The last two main chapters of this book deal with information concerning rituals connected with the Ophite diagram. Origen has preserved a fragment of Celsus where the latter had described an anointment ritual practiced by the users of the diagram. Origen understands this anointment as a perversion of Christian initiatory baptism, denies its existence even in “heretical” circles, and claims the Ophites instead curse Jesus as part of their initiation. I will first examine Origen’s alternative version of the Ophite initiation because a proper understanding of Origen’s motives and rhetorical agendas is important in examining the veracity of Celsus’ report, discussed in Chapter 9. This chapter on Origen’s claim further touches upon the relationship between 1 Cor and the Ophite mythology since Origen connects the Ophite cursing of Jesus with 1 Cor 12:3 (“I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says ‘Jesus is accursed!’ [Ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς].”) Schmithals has taken this link for granted, suggesting the Corinthians were Gnostics—although not necessarily the same Ophites of whom Origen speaks—who cursed the fleshly human Jesus based on their strong separation or possessionist Christology (the divine Christ remained different from the human Jesus), while Pearson has proposed that the purported Ophite cursing arises out of a heresiological misunderstanding of “Gnostic” snake exegesis linking Christ with the accursed (Gen 3:14) serpent. There are problems with both of these suggestions, and the Ophite mythology itself does not seem to corroborate Origen’s claim either. Therefore, this chapter assesses the veracity of Origen’s claim by first exposing his rhetorical agenda, and then by searching for traces of negative images of Jesus both in Ophite and other “Gnostic” sources. Finally, a new proposal is put forth as to where Origen found the basis for his curious claim.

1 Schmithals 1971, especially 124ff.
8.1 Origen’s Information

Origen mentions the Ophites (Ὀφιανοί) in three of his surviving works: in *Contra Celsum* (3.13; 6.24–38; 7.40), where he describes the diagram and answers Celsus’ accusations; as well as in commentaries on 1 Corinthians (*Catena fragment* 47, 1 Cor 12:3)\(^3\) and Matthew (*Commentariorum in Matthaeeum series*, 852).\(^4\) Of these, the material in *Contra Celsum* contains not only Origen’s and Celsus’ information about the diagram and its ritual use, but also polemical passages from both authors. The occasion for Origen’s description of the diagram was given by Celsus’ *True Doctrine*, where the latter had described and ridiculed the Ophite diagram and its ritual use, attributing it simply to “Christians.” Origen, by describing the same teaching, wanted to make it clear that it instead derived from a heretical sect called “Ophites,” whose adherents were not to be confused with real Christians. Thus, it is important to note that in *Contra Celsum* one finds polemical passages where Origen is devoted to making it clear that the Ophites known to Celsus are not true Christians (3.13; 6.24,28,30; 7.40). Apart from the section dealing with their teaching in detail (6.24–38), Origen’s other references to the Ophites in *Contra Celsum* mostly just repeat what he has already said (7.40), or state that the Ophites are a heretical sect that is connected with certain other Gnostic branches and teachers.\(^5\)

Origen connects the Ophites specifically with the cursing of Jesus in two out of his three works which mention them. *Contra Celsum* 6.28 has, “Ophites... do not admit anyone into their meetings unless he has first pronounced curses against Jesus (ἀρὰς θῆται κατὰ Ἰησοῦ).” This statement occurs within the section dealing with the Ophite diagram (6.24–38), and it is part of a polemical passage where Origen answers to Celsus’ claim that Christians curse the creator because he had cursed the serpent.\(^5\) Origen goes on to say that those who call the creator accursed are not really Christians, but certain “Ophites,” and that the accusations against these do not apply to the real Christians:

---

\(^1\) Text in Jenkins 1909, 30; translation in Chadwick 1980, 344n2.


\(^3\) *Cels.* 3.13: Ophites and Cainites. Cf. also Origen’s *Commentariorum in Matthaeeum series* 852, where he offers a longer list of heretical teachers and groups: Marcion, Basilides, Valentinians, Apellians, Ophites.

\(^4\) See also Pearson 1967, 302.