

The Nonviolent Christ at the Apocalyptic Center of Origen's *Homilies on Joshua*

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Abstract

Christians ancient and modern have puzzled over the violence in the book of Joshua. Origen of Alexandria interprets this text apocalyptically, to give readers a sense of their own personal moral struggle as participating in a cosmic effort. For Origen, the central act of apocalypse is the cross of Jesus Christ, conquering evil through nonviolence and making religious violence explicitly prohibited. This is a compelling exegesis still today, since by using the cross to reinterpret Joshua, Origen presents a middle path between endorsing the violence depicted and excising or ignoring it.

Keywords

apocalyptic, Christology, hermeneutics, Joshua, nonviolence, Origen of Alexandria, pacifism, patristics, soteriology

Nonviolent Interpretation of Shocking Violence

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–256) believed that Jesus Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection, changed human patterns of violence. It was evident to Origen that these patterns needed to be changed: his specific context was one in which torture and systemic violence were widespread.¹ In such circumstances, Origen embraced a pacifism

1. See the summary of Roman use of torture in administrative and judicial practice in Paul R. Kolbet, "Torture and Origen's Hermeneutics of Nonviolence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008): 545–72 at 545–52, <http://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfm053>.

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that grew from his understanding of the cross of Christ, in which Christ conquered violence through nonviolence. This conquest led to a reinterpretation of the narratives of Scripture as well. For Origen, Christ was something new, Christ brought a revolution, and thus Origen interpreted human narratives of warfare and bloodshed in a new way.

To explain what sort of revolution this was, it is necessary to understand Origen's theological context and the different views about biblical violence that he opposed. I will show below that it is not only in modernity that people have been puzzled by the violence described in the Old Testament. Among Christians in antiquity, the interpretation of such violence was contentious and even became a church-dividing issue. People chose not to worship with one another and decided to eliminate certain books from the canon of Scripture in part because of conflicting interpretations of scriptural violence. I will discuss below Christians like Marcion of Sinope (d. ca. AD 154), for whom the problem of violence was directly theological, in the sense that the violence indicated that the creator god, violent and bent on justice, was a different god than the god of Jesus Christ.² For Origen, by contrast, the solution to the problem of violence was found in spiritual interpretation of Scripture and in a denial that the literal interpretation of biblical violence could be normative. Origen's spiritual interpretation was based not in avoidance of difficult passages of Scripture but in changing the reader's approach to the passages. Origen's approach was based on a conviction that a believer's knowledge of Jesus Christ changed how one understood who God was and how one understood what was recounted in Scripture.

I show in what follows that, in his *Homilies on Joshua*,³ Origen's spiritual interpretation of biblical violence employs themes characteristic of apocalyptic literature. This genre presents certain prophetic figures receiving from God or angels a special revelation of a hidden reality. Often the hidden reality is an ongoing cosmic drama, a

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2. The current standard for scholarship on Marcion in English is Judith Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic: God and Scripture in the Second Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Still interesting is Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion, das Evangelium vom fremden Gott: eine Monographie zur Geschichte der Grundlegung der katholischen Kirche* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960). English translation: Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1990). All English translations will be indicated hereafter with the abbreviation ET.
 3. The text of these homilies exists (except for quotations/paraphrases in catenae) only in a Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia. Latin text: Origène, *Homélies sur Josué*, ed. Annie Jaubert, Sources Chrétiennes (series cited hereafter as SC) 71 (Paris: Cerf, 1960). ET: Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, ed. Cynthia White, *The Fathers of the Church* 105 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002). I presume the general reliability of Rufinus's translation, in accordance with contemporary scholarly consensus. See Jaubert's introductory essay. Jaubert, *Homélies sur Josué*, 82.

struggle between good and evil.⁴ As part of his use of the apocalyptic genre, I show that Origen portrays human moral effort as participation in just such a cosmic battle.⁵ Thus he tries to answer a basic question from his readers: What does all of this violence have to do with me? Origen first interprets the violence in the book of Joshua in reference to the struggle for virtue in the believer's soul. For this reason, I call this interpretive approach apocalyptic-moral. Through the apocalyptic battle imagery, Origen gives his moral exhortation additional significance. He portrays the struggle for virtue as a matter of spiritual life or death. The stakes are high, and Origen calls for a level of energy in this spiritual struggle.

The foundation of these moral points appears when Origen answers a second question: What does the violence of the book of Joshua say about God and God's intention for the salvation of the world? The answer comes through a further dimension of the apocalyptic genre. Origen claims that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the decisive event of an apocalyptic battle represented in the book of Joshua. Origen starts from a basic correspondence of names between Joshua and Jesus. In the Latin tradition (and in those Western languages descended from it), one can distinguish *Iosue* from *Iesus*, Joshua from Jesus, but in Origen's own Greek, *Iēsous* is the name for both. This fact opens up interpretive possibilities for Origen right from the start of the homilies. He recounts that Moses in Exodus 17 delegated the leading of the army to Joshua: "Therefore, when I become acquainted with the name Jesus for the first time [in the canonical order of scriptural books], I also immediately see a symbol of a mystery. Indeed, Jesus leads the army."⁶ The shared name leads Origen to see Jesus Christ as the potential referent of every mention of Joshua, and thus any mention of violence in the book as an indication of violence suffered by Jesus Christ. Origen cites Colossians 2:14–15 repeatedly.⁷ That passage attributes a hidden meaning to the cross of Jesus Christ in terms of cosmic battle, imperial triumph, and the spoils of war. Origen understands the author of Colossians to be asserting that, in Christ's victory, the normal

4. See Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 774–80. Compare Cyril O'Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2009), 9–33. For distinction of apocalyptic from eschatology, see Christopher C. Rowland, "Apocalyptic: The Disclosure of Heavenly Knowledge," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 3, *The Early Roman Period*, ed. John Sturdy, W. D. Davies, and William Horbury (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 776–97, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521243773.024>.
5. Jean Daniélou believes the images of cosmic battle and of the fall of Jericho are primarily about the end of the world. It will be evident below that Origen's use of battle imagery surely includes the end times, but as already proleptically won in Christ. Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1960), 276–86.
6. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.1, SC 71:96; ET Bruce, 27. In the same first homily, Origen makes even clearer "that the book does not so much indicate to us the deeds of the son of Nun [i.e., Joshua], as it represents for us the mysteries of Jesus my Lord." *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.3, SC 71:100; ET Bruce, 29.
7. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.3; 7.3; 8.3; and 11.5.

positions in battle have been reversed: at the cross, the Devil⁸ seems to be the victor and Christ the conquered one, but in fact the Devil has himself been crucified in Christ's suffering, and Christ is the victor.⁹ This reversal of position is, for Origen, the basic logic of how God saves the world. As a result, the interpretation of Joshua's conquering must change dramatically. In reinterpreting the book of Joshua, Origen believes that Christ "teaches us peace from this very reading of wars."¹⁰

Origen's nonviolent reinterpretation of Joshua need not be a mere curiosity of early Christian theology. This approach offers real possibilities for modern appropriations of that book. First, Origen's vision of cosmic battle can still be a compelling and energizing answer to the question of relevance; Origen thinks the violence helps the Christian reader see that the struggle for virtue is a high-stakes contest with cosmic consequences. Second, by centering Jesus in the interpretation of Joshua, Origen provides a sense of how the "newness" of Jesus entails a reversal of the interpretation of conquest: in Christ, it is the nonviolent who win, and so stories of conquest must be about this nonviolent struggle. Finally, the problem, as Origen sees it, is that those who see the literal meaning of Joshua's violent conquest as the only possible interpretation either excise the book from the scriptures or read it as endorsing violence in their own day. As I will show below, Origen charts a middle course by using Christ's nonviolence as the definitive reinterpretation of Joshua's victories.

