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DID ORIGEN DENY THE IDEA THAT “THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE SON WAS NOT”?

I came across an interesting claim on twitter [here](#):

Origen anticipating & contradicting the Arian heresy 10yrs before Arius was born and 80yrs before Nicaea is Fire. “He who was a son according to the flesh came from the seed of David...According to the Spirit, however, he existed first & there was never a time when he was not.” ...

It’s from Origen’s commentary on Romans 1, ch.5.

Pamphilus in his Apology (ch. 50) also quotes it in the Greek from Origen’s commentary on Hebrews. ([tweet link](#))

It would be very interesting indeed if Origen explicitly rebutted one of the main claims of Arius a century later, that “there was a time when the Son was not.” But did he?

There is an online copy of the *Commentary on Romans*, in preview [here](#) (Fathers of the Church 103, p.69, tr. Thomas P. Scheck), so let’s look at it.

5. *Concerning his Son.*⁸³ He who was a son according to the flesh came indeed from the seed of David. Undoubtedly, he became that which previously was not, according to the flesh. According to the Spirit, however, he existed first, and **there was never a time when he was not.**⁸⁴ It should be noted that [M849] he did not say, “who has been predestined Son of God...”

83. Rom 1.3.

84. This formulation also occurs in *Fr. in Heb* 1.8 (= von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire*, p. 77). The Greek formula is attributed to Origen by Pamphilus, *Apology* 1.3. Arius, whose teaching was condemned by the Council of Nicaea, 325, became infamous for his slogan, ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν, “There was a time when he was not,” referring to the time before the Son was created. Origen’s expression clearly anticipates the Nicene and Athanasian definitions. Cf. Bigg, *Christian Platonists*, p. 167, “There is no shadow of a doubt that for Origen the Son is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father.” Cf. 10.8.5; 1.1.2; 1.2.9; 4.4.1.

85. Rom 1.4.

This is indeed what the text says. The problem is that this portion of Origen’s *Commentary on Romans* does not exist in the original Greek, written before 250 AD. It has reached us in Rufinus’ Latin translation, written around 400. Rufinus was accused of attempting to rehabilitate Origen by mistranslation. It is entirely possible that Rufinus introduced this phrasing, therefore (although I believe that these days the accusations against Rufinus are generally discounted).

How can we tell?

Well, let's look at some of the other references.

There appears to be an error in the footnote here: Pamphilus, *Apology* 1.3 does not refer to these matters. See below for this work. But there is a problem here anyway – Pamphilus' *Apology for Origen* has not reached us in Greek, but in a Latin translation by ... Rufinus! We're back to square one.

Onward.

In Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire. A thematic anthology of his writings*, tr. R.J.Daly, 1984, we find this passage, attributed to Origen and supposedly from his lost commentaries on Hebrews:

123. If he is the invisible "image of the invisible God" (Coll: 15), I would like to venture the further affirmation that, as the likeness of the Father, **there never was a time when he was not** (cf. In 1:1-3). For when did God, who according to John is called "light" (1 In 1 :5), not have the "radiance of his own glory" (cf. Heb 1 :3), so that someone could dare to set the beginning of a Son who previously did not exist? When could the WORD whom "the Father knows" (cf. Mt 11:27; In 10:15), and who is the expression of the ineffable, unnamable and unutterable essence of the Father, not have existed? For they who dare to say that **there was a time when the Son was not**, should consider that they will also have to say that there was a time when there was no Wisdom, a time when there was no Life. But it is not right nor, because of our weakness, without danger to take it upon ourselves to separate God from his only-begotten Son, the WORD, who is with him eternally, the Wisdom in whom he takes delight (cf. Prov 8:30). For in this way God is not even considered to be eternally happy. 1

Daly adds, "1. This fragment probably comes, not from the lost commentary on Hebrews, but from the original Greek of PA 4, 1, 1. -R.J.D." (Pa = peri archon, *On First Principles*).

