

## Research Article

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# Sophia: The Female Aspect of Christ in Origen of Alexandria

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**Abstract:** This article examines the feminine aspect of Sophia, a significant title for Christ in Origen of Alexandria's theology. It investigates whether Origen recognized and utilized Sophia's femininity to develop a Christology that incorporates female elements or if he downplayed this aspect to counter Gnostic interpretations, particularly those of the Valentinians, who sexualized the divine. The analysis begins with an overview of the Wisdom figure in Prov 8:22-25 and its representation in Valentinian Gnosticism, highlighting Origen's reliance on biblical texts as foundational to his theological framework. Key passages from Origen's "On First Principles" and "Commentary on the Gospel of John" are explored to reveal his understanding of Sophia as both a mediator in creation and an integral part of Christ's identity. The article concludes that while Origen acknowledges Sophia's femininity, he strategically avoids sexualized language and imagery, likely to prevent misinterpretation among simpler Christians and to distance himself from Gnostic thought. Ultimately, this nuanced approach reflects Origen's complex engagement with the feminine in his theological discourse.

**Keywords:** Origen, Sophia. Christology, feminine, emanation

## 1 Sophia: The Female Aspect of Christ in Origen of Alexandria

In this article, I ask the question: What does it mean for Origen that Sophia<sup>1</sup> – one of the most important names Origen uses for Christ – is feminine? Did Origen just follow an already established tradition for identifying Christ with the Wisdom figure from the Proverbs without finding any theological importance in the fact that Sophia is a female figure? Or did he use this fact actively to develop a Christology with female aspects? Or did he maybe even downplay and neglect the female aspect of the Wisdom to contradict the Gnostic Valentinians who sexualized the divine by constructing the divine as male and female? This article will try to answer these questions by focusing on whether Origen considered Sophia to be a feminine figure in any biological and sexual understanding of the feminine.<sup>2</sup> First, the article will briefly describe how the Wisdom figure is presented in Prov 8:22-25 and used in Valentinian Gnosticism. Next, the article will analyze and discuss two passages from Origen's *On first principles* and *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Finally, a conclusion will summarize the results.

<sup>1</sup> I use Sophia and Wisdom interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> I choose this focus because I consider Origen to be in dialogue with theological positions that did exactly that. Here, I mainly think about the Valentinians. One could also – and maybe better – understand gender categories in a broader sense as “intellectual categories.”

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## 2 Sophia in Proverbs and in Valentinian Gnosticism

Here, I cannot go into detail about the Wisdom traditions in the time before Origen.<sup>3</sup> I will, therefore, limit myself to briefly address two elements in this tradition which is of major importance for Origen's use of the Wisdom figure.

Firstly, it is important to mention Origen's positive dependence on Prov 8:22-25. Origen was a biblical exegete. Therefore, the biblical texts were the most important positive source for his theology. This is also true for his Wisdom theology. Often when he elaborates on themes connected to creation, "beginnings," and Christology, he quotes or alludes to Proverbs Chapters 7–8. This is most clearly seen in the first book of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. Proverbs belongs to a large and quite mixed corpus of Jewish Wisdom literature which partly was included in the Christian biblical canon. In these books, Wisdom "possesses the physical and spiritual, mental, and emotional attributes of the feminine ideal."<sup>4</sup> During the first three centuries AD, the canonicity of this corpus was not fixed. Christian writers from this period therefore used texts which later ended up outside the Christian biblical canon. Proverbs was included in the biblical canon together with Ecclesiastes and the Book of Job. As we shall see, Origen, like many other early Christian writers, used Prov 8:22-25 in his creation theology and in his Christology, which was closely connected. Origen identified Wisdom as one aspect (ἐπίνοια)<sup>5</sup> of Christ that, together with the Logos, created all beings. I will return to this below.

