

ORIGEN, VALENTINIANISM AND WOMEN'S ROLES

Lavinia Cerioni (lav.cer@cas.au.dk)
Aarhus University

Abstract:

This article analyses Origen of Alexandria's and Heracleon's exegeses of the Samaritan woman. It focuses on their allegorical interpretations of the woman and feminine elements (e.g. water jar) as theological and philosophical concepts. The first part of the article offers a brief overview of the scholarship on Origen and Valentinianism. The second part examines and confronts the exegetical methodology, the feminine allegories and the resulting theologies in the texts of the two authors. I will show that their different uses of the feminine as theological and philosophical categories give rise to opposing exegeses of the gospel passage and divergent views about women's role in society.

Key Words:

Origen, Valentinianism, Samaritan Woman, Biblical Exegesis, Women

Introduction

The debate about women's roles in early Christian communities has been livelier than ever in the last decades, as women are still struggling to find their place in many Christian churches and look to the past to understand their modern struggles. In recent years, scholarship on women's role has been polarized regarding the narrative of a dichotomy between heretic/orthodox Christian movements, with women holding leaderships roles in the former and relegated to subservient roles in the

latter.¹ Although there is clear evidence that some minority Christian movements of the first centuries had female leaders, the history of women's lives and the cultural representation of the female gender in early Christianity are much more nuanced and cannot be reduced to opposing poles. This article undertakes a nuanced examination of the exegesis of the Samaritan woman by both Origen of Alexandria and the Valentinian teacher Heracleon. The inquiry shows that the allegiance to either minority or mainstream Christian movements bears minimal correlation with the delineation of women's roles, whilst the theological representation of the female gender reveals many fundamental aspects of the author's theological analysis.

Origen's relation to Valentinianism is a widely debated issue in scholarship on early Christianity. Scholars of the last seven decades devoted a significant effort to investigate it, reaching conflicting conclusions about the correlation between Origen's theology and Valentinian works.² Some claim that Origen utterly rejected Valentinian doctrines as heterodox;³ others picture him as deeply influenced by Valentinianism.⁴ Some scholars believe that Origen has – at the same time – absorbed and

¹ Karen L. King, (ed.), *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*. Harrisburg: Trinity Press International 2000. For a more recent study on women's roles, see Joan E. Taylor & Ilaria L. E. Ramelli (eds.), *Patterns of Women's Leadership in Early Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2021.

² Anna Van den Kerchove, "Origen and the 'Heterodox'. The Prologue of the Commentary on John within the Christian Alexandrian Context" in Daniel Herrmann et al. (eds.), *Alexandria: Hub of the Hellenistic World*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2021, 487–501; Jean-Daniel Dubois, "Le 'Traité des principes' d'Origène et le 'Traité tripartite' valentinien: Une lecture comparée de leurs prologues" in Jean-Daniel Dubois & Bernard Roussel (eds.), *Entrée en matière: Les prologues*, Paris: Cerf 1998, 53–63; Antonio Orbe, *Cristología gnóstica: introducción a la soteriología de los siglos II y III*, Madrid: Editorial Católica 1976; Gilles Quispel, "Origen and the Valentinian Gnosis," *Vigiliae Christianae* 28 (1974), 29–42; Manlio Simonetti, "Eracleone e Origene", *Vetera Christianorum* 4 (1967), 39–58; Manlio Simonetti, "Eracleone e Origene", *Vetera Christianorum* 3 (1966), 111–141; Jean Daniélou, *Origène*, Paris: La Table Ronde 1948.

³ Mark Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church*, Boca Raton: Routledge 2009, 79–103.

⁴ Gaetano Lettieri, "Il nous mistico. Il superamento origeniano dello Gnosticismo nel Comento a Giovanni" in Emanuela Prinzivalli (ed.), *Il Comento a Giovanni di Origene: il testo ed i suoi contesti*, Villa Verrucchio: Pazzini Editore 2005, 177–275.

rejected Valentinian doctrines to develop his own original theology.⁵ This article contributes to this long-standing debate by looking at the female framework of Origen's and Heracleon's exegesis, that is, their respective theological use of feminine allegories and their representation of women's role in their exegesis of the Samaritan woman.

The article is divided in two parts. The first part briefly summarizes the scholarly debate about the existence and forms of the Valentinian school, without pretending to exhaust such a complex argument, and investigates Origen's knowledge of Valentinianism and his own experience with Valentinians. The second part explores Origen's exegesis of the Samaritan woman by comparing it with Heracleon's interpretation. This gospel passage offers also the opportunity to see how women's sexuality, phrased in terms of her spousal status or lack thereof, becomes the exegetical key to unlock the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures.⁶ I argue that Origen's and Heracleon's different interpretations of the Samaritan woman are caused by a different understanding of women and the feminine as theological and philosophical categories, rather than a fundamental disagreement in exegetical methodologies. On the contrary, Heracleon and Origen share the same allegorical methodologies of interpreting Scripture, but they attribute extremely different allegorical meaning to the feminine gender. If Origen allegorically interprets women's sexuality as the embodiment of his theology of progress, Heracleon uses it to represent the faultiness of human nature. Although Origen is well aware of the Valentinian theological models of interpreting feminine images and allegories, he does not incorporate them in his own theology as they are, but rather transforms them into something utterly different. These two allegorical exegeses result in an opposite evaluation of women's social and cultural role, with Origen actually offering a more positive portrayal of women in Christian communities.

