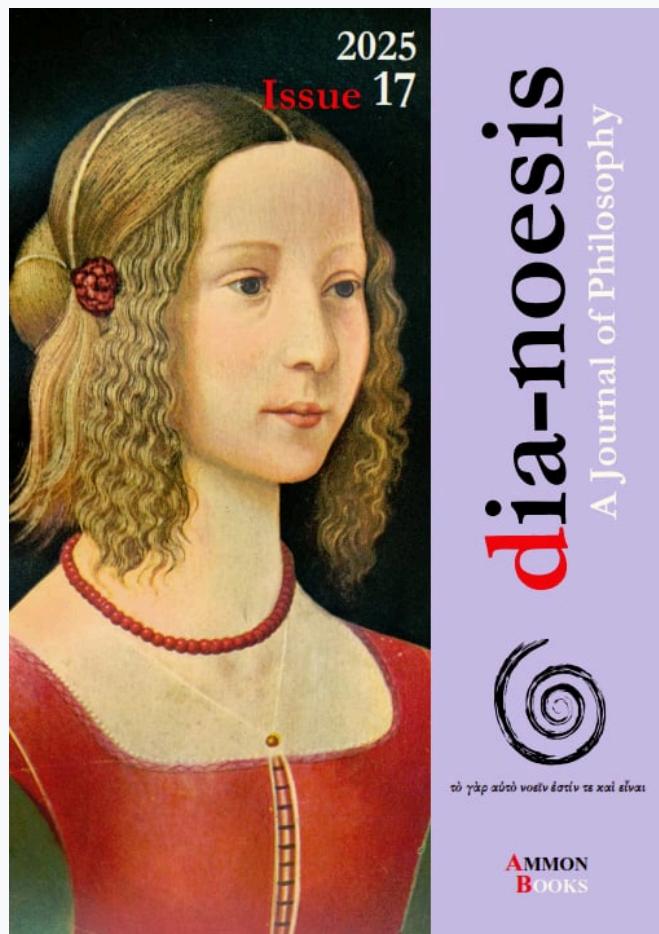


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The image of woman in philosophy



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The Female and Women in Origen

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Abstract

Origen of Alexandria, the prolific Christian theologian and philosopher of the 3rd century, presents an interesting anthropology regarding genders. This article will endeavour to outline his approach to the topic of genders, more specifically to his portrayal of the female in relation to the male and his original theory of the transcendence of sexes and genders both in his protology and in his eschatology or in his exegesis of biblical literature. But is this theory as subversive as it appears to be when it comes to the stereotypical picture of the female and women at his time? Can his ‘angelic’ prototype be related to modern gender theories? Are women and the feminine exalted in his anthropology or still remain in their traditional framework?

Keywords: *Origen, Christian, anthropology, gender theory, female, women, biblical exegesis, asceticism, protology, eschatology, sexes, the binary, the non-binary, angelic prototype*

Introduction

Origen of Alexandria (3rd century), perhaps the most prolific theologian and philosopher of the Early Christianity, developed an interesting anthropology regarding gender. The aim of this paper is to explore Origen's usage of the female and the feminine as well as the place he assigns to women in his anthropology. In his allegorical interpretation of the Genesis, he regards the creation of humanity according to God's image as non-corporeal and associates it with God creating the first human-beings as male and female in perfect union¹. Therefore, he considers the two genders as merely allegorical or grammatical conventions that allude to the two non-material components of human existence but also correspond to the counterparts of a primordial and eschatological perfect couple (Christ and the faithful) whose re-union will eventually restore God's image in humans². Therefore, Origen not only advocates a quintessential human nature (humans created in God's image) beyond gender distinctions, as most scholars point out, but he goes on to transcend the very concept of gender-also sexuality or any physical or social restriction- as part of humanity's fallen state which is characterized by distinctions and categorization³. This means that he does not refer to a non-binary state of being, as any notion of gender (therefore being a man or a woman or else) cannot determine one's identity since in the perfect human, it can only be only allegorical and contrary to a state of divine unity. His transcendence of any gender identification is of a strictly theological basis⁴. His distinctly stereotypically gen-

¹ *Comm. Matthaeum*, XIV, pp.1225.