Secondly, Origen's negative relation to the Valentinian use and interpretation of the Wisdom tradition must be mentioned. Although Origen did have many theological ideas in common with the Valentinians, he differed from them on crucial issues, for example, the question regarding divine and human freedom. This is important for the topic of this article because the Valentinians understood Sophia as part of a predetermined divine hierarchy of aeons (pleroma) organized in male and female pairs. The relations in the pleroma were fixed, but Sophia's role in the pleromatic system was according to the Valentinian tradition to break up and disturb this fixed Pleroma. The consequences of this were chaos that led to the creation of the material world. In their mythological rendering of the world's creation, Sophia's portrayal is extremely sexualized, and her femininity is stressed as a detrimental feature, which encompasses the qualities of materiality, possibility, and subjection to passions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, Sophia played a dubious role in Valentinian cosmology. Sophia played a crucial role in creation, but her role was mainly connected to disorder in the Pleroma and to Wisdom's exclusion of the Pleroma and imprisonment in the material world.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, this did not prevent Origen from employing the Wisdom figure in his theology. Why not? Probably because the Wisdom figure was considered an integral part of biblical tradition.

<sup>3</sup> Daley, "The Beginning" introduces broadly the use of Wisdom traditions in the Hebrew Bible, Judaism, and The New Testament; in second-century Christianity; in Origen; and in the so-called Arian controversy. Daley only includes a short remark on the femininity of Wisdom (p. 169). Daley's article thus provides a broad background for my more specific study of the femininity of Sophia. Concerning the use of Proverbs in Early Christianity, also Wilken, *Aspects*. This volume includes several essays on wisdom traditions in Judaism and Christianity before Origen, and Dowling, "Proverbs," 102–4.

<sup>4</sup> Tova, "Feminine Imagery."

<sup>5</sup> I use different translations of the Greek term ἐπίνοια: aspect, name, title.

<sup>6</sup> Cerioni, *Revealing*, 61–78. In her work, she also underlines the intrinsic ambiguous and paradoxical features proper to Sophia's female gender, as it is indeed her possibility and ability to feel passions (like suffering) that reveals the intimately Christological nature of the Valentinian myth.

<sup>7</sup> This short description reports Irenaeus' description of the Valentinian pleroma in Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 1.2.1-6. Dunderberg, "The School," 65–72, represent the widespread position in modern scholarship that Irenaeus' account of Valentinian cosmogony is his own polemic construction which does not represent Valentinian ideas. However, he also admits that we have similar accounts of the Valentinian myth in for example Clement and Hippolytus and even in Valentinian texts. I agree with Dunderberg and others that Irenaeus' description of Valentinian cosmology is polemic, but I believe that the basic structure in the account is trustworthy since it is in line with other evidence. The few and quite late Coptic versions of Valentinian texts available to us do not provide enough evidence to reject Irenaeus', Clement's, and Hippolytus' accounts.

### 3 Sophia in Origen

In several of his texts, Origen uses Wisdom as a Christological title. He most often uses the title without any further explanation. He often combines the title Wisdom with other titles such as Christ, the Son, the Word, etc.<sup>8</sup> Origen's works are extremely rich in Christological titles because he uses all the titles he finds in the Bible. In some cases, Origen explains the Christological titles, including the title Sophia/Wisdom, in more detail. From these passages, we get a clearer understanding of how Origen understands the Christological title, Wisdom. However, this is not the same as saying that we can get a clear impression of how he understands the female aspect of Sophia. In the following, I will explore this aspect. I will analyze two passages from *On first principles* and *Commentary on the Gospel of John* where the Wisdom figure plays an important role in order to see how Origen understands and uses the Wisdom figure in his theological thinking. Following up on that, I will discuss Origen's attitude to Sophia as a female figure.

