

ARTICLE

## No Hymen Required: Reconstructing Origen's View on Mary's Virginity

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Origen of Alexandria's works contain a seeming contradiction concerning Mary's virginity. He affirms multiple times that Mary remained a virgin after Christ's birth and throughout life, yet one of his homilies on the Gospel of Luke declares that Christ "opened the womb" of his mother—an action many readers equate with destruction of virginity. How can Origen claim that Mary remained virginal if her hymen tissue was no longer intact? Scholars commonly solve the problem by characterizing his thought as self-contradictory or by concluding that he prioritizes Mary's lack of sexual experience over her loss of physical intactness. This essay resolves the contradiction more fully through attention to divergent models for female genital anatomy that circulated in antiquity. Origen, like most thinkers during and before his time, probably did not believe that female virgins have hymens. For him, the terminology of "closed" and "opened" wombs refers not to virginity but to fertility. Scholarly readers have been misled by certain other authors' uses of this vocabulary and by Jerome's Latin translation of the homily, which draws on a different anatomical model. For Origen, Mary is a virginal mother not in spite of a broken hymen, but without possessing a hymen in the first place.

**Keywords:** virginity; Virgin Mary; Mariology; Origen; Jerome

As a rare third-century witness to early Christian thought on Mary's virginity, Origen of Alexandria has drawn the interest and scrutiny of those who study Mariology or asceticism. Many early and mid-twentieth-century scholars pursued the question of which ancient Christian writers subscribed to the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, including her virginity *in partu* (during childbirth). Their studies—which often proceed by grouping Origen with other Greek-speaking "Eastern" authors and grouping Latin-speaking authors together to represent "the West"—sometimes classify authors' positions as adherence to or divergence from an orthodoxy supposedly held from the beginnings of the faith or, at other times, investigate whether particular authors' views had already or had not yet taken on the shape of later doctrinal reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Studies include Georges Jouassard, "Marie à travers la patristique: Maternité divine, virginité, sainteté," in *Maria: Études sur la Sainte Vierge*, ed. Hubert du Manoir (Paris: Beauchesne, 1949), 1:69–157; Hugo Koch, *Virgo Eva - Virgo Maria: Neue Untersuchungen über die Lehre von der Jungfrauschaft und der Ehe Mariens in der ältesten Kirche* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1937); Ignacio Ortiz de Urbina, "Lo sviluppo della Mariologia nella Patrologia Orientale," *Orientalia christiana periodica* 6 (1940): 40–82; José Antonio

With a large, exegetically rich corpus that contains numerous comments on Mary and on ascetic practice, Origen continues to occupy an important role in recent studies of the development of early Christian asceticism and of Mary's significance in early Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

Those who encounter Origen's statements on Mary's virginal status often leave puzzled. He appears to draw conflicting conclusions on whether Mary became ritually impure through giving birth or instead remained pure because of her status as a virgin, and he appears to affirm both that she remained a virgin forever and that Christ's birth compromised the virginal intactness of her sex organs. In this essay, I will address the second tension, focusing on Origen's reasoning about whether Mary remained a virgin during childbirth. I leave aside the matter of ritual (im)purity, which (despite being conflated with the question of virginity by some scholars) does not reflect a shift in his claims about whether Mary was virginal or non-virginal upon giving birth.<sup>3</sup> I argue that Origen's statements about Mary's virginity following childbirth cohere easily if we correct mistaken scholarly assumptions about ancient virginity and virgins' bodies. Heretofore, Origen's interpreters have assumed that diverse ancient writers envisioned female virgins' anatomy in similar ways. Misled by Jerome of Stridon's Latin translation of one of Origen's *Homilies on the Gospel of Luke* and particularly by his translation of a key passage which bears superficial similarities to other patristic discussions, readers have superimposed on Origen's work a one-size-fits-all conceptualization of female virginity in which virgins' organs are blocked by hymen tissue.<sup>4</sup> Comparing Origen's comments on Mary's sex organs with references to fertility in medical, biblical, and exegetical sources reveals that Origen's phrase about womb-opening actually describes fertility rather than loss of virginity. He most likely held to conventional Greek beliefs

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de Aldama, *Virgo mater: Estudios de teología patristica* (Granada: Facultad de Teología, 1963); Hilda C. Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion*, 2 vols. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963–1965); Hans von Campenhausen, *The Virgin Birth in the Theology of the Ancient Church* (London: SCM, 1964); and pertinent essays by Walter Burghardt and Philip Donnelly in the three-volume *Mariology*, ed. Juniper B. Carol (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1955–1961), much of which has now been republished in a different sequence by Mediatrix Press in 2018–2019.

<sup>2</sup>For example, David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: The Jovinianist Controversy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Richard Finn, *Asceticism in the Graeco-Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); and Sarah Jane Boss, ed., *Mary: The Complete Resource* (London: Continuum, 2007). Studies on the development of Marian cult supplement the slim patristic evidence of the third century with other sources that have been overlooked or understudied. See, for instance, Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Mary in Early Christian Faith and Devotion* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup>What conflicts between the passages is Origen's answer to whether Mary's virginity (a given in both cases) allows her to remain ritually pure during the postpartum period, a time when other women are temporarily impure. In *Homilies on Luke* 14.3–8, he takes Luke's phrase "their purification" (Luke 2:22) as an indication that both Jesus and Mary required purification according to Mosaic law following Jesus's birth; in *Homilies on Leviticus* 8.2–4, on the other hand, he offers similar reflections on Jesus's inherently unclean human body but exempts Mary from the need for purification on the grounds that she both conceived and gave birth as a virgin. The issue is purification after childbirth; the Leviticus homily, while it gives a new answer concerning this issue, does not contradict what Origen says in the Lucan homily about the nature of Christ's emergence from Mary's womb or her ongoing status as a virgin.

<sup>4</sup>On the fallacy of treating ancient ideas about virginity as monolithic and predictable, see Julia Kelto Lillis, "Paradox in Partu: Verifying Virginity in the *Protevangelium of James*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 1–28.

about female anatomy, not to the less common notion of closed-off virginal organs that would eventually become mainstream for late ancient (and modern) cultures.

The first section of this essay lays out the content of the alleged contradiction and explains how scholars have accounted for it. A second section shows that Jerome's Latin translation of *Homilies on Luke* 14.7–8 differs from a surviving Greek fragment of the text and bears resemblances to two works of other Latin authors; these Latin works were familiar to Jerome and appear to have influenced his choices as he translated Origen's homily. In the third section, I turn to evidence that is likely to provide insight into Origen's ideas about female genital anatomy: recurring expressions regarding the "opening" or "closing" of wombs found in medical literature, magical images, biblical texts, and references in biblical interpretation by Origen and his Alexandrian predecessors. In the final section, I give my own interpretation of Origen's passage on the basis of the Greek fragment, with reference to the common assumptions discussed in section three that allow readers to make better sense of the terminology. Origen remained consistent in his claims about Mary being a virgin beyond Jesus's birth. In many cases, historical studies of Mariology or asceticism that ask whether a writer affirms Mary's virginity in partu are asking the wrong question; instead of presuming that all writers subscribed to the notion of hymenal integrity for virgins, scholars must expect greater variety in ancient writers' beliefs about female anatomy and pose questions that allow the deeper differences between writers to emerge.

### I. Origen and Mary's Opened Womb: Previous Identifications of the Problem and Proposed Solutions

Publications both old and new allege that Origen contradicts himself in his statements about Mary's virginity.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, Origen affirms that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. He says repeatedly in biblical commentaries and sermons that Christ was Mary's only child.<sup>6</sup> He articulates the view that one can hardly imagine a body entered by the Holy Spirit and overshadowed by the power of the Most High

<sup>5</sup>For example, Dom Ambrose Agius, "The Blessed Virgin in Origen and St Ambrose," *Downside Review* 50, no. 1 (January 1932): 126–137; Joseph C. Plumpe, "Some Little-known Early Witnesses to Mary's *Virginitas in Partu*," *Theological Studies* 9, no. 4 (December 1948): 569; Graef, *Mary*, 1:43–44; Igor Golden, "Origen and Mariology," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 36, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 147; Mark DelCogliano, "Tradition and Polemic in Basil of Caesarea's Homily on the Theophany," *Vigiliae Christianae* 66, no. 1 (2012): 45–47; and Brian K. Reynolds, *Gateway to Heaven: Marian Doctrine and Devotion, Image and Typology in the Patristic and Medieval Periods*, vol. 1, *Doctrine and Devotion* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2012), 78 (Reynolds erroneously cites Clement of Alexandria as the author of Origen's works in part of this discussion). In E. Dublanchy, "Marie," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* 9, no. 2 (1927): 2372, Dublanchy observes Origen's seeming inconsistency, acknowledges the possibility that he is discussing Christ's emergence from the womb rather than Mary's virginal integrity, and concludes that surviving texts do not definitively resolve the matter. Several authors take the tensions as an indication that Origen subscribed to the doctrine of Mary's postpartum virginity but rejected the doctrine of her virginity in partu with its demand for physical integrity (or that he did not address the question of virginity in partu at all): these include Koch, *Virgo Eva - Virgo Maria*, 67–72; Jouassard, "Marie à travers la patristique," 81–82; and Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*, 184–186.