² *Comm. CCant.*, IV, 9.2 in *SC* 376, pp.582-584. Also, *De Princ.*, I: 5-6, *PG*, v. 11, pp.115. *CCCant* I.2, *SC*, 376, pp.176-177, *ibid*, *SC* 376, pp. 250-257.

³ *CCels.*, in *PG*, v. 11, pp. 1070.

⁴ In *CCels.*, 4.18, in *PG*, v. 11, pp.1070: he asserts that since the angels are superior to humans, then if humans are perfected, they will become equal to angels. He evokes the extract from the Gospel according to which in the resurrection humans do not marry but the righteous ones become equal with angels providing their moral conduct is virtuous in deed and in speech.

dered language when it comes to male and female is purely restricted to language and does not define any theologically accepted human identity⁵.

Contemporary research on the ‘gender theory’ of Origen

It is understandable that Origen’s anthropology regarding gender has attracted the interest of modern scholars. More specifically his references to women and the feminine (in his protological, postlapsarian and eschatological anthropology, as well as the allegorical usage of the feminine in his mystical theology) were scrutinized carefully.

Namely, Emanuela Prinzivalli claims that Origen’s protological anthropology (two narratives of the creation of the male-female human in Genesis) places gendered relations onto a new basis and reduces the male dominance at least on a spiritual as well as an individual level but also when it comes to the collective conscience of the Christian community. More specifically, in the first narrative the primordial human nature consists not of two separately ‘male’ and ‘female’ identities but as a unique coupled one ‘in God’s image’, while in the second narrative man and woman are formed (not created from nothing but shaped) from vile materials. This second couple is led into apostasy and is punished. Among them, Eve is blamed the most for this Fall. Prinzivalli places this interpretation into the frame of Origen’s Alexandrian Platonizing dualism and it aims directly against Gnosticism. What is noteworthy is that the woman is the one who receives God’s harsher punishment and the dichotomy of the sexes comes after the Fall. Therefore, in the Genesis, the feminine represents the pre-existing Church which is united with the Logos right from the beginning. Since women’s ‘inferior’ external (corporeal and social) state is the result of previous

⁵ His reference is clearly to ‘names’ or declensions, not real genders (*Comm. CCant.*, 9.2 in *SC* 376, pp. 582-584. See also, *ibid.*, 9.3, pp. 582.

faults (the Fall in Eden) and thus, is able to evolve, it does not correspond to an inherent internal sort of inferiority⁶.

As to the usage of the male and the female in Origen's allegorical interpretation of biblical texts, Prinzivalli observes that with the scene of the self-sacrificial unity of the Son with the Church in the Song of Songs, Origen's male readers are rendered more 'feminine'. At the same time, women would be consoled with the equal value that is attributed to them⁷.

Ilaria Ramelli highlights Origen's view that God-the Christ transcends both sexes but the Christ in his human dimension –(i.e. a model of humanity)- is neither male nor female, whereas she notes that the Christ took on himself all the human nature (both genders). According to this refined Christ-centred anthropology, the binary model will be lifted in end times and we shall return to the genderless existence of angels and the christic ideal⁸. The 'robes of skin' (Gen.3:21) are not the body generally speaking, but the gendered mortality to which sin resulted⁹. In this view, what is the most interesting aspect is that Ramelli bases her argumentation on this type of Origenian gender-independent anthropology in order to prove that Origen reflects the first Christian community's custom of accepting the priestly ordination of women, since the criterion for spiritual gifts, according to Christian theology, is not the differentiation of genders but spiritual and moral purity, so in order to be ordained a minister of the Church, being a virtuous human-being is deemed as more important than being a man or a woman¹⁰. Moreover, Ramelli emphasizes the fact that Origen's allegorical method ruled out a misogynic kind of hermeneutics of biblical narratives as well as the exclusion of women from the Church's leadership¹¹. Finally, although Origen makes use of allegory that identifies the male with positive aspects of the human nature and the

⁶ Prinzivalli (also: *Hom. in Genesim*, *Comm. in Genesim*, *Hom. in Iesu Nave* IX, 9).

⁷ Prinzivalli (also: *Comm. CC* III.9,3-4 (SC 376, 582-584). *Comm. in Matthaeum*, XIV, 17).

