

Research Article

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“Teachers of Good Things”: Origen on Women as Teachers

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Abstract: Origen expected elderly women and men to be “teachers of good things” in Christian congregations (cf. Titus 2:2–3), and he allowed women to give “spiritual instruction” to younger women. He wrote that women can have “pure minds” and receive divine revelations. At the same time, he followed the (Deutero-)Pauline prohibitions on women to speak and teach in church. This article investigates Origen’s argumentation and his emphases when mentioning female teachers, in order to determine to which degree it is based on theological principles, and where he is following social norms. Why is it, as Origen writes in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (in catena), shameful for a woman to speak in church, “even if she should speak marvelous and holy words”?

Keywords: Origen, teaching, teachers, prophecy, women, gender, social norms

1 Introduction

The aim of this article is to describe Origen’s opinion and discussion on women as Christian teachers. Origen was a remarkable exegete whose works at times possess a very creative and innovative quality, but he was, of course, also a child of his time, i.e. the third-century Roman world, and its social norms. On the one hand, in his works, he wrote as if the physical world and its sexual differences were but a stage to be overcome,¹ and on the other hand, as we shall see below, he did adhere to a set of social expectations repressing women from being active and vocal in the public sphere.² Additionally, in some texts, he emphasizes the restrictions on women’s teaching activities much more than in other texts. Therefore, when we study Origen’s works today, we can perceive his statements on women as social agents as inconsistent. Here, I shall not go much into Origen’s explicit thoughts on the creation of man and woman or into his sophisticated understanding of how each human possesses a female soul and a male spirit.³ As such, this article does not study Origen’s explicit theoretical or theological conception of the feminine, but investigates rather how he perceived women as

¹ Peter Martens describes how Origen depicts the protological and eschatological state of the minds as existing “equal and alike,” in: Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 227–42. See e.g. Origen, *On First Principles* 2.9.6. For considerations on the eschatological salvation as being without sexual differentiation, see also, Pålsson, “Angelic Humans, Glorious Flesh.”

² Origen is no exception in this regard. If women were mentioned as teaching at all in early Christianity, it was always with a certain ambivalence or attempt at legitimization, see for example, Munkholt Christensen and Gemeinhardt, “Holy Women and Men as Teachers.” It is not surprising that Origen speaks against women teaching, but rather peculiar that he occasionally seems less hesitant in ascribing women some teaching authority. It should be mentioned that some Roman women were well-educated and did hold power and authority, primarily due to their wealth and social standing, but women of all strata were almost completely excluded from official public offices and activities (Hemelrijk, *Matrona Docta*, 8; 86; 101).

³ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 1.5.

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agents in the social world around him. We can get a glimpse of his attitudes by studying his various exegetical writings. Of course, one must be cautious when dealing with men's elaborations on women's activities and possibilities. One must question what such normative statements really express, is it a male vision or the actual world? Even if Origen, as we shall see, did not find it proper for women to teach in public, women possibly did so anyway. Otherwise, it would hardly have been necessary for him to address its impropriety. I do to some degree agree with Elizabeth Clark that what we read in ancient sources is mostly reflective of the Christian male imagination and not necessarily of the activities of actual women.⁴

As is often the case in Origen's rich and varied works, one can find different and ambiguous statements about multiple topics, including the topic of women and their opportunities. Emanuela Prinzivalli is right in concluding that Origen's anthropology and allegoric Bible interpretation occasionally lead to readings of the Bible that are much kinder to the female sex than one could expect in the third century.⁵ In a case study on the Sarah-Hagar-Motive, Miyako Demura even recognizes what she calls a feministic parallel in Origen's interpretation.⁶ I would not go quite that far, since he, in other contexts, obviously cannot really put these egalitarian intentions into practice.

In the following, I present some examples where Origen reflects on and acknowledges women as teachers and prophets. Subsequently, I highlight instances where Origen denies women these possibilities, and finally, I consider why Origen argues with a certain level of inconsistency on the matter.

2 How Women Can Teach

We begin with Origen's *Commentary on Romans*, which was translated and edited by Rufinus and is today known to us in full only in Rufinus' shortened, Latin version. In this commentary, Origen dedicated a paragraph to Romans 16:6, which reads: "Greet Mary, who has labored much among you." Origen elaborates:

'Greet Mary, who has labored much among you.' He [Paul] is teaching even in this that women likewise ought to labor for the churches of God. For they labor both when they teach young women to be modest, to love their husbands, to raise children, to be pure and chaste, to govern their homes well, to be kind, to be submissive to their husbands, to receive in hospitality, to wash the feet of the saints, and all the other things written that are recorded concerning the services of women to do with all purity.⁷

Origen here uses one biblical text to interpret another, because his explanation of the greeting in Romans 16:6 is really a paraphrase of Paul's Letter to Titus 2:3-5, where the role of widows in the church is described. Modern scholarship categorizes the Letter to Titus as deutero-Pauline.⁸ Titus 2:3-5 expresses the expectation

4 "I [Elizabeth Clark] assume... that the extant literature reveals more about the rhetorical and other functions that the appeal to 'woman' served in the early Christian (male) imagination than it does about the activities of actual women." (Clark, "Thinking with Women," 43).

5 Prinzivalli, "Weiblichkeitskonstruktionen," 99: "Die platonische Ausrichtung der Anthropologie und die Vorliebe für die allegorische Bibelauslegung – zwei Ansätze, die das Bestreben verbindet, die sinnlich wahrnehmbare Wirklichkeit zu überwinden, um zur spirituellen Wirklichkeit zu gelangen – sorgen dafür, dass die alexandrinische Exegese die Wirkung einiger biblischer Texte abmildert, die man in einer für die Frau besonders unvoreilhaftesten Weise auslegen könnte."

