# SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

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## CONTENTS

# From the "Theater of the World" to the "Mask of Christ" — and Back Again: Insights from Origen's Newly Discovered Homilies on Psalms[1]

**Maren R. Niehoff**

*Abstract*: This article provides the first translation and in-depth analysis of a passage in Origen's newly discovered homilies on Psalms, which refers to the theater in Caesarea and uses theatrical language to describe Christian identity. By putting on the mask of Christ the Christian adopts a Christian identity and becomes an active member in the community. The article interprets Origen's arguments in the context of material evidence from Caesarea which reflects the city's centrality in theatrical competitions. Moreover, Origen's exceptionally positive attitude towards the theater, compared to that of other Christian authors, is interpreted in view of Lucian, the second Sophistic, who recommended theatrical dances as a form of education and self-formation. In a second step the article surveys other passages in Origen's oeuvre, which relate more critically to the theater, and argues that Origen assumed different rhetorical roles, depending on the exegetical contexts. He adopted Paul's maverick style and positioned himself on changing stages. Finally, the article looks at contemporary Jews, who are briefly mentioned by Origen, and explores some of their attitudes to the theater, focusing on Rabbi Abbahu of Caesarea and Genesis Rabbah, who both showed a keen interest in integrating actors and theatrical images in rabbinic culture. The theater of Caesarea thus emerges as a discursive stage where 'Pagan', Christian and Jewish actors mingled and presented themselves, always aware of the Other, always competing for more attractive masks to put on. Origen turns out to have been a particularly sophisticated actor on this stage.

*Keywords*: Origen; Homilies on Psalms; theater masks; Caesarea; Lucian; Rabbi Abbahu; Christian identity

[1] I thank the ISRAEL SCIENCE FOUNDATION (grant no. 1720/17) for supporting the research on which this article is based. Thanks also to Yehuda Liebes for our *Hevruta* reading of the newly discovered homilies in which I first encountered the passage on the theater. This article is based on a lecture at the conference of the Israel Society for the Promotion of Classical Studies at Tel Aviv University, May 2019. I thank the main organizer, Rachel Zelnick-Abramovitz, for setting up a splendid environment for discussion and exchange. Thanks also to Jas Elsner for discussing Faustina's sarcophagus. Two anonymous readers provided very useful comments. One of them, Margaret Mitchell, later identified herself and continued to discuss the article with me. I completed the article during my tenure as a Martin Hengel Fellow at Tübingen University and thank my hosts Volker Drecoll and Irmgard Männlein-Robert for their warm hospitality.

In May 2012 Marina Molin Pradel discovered in the *Staatsbibliothek* of Munich the manuscript of 29 Greek homilies on the book of Psalms, which were quickly identified as stemming from Origen's pen. Apart from four homilies which had been known through Rufinus' Latin translation, these homilies contain completely new, original texts of the influential church father. Written down by stenographers, they reflect Origen's spoken words in the more informal setting of sermons to a wider audience and still contain spontaneous, oral expressions.[2] In the excellent critical edition, prepared by Lorenzo Perrone and his Italian team, the hitherto unknown homilies amount to almost 400 pages.[3] A special issue of the Italian journal *Adamantius* 2014 was devoted to the new homilies and confirmed their authenticity from various angles. It has also become clear that Origen delivered them in Caesarea towards the end of his career. While several important studies have already been published,[4] the homilies only begin to draw wider attention in patristic circles, probably because they have not yet been translated into any modern language.

In this article I discuss a passage on the theatre in the newly discovered homilies, which throws new light on Origen's involvement in contemporary culture and suggests that late antique Caesarea was a vibrant center of inter-religious and inter-cultural encounters. In the third century CE Caesarea was the capital of the Roman province *Palaestina* and cherished its Herodian theater, which had also become the site of dance competitions.[5] The city hosted important educational institutions and was home to several thriving, religious communities. Thus far, however, the specific Caesarean context of most of Origen's works has often been overlooked.[6] Interpreted in the general context of early Christianity, with emphasis on his home town Alexandria, Origen has thus been considered as a rather typical exponent of a Christian rejection of the theater, which was expressed in numerous places and at different times. Leonardo Lugaresi, who published a comprehensive study of the theater in early Christian sources only four years

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2 For details on the wider context of Origen's homilies on the "Old Testament", see Nautin 1977, 389-412; Trigg 1985, 176-88; cf. the relatively closed, elitist character of Origen's school, discussed by Pietzner 2013, 273-334; for spontaneous oral expressions in the newly discovered homilies, see e.g. *Hom. I Ps. XV*, par. 9 (ed. Perrone 87): μικροῦ δεῖν παραλελοίπαμεν τὸ ποτήριον! ("we almost left out the drinking-cup!"); Hom. II Ps. 15, par. 2 (ed. Perrone 92): ἦν δὲ ἡ ἀρχὴ τοῦ σήμερον ἀναγνώσματος ("this was the beginning of today's reading"); *Hom I Ps. XV*, par 1 (ed. Perrone 73): καὶ ἵνα μὴ ταῦτα λέγωμεν ἃ δύνασθε καὶ ἑαυτοῖς ἀναλεγόμενοι εὑρίσκειν, φαμὲν ὅτι… ("in order that we may not say such things as you can find by collecting them yourselves, we say that…"); *Hom. II Ps. XV* (ed. Perrone 92): δώδεκα δὲ ἐὰν λέγω, ὑπεξαιρεθέντος Ἰούδα φημὶ καὶ ἀντὶ Ἰούδα Μαθθίου ἐγκαταταχθέντος, καὶ γὰρ τοῦτο γέγραπται ἐν ταῖς τῶν Ἀποστόλων Πράξεσι ("when I say twelve [apostles], I speak with the exception of Judas, Judas Matthias having been put in his place, for this is also written in the *Acts of the Apostles*" [Acts 1.26]).

3 Perrone *et al.* 2015.

4 Perrone 2013, 2017; Fürst 2014**,** Mitchell 2017; Mitchell forthcoming; Buchinger 2019.

5 On the theater of Caesarea and the Roman culture of the city, see Frova *et al*. 1965; Levine 1975a; Holum 1988; Gersht 1996, 2008; Holum and Patrich 1999; Raban and Holum 1996; Lehrmann and Holum 2000; Ameling, Cotton *et al*. 2011; Isaac 2011; Gendelman 2011, Gendelman and Gersht 2017; Patrich 2011: 77-117; Eck 2014; 'Ad, Arbel and Gendelman 2018. For details on dance competitions in Caesarea, see below.