⁸ Ramelli, pp.314 and pp.319 (also: *Gal. 3:28*).

⁹ *Ibid*, pp.320.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp.321-322 (also: *Comm. Corinth.* 14:34-35).

¹¹ Ramelli, pp.323.

female with negative ones, he judges as the primary culprit of the Fall not the female nature as such but ethical choice¹².

Lavinia Cerioni asserts that in Origen we come across the co-existence of the dichotomy of the sexes according to the paternalistic model of the ancient world, with the metaphorical usage of the female as an intellectual category that transcends this traditional binary model¹³. However, Cerioni recognizes originality both in Plato and in Origen in their gender ‘continuum’ that transcends the antithesis between a ‘defective’ and ‘inferior’ femininity and a ‘perfect’ and ‘superior’ masculinity. In her theological anthropology, she sees variable gendered roles not only at the level of allegory but also of ontology¹⁴. Therefore, one of the Son’s ‘επίγονοι’ is Sophia, an aspect of the Son which not only symbolically but also hypostatically (ontologically) feminine, but also has male traits (for instance steadiness). In reality, souls are also hypostatically female regardless of the physical sex with which they are attached¹⁵.

Anna Navrozidou considers the use of the male and the female in the hermeneutics of Gen. 1:27 (male-female genderless first human-being) and Gen.2 (first couple with two distinct sexes and reproductive functions) contradictory and problematic¹⁶, on the one hand because the creation of Eve as a by-product with the mere purpose of procreation comes in contrast with Origen’s views on liberty, whereas the inclusion of the woman into the symbolic couples that represent cosmic harmony disengages binary differentiation from procreation¹⁷. On the other hand, Navrozidou is interested in how Origen sees the female nature and spots a tension between the spiritual and the carnal role. Lot’s daughters for instance embody the negative side in literal hermeneutics, since they were not successful in their roles as free souls –

¹² Ibid, pp.325.

¹³ Cerioni, pp.12.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp.10 (also: *CCels.*, 4.18, about Christ’s soul as a mother feeding the faithful with ‘her milk’ and in: *Comm. CC* 2,4.6 about female souls as ‘perfect men’).

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.3.

¹⁶ Navrozidou,pp.30.

¹⁷ Ibid, pp.27 (also: *Hom. in Genesim*, *Comm. in Genesim*).

(despite the fact that they accomplished the female role of procreation). On the other hand, Sarrah transcended the restrictions of her fleshly ‘deficiency’ as a barren old woman and became a mother, thus becoming a free soul¹⁸. Here, the regulating factor for giving a woman value is free will¹⁹. Equally interesting is Navrozidou’s observation about the 5th Homily on Lot, according to which Lot’s male soul is in harmony with his spirit, so its masculinity is associated with its rationality, whereas his wife’s soul is female because she is enslaved in the flesh. Thus, women are associated with lust and unfaithfulness²⁰.

Martens claims that Origen in his identification of the female with the pre-existent Church, he stresses that the latter, since she is a ‘female’ is prone to infidelity and sin. Therefore, she abandons her initial matrimonial union with the Logos, since He will eventually be united with her flesh (the divine-male will be united with the female human nature), after He has chased her as though she were an archetypically unfaithful female. In this union, God’s initial promise will be accomplished and they will ‘become one flesh’ (‘ἐσονται εἰς σάρκα μίαν’)²¹. So, he thinks that Origen allegorizes the feminine in a negative manner²². As for Origen’s perception of sexual desire, he observes that in the end times, the human with the male and the female re-united will no longer have the need for carnal desire or any sort of desire, since he/she will be complete and not in need of anything in his/her union with the Christ²³.

Jacobsen considers that Origen ‘de-sexualizes’ the female symbolism of Sophia (one of the Son’s dimensions (ἐπίνοια) so that he expresses his opposition to the Gnostic sect of Valentinianism²⁴. While Sophia is represented as a female that bears in her womb before all aeons all the created things and

¹⁸ Ibid, pp.30.

¹⁹ Ibid, pp.27.

²⁰ Ibid, pp.28.

²¹ Martens, pp.530 (also: *Comm. in Matthaeum*.14:17: ‘ἐν τῷ κατ’είκόνα ὀμφοτέροις χαρισάμενος’).