Origen on the Point of Scripture

Discussion of Origen's interpretation of Scripture, particularly of the Old Testament, often becomes structured by modern debates about figurative and historical interpretation.¹¹ A question that arises is how Origen understands a factual or a real event lying behind a historical account. In the specific case of the *Homilies on Joshua*, one could ask whether Origen thinks the violence really happened at all, or whether God's commanding of the violence really happened. Such historical questions will have to remain

8. Origen promotes the theory of the Devil as a rebellious angel. For a summary, see Neil Forsyth, "Origen's Wicked Angel: Universal Fall and Redemption," in *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 358–84, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10vm220.26>.

9. Origen's use of Colossians to ground an apocalyptic worldview is unsurprising; the apocalyptic worldview of Colossians has been noted repeatedly by scholars. See Christopher Rowland, "Apocalyptic Visions and the Exaltation of Christ in the Letter to the Colossians," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 6, no. 19 (September 1983): 73–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0142064x8300601905>; and Benjamin Wold, "Apocalyptic Thought in the Epistles of Colossians and Ephesians," in *The Jewish Apocalyptic Tradition and the Shaping of New Testament Thought*, ed. Benjamin E. Reynolds and Loren T. Stuckenbruck (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 219–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1kgqv21.15>.

10. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 14.1, SC 71:314; ET Bruce, 130.

11. For a helpful schema of these debates, see Peter W. Martens, "Origen against History? Reconsidering the Critique of Allegory," *Modern Theology* 28, no. 4 (2012): 635–56 at 636, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2012.01776.x>.

unresolved in this essay. In these homilies, Origen seems to say different things in different places about whether the violence depicted in that text actually happened or not. The criteria, too, by which he decided one way or the other are not immediately apparent. Thus, to deal with the question of the place of factual events, one would need to introduce many other texts of Origen that are better suited to settling the question than the *Homilies on Joshua* are.¹² A verdict lies beyond the scope of the present essay.¹³

I am concerned, rather, with what scholars have called the “audience-orientation” of Origen’s reading.¹⁴ He is interested in what the narrative of Joshua means for the lives of his audience, because he conceives of the book as aiming at the salvation of those who read it.¹⁵ Salvation, and particularly salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ, Origen believes, is Scripture’s overarching point.¹⁶ It is on the basis of this main point, or, in Greek, the *skopos*, that Origen often engages in spiritual or allegorical interpretation, a method that, as I will show below, occurs throughout the *Homilies on Joshua*. Spiritual interpretation’s prominence in these homilies, however, can lead to a misconception that Origen sees himself primarily as an allegorical interpreter. In fact, Origen sees allegory as of decidedly secondary importance to the *skopos*. One can see this in the very structure of Origen’s theological masterwork *On First Principles*, where his theory of allegorical exegesis is only considered at the very end of the work. He places the discussion of allegory there because Origen thinks that one does not know how to interpret Scripture allegorically until one can determine what the fundamental point, the *skopos*, of the scriptural passage might be. To discover the *skopos*, the interpreter must begin from the elements of Christian

12. Robert M. Grant, *The Earliest Lives of Jesus* (New York: Harper, 1961), 70–79, gives extensive evidence for discussion of historical facts in Origen’s *Against Celsus* and *Commentary on John*. John Cavadini notes that part of the difficulty of answering the question of history in Origen comes from Origen’s theology. He claims God works in history, and that this work is recognized by faith, in union with the church. The facts behind the narrative are not able to be evaluated in complete separation from this ecclesial faith. John Cavadini, “From Letter to Spirit: The Multiple Senses of Scripture,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 126–48 at 146.
13. A recent engagement with the topic is Hans Boersma’s claims about Origen’s incorporation of historical facts into Origen’s spiritual interpretation. Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 105–30.
14. Frances Young, “The Rhetorical Schools and Their Influence on Patristic Exegesis,” in *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, ed. Rowan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 182–99 at 186, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511555350.012>.
15. Peter W. Martens, “Ideal Interpreters,” in Blowers and Martens, *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, 149–65 at 153–55.
16. Hermann Josef Sieben, “Hermeneutik Der Dogmatischen Schriftauslegung Des Athanasius von Alexandrien,” in *“Manna in Deserto”: Studien Zum Schriftgebrauch Der Kirchenväter* (Köln: Koinonia-Oriens, 2002), 35–60 at 49–57.

faith, determined by the common belief of the church, and against which all scriptural texts can be compared.¹⁷ These fundamental elements anchor further speculative theological elaboration of the faith. Then, once these steps are taken and the point of a scriptural passage is determined, unclear passages can be interpreted using various methods, including allegory, so that believers can come to see every word of Scripture leading to salvation in Christ.¹⁸ In this light, Origen sees himself not primarily as an allegorist but as an ecclesial exegete, reading Scripture according to its overall point as handed down by the church.¹⁹ For Origen, allegory is one more tool for reading Scripture well, but it is a tool that is, by its nature, secondary to the work of discerning the point of Scripture from those passages of Scripture that most clearly indicate that point.²⁰

These reflections on Origen's presuppositions and method help the reader to understand how Origen is dealing with the scriptural narrative in the *Homilies on Joshua*. The overarching point or *skopos* is discovered in the narrative not first through allegory or figurative readings; the figurative readings come later methodologically as a way of integrating the more difficult to understand passages with the clearer ones. The most violent passages in the book of Joshua are just such difficult passages, because for Origen it is hard to see how he can interpret these passages consistently with basic Christian claims about who God is and what God is doing in the world.

Violence and Disgust

Only rarely did ancient non-Christian thinkers see violence, and even genocide, in warfare as morally repugnant.²¹ Ancient historians regularly without judgment

17. Origen speaks of the *elementa ac fundamenta*. Origen, *De Principiis*, Pr.10, in *Origen: On First Principles*, ed. John Behr, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

18. "The believer who has formed a synthetic Christian *epistēmē* rooted in the apostolic tradition can then turn to individual biblical passages, even individual words, and find in them the door to deeper participation in the mystery of divine wisdom." Brian E. Daley, "Origen's *De Principiis*: A Guide to the Principles of Christian Scriptural Interpretation," in *Nova et Vetera: Patristic Studies in Honor of Patrick Halton* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 3–21 at 13. Recently, Samuel Fernández has expressed a similar view: "Origen's Theological System in *On First Principles*," *Modern Theology* 38, no. 2 (2022): 220–46 at 227–32, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12760>.

19. The line from Henri de Lubac is apropos: "Origen, in lovingly proclaiming himself to be a 'man of the Church,' placed the accent on a quasi-native quality that marked the whole of his genius." Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 61.

20. Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 161–213.

21. I am grateful particularly to Dr. Christopher McLaughlin, who led me to reassess and develop Origen's relation with the historical context and to clarify Origen's own disgust at violence.

described the wholesale slaughter of populations.²² When such actions were recorded with moderate disapproval, this disapproval was usually not in terms of those suffering but in terms of the sort of character the person in authority became when ordering such massacres.²³ As an example, one can consider how the ancient non-Christian philosopher Celsus, in one of the places where he treated divinely mandated violence directly, was more concerned with divine inconsistency than with the violence in itself. He pointed out that God appeared to have a fickle character if God ordered some people to take active revenge on enemies but ordered other people passively to accept violence from enemies. Thus, Celsus concluded that the “Nazarene” was “legislating the opposite” (*antinomothetei*) and asked, “Is it Moses or Jesus who is lying?”²⁴

Many Christian thinkers were also concerned with this question of consistency, but the starting point for the investigation differed. While non-Christian thinkers took the violence of war as the default position, Christians more often took as primary Jesus's statements rejecting violence and then had to decide whether violent scriptural narratives could or could not be understood as consistent with Jesus. These questions about violence accompanied questions about who God was, and whether the God that Jesus proclaimed was consistent with the God of the Old Testament. Christians condemned and broke with one another on these theological questions and cited interpretations of biblical violence as criteria for these breaks.