6 Exceptions to this tendency include De Lange 1976, Heine 2010, Fürst 2017.

before the discovery of Origen's additional homilies on Psalms, characteristically concluded that he, too, "had nothing to object to the radical Christian condemnation of the spectacles".[7] While less irritated by them than Tertullian, Origen basically shared his position. When using the motif of the theater metaphorically, Lugaresi further argues, Origen sets up an alternative, inward topology of the heart, which differs in every respect from the theater of real life.[8] These insights are now challenged by the newly discovered homilies and require revision.

Origen's discussion of the theater is embedded in his homily on LXX *Ps*. 81, which provides two striking references to multiple gods, namely "you are gods and sons of the Most-High, all of you" (θεοί ἐστε καὶ υἱοὶ ὑψίστου πάντες)[9] and "God has taken his place in the assembly of gods" (ὁ θεὸς ἔστη ἐν συναγωγῇ θεῶν).[10] These Greek expressions serve Origen as a springboard for an emphatic sermon about the possibility of deification within the Christian community.[11] Identifying the "assembly" (συναγωγή) with the church (ἐκκλησία), Origen interprets the expression "assembly of gods" as a reference to the members of the Christian community in so far as they adopt an elevated, spiritual lifestyle. This interpretation is based on Paul, who criticized the Corinthians for being "fleshly (σαρκικοί)", because they are still immersed in strife and jealousy and "walk in the ways of man".[12] By implication, those transcending their human vices assimilate to God. Origen was most likely also inspired by another Pauline verse, which he quotes three times in the new homilies, but not here, namely: "you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (ὑμεῖς δέ ἐστε σῶμα Χριστοῦ καὶ μέλη ἐκ μέρους).[13]

Origen then explains how one may become divine and assimilate to Christ, encouraging his community to improve spiritually and avoid sin. The somewhat unusual expression "πρόσωπα ἁρματωλῶν λαμβάνετε" in LXX *Ps*. 81.2 then prompts him to

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7 Lugaresi 2008, 514: "Il che, per converso, rende ancora piu significativo il fatto che, nella sostanza, neppure Origene abbia nulla da eccipere alla radicale condanna cristiana degli spettacoli".

8 Lugaresi 2008, 518-22: see similarly the general conclusion of Weiss 2014, 222: "early Christianity perceived these performances as a manifestation of the evil forces and the ambassadors of Satan who dwelled in the cities and with whom the Christian was to struggle on a daily basis"; for more nuanced views, see Barnes 1996; Webb 2005.

9 LXX 81.6, which closely corresponds to the Masoretic text אלהים אתם ובני עליון כלכם (*Ps*. 82.6).

10 LXX 81.1, which interprets the Hebrew expression "God has taken His place in the assembly of God (בעדת אל)" (*Ps*. 82.1). The Greek translators thus solved the apparent contradiction between the singular expression "God" and the notion of an assembly. Origen relies here only on the Greek version, without reference to the underlying Hebrew; for discussions about the level of his Hebrew, see Nautin 1977, who concluded that Origen did not sufficiently master Hebrew to apply himself to the Scriptures in their original language and regularly relied on Aquila in this respect; de Lange 1976, 22, who concluded that he would have "learnt something of the character of the language, and also some vocabulary, from his frequent inquiries and discussions, but it is by no means inconceivable that he relied entirely for his knowledge of Hebrew texts on his Jewish colleagues".

11 For details, see Perrone 2017, 208-14.

12 κατὰ ἄνθρωπον περιπατεῖτε (I *Cor*. 3.3).

13 I *Cor*. 12.27, quoted by Origen in the new homilies, ed. Perrone *et al*. 2015, 77, 190, 454.

develop a highly innovative approach to the topic of masks in the theater of Christianity. To be sure, Origen recognizes the LXX idiom λαμβάνω πρόσωπον (in the singular),[14] which reflects the Hebrew נשא פנים "to show partiality", and initially explains its literal meaning:

> Whenever two are being judged, a rich sinner and a poor righteous, you are partial because of the wealth of the sinner and prefer the sinner to one who is poor, but righteous.[15]

Origen significantly uses here the singular τὸ πρόσωπον as a preposition and renders λαβόντες τὸ πρόσωπον as προκρίνετε, you show partiality. This reading not only reflects the literal sense of the verse but is also supported by Paul's use of the compound προσωπολημψία as well as his insistence that "there is no partiality with God" (*Rom*. 2.11). Whether or not Origen was inspired by Paul, he concludes that his community falls short of the ideal and shows partiality, because it has become used to honor those "who make distinctions not according to God, but according to the world" (*ibid*).

Origen, however, remains intrigued by the plural expression πρόσωπα in LXX *Ps*. 81.2 and offers a "hidden" or spiritual interpretation, which explores this dimension of multiplicity.[16] He now interprets the term in its less common meaning of mask[17] and literalizes the idiom, taking the verse to mean "you put on masks of sinners". Once the masks are identified in the Biblical text, Origen uses theatrical images to explain that Christians may assimilate to Christ by putting on his mask, while sinners will put on Satan's mask:

> Apart from the things I have already said, we can also offer the following hidden meaning concerning the phrase "you put on masks of sinners" (LXX *Ps*. 81.2).[18] Just as actors on the stage with a view to the plays, which they have rehearsed, put on masks, sometimes of a king, sometimes of a household-servant, sometimes of a woman, and sometimes of such-and-such a kind[19] — and one can see those contending for the prize at the theatrical competitions wearing masks — just this is what one should understand spiritually[20] about what pertains to the theater of the world. We all, as contenders for the prize, always put on

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14 See also Ep. Afr. 17.45, where Origen quotes the LXX idiom πρόσωπον (before) from I Kg. 3.16.

15 Hom. Ps. 81, par. 3 (ed. Perrone *et al.* 514).

16 Origen introduces his interpretation as ἀνακεχωρηκότα τοιοῦτον λόγον; in *CJohn* 5.6 he uses the perfect participle of ἀναχωρέω in a similar way, namely parallel to the "spiritual" (πνευμᾶτικός) meaning of Scripture, as distinct from its literal meaning, which is "ready at hand" (πρόχειρος).