²² Ibid, pp.534 (also: *Comm.CC*).

²³ Ibid, pp.533 (also: *1 Cor.* 15:23).

²⁴ Jacobsen, pp. 1 (also: *Princ.*1,2,5).

subsequently gives birth to them through the primordial act of creation and despite the fact that he observes a frequent alternation of male and female titles for the Christ, the scholar does not see in Origen the intention of a ‘gendered’ representation of the hypostatic relation of the Father with Sophia as a relation of procreation²⁵.

Sarah Coakley, referring to Origen’s faulty association of Jesus’ message of love with the platonic eros and asceticism, adheres that this celibacy ideal is hostile to contemporary feminism as it allegorizes women as symbols of materiality, physical desire and sees them as mere instruments of procreation²⁶. In her view of Origen’s ‘gender theory, all sexual identities should be subdued to divine desire. Origen’s platonizing Christianity might be novel when it comes to gender but it cannot be linked to any modern gender theory as in him God is the ultimate goal, although the two genders can be seen through a different physical and social lens²⁷. Among her remarks is Origen’s sexualized imagery in his triadology (‘Origen, Contemplative Elitish and the Romans 8 Model’) (in *De Oratione*), where the Holy Spirit becomes female symbolically in prayer as its role there is presented as a woman’s labour²⁸. Its effect in prayer is a wondrous transcendence of spiritual sterility. In his *De oratione* he makes allusions to the dangers resulting from womanish lust and beauty. Coakley sees an eroticised triadology²⁹ but holds that this gendered symbolic language needs cautious interpretation (‘footnotes’)³⁰. All in all, she sees a demanding and complex renegotiation of gender in Origen, whose ‘gender theory’ is emancipating when it comes to social roles but providing it is beneficial for one’s mystical ascent³¹.

²⁵ Ibid, pp.5 (also: *Comm. in Ioannem* καὶ *Comm. CC*).

²⁶ Ibid, pp.9.

²⁷ Coakley, pp.10 comments on the concept of orientation prioritizing the orientation toward God and godly desire.

²⁸ Ibid, pp.127.

²⁹ Ibid, pp.130-131.

³⁰ Ibid, pp.131.

³¹ Ibid, pp.132.

The male and the female in Origen's anthropology and the transcendence of genders

According to my reading of Origen's texts, of great interest is his notion that in the Genesis creation story, the reference to the creation of male and female in the first narrative (Gen 1: 26-27) (ἐποίησεν) is distinguished from the 'shaping' (ἐπλασεν) of bodily man (Adam) and woman (Eve) from Adam's side (Gen. 2 4-25). Only the former, i.e., the male and female creation defines humanity in God's image. Thus, fleshly man and woman as distinct sexes do not pertain to the first creation of humanity according to God's image³². Origen clearly states that by no means is the woman according to the divine image nor is the man so, but 'those who excel (διαφέροντες) are called male, the second ones female'. In his *Commentary in Matthew*, he clearly states that this union of male and female is not an allusion to real marriage but is only an allegorical way for God to define the perfect human prototype in the male-female syzygy³³. This primordial couple is the 'interior homo' created in God's image, so the male and female are qualities of the interior human³⁴.

But what or who is God's image according to whom humans were made? It is the Christ, the Logos. He is described as being above all three grammatical 'genera' whereas the 'woman' is His Church but also the 'perfect soul' which is also the 'spouse' with whom He will become One flesh³⁵. This prospect is linked by Origen with God's creation of mankind intending to be reformed anew into His likeness³⁶. The latter could be attained through dominance over carnal desires.

³² *Comm. Evang. Matth.* XIV, in *PG*, v.13, pp.1225.

³³ *Ibid.* See also *Comm. CCant.*, I.2, in *SC* 376, pp.176-177.

³⁴ *Hom. Gen.* I,13, pp.158. See also *Selecta*, *PG*, v.12, pp. 93-96, where he asserts that the 'κατ' εἰκόνα' refers to the human soul and all its superior traits, the cognitive power, the ability to judge and do good, the inclination towards justice.

³⁵ *Comm. CCant.*, IX. 9, 3, in *SC*, pp.582-583.