6 Demura, "Das Sara-Hagar-Motiv," 71: "An diesen Stellen beweist Origenes seine Fähigkeit zu einem kritischen Umgang mit biblischen Texten, und seine allegorische Auslegung des Sara-Hagar-Motivs gibt ihm die Möglichkeit, den schroffen Antagonismus zwischen Sara und Hagar in der Genesiserzählung ebenso zu umgehen wie die gefährliche Rhetorik aus Gal 4. Wir können daher sagen, dass Origenes' Herangehensweise gewisse Parallelen zu einer feministischen Perspektive aufweist [...]."

7 Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 10.20-21 (ed. Bammel): 'Salutate Mariam quae multum laboravit in vobis.' Docet et in hoc debere etiam feminas laborare pro ecclesiis Dei. Nam et laborant cum docent adulescentulas sobrias esse diligere viros filios enutrire pudicas esse castas domum bene regentes benignas subditas uiris suis hospitio recipere sanctorum pedes lauare et cetera omnia quae de officiis mulierum scripta referuntur in omnia genere castitate. (Translation in: Scheck, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 293).

8 Furnish, "Letters in the New Testament," 1274.

that older women are “reverent in the way they live” and “teachers of good things (καλοδιδασκάλους)” who “urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.”

This morally and practically oriented “teaching office” which the Letter to Titus and Origen grant women was obviously unproblematic in “mainstream” Christianity, as it found its way into the biblical canon with Paul’s Letter to Titus. Older women should teach younger women how to act and behave. The curriculum comprised a set of virtues that were widely in accord with the Greco-Roman context: women should learn to be modest, pure, and chaste (*sobrias, pudicas, and castas*⁹), and to be kind and submissive to their husbands/men (*subditas uiris suis*). Origen added also another task for widows mentioned in 1 Timothy 5:10, i.e. to wash the feet of the saints. These lessons are passed on from older women to teenagers (*docent adulescentulas*). Here, in the *Commentary on Romans*, Origen does not elaborate further or mention any kind of theological or intellectual wisdom that should also be taught by older women.

However, when cross-referencing within Origen’s commentaries, we find that Origen did, in fact, understand this list of virtues and behaviors to have more than one meaning. Indeed, in other writings, Origen infers that the obligation of older women to wash the feet of the saints (1 Timothy 5:10; *sanctorum pedes lauare*) is not only to be understood practically, but also spiritually. In his *Commentary on John* 32.12, Origen writes about the widows, who are enrolled into ecclesiastical honor, and their obligation to wash the feet of the holy. He adds:

[...] I think it would be ridiculous to stop at the literal meaning And do not be surprised if you have to interpret the statement anagogically (ἀνάγειν (i.e. a meaning that is lifted up)), ‘If she has washed the feet of saints,’ since older women, analogous to older men, are commanded also to be teachers of what is good (καλοδιδάσκαλοι).¹⁰

Suddenly, here in the *Commentary on John* the older women and older men are asked the same: to teach what is good. Likewise, in Origen’s *Homily 6 on Isaiah* – which was translated into Latin by Jerome – Origen interprets the washing of feet allegorically, he writes:

And, oh, that I might now take the water that can wash the feet of your soul, so that each one of you may say, when he has been washed, ‘I have washed my feet, how will I stain them?’ For the bride says this in the Song of Songs, not indicating bodily feet washed, but non-stumbling feet But indeed even some widows are appointed in the churches; it says, ‘if she has washed the feet of the saints.’ Yet, if you want to hear more clearly how the widow washes the feet of the saints, listen to Paul in another passage appointing widows and saying, ‘They teach well so that they may form chaste young maidens,’ washing away the dirt from the feet of the young girls. And those widows are worthy of ecclesiastical honor, whosoever wash the feet of the saints with the word of spiritual doctrine, but indeed not the feet of male saints, but rather the feet of women saints, for [Paul states], ‘I do not permit a woman to teach or rule over a man.’ He [Paul] wants women to teach well so that they may exhort not young men to chastity, but young maidens – indeed, it is improper that a woman be made the teacher of a man – so that they may exhort young maidens to chastity and to love their husbands and children. Therefore, let us learn to wash the feet of the disciples. For this reason, these things have been said: ‘Seeing, you will see and not understand.’ ... for truly each thing that was done in the body was a likeness and type of future things.¹¹

⁹ These adjectives echo regular praise of women in Roman Antiquity, e.g. the Roman funeral inscription for the wife Amymone: *Hic sita est Amymone Marci optima et pulcherrima, lanifica pia pudica frugi casta domiseda* (“Here is buried Amymone, [wife] of Marcus, best and most beautiful, a worker-in-wool, devoted, modest, frugal, chaste, a stay-at-home,” in: CIL VI.11602, translation: Parkin and Pomeroy, *Roman Social History*, 92).

¹⁰ Origen, *Commentary on John* 32.12 (ed. Blanc): Πλὴν καὶ ἅγιον ὄντα ἐνδέχεται δεῖσθαι τῆς νύψεως τῶν ποδῶν, ἐπεὶ καὶ ἡ καταλεγομένη εἰς ἐκκλησιαστικὴν τιμὴν χήρα ἐξετάζεται μετὰ τῶν ἄλλων καλῶν καὶ ἐν τῷ «Εἰ ἁγίων πόδας ἐνίψεν» γελοῖον γὰρ οἶμαι τυγχάνειν τὸ στῆναι ἐπὶ τοῦ ῥητοῦ καί, φέρε εἰπεῖν, τὴν ἔχουσαν πάντα τὰ χαρακτηρίζοντα τὴν ἁγίαν χήραν καὶ τούτῳ μόνῳ λείπουσιν, μὴ κατατετάχθαι εἰς ἐκκλησιαστικὴν τιμὴν, πολλάκις διὰ παιδισκῶν καὶ οἰκετῶν φιλοφρονησαμένην, ἐν ᾧ καιρῷ ὑπόρει καὶ εἶχεν τὰ ἐπιτήδεια, τοὺς ξένους ἢ τοὺς ἀπαξιαπλῶς δεομένους τοῦ φιλάνθρωπόν τι ἔργον ἀπ’ αὐτῆς παθεῖν. Καὶ μὴ θαυμάσης εἰ ἀνάγειν σε δεῖ τὸ «Εἰ ἁγίων πόδας ἐνίψεν», ὅπου κελεύονται ἀνάλογον τοῖς πρεσβυτέροις πρεσβυτίδες εἶναι καὶ καλοδιδάσκαλοι. (Translation: Heine, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, Books 13–32, 367).

