

extract

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Could a woman become a gnostic? Clement of Alexandria on femininity and masculinity of human soul

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And is not woman translated into man,
when she has become
equally brave, virile and perfect?
Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI,100,3¹

Introduction; Clement's respect for women, femininity and marriage; Divine femininity; Femininity of the human soul; He who does not become feminine does not grow into a man; Conclusion

Introduction

At a conference devoted to Clement of Alexandria a few years ago, a colleague voiced aloud a question that is politely omitted in the literature due to political correctness: according to Clement, can a woman become a “gnostic” (i.e. the one, who knows God, or a good theologian)? What would Clement say if he saw how many women were studying his work and attending conferences on his ideas? Wouldn't he be shocked?

This question is perfectly relevant. Clement never uses the term ἡ γυνωστικὴ as “female gnostic”, and there is no indication that he counted women as the usual readers of his theological writing, the

1 Transl. W. Wilson, modified.

Stromata. When he says that not only men but also women should seek wisdom (φιλοσοφεῖν), he does not mean intensive study, but rather the practical application of virtue.² Moreover, he claims that men are better in this respect and that they have primacy in everything – unless they become effeminate (*Strom.* IV,62,4).³ In physical strength and moral qualities, a woman can never be equal to a man (*Paed.* II,33,2).⁴ Not that she cannot attain perfection (*Strom.* IV,118,1): By “putting off the flesh” she can become “brave, virile and perfect”, that is, she can turn into a man (*Strom.* VI,100,3).

Nevertheless, in this paper I would like to show that despite some of Clement’s statements proclaiming the traditional superiority of masculinity,⁵ Clement is in fact very positive about femininity, and that in a sense the correct answer to the above-mentioned question

- 2 *Strom.* IV,1,1; 58,3; 62,4; cf. I,93; 99,1. Clement, on the other hand, gives Greek female philosophers and poets (*Strom.* I,80,4; IV,120,3; 121,2–122,4) and Hebrew prophetesses (*Strom.* I,136,1) as models; he does not chastise them for speaking or even writing instead of spinning or holding a cooking spoon. Cf. Judith L. Kovacs, *Becoming the Perfect Man. Clement of Alexandria on the Philosophical Life of Women*, in S. Ahearne-Kroll – P. Holloway – J. Kelhoffer (eds.), *Women and Gender in Ancient Religions: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, Tübingen 2010, 389–413.
- 3 Our author criticizes the loss of masculinity and effeminacy in many places (e.g. *Strom.* II,81,3; *Paed.* II,48,1; 56,3; 59,1; 65,1; 99,1; 105,3; 113,2; 115,2; III,13,1–2; 16,2; 18,1; 69,2; 73,5) and also makes very harsh condemnations of bisexual practice (*Paed.* II,69,1; II,87,3; III,15,1–2; 23,1,3).
- 4 Euripides, fr. 545, 545a, 546 TrGF, from the tragedy *Oedipus*, in: *Strom.* IV,63,2–3 a 125,1: “A woman is always worse than her husband, even when the worst villain marries an honest one”, “every sensible woman is her husband’s servant”, and “when a man speaks, his wife should think he is right, even if he is not, and try to say only what pleases her husband.”
- 5 As Judith L. Kovacs points out (*Becoming the Perfect Man*, 409), Clement in *Strom.* IV,62,4 seems to be directly following Socrates’ words from Plato’s *Republica* 455c. As for the biblical tradition, see, e.g. Sir 42:14 (NRS): “Better is the wickedness of a man than a woman who does good; it is woman who brings shame and disgrace.”

would even be: “Only a woman can become a good theologian according to Clement.” The chosen topic, however, will not lead us to a banal argument about the supremacy of one or the other genders, but surprisingly brings us right to the core of Clement’s soteriology.

Clement’s respect for women, femininity and marriage

We do not know whether Clement was a married man, a celibate, or a widower. It is well known, however, that he was a great defender of marriage.⁶ The only reason for celibacy, which he considered appropriate, was (for men who could easily endure solitude) “the desire for holy knowledge” (*Strom.* III,67), that is, the deepest and most concentrated study of theology and prayer. In other cases, in his opinion, the absence of a woman by a man’s side often causes the capacity to love to disappear from his life (τὸ τῆς ἀγάπης οἴχεται παρ’ αὐτοῖς, *Strom.* III,67,2).