³⁶ *Ibid.* See also *Hom. Gen.* I,13, pp.158 'Si anima coniuncta spiritui atque eius,coniugio copulata declinet..

Consequently, the male and the female are presented as intellectual categories or components of human existence which define the core human existence and their harmonious union in a form of spiritual matrimony blessed by God is a prerequisite for humanity's spiritual ascent, the multiplication and generation of virtues and the accomplishment of humanity's destiny as God's image to reach similitude with God.

However, this unified male and female, the first part the male-like spirit can prevent the soul from slipping into debauchery and fornication, even from becoming a cheating 'harlot' (meretrix) that is more inclined to pleasure like Eve who 'formicated' with the devil and because of her deed, the couple male and female broke and fell into the state of the sexed separated and distinct physical man and woman³⁷. Therefore, the primordial state of union of male and female does not have to do with sexual or physical characteristics but has a spiritual meaning, whereas the postlapsarian separated couple with their distinct sexual characteristics are associated with procreation and sinful sexuality³⁸

Moreover, although this symbolic language would allude to a ubiquitous state of male and female and marriage as the prototype of this perfect harmony between the two genders, Origen cannot escape the stereotype of the feminine being associated with receptiveness but also with lustfulness and prostitution, therefore a weak and inferior character³⁷. It is implied that without the male, the feminine cannot stand on its own, but must be tied in 'marital union' with the male. Without the male, all spiritual products of the union of the female (the soul) will be deemed illegitimate children. The female soul is thus highlighted only as existing in couple with the male spirit. Otherwise, it cannot attain its destination, that is procreation, in this present instance the generation of legitimate offspring, that is superior spiritual assets³⁷. Besides, whatever is associated with the woman (as well as with the man in their sexed nature) is profane and fleshly.

³⁷ Ibid., pp.1229 and pp.1225. See also, ibid.,pp. 1207 (*ανομία*),pp. 1230 (*Συναγωγή*),pp. 1251 (*μοιχεύσασα τῷ διαβόλῳ*). See also *Hom.Luc.* XXIII.

Thus, the binary distinction (the two) is more apt to the man-woman opposition but the non-binary One, the united male-female prototype is what pertains to the divine image. This would imply ‘equality’ also in the degenerate fleshly-sexual differentiated humanity, but the associations implied for the woman are much more negative in comparison to the ones for the man. This again clearly denotes that there is a distinction between the gendered female and the sexed woman. The female prototype is undoubtedly superior to the fleshly sexed woman³⁸.

The ‘Fall’ narrative is also crucial in understanding Origen’s stance, since it is Eve’s choice to betray God’s will and succumb to the serpent’s temptation. As a consequence, the primordial couple lose their ethereal bodies and fall into a material bodily existence. They are vested with their ‘δερμάτινοι χιτῶνες’ (‘tunicae pellicae’=skin cloaks), a heavier sort of body, prone to biological decay and death and can only reproduce through sexual intercourse and labor. The prelapsarian equality and spiritual nature of the two genders is disrupted by the Fall, which is the result of the female weakness, that is the weakness of the soul³⁹.

Therefore, Origen advocates the pre-eminence of an a-sexual state where the spiritual-masculine and the psychic-feminine aspects are in perfect union through an ascetic attitude throughout our lives. He stresses the importance of self discipline and the restriction of all physical sexual urges in view of a superior in nature spiritual growth⁴⁰. This is the ascetic renunciation ideal promoted mainly by the Alexandrian theological school that resulted on a practical level in the founding of numerous monastic communities in the Egyptian desert⁴¹. The question is: could this be revolutionary when it

³⁸ *Comm.Ioan.*, 1.9.

³⁹ *C Cels.*, IX, pp.1095 About sex distinction as the result of the Fall in *PG* 11,388-391. Δερμάτινοι χιτῶνες are the mortal and corruptible bodies with which God vested the first sexed postlapsarian humans. Actually, in the *Selecta in Genesim*, Origen adheres that they are vested with death because of their sin. *Comm. Gen.*.. III.16.

⁴⁰ *De Principiis*. 1:8, pp. 140-141.

⁴¹ Eusebius, *Eccl. Hist.* VI.18.

comes to the way he views the social constructs of gender and women's position in the Church and society in general?