¹¹ Origen, *Homily 6 on Isaiah* (ed. Migne), *Utinam et ego accipiam nunc aquam, quae possit animae vestrae pedes lavare! ut unusquisque vestrum dicat cum fuerit lotus: Lavi pedes meos, quomodo inquinabo illos (Cant. III)? Hoc enim sponsa dicit in Canticis Canticorum, non ostendens corporeos pedes lotos, sed pedes non offendentes. De quibus dicit Salomon: Pes autem tuus non offendat (Prov. III, 23). De quibus et in psalmis scriptum est: Mei autem pene moti sunt pedes (Psal. LXXIII). Verum et quae constituuntur viduae in Ecclesiis: Si sanctorum, inquit, pedes lavit (1 Tim. V). Si autem vis apertius audire, quomodo vidua lavat sanctorum pedes, audi*

Consequently, in two texts by Origen, we see how he goes out of his way (and away from the biblical text's literal meaning) to underline that the biblical obligation to "wash the feet of the saints" does not (only) refer to a concrete act of cleaning a part of the body, but refers also to the act of communicating "spiritual doctrine" that keeps the soul clean: "wash the feet of the saints with the word of spiritual doctrine" (*sanctorum pedes lavant sermone spiritualis doctrinae*). Since Origen in two instances is very certain about his allegorical interpretation of this, it could be Rufinus who omitted this interpretation in the *Commentary on Romans*, but that is speculation.

Origen (in Jerome's translation) stresses that, of course, women can only teach women (because he believes in the authority of First Timothy 2:12 which forbids women to teach in the assembly and to teach men). However, he does assume that women in principle can teach doctrinal content, but only to other women, since women teaching men would be improper (*indecent*). Origen also acknowledges that some might have a hard time following his allegorical interpretation when he jumps from a literal instruction to wash someone's feet to the allegorical meaning that women should teach heavenly wisdom for the sake of creating pure souls. However, he ensures his readers and listeners that he knows what he is doing, because he is one of those who both sees and understands. Origen thus seems intentionally to read also intellectual abilities and doctrinal teaching into the expectations toward elderly women in a congregation and does so by way of the sentence about washing the feet of the saints. However, although he makes use of an allegorical reading, he remains bound by his presupposition that it is improper for women to teach men, caught as he is between an understanding that women can be entrusted to teach "spiritual doctrine," on the one hand, and on the other hand, he is bound by the biblical restrictions and the sentiment of his time that denied women the right to speak in public or teach men.

In a similar manner, Origen is ambiguous when it comes to women's right to prophesize. Although teaching and prophesizing are two different speech acts, they are often related in the early church, and it is worth also lingering on the topic of prophecy in this investigation. In his *Homily on Judges*, translated into Latin by Rufinus, Origen underlines that out of many judges of Israel, only one was also a prophet, and that was a woman: Deborah. Origen writes that: "[...] although a very great number of judges in Israel are reported to have been men, about none of them is it said that he was a "prophet" except 'Deborah, a woman.'" ¹² From this observation, Origen goes on to interpret Deborah in both a historical/literal sense and an allegorical sense. Firstly, he underlines that Deborah is a historical example that testifies to the fact that also women can receive heavenly teachings as prophets and can overcome their frail constitution:

[Deborah as a prophet] renders to the female sex not a small consolation, for it invites women to avoid despairing in any way on account of the weakness of their sex, for even they themselves can become capable of prophetic grace, and indeed they may understand and believe that the purity of mind, not the difference of their gender, merits this grace. ¹³

*Paulum in alio loco constituentem viduis, et dicentem: Bene docentes, ut pudicas efficiant adolescentulas, lavantes sordes pedum juvenularum. Et istae viduae dignae sunt ecclesiastico honore, quaecumque sanctorum pedes lavant sermone spiritualis doctrinae, sanctorum vero non masculorum, sed mulierum. Docere enim mulierem non permittit, neque principari viro. Vult esse mulieres bene docentes, ut ad castitatem suadeant non adolescentes, sed adolescentulas: indecens quippe est, ut mulier magistra viri fiat, sed ut castitatem suadeant adolescentulis, et amare viros et liberos suos. Discamus ergo lavare pedes discipulorum. Ista propter hoc dicta sunt: Videntes videbitis, et non scietis. Quoniam si quid fiebat a Salvatore, ab his quidem, qui non intelligebant, videbatur juxta corpus, non videbatur juxta rationem: ab his vero, qui intelligebant, videbatur quidem juxta oculos, videbatur autem et juxta intellectum, ita ut non compleretur super beate videntes, hoc quod dictum est: Videntes videbitis, et non scietis, sed super peccatores. Sed et cuncta Evangeliorum oremus videntes dupliciter videre, quomodo facta sint juxta corpus, quando Salvator noster venit ad terras. Etenim similitudo erat, et typus futurorum unumquodque, quod fiebat in corpore (Translation in: Lauro, *Homilies on Isaiah*, 95–6).*

¹² Origen, *Homily on Judges* 5,2 (ed. Baehrens): [...] cum plurimi iudices viri in Istrahel fuisse referantur, denullo illorum dicitur quia > propheta < fuerit nisi de >Debbora muliere<. (Translation in: Lauro, *Homily on Judges*, 77).