If a man remains single simply to avoid cohabitation with a woman and the care of the household, it is “unmanly and weak” (*Strom.* II,142,1). And if it is even done because the man regards a close relationship with a woman as something impure and thinks that by sexual abstinence as such he will be conformed to Christ, then it is a dangerous heresy (*Strom.* III,49; cf. IV,146,2).⁷

6 Cf. e.g. Jean-Paul Broudéhoux, *Mariage et famille chez Clément d’Alexandrie*, Beauchesne, Paris 1970; Miklós Gyurkovics, “La santa prole. Il frutto del matrimonio cristiano nella teologia di Clemente di Alessandria”, in *Augustinianum* 58/1 (2018), 45–65.

7 *Strom.* III,49,3 (translated by the author): “They do not know the reason why the Lord did not marry. First, He had His bride, the Church; secondly, He was not an ordinary man who needed human support, nor did He need to beget children, since He lives forever and is the only Son of God.”

Marriage is not an obstacle to spiritual life. The unmarried man is in many ways beyond temptation, because he has only himself to look after: the married man has to undergo a difficult spiritual struggle, by which he becomes strengthened. Moreover, by his responsibility for his wife and family, he becomes an image of divine providence: the fact that he does not go as far in “saving self-care” as the pious celibate because of family concerns is somehow compensated for (*Strom.* VII,70,7–8; III,79,5).

According to Clement, a woman is to be treated with respect by her husband. She is not to be forced into marriage with the one who courts her (*Strom.* II,137,4), nor is her dignity to be in any way trampled upon in marriage (*Paed.* II,97; *Strom.* III,58,2). It is also necessary to respect her delicacy and not to force her to severe ascetic feats by which she would imitate men: it is all right if (unlike a man) she uses perfumes (*Paed.* II,66,1), wears dresses of soft fabrics (*Paed.* II,102,3; III,1), does not go barefoot but wears shoes that protect her entire feet (*Paed.* II,117,1), and does not engage in strenuous sports such as running (*Paed.* III,49,2).⁸

We said that Clement approves of celibacy in specific cases as a space for the deepest possible study of theology and prayer. He even sees celibacy as a precious gift from God (*Strom.* III,4,3). However, he hardly mentions celibacy for women at all,⁹ insofar as we can judge from his extant works.¹⁰ Nor does he try to convince women of the desirability of marriage, e.g., that they will have emotional support as wives or material security in old age, although he gives similar

8 However, Clement also speaks of women’s martyrdom, both bloody (*Strom.* IV,67,4; 127,2), and bloodless (*Strom.* IV,67,3; 68,1).

9 I have found only two minor allusions to this subject (*Strom.* III,60,4; 88,2–3), which, however, do not sound like a recommendation of virginity as a state of life in the Church (cf. e.g. Tertullian, *De oratione*, 22).

10 Clement’s early writing *On Self-control* has unfortunately not survived, cf. *Paed.* II,94,1.

advice to men.¹¹ Could it be that female celibacy was not popular in the Alexandrian church of Clement's time? Or did Clement consider a woman's voluntary choice of solitude and the most intense study to be such an overly severe asceticism and such an imitation of manhood that he did not even mention the possibility?

Divine femininity

In Clement's book *Which Rich Man Will Be Saved?*, we read an often-quoted statement by which Clement speaks of the womanhood of God, as if anticipating modern feminist theology. He derives this idea, among other things, from the final sentence of the prologue of John's Gospel, John 1:18: "No one has ever seen God. It is the only God (the only Son),¹² being in the bosom of the Father (εις τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς), who has made him known." The term κόλπος, as is well known, denotes in Greek the breast, the bosom, or lap (of woman or man), but often also the womb.¹³

At the same time, Clement considers this verse of Scripture to be the key to understanding what love is:

Look at the mysteries of love, and then you will behold the bosom (κόλπος) of the Father, whom the only God alone has made known (John 1:18). It is he himself, God-love (1 John 4:8, 16), and out of love he was captured (ἐθιράθη) by us: his ineffability (τὸ μὲν ἄρρητον αὐτοῦ) [is] Father, but his compassion (τὸ συμπαθές) for us became Mother: The Father by loving became feminine (ἀγαπήσας ἐθιλύνηθη), of which the mighty sign is He whom He begot of Himself. This fruit born of love

11 *Strom.* II,141,2; III,49,3; IV,125,3.