Whereas we know from Eusebius of Caesarea that many of Origen's catechumens were women in the Catechetical School of Alexandria, which means he had an inclusive approach as far as their Christian education is concerned, among his theological views are-judging from his reference to Paul in his *Commentary on I Corinthians* 14, 34-35 about the fact that female prophets never spoke in public- indicative of his accord with the mainstream belief of his era, according to which women were viewed as the 'weak sex'⁴². This is further supported by the fact that his allegorical interpretation of the *Bible* denotes the feminine as an equal element in regard with the male, but with an inclination towards fleshly and emotional weakness as we saw above⁴³.

On the other hand, he still retains the stereotypical depiction of the feminine as the more feeble part of human identity, although its primordial and divine state is portrayed as ultimately androgynous, or rather beyond gender distinction. The ascetic ideal is linked with a divine gift that involves the renunciation from earthly marriage⁴⁴. Despite the fact that 'pure celibacy' is the perfect state, he did not dismiss marriage but regarded it as necessary for procreation. When it comes to the spiritual realm, marriage is seen as a metaphor or an allegory which alludes to the ascete's mystical union of the soul (regardless of one's sex) or the Church (the bride) with Christ the Logos (the bridegroom), especially in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*⁴⁵. In terms of its social and everyday practice, marriage is considered to be only a concession for those - either men or women - who cannot embrace celibacy thus making themselves 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven'⁴⁶. Celibacy is the state that brings one to

⁴² *Comm. I Cor.*, in *PG*, v. 14, pp.823. In the *CCels.* V. III, pp.44.

⁴³ *Comm. CCant.* VI, 2.

⁴⁴ *Comm. Matth.* XIX,12.

⁴⁵ *Comm. CCant.*, III, 9.2, *SC* 376, pp.582-583. Also *ibid.*, pp. 584-585. Also, I. 2, pp. 176-177.

⁴⁶ *Comm. Matth/*, XV (*Matth.19:12*).

the primordial resemblance with God's image, the Christ and is therefore for those with a higher calling.

As indicated above, the ultimate marriage will be with the Logos who is above all genders and gender distinctions⁴⁷. This union will be attained through the practice of the virtues which have a feminine-like quality as to their grammatical typology and which will also be the offspring of this union⁴⁸. This is because in the Christ we are 'neither male nor female' but humanity is all one regardless of sexes and genders⁴⁹. What is more interesting, is the maternal (therefore female) role assigned to the Christ Spouse who breast-feeds His beloved with spiritual fruit⁵⁰. The soul is shown as chasing the perfumed and spiritually charming Bridegroom and fervently longs for his lips and breasts. The imagery is clearly sensual and gender roles are reversed but Origen warns those of us who have not got rid of fleshly sensuality (the 'exterior and fleshly man') to abstain from reading the Song and invites those who are turned towards the 'homo interior' to perceive the deep spiritual truths⁵¹.

This call for the divine marriage is a struggle towards the eschatological vision of a sexless existence of human-beings. In the end-times after the Resurrection the resurrected bodies will be transformed into a spiritual body that will have a more refined quality similar to the ethereal bodies of angels and identical to the sexless bodies that the very first human noes (intellects) had when they were created according to God's image. Our bodies will no longer be physical but they will be transformed into glorified, incorruptible ones as Paul wrote in *I Corinthians 15:42-44*. As Jesus prophesied, 'in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage,

⁴⁷ *Comm. CCant.* III.9.3, *SC* 376, pp.582-583. Cf. Terezis C. A., "Aspects of the presence of the Aristotelian Logic in Western and Eastern Christianity. The "middle places" according to Boethius and Holobolus", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 2023, pp. 67-84; Papaoikonomou A. D., "Christianity and Rationalism: Maximus the Confessor vs. Descartes", *Dia-noesis: A Journal of Philosophy*, 14, 2023, pp. 39-52.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.130-131, also pp.84.

but are like angels in heaven', so sexuality and procreation will no longer be necessary. We will have become non-sexual, like angels with no sex differentiation. Therefore, humanity will have returned to the prelapsarian state when we existed in a non-corporeal state with no division into male and female. The latter was the consequence of sin. In the Resurrection, this division will be abolished altogether and humanity will be brought back to their initial undividedness when it comes to sexes.