¹³ Origen, *Homily on Judges* 5.2 (ed. Baehrens): Praestat et in hoc consolationem non minimam mulierum sexui etiam prima ipsius litterae facies et provocat eas, uti nequaquam pro infirmitate sexus desperent etiam prophetiae gratiae capaces se fieri posse, sed intelligant et credant quod meretur hanc gratiam puritas mentis, non diversitas sexus. (Translation in: Lauro, *Homily on Judges*, 77).

Here, notably, Origen highlights a human’s “purity of mind” as a more important characteristic than his or her sex.¹⁴ With *mens pura*, Rufinus could be referring to the pure mind or intellect, which, according to Origen, allows a human being to draw near to the Word of God and thereby come close to the fulfillment of life and perfect contemplation.¹⁵ It would seem that Origen, with this phrase – purity of mind – is emphasizing that women are also capable of receiving and comprehending the Word of God. Secondly, Origen interprets Deborah as a symbol or a figure for prophecy as such:

But let us also see what aspect of the interior sense breathes forth a mystery. ‘Deborah’ means ‘bee’ or ‘speech.’ But indeed also in the passages above we said that Deborah is to be received in the form of a prophecy, which is a bee. For it is certain that every prophecy produces the sweet honeycombs of heavenly teaching and the sweet honey of the Divine Word.¹⁶

This means that Deborah is understood both as an actual woman who could speak prophetic words, and she is understood as prophecy personified, the mediator of “heavenly teaching and the sweet honey of the Divine Word.” Origen goes on to say that the Church is led by the grace and wisdom of prophecy,¹⁷ and not only does she/Deborah/prophecy “raise” herself “up,” but she also “arouses” the people toward believing. Furthermore, in *Homily on Judges*, Origen does not hide women’s ability to act and speak among people. He also dwells on

¹⁴ This kind of argumentation can also be found in Jerome, Ep. 127.5.3. to Principia (ed. Hilberg): “we judge people’s virtues not by their sex but by their virtues/character” (*virtutes non sexu sed animo*). See also, Origen, *Homily on Judges* 9.1 (ed. Baehrens): “In the above, we read in this very book of Judges about the triumphs of the woman Deborah, for whom a fear caused by lack of faith did not disturb her feminine mind. But what should I recount about Judith, that admirable and most noble of all women? She who, when already things were nearly lost, was not afraid to hasten alone to help and alone to subject herself and her head to death at the hand of the most savage Holofernes, and proceeded to war not relying on military equipment or on war horses or on military supports but on the power of the mind and the confidence of faith. At the same time with determination and courage she killed the enemy, and the woman restored to the country the freedom that the men had lost. And why do we turn back with you to examples of ancient people so long ago? Under our eyes we often have seen the fact that women and virgins, even of a very young age, have endured to the end tyrannous torments by virtue of martyrdom, for whom to the weakness of gender were added the frailties of young life besides.” (*In superioribus legimus in hoc ipso libello Iudicum de Debborae mulieris triumphis nec femineam mentem infidelis formido turbavit. Quid vero illam magnificam et omnium feminarum nobilissiam memorem Iudith? quae iam perditis paene rebus non trepidavit sola succurrere seque ac suum caput ad immanissimi Holophernis necem sola subicere et processit ad bellum non in armis neque in equis bellicis aut subsidiis militaribus freta, sed virtute animi et confidential fidei, consilio simul et audacia hostem peremit; et, quam yiri perdiderant, femina patriae reddidit libertatem. Et quid tam longe antiquorum yobis exempla revolvimus? In oculis nostris saepe vidimus factum mulieres et virgines primae adhuc. aetatis pro martyrio tyrannical pertulisse tormenta, quibus ad infirmitatem sexus novellae adhuc vitae fragilitas addebatur.*) (Translation in: Lauro, *Homily on Judges*, 113–4).

¹⁵ Origen describes the situation of the human soul in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.1: “[...] let her pray that her pure and virginal mind (*mens eius pura et virginalis*) may be enlightened by the illumination and the visitation of the Word of God Himself. For, when her mind is filled with divine perception and understanding without the agency of human or angelic ministration, then she may believe she has received the kisses of the Word of God Himself.” (ed. Brésard and Crouzel. Translation in: Lawson, *Origen. The Song of Songs*, 61).

¹⁶ Origen, *Homily on Judges* 5.2 (ed. Baehrens): *Sed videamus, quid etiam interioris intelligentiae respiret arcanum. >Debbora< apis interpretatur sive loquela. Sed iam et in superioribus diximus quod Debbora in prophetiae forma accipienda sit, quae est apis. Certum namque est quod omnis prophetia suaves coelestis doctrinae favos et dulcia divini eloquii mella componat. Unde et David canebat dicens: »quam dulcia faucibus meis eloquia tua, super mel et favum ori meo!«. Et iterum alibi dicit > iudicia Dei pretiosa esse super aurum et lapidem pretiosum nimis et dulciora super mel et favum <. 3. Sed et illud consideremus, ubi >residere< dicitur prophetia et ubi locus eius esse describitur.* (Translation in: Lauro, *Homily on Judges*, 77).