12 Clement quotes John 1:18 in both important variants: ... μονογενῆς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς... (*Strom.* V,81,3; *Quis div.* 37,1; *Exc.* 6,2; cf. *Exc.* 8,1); μονογενῆς υἱὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς... (*Strom.* I,169,4; cf. *Exc.* 7,3; 9,3).

13 Henry G. Liddell – Robert Scott – Henry S. Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Supplement*, Oxford 1990, 974.

is love.¹⁴

Clement evidently alludes here to the doctrine of the Valentinian Gnostics about the syzygies of the divine Pleroma, the highest of which, according to some sources, is the pair of the Ineffable Father (or Depth), and the Mother Grace (or Silence).¹⁵ He translates this idea into orthodoxy, as if to say: there is no primordial dyad of Man and Woman from which more and more syzygies emanate. God is one, He is both Father and Mother. He is the μητροπάτωρ of whom Orpheus speaks,¹⁶ he is Love (1John 4:8.16), which virginally begets¹⁷ the only Son. And this Son is also the only Love itself. As the Father, God is ineffable and unsearchable; as the Mother, she allows herself to be “captured”, to be grasped – her compassion is intelligible to us, and from her womb the Son is born, who gives men knowledge of the ineffable Father (cf. also Matt 11:27 par.).

According to Clement, the secret of love is therefore the mother’s bosom or the womb of the Ineffable: “womanhood” or “femininity” which God receives out of love – his compassion for us, his tenderness and grace. Certainly, God was and is and always will be what He is (*Strom.* V,141,2). At the same time, however, we can (figuratively) say that, as the Ineffable Father, He “became” Grace, Compassion, “woman”. Or else: as the Good God, He “became” the Father, the Creator, the Just (*Paed.* I,88,2), “the man”. In God, masculinity and femininity exist inseparably. Similarly, the Word, who “became” the Son and already in the beginning “became” flesh (*Exc.* 19,1–2), is a spiritual body that cannot be understood as merely masculine (*Exc.* 10,1–3): also in the Son, masculinity and femininity are equally

14 *Quis div.* 37,1–2, my translation. On *Quis div.* 36–37 see esp. Carlo Nardi, “Il seme eletto e la maternità di Dio nel *Quis dives salvetur* di Clemente Alessandrino”, in *Prometheus* 11 (1985) 271–286.

15 *Exc.* 29–31, which also speaks of the Father’s compassion.

16 *Orficorum fragmenta* 248a, in: *Strom.* V,125,2; 126,2.

17 Cf. *Exc.* 19,4.

present. We cannot call Him the Daughter, only because of the historical event of the incarnation and birth of the man Jesus.

Those [bodies] which are here are male and female and differ from each other, but there he who is the Only-Begotten and inherently intellectual has been provided with his own form and with his own nature which is exceedingly pure and sovereign and directly enjoys the power of the Father.¹⁸

Femininity of the human soul

The Alexandrian teacher addresses his *Paedagogus*, a writing intended to form catechumens and neophytes, to women as well as to men. In its introduction we read:

Let us recognize that both men and women practise the same sort of virtue. Surely, if there is but one God for both, then there is but one Educator for both. One Church, one virtue, one modesty, one common food, wedlock is common, breath, sight, hearing, knowledge, hope, obedience, love, all are alike [in man and woman]. They who possess life in common, grace in common, and salvation in common have also virtue in common and, therefore, education too.¹⁹

Yes, there is no difference between male and female virtue on the spiritual level. The whole human race needs “the same education and virtue”.²⁰

In his defence of marriage against the teachings of the Encratite Julius Cassian, Clement ironically remarks:

This “expert” thinks too Platonistically when he claims that the soul is divine and came here into existence and death because it became feminine (θηλυθηεϊσαν) by lust.²¹

18 *Exc.* 10,3, transl. R. P. Casey.

19 *Paed.* I,10,1–2, transl. S. P. Wood.

20 *Strom.* IV,63,1, cf. SVF III,253–254 and Musonius Rufus (fr. 3, 9,5–7 Hense).

21 *Strom.* III,93,3.