<sup>6</sup>In *Commentary on John* 1.4, Origen states that those who think rightly say Mary had no other children; a fragment of the same commentary and *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17 both claim that Jesus's siblings were children of Joseph and an earlier wife, not biological children of Mary (in the latter commentary he cites a book attributed to James, probably the *Protevangelium of James*, as a source for this tradition). The same explanation appears in *Homilies on Luke* 7.4.

proceeding with ordinary human sexual intercourse afterward; he seems to think that being filled with the Holy Spirit to conceive Christ would naturally lead Mary to preserve her virginity.<sup>7</sup> Origen concurs with some contemporary or previous thinkers in designating Mary the “first-fruits of virginity” among women, just as her son occupies this role among men; the two are inaugural and potentially paradigmatic figures for Christian celibacy, a growing practice with increasing significance in Origen’s time and locales.<sup>8</sup> Another passage in the same commentary summarizes a legendary account in which the priest Zechariah approves of Mary praying in a place at the Jerusalem Temple reserved for virgins, even though she has already given birth.<sup>9</sup> Throughout, Origen makes it clear that virginity either is or entails abstinence from sexual activity, and he attaches a rich range of moral qualities and theological concepts to the sexually virginal state.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, Origen states that Christ “opened the womb” of his mother at his birth. He says this in the fourteenth of his *Homilies on Luke*, likely written during the 230s CE.<sup>11</sup> These homilies survive primarily in a Latin translation by Jerome from around the year 390, though fragments in Greek also survive; modern translations rely on Jerome’s Latin.<sup>12</sup> In homily 14, Origen discusses Luke 2:21–24 and addresses the question of why Jesus’s birth necessitated procedures for purification. The passage from Luke relates that after the set amount of time required by Mosaic Law, Jesus was taken to Jerusalem to be presented before the Lord, and the prescribed sacrifice was offered for “their” purification—implying, Origen says, that Christ as well as Mary needed to be purified, a need Origen explains as a cleansing of “stain” inherent to human embodiment and distinct from the cleansing of sin. Luke 2:23 quotes biblical legal texts that attribute sacred status to firstborn male offspring, those who “open

<sup>7</sup>Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17; and see Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 7.

<sup>8</sup>Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 10.17, in Origen, *Commentaire sur l'évangile selon Matthieu*, ed. and trans. Robert Girod, Sources Chrétiennes (hereafter cited as SC) 162 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1970), 216. English translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

<sup>9</sup>This passage can be found in the critical text of Erich Klostermann, ed., *Origenes Matthäuserklärung II: Die lateinische Übersetzung der Commentariorum Series*, Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller (hereafter cited as GCS), vol. 38, Origenes Werke 11 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1933), 42–43; or in Cipriano Vagaggini, *Maria nelle opere di Origene* (Rome: Pontificum Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1942), 192–193. For this passage, Klostermann provides a Latin text with Greek fragments; Vagaggini has Latin only.

<sup>10</sup>For a fuller discussion of the moral qualities and theological concepts Origen attaches to the virginal state, consult Henri Crouzel, *Virginité et mariage selon Origène* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963) and a forthcoming monograph by Amy K. Hughes based on her dissertation: Amy K. Hughes, “Chastely I Live for Thee: Virginity as Bondage and Freedom in Origen of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus, and Gregory of Nyssa” (PhD diss., Wheaton College, 2013).

<sup>11</sup>Many of Origen’s works were written during his years as a presbyter in Palestinian Caesarea (230s–240s CE). For concise information on proposed dates of composition, see Joseph T. Lienhard, introduction to Origen, *Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, Fathers of the Church 94 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), xxiv.

<sup>12</sup>See François Fournier, “Les Homélie sur Luc et leur traduction par saint Jérôme,” in Origen, *Homélie sur S. Luc; Texte latin et fragments grecs*, ed. and trans. Henri Crouzel, François Fournier, and Pierre Périchon, 2nd ed., SC 87 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1998), 78–79; and Lienhard, introduction to *Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke*, xxxii–xxxvi. Many of Origen’s works survive solely through the Latin translations produced by Jerome or by Rufinus of Aquileia.

the womb” of mothers.<sup>13</sup> Other texts of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament use similar expressions for God’s control over human fertility: women become able or unable to conceive and bear children as God “opens” or “closes” their womb.<sup>14</sup> The Latin translation of Origen’s homily (14.7–8) reads:

“As it is written,” [scripture] says, “in the law of Moses, ‘Every male that opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord,’” and “Three times per year every male will appear in the sight of the Lord God.”<sup>15</sup> This means that males, because they opened the womb of a mother, were holy; they were offered before the altar of the Lord. It says, “Every male that opens the womb”; something [about this] sounds spiritual [in meaning]. For you might say that every male, [though] brought forth from the womb, does not open his mother’s womb in the same way as the Lord Jesus—since [it is] not the birth of an infant but sexual intercourse with a man [that] unlocks the womb of all women. Yet in fact, the womb of the Lord’s mother was unlocked at that moment when her offspring was issued, since before Christ’s nativity no male touched at all that holy womb, [which was] to be revered with all honor. I dare to say something: at the moment about which it is written, “The Spirit of God will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you,”<sup>16</sup> the beginning and conception of seed occurred, and without an unlocking of the womb, a new progeny grew within it.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Laws regarding male offspring that “open the womb” appear in Exodus 13:2, 13:12, 13:15, and 34:19 and in Numbers 3:12, 8:16, and 18:15; see also Ezekiel 20:26. The expression is clearly a reference to the birth of the offspring. While it is possible that the expression is a figure of speech describing fertility in a general way (see note 14), it may be that this verb for “open” or “open up/wide” is meant to describe the extreme cervical dilation and/or vaginal stretching that occur for the first time when firstborn offspring emerge from the uterus and birth canal.

<sup>14</sup>See Genesis 20:17–18, 29:31, 30:22; and 1 Samuel 1:1–6. For related expressions about opening or closed wombs, see Job 3:10–11 and Isaiah 66:9 (the latter has greater variation between Hebrew and other ancient versions). Here, too, it is clear that opened wombs are fertile ones while closed wombs do not conceive or bear—and it is possible, but unclear, that those using the expression envision a concrete change happening to internal organs. On references to “wombs” more generally, there are multiple ancient terms frequently translated as “womb” in English, some of which overlap with other parts of the body than the uterus (for instance, the vagina or the belly or the bosom and lap). In some ancient literature, such as medical texts, writers distinguish between different parts of the female reproductive system like the uterus, vagina, and vulva. Other texts are not so precise, and ancient biblical interpreters frequently treat diverse terms as flexible or interchangeable. I therefore treat differences between terms for “womb” as insignificant for our purposes here and allow each term to encompass more of the reproductive system than the organ we call the uterus.

<sup>15</sup>The first quotation is of Luke 2:23, which paraphrases the verses from Exodus 13 listed above (see also the passages from Numbers). The second quotes Exodus 23:17 or 34:23 (and see Deuteronomy 16:16).

<sup>16</sup>Luke 1:35.