#### 3.1 Sophia in *On First Principles* 1.2

In *On first principles* 1.2, Origen outlines the basic elements of his Christology, and here Sophia plays an important role. The chapter is divided into two parts 1.2,1-4 and 1.2,5-13. Origen's intention in both parts of *On first principles* 1.2 is to argue for his initial claim at the beginning of the chapter that Christ has two natures, a divine and a human, and that he is the only begotten son of God and the eternal Wisdom of God in his divine nature. Origen writes:

First we must know this, that in Christ there is one nature, his deity, because he is the only-begotten Son of the Father, and another human nature, which in very recent times he took upon him to fulfill his divine purpose. Our first task therefore is to see what the only-begotten Son of God is, seeing he is called by many different names according to the circumstances and beliefs of the different writers.<sup>9</sup>

In the following four paragraphs, Origen unfolds his Christology by interpreting the most important of these many names given to Christ. The most important of these names or titles are that the only begotten Son of God is God's Word and God's *Wisdom*. Origen quotes the entire passages from Prov 8:22-25 where the Wisdom says that the Lord brought her forth or created (ἐκτίσέ) her at the very beginning (ἐν ἀρχῇ) as the first of his works. That Christ is Wisdom is supported and explained by references to Col 1:15, where Christ is called the "firstborn of all creation," and 1 Cor 1:24, where Christ is called "Power and Wisdom of God." Choosing these two references reveals how Origen understands the Wisdom figure. The reference to 1 Cor 1:24 is easy to understand because Paul here calls Christ the "Wisdom of God." The reference to Col. 1:15 is more revealing, since the author here calls Christ the "the first born of all creation." It seems that Origen understands this as a reference to Prov. 8:22-23, but these verses describe Wisdom as the first created being (κύριος ἐκτίσεν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ πρὸ τοῦ αἰῶνος) – not the first born (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) as Col. 1:15. Origen's use of biblical references thus shows that he considers "first born" and "first created" to be identical and that he considers the Word and the Wisdom to be identical both being titles of Christ. This is confirmed by a concluding sentence in *On first principles* 1.2,1 which reads: "The Firstborn is not, however, by nature a different being from Wisdom, but is one and the same."<sup>10</sup> Thus, Origen has established that Christ in his divine nature is the eternal Wisdom and the firstborn Son of God. That Christ is God's Wisdom is developed further in *On first principles* 1.2,2 where he argues that God's Wisdom exists substantially (hypostatically) and eternally.

<sup>8</sup> An instructive overview over Origen's use of these Christological titles can be found in the study by Kannengiesser, "Origen's."

<sup>9</sup> Origen, "First Principles" (princ.) 1.2,1, "*Primo illud noc scire oportet, quod alia est in Christo deitatis eius natura, quod est unigenitus filius patris, et alia humana natura, quam in novissimis temporibus pro dispensatione suscepit. Propter quod videndum primo est, quid sit unigenitus filius dei, qui multis quidem et diversis nominibus pro rebus vel opinionibus appellantium nuncupatur.*"

<sup>10</sup> Origen, "First Principles," 1.2,1: "*Nec tamen alius est primogenitus per naturam quam sapiential, sed unus atque idem est.*"

Thus, he rejects those who claim that Wisdom has no independent existence but is “without substance” (*insubstantivum*)<sup>11</sup> being a power or force that can enter the believer and make him wise. According to Origen, the only begotten Son or Wisdom is an independent being,<sup>12</sup> which does not mean that the only begotten Son or Wisdom has a body. Thus, Origen underlines that “being born” or “being created” are metaphors which should not be understood in any literal sense. This seems to exclude any concrete understanding of Sophia as being female. The feminine is thus a cultural category.

Continuing this argument, he says that it is inconceivable that the Father has existed at any time without giving birth to (*generatio*) Wisdom. Thus, the expression in the Prov. 8:22 that Wisdom is the first-begotten of the Father does not mean that there is a chronological or sequential difference between God the Father and the Wisdom. This is unthinkable, according to Origen, who is the first among the early theologians to argue that Wisdom or the Son must be born outside time.<sup>13</sup> Wisdom has existed eternally with the Father. As the beginning of Wisdom is outside of time, Wisdom can therefore neither be conceived nor predicated.