For example, some disputes among Christians focused on the so-called *lex talionis*, a Latin phrase signifying the various laws in the Old Testament that prescribe a punishment equal to the crime, such as “eye for eye” (Ex 21:23–25, NRSV). Some

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22. “But the idealisation of this policy [of rare use of genocide] never entailed a rejection of annihilation as an imperial [Roman] strategy, to be employed selectively whenever it was appropriate. In situations where annihilation seemed necessary, it was described frankly and without any explicit justification.” Myles Lavan, “Devastation: The Destruction of Populations and Human Landscapes and the Roman Imperial Project,” in *Reconsidering Roman Power: Roman, Greek, Jewish and Christian Perceptions and Reactions* (Rome: Publications de l'École française de Rome, 2020), 179–205 at 180, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.efr.4875>. See also Hans van Wees, “Genocide in the Ancient World,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 239–57 at 257, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199232116.013.0013>; and Hans van Wees, “Genocide in Archaic and Classical Greece,” in *Our Ancient Wars*, ed. Victor Caston and Silke-Maria Weineck, *Rethinking War through the Classics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 19–37 at 24.
 23. For an example of an ancient historian gently criticizing genocide as an indication that a ruler has lost self-control, see Polybius, *The Histories*, 5.11.3, as noted in Hans Volkmann and Gerhard Horsmann, *Die Massenversklavungen der Einwohner eroberter Städte in der hellenistisch-römischen Zeit*, 2nd ed., *Forschungen zur antiken Sklaverei*, Bd. 22 (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1990), 75n3.
 24. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.18, in Origène, *Contre Celse* IV, trans. and ed. Marcel Borret, SC 150 (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 54. This quotation here is my translation, but the standard and usually excellent English translation is Chadwick's: Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

Christians tried to demonstrate that these exhortations to retributive violence were so inconsistent with what Jesus prescribed that they must come from a different source than God. In the *Letter to Flora*, a Valentinian gnostic named Ptolemy ranked the law that was “concerned with vengeance and retribution” as the law that was eliminated by the Savior.²⁵ Tertullian also took up the *lex talionis*, but, by contrast, he claimed that laws such as “an eye for an eye” were consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Tertullian thought “an eye for an eye” was designed to limit retribution, and indeed to prevent violence in the first place, and so it was a step along the way toward Jesus’s rejection of retribution.²⁶

Christians also debated the question of God’s wrath and eternal punishment. Irenaeus of Lyons, in the second century, gave evidence that some Christians found God’s punishments in the Old Testament much more severe than in the New. These Christians concluded as a result that there were different gods of the New and the Old Testaments. Irenaeus thought this argument for two gods did not stand up to scrutiny, and he attacked the premise by saying that the New Testament was in fact more severe in its punishments than the Old. He said that in the Old Testament God punished *typice, et temporaliter; et mediocrius*—that is, “symbolically, temporarily, and more moderately”—while in the New Testament God punished *vere, et semper, et austerius*—that is, “really, forever, and more severely.”²⁷ The contrast of “symbolic” and “real” punishment was important to Irenaeus because he thought the punishments of the Egyptians prefigured the later punishment issued to those who did not believe in Jesus.²⁸ Similarly, Irenaeus pointed out that God punished “temporarily” in the Old Testament but “forever” in the New, since, for example, the plagues showed the Egyptians being judged at one historical moment, while the state of punishment after the eschatological judgment was designated as eternal or unquenchable in the New Testament.²⁹ The plagues were also a symbol (*in typo*), in a particular way (*particulatim*), of what was threatened universally (*universaliter*).³⁰ Irenaeus’s overall point was

25. Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora*, 5.4, in Ptolémée, *Lettre à Flora*, trans. Gilles Quispel, SC 24, 2nd ed. (Paris: Cerf, 1966), 62.1–2.

26. “Now there is not here any smack of a permission to mutual injury; but rather, on the whole, a provision for restraining violence.” Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 2.18; ET *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, American ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 3:311. And again, “Thus, whatever Christ introduced, he did it not in opposition to the law, but rather in furtherance of it, without at all impairing the prescription of the Creator.” Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 4.16; ET Roberts and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 3:370–71.

27. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.28.1, in Irenée, *Contre les hérésies Livre IV, Tome II*, ed. Adelin Rousseau, SC 100.2 (Paris: Cerf, 1965), 754, my translation.

28. “[The reader] will discover that the gentiles receive the same plagues universally, that back then Egypt received particularly.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.30.4, SC 100.2:786, my translation.

29. Irenaeus supports this with repeated quotations from Matthew, such as Matthew 25:41. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.28.2, SC 100.2:756–58.

30. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.28.3 and 4.30.4, SC 100.2:760–64, 784–86.

that, as the promise and hope of eternal life become greater, so also the consequences that result when people reject the promise become heavier. Irenaeus said, paraphrasing Luke 12:48, "From those to whom he had given most shall he demand most."³¹

Marcion, like Ptolemy the Valentinian, was an early Christian figure who rejected the violence in the Old Testament as inconsistent with the Good News. Insofar as Origen and others present him, Marcion noticed the apparent contradiction that God sometimes ordered humans to be violent and at other times ordered pacifism. Marcion set up antitheses,³² according to which he posed contrasts of mutually contradictory qualities ascribed to "god" in various biblical texts. He took the difference of what was predicated of "god" as a criterion for distinguishing the "gods" of the different statements. Such a technique allowed Marcion to reject the Old Testament as authoritative and even contributed to a selective reading of the New Testament. Marcion cited with approval only select passages of Luke and only some of Paul's letters.³³ Adolf von Harnack is convinced that one of Marcion's antitheses directly concerned the book of Joshua.³⁴ Origen himself saw Marcion as one of those for whom violence distinguished the true God from the god of the Old Testament. Origen names "Marcion and Valentinus and Basilides," a convenient and recurring triad, as those who proposed "another God of the Law" and who thus were unable to comprehend how a text like the book of Joshua could be interpreted as coming from the true God.³⁵

In his work, Origen continues the pattern shown above, in which Christians questioned the presumption that human patterns of violence were willed by God. Origen expresses tangible disgust at some of the prescriptions of the law of the Old Testament. Some of this disgust is expressed in Origen's simple declaration that a number of

31. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.27.2, SC 100.2:742.

32. Marcion may have even authored a work called *Antitheses*. There is some debate about what the "Antitheses" were in Marcion's theology. Harnack thinks there was a work by this title that contained all of Marcion's teaching and was a fundamental text of his church. *Marcion*, 74–92; ET Steely and Bierma, 53–63. Judith Lieu thinks "Antithesis" was mostly a style of argumentation and perhaps a specific text that served merely as an introduction to his "Gospel." Lieu, *Marcion and the Making of a Heretic*, 283–85.

33. There is some scholarly controversy about whether Marcion's Gospel in fact precedes the canonical form of Luke. For Marcion's Gospel, see Dieter T. Roth, *The Text of Marcion's Gospel*, New Testament Tools, Studies and Documents 49 (Boston: Brill, 2015), 410–36.

