

Il Commento a Giovanni di Origene: il testo e i suoi contesti

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TOWARDS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE IDENTITY OF
THE 'SIMPLE PEOPLE'. SOME REMARKS CONCERNING ORIGEN'S
TREATMENT OF PREVIOUS EXEGETICAL TRADITIONS: CIO XIII, 325 – 337

The main twofold orientation of Origen's exegetical polemic in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John* – against Heracleon and the Gnostics on the one hand and against the literalist 'simple people' on the other – is a very well-known and at least in the case of Heracleon also well studied phenomenon¹. Unlike the controversy with the author of the Gnostic commentary, Origen is generally much more reserved and less explicit when refuting his opponents inside the Church. Due to this fact as well as to the simplicity of the literalistic position of the ἀπλούστεροι is the comparatively restricted scholarly interest in this group².

In the present study we will analyse the explanation Origen gives to John 4:38 as an example of the thesis that, alongside the terminologically distinct and usually short rejections of non-allegorical interpretations on the part of catholic Christians, Origen can be engaged in more veiled and more complicated polemic with the exegetical traditions of the Church previous to him.

We will proceed as follows. First Origen's commentary on John 4:38 (Cio XIII, 325-337)³ will be presented in its context. Then we will attempt to show the polemical intentions of this text. Finally, the crucial question, whether Origen

¹ See e. g. M. SIMONETTI, *Eracleone e Origene*, *Vetera Christianorum* 3 (1966), 111-141; 4 (1967), 23-64 and J.M. POFFET, *La méthode exégétique d'Héracléon et d'Origène*, Fribourg Suisse 1985. A fuller list may be gained from D. PAZZINI, *Giovanni Ev. (scritti esegetici su)*, in *Origene. Dizionario: la cultura, il pensiero, le opere*, a c. di A. MONACI CASTAGNÒ, Roma 2000, 200 and C. MARKSCHIES, *Heracleon*, in *Lexikon der antiken christlichen Literatur*, ed. by S. DÖPP - W. GEERLINGS, Freiburg - Basel - Wien³ 2002, 318-319.

² Two works deal with the problem of the 'simple people' on the basis of Origen's whole literary corpus: G. AF HALLSTRÖM, *Fides simpliciorum according to Origen of Alexandria*, *Societas Scientiarum Fennica, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 76, 1984 and M. HIRSCHBERG, *Studien zur Geschichte der simplices in der Alten Kirche. Ein Beitrag zum Problem der Schichtungen in der menschlichen Erkenntnis*, Berlin 1944 (PhD, typewritten). W. VÖLKER, *Das Bild vom nichtgnostischen Christentum bei Celsus*, Halle (Saale) 1928 studied the problem of *simpliciores* in *Contra Celsum*. See also A. MONACI, *Origene ed "i molti": due religiosità a contrasto*, *Augustinianum* 21 (1981), 99-117 and EAD., *Semplici*, in *Origene. Dizionario*, 440-443.

³ All references to the Greek text of Cio are given according to E. PREUSCHEN (ed.), *Origenes Werke, vierter Band. Der Johanneskommentar*, GCS X, Leipzig 1903.

considers his opponents in *Clo* XIII, 325-337 as 'simple' and their exegesis as literalistic, will be dealt with.

The relatively short explanation of John 4:38 (*Clo* XIII, ch. 50) closes the large section, in which Origen comments on the Gospel of John 4:35-38 (*Clo* XIII, 225 - 337). The main exegetical problem which preoccupies Origen in this section is the right interpretation of 'harvest' in John 4:35: «Do you not say there are yet four months and the harvest comes?» After the six possible solutions have been discussed and rejected (XIII, 285-295), Origen proposes two more meanings of 'harvest', one of which refers to the interpretation of the Scriptures clarified by the Logos⁴ (XIII, 297, cf. 279). Holding this reference of the 'harvest' to the Holy Scripture in the background, Origen interprets John 4:36 «that he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together». The sowers are Moses and the prophets, who have proclaimed in their writings the coming of Christ; those who reap are understood as apostles because they have reaped «the intellectual seeds of the prophets» about Christ, that is, they have been given the revelation of the mystery of His coming through «the presence of the Word» (XIII, 305-307) or, according to a slightly different explanation, they have understood the hidden meaning of the prophetic Scriptures (XIII, 320).