Next, Origen concentrates on the relation of Wisdom to creation.<sup>14</sup> In the pre-existent and independently existing Wisdom all forms and powers are present that were necessary for the coming creation of both primary existing beings and of contingent individual things.<sup>15</sup> The models for the entire creation and the powers to bring them into being were contained in Wisdom from eternity.<sup>16</sup> This means that in a sense eternity is conferred upon creation since the models for it have been eternally present in Wisdom. A picture begins to emerge of a clear relationship of subordination between the Father, Wisdom, and creation.<sup>17</sup> Sophia and Logos emanated from the Father by generation and therefore participated in the Father’s being, though in a subordinate relationship to him. The Wisdom for its part has contained from eternity the models of creation which Wisdom later allows us to emanate through Logos’ act of creation. For its part creation is thus subordinate to Logos and Wisdom while simultaneously participating in Wisdom and Logos. Sophia and Logos, therefore, fulfil the role as intermediaries between the Father and creation.<sup>18</sup> Using this image of Wisdom containing the ideas and plans for all created beings invites an understanding of Wisdom as being pregnant from eternity with the future created beings. However, Origen does not use this image or metaphor explicitly when explaining the role of Wisdom as a mediator in creation.

Later in *On first principles* 1.2,3 Origen makes an important move by comparing Christ as Wisdom to Christ as Logos. As “the beginning of the ways” Wisdom from eternity creates and contains everything in herself. As she communicates the plans of the divine Wisdom outside herself to created beings, she is the Word, Logos. This is a very important Christological statement since it confirms that Origen considers Wisdom to be the internal creative aspect (ἐπίνοια) of Christ and Logos to be the external communicative aspect of Christ.<sup>19</sup> This idea is important for our question concerning the role of the feminine in Origen because it could indicate that

<sup>11</sup> Origen, “First Principles,” 1.2,1.

<sup>12</sup> Origen, “First Principles,” 1.2,2: [...] *unigenitum filium dei sapientiam eius esse substantialiter subsistentem*. We should note that in this context Rufinus explains that *subsistentia* is a translation of ὑπόστασις. The only-begotten son is thus a hypostatically existing being, cf. Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood*, 66. Cf. also Origen, “First Principles,” 4.4,1–2.

<sup>13</sup> Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood*, 67–9. See also Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John,” 1.102 where Origen discusses the theme ἀρχή. The Father is the eternal ἀρχή of the Son. This part of Origen’s “Commentary on John” is from the same period as *On First Principles*.

<sup>14</sup> The end of Origen, “First Principles,” 1.2,2.

<sup>15</sup> Origen, “First Principles,” 1.2,2: *In haec ipsa ergo sapientiae subsistentia quia omnis virtus ac deformatio futurae inerat creatura, vel eorum quae principaliter existunt vel eorum quae accidunt consequenter, virtute praescientiae praeformata atque disposita*.

<sup>16</sup> The same idea is found in comm. In Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John,” 1.113–115, written around the same time as *On First Principles*.

<sup>17</sup> See also Origen, “First Principles,” 1.3,5 for another clear indication of subordination.

<sup>18</sup> This is revealed in a very significant manner in Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John” 2.3, where Origen explains how Logos’ divinity is derived from the Father’s divinity. Behr, *The Way*, 195–7; Harl, “La Préexistence,” 246. Both emphasise that, according to Origen, the relation between the Father and the Son is best understood as one of ontological rather than chronological subordination.

<sup>19</sup> Behr, *The Way*, 191–7. On these pages, Behr provides a very fine analysis of *On first principles* 1.2. However, Behr does not distinguish between Christ as Sophia and Christ as Logos which is important to understand how Origen considers the creative process to be.

