

Research Article

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Origen and the Story of the Mother and Her Seven Sons: Reimagining Third-Century Caesarean Horizons

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Abstract: This article employs Galit Hasan-Rokem's notions of vertical and horizontal axes of transmission for the study of biblical reception history, presenting the reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons in Origen's writings as a case study. I suggest that Hasan-Rokem's vertical axis of intergenerational transmission corresponds to reception history: it also involves us and thus demands our critical awareness. The horizontal axis of intergroup transmission, then, calls for our sensitivity toward the diverse interpersonal and intercultural exchanges that reception history presents less frequently as authoritative or even manifest. My analysis scrutinizes Origen's pronouncedly bookish relation to the story of the mother and her seven sons, and I provide a reading of this relation as entailing both (inter)personal and intercultural encounters. I use both Eusebius' biography of Origen and recent studies on late antique rabbinic discourse as means by which to broaden our perspective on Origen's horizon of expectation. In conclusion, I suggest that Origen's portrayal of the mother indicates some ambivalence toward this figure: her words of wisdom have undisputed authority over Origen, while her embodied wisdom makes him reserved. Thus, the reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons in Origen's writings could strengthen the prospect that the story was a living reality for Origen as well as for others in third-century Palestine.

Keywords: biblical reception, Eusebius, Maccabees, martyrdom, miraculous birth, mother and her seven sons, motherhood, Origen, Origen's childhood, Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom*

What is biblical reception history?¹ This question continues to be asked because, even though most scholars would trace the roots of reception history back to Hans Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Hans-Robert Jauss' aesthetics of reception, no single method of biblical reception history has emerged.² Instead, the field continues to function as a reflective shared space, biblical reception being discussed as a

¹ This article and my reflections on theory and method in the field of reception-historical studies reflect my background in biblical studies – hence, my attribution “biblical” to reception history. This provides both a context and a restriction to my contribution, and I do acknowledge that some questions related to biblical reception history might be rather specific due to the particular textual history of biblical texts. Even so, my wish is not to isolate the study of biblical reception history from, e.g., patristic reception history but, rather, to join in searching for common theoretical grounds.

² This is not due to a lack of effort. Rather, I believe it bespeaks of the difficulty of forging a method out of reception history. I regard this state of affairs to be rather fortunate considering the tendency of biblical scholars to “turn everything they touch into a method,” as Moore and Sherwood (*The Invention*, 33) aptly put it. On the contrasting general tendency in literary studies not to produce a method, see Moore and Sherwood, *The Invention*, 33–6.

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theory, method, and history. The relevance of biblical reception history unfolds, in particular, through “its mediation between historical and aesthetic approaches (insisting that it is all effective history, always both production and reception).”³ By this mediation, I mean that the scholarly orientation in the study of biblical reception history is – or has the potential to be – engaged with the more traditional aims of historical reconstruction, while it also embraces the interpretative involvement of the scholar in the process, which is characteristic of literary approaches.

The mediation between historical and aesthetic approaches is implied in Gadamer’s concept of the “fusion of horizons,” which suggests that the horizons are more than one. In addition to the horizon of the text, against which its original meanings may be constructed, Gadamer maintains that the process of understanding also includes the horizon of the interpreter, and a scholarly interpreter is no exception.⁴ In the case of biblical texts, it has since become increasingly difficult to maintain that any interpreter can access the biblical text in itself. By contrast, there are layers of horizons between “us” and “them” that reflect both the diverse mediators and the diverse media through which biblical texts have reached us.⁵ We are hindered from entering a vacuum with a subject matter such as “the Bible” by a chain of traditions both confessional and scholarly – perhaps to be described more accurately as a “web of life.”⁶ To acknowledge this is an important aspect of the current study of biblical texts and their reception, stressing the necessity of evaluating our contemporary horizons of expectations and the impacts they bear on our analysis.⁷ Thus, a reception-historical analysis must entail a critical engagement with reception history itself – that is, an engagement with the traditions through which we receive and which we sustain.⁸

This article represents an attempt to integrate theoretical insights from the work of Galit Hasan-Rokem into biblical reception history.⁹ Hasan-Rokem’s academic background is broad, including ethnographic as well as historical-literary studies with no articulated interest in biblical reception history. Yet, her interest and experience in both past and present cultural exchanges within their specific historical contexts, combined with her delicate awareness of her own historical and hermeneutic situatedness, grant her an advantageous

³ Beal, “Reception History,” 364.

⁴ The Gadamerian understanding refutes the possibility of more traditional biblical hermeneutics whose sole interest is the construction of the original context of the text, and thereby its original meaning, without acknowledging the role of the scholar in the enterprise. See, Malpas, “Hans-Georg Gadamer.”

⁵ While my use of the first person plural here and throughout the article entails diversity – acknowledging our different interests and backgrounds – I also use it to claim that there is something in our scholarly guild and reception-historical heritage that unites (most of) us. The first person plural thus implies not only a sense of self-reflection (counting myself as part of that collective), but also an invitation for a shared, collegial self-reflection – an invitation that also entails a call to disagree and to complement my assessment.

⁶ I borrow this metaphor from Galit Hasan-Rokem’s book title (*Web of Life*). The Bible is, according to Beal (“Reception History,” 364; emphasis in the original), an “ongoing, culturally specific process of relationship between texts and readers. To transpose Jauss, we can say that *biblical literature is not a fact but an event, a dialectic relationship of production and reception*.” Note that this view significantly differs from Gadamer’s view of the Bible as a “classic;” cf. Beal, “Reception History,” 363.

⁷ How much of this reflection is made explicit in scholarly publications varies a lot and depends on each scholar’s preferences. Only a handful of explicit examples (which do not necessarily explicitly use reception-historical analysis) stand out, such as Stowers’ emphasis on the impact that Augustine has had on our reading of Romans (*A Rereading*); White’s argument that the historical or “real” Paul is always a discursive construction and a product of reception, in early Christian writings or modern study (*Remembering Paul*); or Cobb initiating “the process of peeling away layers of later traditions helps us see that much of what seems obvious and commonsensical now was not necessarily so in the first centuries of Christian history” (*Divine Deliverance*, 17). Evans’s challenge to the allegedly detached stance of historical-critical exegesis and his claim that historical interpretation is not separate from theological but is “part of an ongoing theological engagement and an ‘application of the texts’” (*Reception History*, 249–50) is an example of explicitly Gadamerian engagement.

⁸ Leonard (“Reception,” 839) asks whether reception history is a subfield, a task of some, or a thoroughly transformative engagement, and my answer is the latter.

⁹ From among Hasan-Rokem’s works, the most important for this study are her two monographs (*Web of Life*; *Tales of the Neighborhood*) as well as her more recent article (“Ecotypes”). On her current research with Jacob Israel Yuval, see below.

perspective from which to provide theoretical insights that are relevant for current studies in biblical reception history, that is, for engaging our historical textual analysis with hermeneutic sensitivity and responsibility. Hasan-Rokem herself characterizes her approach to ancient texts as “dialogical,” and her following description of it illustrates her recognition of her own place *vis-à-vis* the subject of her analysis:

[T]he dialogical approach also brings into the research a heightened existential consciousness and a positive approach to interpersonal and intercultural communication itself. It generates as well a critical approach to the inescapable power of hierarchies that is a part of most fieldwork situations, [...] although it does not, of course, erase these inequalities. [...] Historical study produces a similar “inequality,” formulated by Hans Georg Gadamer and others as the hermeneutical stance of those who are acquainted with what came to pass. The feminist aspect of the present approach acknowledges, in fact celebrates, this turning of tables on the ancient patriarchal texts.¹⁰

The historical distance between us and our sources is not a neutral or innocent matter, but entails a complex set of relations in which we are involved. Scholarly interest in reception history demands interest in this complexity. Hasan-Rokem’s insights encourage us not only to recognize our own situatedness, but also to be aware of our privileged position *vis-à-vis* the past and, with it, our own part in directing our scholarly attention. My case study is Origen and, more precisely, the reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons in his writings,¹¹ and I shall use this case in order to advance a simultaneously positive and critical approach, inspired by Hasan-Rokem, to the study of biblical reception history.

