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Become Like the Angels: Origen's Doctrine of the Soul by Benjamin P. Blosser (review)

Kellen Plaxco

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way Origen's faith intersected with his exegesis. The book should be useable for upper level undergraduate students as well as graduate students. It is, perhaps, too pricey, however, for a textbook, especially if other texts are used in addition.

Ronald E. Heine, Northwest Christian University

Benjamin P. Blosser

Become Like the Angels: Origen's Doctrine of the Soul

Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2012

Pp. vii + 290. \$69.95.

Blosser charts Origen's anthropology in light of its debts to school Platonism. The first two parts of the monograph explore Origen's version of a "two-souls" psychology as a solution to the general psychological problem of moral struggle. In a third part, Blosser sets this psychological structure within the drama of the soul's life—from "preexistence" through "descent" to "destiny." The book alternates between doctrinal pre-history in non-Christian philosophy and Origen's appropriation (or not) of such doctrines. Blosser's consensus-style synopsis of Hellenistic philosophy is not intended to break new ground, but to throw into relief Origen's originality. Throughout, Blosser maintains the position that Origen was *more* theologian than purveyor of philosophical speculation. Whether Origen would have recognized the opposition of theology to philosophy implied by Blosser's portrait is debatable.

Chapter one ascribes to Origen the view that "man is a synthesis of two divergent powers." The soul's "rational" and "irrational" "parts" are not so much *parts* as they are possible moral futures. Chapter two saves both Platonism and Origen from the cheap criticism that their dualisms are anti-material. However, the body is the location of vicious behavior for both schemes, even if, for Origen, it is not beyond redemption. Chapter three introduces the doctrine of "two souls." Blosser ascribes a bad, "conflict" version of the doctrine to gnostics. He grants a non-problematic "hierarchical" model to Plato, his followers, and to Origen. Though Blosser's focus is not gnosticism, specialists in gnostic literature may question his narrative. It is based primarily on Hans Jonas's dated but influential *The Gnostic Religion*, without reference to intervening scholarly developments on the subject. However, Blosser could sacrifice his portrayal of gnosticism without giving up his reading of Origen.

In chapters four and five, "two souls" turn out to be, for Origen, really only one soul in two modes—the "higher" and the "lower." To confuse matters further, the higher soul is the "mind" (*nous*) and is to be distinguished from the lower soul, or "soul" properly speaking. Blosser insists we analyze Origen's anthropology in terms of the "two souls" tradition because of that doctrine's appearance in *On First Principles* 3.4, even if its position within that stream is sometimes strained. One wonders whether it wouldn't make more sense, in Origen's case, simply to speak of a *single* soul whose "*nous*" governs moral action. In chapters

six, seven, and eight, Origen's views on preexistence, fall, and eschatology are compared with similar doctrines in Middle Platonism. Where Platonism had achieved merely an "impersonal, mechanistic, and individualistic eschatology," Blosser argues that Origen's eschatology is more dynamic and "personal."

A brief appendix sketches the afterlife of Origen's distinction between "mind" and "soul" in the later Greek tradition. Blosser points to Didymus's *Commentary on Genesis* to underscore Didymus's general affinity with Origen's anthropology. However, Blosser asserts that Didymus departed from Origen's adherence to embodiment's necessity—a departure that would "theologically cripple the Origenist tradition and lead to its demise" (270). We may leave aside the question of this judgment's accuracy regarding Didymus himself. Blosser's story gives both too much credit to Didymus (was he really so deeply influential?) and not enough: Didymus's only well-known disciple in the Origenist vein was Evagrius, whom Blosser goes on to praise as having astutely maintained Origen's anthropological balance.

The book's consistent hesitancy to wade into the question of Origen's intellectual development may reflect Origen scholarship's collective uncertainty about such matters. But it renders the book vulnerable to future criticism along developmental lines. Furthermore, Blosser's avoidance of the vexing question of Origen's use of metempsychosis is glaring in a book on Origen's psychology. Blosser is aware of the complications that arise in using Rufinus's sterilized Latin to reconstruct Origen's actual doctrines. Nevertheless, he dismisses without argument evidence for Origen's doctrine of metempsychosis in *On First Principles* 1.8.4 (121). Although Koetschau's suggestions should not be taken uncritically, he provides a number of echoes of Origen's purported doctrine of metempsychosis. These texts demand explanation. Yet Blosser appeals to Rufinus's Latin (the doctrine is "by no means to be admitted") as though it were obviously Origen's original statement. Blosser acknowledges, one page later, Origen's portrayal of the doctrine of "mind/soul transformation" as a speculative hypothesis, not a dogma. He deems Origen's use of that theory a "working model" (122). Why doesn't Blosser apply this procedure in the case of metempsychosis? Whereas Rufinus had no reason to tamper with Origen's disclaimer in the case of "mind/soul transformation," he might well have been tempted to harden Origen's characterization of metempsychosis as "speculative" into the hard and fast rejection we find in *On First Principles* 1.8.4. But Blosser does not anticipate this possibility; he takes Rufinus's portrayal at face value. Nevertheless, this fumble does not represent Blosser's methodology in handling *On First Principles* generally. I raise it only to question Blosser's presentation by his own lights.

In the final analysis, Blosser's account of Origen's psychology is well-informed even if it is not indisputable. We have to thank him for providing a road map of complicated territory for those interested in delving further into the depths of Origen's writings. His book offers a relevant perspective for specialists and a useful point of departure for advanced students interested in exploring further the rich terrain of Alexandria's pioneer of Christian theology.

Kellen Plaxco, Marquette University/Katholieke Universiteit Leuven