It is possible that when Clement says in *Quis div.* 37 that God became feminine by love, this is a provocative allusion to this statement of Cassian about the feminization of the soul. Cassian himself perhaps follows Plato's *Timaeus* (90 e), according to which cowardly and unrighteous men become women in the next birth; but Platonic elements are probably adopted by Cassian, who "came out of the school of Valentinus" (*Strom.* III,92,1), mainly in a form paraphrased and deformed by Valentinian gnosis. The Church in the concept of the Valentinians is the offspring of the virgin mother Wisdom, or her spiritual seed sown in the chosen souls. It is the product of the desire of this "Woman in high", the offspring of her "mating" without a mate (*Exc.* 67–68). Therefore this seed is also "female", i.e. imperfect, infantile, weak and subject to the powers of the world.²² Through the Saviour it is then redeemed from its humiliated, female state and transformed into a man (εἰς ἄνδρα μετατίθεσθαι) by entering into partnership (syzygy) with its personal angel.²³

It is this doctrine that Clement seeks to refute when he asserts in several places in his work that the human soul is saved (not just some seed sown in it) and that "after the putting off (ἀπόθεσις) of the body" the soul is neither female nor male. It is in this context that his statement I mentioned in the introduction occurs:

For souls, themselves by themselves, are equal. Souls are neither male nor female, when they no longer marry nor are given in marriage (Luke 20:35 par.). And is not woman translated into man (μετατίθεται εἰς τὸν ἄνδρα), when she has become equally brave, virile and perfect?²⁴

Yes, Cassian is certainly right that lust is something that degrades the human soul. This defect will not be present in the kingdom

²² *Exc.* 21,3; 68; 79.

²³ *Exc.* 21,3; 22,3; 79.

²⁴ *Strom.* VI,100,3, transl. W. Wilson, modified.

of heaven, for there we will no longer lack anything:²⁵ we will be completely satiated with goodness and will not long for anything. In the eternal rest, people do not “marry and are not given in marriage” (*Strom.* VI,140,1) in the sense that masculinity and femininity are no longer traumatically split by lust:

The Scripture says: “For in this world, they marry and are given in marriage,” for this world is the only place in which the female is distinguished from the male, “but in that other world, no longer” (Luke 20:34–35). There, the rewards of this life, lived in the holy union of wedlock (συζυγία), await not man or woman as such, but the human person, now divided because he is split in two by lust.²⁶

But it would be too hasty to conclude from the above statements that Clement imagined the resurrected human personality as hermaphroditic.²⁷ Although he speaks of the saved soul as neutral, he does not enter into any speculation as to the nature of the human resurrection body.²⁸ His primary concern is not to create eschatological hypotheses, but to deny heterodox interpretations of Scripture that he considered harmful. First: the male-female partnership (συζυγία) is certainly not an eternal principle of divine Pleroma, as the Valentinians think; second: salvation does not mean deliverance from “evil” sexuality, as the Encratites think – it is the healing of man from selfishness and hardness:

Cassian says: When Salome asked when the things she asked would be known, the Lord answered her, “When you trample on the garment of shame and the two become one, and male and female will be neither male nor female”. First of all, we have these words not in the four Gospels that have been handed down to us, but in the *Gospel according to the*

25 Klement, fr. 46 Stählin; cf. *Strom.* III,87,2.

26 *Paed.* I,10,1–3, transl. S. P. Wood, modified.

27 Cf. Kovacs, *Becoming the Perfect Man*, 393.

28 Kovacs, *Becoming the Perfect Man*, 395.

Egyptians. It also seems me that Cassian misunderstands that “male” here means anger and “female” lust.²⁹

Clement here corrects the “overly Platonizing” Cassian by recalling the Platonic motif of the double chariot (*Phaedrus* 246b) in Philo’s interpretation, which was apparently very popular in Alexandria at the time: according to Philo, the horses of the human chariot are lust or greed (ἐπιθυμία), which is femininity, and anger or aggression (θυμός), which is masculinity.³⁰ Greed, this “female” vice, as has already been said, has no access to heavenly rest. And the same applies to anger as a “male” vice: human aggression is also something provisional, a kind of childhood disease of the human race. “We are not brought up for war, but for peace.”³¹ Before we can enter the resurrection, we must “trample on the garment of shame”, i.e., strip off and leave behind the shameful selfish desire and aggression, grow out of these inner movements of which we are right to be ashamed and which (like a piece of cloth) “veil our reason”, Clement goes on to say.³² When we have our reason unveiled and free, our being will be integrated:

Then there will be in you “neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28), as Paul also says. The soul, once it has come out of this form, when the masculine and the feminine are distinguished, is transformed to union (μετατίθεται εἰς ἔνωσιν) and is neutral (οὐθέτερον οὔσα).³³

We can see that here Clement no longer speaks of the transformation of woman into man, but of the transformation of each individual soul “to union”.