In the twenty-first century, at least three scholars have published research on Origen’s reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons.¹² All of them base their work on the premises that (1) Origen used 2 Maccabees as his source text and that (2) he knew this story from it. The main contribution over the past decade or so has been to put forward the argument that Origen also knew 4 Maccabees and that his account was influenced by it as well.¹³ My point of departure differs from these studies in that I distinguish the story of the mother and her seven sons from all its written accounts – both those in the Books of Maccabees, in Origen’s writings, and elsewhere – taking each as a version of the story and all together as contributing to how we understand it.¹⁴ This premise paves the way for the possibility that the story was not only a biblical text to Origen, but possibly known to him and his contemporaries from other sources and other media than the Books of the Maccabees.¹⁵ My contextualization of the mother and her seven sons among miraculous mothers and figures of the wise toward the end of the article explicitly addresses this possibility. The critical aspect of my approach, thus, entails an attempt to destabilize the central status of biblical texts, or the

¹⁰ Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood*, 5.

¹¹ I mostly focus on *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, but I also use Origen’s other writings that are available in scholarly editions. All ancient works referred to in this article are listed in the Bibliography under their author. For biblical texts, I use the NRSV English translation, unless otherwise noted. For scholarly editions and translations of *Exhortation*, see deSilva, “An Example of How,” 339 n. 5. I use the Greek text available through *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, which is Koetschau’s edition (1899, 3–47), and the English translation by Chadwick (1954, 393–429), albeit often modified. Both these works divide *Exhortation* into 51 chapters similarly, and I refer to the text accordingly.

¹² DeSilva, “An Example of How;” van Henten, “The Christianization” (and “The Maccabean Martyrs,” esp. 22–31); and Corke-Webster, “Mothers and Martyrdom.”

¹³ This argument is made by DeSilva (“An Example of How”), who gives a useful brief overview of previous research on the topic, and affirmed by van Henten, “The Christianization.” An alternative main contribution would be the contextualization of Origen’s reception in the so-called “Christianization” of the Maccabean martyrs, on which see esp. van Henten, “The Christianization,” 343–50. I do not address this aspect of current research in this article; see, however, Rafael, “Since When.”

¹⁴ This premise is a significant part of my forthcoming dissertation, in which I present the story of the mother and her seven sons as a shared narrative tradition and analyze its reception in the Books of the Maccabees.

¹⁵ The popularity of the story of the mother and her seven sons – or of any other story – in third-century Caesarea can be difficult to prove, as much of the culture of the time is entirely lost to us. Yet, the fact that the story also finds its way into late antique rabbinic literature in versions that are clearly shaped by oral tradition strengthens the prospect that it was a shared narrative tradition. For these rabbinic versions, see, e.g., Cohen, *Studies in the Variety*, 55–6 n. 3. Recent scholarship has also questioned the influence of the Books of Maccabees on early Christians during the first centuries of the Common Era, suggesting that traditions, rather than the books, relating to the time of the Maccabees were in circulation. See Horbury, “W.H.C. Frend on Martyrdom,” 441–2, who refers to Baslez, *Les Persécutions*, as well as van Henten, “Das Jüdische Selbstverständnis.”

Bible, as the primary archive and transmitter of the biblical heritage. While Origen's reception indisputably tells us about himself and his (views on the) scriptures, my focus also falls on an emotional register that is broader than the scholarly or the intellectual. I intend to open up a more positive approach to other media and other partners in conversation and to argue that Origen does not receive the story of the mother and her seven sons in isolation. This will enable us to reimagine Origen's horizon of expectations in third-century Caesarea more broadly and, ultimately, gain from Origen's reception new avenues to understanding the story of the mother and her seven sons.

1 Theorizing Origen's Caesarea: The vertical and the horizontal axes of transmission

Origen is one of the better-known early Christian writers and characters, known to us through both his writings and the writings of others. A particularly significant source for Origen's life and person is Eusebius' *History of the Church*, which includes "a mini-hagiography of Origen."¹⁶ From Eusebius, we learn that Origen was born in Alexandria where he was educated in both philosophy and Christianity, and that he eventually sold "his library of non-Christian works and devot[ed] himself solely to the study of biblical texts."¹⁷ We also learn that Origen moved from Alexandria to Caesarea in Palestine where he was immediately recognized as an authoritative teacher of scriptures.¹⁸ In Caesarea, in the wake of the persecution ordered by the emperor Maximinus,¹⁹ Origen wrote a work entitled *Exhortation to Martyrdom* in order to prepare his acquaintances Ambrose and Prototectus, and possibly others, for martyrdom.²⁰ He integrated into this work a story of "the seven brothers described in the Books of Maccabees," which he deemed "most valuable for our purpose."²¹

I suggest that these two Caesareans, Origen and Eusebius, exemplify a glimpse of something akin to what Hasan-Rokem has characterized as the *vertical axis of intergenerational transmission*. She identifies such an axis of transmission as inbuilt in the textual awareness of the corpus of late ancient rabbinic literature, which abounds with formulations such as "X said in the name of Y." The vertical axis of transmission sustains the impression of an intergenerational rabbinic establishment and, moreover, that the rabbis spoke in – and inhabited – their own "rabbinic world," a world that belonged to them and to which others had little to add.²² Although Origen and Eusebius are separated by a century and were individual authors who produced their own literary works, there is a vertical, intergenerational link between them. While Eusebius may be characterized as an "Origenian scholar" or as "Origen's successor," our familiarity with Origen is also in many respects dependent on Eusebius.²³ Thus, from our standpoint, both figures are dependent on each other albeit in different ways. Moreover, together with other "church fathers," Origen and Eusebius sustain their own world and their own uninterrupted, as it were, axis of

¹⁶ Schott, *The History*, 276. The sketch of Origen's life I provide here follows Eusebius's account in Book 6, which remains the point of departure of scholarly reconstructions, regardless of its obvious biases. All quotations are taken from *The History of the Church*.

¹⁷ Schott, *The History*, 277, referring, in particular, to *The History of the Church* 6.2.15; 6.3.8.

¹⁸ *The History of the Church* 6.19.16.

¹⁹ On Origen's composition of this work, see *The History of the Church* 6:28; for dating this composition to 235–6 CE, see McGuckin, "The Scholarly Works," 39; Corke-Webster, "Mothers and Martyrdom," 56.

²⁰ Origen's "intended audience was probably broader than the persons addressed," van Henten, "The Christianization," 334. Yet, the possibility of a mostly adult male first audience cannot be excluded as the brief persecution of Maximus in Palestine was, according to Eusebius, aimed at "only the leaders of the churches [...], since they were responsible for the teaching that is according to the Gospel" (*The History of the Church* 6.28).

²¹ *Exh.* 23 and 27.

²² Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 110.

²³ On Eusebius's relationship to Origen, see McGuckin, "The Life," 1–2; see also Schott, *The History*, 276: "Pamphilus and Eusebius considered themselves Origen's successors, and thus were invested in the biography of the man they considered their scholarly ancestor."

transmission of knowledge, which resembles the collegial and intergenerational logic of the “rabbinic world.”²⁴ In fact, they offer a prime example of the kind of textual awareness that often seems inbuilt in early Christian literature, which limits our perspective on the world of early Christians more often than not, suggesting that our biblical and patristic heritage is almost exclusively male and mostly scholarly.²⁵

To expand from Hasan-Rokem’s proposition toward a more comprehensively reception-historical perspective, I wish to include in this vertical axis of transmission both the biblical texts themselves and ourselves. The biblical texts represent an earlier stage on that axis: wherever and by whomever the “Books of the Maccabees” were written, they seem to have been part of Origen’s library in Caesarea and of Eusebius’s library later on, and they are part of our own libraries as well. It is noteworthy that, on such an axis of transmission, even the unknown authors of the Books of the Maccabees become more familiar to us: we may distinguish their authorial emphases by comparison with the emphases of later authors who reworked their texts. In the process, these anonymous authors often become similarly disposed as the authors we know by name.²⁶ Indeed, the vertical axis of transmission is not only sustained by collegial connections, but it also helps us imagine such connections where they did not necessarily exist.²⁷ It creates a sense of cohesion and a sense of access to the past while being highly exclusive at the same time. Our focus in reception-historical studies in the context of late antiquity often falls on biblical texts and their male interpreters (for instance, the so-called church fathers).²⁸ Perhaps, one explanation for this focus is that both the text and the recipient (and possibly his colleagues) are identifiable to us, whereas the inclusion of possible others seems too risky and obscure a business to be counted as solid, evidence-based research.