<sup>17</sup>Translated from the Latin text provided in Origen, *Homélies sur S. Luc*, ed. Crouzel, Fournier, and Périchon, SC 87:226: “*Sicut scriptum est, inquit, in lege Moysi, quia omne masculinum, quod aperit vulvam, sanctum Domino vocabitur et: ter per annum apparebit omne masculinum in conspectu Domini Dei. Masculina, quae ex eo, quod vulvam matris aperuerunt, sancta erant, offerebantur ante altare Domini: omne, inquit masculinum, quod aperit vulvam, sacratum quippiam sonat. Quemcunque enim de utero effusum marem dixeris, non sic aperit vulvam matris suae ut Dominus Iesus, quia omnium mulierum non partus infantis, sed viri coitus vulvam reserat. Matris vero Domini eo tempore vulva reserata est, quo et partus editus, quia sanctum uterum et omni dignatione venerandum ante nativitatem Christi masculus omnino non tetigit. Audeo quid loqui, quia et in eo, quod scriptum est: Spiritus Dei veniet super te, et virtus*

Origen goes on to consider the sordid conditions of fetal development, developing the point that Christ shared in the impurity of human bodily life and thus underwent purification.<sup>18</sup> Scholars note the concrete physicality of this depiction—Christ growing in Mary’s innards, witnessing the inherent uncleanness of bodies, and unlocking Mary’s womb at the nativity—and draw comparisons with comments from Tertullian of Carthage, Origen’s older contemporary in Roman North Africa, who refuted some of his theological opponents by arguing that Christ was truly, concretely human and thus was born in an ordinary, messy way that destroyed the virginity of his mother.<sup>19</sup> Later ancient writers would teach that Mary’s childbearing was virginal *because* her womb miraculously remained closed.<sup>20</sup> How can Origen consider the postpartum Mary a virgin if he agrees with Tertullian’s assessment that Christ emerged from Mary in an ordinary way and thereby opened up her sex organs?

While many have concluded that Origen blatantly contradicts his other statements by writing this passage in homily 14, a more nuanced solution was first advanced in the mid-twentieth century by Cipriano Vagaggini and then disseminated by Henri Crouzel in the Sources Chrétienne edition of the homilies.<sup>21</sup> They, like other readers, take Origen’s womb-opening language as a reference to the tearing of Mary’s hymen tissue; they observe, however, that this does not necessarily mean her virginity is compromised. Rather, according to Vagaggini, Crouzel, and some recent readers, Origen defines Mary’s virginity by whether she has had sex, not by her physical integrity; he believes that Christ’s birth destroyed her physical virginity, but this is not the criterion he applies for rendering a verdict on her virginity as a whole.<sup>22</sup> Vagaggini’s solution is a step in the right direction, but it obscures the deeper difference that divides Origen (and many early Christian and non-Christian authors) from those who judged Mary virginal

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*Altissimi obumbrabit te, principium seminis et conceptus fuerit, et sine vulvae reseratione novus in utero foetus adoleverit.*” The text is also available in Max Rauer, ed. *Die Homilien zu Lukas in der Übersetzung des Hieronymus und die Griechischen Reste der Homilien und des Lukas-Kommentars*, GCS 49, Origenes Werke 9, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1959), 89–90.

<sup>18</sup>See analysis in Andrew S. Jacobs, “Sordid Bodies: Christ’s Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen’s Fourteenth Homily on Luke,” in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2013), 219–234.

<sup>19</sup>Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 23 (discussed below); see also Tertullian, *On the Flesh of Christ* 4 and Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.11, 4.21. For analysis, see Charlotte Radler, “The Dirty Physician: Necessary Dishonor and Fleshly Solidarity in Tertullian’s Writings,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63, no. 4 (2009): 345–368.

<sup>20</sup>Examples are numerous. Several references are gathered in Julia Kelto Lillis, “Who Opens the Womb? Fertility and Virginity in Patristic Texts,” in “Papers Presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2015,” vol. 7, “Health, Medicine, and Christianity in Late Antiquity” ed. Markus Vinzent, Jared Secord, Heidi Marx-Wolf, and Christoph Marksches, special issue, *Studia Patristica* 81 (2017): 187–201.

<sup>21</sup>Vagaggini, *Maria nelle opere di Origene*, 88–97; Henri Crouzel, “La théologie mariale d’Origène,” in Origen, *Homélie sur S. Luc*, ed. Crouzel, Fournier, and Périchon, SC 87:40–44.

<sup>22</sup>Those who reiterate Vagaggini or Crouzel’s interpretation or draw a similar conclusion include Walter J. Burghardt, “Mary in Eastern Patristic Thought,” in Carol, ed., *Mariology*, 2:105–107; Charles William Neumann, *The Virgin Mary in the Works of Saint Ambrose* (Fribourg: University Press, 1962), 131; Emmanuel Lanne, “Marian Doctrine and Piety up to the Council of Chalcedon: The Fathers and the Liturgy; Marian issues from an eastern perspective,” in *Studying Mary: Reflections on the Virgin Mary in Anglican and Roman Catholic Theology and Devotion*, ed. Adelbert Denaux and Nicholas Sagovsky (London: T & T Clark, 2007), 44; and cf. Jacobs, “Sordid Bodies,” 226.

or non-virginal on the basis of hymenal integrity. It fails to recognize ways that ancient thinkers could diverge in their understandings of women's bodies and instead perpetuates a distortion of Origen's reasoning that originated with Jerome's translating.

## II. Jerome's (Mistaken) Managing of Origen's Meaning

Modern Mariologists and other readers have noted similarities between the discussion of Mary's womb in Origen's homily and discussions by other early Christian writers, especially Tertullian (mentioned above) and Ambrose of Milan, a fourth-century Italian bishop who knew Origen's works well and whose views on Mary's lifelong virginity and Christian celibacy helped chart the course of subsequent thought and practice. Scholars who draw these comparisons rely on Jerome's Latin translation of Origen's words. While Jerome is generally regarded as a reliable translator of Origen's thought, he famously practiced a sense-for-sense rather than word-for-word approach in his translation projects.<sup>23</sup> This approach requires that a translator discern units of meaning within a text and attempt to convey them through clear expressions in the new language. Translating sense-for-sense often eliminates the ambiguity or flexibility of certain words and phrases from the original work, making it easy for a translator to suppress other potential meanings (intentionally or unintentionally).

Because of fourth- and sixth-century condemnations and the associated destruction of Origen's works, few of his writings survive in Greek, but fragments of Greek text do exist for some works that are extant in Latin. In the case of 14.7 in the *Homilies on Luke*, Jerome's Latin is not the sole surviving source. A few *catenae*—"chains" of patristic comments on biblical passages recorded in later manuscripts—preserve a Greek fragment that reads:

Therefore it was necessary for males, being holy because of opening a womb, to be offered to the Lord near the altar; and only Christ opened up a womb by being born from a virgin, for nothing else before Christ touched that holy womb; while the firstborn of all [parents], even though they are firstborn, still do not themselves open up the womb first, but the mate does.<sup>24</sup>

The varied forms such fragments take make it uncertain whether this brief version of the passage reflects Origen's own wording or is a condensed version of his thoughts.<sup>25</sup> Some catena fragments compress content into smaller units for transmission. Yet even

<sup>23</sup>See Jerome's *Letter 57* and a recent discussion of his translation theory in Matthew A. Kraus, *Jewish, Christian, and Classical Exegetical Traditions in Jerome's Translation of the Book of Exodus: Translation Technique and the Vulgate* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 45–49.

<sup>24</sup>Translated from the Greek given in Rauer, *Die Homilien zu Lukas*, GCS 49:89–90: "Τὰ οὖν ἀρσενικὰ ἄγια ὄντα ἅτε μήτραν ἀνοίγοντα ἔδει ἀναφέρεσθαι κυρίῳ παρὰ τῷ θυσιαστηρίῳ, μόνος δὲ Χριστὸς διήνοιξεν μήτραν ἐκ παρθένου τεχθεῖς: οὐδὲν γὰρ ἄλλο πρὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ τῆς μήτρας ἐκείνης τῆς ἱερᾶς ἦψατο: πάντων δὲ τὰ πρωτότοκα, εἰ καὶ πρωτότοκά ἐστιν, ἀλλ' οὐ διανοίγουσιν αὐτὰ πρῶτα τὴν μήτραν, ἀλλ' ὁ σύμβιος." A longer expansion on this fragment that was shown in the main text of Rauer's first edition appears inauthentic in its vocabulary and themes, and it was not included in the second edition.

<sup>25</sup>A helpful description of the form and complexities of *catenae* is available in Françoise Petit, "La chaîne grecque sur la Genèse, miroir de l'exégèse ancienne," in *Stimuli: Exegese und ihre Hermeneutik in Antike und Christentum; Festschrift für Ernst Dassmann*, ed. Georg Schöllgen and Clemens Scholten (Münster: Aschendorfsche, 1996), 243–244. Rauer notes in his critical edition that one of the manuscripts containing this passage reflects direct use of Origen's homilies as opposed to use of prior *catenae* only, but this does

if the Greek fragment is a paraphrase rather than verbatim, its differences from Jerome's Latin version suggest that Jerome's understanding of Origen's ideas was one interpretation among others, and perhaps a misleading one.