29 *Strom.* III,92,2–93,1, cf. *Strom.* III,63,2–3; 64,1.

30 Philo, *De agr.* 73: ἵπποι μὲν οὖν ἐπιθυμία καὶ θυμός εἰσιν, ὁ μὲν ἄρρηγ, ἡ δὲ θήλεια. Cf. Salvatore R. C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria. A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism*, Oxford 1971, 98p 7n. Cf. *Strom.* V,53,1 a *Paed.* III,53,2.

31 *Paed.* I,98,4; cf. *Strom.* IV,62,3; VI,72,3.

32 *Strom.* III,93,1–2; cf. e.g. *Paed.* I,5,1–2; 28.

33 *Strom.* III,93,2–3.

He who does not become feminine does not grow into a man

Let us now return to the passage from Clement's book *Which Rich Man Will Be Saved?*, which speaks of the feminization of God. The passage we have quoted goes on to speak of Christ, who, as "the fruit born of love", is himself the love:

Being about giving himself as a ransom, [the Son of God] leaves us a new covenant: "My love I give unto you"³⁴. What does this mean, and how great is this love? For sake of each of us he laid down his life – worth no less than the universe. He demands of us in return our lives for the sake of each other.³⁵ But if we owe our lives to our brethren, and acknowledge the such is our agreement with the Saviour, shall we still hoard away and shut up the things of the world, that are poor, and not truly our own, and that pass away? Shall we keep back from each other what the fire will shortly have? Divinely, indeed, and with inspiration, John says, "He that does not love his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15), seed of Cain, offspring of the devil; he does not have the heart of God (θεοῦ σπλάγχνον οὐκ ἔχει); he does not have hope of better things; he is without seed; he is without children; he is not a branch of the ever living, heavenly vine, he is cut off, he has to expect the fire at once (John 15:5–6).³⁶

Clement here uses the peculiar expression, "He that does not love his brother, does not have the σπλάγχνον of God." The term is usually used in the plural (σπλάγχνα) and means literally "internal organs" (i.e., heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, but often also the womb), and figuratively it means the inner self and emotions, especially anxiety,

34 Cf. John 14:27.

35 John 13:34; 15:13.

36 *Quis div.* 37,4–6, transl. P. M. Barnard (modified).

concern, or love.³⁷ The Septuagint³⁸ and the New Testament writers use the term *σπλάγχνα* in a similar way: they designate by it human tender feelings, love,³⁹ concern for another,⁴⁰ and human and divine mercy, compassion.⁴¹

The singular *σπλάγχνον*, which is generally infrequent and does not occur at all in Greek Scripture,⁴² seems here, like the plural *σπλάγχνα*,

37 Liddell – Scott – Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1628. This expression, even in the singular, is used of the inner self of both women and men, cf. e.g. Euripides, *Médeia* 219–221.

38 In the Septuagint version of Prov 12:10, *σπλάγχνα* is a translation of the Hebrew *רַחֲמִים*, which is also a plural and is used in the sense of “compassion”, “mercy”. The singular *רֶחֶם* means “womb”, W. Gesenius, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Wörterbuch über das Alte Testament*, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Herbert Donner, Berlin – Heidelberg: Springer-Verlag, 2013¹⁸, s. v. (p. 1236). Other occurrences of the term *σπλάγχνα* denoting emotions in the Septuagint: Wis 10:5; Sir 30:7; 33:5; Bar 2:17; 4 Macc 14:13; 15:23,29.

39 2 Cor 7:15; Phlm 1:12.