17 πρόσωπον (L&S 701; Montanari 2015, 1836); the common term for mask is προσώπεῖον.

18 ἔστιν … εἰπεῖν καὶ εἰς τὸ πρόσωπα ἁμαρτωλῶν λαμβάνετε ἀνακεχωρηκότα τοιοῦτον λόγον, literally: "it is also possible to tell a hidden meaning such as this of the expression 'you put on masks of sinners'".

19 ὥσπερ οἱ ἐπὶ τῆς σκηνῆς πρὸς τὰ δράματα ἃ μεμελετήκασιν, πρόσωπα λαμβάνουσι νῦν μὲν βασιλέως, νῦν δὲ οἰκέτου, νῦν δὲ γυναικός, νῦν δὲ οἱουδήποτε.

20 τοιοῦτόν τι μοι νόει, more literally: "just this is the spiritual meaning according to me". The verb νοέω, which in the Classical period refers to mental perception or a certain meaning of a word, assumes in Byzantine Greek the notion of spiritual meaning (Lampe 1961: 916); for similar use see Orig., *Hom. II Ps*. 15, par. 5 (ed. Perrone 101), *Hom. II Ps*. 73, par. 1 (ed. Perrone 238), where spiritual meanings are introduced as distinct from literal or physical meanings.

masks. If we are blessed, we put on so to speak the mask of God[21] and say: "sons I have begotten and raised, but they have denied me".[22]

Again, if we are righteous, we put on the mask of Christ[23] and being human we say: "the spirit of the Lord is upon me, on account of which He has anointed me; to bring the good news to the poor He has sent me".[24] And as much as the righteous puts on the wicked mask, according to what is written, in the same way also the Holy Spirit says: "today if you harden your hearts".[25] But the one inspired by angelic power puts on the mask of the holy angel, just like one saying: "the angel of the spirit which speaks in me". These things pertain to the more powerful realm.

By contrast, it is also possible to see someone who puts on the mask of the devil, and another who puts on the mask of the anti-Christ or yet another mask of the demon. Or does the one driven mad not seem to you to bear an alien mask? Thus, also in the case of the passions, there are activities that produce anger, grief and bad emotion and the rest of those evil sins. Therefore, if we are angels, we sometimes put on the mask of God and sometimes the mask of grief and sometimes the mask of the spirit of fornication. As human beings we always change masks, sinning according to the form of sins, while living a good life and practicing the height of virtue as befitting what is truly good.

Why has it occurred to me to say these things? Because of the expression: "you put on the masks of the sinners". If you wish to put on a mask, put on the mask of God, put on the mask of Christ and say: "since you seek a proof for Christ speaking in me" (II *Cor*. 13.3).[26]

Origen points in this passage to a direct correlation between the theater of Late Antiquity and the "theater of the world" set up by God. The respective terms ὥσπερ and τοιοῦτόν underline this correspondence. Origen moreover appeals to the experience of his audience in Caesarea and draws on their eyesight: "and one can see (ἔστιν ἰδεῖν) those contending for the prize at the theatrical competitions (ἐν τοῖς θυμελικοῖς) wearing masks". Most likely, Origen refers here to the famous theater performances in Caesarea, which attracted competitors from afar.[27] The *Expositio totius mundi gentium* praises

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21 οἱονεὶ πρόσωπον λαμβάνομεν τοῦ θεοῦ.

22 LXX *Is*. 1.2 υἱοὺς ἐγέννησα καὶ ὕψωσα αὐτοὶ δέ με ἠθέτησαν; cf. Masoretic text: בנים גדלתי ורוממתי והם פשעו בי
The Greek verb ὑψόω, unlike the Hebrew, implies also a metaphorical deification, namely being exalted and become like God "The Highest" (ὕψιστος). The verb ἀθετέω, unlike פשע (to be wicked), implies rejection, setting at naught.

23 Πάλιν ἐὰν δίκαιοι ὦμεν, πρόσωπον λαμβάνομεν Χριστοῦ; note that Origen does not qualify the putting on of Christ's mark with the particle οἱονεὶ, which he used just before in the context of the mask of God.

24 LXX *Is*. 61.1 πνεῦμα κυρίου ἐπ' ἐμέ οὗ εἵνεκεν ἔχρισέν με, εὐαγγελίσασθαι πτωχοῖς ἀπέσταλκέν με; cf. Masoretic text: רוח אדני יהוה עלי יען משח יהוה אתי. לבשר ענוים שלחני

25 LXX *Ps*. 94.7-8 σήμερον ἐὰν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ ἀκούσητε μὴ σκληρύνητε τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν; cf. Masoretic text *Ps*. 95.7-8: היום אם בקלו תשמעו אל תקשו לבבכם

26 Orig., *Hom. Ps*. LXXI, par. 3 (ed. Perrone *et al*. 2015, 515-6). Note that I take the quotation from II *Cor*. 13.3 to reflect Paul's original assertion that his addresses are indeed seeking a sign; cf. Perrone *ad. loc*.

27 For details on the theater in Caesarea, see Patrich 2011, 177-204; Spielman 2019, 69-71, with emphasis on Jewish *euergetism* connected with the theaters in *Palaestina*, which was

Caesarea for its "circuses" ("circenses") and "pantomime dancers" ("pantomimos").[28] The pantomime was a silent dance performance in the theater, which presented tragic and epic materials on the stage and was broadly appreciated as an educator of the people, in contrast to the mime, a rather more vulgar form of entertainment.[29] Actively supported by Augustus, the pantomime came to be seen as a conspicuously Roman form of theater. A late second century inscription from Magnesia in Asia Minor mentions Caesarea as a city, hosting pantomime competitions. According to Louis Robert's reconstruction, the inscription on the basis of a statue praises an anonymous dancer "on account of pantomime performance and the honors [extended through] citizenship and statues by the Ephesians, the Trojans, the citizens of Antioch near Daphne as well as the citizens of Beirut and Caesarea".[30] Caesarea thus promoted the pantomime at an early stage, considering that it is only in the second half of the second century CE that this form of theater was included in artistic and athletic competitions.[31] Caesarea's early integration of the pantomime in its contests underlines the Roman flair of its culture in Late Antiquity.[32] This orientation continues into the fourth century, when Libanius mentions "a certain dancer in *Palaestina* [who] has made such a practice of decorum that he is brought forward by the highest authorities in the cities before children and women".[33]

Central to the different kinds of theatrical performance were colorful masks, open-mouthed masks for regular theater performance, closed-mouth masks for dance.[34] The

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modelled on the diaspora; see also Taplin 1999, who outlines the beginnings of theatrical contests in Athens and beyond.