A critical approach to contemporary research

In my opinion, Prinzivalli is accurate in claiming that Origen recognizes humanity's primordial identity as a coupled male and female in perfect union, she rather gives little or no value to Origen's persistence in using stereotypical language, particularly regarding the female's supposed inclination to weakness or fleshly sin⁵². Even the female in the primordial coupled human nature is presented as the second one and the male as 'excelling' ('οἱ μέν διαφέροντες ἄρρεν, οἱ δε δεύτεροι θῆλυ') and it is associated with the soul which cannot stand on its own unless it is coupled with the male⁵³.

On the other hand, Lavinia Cerioni, makes a good point in asserting that in Origen both the paternalistic dichotomy of sexes and the non-binary approach co-exist in a way, as the restoration theory also applies to the transcendence of gender distinction whereas in many other instances he retains all the stereotypical language of his time and considers gender distinction to be necessary for our current postlapsarian state. However, her view that gender indefiniteness transcends the antithesis between the 'superior' male and the 'inferior' female in the *Commentary of the Song of Songs* is not supported by Origen's other passages such as the Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew where the female is seen also under a negative scope⁵⁴. Even in the *Commentary in the Song of*

⁵² *Hom. Gen.* I.13, pp.158. *Comm. Matth.* XI, in *PG.*, v. 13, pp.1251.

⁵³ *Comm. Matthaeum.* XIV, pp.1225.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Songs, Origen adheres that his use of gendered language is strictly grammatical and warns the readers not to associate what they will read with the real male or female genders⁵⁵. She also argues that the Christ as Sophia could be regarded as ontologically feminine despite Origen's clear statement that such a viewpoint is held by the Gnostics and Origen does not regard it as not valid. She claims that this statement is only there because of his desire to oppose the Gnostics who assign ontological gender assets to non-bodily divine aspects. He clearly claims it is about 'naming' and not about being. If he would assign a feminine ontology to dimensions of the divine, why should Origen clarify that it is about 'names' and not essentially the feminine, not only in the *Commentary in the Song of Songs* but also in other passages such as the *Contra Celsum*⁵⁶? Note also that in the Commentary on the Song of Songs the 'genera' used are 'for the inclination of the feminine gender', therefore, we have to do with grammatical and linguistic traits and not hypostatical ones⁵⁷.

Besides, although Anna Navrozidou makes a goof point in claiming that Origen's view on genders is contradictory and problematic since Eve is viewed as a 'tool' for procreation, whereas the male and female couple is disengaged from reproduction, I would add that the latter aims at a spiritual sort of 'procreation' but only on the premises that the female stays coupled with the male. Nonetheless, Navrozidou is correct in claiming that in Origen there is a tension between the spiritual and the carnal role of the two genders. Fleshly women are indeed associated with lust and unfaithfulness, but if they stay coupled with the Christ, they can fight this tendency⁵⁸.

Other researchers point out Origen's dual stance towards the feminine. Martens draws the plausible conclusion that

⁵⁵ *Comm. CCant. IV*, 9, in *SC* 876, pp. 582-584.

⁵⁶ *CCels.* 5:39: *Οὐ γὰρ παρὰ τὸ θηλυκὸν ὄνομα καὶ τῇ οὐσίᾳ θήλειαν νομιστέον εἰναι τὴν σοφίαν καὶ τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅπερ καθ' ἡμᾶς.* See also, *Comm. Cant.* 3, 9, pp. 2: *Et sicut hic sapientiam non ideo aliquam feminanam dici putabis, quia femineo nomine appellari videtur.*

ἐστιν ὁ νιὸς τοῦ θεοῦ..

⁵⁷ *Comm. CCant.* IV: 9, in *SC* 376, pp. 582-584 and *ibid.*

⁵⁸ *De Principiis*, I.6, pp. 116-117. *Ibid.* II, p.2.

Origen allegorizes the feminine also in a negative way⁵⁹. Jacobsen makes the accurate point according to which Origen desexualizes the female, since he portrays a human-being above genders⁶⁰. Cloakley's view that Origen's celibacy ideal is hostile to the modern feminist theory since women are still an image of materiality and physical desire and associated with procreation is partly true, since Origen's double attitude could not be entirely on a par with the modern Feminist theory which largely relies on the non-theocentric idea of human rights⁶¹.