John 4:37 «For in this is the saying true, that it is one who sows and another who reaps» gives Origen the opportunity of repeating his distinction between the sowers and reapers as referring to the prophets and the apostles respectively (XIII, 320-321). After questioning Heracleon's exegesis of this verse (XIII, 322-324), Origen provides his explanation of John 4:38 «I have sent you to reap that in which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor,» the passage we are especially interested in.

This passage can be divided into two parts according to the two different explanations of 'those who laboured'. The first and shorter one (XIII, 325-326; 277, 6-15) stays in accordance with Origen's understanding of the 'sowers' and the 'reapers' in the previous verses and sees Moses and the prophets in 'those who laboured' before the apostles. The second part is much larger (XIII, 326-335; 277, 15-278, 32). It discusses the possibility of the angels being predecessors of the apostles, who entered into the angels' labour of sowing souls in bodies. This part consists of three sections: firstly, Origen proposes to take into consideration the above-mentioned other explanation (XIII, 326-327; 277, 15-26), secondly, he deals with the consequences of the assumption that the angels directly have to do with

⁴ In the English translation of *Clo* we are generally following the work of R. HEINE: *Origen. Commentary on the Gospel according to John, Books 13-32* (The Fathers of the Church 89). Translated by R.E. HEINE, Washington, D.C. 1993, here p. 130.

the human conception⁵ (XIII, 328–331; 277, 26–278, 13) and, finally, Origen emphasizes the tentative character of the proposed second interpretation, provides a scriptural argument for it and makes applications of it to John 4:36,38 (XIII, 332–335; 278,13–32).

Next we shall analyse the second section of part two dealing with the *problems* of the alternative understanding of «those who laboured» in John 4:38. It can easily be shown that in this section Origen has some opponents in mind who disagree or would disagree with his attempt to introduce angels as an alternative to Moses and the prophets in the explanation of this Gospel verse.

Firstly, Origen anticipates possible objections to the active role he ascribes to the angels being involved in the process of forming humans and he discusses them at length (XIII, 328–330; 277, 26ff.).

Secondly, Origen is eager to stress the tentative, hypothetical character of his second explanation. Part two of the exegesis of John 4:38 completely lacks his typical terminology used by introducing a deeper, allegorical meaning of the Bible verse in question. We find instead repeated declarations like: «Now, I do not know if it is applicable also to say something like this about the problem in question»⁶ (XIII, 50, 330; 277, 33–278,1); and: «Now, we do not say it as a proof, for matters of such magnitude need to be thoroughly examined to see if they are so or not»⁷ (XIII, 332; 278, 13–15).

A polemical point can possibly be seen also in the way Origen extends his view of the angels taking part in the creation of human beings in the interpretation of Gen 1:26: «This explanation will take the command “Let us make man according to our image and our likeness” *in a more ingenious manner*» (XIII, 331; 278, 6ff.). Could we go beyond these formal criteria and attempt to find out whom Origen has in mind? The main objection to his suggestion about the angels sowing souls in bodies as a possible interpretation of «those who have laboured» in John 4:38 is the following (XIII, 328; 277, 26ff.): «But someone will object that, on the contrary, God himself is said to form men in the statement, “Your hands have made me and formed me,” (Ps 118:73) and in addition, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you ...”» (Jer 1:5).