Examining the Greek and Latin versions side by side makes the differences apparent.

#### Greek Fragment for Origen's Passage

Therefore it was necessary for males, being holy because of opening a womb, to be offered to the Lord near the altar; and only Christ opened up a womb by being born from a virgin, for nothing else before Christ touched that holy womb; while the firstborn of all [parents], even though they are firstborn, still do not themselves open up the womb first, but the mate does.

#### Jerome's Latin Translation of Origen's Passage

"As it is written," [scripture] says, "in the law of Moses, 'Every male that opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord,'" and "Three times per year every male will appear in the sight of the Lord God." This means that males, because they opened the womb of a mother, were holy; they were offered before the altar of the Lord. It says, "Every male that opens the womb"; something [about this] sounds spiritual [in meaning]. For you might say that every male, [though] brought forth from the womb, does not open his mother's womb in the same way as the Lord Jesus—since [it is] not the birth of an infant but sexual intercourse with a man [that] unlocks the womb of all women. Yet in fact, the womb of the Lord's mother was unlocked at that moment when her offspring was issued, since before Christ's nativity no male touched at all that holy womb, [which was] to be revered with all honor. I dare to say something: at the moment about which it is written, "The Spirit of God will come over you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you," the beginning and conception of seed occurred, and without an unlocking of the womb, a new progeny grew within it.<sup>26</sup>

The Greek fragment makes brief, ambiguous statements. It contains a series of claims about Mary and Christ after the initial statement regarding holiness and offerings: Christ, and only Christ, opened a virgin's womb at his birth; nothing before him touched the "holy womb" of his mother; with all other firstborns, a mate opens the womb first. The Latin gives further material for each of these claims and presents them in a different order. Jerome has Origen say that no other male opened a mother's womb the way that Jesus did; that it is *sex with a man*, not childbirth, that *unlocks* women's wombs; that Mary's womb was *unlocked* during childbirth and not at conception; and that before this unlocking, no *male* touched that holy, *reverence-worthy* womb *at all*. If the Greek fragment represents Origen's words verbatim, Jerome has added explanation or emphasis to every claim. If the Greek summarizes Origen's original words, it is noteworthy that the summary leaves the meanings of the claims open and flexible in the places where Jerome directs readers' attention toward the notion of sexual defloration<sup>27</sup> and the condition of Mary's ultimately "unlocked" womb. Jerome may well have expanded Origen's Greek into a wordier Latin rendering, narrowing the range of potential meanings in the process.

not solve the question of whether the catena writer copied or condensed Origen's ideas: Rauer, introduction to *Die Homilien zu Lukas*, GCS 49: liv, lviii.

<sup>26</sup>Since Jerome's elaborations put the material in a different sequence than the Greek fragment does, it is unclear at what point he turns to subsequent homily content that is not reflected in the fragment.

<sup>27</sup>This crass term is inappropriate for describing virginity loss today, but it aptly describes some ancient notions about virginity, including the ideas that men destroy and women passively lose virginity and that this act lessens women's value and desirability. Since modern usage of the term often denotes or connotes hymenal rupture, I reserve it for ancient conceptualizations that involve hymens or other concrete, anatomical notions about virginity.



By the time Jerome translated homily 14 around 390 CE, he was familiar with works of Tertullian that discuss the nativity and with the *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke* written by Ambrose, who built on Origen's exegesis of this Gospel without hesitating to adapt or depart from Origen's ideas.<sup>28</sup> Like many readers today, Jerome seems to have read Origen's words through the lens of these other discussions. Tertullian writes the following in chapter 23 of his treatise *On the Flesh of Christ*:

[One could call Mary] a virgin in terms of a husband, [yet] not a virgin in terms of childbirth. . . . She became married during childbirth. For she became married by the law of the opened-up body. . . . The same sex [as a hypothetical husband] did the unsealing. Indeed, it is on account of this womb that it is written of others, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord." . . . Who so properly opened the womb as the one who opened up a closed one? Yet for everyone, marriage does the opening up. . . . She should be called "not a virgin" rather than "a virgin," who became a mother at a leap, in a way, before being a wife. . . . Since by this reasoning the apostle proclaimed that the Son of God was issued not from a virgin, but "from a woman," he recognized the [condition of Mary's] womb opened by the nuptial event.<sup>29</sup>

Ambrose, who in later works insists that Mary's womb remained virginally closed despite childbearing, uses the terminology of womb-opening in its biblical sense—to discuss fertility—in his *Exposition on Luke*, referring to the conception (rather than the birth) of Christ as an opening of Mary's womb.<sup>30</sup> Sections 2.56–57 say this of Mary's conceiving:

<sup>28</sup>Previous writings by Jerome indicate familiarity with a variety of Tertullian's works, including stances and themes regarding Mary's virginity and childbearing that appear in *On the Flesh of Christ* and *Against Marcion* (as shown in Jerome's *Against Helvidius*, written in the 380s); it is highly probable that he had encountered *On the Flesh of Christ* 23. On Jerome's knowledge and use of Tertullian's works more generally, see Pierre Petitmengin, "Saint Jérôme et Tertullien," in *Jérôme entre l'Occident et l'Orient: XVIe centenaire du départ de saint Jérôme de Rome et de son installation à Bethléem; Actes du colloque de Chantilly, septembre 1986*, ed. Yves-Marie Duval (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1988), 43–59. One of Jerome's comments in the preface to Origen's *Homilies on Luke* is widely taken as a reference to Ambrose's *Exposition of the Gospel According to Luke*, which circulated by the late 380s or beginning of the 390s; Jerome's negative evaluation of Ambrose in this and some other works does not preclude the possibility that Ambrose's text influenced Jerome's reading of Origen. See Fournier, "Les Homélie sur Luc," 65–92. For examples of Jerome borrowing from these authors in his compositions, see Neil Adkin, "Tertullian in Jerome (Epist. 22, 37, 1f.)," *Symbolae Osloenses* 68, no. 1 (1993): 129–143; Elizabeth A. Clark, "Dissuading from Marriage: Jerome and the Asceticization of Satire," in *Satiric Advice on Women and Marriage: From Plautus to Chaucer*, ed. Warren S. Smith (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 154–181. On Ambrose's use of sources in his *Exposition on Luke*, see Ambrose, *Traité sur l'Évangile de S. Luc: Livres I–VI*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Tissot, 2nd ed., SC 45 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1971), 15–18.

<sup>29</sup>Tertullian, *La chair du Christ*, ed. and trans. Jean-Pierre Mahé, SC 216 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1975), 302–304: "Virgo quantum a viro, non virgo quantum a partu. . . . In partu suo nupsit. Nam nupsit ipsa patefacti corporis lege. . . . Idem illud sexus resignavit. Haec denique vulva est propter quam et de aliis scriptum est: *Omne masculinum adaperiens vulvam sanctum vocabitur domino*. . . . Quis tam proprie vulvam adaperuit quam qui clausam patefecit? Ceterum omnibus nuptiae patefaciant. . . . Magis non virgo dicenda est quam virgo, saltu quodam mater antequam nupta. . . . Cum hac ratione apostolus non ex virgine sed ex muliere editum dei filium pronuntiavit, agnovit adapertae vulvae nuptialem passionem."

<sup>30</sup>The observation that Ambrose's phrases about womb-opening in the *Exposition on Luke* refer to conception, not birth, is highlighted in Neumann, *Virgin Mary*, 113–138.