Origen considers Wisdom to conceive and give birth through Logos to all created beings. However, this idea is not clearly expressed in the text, and it might be contradicted by the following identification of Wisdom and Logos – the female and male aspects of Christ, the Son. This description of Sophia and Logos as two aspects of the one Christ is repeated in *On first principles* 1.2,5 where Origen directly identifies the Wisdom with the Son:

Now as we said above, the Wisdom of God has her subsistence nowhere else but in him who is the beginning of all things, from whom also she took her birth. And because he himself, who alone is a Son by nature, is this Wisdom, he is on this account also called the ‘only-begotten’.<sup>20</sup>

This indicates that Origen does not see any problem in using male and female titles of Christ side by side nor in changing from one to the other. This could indicate that gender is not an issue for Origen when he interprets the many different aspects and titles of Christ.

In the second part of chapter 1.2, Origen supports his interpretation of the Christological titles with references to several biblical passages. Most important for our topic is that, in *On the First principles* 1.2,5, he quotes the Wisdom of Solomon 7:25-26, saying that Wisdom is the breath of the power of God and an effluence (ἀπόρροια) of the Almighty. Rufinus uses the Greek word, which he only does in a few important cases, and afterward, he translates it into Latin. The Latin term he uses is *manatio* which means emanation, outflow, or the like. The word ἀπόρροια is part of a quotation from the Bible, so it is not Origen’s or Rufinus’ own word, but the way Rufinus handles the quotation indicates that it is important for him to make clear that the relation between God the Father and the Wisdom should be understood as emanation. Origen’s use of the idea of emanation could indicate that he considers the relation between God the Father and Wisdom as a substantial relation indicating that the Wisdom is an outflow of the Father’s own nature. This seems to be confirmed by *On first principles* 1.2,6 where Origen interprets the meaning of Paul’s expression that Christ is “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Interpreting this, Origen says that an image can be two different things: firstly, a carved or painted image (i.e. a copy without substantial relations to that which it is an image of), and secondly a “child being an image of its parents” (i.e. an image with substantial relations to that which it is an image of). The first is how human beings are images of God, the second is how the Son, Christ, is an image of God. If this is also true about the relation between the Wisdom and God the Father, it seems clear that Wisdom is of the same substance as God the Father. Even if this is the case, Origen does not indicate that the substantial and emanative relation between the Father and the Wisdom has any gendered perspective. The Father is not said to give birth to Wisdom, and there is no indication that Origen considers the Wisdom to represent a specific feminine element of the divine substance which emanates from God in order to establish a gendered and sexual relation between God the Father and the Wisdom, as it was the case with the Valentinian myth.

### 3.2 Sophia in Commentary on the Gospel of John

In the first book of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Origen interprets John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word.” He also includes Prov. 8:22 here. And, as in *On first principles* 1.2, he understands Word and Wisdom, Logos and Sophia as two different aspects of Christ:

But it is as the beginning that Christ is creator, according to which he is wisdom. For wisdom says in Solomon, “God created me the beginning of his works” (Prov. 8,22), that “the Word might be in the beginning” (Joh 1:3-4) in wisdom.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Origen, “First Principles,” 1.2,5: “*Sapientiam vero dei dicimus, sicut superius diximus, subsistentiam habentem non alibi nisi in eo, qui est initium omnium, ex quo et nata est. Quae sapientia quia ipse est, qui est solus natura filius, ideo et ‘unigenitus’ dicitur.*”

<sup>21</sup> Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John,” 1.111: Δημιουργός δὲ ὁ Χριστὸς ὡς ἀρχή, καθ’ ὃ σοφία ἐστὶ, τῷ σοφία εἶναι καλούμενος ἀρχή. Ἡ γὰρ σοφία παρὰ τῷ Σαλομῶντί φησιν· «Ὁ θεὸς ἔκτισέν με ἀρχὴν ὁδῶν αὐτοῦ εἰς ἔργα αὐτοῦ», ἵνα «ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦ ὁ λόγος», ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ.