¹⁷ Origen, *Homily on Judges* 4.4 (ed. Baehrens): “[...] and understands from whom help for him is to be earnestly requested, and ‘he cries out to the Lord,’ until for that soul which ‘has cried out to the Lord,’ prophecy, which is in the figure of Deborah, is raised up, and, according to the grace and wisdom of prophecy, either the people of the Church are governed or likewise the understanding of every single mind and soul is directed, by Christ Jesus our Lord, ‘to whom are glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.’” (*et intelligat, unde sibi sit auxilium deposcendum, et clamet ad Dominum, donec animae illi, quae ‘clamaverit ad Dominum’, suscitetur prophetia, quae est in figura Debborae, et secundum prophetiae gratiam et intelligentiam vel ecclesiae populus gubernetur vel etiam sensus uniuscuiusque mentis et animae regatur, per Christum Iesum Dominum nostrum, »cui est gloria et imperium in saecula saeculorum. Amen!*) (Translation in: Lauro, *Homily on Judges*, 75).

the topic that God by His powers can enable even the frailest human to act with strength. This is a trope often used about women in particular.¹⁸

For that reason the prophet [Deborah] says: 'Lord, humble for me those stronger than I am.' For how may this so very great power of the spirits not be far more powerful than human fragility? But in him, Christ, God 'aids us in our weakness,' in relation to whom the Apostle says: 'I can do all things in him who strengthens me greatly,' Christ. Therefore, those powers are truly stronger than we are, but, again, Christ, who is in us and strengthens us greatly, is stronger than all things, 'to whom are glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.'¹⁹

Whether Origen means that all human beings must rely on the strength that God can give them, or he deliberately mentions this in relation to Deborah, who as a woman needs to be strengthened from outside, is unclear. But it is clear that in Origen's *Homilies on Judges*, women are presented as very capable, because they can be pure of mind and be strengthened by Christ in their endeavors.

3 But Women Should Not Teach – Why?

In Origen's *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35* (transmitted in a catena), Origen takes a very clear stance against female prophets and teachers acting in public or in front of men. In an argument that takes Paul's remarks at face value, Origen states that: women should not teach, *not* because women cannot receive or understand the word of God, but simply because they should not speak in public. Since this comment is found as a fragment in a later compilation of exegetical commentaries, a so-called catena, we cannot know if Origen's original wording is changed or paraphrased. Nonetheless, the fact that Origen in this transmitted commentary expresses a frank opinion against women teachers can be explained by a dual focus in the text: not only is he commenting on the biblical text (which often leads him to creative and open-ended interpretations), but he is also addressing a specific historical context. Origen's concern stems from the rise of the Montanist movement, where female prophets such as Priscilla and Maximilla assumed leadership roles, prompting Origen to critique their influence:

Although all speak and are allowed to speak when they are granted a revelation, 'the women,' he says, 'should keep silent in the churches.' They in no way fulfill this command, those disciples of women, who chose as their master Priscilla and Maximilla, not Christ, the Spouse of the Bride.²⁰

Origen goes on to present arguments both for and against the activities of women prophets depending on whether these actions are performed in public or not:

But, let us be good-natured players, and cope with the arguments which they judge convincing. The Evangelist Philip, they say, had four daughters, and all prophesied. If they prophesied, what is strange, they ask, if our own prophetesses — as they are called — also prophesy? Let us then resolve this difficulty. First, since you say: 'Our women prophesied,' show in them the signs of prophesy. Second, if the daughters of Philip prophesied, at least they did not speak in the assemblies; for we do not find this fact in the Acts of the Apostles. Much less in the Old Testament. It is said that Deborah was a prophetess. Mary, the

¹⁸ Fortunatus, *Vita Sanctae Radegundis*, Prologue (ed. Krusch): "and, despite their frail physique, He confers glory and greatness on women through strength of mind." (*et corpore fragiliores ipsas reddat feminas virtute mentis inclitae glorias*).

¹⁹ Origen, *Homily on Judges* 6,6 (ed. Baehrens): *idcirco dicit propheta: »Domine, humilia mihi fortiores me«. Quomodo enim non haec tanta spirituum vis longe sit humana fragilitate vehementior? Sed in eo Deus >adiuvat infirmitatem nostram, in quo dicit Apostolus: »omnia possum in eo, qui me confortat, Christo«. Sunt ergo istae quidem virtutes fortiores nobis, sed iterum qui in nobis est »Christus« et >confortat< nos, est omnium fortior, >cui est gloria et imperium in saecula saeculorum. Amen!<.* (Translation in: Lauro, *Homily on Judges*, 93).

²⁰ Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, catena* (ed. Jenkins): Ὡς γὰρ πάντων λεγόντων καὶ δυναμένων λέγειν, ἐὰν ἀποκάλυψις αὐτοῖς γένηται, φησὶν Αἱ γυναῖκες ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις σιγάτωσαν. ταύτης δὲ τῆς ἐντολῆς οὐκ ἦσαν οἱ τῶν γυναικῶν μαθηταί, οἱ μαθητευθέντες Πρισκίλλῃ καὶ Μαξιμίλλῃ, οὐ Χριστοῦ τοῦ ἀνδρὸς τῆς νύμφης. (Translation in: Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 28–9).

sister of Aaron, tambourine in hand, led the choir of women. There is no evidence that Deborah delivered speeches to the people, as did Jeremiah and Isaiah. Hulda, who was a prophetess, did not speak to the people, but only to a man, who consulted her at home. The Gospel itself mentions a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser; but she did not speak publicly. Even if it is granted to a woman to prophesy and show the sign of prophecy, she is nevertheless not permitted to speak in an assembly. When Mary, the prophetess, spoke, she was leading a choir of women. For: ‘It is improper for a woman to raise her voice at meetings,’ and: ‘I am not giving permission for a woman to teach’ and even less ‘to tell a man what to do.’ (1 Timothy 2:12).²¹

From this paragraph, it becomes clear that Origen’s main problem with women speaking in public is not what they say, but simply what he perceives as a mistake: that women are speaking in public or in an assembly, which, according to Origen, no real woman prophet ever did.²² One can reflect on the fact that Origen did not make this point in his mentioning of Deborah in *Homily on Judges*. In *Commentary on 1 Corinthians*, Origen goes on to underline what women are supposed to do (in accordance with Titus 2, 3–5), but also what they are not authorized to do, i.e. teaching men:

Although those given above say more categorically that a woman does not have the right by her word to guide a man, I shall further prove this position from another text. ‘Bid the old women to behave themselves as befits holy women, teaching what is good, in order to form young women in wisdom,’ and not simply ‘Let them teach.’ Certainly, women should also ‘teach what is good,’ but men should not sit and listen to a woman, as if there were no men capable of communicating the word of God.²³

In the following, Origen continues to emphasize the restriction on women in relation to teaching and even speaking in an assembly:

‘If they [women] have any question to ask, they should ask their husbands at home: it does not seem right for a woman to raise her voice at meetings.’ It seems to me that the expression ‘their husbands’ does not refer only to husbands; for if that were the case, either virgins would speak in the assembly, or they would have nobody to teach them, and the same is true for widows. But could ‘their husbands’ not also mean a brother, a relative, or a son? In short, let a woman learn from the man who is her own, taking “man” in its generic sense, as the counterpart of ‘woman.’ ‘For it is improper for a woman to speak in an assembly,’ no matter what she says, even if she says admirable things, or even saintly things, that is of little consequence, since they come from the mouth of a woman. ‘A woman in an assembly’: clearly this abuse is denounced as improper — an abuse for which the entire assembly is responsible.²⁴

21 Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, catena* (ed. Jenkins): ἀλλ’ ὁμως εὐγνωμονῶμεν καὶ πρὸς τὰ πιθανὰ ἐκεῖνων ἀπαντῶντες. τέσσαρές φασι θυγατέρες ἦσαν Φιλίππου τοῦ εὐαγγελιστοῦ καὶ προεφήτευσαν. εἰ δὲ προεφήτευσαν, τί ἄτοπόν ἐστι καὶ τὰς ἡμετέρας, ὡς φασὶν ἐκεῖνοι, προφητίδας προφητεύειν; ταῦτα δὲ λύσομεν. πρῶτον μὲν λέγοντες ὅτι Αἱ ἡμετέροι προεφήτευσαν, δείξατε τὰ σημεῖα τῆς προφητείας ἐν αὐταῖς· δεῦτερον δὲ Εἰ καὶ προεφήτευσαν αἱ θυγατέρες Φιλίππου, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις ἔλεγον· οὐ γὰρ ἔχομεν τοῦτο ἐν ταῖς Πράξεσι τῶν Ἀποστόλων. ἀλλ’ οὐδ’ ἐν τῇ παλαιᾷ· Δεββώρα μεμαρτύρηται προφήτις εἶναι, λαβοῦσα δὲ Μαριάμ ἡ ἀδελφὴ Ἀαρὼν τὸ τύμπανον ἐξήρχε τῶν γυναικῶν. ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἂν εὐροις ὅτι Δεββώρα ἐδημηγόρησεν εἰς τὸν λαὸν ὡς περ Ἰερεμίας καὶ Ἡσαΐας· οὐκ ἂν εὐροις ὅτι Ὀλδὰ προφήτις οὕσα ἐλάλησε τῷ λαῷ ἀλλ’ ἐνί τινι ἐλθόντι πρὸς αὐτήν. ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐν τῷ εὐαγγελίῳ ἀναγγέλλεται Ἄννα προφήτις, θυγάτηρ Φανουὴλ, ἐκ φυλῆς Ἀσήρ· ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐλάλησεν. ἵνα οὖν καὶ δοθῇ ἐκ σημείου προφητικοῦ εἶναι προφήτις γυνή, ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπεται αὐτῇ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ. ὅτε ἐλάλησε Μαριάμ ἡ προφήτις ἄρχουσα ἦν τινων γυναικῶν· αἰσχρὸν γὰρ γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ διδάσκειν δὲ γυναικὶ οὐκ ἐπιτρέπω ἀπλῶς ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ αὐθεντεῖν ἀνδρός. (Translation in: Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 28–9).

22 Anne Jensen notices an inconsistency in Origen’s argumentation: “It is obvious how differently Origen must interpret *ekklesia* in these cases in order to “prove” that the genuine prophetesses observed the same rules as those later prescribed to the only women ministers in the church, the deaconesses!” (Jensen, *God’s Self-confident Daughters*, 171).

23 Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, catena* (ed. Jenkins): Καὶ ἄλλοθεν δὲ τοῦτο παραστήσω, εἰ καὶ ἐκεῖνο ἀσφαλέστερον εἴρηται περὶ τοῦ μὴ τὴν γυναῖκα ἡγεμόνα γίνεσθαι τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ ἀνδρός· πρεσβυτίδας ἐν καταστάματι ἱεροπρεπεῖς, καλοδιδασκάλους, ἵνα σωφρονίζωσι τὰς νέας, οὐχ ἀπλῶς ἵνα διδάσκωσιν. καλοδιδάσκαλοι μὲν γὰρ ἔστωσαν καὶ γυναῖκες, οὐχ ἵνα ἄνδρες καθήμενοι ἀκούωσι γυναικῶν, ὡς ἐκλείπόντων ἀνδρῶν τῶν δυναμένων πρεσβεύειν τὸν τοῦ θεοῦ λόγον. (Translation in: Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 28–9).