Alluding to Gal 3:19 and Heb 2:2, Origen reminds one here that God Himself is certainly the real subject of creation, forming men through His angels (XIII,

⁵ Origen must have been acquainted with this idea on the basis of previous Christian tradition. About the angels' role in human procreation according to early Christian tradition before Origen, see J. MICHL, *Engel IV (christlich)*, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum V*, Stuttgart 1962, 138 and C. BLANC, *L'angélologie d'Origène*, in *Studia Patristica* 14/3, Berlin 1976, 89 n. 2.

⁶ HEINE's translation slightly altered.

⁷ HEINE's translation slightly altered, cf. also p. 277, 15–17. 21–22.

329). This explanation makes possible both: to maintain the exposition proposed and to presume that the 'hands' in Ps 118:73 are to be understood as angels. The last point is neither accidental nor unimportant for Origen, who is engaged in refuting the literal understanding of biblical anthropomorphisms, being one of the main features of the 'simple believers'⁸.

The second attempt to replay to the questioning of angels functioning as sowers of the souls in the bodies (XIII, 330–333; 278,6ff.) is more complicated. Origen is basing on Dtn 32:8ff. (LXX): «When the most High divided the nations ... He appointed the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God; and Jacob became the Lord's portion...». Origen says that Job, David and Jeremiah – the biblical writers who spoke about their being created by God or by God's hands respectively – belonged to God's portion and have been really created by Him. Non-Hebrew people belonging to the angels' portions are created by their angels. In the light of this creation theory, Origen proposes what he calls «a more ingenious» understanding of Gen 1:26: «Let us make man according to our image and our likeness», arguing that these words are directed by God to the angels⁹.

This second answer lets Origen correlate his creation theory with two Scripture references (Dtn 32:8 and Gen 1:26) and explains how God and the angels simultaneously could be seen as immediate human creators on a biblical basis. At

⁸ The various wordings of the biblical words (Ps 118:73; Hi 10:8) about the creation of man by the hands of God frequently occur in the Christian as well as in Jewish sources of the first and second century lacking any additional comments and open to being taken literally. We find this biblical anthropomorphism in the following texts (the list is not exhaustive): 1Clem. 33:4; Athenag., *Legatio* 33; Thophil. Ant., *Ad Autol.* 2:18; Iren., *Demonstr.* 11; *Adv. haer.* IV,20; Tert., *De res.* 5–6, *Adv. Marc.* II 4:4; Clem. Al., *Paed.* I, 7:1–2; Ps.-Cypr., *De mont.* 4; Philo, *De virt.* 203; *Apoc.Mos.* 33:5; 37:2; *Slav Henoc* 44:1; 4Esr 3:5; 8:7,42–44; *Apoc.Esr.* 2:10–11; *Apoc.Sedrach* 4:3. St. Irenaeus of Lyon and St. Theophilus of Antioch were the first Christian authors before Origen to give an interpretation of the image of the creation of man by God's hands, understanding the 'hands' as the Logos and the Wisdom or (only by Irenaeus) the Son and the Holy Spirit. Origen's explicit comment to the metaphor has not been transmitted, but our text as well as CC IV, 37 (SC 136, 276, 1–16 Borret) do show his being engaged in solving the problem. It is worth noting that his solution was apparently different from that of St. Irenaeus and St. Theophilus. Regarding the literalist understanding of the Bible as the main characteristic of the 'simple believer', see G. AF HÄLLSTRÖM, *Fides simpliciorum*, 93, 64 n. 8.

⁹ R. MCL. WILSON, *The Early History of the Exegesis of Gen. 1. 26*, in *Studia Patristica* 1, Berlin 1957, 420–424 brings parallels to this exegesis from Rabbinic literature and raises the question about Origen's sources, but without tangible results (mentioned are Philo, Plato's *Timaeus*, and the Gnostics).

the same time, Origen speaks simply about creation by God cancelling the anthropomorphic creation by the hands of God.