28 *Exp*. 32.9 (ed. J. Rougé 1966).

29 On the role of the pantomime, see Friedlaender 1934, 526-34; Bieber 1961, 235-7; Jory 1996; Hall and Wyles 2008; Weiss 2014, 128-35.

30 [Διὰ τὴν ἐ]νρύθ[μου κινήσεως ὑ]πόκρισιν τειμ[ηθέντα] καὶ πολειτεί[αις καὶ] ἀνδριάντων ἀνασ[τά]σεσιν ὑπὸ Ἐφεσίων, Τρῳ[α]δέων, Ἀντιοχέων τῶν πρ[ὸς] Δάφνην, Βηρυτίων, Κα[ισα]ρέων (in Robert 1930, 117).

31 On the inauguration of pantomime contests, see Robert 1930, 120.

32 The extent of Latinization in Caesarea has been the subject of some scholarly debate. Numerous Latin inscriptions have recently come to light (Ameling, Cotton *et al.* 2011, CIIP vol. 2, no. 1227 (the first attestation of a consular governor of Judaea), 1228 (mentioning the career of a father and son in the city council, showing the social mobility and integration of local elites into the Roman administration), 1241 (the first attestation of the colony's subdivision into *vici* after the Bar Kokhva Revolt), 1248 (mentioning "Iulia Agrippina, daughter of the *primus pilus* Iulius Agrippa", who seems to have settled in Caesarea after his retirement from the Roman army), 1275 (mentioning a centurion's club room for an association of soldiers). While Eck 2014, 154-55, and Cotton and Eck 2002, have interpreted these Latin inscriptions as signs of a strongly Latinized culture in Caesarea, Isaac 2011 has warned not to overinterpret the evidence of the Latin inscriptions. He stresses that most inscriptions are still in Greek and that official inscriptions in Latin do not necessarily reflect spoken language in daily life.

33 Φασὶ δέ τινα ἐν Παλαιστίνῃ τοσαύτην ἄσκησιν πεποιῆσθαι κοσμιότητος ὥσθ' ὑπὸ τῶν ἄκρων ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἐπὶ παῖδας καὶ γυναῖκας εἰσάγεσθαι (Lib., *Or*. 64.40); see also Philo of Alexandria's brief reference to a pantomime actor from Ascalon (Philo, *Legat.* 203-5).

34 For details on the open-mouthed masks in comedy and tragedy and the use of closed-mouthed masks in Roman pantomime, see Jory 2002, 239-43; McCart 2007, 262-6.

material evidence from Caesarea preserves several images of such masks. A marble mask of a young woman was found in the theater,[35] and open-mouth masks recently emerged on the lid of a sarcophagus found in the harbor (Fig. 1).[36]

Moreover, two mosaics from a villa near Caesarea depict the tragic mask of a king and a comic mask of a servant, precisely of the kind Origen mentions in his homily on Psalms (Fig. 2).[37]

**Fig. 1**

**Fig. 2**

35 Frova *et al*. 1965, 202-3; Weiss 2014, 130.

36 Picture of sarcophagus (courtesy of Ishai Patrich). For details on the sarcophagus, which is dated to the late 2nd century, and burial practices in Late Antique Caesarea, see Gersht and Gendelman 2019, esp. 196-201.

37 The mosaic images are taken from Holumn 1988, 129, 121. Thanks to Joseph Patrich for drawing my attention to them.

Origen relates with sympathy to the theater of Caesarea and takes for granted that his audience attends performances. Those hearing his sermon, many of whom will not yet have become Christians, are expected to be familiar with actors, who rehearse their plays and put on masks just before going on stage. Standard masks, such as that of a king, a household-servant and even of a woman, are similarly known. Origen appeals to this shared, cultural background to conceptualize the kind of personality change he has in mind for those becoming true Christians and assimilating to Christ. He admits that "we all, as contenders for the prize, always put on masks (Πάντες γὰρ οἱ ἀγωνιζόμενοι ἀεὶ πρόσωπα λαμβάνομεν)". Performing and publicly competing for prizes are thus inherent features of human life. The question is not whether one should attend the theater and become an actor oneself, but rather which kind of mask one chooses to put on.

While Tertullian dismissed theatrical performances as merely external simulation, which is contrary to "religion in the soul" ("religio in animo")[38] and "incompatible with true religion and true submission to God",[39] Origen insists on a reciprocal relationship between wearing a mask and shaping one's self. He says: "whenever we are righteous, we put on the mask of Christ". Wearing the mask of Christ provides a visible sign of inspiration by God and at the same time consolidates the religious experience by transforming the wearer of the mask into a messenger to others. By putting on the mask of Christ one changes one's personality and role in society and begins to play a more active part in the Christian community.

Origen provides further explanations for the connection between the mask and the actor's experience: "and as much as the righteous puts on the wicked mask, according to what is written, in the same way also the Holy Spirit says: 'today if you harden your hearts'". In this case, too, the mask has a significant transformative effect, both initiating and marking a hardening of the heart. Indeed, Origen presents the mask as a spiritual catalyst: "but the one inspired by angelic power puts on the mask of the holy angel, just like one saying: 'the angel of the spirit which speaks in me'". While the actor has previously been inspired by the holy angel, he now impersonates the heavenly being and speaks his very words, translating his initial religious experience into bodily performance and vocal expression. The mask transforms him from a passive recipient of higher truths into an actor with a visible role to play in the Christian community.