24 Origen, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35, catena* (ed. Jenkins): Εἰ δέ τι μαθεῖν ἐθέλουσιν, ἐν οἴκῳ τοὺς ἰδίους ἀνδρας ἐπερωτάτωσαν· αἰσχρὸν γὰρ ἐστὶ γυναικὶ ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ λαλεῖν. δοκεῖ μοι τὸ τοὺς ἰδίους ἀνδρας οὐκ ἐπὶ τοὺς γαμετοὺς ἀναφέρεσθαι μόνον· αἱ παρθένοι γὰρ ἢ λαλήσουσιν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ ἢ οὐχ ἔξουσιν τοὺς διδάσκοντας, καὶ αἱ χηρεύουσαι ὁμοίως· ἀλλὰ μήποτε τοὺς ἰδίους ἀνδρας οἷον καὶ τὸν ἀδελφὸν καὶ τὸν οἰκεῖον καὶ τὸν υἱόν; ἅπαξ ἀπλῶς ἀνδρός πυνθανέσθω γυνὴ τοῦ ἰδίου κατὰ τὸ γενικὸν ὄνομα ἀνδρός πρὸς ἀντιδιαστολὴν γυναικός· αἰσχρὸν γὰρ γυναικὶ λαλεῖν ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ, ὅποια ἐὰν λαλῇ, κἂν θαυμαστὰ λαλῇ, κἂν ἅγια, μόνον δὲ ἀπὸ στόματος γυναικείου ἐξέρχεται. Γυνὴ ἐν ἐκκλησίᾳ δηλονότι κατὰ τὸ αἰσχρὸν λέγεται ἐπὶ κατηγορίᾳ τῆς ὅλης ἐκκλησίας. (Translation in: Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 28–9).

In this instance, Origen does not expand the meaning of the biblical commandment by mentioning a parallel text or an allegorical reading. On the contrary, he considers how to understand the prohibition on women speaking in the church in an even more comprehensive way. Since not all women have a husband, it is not only teaching a husband that poses a problem, but teaching any man to whom the woman in effect “belongs.” As Origen here realizes that the biblical text is vague, he goes on to narrow its meaning further. This is in sharp contrast to the above-mentioned instances of exegesis by Origen, where he broadens the meaning of concrete biblical words.

Why is women speaking in the church improper (κατὰ τὸ αἰσχρὸν)? Origen does not explain it, but he takes it for granted that people would agree on this, based on the Pauline prohibition. In this particular commentary, all egalitarian anthropology that we could expect to find in Origen’s works is disregarded, in order to make sure that Christians do not disturb current norms, according to which women should not speak in public or begin to teach men in private.

Also in his *Homilies on Joshua*, translated by Rufinus, Origen underlines that women should not teach. He writes:

Consequently, women are appointed to be taught by their husbands at home and are assigned the part more of learners than of teachers (*magis in discipulorum quam docentium*). No one comes to my aid who is not able to teach me, and from whom I do not find something that I ought to imitate or hold fast.²⁵

From this conclusion, however, Origen goes on to elaborate that not only women act in a “womanly way,” but occasionally men do too, and, on the other hand, some women act manly.

But you also who under the name ‘women’ are weak, slack, and sluggish, may you be warned so that ‘you may raise up the slack hands and loose knees,’ that is, that you may stir up neglectful and idle spirits and assume a bold firmness in accomplishing legal and gospel precepts and hasten swiftly to the perfection of strong men. For divine Scripture does not know how to make a separation of men and women according to sex. For indeed sex is no distinction in the presence of God, but a person is designated either a man or woman according to the diversity of spirit. How many out of the sex of women are counted among the strong men before God, and how many of the men are reckoned among slack and sluggish women? Or does it not seem to you that that man must be judged among ‘women’ who says, ‘I am not able to observe those things that are written, I am not able ‘to sell what I have and give to the poor,’ I am not able ‘to present the other cheek to the one who strikes,’ I am not able ‘to bless the person cursing,’ I am not able ‘to pray for the blasphemer,’ I am not able ‘to suffer and endure persecution’; and other similar things that are commanded? The one who says, ‘I am not able to accomplish,’ what else does it seem to you than that he must be counted among women, who can do nothing manly?²⁶

“Women” here are thus a synonym for “weak,” but that does not mean that Origen finds all women weak. On the contrary, both men and women can progress spiritually on a scale from “female” toward “male.” Obviously, Origen does not want to say that Christian perfection is limited to the male sex, but that Christian accomplishment can be achieved by males and females alike. However, this Christian equality among men and women is related to practice and fulfilment of Christian instructions, not to their dissemination. According to Origen, women should not (even when they could) teach these instructions in any assembly

²⁵ Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 3,1-2 (ed. Baehrens): *Quia ergo >mulieres< a viris suis domi doceri iubentur et magis in discipulorum quam docentium persona ponuntur, ad auxilium meum non venit, qui docere me non potest et eius nihil invenio, quod imitari debeam vel tenere.* (Translation in: White, *Homilies on Joshua*, 44).

²⁶ Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 3,1-2 (ed. Baehrens) ... *sed et vos, qui sub >mulierum< appellatione infirmi et remissi ac languidi estis, commonemini, ut >remissas manus et dissoluta genua erigatis<, id est ut negligentes et desides animos suscitetis et virilem eonstantiam in explendis praeceptis legalibus et evangelicis assumatis atque ad virorum fortium perfectionem celeriter properetis. Non enim novit scriptura divina secundum sexum separationem virorum ac mulierum facere. Etenim sexus apud Deum nulla discretio est, sed pro animi diversitate vel vir vel mulier designatur. Quantae ex mulierum sexu apud Deum in viris fortibus numerantur, et quanti ex viris inter remissas et languidas mulieres reputantur? Aut non tibi videtur inter mulieres aestimandus ille vir, qui dicit: non possum observare. quae scripta sunt, »vendere, quae habeo et dare pauperibus< non possum, »pereutienti maxillam praebere alteram< non possum, »maledicentem benedicere< non possum, »blasphematus deprecari< non possum. »persecutionem pati et sustinere< non possum; et cetera similia, quae mandantur, qui dicit implere non possum’, quid tibi aliud videtur quani inter mulieres, quae nihil virile possunt, esse numerandus? (Translation in: White, *Homilies on Joshua*, 106–7).*