Summarizing, we can say that Origen is anticipating objections to his creation theory which would see the only Creator of men in God Himself, but not in angels. This reconstructed position reminds one of the anti-Gnostic polemic concerning the creation of men in the *Adversus haereses* of St. Irenaeus of Lyon. From the Gnostic point of view, the world and men are products of the creationist activity of the evil angels¹⁰. In opposition to that, St. Irenaeus insists on God's uniqueness as Creator of the world and men. Of interest for our analysis is the following passage from *Adv. haer.* IV, 20, 1 (SC 100/2, 624, 11 – 626, 21 Rousseau):

Non ergo angeli fecerunt nos neque plasmaverunt nos, neque enim angeli poterant imaginem facere Dei, neque alius quis praeter verum Deum ... Neque enim indigebat horum Deus ad faciendum quae ipse apud se praefinierat fieri, quasi ipse suas non haberet manus. Adest enim ei semper Verbum et Sapientia, Filius et Spiritus, per quos et in quibus omnia libere et sponte fecit, ad quos et loquitur, dicens: Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram.

«It is therefore not the angels who have created us nor have they formed us, for neither angels nor anyone else could create the image of God except the true God ... For God did not need them to create what He had determined by Himself to come into existence as if He didn't have His hands. It is because the Word and the Wisdom, the Son and the Spirit are always with Him. It is through them and in them that He has freely and voluntarily created all things and it is to them that He speaks: "Let us make man according to our image and our likeness" (Gen 1:26)».

The passage quoted is, to a certain degree, a summary of St. Irenaeus refutation of the Gnostic teaching about the evil angels' creation of man¹¹. The angels are completely excluded from the process of creation because it is only possible for God to create the image of God. The mediators in the creation of man are the 'hands' of God – the Son and the Holy Spirit; it is to them that the words of Gen 1:26 are addressed.

Origen, while insisting on God being the only real subject of the creation of man (XIII, 329; 277, 30ff.), is undoubtedly *dogmatically* on the side of St. Irenaeus. However, his attempt to introduce the angels as taking an active part in the process of creation provides tensions *on the exegetical level* with the anti-Gnostic creation vision described above: as we have seen, Origen seems to understand the

¹⁰ *Adv. haer.* I, 23, 2. 24, 1–5; V, 19, 2.

¹¹ Cf. *Adv. haer.* IV, 7, 4; V, 18, 1 and *passim*. About the Son and Holy Spirit as the hands of God in Irenaeus see J. MAMBRINO, "Les Deux Mains de Dieu" dans *l'oeuvre de saint Irénée*, Nouvelle Revue Théologique 79 (1957), 355–370.

'hands of God' in Ps 118:73 as angels and explicitly – and possibly even polemically¹² – addresses God's appeal «Let us make man» not to the Son and the Spirit, but to the angels as well¹³. The bishop of Lyon's statement «It is not the angels who have created us nor have they formed us» is consequently a dogmatic one, Origen's opposite hypothesis lacks any *dogmatic* polemic and is aimed at solving exegetical problems, being conscious of the existing differences of opinion in this area¹⁴.

Two more points of contact between Origen's commentary on John 4:38 and *Adversus haeresis* can be noted. The first of them is the exegesis of Jer 1:5. According to St. Irenaeus the words «Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you ...» is one of the scriptural evidences confirming that it is «the Word of God» who «forms us in the womb»¹⁵. As in the case with Gen 1:26, this understanding does have a clear anti-Gnostic orientation and must demonstrate that, besides the primordial creation of man, even present creations are to be ascribed to God the Father alone, and respectively, *i.e.*, His Son and the Holy Spirit. Origen's theory of creation lets him understand Jer 1:5 either in the sense of creation by God through the angels (XIII, 329–330; 277, 30–33) or as God's immediate creation, but restricted only to «God's portion», *i.e.*, His chosen nation (XIII, 330; 278, 3ff.). In both cases, a formal disagreement with Irenaeian tradition can be felt.