34. Harnack derives this from evidence in Origen and Tertullian. See antithesis number 3, in Harnack, *Marcion*, 89; ET Steely and Bierma, 60. The evidence for this claim is perhaps not as compelling as Harnack wants it to be. Harnack's appendix shows that his evidence is just two passages in Origen's *Homilies on Joshua*, 10.2 and 12.1. See Harnack, *Marcion*, "Beilage V," 272*–73*. The pagination of the appendices (*Beilagen*) starts over at 1 in the German edition but adds an asterisk to distinguish the section from the pagination of the main text.

35. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 12.3, SC 71:301; ET Bruce, 123. See also 7.7, SC 71:214–16; ET Bruce, 83. On how frequently Origen mentions the three as a triad, see Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 108–9.

commands God gave in the Old Testament are “not good.” Origen thinks he is not imposing this judgment on the text, but that the Old Testament itself says this. In a section of the *Against Celsus* where Origen deals with Celsus’s concern that God inconsistently both commands and forbids violence, Origen proposes an interpretive principle that he believes Celsus does not understand. Origen especially looks to Ezekiel 20:21–25, where God says that Israel has turned from him, and as a result God gives them “statutes that were not good.” Yet, shortly before this, God says he gave them “statutes that were good.”³⁶ Origen points out the apparent inconsistency and says that he believes that all of the old commands are in fact good, as long as they are interpreted spiritually, that is, in light of Christ. For Origen, the commands of Christ are obviously “acts of virtue” (*andragathēmata*). The commands of the old law, by contrast, are ambiguous. They must be accepted when compatible with Christ’s commands and reinterpreted when they seem to contradict Christ.³⁷

Origen uses this interpretive approach in the *Homilies on Joshua*. He portrays that book’s violence as repulsive and contrasts this to the attractiveness of Christ’s nonviolence. Some of the terms for Origen’s disgust at violence are vivid. In one homily in which he treats some of the most violent passages in the book of Joshua, Origen says right at the start, “We plead with you, O hearers of the sacred scrolls, not to hear with weariness or distaste [*taedio vel fastidio*] those things that are read because the narration of them seems to be less pleasant [*minus delectabilis*].”³⁸ The word *taedium* signifies a kind of weariness or lassitude, and the one paired with it, *fastidium*, literally signifies nausea.³⁹ If Origen is using such language, the aversion that he imagines that Christians feel is strong.

Another way that Origen highlights revulsion at violence is by contrasting what is worthy of God with what seems unworthy: cruelty. Origen believes that God the Holy

36. Ezekiel 20:25 and then 20:11, quoted at Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.20, SC 150:60.19–21, my translation.

37. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.19, SC 150:58.17–22.

38. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.1, SC 71:218; ET Bruce, 85, translation slightly adjusted.

39. The English cognate “fastidiousness” means a sort of pickiness or neatness, but the cognate meaning results from the kind of pickiness that occurs when a person has physical revulsion at certain foods. See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “fastidious (adj.),” <https://www.oed-com.proxy.bc.edu/view/Entry/68445?redirectedFrom=fastidious>. Also see Robert A. Kaster, “The Dynamics of *Fastidium* and the Ideology of Disgust,” in *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 104–33. Thanks to private correspondence with Dr. Michael Hanaghan for the reminder that we do not know the Greek word that Rufinus is translating here. One possibility is a form of Greek *aēdēs*, since in one place Rufinus renders Gregory Nazianzus’s use of the Greek *aēdēs* with the Latin *fastidium*. Compare Gregory’s “in order not to be nauseating,” *mēte aēdēs einai*, with Rufinus’s “in order not to cause nausea,” *neque efficiat*. . . *fastidium*. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 38.6; Greek: *Discours* 38–41, ed. Claudio Moreschini, SC 358 (Paris: Cerf, 1990), 114; Latin: Rufinus, *Orationum Gregorii Nazianzeni novem interpretatio*, ed. Augustus Engelbrecht, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 46 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1910), 92.

Spirit has inspired the biblical writers, and he is wary of an interpretation of the book of Joshua that would directly attribute to God a kind of savagery that seeks the death of entire peoples. Origen claims repeatedly that such an interpretation is not worthy of God. For example, Origen says:

But Marcion and Valentinus and Basilides and the other heretics with them, since they refuse to understand these things in a manner worthy of the Holy Spirit, “deviated from the faith and became devoted to many impieties,” bringing forth another God of the Law, both creator and judge of the world, who teaches a certain cruelty through these things that are written.⁴⁰

If one takes God's command to kill these enemies literally, Origen sets out a dilemma: one must either react to this with disgust and say that this is unworthy of God, or one must see these commands of God's as justifying violence now. Origen says, “If we understand this according to the letter, it will be necessary for us to shed blood incessantly.”⁴¹ Origen holds that the premise—specifically, that the command to kill should be taken literally—is wrong. Origen does not want, on the one hand, to excise the depiction of violence or, on the other, to receive it as an enduring command from God. He wants a middle way that retains the narrative of violence but offers a new reference for the violence. Origen's solution lies in the spiritual interpretation of these violent passages of Scripture.

Apocalyptic-Moral Interpretation of Violence

In his homilies on Joshua, Origen creates an image of an idealized listener.⁴² Such a person seeks not only understanding of Scripture but also practical applications of it. For example, Origen says:

When people hear these things, it is likely they say [*verisimile est auditores dicere*], “What is this to me? What does it contribute to me if I know that those who were living in Ai were conquered, as if similar or even mightier wars either have not been waged or are being waged? Was this the concern of the Holy Spirit that with so many great and noble cities deserted and demolished, the battle of the city of Ai might be ordered written in the sacred scrolls?”⁴³

Origen is concerned with relevance to his listeners throughout the homilies, and his answer to this concern is in terms of the apocalyptic genre. In modern discussions of

40. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 12.3, SC 71:300; ET Bruce, 123. See also 8.1, 4, 6; 13.3; 15.6.

41. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 15.6, SC 71:354; ET Bruce, 149.

42. This is not so different from the concept of the “ideal interpreter” posited by Martens, but, as I note just below, here such a figure is even more vividly represented by Origen's rhetoric, which creatively invents a dialogue with his “hearers” (*auditores*). Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 4–6; and Martens, “Ideal Interpreters,” in Blowers and Martens, *Oxford Handbook to Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, 152–62.

43. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.2, SC 71:220; ET Bruce, 86.

biblical genres, apocalyptic literature involves an unveiling or uncovering of a level of reality that has been hidden behind the events of human history.⁴⁴ Origen does not use the modern term “apocalyptic” for his interpretive approach, but he reads the book of Joshua according to the criteria of the genre, since he claims that the book of Joshua represents an ongoing battle between good and evil, a battle normally hidden from human physical sight. He offers his listeners an imaginative vision of themselves as participating in the battle, whether they are aware of it or not. He provides this context from his first homily on Joshua:

“Every place you have set the soles of your feet will be yours” (Jo 1:3). He [Joshua] had said this to those living at that time concerning the territories of the Canaanites But let us consider what is promised to us in these words. There are certain diabolical races of powerful adversaries against whom we wage a battle and against whom we struggle in this life. However many of these races we set under our feet, however many we conquer in battle, we shall seize their territories, their provinces, and their realms, as Jesus our Lord apportions them to us. For they were once angels; they were glorified in the kingdom of God. Or do we not read that Isaiah says of one of them, “How did Lucifer fall, the one who rose in the morning?” (Is 14:12) That Lucifer, without a doubt, had a throne in the heavens until he became a fugitive angel. If I should conquer him and set him under my feet, if I should deserve that the Lord Jesus “crush Satan under my feet” (Rom 16:20), I shall deserve as a consequence to receive the place of Lucifer in heaven.⁴⁵

One could summarize Origen’s point in three statements. First, Origen claims that there are unseen spiritual powers fighting against Christians. Second, these spiritual powers used to be angels, but they rebelled against God.⁴⁶ Third, Origen claims that Joshua’s promise that the Israelites would seize the territory of the tribes of Canaan is, when understood rightly, “promised to us” in a spiritual sense: by resisting and indeed conquering evil spiritual powers, Christians earn the place of the fallen angels in heaven. Just as the Israelites fought with the Canaanites for the physical land, so the Christians fight with the demons for the right to a heavenly territory.