⁵ Carl J. Berglund, "Origen's Vacillating Stances toward His "Valentinian" Colleague Heracleon", *Vigiliae Christianae* 71:5 (2017), 541–569; Manlio Simonetti, "Eracleone e Origene Sulla Samaritana", *Vetera Christianorum* 53 (2016), 5–17.

⁶ Thanks go to Monnica Klöckener who has underlined the importance of the Samaritan woman for Origen's argument about the dignity of human beings: Monnica Klöckener, "The Samaritan Woman in Origen's Commentary on John Seen from a Modern Perspective of Human Dignity" in Alfons Fürst (ed.), *Perspectives on Origen and the History of his Reception*, Aschendorff: Münster 2021, 67–80.

Origen and Valentinianism

The existence of a Gnostic Valentinian school was questioned in the 1990s following Michael Williams' proposal to dismantle the category of Gnosticism.⁷ Following the dissemination of the Nag Hammadi codices and the uncertainties in defining the Gnostic multilayered religious phenomenon,⁸ the debate on Origen and Valentinianism reached a stalemate. Only few new studies on this topic have been conducted in the following years, most likely due to the unclear definition of Valentinianism.⁹ However, Einar Thomassen demonstrated with both textual and archeological evidence the existence of a Valentinian school.¹⁰ This school is known to us through Nag Hammadi treatises – mostly the *Gospel of Philip*, the *Gospel of Truth* and the *Tripartite Tractate* – and polemical accounts of the so-called heresiologists, and some pieces of archeological evidence.¹¹ Thomassen summarizes the core features of Valentinianism in three doctrines: 1. The historical appearance of the Saviour; 2. the protological speculation about the origin of plurality; 3. the ritually enacted redemption.¹²

As a matter of fact, the Valentinian doctrines presented by Thomassen corresponds for the large part to those beliefs which Origen identi-

⁷ See Ismo Dunderberg, *Beyond Gnosticism: Myth, Lifestyle, and Society in the School of Valentinus*, New York: Columbia University Press 2008; Michael A. Williams, *Rethinking "Gnosticism": An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1996.

⁸ There are also studies on other identifiable Gnostic movements, such as Ophitism and Sethianism, see Tuomas Rasimus, *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence*, Leiden: Brill 2009; John Turner, "The Gnostic Sethians and Middle Platonism: Interpretations of the Timaeus and Parmenides", *Vigiliae Christianae* 60:1 (2006), 9–64.

⁹ Van den Kerchove, "Origen and the 'Heterodox'"; Berglund, "Origen's Vacillating Stances".

¹⁰ Einar Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed: The Church of the "Valentinians"*, Leiden: Brill 2006.

¹¹ Gregory H. Snyder, "The Discovery and Interpretation of the Flavia Sophe Inscription: New Results", *Vigiliae Christianae* 68:1 (2014), 1–59; id., "A Second-Century Christian Inscription from the Via Latina", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 19:2 (2011), 157–95.

¹² Thomassen, *The Spiritual Seed*, 2. For further studies on Valentinianism, see Christoph Marksches & Einar Thomassen (eds.), *Valentinianism: New Studies*, Leiden: Brill 2020; Christoph Marksches and Johannes van Oort (ed.), *Zugänge zur Gnosis. Studien der Patristischen Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, Leuven/Walpole: Peeters 2013.

fied as Valentinian. Origen never quotes any of the Nag Hammadi Valentinian treatises known to us, but he alludes implicitly and explicitly to Valentinian doctrines throughout his entire corpus. It is likely that his knowledge of Valentinianism came from both firsthand experience with Valentinian communities and exposure to the works of other theologians who polemicized against Valentinians, particularly Clement of Alexandria.¹³ Origen mentions Valentinus explicitly several times (31, to be exact) and often refers to his followers in Greek as those *apo tou Oualentinou*.¹⁴ Thanks to recent discovery of the *Homilies on Psalms*, the Greek terms *Oualentinianos* and *Oualentinianoï* are also attested in the Origenian corpus.¹⁵ Besides mentioning the founder of the school and its followers, Origen discusses in details the doctrines of Valentinus' disciple Heracleon,¹⁶ whose *Commentary on the Gospel of John* was refuted in details by Origen in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Heracleon is the only Valentinian teacher whom Origen quotes directly, and Origen is also one of the two sources through which the books of Heracleon are known.¹⁷

Although Origen could not have met Heracleon personally, it is almost certain that Origen met several Valentinians given the existence of

¹³ Gilles Dorival & Alain Le Boulluec, *L'abeille et l'acier: Clément d'Alexandrie et Origène*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 2019.

¹⁴ For instance, *Cels.* 2, 27–5, 61–6, 35 in Marcel Borret (ed.), *Origène: Contre Celse*, tome I–V (Sources chrétiennes 132, 136, 147, 150, 227), Paris: Cerf 1967–1976; *Hom. Luc.* 20, 2 in Henri Crouzel, François Fournier & Pierre Périchon (eds.), *Origène: Homélie sur saint Luc* (Sources chrétiennes 87), Paris: Cerf 1962.