40 Phlm 1:7; 1:20.

41 About God – Luke 1:78; about human person – Phil 2:1; Col 3:12; 1 John 3:17.

42 Nardi, “Seme eletto”, 283, notes that τὸ *σπλάγχνον κυρίου* is the title of the Messiah in the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (VIII,4,5; cf. VI,8,2). I consider it probable, however, that rather than to this Old Testament apocryphon Clement in *Quis div.* 37,6 alludes to the *Shepherd of Hermas* (*Sim.* 9,24,2–4), where he speaks of the faithful dwelling on the seventh mountain (on the vision of the twelve mountains see *Sim.* 9,1,5–10): “They were always simple, and harmless, and blessed, bringing no charges against one another, but always rejoicing greatly because of the servants of God ... always having pity (*σπλάγχνον ἔχοντες*) on every man, and giving aid from their own labour to every man, without reproach and without hesitation. ... And I, the angel of repentance, say to you who are such, Continue to be such as these, and your seed will never be blotted out. ... The whole of your seed will dwell with the Son of God; for you have received of His Spirit” (transl. F. Crombie). Similarly in *Quis div.* 37, the generous giving of possessions and the seed of Cain (as opposed to the elect seed, *Quis div.* 36,2–3) is spoken of; moreover, *Quis div.* 42,18 (and *Strom.* I,85,4) also speaks directly of the Angel of Repentance (cf. *Hermae Pastor, Vis.* 5,1,7; *Mand.* 4,2,2; 12,4,7; 6,1; *Sim.* 9,1,1; 14,3; 23,5; 24,4).

to refer to typically feminine emotions, to mercy, tenderness and compassion.⁴³ It corresponds to the Johannine expression “the Father’s bosom” (κόλπος τοῦ πατρὸς). Precisely because the Father became mother out of love and as the unsearchable gave Himself to be captured – because He “gave birth” to the Word – precisely because God became a woman, it is necessary for every human being to acquire femininity. Whoever does not have in himself God’s σπλάγχνον, that is, the divine womanhood, softness, mercy, compassion – whoever is too masculine – will be rejected like a barren branch, like the seed of Cain.⁴⁴

Clement also touches on the mystery of the Father’s merciful (“feminine”) love in the seventh book of *Stromata*:

But “he that is joined to the Lord”⁴⁵ in Spirit “becomes a spiritual body”⁴⁶ by an excellent (διάφορον) kind of conjunction. Such a one is wholly a son, a holy man, passionless, gnostic, perfect, formed (μορφούμενος) by the teaching of the Lord; in order that in deed, in word, and in spirit itself, being brought close to the Lord, he may receive the mansion that is due to him who has become a man thus (ἀπηνδρωμένω).⁴⁷ Let the specimen suffice to those who have ears.⁴⁸ For it is not required to unfold the mystery, but only to indicate what is sufficient for those who are partakers in knowledge to bring it to mind; who also will comprehend how it was said by the Lord, “Be perfect as your Father” (γίνεσθε ὡς ὁ

43 Cf. Clement of Rome, *Hom.* XII,26,6, according to whom philanthropy is masculine-feminine (ἀρρενόθηλος): its “feminine” (intuitive) component is mercy and its “masculine” (rational) component is love of neighbour. Clement probably knew the source of the Clementine homilies, see Paul Collomp, “Une source de Clément d’Alexandrie et les homélies pseudo-clémentines”, in *Revue de philologie, de littérature et d’histoire anciennes* 37 (1913), 19–46.

44 Nardi, “Seme eletto”, 283.

45 1 Cor 6:14.

46 1 Cor 15:44.

47 cf. Eph 4:13.

48 Matt 11:15.

πατήρ ὁμῶν τέλειοι),⁴⁹ perfectly, by forgiving sins, and forgetting injuries, and living in the habit of passionlessness.⁵⁰

In order to indicate what this perfection or maturity consists of, i.e. what the Pauline “becoming a man” (Eph 4:13) means, Clement links two parallel Gospel statements: Matthew’s version, “You will be perfect/adult, just as your heavenly Father is perfect,” and Luke’s: “Be merciful as your Father is merciful.”