This scholarly focus sets the study of biblical reception history within the confines of the common acknowledgment that “literary texts with historical reference reflect the realities of those who crafted them rather than of those who figure in them and about whom they seem to tell,”²⁹ leading to the conclusion that one’s reception tells about oneself and one’s own context. Consequently, such a focus also leads to constructions of biblical reception history as almost exclusively professional and male, that is, limited to those whom we expect to have had both the chance and the skills to handle the scriptures.

Questioning such premises, Hasan-Rokem proposes a more inclusive viewpoint on the production of ancient literature that, I believe, could also better make manifest diversity in our study of biblical reception history. She couples the vertical axis of transmission with what she calls the *horizontal axis of intergroup transmission*, which she defines as comprising “the cultural encounter between the discourse created within the academy and realms of discourse outside it – with children, women, converts, strangers, members of other religions, and even supernatural creatures.”³⁰ Hasan-Rokem maintains that such voices, which the textual awareness of the rabbinic corpus seldom presents as author(itie)s, were nonetheless

²⁴ Corke-Webster’s approach to the relationship between Eusebius and Origen emphasizes their collegial closeness and yet acknowledges potential tensions, in contrast to the more standard scholarly view of Eusebius merely “celebrat[ing]Origen in an uncomplicated fashion” (“Mothers and Martyrdom,” 55). Perhaps, scholars studying the rabbis may thus be more accustomed to accept that they were in a collegial, intergenerational relationship, entailing both agreement and disagreement.

²⁵ To avoid any misunderstandings, I emphasize that I speak here about the limitations of our perspectives, not about the world of early Christians as it was. Indeed, a current issue in scholarship seems to be that we have access only, or mostly only, to those who produced our surviving sources, while other voices are lost to us.

²⁶ The scholarly tendency to identify anonymous authors as educated members of a male elite is connected to the fact that known authors are often educated members of a male elite and to the fact that our scholarly discourse is conditioned to a mode of interpretation that is author-oriented. In the case of 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees, the number of scholars who even note the possibility that their authors were not male or Jewish is virtually zero; see, however, Rajak, “The Maccabean Mother,” 41; Tolonen and Uusimäki, “Managing the Ancestral,” 114 n. 1.

²⁷ On this issue, see Muehlberger (“On Authors”), who aptly characterizes “[t]he evidence specialists in early Christian history use” as having resulted from a “long-term, informal archival process,” which has given us “a collection, not of evidence, but of authors,” and observes how authors such as Pseudo-X emerge from the process in order that text of unknown origin may be better cataloged.

²⁸ Examples of such studies are too numerous to be listed, but I trust that the present volume will suffice to illustrate the state of affairs.

²⁹ Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood*, 3.

³⁰ Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 110.

significant to the rabbis who crafted their responses directly or indirectly to them.³¹ An analysis that attempts to recover them aims “to elicit the orality in the written, to invoke the plurality of the canonical, and by that to problematize the authority of the received traditions.”³²

Hasan-Rokem points to proverbs and stories in particular as units that may circulate in literary sources but do not always originate from the authors of these sources and may thus entail a more inclusive view-point on the production and transmission. Such is the case of the transmission of many biblical stories, not excluding the story of the mother and her seven sons in Origen’s writings. In my following analysis, the acknowledgment of the horizontal axis of transmission, along with the vertical, opens up prospects of interpersonal and intercultural exchange that are not limited to those whom we hold responsible for the surviving literary sources and whom we identify as author(itie)s. By reimagining third-century Caesarean horizons in this way, I seek to construe Origen’s relationship with the topic he deals with without adhering to a paradigm in which he handles texts in his chamber. Instead, in crafting his version of the story of the mother and her seven sons, I present Origen as responding to diverse realms of discourse – with those whom he perceives to be his equals, with those belonging to his own personal history, and with one whose presence causes both admiration and ambivalence in him.

While the interpretation of ancient texts always involves some level of speculation, I am aware that my mode of operation may come across as more experimental than is the norm in current studies on biblical reception history. Referring back to Beal,³³ however, it represents one attempt to mediate between historical and aesthetic approaches to the study of biblical reception history without giving preference to the historical.³⁴ As such, this article is also genuinely concerned about the blurred boundary between historical reconstruction and interpretative engagement in our field.

2 Origen’s distinctive ways of relating (to) the story of the mother and her seven sons and Eleazar

In his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen takes up the story of the mother and her seven sons in direct sequence with the story of Eleazar. This manner of presentation follows that of 2 Maccabees, in which the two stories are also given in the same order and as two separate accounts without establishing any explicit historical connection between them. In both cases, such a manner of presentation leaves some room for the reader to establish a historical, or other, connection.³⁵ The aspect to which I wish us to pay attention is the intriguingly bookish way in which Origen introduces the latter story in comparison to the former. As one possible explanation to this state of affairs, I propose that Origen’s different ways of relating these two stories bespeak his different ways of relating to their protagonists.

Origen introduces the story of the mother and her seven sons in the following manner:

The seven brothers described in the books of Maccabees, whom Antiochus tortured with “whips and scourges” because of their loyal adherence to the service of God,³⁶ constitute a magnificent example of courageous martyrdom to everyone who considers whether he will be inferior to children who not only endured tortures one by one but also showed how steadfastly

³¹ Hasan-Rokem, *Tales of the Neighborhood*, 3–4, 10–1.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

³³ Beal, “Reception History,” 364.

³⁴ For the observation that literary theories have often tended to assimilate automatically with the discipline’s unquestioned focus on historical issues and merely “become an[other] exercise in historical criticism,” see Moore and Sherwood, *The Invention*, 101.

³⁵ The separateness of these stories in 2 Maccabees has sometimes been taken as an indicator of their distinctive backgrounds, reflecting the fact that the author of 2 Maccabees first brought them together. In 4 Maccabees, instead, all these nine figures die on the same day and in connection to the same occasion.

³⁶ Origen uses here the word θεοσέβεια, yet εὐσέβεια will be his more common choice; cf. the following footnote.

they adhered to piety³⁷ by witnessing the sufferings of their brothers. One of them, whom the text³⁸ calls their spokesman, said to the tyrant: “Why question us? What will you learn? For we are ready to die rather than to transgress the laws of our fathers?”³⁹

As we can see, Origen emphasizes that what he begins to discuss here is a written account, referring to it twice as a “text,” “writing,” or possibly even “Scripture” (ἡ γραφή).⁴⁰ Origen’s bookish emphasis becomes all the more evident in comparison to his framing of the story of Eleazar, for which he names no written source. With no mention of the Books of the Maccabees, Origen presents the figure of Eleazar in connection with Solomon and his wisdom:

This⁴¹ is also helpful for our present theme. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon says: “I praised all those who have died more than the living, as many are alive until now.”⁴² Who could more justifiably be praised for his death than he who of his own free choice chooses to die for the sake of piety? Such a man was Eleazar “who welcomed death with honor rather than life with pollution [...]”⁴³

The presentation of Eleazar that follows mostly comprises a recitation of Eleazar’s words, which Origen recommends as practicable for his readers. In fact, Origen’s focus falls on Eleazar’s speeches so exclusively that his account hardly even comprises a full story.⁴⁴ While both the brief characterization of Eleazar and his speeches in *Exhortation* correspond to the text of 2 Maccabees almost verbatim,⁴⁵ Origen always presents the text either as his own words or as the words that Eleazar had spoken and not as quotations from 2 Maccabees. This does not mean that Origen could not have had a text in front of him, but I wish to emphasize that Origen nowhere specifies how Eleazar’s words had been mediated to him. The same mode of quotation is confirmed by Origen’s conclusion of the story:

Such indeed was the death of Eleazar that *it was said of him*: “He left his death as an example of nobility and a memorial of virtue, not only to the young but also to the nation as a whole.”⁴⁶

Origen thus affirms Eleazar’s lasting reputation among his people by quoting anonymous masses. In 2 Maccabees, however, the same is stated by the narrator.⁴⁷

³⁷ Here, as well as frequently elsewhere, Origen uses the word εὐσέβεια, which Chadwick translates as “religion” (and in the passage quoted even as “their religion”). While this ancient virtue may be particularly difficult for us to understand, “religion” is among the most criticized suggestions (see, e.g., the discussion on 4 Maccabees in Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 150–1). In this article, I simply translate εὐσέβεια as piety, despite the word’s archaic sound.