¹⁵ The former is attested twice in *Hom. Ps.* 10,7 and 22,7, while the latter in *Hom. Ps.* 24,7, also twice. For the texts, see Lorenzo Perrone, Marina Molin Pradel, Emanuela Prinzivalli, & Antonio Cacciari (eds.) *Die neuen Psalmenhomilien: eine kritische Edition des Codex monacensis graecus 314*, (Origenes Werke, 13), Berlin: De Gruyter 2015.

¹⁶ *Comm. John* 2, 100 in Cécile Blanc (ed.), *Origène: Commentaire sur saint Jean*, tome I–V (Sources chrétiennes 120 bis, 222, 290, 385), Paris: Cerf 1996–1992. For the English translation, see Ronald E. Heine, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press 1993.

¹⁷ Ansgar Wucherpennig, *Heracleon Philologus: Gnostische Johannesexegese im zweiten Jahrhundert*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2002; Michael Kaler & Marie-Pierre Bussi eres, "Was Heracleon a Valentinian? A New Look at Old Sources", *Harvard Theological Review* 99:3 (2006), 275–279. For the other source on Heracleon's fragments, that is Clement of Alexandria, see Carl Johan Berglund, "References to Heracleon in Clement of Alexandria", *Early Christianity* 12 (2021), 228–247.

a strong and lively Valentinian community in third-century Alexandria, the city where he spent his youth and early adulthood and received his theological formation.¹⁸ If we are to believe Eusebius' biography, Origen's patroness, who helped him when he was only eighteen, was also sponsoring another young teacher named Paul, who was likely a member of the Valentinian school.¹⁹ In Origen's letters, whose authenticity is disputed, he himself admits that he was approached by philosophically trained Christian heretics and that he then took an interest in these heretical doctrines in order to refute them.²⁰ It seems likely that Origen is referring to Valentinianism, given that he often addresses Valentinianism openly as one of his main polemical targets. In addition, Valentinian teachers are certainly among the most learned Christian teachers of the third-century Alexandrian theological and philosophical landscape. Among members of Origen's intellectual circle, it is attested that his friend and patron Ambrose had been a Valentinian at some point in his life.²¹ As Origen's patron, Ambrose strongly encouraged him to carry on his refutation of Heracleon's *Commentary*, and Origen even complains that Ambrose forced him to write too many books.²² Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* was not composed all at once, but it was developed over the course of several years. Origen himself tells us that he wrote the first five books while he was in Alexandria, thus before 235 CE, and the following books in Caesarea. The thirty-second book, probably the last he had written, was composed around 245. Despite Origen's massive effort, the commentary was never completed, probably because Origen intensified his pastoral commitments in the last decade of his life.²³

It is unfortunately not clear how and when Origen came to read Heracleon's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Since Heracleon's commentary

¹⁸ Manlio Simonetti (ed.), *Testi gnostici in lingua greca e latina*, Milano: Mondadori 1999.

¹⁹ Eusebius, HE 6,2,13–15 in Eusèbe de Césarée, *Histoire ecclésiastique*, tome II Livres V–VII, Texte grec, traduction et notes par Gustave Bardy (Sources chrétiennes 41), Paris: Cerf 1995; Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen. Early Church Fathers*, London: Routledge 1998, 8.

²⁰ Eusebius, HE 6,18,2 and 6,19,12.

²¹ Eusebius, HE 6,18,1.

²² *Comm. John* 5, 1–2.

²³ Ronald E. Heine, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press 1996, 4–19.

was written prior to Origen's work, it is the first known exegetical commentary on a gospel, but it is not possible to identify a more precise date for its composition. Anna Van den Kerchove suggests convincingly that Origen read it in Alexandria, despite not quoting the book directly in the Alexandrian books of *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. She suggests that Origen did not need to make explicit reference to this work when he wrote in Alexandria as the local Christian community was already aware of Valentinian doctrines, and it is likely Origen did not want to encourage the rumors that slandered him about his connection to so-called heretics.²⁴ By contrast, the community in Caesarea had no direct knowledge of Valentinian teachings and Origen felt the need to warn them in details about the risks of what he believed an erroneous approach to Scripture.²⁵

It is indeed the exegetical approach to Scripture that represents the core of Origen's controversy with Heracleon, in particular, and Valentinian teachers in general. Both theologians are clearly well versed in hermeneutical techniques and master the Scriptures. Although Origen polemicizes vehemently against Heracleon's exegesis, they employ the same allegorical methodology when interpreting the Scripture. Manlio Simonetti noted that "Given the exceptional exegetical expertise of the two theologians, their comparison meant the mature application, in a Christian cultural environment, of the *ratio interpretandi* of the classic hermeneutics".²⁶ Thus, Origen sometimes resorts to an accusation of poor philological and exegetical accuracy in Heracleon's commentary, being unable to criticize his allegorical methodology.²⁷ Both Origen and Heracleon value mostly the allegorical meaning of the Scripture, often justifying their allegories by means of biblical associations, and by creating a meta-narrative which can be understood only by the more advanced readers. The main point of contrast between the two exegetical methods lies therefore in the different consideration of what is the correct allegorical meaning of the Scripture and who can achieve such an understanding. According to what Origen reports in his *Commentary*,

²⁴ Eusebius, *HE* 6,19,2–4.

²⁵ Heracleon is named only twice in the Alexandrian books, while his presence is much stronger in the Caesarean books with 46 mentions. See Van den Kerchove, "Origen and the 'Heterodox'", 492–493.