Paul is, moreover, invoked. Origen says: "put on the mask of God, put on the mask of Christ and say: 'since you seek a proof for Christ speaking in me — ἐπεὶ δοκιμὴν ζητεῖτε τοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ λαλοῦντος Χριστοῦ'" (II *Cor*. 13.3). Towards the end of the *Second Epistle to the Corinthians* Paul warns his audience not to sin, but to become aware of Christ's presence both in themselves and in him. Christ, he asserts, "lives by the power of God" (ζῇ ἐκ δυνάμεως θεοῦ)[40] and his power works in his readers, too. Acutely aware of his own absence from Corinth, Paul attempts to bridge the gap and make his own figure present through his letter. Paul also prefigures Christ, who is even more absent, but brought to life in his own person and through him in the *Epistles to the*

38 Tert., *Spect*. 1.3.

39 "non competent verae religioni et vero obsequio erga verum Deum" (Tert., *Spect*. 1.4.)

40 II *Cor*. 13.4.

*Corinthians*.[41] Origen, a keen reader of Paul's *Epistles*, as Margaret Mitchell has abundantly shown, relates to these Pauline ideas of imitation and representation, especially with regard to weakness and likeness to Jesus' death.[42] He is fond of mechanisms that invoke absent figures and their powers. The term δοκιμή, in Classical Greek "proof" or "test", but in the *Letter to the Romans* also "approved or tested character", plays a key-role in Origen's interpretation.[43] He seems to have taken the term in the sense of a visible sign or proof of character and connected it to the masks of the contemporary theater. The mask, like Paul's *Epistles*, brings to life the absent person of Christ and encourages the Christian to assimilate to him and put on his role. It can hardly be accidental that Paul, the most maverick author of Antiquity, encouraged Origen to construct Christian identity by invoking the dazzling masks of the theater in Caesarea.[44]

Origen's positive use of masks in his construction of Christian identity is unusual among Late Antique Christian authors. Tertullian, the most outspoken opponent of the theater, denounced the theater as a "temple of demons" and spoke of the mask as a "lie" ("falsum").[45] He moreover identified a "pantomimist impersonating a woman" as the climax of sin and positioned it at the opposite end of God, the "author of truth" ("auctor veritatis"), who disapproves of any kind of simulation and legislates against men wearing female dress.[46] Similarly, the Second Sophistic Aristides assumed a remarkably critical position, which may have to do with personal rivalry.[47] Male dancers assuming female roles, he complained, "adorn their hair more than Phaedra".[48] Origen obviously expresses different views in the newly discovered homilies and integrates Christianity into theatrical discourses. He may even have been familiar with the Greek version of Tertullian's polemic against the theater and, if so, he obviously refrained from embracing it.[49]

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41 For details on Paul's rhetoric in *Corinthians*, shaped in view of his own absence, see Mitchell 2017b; for similar rhetoric in Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*, see Becker 2019.

42 Mitchell 2010, Mitchell forthcoming.

43 ἡ θλῖψις ὑπομονὴν κατεργάζεται, ἡ δὲ ὑπομονὴ δοκιμήν (*Rom*. 5.4), similarly in *Phil*. 2.22. L&S 442, Monatanari 2015, 546, recognize the special meaning of δοκιμή in the Pauline corpus, even though one generally has to be aware of accepting the numerous special meanings advocated in Walter Bauer's *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*; for a discussion of the problematic nature of the latter, see Förster 2018.

44 Paul's brief reference to agonistic competitions and the hope of gaining the imperishable wreath in I *Cor*. 9.25 must have further inspired Origen, even though he does not quote this verse here.

45 "daemonum templum" (Tert., *Spect*. 12.7, 23.5; ed. M. Turcan 1986); see also Duncan 2006, who analyzes these polemics in the context of 'Pagan' anxieties about the collapse of a clear distinction between reality and imagination.

46 Tert., *Spect*. 23.5; see also: "adultery is everything to that which is [artificially] fashioned" ("adulterium est apud illum omne quod fingitur" (*ibid*)).

47 Bowersock 2008 analyzed the fragments of Aristides' no longer extant treatise against the pantomime and convincingly argued that personal reasons, especially rivalry, played a central role in shaping his negative views.

48 Arist., fragm. in Lib., *Or*. 64. 50.

49 Tertullian mentions the Greek version of his critique of the theater in *Cor*. 6.3.

Origen's position instead resonates with Lucian's treatise *On Dance*. As Ismene Lada-Richards has shown, Lucian recovers the genre of the pantomime from its cultural marginality among the mimetic arts and advertises it as an elite form of education.[50] Lucian insists that the pantomimist brings Greek traditions so vividly to the stage, that no one in the audience will be able to escape its positive educational influence (*Salt*. 3). Sharing the goals of philosophy, the pantomime is far more effective in depicting characters and emotion for the purpose of moral improvement (*Salt.* 35). Lucian moreover explains that the dancers "accommodate themselves to the masks (προσώποις) which they assume, so that what they say is not inappropriate to the princes or tyrant-slayers or poor people or farmers whom they introduce, but in each of these what is individual and distinctive is presented".[51] In the process of imitating ancient heroes, the dancer himself is transformed and "becomes all the things which he has imitated".[52] Relating to a dancer with five masks, Lucian cites a "barbarian", who comments "I did not realize, my friend, that though you have only this one body, you have many souls" (*Salt.* 66). One actor, Lucian ironically recalls, even identified with his theatrical role to the extent that he continued to act off-stage as if he was the ancient hero (*Salt.* 83). Origen shares these assumptions about the transformative role of masks and adopts them for the purposes of his own religion. In his view, becoming a Christian means to perform a specific role in the theater of the world set up by God. His audience, which was probably still largely 'Pagan', can thus assume a familiar dramatic role, but put on a new mask, which will lead to a distinctly Christian lifestyle. *Vice versa*, becoming wicked corresponds to putting on the mask of Satan. In both cases, the mask is intimately connected to the ethical character of the wearer and not just an external appearance or a tool of simulation.

Lucian assigns the pantomime an important role in religious life and traditional education. He stresses that dancing has accompanied ancient cults from their inception so that dismissing the dances amounts to "quarreling with the gods".[53] Spectators leave the theater as better men, because they have learnt to distinguish good from bad and to make the right ethical choice (*Salt*. 69). By encountering the ancient heroes on the stage, they see themselves in a mirror and get to know themselves (*Salt*. 81). The experience of the theater, which appeals to both the mind and the emotions, thus prompts the spectator to effect a change in his life and improve his character. While Origen does not explain in such detail the inner transformation of the actor and his audience, he shares the same educational assumptions. He invites his audience to enjoy the theatre and imagine themselves as wearing the mask of Christ, impersonating their God and advocating his values.