“Every male opening a womb will be called holy to the Lord”; for the Virgin’s childbirth was promised in the words of the Law. And he [was] truly holy, since [he was] immaculate. Then the words repeated by the angel in the same way declare him to be the one who is designated by the Law: [scripture] says, “Because the [infant] that will be born will be called holy, the Son of God”; for no sex with a man unlocked the hidden places of the virgin’s womb, but the Holy Spirit poured immaculate seed into her inviolable uterus. In fact, the holy Lord Jesus was unique among all born of a woman—he who by the novelty of an immaculate birth did not experience the pollution of earthly corruption and [indeed] banished [it] with heavenly majesty. . . . He alone opened the womb for himself . . . so that he [later] went out [from it] immaculate.<sup>31</sup>

While Tertullian and Ambrose focus on two different moments in Mary’s reproductive experiences (birth or conception) and diverge over whether Mary remained a virgin during and after childbirth, they share other things in common. Both engage with the same biblical expression about womb-opening that Origen does, and both claim that the expression applies to Christ in a unique way. Each explains this claim by specifying that womb-opening ordinarily entails a male sex partner destroying a female virgin’s virginity; in doing so, they exhibit a shared set of beliefs about virgins’ bodies and virginity loss, and they each direct a reader’s attention to the concrete condition of Mary’s sex organs. Tertullian says that “for everyone [else], marriage does the opening-up” of the womb that Christ did in Mary’s case. He argues that after delivering, Mary should be considered married rather than virginal on the basis of her womb being opened by her son; in this passage, Tertullian makes virginity itself a matter of whether female sex organs remain closed and intact or permanently opened.<sup>32</sup> Ambrose’s picture of sex and virginal anatomy is similar: Christ’s causation of his own conception in Mary’s uterus is contrasted with the “unlocking” that a man would have performed upon Mary’s organs in sexual intercourse. As for the condition of her organs, Tertullian invites readers to ponder the “nuptial” effects of Christ’s birth on Mary’s previously “closed” genitals, while Ambrose describes her uterus as “inviolable” when the Holy Spirit is inseminating her.

It is highly likely that these passages by Tertullian and Ambrose informed Jerome’s understanding of Origen’s *Homilies on Luke* 14.7–8.<sup>33</sup> For each succinct and ambiguous

<sup>31</sup>Ambrose, *Traité sur l’Évangile de S. Luc*, ed. Tissot, SC 45:97–98: “*Omne masculinum adaperiens vulvam sanctum domino vocabitur*; verbis enim legis promittebatur virginis partus. Et vere sanctus, quia immaculatus. Denique ipsum esse qui lege signetur in eundem modum ab angelo repetita verba declarant: *quia quod nascetur inquit sanctum vocabitur filius dei*. Non enim virilis coitus vulvae virginalis secreta reseravit, sed immaculatum semen inviolabili utero spiritus sanctus infudit; solus enim per omnia ex natis de femina sanctus dominus Iesus, qui terranae contagia corruptelae immaculati partus novitate non senserit et caelesti maiestate depulerit. . . . Hic ergo solus aperuit sibi vulvam . . . ut immaculatus exiret.”

<sup>32</sup>Tertullian utilizes multiple definitions for virginity in his works. In one treatise alone (*On the Veiling of Virgins*), he draws on more than one common ancient meaning of the category “virgin,” often using it to designate marital singleness but also using it to designate young age and innocence from sexual awareness or desire; see especially *On the Veiling of Virgins* 11–12. Many have rightly observed that his remarks on Mary qualifying as both a “virgin” and a “woman” in *On the Veiling of Virgins* conflicts with his comments about her virginity and womanhood in *On the Flesh of Christ*.

<sup>33</sup>It is certain that Jerome had recently read Ambrose’s commentary and likely that he also knew this exact passage of Tertullian’s, though the similarities could be adequately explained through his familiarity with Ambrose’s passage alone. Tertullian’s passage spells out even more clearly and startlingly the anatomical conceptualizing of virginity that Ambrose and Jerome gradually came to utilize in their own works, regardless of whether they owed these ideas to Tertullian’s expression of them in *On the Flesh of Christ*.

Greek statement found in the surviving fragment, Jerome provides a longer Latin version with ideas and phrasing that resemble those of Tertullian and Ambrose. Where the Greek says that only Christ opened a womb by being born from a virgin—a statement that could refer to the uniqueness of the way Christ opened a mother's womb or simply to the uniqueness of his birth from a virgin—Jerome specifies that this was a unique manner of womb-opening, for sex with a man normally unlocks women's wombs before childbirth. Both Tertullian and Ambrose refer to sexual intercourse as the universal mechanism for womb-opening, and each adds a verb to those used for "opening" and "opening up" in the biblical texts: Tertullian adds the term "unseal" in his discussion, and Ambrose uses "unlock." Where the Greek relays simply that Christ opened up a womb by being born—a biblical expression for birth in general—Jerome states that Mary's womb was not "unlocked" when she conceived, but was in fact "unlocked" when her child emerged; use of this verb in place of the term for "opening" or "opening up" which is found in Luke 2:23 reinforces the idea that genital penetration changes female anatomy from a closed state to an open state.<sup>34</sup> Where the Greek refers to Mary's womb being virginal because "nothing" touched it before Christ did, Jerome specifies that no "male" touched her womb at all and that her womb was "to be revered with all honor" (possibly a reference to Joseph's reverent abstinence toward Mary's body).<sup>35</sup> This once again prompts readers to think of womb-opening as the task of a male sex partner. Jerome's translation reflects the anatomical conceptualizing of virginity seen in Tertullian and Ambrose, where female virgins have a closed-off reproductive system until genital penetration opens their bodies and ends their virginity. The general vocabulary and open-ended claims of the Greek fragment suggest that Origen's original statements were less specific.

When a modern reader encounters Jerome's version without another for comparison, it is easy to assume that resemblances between Origen's, Tertullian's, and Ambrose's works reflect a strong similarity between Origen's own statements and those of the Latin authors. As the analysis above indicates, it is more probable that Jerome had Tertullian's and Ambrose's ideas in mind as he translated Origen's homily. The places where Jerome's Latin diverges from the extant Greek are the same places where he employs notions and terms used by Tertullian and Ambrose to discuss Mary's womb and virginal status. The liberties Jerome took in his translating foreclose other interpretations of Origen's statements and are probably misleading. To better understand Origen's phrases about offspring and sex partners who open wombs, one can explore the meanings of such language in sources from Origen's cultural environment and his own reading material. In the next sections, I show that this exploration yields meanings that are more plausible than Jerome's and that cohere with Origen's other comments on Mary, virginity, and fertility.

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An overview of the emergence of this reasoning in Ambrose's and Jerome's works appears in Lillis, "Who Opens the Womb?," 197–198.

<sup>34</sup>The Greek term in Luke 2:23 and in Exodus 13 (LXX) is *διανοίγω* (perhaps meaning "open up"), and in some related passages, *ἀνοίγω* ("open") is used. Jerome's Latin quotation and the Vulgate read *aperio* ("open"), though one might expect *adaperio* ("open wide"), the verb Tertullian uses in his quotation of the same verses (as the passage above shows, Tertullian's comments use both *adaperio* and *patefacio* as well as the further verb *resigno*). Ambrose and Jerome's verb for "unlock" is *resero*, which does not come from the scripture passages.

<sup>35</sup>See Jerome's claims and speculations about Joseph's sexual abstinence in *Against Helvidius* 8 and 19. Jerome may also be intensifying the sense of reverence here to counterbalance the subsequent mention of Mary's unclean innards. Ambrose's works emphasize the present imperative to revere Mary's womb.

### III. Expressions about Womb-Opening and Ancient Hellenistic Assumptions about Female Anatomy

The correlation Tertullian and Ambrose drew between a “closed” womb and preserved sexual virginity was an innovation. Prior to the late fourth century CE, Mediterranean or Near Eastern evidence for belief in a hymenal barricade or virginal “seal” is extremely rare.<sup>36</sup> Stories about virginity tests, literary innuendos and slang, depictions of violence against virgins—none of this extant material contains strong evidence for a belief that virgins have distinctive genital anatomy. Only in very late antiquity do sources indicate a widespread investment in the idea that sexual virginity and virginity loss can be perceived in women’s bodies. Tertullian is the earliest writer to describe virginity as a state of genital closure prior to irreversible genital opening, and over a century and a half passed before other writers followed.<sup>37</sup> While it is possible that Origen encountered the comments or concepts of Tertullian regarding Mary’s womb, his works give no indication that he had heard of the new meanings for “closed” and “opened” wombs used by his Carthaginian contemporary.<sup>38</sup>

A different set of assumptions about female anatomy can be gleaned from the wealth of medical texts surviving from antiquity and from other sources described below. Medical writers assume that normal vaginas are unobstructed passageways. Medical texts and magical images depict the womb as something that naturally opens and shuts during fertility cycles and in the processes of conception, gestation, and parturition. Beyond medicine, Alexandrian authors like Philo and Clement link the idea of womb-opening with fertility, not with loss of virginity. References to wombs opening and shutting appear in sources spanning several centuries before Origen’s time and continue to appear in later antiquity, despite the rise of references to “closed” wombs

<sup>36</sup>The second-century physician Soranus of Ephesus described and then disproved the theory that virginal women have a membrane (*hymen*) that grows across the vagina and breaks during first coitus (*Gynecology* 1.17). Soranus’s location in Rome suggests that someone in Rome—whether fellow doctors, midwives, or members of the population at large—had begun to think of hymen tissue as a virginal barricade. Aside from the two Christian sources mentioned in note 37, this is the only surviving evidence for belief in hymens prior to the late fourth century. Scholars mistakenly conflate the notion of a hymen with other notions about virginity that occasionally appear in ancient sources, such as the observation that beginning to have sex may cause light bleeding, and have wrongly assumed that we can use later periods’ practices to explain early sources. Examples of ancient sources which have been misinterpreted in this way include passages in the Dead Sea Scrolls and a scene in the *Protevangelium of James*, both of which seem at first glance to describe gynecological tests for sexual virginity.