²⁶ Simonetti, "Eracleone e Origene Sulla Samaritana", 16.

²⁷ *Comm. John* 6, 306.

the answer to the question depends on the human natures for the Valentinian Heracleon. Only those who were protologically endowed with a spiritual nature will understand the spiritual and hidden meanings of the Scripture. The scholarly interpretation regarding Heracleon's theory of the fixity of natures is harshly contested by Wucherpennig as an Origenian slander, although there are no other sources to attest otherwise.²⁸ The problem of whether the three Valentinian natures (hylic, psychic and pneumatic) are to be considered deterministic or not is one of the major issues of Valentinian scholarship, and it cannot be addressed here.²⁹ For Origen, the correct allegorical meaning is a matter of spiritual progress, exegetical proficiency in reading the Scripture and operating a "movement 'from *lexis* to *logos*,' from the finite words of scripture to the infinite underlying capacity for wise speech they exhibit", to borrow the words of Mark James.³⁰ Origen's allegorical exegesis, far from being arbitrary, as it was claimed by several scholars,³¹ strives to understand the language of scripture in a way that takes into consideration all the possible meanings of the Scriptural words and sees it as a pedagogical path which leads to supreme Wisdom.

Origen and the Feminine

Within the context of the studies of Origen's relation to what he believed to be Valentinianism, an investigation of the use of feminine allegories in Origen's and Heracleon's understanding of the Gospel of John is particularly interesting because of the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures which these theologians were seeking. From the extant passages, it

²⁸ Wucherpennig, *Heracleon Philologus*.

²⁹ Jean-Daniel Dubois, "Once Again, the Valentinian Expression 'Saved by Nature'" in Marksches & Thomassen, *Valentinianism*, 193–204; Alexander Kocar, "The Ethics of Higher and Lower Levels of Salvation in the *Excerpt from Theodotus* and the *Tripartite Tractate*" in Marksches & Thomassen, *Valentinianism*, 205–238; Einar Thomassen, "Saved by Nature? The Question of Human Races and Soteriological Determinism in Valentinianism" in Marksches & van Oort, *Zugänge Zur Gnosis*, 129–150; Ismo Dunderberg, "Valentinian Theories on Classes of Humankind" in Marksches & van Oort, *Zugänge zur Gnosis*, 113–128; Francesco Berio, "Valentinus gnosticus. Note a Ref VI 36, 6–8", *Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni* 82:1 (2016), 239–262.

³⁰ Mark R. James, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation*, Leiden: Brill 2021.

³¹ Robert P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2002.

seems that the episode of the Samaritan woman was as significant for Heracleon as it was for Origen. Possibly, it became significant for Origen since it was particularly significant for Heracleon.³² In their quests, both Heracleon and Origen make specific assumptions about the allegorical meaning of women and female everyday objects and used them to signify theological concepts. Having inherited a neat gendered metaphorical dichotomy from the Platonic and Philonic writings,³³ both authors understand the feminine to represent lower ontological perfection (that is, the human condition), while they employ masculine metaphors to signify the higher ontological perfection (that is, the divine condition). Most times, they both interpret the Samaritan woman as a type of the human soul.³⁴ But unlike previous traditions, both authors use feminine metaphors to express the dynamics of being, the subjection to passions and the need for redemption. Despite these similarities, the theological implications resulting from their use of feminine imagery could not be more different.³⁵ For these reasons, I believe that research on Origen and Valentinianism could greatly benefit by looking at feminine allegories more closely. In the following section, I bring several examples of how a similar allegorical exegesis of women and female-related everyday objects (e.g. water jar) can result in the affirmation of two opposing theological doctrines and two different views of the theological significance of the female gender.

³² This is particularly evident in Simonetti, "Eracleone e Origene Sulla Samaritana".

³³ Robert M. Berchman & John F. Finamore (eds.), *Women and the Female in Neoplatonism*, Leiden: Brill 2022; Kathrine Gillhuly, *The Feminine Matrix of Sex and Gender in Classical Athens*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009; Richard A. Baer, *Philo's Use of the Categories Male and Female*, Leiden: Brill 1970.

³⁴ For the soul as female in Origen and its theological and philosophical implications, see Alfons Fürst & Holger Strutwolf (eds.), *Origenes, Die Homilien Und Fragmente Zum Hohelied*, Berlin: De Gruyter 2016, 24–29; Herrmann Vogt, "Die Witwe als Bild der Seele in der Exegese des Origenes", *Theologische Quartalschrift Tübingen* 165 (1985), 105–118. For the soul as female in Valentinianism, see Ulla Tervahauta, *A Story of the Soul's Journey in the Nag Hammadi Library: A Study of Authentikos Logos (NHC VI,3)*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht 2015; Lettieri, "Il nous mistico", 245–274.

³⁵ For a survey of the different uses of Gnostic feminine imagery see Lavinia Cerioni, *Revealing Women. Feminine Imagery in Gnostic Christian Texts*, Turnhout: Brepols 2021.

The Exegesis of the Samaritan Woman

Although the episode of the Samaritan woman occupies the entire thirteenth book of Origen's *Commentary on John*, we have a partial interpretation of the episode since only Origen's commentary from Jn 4:13 onward is preserved. The encounter between Jesus and the woman was commented on in the twelfth book of the commentary, which is unfortunately lost.