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50 Lada-Richards 2008.

51 τὸ ἐοικέναι τοῖς ὑποκειμένοις προσώποις καὶ μὴ ἀπῳδὰ εἶναι τὰ λεγόμενα τῶν εἰσαγομένων ἀριστέων ἢ τυραννοκτόνων ἢ πενήτων ἢ γεωργῶν, ἀλλ᾽ ἐν ἑκάστῳ τούτων τὸ ἴδιον καὶ τὸ ἐξαίρετον δείκνυσθαι (Luc., *Salt.* 65).

52 Γιγνομένου ταῦτα ἅπερ ἐμιμεῖτο (*Luc*., *Salt.* 19); see also Leppin 1992, 122, who discusses several inscriptions praising pantomimists for becoming the characters they perform.

53 Luc., *Salt*. 16, 20-21, 25.

Relying on masks, Origen assumes a surprisingly versatile notion of Christian identity. Rather than envisioning a stable essence he anticipates changing roles and maverick forms of self-positioning in the theater of the world. As he put it:

> Therefore, if we are angels, we sometimes put on the mask of God and sometimes the mask of grief and sometimes the mask of the spirit of fornication. As human beings we always change masks, sinning according to the form of sins, while living a good life and practicing the height of virtue as befitting what is truly good.[54]

Origen's emphasis that "as human beings we always change masks" (καὶ ἀεὶ τὰ πρόσωπα ἄνθρωποι ἀμείβομεν) is remarkable. Playing ever changing roles is inherently human, while only God has no need of masks and provides a stable orientation for the theater of the world. Human beings, especially 'Pagans', can thus become Christians or consolidate their Christian identity by performing with the mask of Christ. This image suggests an intriguing relationship between interiority and exteriority or identity and performance. Wearing a mask relates to all these aspects and blurs the boundaries between them, suggesting that one is what one performs.[55] Origen thus shares a performative notion of identity, characteristic of numerous authors of the Second Sophistic.[56]

These insights from Origen's newly discovered homilies on Psalms also illuminate his remarks in his *Letter to Africanus* about the connection between the mime and the Bible. Africanus had dismissed the additions to the Book of Daniel as too "astounding" and "paradoxical", i.e. improbable. These overly dramatic features render the story in his view more worthless than "the mime of Philistion".[57] Origen does not respond to this charge by demonstrating the seriousness of the story of Susanna, as we might expect, but rather by pointing to another Biblical story which would qualify even more as a mime. After reporting at length the story of King Solomon judging the case of two prostitutes fighting over a baby, Origen concludes: "for if already it is necessary to expose something ridiculous concerning the Scriptures used in the Church, it would have been appropriate to compare to Philistion's mime the story concerning the two prostitutes rather than that about the respectable Susanna".[58] Sex and drama are thus present in the Bible and may be compared to mime, yet not particularly so in the case of Susanna. Origen, of course, counts on the fact that nobody would want to extract the story about Solomon from the Bible and thus feels free to use this kind of rhetoric. For our purposes, it is significant that he does not hesitate to blur once more the boundaries between Christian identity and theatre.

However, as Leonardo Lugaresi has pointed out, Origen expresses different views in other works. Most conspicuously, he criticizes the theater in his treatise *On Prayer*, which Lugaresi takes as his quintessential position on the matter.[59] Here indeed Origen

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54 Orig., *Hom. Ps*. LXXI, par. 3 (ed. Perrone *et al*. 2015, 516).

55 For recent explorations of the complex relationship between interiority and exteriority in Jewish, Christian and 'Pagan' sources of Late Antiquity, see Niehoff and Levinson 2019.

56 Whitmarsh 2001, 2013; Gleason 1995.

57 Afr., Ep. Orig., par. 4 (ed. De Lange 2008, 516).

58 Or., *Ep.Afr*. 17 (ed. De Lange 557-8).

59 Lugaresi 2008, 515-6; see also Lugaresi 2003.

associates dramatic performance with merely external simulation, which he contrasts to internal piety:

> We must carefully hearken to the expression "they may appear" (φανῶσιν, Mt. 6.5), because nothing which (only) appears is good, as if existing only in appearance and not truly, imprinting an impression of errors, nothing precise and true. As much as actors of some dramas in the theaters[60] are not what they say (they are), and do not meet that for which they are considered according to the mask they wear, thus all those who provoke by gestures of appearance the impression of goodness are not righteous, but only simulators of righteousness[61] and they perform in the private theater "in the synagogues and the corners of the streets" (Mt. 6.5).[62] But the one who is no hypocrite, but has put away from himself everything alien, prepares to receive applause in the theater which is by far better than any aforementioned and enters his own "room",[63] after shutting up for himself the treasure of "wisdom and insight" (Col. 2.3),[64] in addition to the wealth already stored inside. Granting nothing to anything external and avoiding any look at external things, he shuts every door of sense perception, so that he may not be trapped by the senses and that no impression of them may settle in his mind. He prays to Him who does not flee and leave behind such a hidden space, but settles in it, His only Begotten Son being present together with Him.[65]

This passage has been taken as an expression of Origen's quintessential position on the theater. If we consider its context, however, different conclusions suggest themselves. Origen quotes here the expression φανῶσιν from Mt. 6.5, indicating that he explores the hermeneutic potential of Matthew's polemics against the synagogue. Origen adopts the image of the hypocritical Jewish actors, who perform lip service in the synagogues without committing their heart to God. Like Tertullian, he now distinguishes acting on the stage from authentic religious experience. The real theater is that of God, who is present in the innermost chamber of the heart, hidden from the public eye. Origen's vocabulary echoes Platonic notions, with their characteristic devaluation of sense-perception. On these assumptions, anything external and material is false, a mere imitation of the Ideal, which amuses and distracts from the essence.