The physical land has another possible referent since Origen claims that the disputed territory can also be a reference to the Christian’s own soul. In this case, the enemies who occupy the territory are not directly the fallen angels but the vices that corrupt the soul’s integrity:

But let us see what follows in the next place: “And Jesus burned Ai,” it says, “and it was made a field that may never be inhabited.” You see that these things that follow truly pertain more to the truth of a mystery than that of history [*Vides quia haec, quae consequuntur, magis ad mysterii quam ad historiae pertinent veritatem*]. For it is not so much that a piece

44. Brown, *Introduction*, 774–80; and Rowland, “Apocalyptic,” 779–80.

45. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.6, SC 71:108–10; ET Bruce, 33–34.

46. As noted above, Origen says that the Devil is a fallen angel, and Origen claims that the Devil’s status as an angel is already common knowledge among Christians of his day. Forsyth, *The Old Enemy*, 358.

of land is forever uninhabitable, but that the place of demons will be uninhabitable when no one will sin and sin will not rule in any one.⁴⁷

Origen is drawn to a moral interpretation here because of what he considers an absurdity, that a piece of land could in fact be forever uninhabitable. This is, for Origen, an obvious exaggeration meant to point the reader beyond the literal meaning and toward a spiritual interpretation of the destruction that is happening. The spiritual interpretation is, in such a case, not only apocalyptic but what I call apocalyptic-moral. The hidden battle is the struggle of virtue and vice. Demons control spiritual territory, so to speak, so long as human beings fall into sin. Similarly, Origen says in the first homily:

Within us, indeed, are all those breeds of vices that continually and incessantly attack the soul. Within us are the Canaanites; within us are the Perizzites; here are the Jebusites. In what way must we exert ourselves, how vigilant must we be or for how long must we persevere, so that when all these breeds of vices have been forced to flee, "our land may rest from wars" (Jo 11:23) at last?⁴⁸

To assert that the territory is interior in this way is helpful to Origen in dealing with an egregious form of violence narrated in the book of Joshua, which is the "ban," the command to exterminate opponents from the land.⁴⁹ Origen has already established that a primary referent of Joshua's war of invasion is an apocalyptic battle that is taking place in the "territory" of the virtues and vices of human souls. If that is the case, then Origen thinks that the command of extermination makes a lot of sense, because it is now transformed into a command for the moral purity that is fitting for a follower of Christ. Such extermination of vice is something that every Christian should long for:

For in this manner what is said will also appear more devout and more merciful, when he is said to have so subverted and devastated individual cities that "nothing that breathed was left

47. Origen concludes the passage with a reference to his doctrine of universal salvation: "Then the Devil and his angels will be consigned to the eternal fire with our Lord Jesus Christ sitting as ruler and judge . . . until he takes care of every soul with the remedies he himself knows and 'all Israel may be saved.'" *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.5, SC 71:230–31; ET Bruce, 90.

48. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.7, SC 71:110; ET Bruce, 34.

49. A fine short introduction to the "ban," or *ḥērem*, is Susan Niditch, "War and Reconciliation in the Traditions of Ancient Israel: Historical, Literary, and Ideological Considerations," in *War and Peace in the Ancient World*, ed. Kurt A. Raaflaub, *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 141–60 at 144–46. Origen says that the narrative itself provides reasons to hold that physical extermination cannot be the meaning of the text's references to the ban. In one case, Origen rejects a literal reading of the ban because of a simple sense of disproportion: the punishment is far worse than the crime (in this case, the theft of some gold), so the ban cannot be taken literally. He writes, "I do not think so great a force of sin was in that theft of a little gold that it defiled the innumerable Church of the Lord. But let us see if a deeper understanding does not reveal the enormity and severity of the sin." *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.7, SC 71:214; ET Bruce, 82–83.

in them, neither any who might be saved nor any who might escape.” Would that the Lord might thus cast out and extinguish all former evils from the souls who believe in him—even those he claims for his kingdom—and from my own soul, its own evils; so that nothing of a malicious inclination may continue to breathe in me, nothing of wrath; so that no disposition of desire for any evil may be preserved in me, and no wicked word “may remain to escape” from my mouth.⁵⁰

The text appears “more devout and more merciful” as long as one interprets Joshua as presenting the extermination of vice from the human soul of the believer, instead of as a story of the slaughter of human beings who opposed the Israelites. Christians, Origen believes, should want perfection, and perfection entails the elimination of vices and demonic influence from the human soul.

Origen does not explicitly meditate on the reason that the violence in the book of Joshua is fitting for this theme of moral conversion, but there is a very strong association in these homilies between the narratives of violence and Origen’s exhortations to vigorous exertion and persistence. These images of battle are opposed to drowsiness, as Origen says:

But let us not imagine that we may be able to enter into this inheritance yawning and drowsy, through ease and negligence. The wrath of his own race possesses the angel. Unless you vanquish this [wrath] in yourself and cut off all violent impulses of anger and rage, you will not be able to claim as an inheritance the place that angel once had. For you will not expel him from the land of promise by your slothfulness.⁵¹

The images of battle directly accompany Origen’s rousing counsel, that the Christian will not enter into the promised inheritance by taking it easy. There is an angel dedicated to wrath, and “in like manner some angels incite pride, jealousy, greed, and lust and instigate these evil things.”⁵² The path to defeating these spiritual forces and their associated vices is through energetic practices of resistance, symbolized in imagery of battle and warfare.

Pondering a passage in which God commands the Israelites to exterminate their enemies, Origen speaks to a persistence that a spiritual meditation on the text should produce in him: “But may the Lord help me never to neglect his works and never to take away the ‘spiritual sword of the word of God’ from the blood of opposing powers; rather, let me kill them in each of my hearers.”⁵³ That emphatic “never” gives some sense of the sort of endurance he finds inspired in him through these images of warfare. He makes a similar point in homily 1, when he asks:

50. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 13.3, SC 71:308; ET Bruce, 127–28. For similar passages, see 7.4, 6; 8.7; 15.3, 4.

51. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.6, SC 71:110; ET Bruce, 34.

52. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.6, SC 71:110; ET Bruce, 34.

53. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 15.6, SC 71:354; ET Bruce, 150.

In what way must we exert [*laborandum est*] ourselves, how vigilant must we be or for how long must we persevere, so that when all these breeds of vices have been forced to flee, "our land may rest from wars" (Jo 11:23) at last? It is for this purpose that the prophet urges that "we meditate on the Law of the Lord day and night" (Ps 1:2). This continual meditation on the divine word is like some trumpet rousing your souls for battle, so that you do not sleep while the enemy is awake.⁵⁴

Origen's earlier note of exertion and putting aside "ease and negligence" is here taken up again (*laborandum est*), and added to it is this other dimension of the battle imagery, of the need for that exertion to be persistent and continuous.