³⁸ I translate ἡ γραφή here as Origen’s reference to the text that is not his; commonly, this term is translated as “Scripture” (in addition to Chadwick, see deSilva, “An Example of How,” 353; and van Henten, “The Christianization,” 336–7).

³⁹ *Exh.* 23. Here and elsewhere, I modify Chadwick’s translation and include notes on the most significant changes. I preserve Chadwick’s quotation marks for Origen’s quotations but leave out the biblical references he gives in brackets because I think that the text itself contains sufficient references to Origen’s sources.

⁴⁰ Cf. footnote 38 above. His second reference is found at the conclusion of his discussion of the story in *Exh.* 27.

⁴¹ Contra Chadwick’s translation (“This text also is helpful for our present theme”), the reference here (τοῦτο) does not necessarily imply a written account but something of a story.

⁴² I follow here van Henten’s translation (“The Christianization,” 337), who characterizes this as Origen’s “free quotation from Ecclesiastes [4:2] according to the Septuagint” for the purpose of enhancing the link between the verse and Eleazar. Yet, this translation does not fully communicate the idea that I imagine mattered for Origen; cf. CEB translation of the verse: “So I declare that the dead, who have already died, are more fortunate than the living, who are still alive.”

⁴³ *Exh.* 22.

⁴⁴ In his speech in *Exh.* 22, Eleazar subtly seems to refer to his interrogation as he refutes the chance offered to him to “make a pretence;” cf. 2M 6:26. Apart from this, there are no mentions of his persecutor(s) or any events related to Eleazar’s trial in *Exhortation*.

⁴⁵ Cf. 2M 6:19 and 23 for the description of Eleazar’s figure and 2M 6:24–8 and 30 for his speech.

⁴⁶ *Exh.* 22; emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ 2M 6:31: “So in this way he died, leaving in his death an example of nobility and a memorial of courage, not only to the young but to the great body of his nation.”

Comparing Origen's account with that of 2 Maccabees, van Henten accurately observes that "Origen's rendering of the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons [...] is more free and selective" as it "offers less extensive quotations [from 2 Maccabees]" than his rendering of Eleazar's story.⁴⁸ This is true; Origen's version of the story of the mother and her seven sons is like a paraphrase, while his version of the story of Eleazar often resembles the text of 2 Maccabees almost verbatim. Yet, as Origen does not identify a source for his account of Eleazar, and since his presentation of the story of the mother and her seven sons emphasizes his reliance on a written source, I would also highlight Origen's freedom in presenting Eleazar's figure *vis-à-vis* his explicit reliance on a written source in the case of the mother and her seven sons. I interpret the difference in the way Origen relates the story of Eleazar, on the one hand, and the story of the mother and her seven sons, on the other, as an indication of his more intimate and easier relation to Eleazar and, respectively, of his more reserved relation to the mother and her seven sons. This is to say, my analysis puts forward the possibility that Origen's reception is not only an interpretation of the text but, rather, reflects his relation to beings whom he perceived, at least to some extent, to be real.

Origen's presentation of Eleazar may be a hint of the shared scriptural expertise between Origen and his rabbinic colleagues.⁴⁹ His way of appending Eleazar's example to a verse from Ecclesiastes and his associating Eleazar with the figure of Solomon suggest that the story of Eleazar functions like an aggadic midrash, illustrating and expanding on the wisdom of Solomon.⁵⁰ Eleazar's own historical or scriptural context is rendered insignificant in contrast to the biblical text whose exposition it serves. At the same time, Origen's emphasis on the verbal aspect of the story – Eleazar's instruction – contributes to the impression of Eleazar being a sage,⁵¹ who may expound and implement the meaning of scripture. But Origen not only attaches Eleazar to Solomon; by his presentation, Origen also brings Eleazar closer to himself.

The association with Ecclesiastes adds a feel of indifference to the figure of Eleazar – "vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Eccles 1:2) – which is an emphasis well suited for Origen's own ideal of ascetic life and martyrdom, characterized by the renunciation of all things worldly.⁵² I thus suggest that Origen's way of relating (to) Eleazar bespeaks of Origen's close association with his figure: Eleazar's words merge with those of Solomon, Origen and, ideally, of Origen's readers, while his historical context and placement in scriptures are effaced.⁵³ Even if Solomon and Eleazar may represent to us biblical figures and Origen a historical one, Origen's reception indicates he did not necessarily make a similar distinction. In light of *Exhortation*, Solomon, Eleazar, and Origen construe a vertical axis of intergenerational transmission, representing not only what Origen receives but also what he intends to pass on.

A connection between 2 Maccabees and Origen's text is obvious to anyone who has access to both these texts. Even so, I wish to emphasize that Origen relates the stories of Eleazar and of the mother and her seven sons differently, presenting only the latter as something he takes from a written source. Thus, Origen

⁴⁸ van Henten, "The Christianization," 338–9.

⁴⁹ Origen's interfaces with his rabbinic colleagues have already been explored in diverse studies; see, e.g., Boyarin, "Philo, Origen, and the Rabbis;" Niehoff, "Origen's *Commentary*;" Hasan-Rokem and Yuval, "Myth, History and Eschatology;" and below.

⁵⁰ Origen's conclusion of his account of Eleazar with the formula "it was said of him" is similar to the conclusion of the story of the mother and her seven sons in *Lamentations Rabbah* 1.16 ("It was said of her [...]"). Curiously, moreover, Origen also quotes Ps 44 (43):22 ("For thy sake we are killed all the day long, we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter"), which is a verse commonly ascribed to martyrs in rabbinic literature (see, e.g., b Gittin 57b), as that which "only martyrs can say to God" before the story of Eleazar (*Exh.* 21). The extent to which Origen's views on martyrdom are connected to late antique rabbinic views is a topic I must leave for another occasion.

⁵¹ Notably, while Origen does emphasize Eleazar's venerable age, his "noble upbringing since childhood," and his education in the law, he does not mention Eleazar's profession. According to 2 Maccabees, Eleazar was a scribe (2M 6:18), and according to 4 Maccabees, he was a priest (4M 5:4; 7:6). See also van Henten's remark ("The Christianization," 344) on Origen "not [being] interested in the personal information about the martyrs and skip[ping] most of the biographical details."

⁵² For renunciation as Origen's core ideal in *Exhortation*, see Corke-Webster, "Mothers and Martyrdom," 57–62, as well as below. 2 Maccabees does not especially entail such a connotation if the stories of Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons are read as part of the broader historical narrative of the Maccabean Revolt that is concerned with "worldly" matters, such as the occupation of the land.

⁵³ Such use of the speeches of biblical figures is not limited to this case, but similar cases can be found in other Origen's exhortative texts. See, e.g., Origen's homily on Psalm 15, quoted in James, *Learning the Language*, 113, as well as his discussion.

creates a distance between these two stories, which are two sequential chapters in 2 Maccabees. By detaching Eleazar from the time of the Maccabees and connecting him with Solomon, Origen creates the impression that martyrdom was a well-founded practice, rooted already in Solomon's wisdom and hence approved by him.⁵⁴ Eleazar's close attachment to Solomon becomes all the more important if the Books of the Maccabees did not represent authoritative wisdom in third-century Palestine to the same extent as did some of the writings ascribed to Solomon.⁵⁵ Building on Hasan-Rokem, I envision that Origen constructs a vertical axis of transmission, on which adult, learned, and wise men like him – his "equals" – perform and which he also exhorts his readers to join.