<sup>37</sup>The only definite exception is the bishop Cyprian of Carthage, who wrote a letter in the mid-third century that recommends enlisting midwives to verify particular women’s virginity through gynecological examination. This is the first clear evidence for gynecological virginity testing in antiquity. The next comes from Christian sources written in the final decades of the fourth century. It appears that this testing practice and the accompanying beliefs about virgins’ perceptibly closed genitals arose in Carthage before it arose in other parts of the Mediterranean world, perhaps with writers drawing on notions emerging in some circles in Rome (see previous note) and perhaps motivated by the special status accorded to female virgins in the Christian community at Carthage (a status that Tertullian seeks to regulate in his treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins*).

<sup>38</sup>Many scholars have discussed whether Origen was familiar with Tertullian’s comments on Mary’s opened womb. He most likely was not; if he was, he proceeded in a different direction with his own reasoning. Both were engaging with content from the Gospel of Luke and earlier biblical material about womb-opening, and the seeming similarities in the surviving Latin reflect Jerome’s knowledge, not Origen’s knowledge, of Tertullian’s works.

among Christians and a growing belief that virgins' vaginas are sealed shut unless or until penetration opens them.<sup>39</sup>

Beginning with the Hippocratic writings of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, ancient physicians recorded their knowledge of female bodies and reproductive health, writing about both virgins and mature women.<sup>40</sup> Hymen tissue is strikingly absent in the detailed anatomical and therapeutic schemata of gynecological authors.<sup>41</sup> These authors discuss only pathological instances of membranes covering vaginas,<sup>42</sup> and they explain the bleeding and pain often associated with sexual initiation as the release of menstrual blood trapped further inside the body or as the rupture of vessels that stitch together the walls of the vagina itself.<sup>43</sup> The hymen's status in today's medicine as a highly variable and functionless byproduct of fetal development might help today's readers imagine how groups of people who observed hymen tissue could see it as an

<sup>39</sup>The awkward fit between longstanding medical models for female anatomy and the emerging notion of the hymen is especially evident with a passage from a seventh-century Alexandrian medical commentary: here Stephanus of Athens makes the first extant attempt to reconcile hymenal and traditional medical models for virgins' anatomy (*Hippocratic Aphorisms* 5.63). See Caroline Musgrove, "Debating Virginité in the Late Alexandrian School of Medicine," in ed. Vinzent, Secord, Marx-Wolf, special issue, and Marksches, *Studia Patristica* 81 (2017): 203–216.

<sup>40</sup>Helpful studies on ancient gynecological knowledge and on doctors' and midwives' tasks, tools, and access to women's and girls' bodies include Helen King, *Hippocrates' Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece* (London: Routledge, 1998); Rebecca Flemming, *Medicine and the Making of Roman Women: Gender, Nature, and Authority from Celsus to Galen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); G. E. R. Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology: Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 62–86; Lesley Ann Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994); Ann Ellis Hanson, "A Division of Labor: Roles for Men in Greek and Roman Births," *Thamyris* 1 no. 2 (Autumn 1994): 157–202; Ralph Jackson, "Roman Doctors and Their Instruments: Recent Research into Ancient Practice," *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 3 (1990): 5–27; and Valerie French, "Midwives and Maternity Care in the Ancient World," *Helios* 13, no. 2 (1986): 69–84.

<sup>41</sup>On the absence of the hymen in Greek medical reasoning, see Giulia Sissa, *Greek Virginité*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), esp. 105–123; Giulia Sissa, "Maidenhood without Maidenhead: the Female Body in Ancient Greece," in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 339–364; Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science*, 47–55; and Kathleen Coyne Kelly, *Performing Virginité and Testing Chastity in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2000), 22–28.

<sup>42</sup>Problematic genital membranes are discussed in various ancient biological and medical works spanning multiple periods. These include Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 4.4.773a, Celsus, *On Medicine* 7.28, and Aetius of Amida, *Gynecology* 51 and 96 (with different numbering in some editions, also known as *Tetrabiblion* 16.51 and 96). Ann Ellis Hanson argued in a past work that the uterus was considered "sealed" before sexual initiation in popular Greek thought of earlier antiquity, but this sealing barricade would be at the mouth of the uterus not the vagina: Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Medical Writers' Woman," in *Before Sexuality*, ed. Halperin, Winkler, and Zeitlin, 309–337.

<sup>43</sup>Hippocratic authors describe pent-up menstrual blood causing problems within the body, as seen in the text *Diseases of Young Girls*, discussed below, a Greek text and English translation of which are available in Rebecca Flemming and Ann Ellis Hanson, "Hippocrates' *Peri Partheniôn* ('Diseases of Young Girls'): *Text and Translation*," *Early Science and Medicine* 3, no. 3 (August 1998): 241–252. Soranus reasons that the vagina is lined with small blood vessels that rupture when vaginal tissue is stretched out by sexual intercourse for the first time (*Gynecology* 1.16–17); he assumes that virgins or their healthcare providers can already see or reach the uterus to assess its position and condition (1.34–35).

insignificant feature of the genital landscape, rather than a membrane or body part in its own right.<sup>44</sup>

In Hippocratic medical texts, the female reproductive system does not change from a state of closure to a state of openness in a one-time step of sexual intercourse but changes gradually from a virginal state to a womanly one; meanwhile, the uterus opens and shuts cyclically. The womb's mouth (often a reference to the cervical os) opens to allow menses to exit, semen to enter, or a child to be born, and it closes during pregnancy, illness, and at ordinary points in the fertility cycle when the womb does not receive seed for conception.<sup>45</sup> In a virginal young woman, both a closed uterine mouth and the compact, cramped tissues, veins, and pathways within the body can lead to health problems, and her whole system may need therapeutic intervention in order to become open for healthy menstruation and gestation. The Hippocratic treatise *Diseases of Young Girls* portrays puberty as a time of danger for many girls and prescribes speedy marriage so that sex and childbirth can create outlets for the excess blood that exerts pressure on girls' organs and threatens their sanity,<sup>46</sup> stating: "If they become pregnant, they become healthy."<sup>47</sup> Other texts describe warming and moistening effects of penile-vaginal intercourse that help the uterine mouth to open or close at appropriate times.<sup>48</sup> Helpful effects of sex, pregnancy, and childbirth include gradual dilation and straightening of interior veins and channels and the breaking down of compact surrounding flesh into a spongier texture that allows for greater flow of fluids.<sup>49</sup>

Beliefs in hymenless vaginas and repeatedly opening/closing uteri continued well beyond the classical period in Greek and Latin medical works, and they extended

<sup>44</sup>For example, see the description given in Henry Gray, *Gray's Anatomy: The Anatomical Basis of Clinical Practice*, 40th ed., ed. Susan Standring (Edinburgh: Elsevier, 2008), 1281. Medical experts have questioned the possibility of verifying occurrences of sexual activity, trauma, or abuse through professional examination of hymen tissue; see, for instance, Diane F. Merritt, "Vulvar and Genital Trauma in Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology," *Current Opinion in Obstetrics and Gynecology* 16, no. 5 (October 2004): 371–381; Jim Anderst, Nancy Kellogg, and Inkyung Jung, "Reports of Repetitive Penile-Genital Penetration Often Have No Definitive Evidence of Penetration," *Pediatrics* 124, no. 3 (September 2009): 403–409; and A. A. Hegazy and M. O. Al-Rukban, "Hymen: Facts and Conceptions," *theHealth* 3, no. 4 (December 2012): 109–115. The World Health Organization has called for an end to virginity testing: "Eliminating Virginity Testing: An Interagency Statement," (Geneva: World Health Organization, 2018), <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/eliminating-virginity-testing-interagency-statement/en/>.