Interpreting his own words, Origen says that we use the title *Wisdom* (Sophia) when we think of the structure and forms of all things, while we use the title *Word* (Logos) when we think of how these ideas and this structure are communicated to spiritual beings.<sup>22</sup> It is difficult to understand what Origen means by this. However, in the following paragraphs, Origen seems to explain himself more clearly. To present the meaning as precise as possible, I will bring a longer quote from these paragraphs:

But consider if it is possible also for us to take the statement, “In the beginning was the Word” (Joh 1:1) in accordance with this meaning, so that all things came to be in accordance with the wisdom and plans of the system of thoughts in the Word. For I think that just as a house and a ship are built or devised according to the plans of the architect, the house and the ship having as their beginning the plans and thoughts in the craftsman, so all things have come to be according to the thoughts of what will be, which were prefigured by God in wisdom, “For he made all things in Wisdom” (Ps 103:24).<sup>23</sup>

This can be understood as meaning that creation took place in different stages. The first stage is the creation of the structure and ideas of all beings. This stage of creation takes place in the Wisdom. The next stage is that these ideas are unfolded or communicated outside God and his Wisdom. This takes place by the Word. It is crucial to be aware that Origen here explains what happened in the “beginning.” This means that he tries to express conditions before time and space were created with the help of chronological and spatial terms. This is indeed impossible, which is evident in the unclear and complicated expressions we meet in these paragraphs. However, I think that Origen wants to express that Wisdom was at work as a creator before rational beings were communicated or created by the Logos as individual beings.

This clarifies and expands the results of the abovementioned interpretation of *On first principles* 1.2 that were focused on the relation between God the Father on the one hand and the Wisdom and the Word on the other hand. In these paragraphs from Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, we can see that creation by Origen is understood as an emanation process which also includes the created rational beings. This can be illuminated further by including another title which Origen uses about Christ. This is the title “life” (ζωή), which we find in *Commentary on John* 1.112. Origen suggests that the Savior, who is many good things, has conceived the many good things which he is in a certain order so one good thing is first, another second, and so forth. Thus, he suggests that the Word is in the beginning, which we know is Wisdom. Further in the Word is Life. We thus have a chain of emanation which is God the Father, Wisdom, Word, and Life.

The interesting question is now whether this chain of emanation from God the Father to the rational beings who have received life from the Wisdom and the Word represents an outflow of divine substance to created rational beings. Since the Word passes on Life to the beings who were conceived in Wisdom and established as hypostatical beings in the Word, it is plausible to imagine that the emanative relation between God the Father and the rational beings is of a substantial nature which means that the divine substance emanates to rational beings who thus participates in the divine substance. Origen himself asks this question, but his answer is blurred. In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1.115, he ends the argument that I just presented with a comment on this. He writes:

And we must say that after God had created living wisdom, if I may put it this way, from the models in her he entrusted to her [to present] to the things which exists and to matter [both] their conformation and forms, but I stop short of saying their essences.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John,” 1.111: κατὰ μὲν τὴν σύστασιν τῆς περὶ τῶν ὅλων θεωρίας καὶ νοημάτων τῆς σοφίας νοουμένης, κατὰ δὲ τὴν πρὸς τὰ λογικά κοινωνίαν τῶν θεωρημένων τοῦ λόγου λαμβανομένου.

<sup>23</sup> Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John,” 1.113–114: Ἐπίστησον δέ, εἰ οἷόν τέ ἐστι καὶ κατὰ τὸ σημαινόμενον τοῦτο ἐκδέχεσθαι ἡμᾶς τὸ «Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος», ἵνα κατὰ τὴν σοφίαν καὶ τοὺς τύπους τοῦ συστήματος τῶν ἐν αὐτῷ νοημάτων τὰ πάντα γίνηται. (114) Οἶμαι γάρ, ὥσπερ κατὰ τοὺς ἀρχιτεκτονικοὺς τύπους οἰκοδομεῖται ἡ τεκταίνεται οἰκία καὶ ναὺς, ἀρχὴν τῆς οἰκίας καὶ τῆς νεῶς ἐχόντων τοὺς ἐν τῷ τεχνίτῃ τύπους καὶ λόγους, οὕτω τὰ σύμπαντα γεγονέναι κατὰ τοὺς ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ προτρανωθέντας ὑπὸ θεοῦ τῶν ἐσομένων λόγους: «Πάντα γὰρ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἐποίησε».