The stakes are high, both in terms of what the believer might suffer under the dominion of evil spiritual beings⁵⁵ and in terms of the rewards that are on offer if vice is genuinely exterminated. Again, the imagery of battle is important for Origen. It is not only a matter of taking over the land and attaining peace but of enjoying the exultation of triumph. When speaking of the attack on Jericho, Origen brings up Psalm 89:16, "Blessed the people who know the joyful shout." He says, "It [the joyful shout] expresses that sound by which in time of war the army, unanimously raising a loud call together, is accustomed to incite one another to battle."⁵⁶ He goes on to spend a number of paragraphs meditating just on this line of the Psalm, by noting the "harmony of the joyful shout"⁵⁷ and the social nature of the blessings. Some scriptural blessings are for individuals or for small groups, "But here the blessedness is lavish [*profusa*]."⁵⁸ Vices are gone; harmony and unity and joy have replaced them. Origen repeats twice that the "joyful shout" as a line "moves me."⁵⁹

Thus, one can see that Origen interprets the violence in the book of Joshua apocalyptically, in two senses: first, in terms of an eternal heavenly battle between forces of good and evil, and second, by extension, in terms of human participation in that battle through the extermination of vice from the human soul. This interpretive approach is both apocalyptic and moral, and Origen repeatedly associates the book of Joshua and its violence with a tremendous stimulus to moral reform.

54. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 1.7, SC 71:110–12; ET Bruce, 34–35.

55. Origen has a great section on the Old Testament's hatred of slavery and his spiritual interpretation of it as "slavery of the soul." He concludes, "If therefore in this life no one wants to be a slave, but desires to become as free and rich and noble as he can, so that he not only has enough for himself, but may also give to others, shall we then tolerate servitude indifferently in those eternal things that in no measure are about to change?" *Homilies on Joshua*, 10.3, SC 71:276–78; ET Bruce, 112–13, translation slightly corrected.

56. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.2, SC 71:196; ET Bruce, 75.

57. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.2, SC 71:200; ET Bruce, 77.

58. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.2, SC 71:198; ET Bruce, 76.

59. "Quod etiam me permovet dictum." Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.2, SC 71:198; ET Bruce, 75. See also 7.3.

Christ as Nonviolent Apocalyptic Figure

The apocalyptic-moral interpretation outlined above is pervasive and fundamental in the *Homilies on Joshua*, but, for Origen, such an approach is incomplete on its own. Origen does in some other works present what I have called the apocalyptic-moral interpretation. His apologetic text, *Against Celsus*, is a prominent example.⁶⁰ Yet, when looking at the *Homilies on Joshua*, one can see a more expansive vision, in which the apocalyptic-moral interpretation is part of a larger theological project. God repudiates violence in the world through the saving activity of Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh. The violence done to Christ on the cross is the point at which the violent narrative is overturned.⁶¹

As I noted above, the correspondence between Joshua and Jesus is a dominant theme of the homilies, especially through the play on their identical names in Greek. Origen explicitly marks the parallel: "At the coming of Jesus, the walls of Jericho were overthrown; at the coming of my Lord Jesus, the world is overcome."⁶² Origen finds creative ways to link the apocalyptic to the christological theme. For example, the book of Joshua indicates celestial forces participating in the battles to allow the people of Israel to invade Canaan. Before the battle at Jericho (Jo 5:13–15), Joshua encounters a mysterious man with a drawn sword who identifies himself as "chief of the army of the power of the Lord."⁶³ Origen continues:

Therefore, Jesus [that is, Joshua] recognized not only something from God but that which is God [*non solum quod ex Deo est, sed quia Deus est*]; for certainly he would not have worshipped unless he had recognized God. For who else is chief of the army of the powers of God except our Lord Jesus Christ? For every heavenly army, whether angels or archangels, whether powers or "dominions or principalities or authorities," all these that were made through him (Col 1:16), wage war under the chief himself, who is the chief of chiefs and who distributes sovereignty to the sovereigns.⁶⁴

In Origen's interpretation of the passage, Jesus (Joshua) worships Jesus (the Word), and the union of the apocalyptic with the christological is affirmed. For Origen the scene is yet another indication that the book of Joshua is about a battle waged not simply by human actors but by an army led by the one who "is God," the Lord Jesus

60. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 7.22, SC 150:64; ET Chadwick, 412.

61. This interpretive step, linking the apocalyptic-moral interpretation to Christ's cross, is frequently missed. See, for example, a recent book that only quotes passages from the *Homilies on Joshua* that pertain to what Origen's contemporary Christians should do and not to the larger context of Christ's life and work. George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 146–47.

62. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.3, SC 71:202; ET Bruce, 77.

63. "Princeps militiae virtutis Domini." Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 6.2, SC 71:184; ET Bruce, 70.

64. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 6.2, SC 71:186; ET Bruce, 70–71.

Christ. The apocalyptic theme of battle is thus taken up into the theme of Jesus Christ as the ruler and governor of the entire contest.

In addition, one should note the directionality of this scene of the "chief of the army." The apocalyptic "unveiling" note in this section of the text of Joshua is evident enough, because the text is indicating some heavenly involvement in the battles, involvement revealed in a particular way to Joshua. Yet the unveiling has different possible directions. For example, one might interpret this encounter between Joshua and the "captain" as showing God's *particular* intervention in the *particular* circumstances of the *particular* battle being waged at Jericho. Such an interpretation of the unveiling concerns God's providential care for God's people in the events at Jericho. Origen, by contrast, interprets the scene as moving not from God to a specific historical case, but rather in the other direction, from a specific case to a cosmic and Christ-centered providence over history. What is unveiled is the participation of this story in a much larger vision of cosmic battle between good and evil, a vision that for Origen is about Christ. Origen says:

Therefore, Jesus reads the Law to us when he reveals the secret things of the Law. For we who are of the catholic Church do not reject the Law of Moses, but accept it if Jesus reads it to us. For thus we shall be able to understand the Law correctly, if Jesus reads it to us, so that when he reads we may grasp his mind and understanding.⁶⁵

Because Jesus is the central act of God's work for salvation, Jesus becomes the hermeneutical key: interpreting Joshua in terms of Jesus Christ is described as Jesus "reading the law."⁶⁶

Moreover, the salvation that comes from Scripture is not possible without the work of Jesus Christ. If Jesus is the one waging and winning this war, then the conquering of evil in one's own soul is a matter of placing the soul at the disposition of Jesus. Origen says:

And yet, if only my Lord Jesus the Son of God would grant that [victory] to me and order me to crush the spirit of fornication with my feet and trample upon the necks of the spirit of wrath and rage, to trample on the demon of avarice, to trample down boasting, to crush the spirit of arrogance with my feet, and, when I have done all these things, not to hang the most exalted of these exploits upon myself, but upon his cross.⁶⁷

The theme of "hanging them upon the cross" arises repeatedly in these homilies, from the literal hangings and crucifixions represented in the book of Joshua and from the passage that Origen uses to interpret those passages, Colossians 2:13–15. There Paul⁶⁸

65. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 9.8, SC 71:260–61; ET Bruce, 103–4.

66. This centering on Christ is not limited to Origen's work in the *Homilies on Joshua* but pervades his theology and exegesis. Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 217.

67. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 12.3, SC 71:300; ET Bruce, 123.

68. For my purposes here, I remain agnostic about whether Colossians is Pauline or deuterio-Pauline.

writes that God has destroyed a “bond” (*cheirographon*) against us and “nailed it to the cross” (*prosēlōsas auto tō staurō*). Moreover, there is a military triumph against the opposed powers: “leading away the principalities and the powers he exposed them publicly and led them off in triumph upon it [the cross]” (Col 2:15, author’s translation).