<sup>45</sup>On the processes described in this paragraph, consult King, *Hippocrates' Woman*, chap. 1 (esp. 27–35) and 70–72 (and see 140–141); Ann Ellis Hanson, "Conception, Gestation and the Origin of Female Nature in the *Corpus Hippocraticum*," *Helios* 19, no. 1 (1992): 31–71; Ann Ellis Hanson, "The Hippocratic *Parthenos* in Sickness and Health," in *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body*, ed. Bonnie MacLachlan and Judith Fletcher (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 40–65; and Dean-Jones, *Women's Bodies in Classical Greek Science*, 47–109, 125–129. See also the assumptions about fertility, open wombs, and bodily pathways that can be inferred from Hippocratic pharmacology: Laurence M. V. Totelin, *Hippocratic Recipes: Oral and Written Transmission of Pharmacological Knowledge in Fifth- and Fourth-Century Greece* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 197–219.

<sup>46</sup>Flemming and Hanson, "Hippocrates' *Peri Partheniōn* ('Diseases of Young Girls')," 241, 252. The title is often translated as *Diseases of Virgins*.

<sup>47</sup>As translated by Flemming and Hanson, "Hippocrates' *Peri Partheniōn* ('Diseases of Young Girls')," 252.

<sup>48</sup>Pertinent passages from the Hippocratic work *Diseases of Women 1* and a two-part text known as *Generating Seed/Nature of the Child* are given in English in Ann Ellis Hanson, "Hippocrates: *Diseases of Women 1*," *Signs* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1975): 567–584.

<sup>49</sup>For an example, see *Diseases of Women 1.1*.

beyond medical literature to other types of sources. The second-century physicians Soranus and Galen exhibited these beliefs,<sup>50</sup> as did several Byzantine physicians.<sup>51</sup> Texts of other kinds, such as Clement of Alexandria's late second-century *Pedagogue*, include descriptions of the womb opening, shutting, and opening again.<sup>52</sup> Amulets and magic spells recovered from Egypt and elsewhere seek to close, open, lock, or unlock a woman's uterus to cause events such as pregnancy or miscarriage, sometimes showing images of wombs with keys or locks to represent the reversible states of opening and closure that correlate with different states of fertility.<sup>53</sup> A third-century Greek writer living in Alexandria and Caesarea would likely have shared the common assumptions that a woman—even a virginal one—has a hymenless vagina and a uterus that both opens and shuts.

Patterns in ancient biblical interpretation heighten the probability that Origen understood phrases about womb-opening as references to conception and birth and not to an effect of first coitus. Many early Jewish and Christian interpreters took biblical expressions about "opened" or "closed" wombs in ways the biblical texts themselves suggest: as references to fertility or infertility.<sup>54</sup> Aside from the single passage by Tertullian, no surviving Christian work correlates "closed" wombs with virginity and "opened" wombs with virginity loss until the late fourth and early fifth centuries when this correlation suddenly becomes ubiquitous. Instead, earlier authors treat God and offspring (not a male sex partner) as the agents who perform womb-opening.<sup>55</sup>

Unlike most of these early authors, Origen does consider the role of a mate in this "opening" act.<sup>56</sup> He was preceded in this by the Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria, whose allegorical writings exerted a great influence on his exegesis.<sup>57</sup> At first glance, readers could easily mistake Philo's comment on husbands' womb-opening as a reference to rupture of the hymen, but a closer reading reveals that it refers to men's ability to cause conception. Philo says in two different works that "to open the womb is characteristic of a husband"; in both, he reflects on God's control over human fertility in

<sup>50</sup>Soranus, *Gynecology* 1.43–44; Galen, *On the Natural Faculties* 3.3; and Galen, *On the Use of Parts* 14.3.

<sup>51</sup>For instance, the idea that the womb opens and closes is seen throughout Aetius of Amida's *Gynecology* (also known as *Tetrabiblion* 16), and the notion of a hymen is absent in this work.

<sup>52</sup>Clement of Alexandria, *The Pedagogue* 2.10.92–93.

<sup>53</sup>Jean-Jacques Aubert, "Threatened Wombs: Aspects of Ancient Uterine Magic," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1989): 421–449, esp. 425–443, 446; Ann Ellis Hanson, "Uterine Amulets and Greek Uterine Medicine," *Medicina nei secoli* 7, no. 2 (April 1995): 281–299. For one of the late ancient examples, see Ralph Jackson, *Doctors and Diseases in the Roman Empire* (London: British Museum Publications, 1988), 106. On Byzantine amulets, see Gary Vikan, "Art, Medicine, and Magic in Early Byzantium," in "Symposium on Byzantine Medicine," ed. John Scarborough, special issue, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 38 (1984): 65–86; and Jeffrey Spier, "Medieval Byzantine Magical Amulets and Their Tradition," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56 (1993): 25–62. The association of (in)fertility with the idea of wombs closing and opening appears in ancient non-Hellenistic sources as well, such as in early Mesopotamian medicine.

<sup>54</sup>Refer to section one above for the biblical passages that use these expressions.

<sup>55</sup>See the sources collected in Lillis, "Who Opens the Womb?" As discussed briefly in section one, when applied to God, the expression refers to divine control over women's abilities to conceive and bear children; when applied to offspring, the expression refers to emergence from the reproductive system at birth.

<sup>56</sup>The biblical passages refer variously to animal or human offspring or both, and Origen's reference to a "mate" leaves more room for human-animal similarity than do references to men/husbands in the Latin texts cited above.

<sup>57</sup>Regarding Philo's influence on Origen, see especially David T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 157–183.

biblical texts and asks what role human husbands play, given this divine agency.<sup>58</sup> He reasons that the womb (of the body or of the soul) is granted conception by God, but it brings forth children to or for a husband (whether for a literal husband or for the mind or virtuous person that impregnates the soul to make it fruitful). For him, just as for biblical authors, womb-opening—even by a husband—refers not to female virginity loss, but to a man’s ability to make his wife conceive.<sup>59</sup>

In homilies on sections of Genesis and of Numbers, Origen understands womb-opening expressions as references to fertility.<sup>60</sup> Judging by extant evidence of how ancient writers used or interpreted such expressions, nothing in his Hellenistic heritage would prompt him to make the leap that Tertullian made to equating a closed womb with virginity and an opened womb with defloration.<sup>61</sup> Like many others of his time, Origen was probably unfamiliar with the notion of a vaginal hymen for virgins. Like Clement, he most likely subscribed to the medical and popular belief that the female reproductive system opens and shuts. Like Philo, he took the scriptural phrase “opening the womb” to describe fertility, not destruction of a virginal barrier, in his exegetical writings. In contrast to Tertullian and later authors who discussed whether Mary’s hymen ruptured during childbirth and who considered the implications of her hymen’s condition for her status as a virgin, Origen discussed her opened womb without any reference to hymens whatsoever. In his conceptual framework for the female body, this membrane did not exist. His comments about Mary’s womb invoke not the anatomical question that occupied later thinkers, but ideas about fertility that were already commonplace.

#### IV. Origen’s (Un)original Statements about Christ and Mary’s Womb

In *Homilies on Luke* 14.7–8, Origen makes claims about Mary and Christ that are consistent with his comments elsewhere about her ongoing virginity. This becomes clear when his comments are read in light of the common exegetical patterns and physiological assumptions discussed above instead of through the lens of anatomical reasoning about virginity that Jerome brought with him when he translated the sermon. In this section, I offer meanings for the content preserved or summarized in the Greek homily fragment that cohere with Origen’s cultural environment and with his statements about Mary’s virginity in other works.

The first claim Origen makes in this passage is that “only Christ opened up a womb by being born from a virgin.” This does not mean that Christ alone opened a womb at his birth; other offspring do this too, and Origen may attach to the biblical expression any number of exact or inexact images for what the physical “opening up” of delivery entails (for example, the uterine mouth opening wide in cervical dilation or the vagina stretching wide around an infant). Rather, Christ is unique in doing this womb-opening *by being born from a virgin*. He alone exits the womb of a

<sup>58</sup>Philo, *On the Cherubim* 13.46, in *Philo: Volume II*, trans. F. H. Colson, G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library 227 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 36; and Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 2.13.46–48, in *Philo: Volume I*, Loeb Classical Library 226 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929), 254, see also 3.63.180–181, pp. 422–424.