The last example of contacts between Irenaeus and Origen is the explanation the Bishop of Lyon gives to the very verse of the Gospel of John commented on by Origen in XIII, 50, *i.e.* John 4:38. As a matter of fact, the explanation given in

¹² Just., *Dial.* 62,3 (PTS 47, 177, 22–24 MARCOVICH) while dialoguing with Tryphon, confutes the attribution of Gen 1:26 to the angels: οὐ γὰρ ὅπερ ἡ παρ' ὑμῖν λεγομένη αἵρεσις δογματίζει φαίην ἂν ἐγὼ ἀληθὲς εἶναι, ἢ οἱ ἐκείνης διδάσκαλοι ἀποδείξαι δύνανται, ὅτι ἀγγέλους ἔλεγεν (*e. g.* the words of Gen 1:26) ἢ ὅτι ἀγγέλων ποίημα ἦν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ἀνθρώπειον and understands these words to be addressed to the Wisdom of God. Whereas it cannot be ruled out that Origen knew this passage or similar statements by other early Christian writers, the points of contact of his commentary on John 4:38 with *Adversus haereses* seem too many (see the discussion below) not to assume that Origen had this or cognate source in mind.

¹³ Unlike St. Irenaeus' solution, this attribution makes the understanding of the words «according to our image and our likeness» quite difficult. Origen might have failed to notice the problem because of the very preliminary character of his draft.

¹⁴ H. CROUZEL, *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène* (Théologie 34), Paris 1956, 125 n. 255 refers to two places (CMt XII, 2, GCS X 73, 11ff. and CC II, 9, GCS I, 136, 5ff.), where Origen understands the words of Gen 1:26 as being directed to the Logos; for other examples of Gen 1:26 in Origen being addressed to the Son or to the Logos see R. MCL. WILSON, *The Early History*, 435 n. 6,7.

¹⁵ *Adv. haer.* V,15,2–3.

Adv. haer. IV, 23, 1 perfectly coincides with the first short interpretation of 'those who laboured' in XIII, 325–326; 277, 6–15. Origen writes:

«It is not difficult, on the basis of our previous discussion, to see how Jesus sent the disciples to reap that in which they themselves had not labored. For after Moses and the prophets labored ... the apostles entered into the labor of Moses and the prophets».

The understanding of St. Irenaeus is quite the same:

Qui ergo sunt qui laboraverunt, qui dispositionibus Dei deservierunt? Manifestum est quia patriarchae et prophetae.

«Now, who are those who have laboured <and> served God's dispensation? It is quite clear that it is the patriarchs and the prophets».

Both interpretations understand those who laboured as the patriarchs (respectively Moses) and the prophets, and both regard it as almost self-evident. The main difference¹⁶ between them is that Origen mentions the first explanation in passing concentrating on his second explanation whereas in *Adv. haer.* IV, 23, 1ff. any other explanation is absent.

From this evidence arises the question, if Origen, who considers the first explanation as obvious and possibly is acquainted with it either also on the basis of *Adversus haereses* or of other related sources, could associate it with the bodily meaning of the Holy Scripture and try to provide in his second explanation a spiritual one. If the twofold structure of *Clō* XIII, 325–337 could be seen as corresponding to Origen's usual distinction between the bodily or literal and the spiritual meanings of Scripture, then we shall be able to establish a link between the exegetical traditions which Origen is questioning in his commentary on John 4:38 and his general criticism of the literalist 'simple people'. In other words, proceeding from the analysis of the hermeneutical presuppositions of the passage in question, we shall now try to understand, if Origen in any sense associates the polemics in *Clō* XIII, 325–337 with his usual combat against the literalist *simpli-ciores*.

To answer the question, we must determine the character of both explanations given to John 4:38 and then examine the relationship of the second explanation to Heracleon's commentary.