or to any man. In my understanding, Origen thus remains ambiguous in his comments on women as teachers. Origen is clear in his rejection of women as teachers in public or for men, “even if she says admirable things, or even saintly things.” In other words, Origen does not explicitly question women’s ability to teach Christian content, but the impropriety of the action. This rationale may seem illogical to a modern mindset, but it would have appeared as a normal and decent attitude in Origen’s original context. It seems that Origen did not systematically consider women’s active engagement in the church; thus, one can infer that the topic was not high on his agenda. When studying Origen’s approach to the actual agency of women, we must suffice with sporadic comments on the topic in his writings, where he occasionally gives advice that seems dependent on his immediate – and for us rather elusive – context. However, it would be incorrect to think that the question of which authoritative roles to allow for women did not exist in early Christianity, as the Montanist movement, for example, allowed women active roles within their congregations.

4 Argumentation Depending on the Context

Although Origen never explicitly encourages women to teach in general, it is obvious that his remarks on the topic are varied and slightly inconsistent. Only in some texts does he emphasize the restrictions on women’s role as “teachers of good things” and as prophets. One might ask if there is, nonetheless, some internal logic or systematicity in Origen’s remarks on women as teachers. We can observe that Origen is most dismissive of women’s teachings and, at the same time, most literal in his exegesis in his *Commentary on Romans*, *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (in catena) and in *Homilies on Joshua*. On the other hand, he is most encouraging of elderly women teaching (women), even “in spiritual doctrines,” in *Homilies on Isaiah*, *Homilies on Judges* and *Commentary on John*, Book 32. It is in two of the latter texts that he goes into creative allegorical interpretations, most notably in *Homily 6 on Isaiah* where he interprets the phrase “if she has washed the feet of the saints” to mean that elderly women ought to teach young women “with the word of spiritual doctrine” and thereby keep the souls of young women clean. Interestingly, he introduces this arguably far-fetched interpretation with the confident opening: “I think it would be ridiculous to stop at the literal meaning.”

Pierre Nautin has suggested that *Homilies on Judges* (maybe written 239-42) and the *Commentary on John*, Book 32 (maybe written 248) are some of Origen’s mature works.²⁷ Could this indicate a change in Origen’s opinion on the matter of women’s activity over time, or perhaps rather a general inclination in his writings toward more pragmatic, pastoral approaches later in his life? Such arguments, based on the insecure chronology of Origen’s works, are speculative. Furthermore, there seems to be no systematicity in relation to the genres in which certain positions occur, although there might be a slight tendency for Origen to encourage women in homilies more than in commentaries which probably had a different audience. Anders-Christian Jacobsen has convincingly shown that Origen’s, at first glance, slightly diffuse conceptions of Christology and soteriology are, in fact, consistent. The hermeneutical key, which Jacobsen suggests, is to focus on the audience of Origen’s texts and see how Origen adjusts his expressions to various audiences: “To weak and uneducated Christians he presents basic teaching, mainly in the homilies, while to the more spiritually advanced Christians he presents the deeper levels, mainly in the biblical commentaries.”²⁸ With this perspective, Jacobsen maintains that “behind the diversity, there is unity.”²⁹ However, when this method is applied to Origen’s remarks on women’s teaching legitimacy, there is no real tendency for him to adjust his opinion to a particular general genre with a certain audience. He relativizes gender characteristics in his *Homilies on Joshua*, and excludes women most vehemently from public speaking in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians* (in Catena). In *Homily on*

²⁷ Nautin, *Origène*, 408–12.

²⁸ Jacobsen, *Christ – The Teacher of Salvation*, 236.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14–5.

Judges 5, he comments on women's ability to receive merit due to their "purity of mind," but does not combine this mental ability with a general justification for women to be included in public conversations.

Most probably, Origen chose his words carefully to match concrete contexts and acute situations, which could explain why he suddenly preached against the Montanists and their prophesising women leaders in his *Commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:34-35* (in Catena), while in another situation he praised Deborah for having prophesied according to the Book of Judges. In other words, the slight variations in Origen's argumentation could indicate different occurrences in the social world surrounding him. He seems to have sanctioned elderly women to be teaching authorities for women, but he could not tolerate women dominating public spaces. As such, in terms of social conduct, he was a child of his time, and he did not use his thoughts on creation and salvation to raise awareness of women's teaching authority. On the other hand, he also did not argue theologically to diminish women's authority as intelligent agents.

5 Conclusion

In his writings, Origen revisits the topic of women's roles in Christian congregations several times. It seems that Origen addressed this topic because women were active both in the congregations which he frequented and in movements he deemed heretical, such as the Montanists. Origen appears to have accepted that women could hold certain offices, such as women deacons and widows, and should be allowed to teach other women in the congregation. However, when describing female agents, he predominantly referred to biblical examples like Mary, Phoebe, and Deborah. Consequently, the discussion of women's agency in the church remains largely theoretical in Origen's writings. An inconsistency noticeable to a modern reader arises in Origen's normative statements that women can possess "purity of mind" and speak "saintly things," yet he considered it "indecent" for women to teach in assemblies.

The role of a teacher and that of a prophet are different, but occasionally these forms of agency overlap in Origen's work and therefore in the current discussion. In Origen's view, women could both prophesize and teach, but it was dangerous for women to speak in public and take authority over men. At times, Origen emphatically underlined that women were not allowed to speak and teach in public or in front of men, while in other writings he emphasized women's ability and right to work in the church, teach younger women, and hold service positions. Origen highlighted women's service to the church as deserving both reward and honor, as seen in his *Commentary on Romans* when he discussed Paul's commendation of sister Phoebe³⁰ – but that is another topic.

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³⁰ Origen, *Commentary on Romans* 10.17-18 (ed. Bammel).

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