<sup>59</sup>For other examples of Philo’s understanding of the biblical expression, see *On the Birth of Abel and the Sacrifices Offered by Him and Cain* 27.89, 31.102–32.106, 36.118; and *On the Change of Names* 23.130–25.144, 44.255.

<sup>60</sup>Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 3.2.1, 3.4.1; and Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 6.3.

<sup>61</sup>On how Tertullian may have come to make this leap, see note 37 above. On the term “defloration,” see note 27.



woman who has never had sex. Origen's second statement, "for nothing else before Christ touched that holy womb," explains what made Mary a virgin: no sexual contact compromised her virginal status before Christ's birth. Since birth is a naturally womb-opening event but not a sexual one, vaginal contact with her son poses no threat to Mary's virginity.

Origen goes on to say that other firstborns, "even though they are firstborn, still do not themselves open up the womb first, but the mate does." Other firstborn children are born after a mate causes conception through sexual intercourse—male sex partners "open" the womb in the sense of imparting fertility to it, and this terminates virginity because fertility is imparted through sexual contact. In ordinary cases, female fertility is caused by the same penile-vaginal intercourse that ends female virginity. Because Mary's fertility sprang from divine action and not a human mate, her womb is still "a virgin's" womb throughout pregnancy and parturition, and Christ is thus the only firstborn child whose womb-opening birth is from a virgin.

As he points out that mates and not offspring open wombs "first," Origen appears to have in mind both of the biblical meanings for expressions about womb-opening: to open the womb is to cause conception and to open up the womb is to emerge at birth. In biblical texts, only God opens wombs in the first sense—hence the need for Philo to work out a role for human husbands. Origen attributes Christ's conception to divine causation yet may have taken his cue from Philo in mentioning that mates (not just God) ordinarily perform one kind of womb-opening prior to the kind that offspring do at birth. It is possible Origen subscribed to ideas worked out at length in medical writings about husbands' sexual agency coaxing open the uterine mouth and initiating an opening up of pathways in the female reproductive system; even if he did not, his reference to mates opening wombs makes good sense alongside Philo's engagement with the biblical expression, which extends God's conception-causing agency to human men. Meanwhile, popular and medical beliefs of the time taught that women's wombs have a mouth that opens and shuts in a natural cycle and in response to sexual, magical, or therapeutic interventions. Womb-opening is not a one-time act performed upon a virgin, but a repeatable process.

Overall, Origen's point about Christ and Mary's opened womb is that Christ alone was born from a mother who had not experienced sex. The opening of Mary's womb in conception and birth posed no threat to her virginal status, for according to the dominant model for women's anatomy in Mediterranean antiquity, virgins' vaginas are unobstructed, and wombs can open and shut. Jerome's version of Origen's point is different. His translation of *Homilies on Luke* 14.7–8 conveys that Christ alone came from an innately closed womb that had not been permanently unsealed by defloration. Where Origen employs a traditional Greek model for female anatomy, Jerome draws on an innovative model with a Roman pedigree, one that imagined hymen tissue to be a barricade for the vagina and a potential indicator of sexual purity. Early Christian writers who reasoned about Mary's virginity worked not with uniform definitions, but with multiple ones, with differences as fundamental as the question of what body parts women possess.

## V. Conclusion

Modern readers share with Jerome the difficulty of apprehending past discourses about virginity, especially discourses that predate the late ancient discursive shift toward making virginity perceptible and anatomical. For centuries since then, medical, theological, and popular discourses have anatomized virginity in the concept of a hymen, though its

conceptualization as a discrete body part and a marker of sexual virginity is now widely contested and was contested in multiple past periods.<sup>62</sup> In Origen's day, a hymenal model for virgins' anatomy and belief in the bodily perceptibility of female virginity were still unusual; other models and beliefs predominated. The twentieth-century "solution" to the supposed contradiction in Origen's thought was correct in asserting that he defines virginity as sexual inexperience and not hymenal intactness, but it was incorrect in assuming that hymenal intactness was part of every early Christian author's conceptual world, including Origen's. Against a backdrop of common Hellenistic notions concerning the female reproductive system, Origen's ideas look quite ordinary, and his comments about Mary's fertility and virginity cohere without difficulty.

This study of Origen's reasoning and scholars' misconstrual of it has underscored differences between ancient thinkers. It also necessitates caveats for generalizations about the faithfulness of translators and the (in)coherence expected of thinkers. Although scholars of early Christianity have widely renounced past generations' automatic suspicion of Rufinus of Aquileia and preference for Jerome as transmitters of Origen's thought, there remains a general confidence that one can trust Jerome to have taken great care with Origen's words and ideas.<sup>63</sup> Even a careful translator can lead later readers astray. Jerome may have thought that he was accurately representing or elaborating on Origen's reasoning, but his own understanding of Origen's homily was influenced by a shift in virginity discourse anticipated (and perhaps precipitated) by Tertullian and catalyzed by both Ambrose and Jerome as they each engaged in controversies and turned to Mary's closed womb as symbol and support for their positions.<sup>64</sup> Origen himself, while not responsible for the contradiction later readers have ascribed to him regarding Mary's opened womb, does appear to have drawn two

<sup>62</sup>On recent cautions against using hymen tissue to verify sexual activity or abuse, see note 44. On debates over the hymen's existence or significance during or across past periods, see Kelly, *Performing Virginity*; Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, "Virginity Now and Then: A Response to *Medieval Virginites*," in *Medieval Virginites*, ed. Anke Bernau, Ruth Evans, and Sarah Salih (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 234–253; Marie H. Loughlin, *Hymeneutics: Interpreting Virginity on the Early Modern Stage* (London: Associated University Presses, 1997), 27–52; Corinne Harol, "The Hymen and Its Discontents: Medical Discourses on Virginity," in *Enlightened Virginity in Eighteenth-Century Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 59–84; a fascinating nineteenth-century notice titled "The Physical Signs of Virginity," in *British Medical Journal*, 5 January 1895, 27; and Giulia Sissa's consideration of the impact of legal systems upon medical knowledge in "The Hymen Is a Problem, Still: Virginity, Imperforation, and Contraception, from Greece to Rome," *Eugesta* 3 (2013): 67–123, esp. 96–103. Hanne Blank gathers a wide range of sources for debates about hymens in a book for general audiences (with a few questionable interpretations of ancient and medieval sources): Hanne Blank, *Virgin: The Untouched History* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), chaps. 4–6. See also Anke Bernau, *Virgins: A Cultural History* (London: Granta, 2007). For a recent assessment of the complexity of discourse on hymen tissue, see Hanna Cinthio, "You Go Home and Tell That to My Dad! Conflicting Claims and Understandings on Hymen and Virginity," *Sexuality and Culture* 19 (2015): 172–189.

<sup>63</sup>Vagaggini, *Maria nelle opere di Origene*, 46; Fournier, "Les Homélie sur Luc," 85–87; and Lienhard, introduction to *Homilies on Luke, Fragments on Luke*, xxxvi.

<sup>64</sup>Studies that discuss these controversies include Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy*; Neumann, *The Virgin Mary*; Benoît Jeanjean, "La virginité de Marie selon saint Jérôme: polémiste et exégète," in *La virginité de Marie: Communications présentées à la 53<sup>e</sup> session de la Société française d'études mariales, Issoudun, septembre 1997, réunies par Jen Longère* (Paris: Médiaspaul, 1998), 85–103; Ariel Bybee Laughton, "Virginity Discourse and Ascetic Politics in the Writings of Ambrose of Milan," (PhD diss., Duke University, 2010); and Karl Shuve, *The Song of Songs and the Fashioning of Identity in Early Latin Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

different conclusions about Mary's ritual purity after childbirth.<sup>65</sup> Whether this resulted from a change in his thought over time or from the exigencies of different exegetical tasks, his consistent verdict on Mary's virginity does not preclude inconsistencies on other topics.

Instances like these bring into sharper relief than ever the need to attend to particularity in historical study of Christian thought and culture. Writers' ideas and writers' attempts to render one another's ideas can conform to general patterns while still deviating from these patterns at times. Writers who appear to address shared interests with a common vocabulary may wield their terms differently. The most probing questions for investigating the thinking of early Christians are not those that expect a high degree of continuity but those that leave room for variety—and for questioning what concepts and assumptions ancient writers bring to their work in the first place.

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<sup>65</sup>See the introductory section above.

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