Having introduced Eleazar in such a way, Origen then attends to a story that displays children and a woman. He places this story in a markedly scriptural context, presenting himself as a commentator *on it* and not in direct exchange *with them*, thereby creating a different sense of distance and, indeed, proximity between them and himself: their story is guarded in a book on his desk.⁵⁶ What could such a treatment tell about Origen's reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons? From a greater historical distance, we may assume that the story of the mother and her seven sons was more popular and circulated more broadly in late antiquity than did the story of Eleazar.⁵⁷ Origen's presentations would, however, seem to suggest the opposite for the case of third-century Caesarea. Yet, perhaps, his attempt to tie the story of the mother and her seven sons to a written source could indicate a need to present it, in particular, as mediated by books and thereby to better control this shared narrative tradition – I shall return to this prospect of intercultural exchange below. Meanwhile, I shall suggest that Origen's close association with Eleazar and his bookish distance from the story of the mother and her seven sons might also reflect the ways in which both these stories interconnected with the story of his own early life.

3 Origen's near-martyrdom as a further insight into his reception

By the story of Origen's early life, I recall the story of his near-martyrdom. The account we have of it is another story of uncertain historicity as well as ownership: while Origen features in it as the main protagonist, he does not himself transmit this story and, instead, we rely entirely on Eusebius' biography of Origen. It is beyond dispute that Eusebius might not transmit to us a historically reliable picture of Origen's early life and that he quite probably puts his own touches on it.⁵⁸ Yet, I also maintain that Origen's life as Eusebius tells it belongs not necessarily only to Eusebius but also to others, including Origen himself and even us. Thus, I seek the balance between not holding Origen accountable for everything that Eusebius says, on the one hand, and not taking Eusebius's authorship to mean his complete craftsmanship on the

⁵⁴ I believe that the separation of these stories in 2 Maccabees also serves a similar purpose: it creates the impression that "martyrdom" was practiced widely and that it had a history. Yet, Origen seems to take the separation to a further level, distancing Eleazar from the time of the Maccabees

⁵⁵ I assume that Solomon was a well-established source of wisdom by Origen's time. The question is not about the canonical status of Ecclesiastes or the Books of the Maccabees but rather about their interpretative traditions.

⁵⁶ One may recall Margaret Mitchell's distinction between commenting on and commenting with scriptures, where the scripture not the object, but rather the medium of commentary (cf. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians*). Following Mitchell, I could perhaps say that Origen presents Eleazar as a medium – in a similar manner in which he would also see himself as a medium – and the story of the mother and her seven sons as an object.

⁵⁷ As regards late antique Christian literature, Eleazar often though not always accompanies the mother and her seven sons. As noted above, the story of the mother and her seven sons can also be found in late antique rabbinic literature (cf. footnote 15 above), but the story of Eleazar cannot; on the limited reception of the Books of the Maccabees in rabbinic literature, see Stemberger, "The Maccabees."

⁵⁸ Cf. Corke-Webster's ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 53–5) useful overview of recent developments in the study of Eusebius as a source and an author.

matter, on the other.⁵⁹ Bearing in mind that Origen *himself* is in any case not accessible to us and, yet, that his figure is not entirely lost to us due to the survival of both his own writings and those of others, I suggest that we may further explore Origen's relation to both Eleazar and the mother and her seven sons on the level of more (inter)personal exchanges, if we also take account of his early life as transmitted by Eusebius.

In addition to Eusebius, my following analysis of Origen is indebted to James Corke-Webster's recent work on the relation of mothers to martyrdom in both Origen's and Eusebius' writings and the influence of the Maccabean story upon them. For one, Corke-Webster contextualizes Origen's reception of the story in *Exhortation* in the broader framework of Origen's emphasis on renouncement and asceticism, which is definitely a key to understanding his standpoint.⁶⁰ Second, Corke-Webster argues for the significance of the Maccabean imagery in Eusebius's shaping of Origen's early life in his *History of the Church* and specifically in the story of his near-martyrdom and that Eusebius' use of Maccabean motifs is "a response to his own intellectual predecessor Origen's comparable use of them a century before."⁶¹ Whereas Corke-Webster maintains the more conventional chronology of historical analysis – that Origen may be influenced by the Books of the Maccabees, and Eusebius by both the Books of the Maccabees and Origen – my own analysis tests the possibilities to go beyond this established chronology and asks, whether our insights into Origen could grow from both the Books of the Maccabees and Eusebius.

Eusebius presents Origen as having become fatherless at an early stage of his life and that this state of affairs was due to his father's martyrdom.⁶² A rather striking resemblance to the story of the mother and her seven sons unfolds from the information that Origen remained under the custody of his mother together with his six (!) younger brothers when he himself was not yet seventeen years old.⁶³ Indicating the different roles his parents played in Origen's life, Eusebius tells that Origen's zeal for martyrdom was due to his close attachment to his father, and that he probably would have succeeded, had his mother not prevented him. At the crucial moment when Origen was urged to run out from the house in order to be martyred with his father, his mother tried to win him over by words of persuasion and finally forced him to remain at home by hiding all his clothing.⁶⁴ Eusebius' focus, as Corke-Webster maintains, falls on the affectionate father–son relationship, which he presents as a source of Origen's learning and virtue.⁶⁵ While Eusebius considers the actions of Origen's mother to have been providential, he nonetheless gives credit to Origen's father for his early education and care.⁶⁶ The mutuality of their solidarity is reinforced, as Eusebius explains that Origen was not deprived from his zeal but, rather, redirected it and sat down to write his father a letter of encouragement to martyrdom.⁶⁷

Corke-Webster points out that Origen's emphases regarding family relations are quite contrasting compared to those of both Eusebius and the Books of the Maccabees, in which family is presented as a unit of primary care and education in virtue.⁶⁸ Indeed, in 4 Maccabees, family is a core value in itself and

⁵⁹ Consider, for instance, that Eusebius indicates a broader renown of the issues he transmits, giving the following as his excuse for relating Origen's childhood desire for martyrdom: "How intense Origen's resolve for the Divine Logos was after this [i.e., his father's martyrdom], it is not out of place to recount briefly, especially when his story is famous among most people" (*The History of the Church* 6.1).

⁶⁰ Corke-Webster, "Mothers and Martyrdom," esp. 56–62 on Origen.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 56; esp. 64–8 on Eusebius.

⁶² *The History of the Church* 6.1.

⁶³ *The History of the Church* 6.2.12. While the historicity of this fact cannot be proven, Corke-Webster ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 64) is definitely correct in identifying the "single mother and seven sons in the context of martyrdom [a]s a clear allusion to the Maccabean story."

⁶⁴ *The History of the Church* 6.2.4–5.

⁶⁵ Corke-Webster, "Mothers and Martyrdom," 66–8.

⁶⁶ *The History of the Church* 6.2.7–11.

⁶⁷ *The History of the Church* 6.2.6.

⁶⁸ Corke-Webster ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 68) only discusses 4 Maccabees, to which Eusebius' account has a greater resemblance. Yet, the role of the parent (the mother) in educating the children is also emphasized in 2 Maccabees 7.

piety (εὐσέβεια) is a virtue of loyalty that also encompasses dutiful and caring familial relations.⁶⁹ In consequence, 4 Maccabees presents the seven brothers as being only temporarily separated by death, suggesting that their deaths illustrated and, in fact, strengthened their mutual love and bonds and were to be followed by their reunion.⁷⁰ Familial loyalty and affection were not obstacles to virtue but, rather, were in themselves a reason to die.⁷¹ Origen, instead, seems to understand piety (εὐσέβεια) in terms of a human–divine relation. In his version of the story of the mother and her seven, he contrasts the love of God with other bonds of affection, which are a form of weakness, stating that:

[P]iety and love for God, in face of the most painful agonies and the severest torments, is far more powerful than any other bond of affection. This love for God and human weakness cannot dwell together in us.⁷²