Origen allegorizes the Samaritan woman as the type of the heterodox Christian believer: she has searched for God her whole life, she has had many husbands and, allegorically, she has been exposed to so many beliefs that she is not able to recognize a true prophet.³⁶ The encounter with Jesus at the well represents the turning point of her life, for she is allowed to drink the living waters of the eternal life. Because of this encounter, she is now free of her previous ignorance and is converted to the true faith and becomes an apostle.³⁷ As Monnica Klöckener stressed in her recent article, the Samaritan woman is a pivotal example of Origen's belief in human dignity.³⁸ The Samaritan woman represents the heterodox both literally and metaphorically: she is a Samaritan, therefore her religion was ill-considered by those belonging to Pharisaic Judaism,³⁹ and she has divorced five husbands, which allegorically represents the many literalist Christian movements of the earliest centuries. In line with Origen's theological pedagogy and in opposition to Valentinian doctrines on human natures, the woman's heterodoxy is not interpreted as a permanent status but as a momentary lapse in judgment. Her relationship with these men symbolizes the soul's search for God, and the opposition between licit and illicit sexual relationships for women is a driving feature of the Origenian theological framework in this passage. Associating women's sexual relationships with the search for God is a recurrent trait in Origen's writings, and the most explicit example is Origen's exegesis of the *Commentary and Homilies on the Song of Songs*, where the bride becomes the type of every believer in search

³⁶ *Comm. John* 13,1,7; 13,8,48; 13,9,51–52.

³⁷ *Comm. John* 13,169.

³⁸ Klöckener "The Samaritan Woman", 68.

³⁹ *Comm. John* 13, 77–79.

for God.⁴⁰ From a literary perspective, there are two notable antecedents to Origen's sexual allegory: the Jewish tradition of Israel as a bride or a prostitute, and the Valentinian mythology of Sophia.⁴¹ There is, of course, a certain degree of interconnection between these three traditions, but Origen is openly polemizing against the bride/prostitute paradigm which drives Valentinian mythologies in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. In both Origen's texts and Valentinian mythologies, the sexual status of women becomes the key exegetical element for the allegorical interpretation of all female gospel figures. In Origen, promiscuity is interpreted as a literal and/or erroneous allegorical interpretation of Scripture, while Valentinianism uses the myths of Sophia's sexual desire to explain the origin of the physical and material world and, consequently, evil.⁴² For Origen, understanding the Samaritan woman's marital situation is important to such an extent that he dedicates a brief excursus to explaining the rules that regulate women's sexuality in the Jewish society. A woman is considered an adulterer if she lies with a man before her husband dies, but she is allowed to be with another man if her previous husband died.⁴³ According to Origen, the Samaritan woman's previous husbands are not dead, but she gave them *to apostasion*, a bill of divorce, which would put her in a very weak position, as the status of divorced women in the Jewish law was, at the very least, socially and economically challenging.⁴⁴ Origen writes: "The Samaritan woman's relationship with five husbands, and after them her association with a sixth who was not her legitimate husband, was everything that she had done."⁴⁵ Her having multiple partners has a double allegorical meaning. On the one hand, Origen identifies them with the five

⁴⁰ *Comm. Cant.* 1,3, 12–13; 1,4,7–10; 1,5,8–9; 2,4,11; 4,1,1–3 in Luc Brésard & Henri Crouzel (eds.), *Origène: Commentaire sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, tome I–II (Sources chrétiennes 375–376), Paris: Cerf 1991–1992.

⁴¹ Cerioni, *Revealing Women*.

⁴² For the Valentinian protological mythology see *Valentinian Exposition* (NHC XI, 2); Irenaeus, *Haer.* 1,1–8; Hippolytus, *Elenchos* 6, 29–36.

⁴³ *Comm. John* 13, 43–46.

⁴⁴ Bernard Jackson, "The 'Institutions' of Marriage and Divorce in the Hebrew Bible", *Journal of Semitic Studies* 56:2 (2011), 221–251.

⁴⁵ *Comm. John* 13, 181: Πάντα δὲ ἦν, ἃ ἐποίησεν ἡ γυνή, ἢ πρὸς τοὺς πέντε ἄνδρας κοινωνία καὶ μετ' ἐκείνους ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἕκτον οὐ γνήσιον ἄνδρα συγκατάβασις, ὄντινα

senses, through which humans experience the material world and make sense of it. On the other hand, they represent those who read the Scriptures literally and are not able to achieve a spiritual understanding. Her sixth partner, who is not even her husband as the previous ones, is interpreted as her beliefs in the wrong spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures. In other words, the sixth husband represents Heracleon's teaching, that is, those Christian teachers who believed in the existence of an allegorical and spiritual scriptural sense, but failed to achieve the correct meaning:

I think that every soul that is introduced to the Christian religion through the Scriptures and begins with sense-perceptible things called bodily things, has five husbands. There is a husband related to each of the senses. But after the soul has consorted with the matters perceived by the senses and later wishes to rise above them, urged on to things perceived by the spirit, she may then encounter unsound teaching based on allegorical and spiritual meanings. She then approaches another husband after the five husbands, having given a bill of divorce to the former five, as it were, and having decided to live with this sixth. And we will stay with that husband until Jesus comes and makes us aware of the character of such a husband. But after the Logos of the Lord has come and conversed with us, we deny that husband and say, "I have no husband."⁴⁶