<sup>24</sup> Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel John,” 1.115: Καὶ λεκτέον ὅτι κτίσας, ἵν’ οὕτως εἴπω, ἔμψυχον σοφίαν ὁ θεός, αὐτῇ ἐπέτρεψεν ἀπὸ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ τύπων τοῖς οὖσι καὶ τῇ ὕλῃ <παρασχεῖν καί> τὴν πλάσιν καὶ τὰ εἶδη, ἐγὼ δὲ ἐφίστημι εἰ καὶ τὰς οὐσίας.

R.E. Heine's translation is not that easy to understand. The reason for this is that Origen's own text is blurred. That is, I believe, because Origen's argument logically would lead to the conclusion that Wisdom conferred divine essence to rational beings through the process of emanation. However, Origen does not want to say this, since he is aware that this comes too close to for example Valentinian views that many, including Origen himself, considered to be heretical. He therefore stops short of concluding what would have been the most obvious conclusion to his whole argument. Thus, he ends up agreeing with what he claimed in *On the first principles* 1.2,6 where he argued that Christ is an image of God in a substantial way as the Son is an image of his Father, while created beings are images of God in an unsubstantial way as a statue can be an image of a living person.

Since Origen understands the relation between God the Father and the Wisdom and the Word as a substantial relation, he might be open to interpreting this relation as a kind of procreation, while this cannot be the case when considering the relation between the Wisdom and the Word and the created beings since Origen stops short of claiming a substantial relation between the Wisdom and the Word and created beings. However, this is not the same as concluding that Origen actually considered the relation between God the Father and the Wisdom and between the Wisdom and the Word in terms of procreation. The opposite seems to be the case.

## 4 Conclusions

The question is now whether these interpretations of the Christological title Wisdom reveal anything about Origen's understanding of the feminine aspects of the Wisdom. At this point, it might make sense to mention a passage from the prologue of Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. In this passage, he considers why the Bible most often uses the words *caritas* and *dilectio* when speaking of love instead of the words *cupido* and *amor*. The reason is, according to Origen, that the Divine Scripture wanted to avoid that talking about love should be an occasion for fall for the simple Christians who might think that the Bible exhorted them to sexual love – not charity. However, in the Song of Songs the word *amor* is used to describe the Wisdom's desire for the bridegroom and the imagery is explicitly sexualized. This is, according to Origen, the case because the Song of Songs is written for advanced Christians who will understand that even if the language and imagery of the biblical text are sexualized the exhortation to love should be understood spiritually. Judged from this passage from the Song of Songs, Origen is fully aware of the Wisdom figure being feminine and that the Bible itself speaks about the love as a desire for the Wisdom in sexualized vocabulary and imagery. However, he also states very explicitly why this is an exception in the Bible and why this should continue to be so in his own texts. Thus, this might be a key to understanding why Origen does not develop Sophia's femininity in his own texts even if he makes intensive use of the Wisdom figure in his creation theology and in his Christology. As mentioned above, another reason for Origen to avoid sexual language and imagery could be his wish to distance himself from the Valentinian's sexualizing of Sophia. Thus, for example when he writes that Sophia "[...] fashions beforehand and contains within herself the species and causes of the entire creation, [...]"<sup>25</sup> it would have been obvious to interpret this further along the lines of pregnancy and birth. When he does not do that, it probably is due to two reasons: first, he wants to avoid arousing and legitimate sexual desire among the weaker Christians, and secondly, he wants to distance himself from the Valentinians' sexualizing of Sophia.

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<sup>25</sup> Origen, "First Principles," 1.2,3.

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