Why does Origen in *On Prayer* choose such a different language from that which we explored in the newly discovered homilies on Psalms and in the Letter to Africanus? Did Origen speak differently to a Christian audience than to one not yet converted or, in the case of Africanus, an audience close to Greek methods of scholarship? He would then have chosen to appeal to each audience on its own terms, using a positive image of the

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60 ὥσπερ δὲ οἱ ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις δραμάτων τινῶν ὑπροκριταὶ. Origen uses here the word ὑποκρῖτής both in its Classical meaning "actor" (L&S 844) and its negative meaning "hypocrite" (Mt. 6.2 and 6.5, where the hypocrites in the synagogues are referred to).

61 οὐ δίκαιοι ἀλλ' ὑποκριταί εἰσι δικαιοσύνης. Origen relies here univocally on the negative connotation of the term ὑποκρῖτής.

62 καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἰδίῳ θεάτρῳ ὑποκρινόμενοι ταῖς συναγωγαῖς καὶ ταῖς γωνίαις τῶν πλατειῶν.

63 ταμεῖον, quoted from Mt. 6.6. In Classical Greek this term has a more elevated connotation, referring to a treasury or magazine (L&S 791). Origen also borrows the verb εἰσέρχομαι from Mt. 6.6, but uses it in the present form rather than in the aorist imperative.

64 Origen assumes here the context of the explanations in Col. 2.3, regarding the mystery of Christ, "in which all the treasures of wisdom and insight are hidden".

65 Or., *Ora*. 2.20 (ed. Fürst and Markschies 2014, 174-6).

theater in a 'Pagan' context, hoping to allure sympathizers with traditional culture into the Christian faith as well as his more conservative scholarly positions. We may even imagine that Origen would disclose his real, more critical view on the theater as time would pass on and clarify, as he does in *On Prayer*, that dramatic images are opposed to Christianity, if not outright dangerous and irritatingly 'Jewish'.

However, is such a chronological scenario, with the assumption of an underlying distinction between merely rhetorical and essential positions, necessary? Origen may alternatively have assumed a more hybrid position, which strongly reacts to the language of each Biblical passage he interprets in any given context. In the homily he was inspired by LXX Ps. 81.2 to interpret the image of the masks as a meaningful expression of the human personality, while in his treatise *On Prayer* he celebrated Matthew's image of the Jewish hypocrites in the synagogues.[66] Origen's remarkable versatility indeed suggests that he saw himself as a kind of actor, who puts on different masks suiting the respective occasion of his performance. Following in the footsteps of Paul, he self-consciously acted on the stage of rhetoric and literary activity, expressing multiple views, which added up to a highly complex personality. Boundaries vis-à-vis the Greco-Roman theater were porous and blurred, Origen obviously feeling at home on the stage of the theater in Caesarea. Boundaries vis-à-vis the Jews, on the other hand, were marked and redrawn with emphasis. Only Christianity, Origen seems to imply, should play a prominent role in the theater of the world, while the Jews were to be consigned to their "private theater" in the corners of public spaces.

Contemporary Jews, however, saw the theater differently. They took a lively interest in it and engaged dramatic language to conceptualize their religion in topical terms. While a diversity of opinions is expressed in rabbinic sources, containing much criticism, Rabbi Abbahu, Origen's younger contemporary in Caesarea, adopted a remarkably open attitude.[67] Several rabbinic sources testify to his involvement in the theater and indicate that he saw it as part of the Jewish experience in the city, even though he was acutely aware of the fact that the mime could be turned polemically against Judaism. Abbahu is even said to have gone to the theater and met with a Jewish actor, who was regarded in his circles as a "five-fold sinner".[68] One of the sins attributed to him was "decorating the theater" (משפר תייטרון). This actor seems to have been one of the more Hellenized members of the Jewish community of Caesarea, whose profile is difficult to reconstruct, because they did not leave behind texts.[69] This type of Judaism apparently flourished next to the rabbinic study houses, which functioned in Hebrew and Aramaic. As the case of the Jewish actor shows, such Caesarean Jews took advantage of all the options Greco-Roman culture had to offer and, among others, became active on the stage.

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66 See similarly HGen. 3.5

67 For details, see Weiss 2014, 132-5; Spielman 2019, 125-258; on Abbahu's general openness to Greco-Roman culture, see Levin 1975b; Niehoff 2019.

68 The story of Rabbi Abbahu and "Pentekaka" is found in jTa'an 64 b; see also Lieberman 1942, 31-3; Levine 1975a; Jacobs 1998, 341-4.

69 De Lange 2015 pointed to the importance of Hellenistic Judaism in Late Antique *Palaestina* and used the Later Jewish Greek translations of the Bible as a means of accessing it.

The Jewish actor from Caesarea has striking parallels in Rome. Josephus mentions Aliturus, a Jewish actor close to Nero and Poppaea, who introduced him to imperial circles and thus helped him to fulfill his first diplomatic mission.[70] Another Jewish actor in Rome is mentioned and ridiculed by Martial (Ep. 7.82). Moreover, the lid of a Roman sarcophagus mentions Faustina, whose Jewish identity is marked by the Hebrew expression "shalom" as well as the Menorah, the Lulav and the Shofar (Fig. 3). The three theater masks, which play a prominent role rather than just serving as a marginal decoration, suggest at least that the symbols of the theater were considered as congenial with Judaism and, perhaps, even that she herself was an actress.[71]

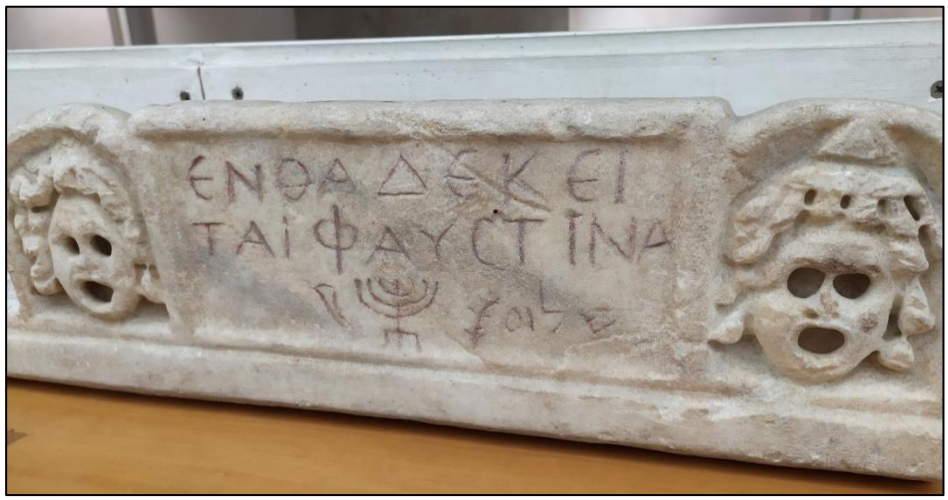

**Fig. 3**

These Roman parallels indicate that the Caesarean actor was involved in a similar cultural scene as some members of the Jewish community in the capital of the empire. Rabbi Abbahu, the leading religious authority of his generation, acknowledged this form of Hellenistic Judaism and its active engagement with the theater. Setting a remarkable example, he invited the actor from the theater in Caesarea to perform a community prayer in his synagogue.