Finally, Ilaria Ramelli is perfectly right in supporting that Origen's gender-independent anthropology echoes the first Christian community's custom of accepting the priestly ordination of women, since the criterion for spiritual gifts, according to Christian theology, is not the differentiation of genders but spiritual and moral purity which he also emphasises as the primary vehicle for salvation⁶². However, Ramelli's view that Origen's allegorical method ruled out a misogynic kind of hermeneutics of biblical narratives as well as the exclusion of women from the Church's leadership could not be altogether true since there are still some remnants-(as mentioned above)-that place the female as second in the primordial pair or associate it with negative tendencies if disengaged from the male⁶³. According to her, although Origen makes use of allegory that identifies the male with positive aspects of the human nature and the female with negative ones, he judges as the primary culprit of the Fall not the female nature as such but ethical choice. This could be right but since she identifies it with the inherent dependency of the second in the pair female-like pre-existent Church to stay in union with the male-like sovereign spirit or the Christ her act of autonomous behaviour that is seen as fornication seems to also play a part

⁵⁹ Martens, 533.

⁶⁰ Jacobsen, 9.

⁶¹ Cloakley, 9.

⁶² Ibid, pp.321-322 (also: *Comm. Corinth.* 14:34-35).

⁶³ Ramelli, pp.323.

in this ethical choice ultimately since the divine Logos could not ever make such a choice⁶⁴.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in Origen's gendered theological language, the feminine is seen both positively and negatively. In his aspiration to depict the unified pair male-female as the primordial and quintessential archetype of humanity that will be restored in the end-times, although he portrays the female as part of the perfect couple that makes up the essence of humanity in God's image, the female is nonetheless presented as second and it cannot escape the stereotypical connotations of the Greco-Roman world altogether. Therefore, Origen draws his imagery from stereotypical depictions of women, as either mothers or potentially weak or even sinful adulteresses (even whores). In his archetypical description of the first human-beings but also in his postlapsarian and eventually in his eschatological anthropology, sexuality and the biological sex distinction are seen as the degenerate forms of a higher spiritual state of sexlessness and an absence of sexual differentiation. Thus, we cannot esteem Origen to be a genuine adherent of the equality of sexes as we know it in today's discussion about genders, since his view is that a spiritually advanced way of ascending towards the divine is the renunciation of sex differentiation and the material sexuality in general, but seek a spiritual sort of Eros that puts our gendered-surely also our sexual- natures aside.

One could argue that this is indeed a 'non-binary' approach of human-sexuality but on a totally different level, namely a spiritual one which does not yet deny the postlapsarian state of division. The latter can only be transcended through prayer, asceticism and a Christian spiritual life whose aim is to subjugate all sexual or physical passions.

On the other hand, it is of great importance as a step forward that even on an allegorical or a metaphysical level the male and the female are seen as primordially equal and he opposes to non-Christian views of his time that degrade

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp.325.

women. But this should be seen strictly on the basis of his Christian theological heritage. In the first place, his belief in the transformative power of the Christ that leads to a unity that transcends all distinctions including the ones that sexual differentiation entails, as well as his eschatological vision of resurrected humanity echo Paul's 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'.

Origen does not aspire to refer to social gender roles or promote a certain sort of sexuality. On the contrary, his anthropological portrait of the male and the female juxtaposed with the distinction of man and woman in fleshly terms aims at propagating a transcendent anthropological model beyond genders and sexes. His angel-like eschatological resurrected human-being beyond any notion of gender where it does not really matter whether one was born as either a man or a woman could offer a very broad terrain for study to a modern gender theorist. The ontological nucleus of the human-existence is no longer dependent on one's sex or social concept of gender but goes far beyond it. His optimism is noteworthy in his adamant faith that the perfect human-nature can be attained in spite of the restrictions of corporeality and social norms. In his theology, matter is eventually spiritualized so that humanity's divine image is finally restored. This very ideal applies also to the distinction of sexes. In the end, all shall be one in God.

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Articles