To Origen, martyrdom was not an expression of family solidarity but an ascetic ideal that meant the renunciation of everything worldly, including familial ties. A martyr, thus, preferred the love for God and renounced all other objects of desire, including love for one's family.⁷³ In light of Eusebius' account of Origen's near-martyrdom, such an assessment could be interpreted as reflecting Origen's attachment to his own father. Regardless of the possibility presented by Eusebius that Origen's father had first lovingly instructed and equipped his first-born son for life, the teenaged boy still needed to reconcile this experience with the fact that his father had renounced him as he chose God over family. Thus, while Eusebius emphasizes their deep mutual agreement and encouragement, Origen's own memory of his father could have rather connected to renunciation than family solidarity and was, perhaps, reflected in his way of relating to Eleazar's seemingly childless figure.⁷⁴

As regards the story that follows, the brothers comprise Origen's more explicit focus to the extent that he first presents the story as theirs without even mentioning their mother.⁷⁵ Regardless of the presence of the family motif, Origen presents the brothers too as free from familial affection and independent from their mother.⁷⁶ His brief discussion on the mother also highlights renunciation rather than familial duty or affection:

At that moment, one could have seen how the mother of these heroes, for her hope in God, bravely bore the torments and deaths of her sons. For the dew of piety and the cool breath of holiness did not allow her maternal instinct to be kindled within her – the instinct which in most mothers faced with such severe pains would have been a burning fire.⁷⁷

⁶⁹ Drawing on d'Angelo's analysis of 4 Maccabees ("Εὐσέβεια"), as well as Richard Saller's numerous works on the Roman family, Corke-Webster's analysis is attuned to the shared meaning of εὐσέβεια in 4 Maccabees and in the discourse of early Roman imperial virtue ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 60–2).

⁷⁰ See, e.g., 4M 17:5; 18:23. The emphasis on the family's reunion in the hereafter acquires an even more concrete form in 2 Maccabees in which resurrection is understood as the resurrection of the flesh. In 4 Maccabees, the emphasis remains on the immortality of the soul.

⁷¹ Piety, virtue, and law are all presented in 4 Maccabees as causes to die for, and family represents the homeland at the micro-level. Due to its connections to Greco-Roman noble death traditions and patriotism, there is no separate "religious cause" in 4 Maccabees for the death of the mother and her seven sons, even if the protagonists were called martyrs.

⁷² *Exh.* 27.

⁷³ Origen's choices in his personal life, such as his self-castration, also lend support to this. Corke-Webster ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 66), however, maintains that Eusebius, while transmitting these choices to us, related critically to Origen's more extremist stance.

⁷⁴ Corke-Webster ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 68) also notes that Eusebius's depiction of Origen's father combines the figures of Eleazar and the father of the seven brothers, as they are depicted in 4 Maccabees.

⁷⁵ *Exh.* 23.

⁷⁶ As Corke-Webster notes ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 61–2), "family solidarity" is deliberately lost in Origen's version of the story. Moreover, in comparison to 4 Maccabees, for instance, Origen does not present any potential weaknesses of the brothers, such as their inner emotions. The youngest of the brothers, whom the mother specifically supports in both 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees, receives from her "many exhortations to endurance" in *Exhortation* as well, yet one hardly gets the impression that the boy would have needed them. The fact that both 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees report the mother's speeches suggests that her encouragement actually mattered, whereas Origen leaves them out of the story.

⁷⁷ *Exh.* 27.

Origen's elaboration on the mother is relatively brief.⁷⁸ In contrast to Eleazar's instruction and the exemplary role of the brothers, the mother's role in Origen's account is simply not to prevent her sons from martyrdom – that is, not to do to her sons what Origen's own mother had done to him. Origen does not elaborate on her, nor does he mention any of the persuasive arguments that she puts forward in 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees, which could indirectly bespeak her children's attachment to her and have served as an indication of her quality as her children's encourager and, indeed, their educator.⁷⁹ At best, for Origen, the mother serves the same purpose as do her children: all of them are family members who tolerated watching each other's tortures and death undisturbed by any emotional struggles.

In line with his emphasis on the renunciation of family and thus martyrdom as marking the end of the family, moreover, Origen's brief account indicates that this mother ceased to be a mother: according to *Exhortation*, her maternal instinct is not even kindled, and Origen's rendering "gives prominence to divine action."⁸⁰ Such an image of a mother is quite contrasting to the one provided by Eusebius of Origen's own mother whose very "motherly feelings" had prevented Origen from a martyr's death. Yet, Corke-Webster argues that Eusebius's description of Origen's mother alludes to Origen's description of the mother of the seven sons precisely in that both of these mothers are celebrated as "subject[s] of divine agency."⁸¹ Given his succession to Origen, Eusebius could hardly have regretted the failure of Origen's attempt at martyrdom. Thus, Eusebius ignores Origen's childhood enthusiasm for martyrdom and celebrates, instead, Origen's mother as the heroine whose actions saved Origen from an early death and thereby enabled his future as the great teacher that he became.⁸²

But how about Origen himself? Origen does not leave us even a trace regarding his relationship with his mother, and even Eusebius does not directly address this issue, his attention being focused on the father-son relationship. Yet, I would like to suggest that Origen's brief and, indeed, flat reception of the figure of the mother of the seven sons in *Exhortation* could reflect not only his emphasis on renouncement in general, to which his reception of Eleazar and the brothers also points. It could also entail his potential disappointment in his own mother, whose unwillingness to renounce her son had stood in the way of Origen's own martyrdom and separated him from his father. Against the backdrop of such a personal history could also emerge his presentation of the mother of the seven sons as entirely void of maternal instinct, a mother who is not in the center of the story of her children's martyrdom in any way.

4 Miraculous mothers: The mother of the seven sons as a popular figure of the wise

Origen's portrayal of the mother in *Exhortation* is surprisingly flat and pale, especially considering that Origen most likely had access to both 2 Maccabees and 4 Maccabees (or, alternatively, any other version of

⁷⁸ In Corke-Webster's assessment ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 57; emphasis mine), "Origen's use of the Maccabean family climaxes in a *lengthy* discussion of the mother." I assume Corke-Webster means the whole of section 27, but only the lines that I have quoted above are concerned with the mother. The rest of section 27 deals with the story as a whole (see below).

⁷⁹ Contra Corke-Webster ("Mothers and Martyrdom," 60), according to whom "the mother's role is simply to encourage her children's deaths and separation from herself," and van Henten ("The Maccabean Martyrs," 26), who finds Origen's *Exhortation* to join the broader trend in early Christian writings "to elaborate and embellish the praise for the mother."

⁸⁰ Corke-Webster, "Mothers and Martyrdom," 59. Here, as well, Origen's presentation is in contrast with the emphases of 4 Maccabees. Whereas 4 Maccabees highlights the mother's female qualities and the management of her motherly feelings and agency, which together make her a more remarkable demonstration of pious reasoning than her sons and the most motherly, deeply caring and loving mother.

⁸¹ Corke-Webster, "Mothers and Martyrdom," 65.

⁸² According to Eusebius, not only "divine and heavenly providence [...] placed an impediment in his way in the form of his mother," but the mother's actions also ensured that Origen would have to direct his enthusiasm towards exhorting others to martyrdom, starting from his own father; *The History of the Church* 6.2.4–6.

the story): the mother is indisputably the most prominent figure of the story in most of the surviving versions.⁸³ The fact that Origen largely bypasses the mother's charisma is all the more intriguing since he shows awareness of her words and clearly appreciates her wisdom and authority elsewhere. Outside *Exhortation*, Origen recites her teaching twice in order to provide authority for creation *ex nihilo*. In this connection, he presents the mother as a philosopher-teacher and recalls her words, rather than elaborating on her parenthood.⁸⁴ As I have suggested above, Origen's way of reducing the verbal instruction of the mother in his rendering of the story in *Exhortation* could relate to his interest in highlighting Eleazar's instruction and spiritual parenthood in this connection. If Origen wished to present Eleazar as the example and the authority whom the brothers followed, the wisdom possessed and embodied by the mother might only have challenged that status. Origen could, moreover, have seen himself as following the instruction of his martyred father who had renounced his family, rather than being under the authority of his mother who had done her best to preserve what was left of hers. Yet, in what follows, I would also like to explore Origen's reception of the mother against broader horizons.