Origen makes this passage from Colossians the focal point of two of the most gruesome passages in Joshua, one where Joshua has the king of the city of Ai crucified, and the other where Joshua crucifies five other kings of conquered cities. In the case of the king of Ai, Origen is conscious again of the problem both of the violence and of its reference to the reader.⁶⁹ This anxiety about how his listeners will interpret this section in the book of Joshua concerning the city of Ai surfaces especially frequently in this eighth homily. Origen twice brings up the question of relevance to the listener (8.2 and 8.6), and three times the question of whether the narrative is “worthy” of the Holy Spirit (8.1, 4, 6). In response to these questions, Origen unites the apocalyptic-moral interpretation to one centered on Christ. For example, in an exegesis of one passage (Jo 8:29), Origen is intent on the strange fact that the Septuagint translates the Hebrew *‘al-ha’ēš* as *epi xylou didymou* (which Rufinus renders in Latin *in ligno gemino*).⁷⁰ Origen interprets this directly in terms of Colossians 2:

The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ was twofold. Perhaps to you it seems an astonishing and novel word that I say, “The cross was twofold,” that is, it is twofold and for a double reason. For the Son of God was indeed visibly crucified in the flesh, but invisibly on that cross the Devil “with his principalities and authorities was affixed to the cross.”⁷¹

Origen has made a transposition. It is not the “bond” that has been affixed to the cross but the Devil himself. Origen explains:

Therefore, there is a double reason for the cross of the Lord: the one, by which the apostle Peter says that Christ crucified leaves behind an example for us, and this second one, by which the cross was a token of victory [*trophaeum*] over the Devil, on which he was both crucified and triumphed [*crucifixus est et triumphatus*] . . . [Paul] says that, for him, two opposing things have been crucified: himself as a saint and the world as a sinner. As we

69. This homily including the king of Ai contains the quotation already recounted above, concerning “disgust or distaste”: “We plead with you, O hearers of the sacred scrolls, not to hear with disgust or distaste [*taedio vel fastidio*] those things that are read because the narration of them seems to be less pleasant [*minus delectabilis*].” Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.1, SC 71:218; ET Bruce, 85.

70. Graeme Auld in the Septuagint Commentary Series translates *epi xylou didymou* as “on a forked tree,” and says, “That it was the first Jesus who gave instructions about removing the body from the tree resonates powerfully with the fate of the second [Jesus]. And it may be just that link which has occasioned the LXX plus: that the tree was ‘forked,’ so more clearly anticipating exposure on a cross.” *Joshua: Jesus Son of Nauē in Codex Vaticanus*, Septuagint Commentary Series 1 (Leiden: Brill), 27, 150.

71. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.3, SC 71:222–24; ET Bruce, 87.

said above, this was doubtless a sign of Christ and the Devil. "For we are crucified to the world" (Gal 6:14) at that time when "the prince of this world comes and does not find anything in us" (Jn 14:30); and "the world is crucified to us" when we do not accept the lusts of sin.⁷²

Here is a double crucifixion, and Origen pictures this as a matter of us joining Christ in his crucifixion ("we are crucified") and the Devil being crucified by our rejection ("the world [i.e., "the prince of this world"] is crucified").⁷³

Origen believes this interpretation to be helpful to believers and worthy of the Holy Spirit:

Thus, if in this manner we understand what is written, perhaps the reading will seem worthy [*digna*] of the pen of the Holy Spirit. For what does it profit me [*quid mihi prodest*] if I know that on twofold wood the king of Ai was hanged? But if I know there is a double power of the cross, that both Christ is suspended on it in the flesh and the Devil is conquered on it with his army, my soul will be edified from the understanding of the mystery.⁷⁴

This pulls together the key pieces of Origen's interpretation. What is worthy of the Holy Spirit, and what is edifying (and therefore relevant) to the believer's soul, is the cross of Christ as somehow double. The cross is at the same time Christ undergoing passive suffering and actively conquering the Devil through that suffering. The cross is the place where passivity ("crucified from weakness") and activity ("that he may bring to life") are reversed:

And in order that we may extend still higher the grandeur of the mystery, perhaps a greater thing is that "the knowledge of good and evil" is understood to be in this wood, on which both the good Christ and the evil Devil were suspended. Indeed, the evil one was suspended so that he might perish, but the good so that he might live "by the power"; just as the Apostle says of Christ, "And even if he were crucified from weakness, yet he lives by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4). Not only so that he may have life, but that he may bring to life, because he himself is "the last Adam made into a life-giving Spirit."⁷⁵

The hermeneutical reversal has taken place. Christ suffers violence but conquers; the Devil brings about Christ's crucifixion but suffers defeat. The evil powers are "led off in triumph upon the cross" because of the suffering of Christ who was nailed to the cross. The crucifixion of the king of Ai has a nonviolent meaning because it symbolizes the defeat of evil that takes place not by Jesus's bringing an army to cut down the Devil but by Jesus's obedient suffering.

72. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.3, SC 71:222–24; ET Bruce, 87–88.

73. This passage is a particular focus in Panayiotis Tzamalikos, in his emphasis on Origen's eschatology. Tzamalikos, *Origen: Philosophy of History & Eschatology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 88–89.

74. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.6, SC 71:232; ET Bruce, 91.

75. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.6, SC 71:232–34; ET Bruce, 91–92.

Origen against Violence in His Own Day

Origen sees his Christ-centered, nonviolent interpretation as precluding religious justifications for violence in his own day. Paul Kolbet has illustrated helpfully how Origen sees his interpretation of Scripture generally as part of a program of nonviolent resistance to Roman imperial violence.⁷⁶ I want to focus here on the way that the book of Joshua itself becomes a tool for Origen's program of encouraging this pacifism among Christians.

Origen is aware that the book of Joshua could be seen to be directly endorsing violence. Origen associates a violent use of the book of Joshua particularly with the view that the ancient historian Josephus called the "fourth philosophy" in Judaism, which called for the violent driving out from the land those authorities who did not worship the God of Israel.⁷⁷ Origen first describes the view he opposes:

When that Israel that is according to the flesh read [*legeret*] these same Scriptures before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, they understood [*intellegebat*] nothing in them except wars and the shedding of blood, from which their spirits, too, were incited to excessive savageries and were always fed by wars and strife.⁷⁸

In homily 8, Origen claims that an interpretation that endorses violence is a present problem:

"And they struck them," it says, "with the edge of the sword until not one of them was left who might be saved or who might escape" (Jo 8:22–24). When the Jews read [*legunt*—present tense] these things, they become cruel and thirst after human blood, thinking that even holy persons so struck those who were living in Ai that not one of them was left "who might be saved or who might escape."⁷⁹

It must be noted that Origen in such passages is attributing the attitude of some Jews toward warfare to the entire non-Christian Jewish community. Origen's generalization is unfairly broad. The characterization of Jews as cruel and bloodthirsty would go on to have a terrible legacy in anti-Judaism all the way into the twenty-first century. Such a description is certainly significant and distressing.⁸⁰ Yet for the purposes of this essay, Origen's worry about the use of the book of Joshua to excuse violence is important because of how it is being used to characterize Christianity. In this sense, one can read Origen's attribution of some interpretations to "Jews" as an exercise not so much

76. Kolbet, "Torture and Origen's Hermeneutics," 552–58.

77. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.23, in *Flavii Iosephi Opera*, ed. Benedictus Niese, vol. 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1890), 144.

78. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 14.1, SC 71:314; ET Bruce, 130.

79. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.7, SC 71:234; ET Bruce, 92.

80. For a helpful survey of these issues, see Paula Fredriksen and Oded Irshai, "Christian Anti-Judaism: Polemics and Policies," in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4, *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 977–1034.

in defining some sort of "Judaism" but in defining what is "not Christian." Daniel Boyarin makes a similar reading of Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, a Christian text from the century prior to the time of Origen. For Boyarin, Justin's work is not concerned with what Jews did or did not believe. Boyarin says, "Rather than disputing with anyone or producing a genuinely apologetic text, on my reading Justin is working out in the dialogue form the whatness of Christianity as he would see it."⁸¹ In a similar mode, one can read these passages from the *Homilies on Joshua* as Origen's attempt to show Christians that they cannot themselves use the book of Joshua as an excuse for religious violence.