ἀρνησαμένη καὶ τὴν ὑδρίαν καταλείπουσα εἰς ἕβδομον σεμνῶς ἀναπαύεται, προξενούσα τὴν ὠφέλειαν καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν προτέρων αὐτῆς δογμάτων οἰκοῦσι πόλιν τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τῶν οὐχ ὑγιῶν λόγων, τὴν αὐτὴν τῇ γυναικί·

⁴⁶ *Comm. John 13, 51–52*: Οἶμαι πᾶσαν τὴν εἰσαγομένην ψυχὴν εἰς τὴν διὰ τῶν γραφῶν ἐν Χριστῷ θεοσεβειαν ἀπὸ τῶν αἰσθητῶν καὶ σωματικῶν λεγομένων ἀρχομένην, τοὺς πέντε ἄνδρας καθ' ἑκάστην τῶν αἰσθήσεων ἀνδρὸς τινος γινομένου ἰσχειν· ἐπὶ δὲ μετὰ τὸ ὠμικηκεῖναι τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ἀνακυψαί τις θέλων καὶ προτραπείσῃ ἐπὶ τὰ νοητὰ περιτύχη λόγῳ προφάσει ἀλληγορίας καὶ πνευματικῶν οὐχ ὑγιαίνοντι, οὗτος μετὰ τοὺς πέντε ἄνδρας ἑτέρῳ προσέρχεται, δούς, ἴν' οὕτως εἶπω, τὸ ἀποστάσιον τοῖς προτέροις πέντε καὶ κρίνων συνοικεῖν τῷ ἑκτῷ. Καὶ ἕως ἂν γε ἐλθῶν ὁ Ἰησοῦς εἰς συναίσθησιν ἡμᾶς ἀγάγῃ τοῦ τοιοῦτου ἀνδρὸς, ἐκεῖνῳ σύνεσμεν· ἐλθόντος δὲ τοῦ κυρίου λόγου καὶ διαλεχθέντος ἡμῖν, ἀρνούμενοι ἐκεῖνον τὸν ἄνδρα φημέν· "Οὐκ ἔχω ἄνδρα."

The Samaritan woman is not only the type of every Christian who undergoes a conversion to Christ, but she is specifically the type of those who abandon the Valentinian teachings of Heracleon and embrace Origen's teachings. Here Origen begins a detailed explanation of Heracleon's exegetical method. Heracleon's first mistake is discrediting the texts from the Hebrew Bible by not reading them as the typological prefiguration of the new covenant.⁴⁷ Valentinians denied that the Jewish texts have been renewed by the arrival of Jesus, who validated the Law by giving it a new meaning.⁴⁸ They considered the Jewish Law as an archontic creation of an inferior and false deity.

Heracleon takes the well of Jakob as a symbol of the hylic world, which will be destroyed at the coming of the Saviour.⁴⁹ Origen's account of Heracleon's second mistake gives us clues about Origen's own view on women. Origen admits that he could have agreed with Heracleon's interpretation had he not taken away the woman's freedom of choice: "We too would agree, then, if he were admitting that she had free choice and not hinting that her nature was more excellent. But if he is referring the cause of her consent to her natural state, as something not present in all people, his argument must be refuted."⁵⁰ Heracleon is taking away the Samaritan's choice (προαίρεσις) by imputing her assertiveness to a protological and natural endowment of a pneumatic superior nature (φύσις). Whether Origen is polemically targeting a Valentinian doctrine or he is consciously misconstruing Heracleon's argument, it does not change the fact that Origen values free will above all else and believes firmly that women have and are invited to make use of it. Hence, Origen argues in favour of free will against Heracleon's alleged natural determinism. Contrariwise, he claims that Heracleon's exegesis is arbitrary and is grounded on Valentinian mythological rendition of John's prologue, rather than on Scriptural basis.⁵¹

⁴⁷ *Comm. John* 13, 106–108.

⁴⁸ *Comm. John* 13, 23–25.

⁴⁹ *Comm. John* 13, 187–192.

⁵⁰ *Comm. John* 13, 64: Εἰ μὲν οὖν τὴν προαίρεσιν ἀπεδέχετο, μηδὲν περὶ φύσεως αἰνιττόμενος ὡς διαφοροῦσης, καὶ ἡμεῖς ἂν συγκατεθέμεθα· εἰ δὲ τῇ φυσικῇ κατασκευῇ ἀναφέρει τὴν τῆς συγκαταθέσεως αἰτίαν, ὡς οὐ πᾶσιν ταύτης παρούσης, ἀνατρεπτόν αὐτοῦ τὸν λόγον.

⁵¹ For the Johannine dependency of Valentinian mythology see Lettieri, "Il nous mistico".

