen because they denied the individual existence of the Son before creation, thus conceding something to the monarchians.

8 Of course, the question of Origen's subordinationism is hotly debated; and some scholars, such as Ramelli, would disagree with my assessment.

9 Regarding Novatian's subordinationism, I agree with the broad conclusions of Daniel Lloyd's dissertation on Novatian's subordinationism. See his "Ontological Subordination in Novatian of Rome's Theology of the Son" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Marquette University, 2012).

10 I am not the first to argue that pre-Nicene subordinationism was not aberrant. Wolfgang Marcus argued this position in his *Der Subordinationismus als historiologisches Phänomen: Ein Beitrag zu unserer Kenntnis von der Entstehung der altchristlichen "Theologie" und Kultur unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Begriffe Oikonomia und Theologia* (München: M. Hueber, 1963). While Marcus seeks to normalize pre-Nicene subordinationism, his account is directed at determining whether this pre-Nicene subordinationism should be considered some sort of "proto-Arianism." His account is more historically sensitive than most, but it is still drawn into the orbit of Nicene and post-Nicene debates. Daniel Lloyd's recent dissertation also sought to rehabilitate pre-Nicene subordinationism as a measured theological strategy.

End Excerpt.