The first observation we have got to make is that *Clō* XIII, 325–337 lacks Origen's typical terminology indicating whether the particular interpretation belongs to the spiritual or to the bodily level of the Scripture. The exegesis of the whole passage of John 4:35–38 does show, however, an internal hermeneutical

¹⁶ The less important ones are linked with a broader context and are of no significance for the present discussion.

logic, which allows us to make some observations about the commentary to John 4:38. *CIO* XIII, 261; 269–270 demonstrates that Origen rejects the literal meaning of John 4:35 and understands the whole verse allegorically. This allegorical understanding is based upon *CIO* XIII, 250–258, where Origen tries to show that the ‘harvest’ in John 4:35 cannot be taken literally. Consequently, his explanations of the ‘harvest’ (θερισμός) and the ‘reapers’ (θερίζοντες) in the commentary on John 4:35–38 are to be understood as allegorical. Origen provides two non-literal explanations of the ‘harvest’, referring them to the interpretation of the Scriptures (XIII, 279; 297) and to the perception of all created beings (XIII, 280; 297), while he clearly gives preference to the first. Coming to John 4:38 «I have sent you to reap that in which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor», he must state that his connection of the ‘reapers’ to the apostles, who understand the hidden meaning of the Scriptures, which have required much exegetical skill in the previous verses, is self-evident in this case. This self-evidence casts a literalistic shadow over the understanding of ‘those who laboured’ as Moses and the prophets. Finally, Origen might have been acquainted with the interpretation of this verse by St. Irenaeus, calling the above mentioned understanding of ‘those who laboured’ manifest.

All this could have caused in Origen an impression of his first interpretation of John 4:38, a spiritual one in accordance with the internal logic of the commentary, being too obvious. He says it almost directly: «It is not difficult, on the basis of our previous discussion, to see how Jesus sent the disciples to reap that in which they themselves had not labored» (XIII, 325; 277, 6–8). Origen’s cautious way of introducing the second interpretation¹⁷ is, if our analysis is correct, partly due to its unsettled hermeneutical character¹⁸ and partly to its challenging nature regarding the existing exegetical traditions of the Church.

The third reason for the tentative character of the second interpretation seems to be its relation to Heracleon’s commentary on John 4:38. This relation is posed by Origen himself at the very end of his report about Heracleon’s explanation of John 4:38 (XIII, 337): «Now, it is possible for the reader, by comparing what we have said and what Heracleon has said, to see which explanation turns out well»¹⁹.

The point of comparison is the following words of Heracleon (XIII, 336; 278, 33–279, 2):

¹⁷ «Now we do not say it as a proof, for matters of such magnitude need to be thoroughly examined to see if they are so or not» (XIII, 332; 278, 13–15) and other examples.

¹⁸ It is put opposite to the first interpretation, which is spiritual, but at the same time obvious.

¹⁹ Heine’s translation slightly altered.

«Heracleon says that these seeds were sown neither through them nor by them (and he means the apostles), but that those who have labored are the angels of the dispensation (οἱ τῆς οἰκονομίας ἄγγελοι)²⁰, through whom, as mediators, they (= the seeds) were sown and brought up».

Origen provides not the slightest criticism of this interpretation and possibly has it in view when introducing his second explanation of «those who laboured» (XIII, 326; 277, 15–18): «But we must consider everything that concerns those [who are sown] by some [and] reaped [by others]».

Moreover, his description of the angels' activities by sowing souls in bodies (XIII, 327; 277, 22–25), «... the angels ..., at the appointed time, begin to make the dispensation (οἰκονομία) concerning each one ...», seems to echo Heracleon's phrase οἱ τῆς οἰκονομίας ἄγγελοι. The general impression is, then, that Origen borrows Heracleon's interpretation²¹, provides for it a scriptural basis, and examines whether it can really be useful. This borrowing from a Gnostic author in combination with the questioning of the established orthodox exegesis developed in the controversy with the Gnostics might be an additional reason for Origen's cautious and reserved manner in the passage.