Origen appeals to Christians within these homilies to condemn all war. He says, "If, therefore, you wish to be made worthy to pursue the inheritance from Jesus and if you wish to claim a portion from him, you must first end all wars and abide in peace, so that it may be said concerning the land of your flesh, 'The land ceased from wars.'"⁸² This pacifism is confirmed in Origen's *Against Celsus*, in which he explains that Christians do not fight in the army because their ultimate commitment goes beyond any particular earthly territory, in care for the church. They do not fight for the empire, but they care about the general welfare of society and pray for it.⁸³ What is more, for Origen Christian pacifism cannot be only a matter of rejecting violent acts; it must be accompanied by freedom from wrath:

For example, if wrath rises up into my heart, it can happen that, either deterred by fear or even restrained by a dread of future judgment, I do not actually do works of wrath. But, [Scripture] says, this is not sufficient. Rather, you must so act that not even the impulse of wrath retains a place within you. For if your spirit boils up and is disturbed, even if the deed is not done, nevertheless the disturbance itself is not suitable for one who fights under the leadership of Jesus The prophet also forewarns about this, looking forward in the Psalms and saying, "Blessed is the one who seizes your little ones and dashes them against the rock" (Ps 137:9), who seizes, namely, the little ones of Babylon, which are understood to be nothing else but these "evil thoughts" (Mt 15:19) that confound and disturb our heart.⁸⁴

Origen shows here the intersection of his interpretive approach and his pacifism. He even uses one of the more famous images of violence from the Bible, Psalm 137:9, to talk about the exact opposite, the very elimination of wrath (*ira*) in the heart.

Origen claims that it is Christ who makes it impossible for Christians to take the violence of the book of Joshua as a reason to commit violence now:

But after the presence of my Lord Jesus Christ poured the peaceful light of knowledge into human hearts, since, according to the Apostle, he himself is "our peace" (Eph 2:14), he

81. Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 28.

82. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 19.1, SC 71:394; ET Bruce, 168.

83. Origen, *Against Celsus*, 8.73–75, SC 150:344–52; ET Chadwick, 509–10.

84. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 15.3, SC 71:342; ET Bruce, 143–44.

teaches us peace from this very reading of wars. For peace is returned to the soul if its own enemies—sins and vices—are expelled from it.⁸⁵

Origen says that Christ “teaches us peace from this very reading of wars,”⁸⁶ and elsewhere Origen speaks of apparent cruelty “discovered to be” kindness,⁸⁷ apparent cruelty in fact being compassion.⁸⁸ He interprets a narrative that presents war and genocide as having a present application to nonviolence.⁸⁹ Origen believes that Paul, in Ephesians 6:12, has provided the key to this reading:

Just as Jesus [i.e., Joshua] said then [*ibi dicebat*] that your war would be against the Amorites and Perizzites and Hivites and Jebusites, likewise Paul also declares to you here [*tibi etiam hic Paulus denunciat*], saying, “Your fight will not be against flesh and blood,” that is, we shall not fight in the same manner as the ancients fought [*id est non sic pugnabimus, sicut pugnauerunt antiqui*]. Nor are the battles in our land to be conducted against humans “but against sovereigns, against authorities, against the rulers of darkness of this world” (Eph 6:12).⁹⁰

Origen clearly rejects the attempt to read Joshua as endorsing violence in Origen’s day, since “we shall not fight in the same manner as the ancients fought.”

The Path of Nonviolent Interpretation: Conclusion

The *Homilies on Joshua* display the theological basis of Origen’s nonviolence. In the first place, these homilies establish the apocalyptic context securely. Origen sees the book of Joshua as narrating participation in a cosmic war between good and evil, and he claims this on the basis of indications within the book itself and in its correspondence with other passages of the Bible. One of the major arenas for human participation in that cosmic battle is the effort to live a moral and virtuous life. Origen frequently interprets the wars in Joshua as symbols of this struggle for virtue both as individuals and as the Christian community. Christ’s own death at the cross is the apocalyptic event that is the foundation for this celestial warfare and all of its symbolism. Origen’s Christocentrism is apparent in many contexts in his writings, but I have shown above just how thoroughly it structures Origen’s apocalyptic thought on the book of Joshua.

85. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 14.1, SC 71:314; ET Bruce, 130.

86. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 14.1, SC 71:314; ET Bruce, 130.

87. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 11.6, SC 71:292; ET Bruce, 119.

88. “This is, therefore, a work of the highest compassion that the heretics accuse of cruelty; what was dimly sketched formerly by the son of Nun through certain individual cities the Lord Jesus accomplishes now in truth through certain individual souls of believers.” Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 13.1, SC 71:304; ET Bruce, 125.

89. “They do not understand that mysteries are dimly shadowed in these words and that they more truly indicate to us that we ought not to leave any of those demons deeply within, whose dwelling place is chaos and who rule in the abyss, but to destroy them all.” Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 8.7, SC 71:234; ET Bruce, 92.

90. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 12.1, SC 71:296; ET Bruce, 120–21. Origen refers to Ephesians 6:12 also at 1.5; 5.2; 11.4; 15.1; and 15.5.

These elements have been established clearly as points of historical and literary interpretation of Origen's work. It is interesting how much these elements of Origen's thought relate to his discomfort with the book of Joshua and its surface narrative, a discomfort that many modern people will recognize. My study of Origen on Joshua shows that the violence in the narrative of Scripture is not solely a modern problem, even though, to be sure, the context of the problem varies across the centuries. In this state of discomfort, Origen could have simply rejected violent texts in Scripture as not from God. As is clear in the case of Marcion of Sinope, the question of what counted as Scripture was only slowly becoming fixed, so rejection of the book was always an option.

Origen believes that rejection of the violent texts of Scripture denies that Jesus's work can be seen transparently in faith even in commands that seem to be not good or in deeds that evoke nausea in the reader. The mystery of Jesus's cross, bringing victory out of tragedy, conquering violent evil through suffering, applies even in the process of interpretation. In a charming moment, Origen says that it is not enough for him to know *that* Jesus Christ saves; rather, he wants to know *how* Jesus saves. He says to his congregation, "I myself, I who teach you, want to learn equally with you."⁹¹ What he directs himself and his listeners to ponder once again is Colossians 2:14–15 and the strange reversal, in which the Christ who suffers violence conquers, and the Devil who perpetrates violence is defeated. For Origen, this vision of the "mysteries" answers the "how" of salvation: "Because with the prince of this world bound, the world was overcome, and the heavenly army gave the joyful shout at the triumph of Christ. Truly, therefore, blessed are the people of the nations, those who know this joyful shout of the heavenly army and who begin to recognize the mysteries and believe."⁹² The cosmic mystery of Christ's "trampling death by death"⁹³ is the answer to the "how" of salvation. That mystery is also the answer to the "how" of the interpretation of violence. Origen does not reject the violent texts of Scripture, because simple rejection is not how Christ's victory over violence works. Jesus is communicated in violent texts not through rejecting but in fact through using them, as paradoxical images of the cosmic victory that is Christ's.⁹⁴

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91. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.3, SC 71:202; ET Bruce, 77.

92. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 7.3, SC 71:204; ET Bruce, 78.

93. *Thanatō thanaton patēsas*. Nomikos Michael Vaporis, *The Services for Holy Week and Easter* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1993), 278.

94. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for *TS* and to generous readers and commenters on earlier versions of this article at Boston College and at Australian Catholic University's Institute for Religion and Critical Inquiry. Special thanks to Dr. John Cavadini for first introducing me to Origen on Joshua.