We know very little about the sources of Heracleon's exegesis, but what is deducible from his fragments as reported by Origen is extremely similar to the Valentinian mythology described by Irenaeus in *Against All Heresies* 1, 1–8. The mythological nature of Valentinian texts is addressed explicitly as a problem by Origen since it lacks clarity and does not constitute a solid base for allegorical exegesis.⁵² Origen explicitly mentions only one of Heracleon's sources, a work titled *The Preaching of Peter* but claims he does not have time to refute this book.⁵³ Unfortunately, we do not have any knowledge of a book by this title, and thus cannot compare it with Heracleon's fragments. Origen often refutes Heracleon's allegories by claiming that: "He seems to have invented these things at random without any plausible argument".⁵⁴ This is particularly visible in their disagreement on the allegorical meaning of the Samaritan woman's denial of having a husband. Heracleon interprets it as discovering her pneumatic nature and the consequent abandonment of her six hylic husbands,⁵⁵ whilst Origen associates it with her finding the true faith. Both theologians agree that she allegorically takes Jesus as her destined bridegroom and embraces the true faith by drinking the living waters.⁵⁶ How to interpret these waters is, once again, the object of a dispute. By using a complex and highly educated reference to Jacob's well in Genesis, Origen builds his interpretation of the Samaritan woman in comparison and complementary to Rebecca. As Origen points out, both women met their match at the well and both were asked for water. Jacob's well is a very important theological place in Origen's theology, and it often signifies the Scripture.⁵⁷ It is then even more relevant that this place becomes a feminine space in Origen's interpretation:

Rebecca herself too, however, a maiden beautiful to behold, went out with a water jar on her shoulders before Abraham's servant

⁵² *Comm. John* 13, 122.

⁵³ *Comm. John* 13, 104.

⁵⁴ *Comm. John* 13, 93: ἀλλ' ἔοικεν ταῦτα ὡς ἔτυχεν ἐσχεδιακῆναι χωρὶς πάσης πιθανότητος.

⁵⁵ *Comm. John* 13, 67–74.

⁵⁶ *Comm. John* 13, 3–7 and 13–19.

⁵⁷ Monnica Klöckener, *Die Frau am Jakobsbrunnen in altkirchlicher Johannesexegese*, Münster: Aschendorff 2021; Manlio Simonetti, *Origene Esegeta e la sua tradizione*, Brescia: Morcelliana 2004, 123–134.

finished speaking within himself. Since she was not drawing water like the Samaritan woman, she went down to the fountain (the well) and filled her water jar, and, when she came up, Abraham's servant ran to meet her and said, "Give me a little water to drink from your water jar." Because he was Abraham's servant, he was content to receive even a little water from Rebecca's water jar. "And Rebecca quickly let down the water jar upon her arm, and gave him a drink, until he stopped drinking." Because, then, Rebecca's water jar was worthy of praise, she did not leave it behind, but because that of the Samaritan woman was [not], it was left at the sixth hour.⁵⁸

Later on in the text, Rebecca embodies the Hebrew Bible because she kept her water jar and drank the well's water, thus not extinguishing her thirst. The Samaritan woman abandoned her jar and was utterly changed by the encounter with Jesus because his living water transformed her into an apostle.⁵⁹ Unlike Rebecca, the Samaritan woman asked Jesus to give her some water and it is this driving desire, which Origen considers a feminine trait, that made a difference. He associates the woman's desire with the bride's desire for the Logos and eternal life.⁶⁰ Origen connects all these female-centered episodes to disprove Heracleon's exegesis of the water jar, which he interpreted as the "disposition capable of receiving life, and the thought of the power that is from the Savior".⁶¹ For Heracleon, the Samaritan woman was destined

⁵⁸ *Comm John* 13, 177–178: Ρεβέκκα μέντοι καὶ αὐτὴ ὕδριαν ἔχουσα ἐπὶ τῶν ὤμων, πρὶν συντελέσαι λαλοῦντα ἐν τῇ διανοίᾳ τὸν παῖδα τοῦ Ἀβραάμ, ἐξεπορεύετο καλὴ τῇ ὄψει παρθένος· ἣτις ἐπέπερ οὐχ ὁμοίως ἦντλει τῇ Σαμαρείτιδι, καταβαίνει ἐπὶ τὴν πηγὴν καὶ πληροὶ τὴν ὕδριαν, ἀναβάση τε αὐτὴ ἐπιτρέχει εἰς συνάντησιν ὁ τοῦ Ἀβραάμ παῖς καὶ εἶπεν· "Πότισόν με μικρὸν ὕδωρ ἐκ τῆς ὕδριας σου." (178) Ἐπεὶ γὰρ παῖς ἦν τοῦ Ἀβραάμ, ἡγάπα κἄν μικροῦ ὕδατος ἀπὸ τῆς ὕδριας Ρεβέκκας λαβεῖν· "Καὶ ἔσπευσεν ἡ Ρεβέκκα, καὶ καθέειλεν τὴν ὕδριαν ἐπὶ τὸν βραχίονα αὐτῆς καὶ ἐπότισεν αὐτόν, ἕως ἐπαύσατο πίνων» ἐπέπερ οὖν ἦν ἐπαινετὴ ἢ τῆς Ρεβέκκας ἐπαύσατο πίνων· ἐπείπερ οὖν ἦν ἐπαινετὴ ἢ τῆς Ρεβέκκας ὕδρια, οὐ καταλείπεται ὑπ' αὐτῆς, ἢ δὲ τῆς Σαμαρείτιδος οὐκ οὕσα ὥρα ἔκτη ἀφίεται.

⁵⁹ On the value of eating and drinking in Origen's theology, see the thorough contribution of Fernando Soler, *Orígenes y los alimentos espirituales: El uso teológico de metáforas de comer y beber*, Paderborn: Brill 2021.

⁶⁰ *Comm. John* 13, 17–18.