This final stage of my analysis most explicitly considers the possibility that Origen's reception is not simply an interpretation of the text but, rather, a response to a popular narrative tradition concerning the mother of the seven sons. I shall build on Galit Hasan-Rokem and Israel Jacob Yuval's presentation of the third-century Palestinian milieu as a fertile stage for discussions beyond scholarly circles on the theme of miraculous birth, which is grounded in their identification of interfaces between *Leviticus Rabbah* and Origen's homilies on Leviticus that betray a shared interest in this particular theme.⁸⁵ I argue that the theme of miraculous birth is also interwoven with the mother of the seven sons especially as she is portrayed in 2 Maccabees. The acknowledgment of this connection could in itself strengthen the prospect of the story's popularity beyond scholarly circles in Palestine as well as elsewhere, but I also present it as a reason that could have kept Origen from quoting the mother's words and especially her words according to 2 Maccabees. Moreover, it could have translated Origen's encounter with the mother of the seven sons as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, a reality both attractive and dreadful,⁸⁶ and thus broadens the realms of his discourse to include not only members of other religions, but also supernatural or holy beings that he perceived to be real.⁸⁷ For, just like her knowledge of creation *ex nihilo*, which has authority and appeal to Origen, the mother's testimony to miraculous birth emerges from her own bodily experience of childbearing and likens her to a keeper of wisdom, a sage.⁸⁸

Hasan-Rokem and Yuval discuss the rabbinic context of third-century Palestine in a broad sense that entails the involvement of rabbis and others. They suggest that the rabbis' elaborations on miraculous birth in *Leviticus Rabbah* were a response to the attraction of this theme and reflect a certain ambivalence due to

⁸³ The more common view is that the mother becomes a more prominent protagonist in the later versions of the story, which suggests that her role is less central in the Books of the Maccabees (see, e.g., Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 118). I maintain, however, that the mother is the most prominent protagonist already in the Books of the Maccabees and, indeed, that Origen's portrayal of her figure makes her much less central. Regardless of the fact that the structure of Origen's version of the story reflects that of 4 Maccabees (deSilva, "An Example of How," 348), Origen's version does not climax with the mother. The mother's prominence in 2 Maccabees, instead, is reflected in the way in which her presence interrupts the narrative (2M 7:22–3). Here, she is already praised for having witnessed the death of her seven sons even though the last one is still alive.

⁸⁴ In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (1.103), Origen promotes as the Christian view the idea that God having created "the things which are from that which does not exist" and refers this teaching to "the mother of the seven martyrs in the Maccabees" (cf. 2M 7:28). The same is repeated in *On First Principles* (2.1), the mother also noted as a scriptural authority here. In addition to the mother, the angel of repentance in the Shepherd of Hermas is, for Origen, an authority on this matter.

⁸⁵ Hasan-Rokem and Yuval's joint publications on *Leviticus Rabbah*, Origen, and the theme of miraculous birth are part of a larger project. I rely here mostly on Hasan-Rokem and Yuval, "Myth, History and Eschatology;" see, however, Hasan-Rokem and Yuval, "Rabbinic Reflections."

⁸⁶ I recall Rudolf Otto's famous paradox concerning religious experience; see also Hasan-Rokem and Yuval "Myth, History and Eschatology," 265), who consider the possibility of the birth of Jesus having been such an attraction in the eyes of Palestinian Jewry.

⁸⁷ Cf. Hasan-Rokem, *Web of Life*, 110.

⁸⁸ Cf. Finitsis, "Scent of a Woman," which offers an illuminating reading of this mother as "Lady Wisdom." Finitsis ("Scent of a Woman," 374) also reminds readers that this mother is named Solomone in later traditions, which suggests a succession to Solomon.

its immediate connection with the story of the birth of Jesus in late antique Palestine. As an important correction to earlier studies, Hasan-Rokem and Yuval maintain that the rabbis did not embark upon this issue merely to ridicule Christian views on the miraculous birth of Jesus but, rather, in order to guide “their own” – including those among their audience who might have found the idea of the miraculous conception too attractive to be rejected.⁸⁹ They argue that the rabbis, in their cautious response to this matter, did not entirely reject the possibility of miraculous birth but, rather, highlighted the miraculous character and divine origin of *every* human conception. Accordingly, the following is stated in *Leviticus Rabbah*:

Be aware that when they (humans) have fulfilled their needs one turns her face here and the other turns his face there and you (God) put in every single drop [of semen] from him. This is what David said: “Though my father and my mother abandon me, the Lord will take me in” [and] “with sin my mother conceived me.”⁹⁰

Such a response would have enabled people to hold on to their attraction to the idea of the miraculous conception, and at the same time, they would find the case of Christ’s miraculous conception far less unique and thus far less miraculous than it was according to Christians.

Hasan-Rokem and Yuval read *Leviticus Rabbah* in dialogue with Origen’s homilies on Leviticus, but they do not broaden Origen’s horizontal axis to the same extent as they do with the rabbis’. In an attempt to take their work in this direction, I envision that Origen and his colleagues would probably have been prone to emphasizing the uniqueness and singularity of the conception of Christ in Mary’s womb not only within their learned circles but also beyond. Following this line of thought, Origen’s restrained representation of the mother in *Exhortation* makes even more sense. Her words that Origen leaves out not only provide core arguments for creation *ex nihilo*, but they also testify to her personal experience of miraculous conception and her solitary parental role:

I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. [...] I carried you nine months in my womb, and nursed you for three years, and have reared you and brought you up to this point in your life, and have borne the burden of your education. I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. And in the same way the human race came into being.⁹¹

Rather effortlessly, the mother presents the conception of all her seven children as an event characterized by divine involvement – not caused by human intercourse and definitely not originating from a man’s will. Her husband is entirely absent from her autobiographical reflection.⁹² Consequently, the birth account of the seven brothers is not related to “sin,” that is, the sexual pleasure between two human beings. One might expect that Origen, given his emphasis on asceticism, would have appreciated this point, were the conception without sin not connected in his mind with the uniqueness of Christ.

The mother’s speech in 2 Maccabees has a firm biblical background that links her to wisdom, since pondering God’s creation and involvement in the mystery of the beginning of life in a woman’s womb are hardly exceptional themes in the Psalms or other wisdom literature.⁹³ In this light, the strategy chosen by the rabbis seems all the more effective: human conception and birth have a miraculous feel to them, regardless of our scientific explanations, and the awe that it inspires seems to be a universal human sensation.⁹⁴ Indeed, even as she is witnessing her children’s sufferings and death, the mother herself still seems to be in awe of how it all began inside her. She has treasured and pondered the miracle of their

⁸⁹ Hasan-Rokem and Yuval, “Myth, History and Eschatology,” 264–5.

⁹⁰ *Leviticus Rabbah* 14:5, as translated in Hasan-Rokem and Yuval, “Myth, History and Eschatology,” 263–4.

⁹¹ 2M 7:22, 27–8; translation according to NRSV.

⁹² The mother’s emphasis in this regard is much stronger in 2 Maccabees than in 4 Maccabees, in which the mother does not speak about the time of conception and in which she later also identifies her sons’ father and shares the credit for their education with him. See also Finitsis (“Scent of a Woman,” 367) on the mother’s conception as miraculous.

⁹³ For an example, take Ps 139, which vividly describes God’s creative actions inside woman.

⁹⁴ Consider, for instance, the frequency of a woman and her womb as representations of the creation of the world in different cultures.

conception and birth in her heart throughout their lives, and indeed, it helps her endure their terrible ending – quite like Mary, the mother of Jesus.⁹⁵ I therefore suggest that the mother's experience of her children's miraculous and divine conception was potentially too much for Origen in Caesarea. Origen could have recognized the prospect that her words might render Jesus' conception and birth more commonplace, especially if such prospects were already part of the discussion, as Hasan-Rokem and Yuval suggest.