In the appendix, the source for section 123 is given as "Hebr. frag 1, 8 - Cramer VII, 361-362".

But Cramer is a collection of materials from the Greek catenas in Paris. Unfortunately the attributions of passages in the catenas are often wrong. So this is not really evidence either!

None of this is very satisfactory, but I thought we might look at the French edition of the *Commentary on Romans*, as these often have good footnotes. In the *Sources Chrétiennes* edition, SC 532, p.178-179, our passage is book 1, chapter 7, and it does indeed have an interesting footnote.

1. Qui filius secundum carnem quidem ex semine factus est David. Factus est autem sine dubio id quod prius non erat secundum carnem. Secundum spiritum vero erat prius et non erat quando non erat [1]. Observandum est enim quia non dixit: ...

[1] *Non erat quando non erat* : Ce passage est cité et commenté par Pamphile dans son *Apologie pour Origène*, 52 (SC 464, p. 110) : « Il 'fut fait' ce qu'il n

était pas précédemment, car il est évident que, selon la chair, il n'était pas antérieurement; selon l'esprit, en revanche, il était précédemment et il n'y avait pas de moment où il n'était pas. » Cette formulation se trouve déjà dans le *PArch* I, 29 et IV 4, 1. C'est la première expression d'une formule qui sera utilisée lors de la controverse arienne, pour réfuter l'allégation que le Fils n'est pas consubstantiel au Père.

The SC confirms that we only have the Latin of Rufinus. But it gives us a better reference for the *Apology for Origen*, section 52 of the SC edition (SC464). In fact in section 51 Pamphilus tells us that what follows is from the *Commentary on Romans*.

Let's take it from the FOC translation, also by Thomas P. Scheck:

46. PAMPHILUS. We have brought forth this single testimony concerning the deity of the Son of God from those books that his accusers especially rebuke. But doubtless in his other books as well he understands things in the same sense, nor does he contradict himself.

47. Concerning the fact that the Father is not prior to the Son, but the Son is co-eternal with the Father, he says the following in the first book of his *Commentary on Genesis*:

48. ORIGEN [12].¹⁵⁶ For God did not begin to be the Father later, as though he were not the Father previously, as if he were impeded for certain reasons by which mortal men are usually impeded, so that they cannot immediately also be fathers from the time when they exist. For if God is always perfect, he does not lack the power by which he is a Father, and if it is good that he is the Father of such a Son, why does it matter or why would he deprive himself of this good and not become the Father immediately, if one can say it this way, from when he is able to be the Father? The same thing should likewise be said about the Holy Spirit.

49. PAMPHILUS. There is another testimony on the same subject in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*:

50. ORIGEN [13]. How else should one understand the "eternal light" except as referring to God the Father? But he, inasmuch as he is the light, never existed at a time when his radiance was not present with him—for a light without its radiance could never be conceived, which, if it is true, then there never was a time when the Son did not exist. But he was not unborn, as we have said of the eternal light. Otherwise, we would appear to be implying two principles of light. But, as the radiance of the unborn light, he was born of that light, having that same light as origin and source; yet there was not [a time] when he did not exist.

51. PAMPHILUS. There is another testimony on the same subject in the *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*:

52. ORIGEN [14]. "Which he promised," he says, "through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures concerning his Son, who was made according to the flesh from the seed of David": that which previously did not exist "was made"; for it is clear that, according to the flesh, he did not previously exist; but according to

the Spirit he existed previously, and there was never [a time] when he did not exist.

53. PAMPHILUS. The same thing is found in the first book of *Peri archon*, that the generation of the Son of God transcends any commencement: ...

It's easy to see from this why this view is attributed to Origen. We do have the Greek of the *Peri Archon*, although I'm not going to look at it now. But it's saying, more loosely, the same thing in Pamphilus as the other sections.

But, as I remarked earlier, this is all *Rufinus*. We do not have the Greek of Pamphilus' book.