⁶¹ *Comm. John* 13, 187: διάθεσιν καὶ ἔννοιαν τῆς δυνάμεως τῆς παρὰ τοῦ σωτῆρος.

to marry her true Pleromatic husband and be reunited in the Pleroma, being a pneumatic nature herself. Origen refutes this interpretation on multiple levels. By interpreting the water jar as the Law, Origen explains why Rebecca was praiseworthy for keeping it and sharing her water with her husband's servant, while the Samaritan woman left it behind to evangelize Samaria. Christ came to overshadow the Law, therefore the Samaritan woman has no longer use for the water jar. Just as Rebecca kept the jar with her and was praiseworthy for it, so the Samaritan woman was laudable for leaving it behind. However, Origen takes his interpretation a step forward. If the encounter between the Samaritan woman and her true pneumatic partner is the apex of Heracleon's interpretation, Origen uses the woman as a prefiguration of each believer's spiritual progress. Once the woman encounters her true bridegroom, she assumes a new public role: "He also uses this woman as an apostle, as it were, to those in the city. His words inflamed the woman to such an extent that she left her water jar and went into the city."⁶² And also: "She disowned the latter man, left her water jar, and reverently rested [on] the Sabbath. She obtained benefit also for those who, on the basis of her former beliefs, dwelt in the same city with herself, that is, in the structure of unsound doctrines."⁶³ She is the woman who proclaims Christ to the Samaritans, and Origen's exegesis is meant to legitimize her apostolic mission. He also notes that women have a forefront place when it comes to receiving and sharing Jesus' message, and he associates the Samaritan woman with Mary Magdalene, who saw Jesus before all the other apostles.⁶⁴ By associating the Samaritan with Mary, Origen shows

⁶² *Comm. John* 13,169: Οἰοῖναι δὲ καὶ ἀποστόλω πρὸς τοὺς ἐν τῇ πόλει χρῆται τῇ γυναικὶ ταύτῃ, ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ἐξάψας αὐτὴν διὰ τῶν λόγων, ἕως ἀφείσα τὴν ὑδρίαν αὐτῆς ἢ γυνὴ ἀπελθοῦσα εἰς τὴν πόλιν εἶπη τοῖς ἀνθρώποις· "Δεῦτε, ἴδετε ἄνθρωπον, ὃς εἶπέν μοι πάντα ἃ ἐποίησα· μήτι οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ Χριστός;" ὅτε "ἐξῆλθον ἐκ τῆς πόλεως, καὶ ἤρχοντο πρὸς αὐτόν"· καὶ τῇ τοιαύτῃ μὲν μὴ ὕστερον, τότε δὲ σαφέστατα ἐμφανίζει ἑαυτὸν ὁ λόγος, ὡς ἐλθόντας τοὺς μαθητὰς θαυμάζειν εἰ καὶ αὐτὴ ἠξιώσεται θηλύς τις καὶ εὐεξαπάτητος οὖσα, τυχεῖν τῆς ὀμιλίας πρὸς αὐτὴν τοῦ λόγου.

⁶³ *Comm. John* 13, 181: Πάντα δὲ ἦν, ἃ ἐποίησεν ἢ γυνὴ, ἢ πρὸς τοὺς πέντε ἄνδρας κοινωνία καὶ μετ' ἐκείνους ἢ πρὸς τὸν ἕκτον οὐ γνήσιον ἄνδρα συγκατάβασις, ὄντινα ἀρνησαμένη καὶ τὴν ὑδρίαν καταλείπουσα εἰς ἑβδομον σεμνῶς ἀναπαύεται, προξενούσα τὴν ὠφέλειαν καὶ τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν προτέρων αὐτῆς δογμάτων οἰκοῦσι πόλιν τὴν οἰκοδομὴν τῶν οὐχ ὑγιῶν λόγων, τὴν αὐτὴν τῇ γυναικί·

⁶⁴ *Comm. John* 13, 179.

acknowledgment, if not even appreciation, for women's leadership roles in the Christian community.

Conclusion

Origen and Heracleon are both masters of allegorical exegesis. Despite using similar hermeneutical criteria, they reach very different interpretations. Their exegetical criteria are fundamentally identical, regardless of what Origen claims, and both perceive the Gospel of John as a pivotal book in their personal Scriptural canon. Notwithstanding, this seems the closest their exegeses can go. Although Origen and Heracleon both make the woman's sexuality the center of their interpretation, their different theologies result in substantially different theological understandings of the Samaritan woman's journey and of women in society. Heracleon interprets the woman as the allegory of a lost spiritual soul who undergoes a journey of repentance until the arrival of her true Pneumatic husband who will restore her to her original divine condition, like Sophia was restored before her. In his interpretation, the woman remains anchored to the paradigm of licit/illicit sexual relationships, where she finds her truth by being in *syzygy* with her pneumatic partner. On the contrary, Origen's allegorical reading is centered on the Samaritan's sexuality in a way that surpasses the social and cultural Jewish norms of his time. Origen does not express a moral evaluation about the woman's situation, he rather gives her back control over her own life. She owns her free will and her encounter at well is the way for her to discover her freedom. When she decides to leave her latest partner and respond to Jesus' calling, she becomes an apostle in her own right, evangelizing the region of Samaria.

In its entirety, this article accentuates the dynamic contribution a female perspective can impart to entrenched theological dialogues, particularly within the realms of free will, progress, and the status of women, as evidenced in the works of Origen of Alexandria and Heracleon.