The inference we can make is that neither the terminology of the commentary on John 4:38 nor its hermeneutical presuppositions give us any formal ground to establish a connection between Origen's general polemics with the 'simple people' and his commentary on John 4:38. This connection can, however, be seen on another level, namely, in Origen's reinterpretation of the theologumenon of the creation of man by the hands of God being open to an anthropomorphic understanding in the whole previous tradition except Irenaeus and Theophilus. Without any direct mentioning of his opponents, Origen suggests such an interpretation of 'the hands of God' which, at the same time, is different from the both previous solutions and rules out a literal anthropomorphic comprehension of

²⁰ In the Gnostic conception, the 'seed' is the Gnostic chosen people. E. H. PAGELS, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*, Nashville - New York 1973, 106 writes that they are «sown into the cosmos through the unwitting agency of the demiurge. The means of this sowing are (as Heracleon agrees) 'the angels of the oikonomia', through whom 'as means' the seeds are sown and raised in cosmic existence». About the 'angels of dispensation' see also W. FOERSTER, *Von Valentin zu Herakleon. Untersuchungen über die Quellen und die Entwicklung der valentianischen Gnosis*, Gießen 1928, 38–39.

²¹ I.e., the idea that 'those who laboured' in John 4:38 can be understood as angels, not the conception about angels' active role in the creation of human beings. R. MCL. WILSON, *The Early History*, 435 seems to mingle both aspects by saying that the similarity with Heracleon's interpretation is «not enough to justify the inference that Origen is dependent on Heracleon for his exegesis».

the 'hands'. We are, therefore, perhaps not wrong in drawing the conclusion that, in the commentary on John 4:38, Origen, in making explicit his theory of the angels' creation of man, has in mind not only the exegetical traditions of St. Irenaeus in particular, but also the beliefs of broader circles of the Church generally.

We can now summarize our observations as follows. The analysis of Origen's hermeneutic in the commentary on John 4:35–38 has shown that the second interpretation of John 4:38 must have been in the eyes of its author some kind of alternative to or special case of the spiritual meaning of this Gospel verse given in the first interpretation. In the commentary on John 4:38, Origen avoids the typical terminology of the bodily / spiritual levels of the Scripture; in his second interpretation, he is studying an interesting case rather than giving a definite meaning of the Gospel verse. Borrowing from Heracleon his interpretation of 'those who laboured' as angels, Origen sets it in the dogmatically orthodox context and supplies it with the scriptural basis. The last proceeding has as a consequence a number of interpretations of various Old Testament places connected with the creation of man in which Origen introduces angels as active partakers in the process of creation. In doing so Origen challenges a lot of more or less established traditions of understanding these passages held by the Church. Most of them could be identified as having been developed in the course of St. Irenaeus' polemic with the Gnostic theory of the creation of man and world²², whereas the insistence upon man's being created by the 'hands of God' is a universal belief of the Church in the first two centuries certainly shared also by the so-called 'simple people'. Conscious of the challenging connotations of his exegesis, Origen repeatedly emphasizes its provisional, hypothetical character and the difficulty of the problems.

²² F. COCCHINI, *Aprire gli occhi: note sull'interpretazione origeniana di Gv 9*, in *Atti del IX Simposio di Efeso su S. Giovanni Apostolo*, a c. di L. PADOVESE, Roma 2003, 93–104, especially 101–104 has shown that Origen's commentary on John 4:34 in *CIO* XIII, 236–242) includes a critical reaction upon *Adv. haer.* V, 15, 2–16, 1 (cf. in particular *CIO* XIII, 238). Combined with our observations (cf. esp. note 15) this evidence raises the question about Origen's polemics with *Adversus haereses* in *CIO* and in particular in book XIII. I would like to express my warmest thanks to Mrs. Cocchini for her calling my attention to the work cited.