The terminology of this passage (“excellent”, “formed”) unmistakably reveals that here Clement is again alluding to the Valentinians.⁵¹ Nor is the verb ἀπανδροῦν (to become a man) likely to be a simple allusion to Eph 4:13: “... until all of us come to the unity (εἰς τὴν ἐνότητα) of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity/manhood (εἰς ἄνδρα τέλειον)...”, but is probably intended to remind the reader of the Valentinian exegesis of this verse. Clement notes it in this form: “When the female [being]”, that is, that chosen, excellent, but originally only female seeds of the fallen female aeon of Wisdom, “becomes men (ἀπανδρωθέντα), they unite (ἐνοῦται) with the angels”, i.e., with the angels of the Saviour, who are said to have immersed themselves with him in the waters of the Jordan, and to be the personal saviours and bridegrooms of the female seed, “and to advance into the Pleroma”.⁵²

The orthodox paraphrase of this doctrine is the whole of Clement’s note 27 in his *Excerpts from Theodotus*, according to which the saved soul (of both man and woman) is the betrothed not of an angel, but of the Son of God Himself. Having put off (ἀπόθεσις) all that enveloped

49 Matt 5:48 and Luke 6:36.

50 *Strom.* VII,88,3–4, transl. W. Wilson.

51 Cf. *Exc.* 41,3 (διάφορον σπέρμα); *Strom.* II,10,2; *Exc.* 21,1; 26,1–2; 35,1; 41,1 (διαφέρον σπέρμα); *Exc.* 45,1 (μόρφωσις ἢ κατὰ γνῶσιν).

52 *Exc.* 21,3; cf. *Exc.* 79: “When the seed was formed, it was changed to a man (μορφωθὲν δὲ μετετέθη εἰς ἄνδρα).”

the soul and was its body, the soul, as a perfect high priest,⁵³ enters the heavenly Holy of Holies and unites herself to the Lord to such an extent that she becomes His body (Exc. 27,3,6). The soul is then no longer a mere bride: she has already given herself to her Bridegroom and become the Word (Exc. 27,5), i.e., she has “became a man” (*Strom.* VII,88,3). She has been transformed “to union” (*Strom.* III,93,2–3).

Conclusion

We have seen that Clement – in response to Valentinian and Encratite teachings – strongly valorises feminine qualities and feelings. He attributes in a certain sense womanhood even to God the Father and God the Son. Clement is even convinced that the very mystery of love lies in God’s femininity and every person should imitate it. This divine “femininity”, this total and fruitful giving of oneself, is clearly displayed in the sacrifice of Christ. The perfect acceptance of salvation then means for the soul a loving, inseparable union with the Son of God – a full acceptance and imitation of the divine self-giving – it means union with the Word. This union may be metaphorically called a marriage, though it is certainly not a male-female couple: masculinity and femininity are equally present in God the Father and God the Son, as well as in each individual saved soul.

What the resurrected human body will look like, whether or to what extent it will retain its masculine or feminine features, is another question, and one that Clement does not ask in his extant work. Nor does his conviction of the gender neutrality of the redeemed soul in any way prevent him from regarding here on earth, in the flesh, the predominance of man, the fragility of woman, and the unambiguous division of social roles as an unquestionable fact.

53 In *Strom.* IV,118,1 Clement explicitly says that this “priestly” perfection can be attained by a woman as well as by a man.

If one is to become a “gnostic” (insofar as this is possible here in the flesh), that is, one to whom Christ’s statement “my sheep know me” (John 10:14) applies, and who can “grasp” God and understand his mystery, according to Clement, intensive study and precise expertise are not the most important things for him (*Strom.* VII,11,3; 55,4). The key is to behold the Father’s bosom, to understand God’s “maternal” self-giving and to accept it as his own: to “become woman” as God himself “became woman”. Thus, even a man busy caring for his family, who is incapable of the great intellectual and spiritual performance he would have the opportunity to make if he lived alone, can be a knower of God (*Strom.* VII,80,4). And this “gnostic” can also be a woman, who (as Clement in his gallantry thought) cannot be asked to make the hard-ascetic efforts that are necessary for the life of a theologian fully immersed in work and prayer.⁵⁴

Abstract

In the works of Clement of Alexandria we can find various and seemingly contradictory statements about womanhood and femininity. What does this patristic author mean when he speaks, on the one hand, of the natural subordination and inferiority of woman to man in all areas of life and of the possible perfection of woman through her transformation into man, and, on the other hand, says that man is to imitate God’s femininity? What does Clement understand by the femininity and masculinity of the human soul, and in what sense does he consider the human soul to be gender-neutral? According to Clement’s theology, is the human soul a bride? And if so, who is her bridegroom? These are the questions that this article attempts to answer.

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