Theatrical images are also invoked in rabbinic Bible exegesis. The Biblical figure of Joseph, for example, was imagined as a pantomime dancer, who dressed in

70 Jos., *Vita* 16.

71 Picture taken from the Museo Nazionale Romano, Inv. No. 67613 (part of the exhibition in Diocletian's Baths). The sarcophagus was found in Rome, outside the Porta S. Sebastiano, near the Via Appia; for details, see Leon 1960, 217-8; Frey 1975, 198-9; Konikoff 1990, 41-4. While Frey assumes Faustina to be an actress, Leon and Konikoff warn that the motif of the masks was too common to warrant specific conclusions about her profession. See also Elsner 2003, highlighting the fluid boundaries between Jewish, Christian and 'Pagan' art as well as scholarly agendas insisting on greater distinctions.

provocatively feminine ways but was ultimately rescued from sinning with Ms. Potiphar. An anonymous interpreter in *Genesis Rabbah* interprets the Biblical information about Joseph's young age in the following way:

> "Joseph was 17 years old" (*Gen*. 37.2) and you say that he was a "youth" (*ibid*)?!
>
> He behaved childishly, penciling his eyes, arranging his hair and walking on high heels (היה עושה מעשה נערות, משמשם בעיניו מתקן בשערו ומתלה בעקבו).[72]

The expression "youth" (נער) strikes the interpreter, because someone 17 years old was considered in Antiquity as an adult. One must thus explain why the Biblical narrator nevertheless presented Joseph as a youngster. This apparent contradiction was creatively solved by suggesting that Joseph behaved childishly.[73] The examples provided in the above passage conform to the stereotype of dancers. Aelius Aristides in his famous critique of the pantomime complained that the dancers "adorn their hair more than Phaedra" and mocked their special sandals with iron strings, which made too much noise.[74] Given these wide-spread notions, combined with the stereotype of the dancers' sexual promiscuity, the rabbinic interpreter drew an image of Joseph as an effeminate dancer, who provoked Ms. Potiphar's love. Moreover, the drama of Phaedra and Hippolytus enjoyed special popularity in Late Antiquity and was often staged in the theaters of the area. This cultural background, too, must have been conducive to rabbinic exegesis.[75] In the rabbinic Midrash, as in the Biblical story, Joseph is ultimately rescued from Potiphar's wife. While the Biblical narrator left open precisely how Joseph managed to escape sin, Rabbi Mattana suggests that "he saw the icon of his father and his blood cooled — איקונין של אביו ראה ונצטנן דמו.[76] This image, too, seems to have theatrical background and refers probably to a mask. Libanius helps us to understand this "icon" in the Midrash, as he compares the dancer to a sculptor, who presents the figures from the past not in stone but in his own body. "Which picture (ποία γὰρ γραφή)", Libanius asks, is more pleasant?[77] Seeing an "icon" of his father, Joseph is rescued by the very means of his own profession, namely by a mask. Confronted with a meaningful image, he is transformed and restrains himself, putting on the role of the righteous. In the rabbinic Midrash Joseph responds to the mask very much like Origen's ideal audience in the newly discovered homilies on Psalms, namely by internalizing the role suggested by the theatrical image.

In conclusion, Origen's newly discovered homilies on Psalms expose fascinating aspects of his attitude towards the theater, which are not found in his previously known works. The homilies substantially enrich our picture of the Church Father and indicate his deep involvement in 'Pagan' culture. The theater provided him with a language to

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72 GR 84.7 (ed. Theodor Albeck 1008), the three descriptions of Joseph's behaviour are repeated in GR 87.3 (ed. Theodor Albeck 1063).

73 For details, see Niehoff 1992, 111-24.

74 Lib., *Or*. 64. 50, 95-7.

75 For details, see Lib., *Or*. 64.67; see also Braun 1934 on Phaedra motifs in the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which I take to be an essentially Jewish text.

76 GR 87.4 (ed. Theodor Albeck 1073).

77 Lib., *Or*. 64.116; for further details on the connection between pantomime and image, see Lada-Richards 2004.

conceive of Christian identity in performative terms and to explain personality changes as an assumption of new roles. While Origen's *Letter to Africanus* also reflects his openness to the theatrical style of Biblical narratives, his treatise *On Prayer* identifies the theater with mere hypocrisy, the opposite of inward religiosity. Origen's polemics in the latter context should not be interpreted as his "real" position. He rather explores the hermeneutic potential of the Gospel of Matthew, where the Jews were cast in the role of hypocrites assuming ever changing roles in the corners of the street. Origen himself thus plays different rhetorical roles, depending on the exegetical contexts. He adopts Paul's maverick style and positions himself at the center of imperial discourses, while locating the Jews on the margins.

Origen's newly discovered homilies suggest an overall positive attitude towards the theater, which may be rooted in the experience of his environment in Caesarea, a vibrant center of inter-cultural and inter-religious encounter. Hellenistic Jews were deeply emerged here in Greco-Roman culture, counting among them a known actor. Rabbi Abbahu of Caesarea as well as some rabbinic exegetes contributing to Genesis Rabbah showed a keen interest in integrating actors and theatrical images in rabbinic culture. The theater of Caesarea thus served as a discursive stage where 'Pagan', Christian and Jewish actors mingled and presented themselves, always aware of the Other, always competing for more attractive masks to put on. Origen turns out to have been a particularly sophisticated actor on this stage.

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