Yet, the mother's wisdom might also have challenged that of Solomon and, in particular, the views presented in Ecclesiastes that seem skeptical of the possibility of any human life after death.⁹⁶ Jonathan Goldstein reads the mother's speech in 2 Maccabees in response to the following claims in Ecclesiastes:

I looked at all the work(s)⁹⁷ of God, for man cannot fathom the work, which is fashioned under the sun; however much a man may toil in seeking, he will not fathom it, and even if a wise man should claim to know, he cannot fathom it. [...] There is no one who knows the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of the pregnant woman; similarly you will not know the work(s) of God, as he fashions everything.⁹⁸

According to Goldstein, the mother⁹⁹ delightfully responds to such skepticism and proposes that a “man's ignorance should lead not to doubt but to affirmation of God's creative power! [...] God, who fashioned her sons there, knows how He did so, for He created the universe and also the process of human reproduction.”¹⁰⁰ Her share in such an imagined dialogue helps to envision this mother as a sage – someone who could challenge even Solomon in wisdom. Had not only Solomon but also this mother appeared to him as sage-like figures, Origen might not have appreciated the dialogue between these two facets of wisdom, considering his identification with Solomon and Eleazar. Regarding the issues both Solomon and the mother touch upon, Origen would probably have found himself in agreement with the mother rather than Solomon.¹⁰¹ Thus, elaboration on the mother's embodied wisdom might only have challenged Origen's portrayal of Solomon and Eleazar (and himself) as the wise.¹⁰² In the case of Origen, moreover, I suspect it is not his ignorance of God's creative power but, rather, the ambivalence he felt toward this particular mother that held him from taking this particular opportunity: further elaboration on this mother might have led him to compromise the uniqueness of Christ's birth.

Without entering into these potential conflicts of interest, Origen simply shifts the focus from the mother's agency to divine agency, affirming a separation between the two and not their fusion.¹⁰³ Thereafter, he emphasizes his own authority in putting forward this useful evidence from a text¹⁰⁴ as if to chain this mother to the scriptures and to place her under his own commentary and control. He then concludes by reverting to man (ὁ ὁῖός), whom Christ – and no mother of any sort – will strengthen to martyrdom:

The love for God and human weakness cannot dwell together in us. Weakness is exiled and altogether driven out of our soul and is rendered entirely incapable where a man can say, “The Lord is my strength and my song” and “I can do all things through Christ Jesus our Lord who strengthens me.”¹⁰⁵

⁹⁵ Comparisons between this mother and Mary are not infrequent, though I am aware of none inspired by Origen's account.

⁹⁶ See, e.g., Eccles 3:19–21; 9:2–6.

⁹⁷ Goldstein's translation (2 Maccabees, 309) entails both the Hebrew singular and the Greek plural.

⁹⁸ Eccles 8:17 and 11:5.

⁹⁹ To Goldstein, though, the author of 2 Maccabees through the mother.

¹⁰⁰ Goldstein, 2 Maccabees, 309.

¹⁰¹ Origen's commentary on Ecclesiastes does not survive, but later commentaries suggest that its remarks on divine providence and life after death were found rather problematic. I thank Siiri Toiviainen Rø for these insights.

¹⁰² Finitsis' (“Scent of a Woman,” 362–4) comparative analysis of the presentations of Eleazar and the mother in 2 Maccabees adds to this as he finds more striking parallels between the mother and the figure of the wise than between Eleazar and the wise.

¹⁰³ This argument does not contradict the one I have made above. In fact, Origen's possible assessment of his mother's care as weakness rather than piety relates, I believe, to his separation of the motherly from the divine agency.

¹⁰⁴ *Exh.* 27. Contra Chadwick's translation (“I believe that this story which I have quoted from the Scripture in abbreviated form is most valuable for our purpose”), Origen not only presents himself as quoting but also as abbreviating the text.

¹⁰⁵ *Exh.* 27.

Although attraction to the theme of miraculous birth was certainly not specific to Palestine or Origen's time, Origen's closer proximity to the Palestinian rabbis could explain his reluctance to elaborate on the mother of the seven sons. While this possibility is beyond verification, our historical distance from Origen allows yet another telling glimpse of his time. Just a decade or two later, the likewise famous-to-be church father Cyprian of Carthage was moved by the story of the mother and her seven sons:¹⁰⁶

With the seven children is clearly joined the mother also, their origin and root, who later bore seven churches, herself the first and only one founded by the Lord's voice upon a rock. Nor is it without significance that the mother alone is with her children in their sufferings. For the martyrs, who in their suffering bear witness to themselves as sons of God, are not considered as of any father other than God, just as the Lord teaches in the Gospel saying: "And you shall call no one your father on earth. One is your Father who is in heaven."¹⁰⁷

Cyprian's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* exploits, without any reservations, the encouragements of the mother of the seven sons to her children, embracing her single-parenthood or, even better, her shared parenthood with God. The children of this mother – the martyrs – claim God as their father while reaffirming their descent from her. What led Cyprian to such a viewpoint deserves a discussion of its own; here, I have only suggested that some intercultural exchanges specific to Palestine could explain why Origen's exhortation is not like his.

5 Conclusion

Recent scholarship on Origen's reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons in his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* suggests that Origen not only knew the account of it told in 2 Maccabees but was also quite profoundly influenced by 4 Maccabees in his rendering of the story. While my analysis conforms to this, I also entertain the possibility that this story circulated in Origen's time apart from these books. Origen's reception, thus, is not only a matter of textual, or scriptural, engagement, but potentially also attests to more diverse realms of discourse, as well as to an emotional register broader than the scholarly or the intellectual. As such, Origen's reception may tell us not only about Origen and his dealings with the scriptures, but also something about the availability of this story in the third century.

With the reception of the story of the mother and her seven sons in Origen's writings as my case study, I have sought to broaden the scope of our study of biblical reception history and integrated into it Galit Hasan-Rokem's concepts of the vertical and the horizontal axes of transmission. Analyzing the vertical axis, which oftentimes represents reception history itself, requires critical reflection – that we reimagine the chain of tradition, or other continuities that are apparent to us, in terms of the web of life. Analyzing the horizontal axis, then, involves attempting to recover conversations that the received traditions oftentimes only implicitly entail and that remain mostly lost to us. Here, Hasan-Rokem particularly underlines conversations that reach beyond one's alleged tradition, or circle of experts, and cut through different layers of communal living.

Much of my argumentation builds on a seemingly insignificant observation concerning the different ways in which Origen presents Eleazar, on the one hand, and the mother and her seven sons, on the other: of the two, Origen places only the story of the mother and her seven sons in a written source. I have suggested that the figure of Eleazar emerges from Origen's *Exhortation* as his ancestral colleague who

¹⁰⁶ That Cyprian invokes here the story of the mother and her seven sons may be confirmed with a look at the broader literary context, in which first the brothers, then the mother and finally also Eleazar are discussed. At the same time, Cyprian also associates this mother of seven with the church – an association not uncommon in early Christian writings. Yet, Knust ("Who Were the Maccabees?," 90 n. 44) questions whether third-century Latin authors knew 2 Maccabees or 4 Maccabees at all, "or only a set of oral traditions about the martyrs."

¹⁰⁷ *Exhortation to Martyrdom: To Fortunatus* 11. Gassman ("Cyprian's Early Career," 8) dates Cyprian's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* as "post-Decian."

embodies Solomon's wisdom and instructs on martyrdom. Together, Solomon, Eleazar, and Origen himself comprise a kind of vertical axis of transmission, as if jointly promoting Origen's ideal of a solitary, ascetic way of life – in light of Eusebius' account of Origen's early life, one could also expect Origen to have connected that ideal to his own martyred father. Instead, Origen's portrayal of the mother of the seven sons might entail a greater degree of ambivalence, and I take it as a chance to reimagine a horizontal axis of transmission. I have suggested that Origen's flat presentation of this mother betrays an ambivalent response to her embodied motherly wisdom, in which exhortation of her children to martyrdom, her persistent love for them, as well as her testimony concerning their miraculous birth are interwoven. In light of Eusebius' account, Origen would probably not have connected such embodied wisdom to his own mother; in light of his own writings, however, one could expect him to have been acquainted with such a mother of the seven martyrs. In an attempt to challenge Origen's presentation and look beyond his authority, I have entertained the possibility that this mother did not only dwell in a book but embodied wisdom competitive with that of Solomon. Given the prospect of the story of the mother and her seven sons as a popular narrative tradition, I construe her figure as a miraculous being who could have represented a living reality for Origen as well as for others in third-century Palestine.

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