

ORIGEN’S INTERPRETATION OF VIOLENCE IN THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

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Abstract: If libertarians advocate for a highly restricted use of violence in society, it is incumbent upon Christian libertarians to offer a hermeneutic approach to scripture that is at least compatible with this ethic. Origen of Alexandria’s exegetical method, although very strange from a modern perspective, is a consistent biblical hermeneutic compatible with the libertarian restriction on violence. This article examines Origen’s interpretation of violence in the book of Joshua. I begin by looking at his exegetical method as a whole, which he describes in his *On First Principles* and then move on to his allegorical interpretation of Joshua. Although I do not intend to offer a systematic defense of Origen’s approach, simply introducing the Christian libertarian to Origen’s take on the violence opens up the current Christian debate on the interpretation of the conquest narratives to a hermeneutic world that goes far beyond (without negating) the findings of historical criticism.

Keywords: Origen, allegory, violence, hermeneutics, Joshua, conquest narratives

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there have been a number of different attempts from scholars of multiple disciplines to make sense of Old Testament violence,

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particularly the killing of innocent women and children in books like Joshua.² Although most of these books *refer* to Origen of Alexandria's (185-254 CE) interpretation of Old Testament violence, few of them offer an in-depth look at what exactly Origen was doing when interpreting the violence.³ Given Origen's incalculable influence on theological heavyweights like Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory Nazianzus,⁴ Origen's approach to the violence passages in Joshua represents far more than a single individual's idiosyncratic reading of a "difficult" biblical text. We are essentially looking at the beginning of a hermeneutic legacy that dominated a large swathe of Patristic exegesis for the next several

² For recent Christian attempts to interpret the killing of innocents in the Old Testament, see Gregory A. Boyd, *The Crucifixion of the Warrior God: Interpreting the Old Testament's Violent Portraits of God in Light of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017); Paul Copan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014); C. S. Cowles, *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003); Douglas S. Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?: Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co., 2011); L. Daniel Hawk, *The Violence of the Biblical God: Canonical Narrative and Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019); David T. Lamb, *God Behaving Badly: Is the God of the Old Testament Angry, Sexist, and Racist?* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2011); Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament's Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012); Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012); Thom Stark, *The Human Faces of God: What Scripture Reveals When it Gets God Wrong (and Why Inerrancy Tries to Hide It)* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011); John H. Walton, *Lost World of the Israelite Conquest—Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites* (Wheaton, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017).

³ One welcome exception to this passing curiosity about patristic interpretations of violence is Hans Boersma's *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 105-130.

⁴ Origen's influence was so great among the Cappadocian fathers that Gregory of Nazianzus referred to him as "the whetstone of us all." Similarly, Athanasius refers to Origen as the "labour-loving" individual who argued for the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son. These quotes were taken from John Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*: Vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xvi, and are originally found in Athanasius, *Decr. 27*; Gregory Nazianzen, *Suida Lexicon*, ed. Adler, 3.619.

hundred years.⁵ His second-century interpretation of the book of Joshua is the first place to begin when trying to understand Patristic exegesis of the violence passages due to his wide-ranging influence.

In order to better understand what Origen does in his Joshua homilies, we will begin by first looking at Origen’s exegetical method in book four of his *On First Principles*. We will then look at Origen’s allegorical understanding of the book of Joshua as a whole. After this, Origen’s first and third homilies on Joshua will be analyzed, particularly his allegorical treatment of the characters Joshua and Rahab. Finally, we will look at his understanding of the function of violence in the book as a whole. This article is not so much an argument in favor of Origen’s approach to Old Testament violence (though I admit that I am sympathetic to it, as will be evident throughout the article) as much as it is an attempt to thoroughly understand why and how Origen makes the exegetical decisions that he does.

II. ORIGEN’S EXEGETICAL METHOD

In the second chapter of book four of *On First Principles*, Origen deals with what he deems the incorrect interpretations of scripture offered by heretics.⁶ He spares no harsh words for those who interpret scripture

⁵ As an example of Origen’s far-reaching legacy, patristic scholar Peter Bouteneff points out that Methodius of Olympus, who helped lead the heretical charges against Origen, still implemented Origen’s spiritual interpretation of the scriptures. See Bouteneff’s *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 121.

⁶ Because the fourth book of Origen’s *On First Principles* is only preserved in its fullness in Rufinus’ translation, a very brief word should be said about its accuracy. In Rufinus’ preface, he tells the reader that he has omitted or edited anything he suspects is not Origen’s only with regard to core doctrines like the Trinity. Because Rufinus specified the changes he made, one could assume that had he made great alterations to the content of *Princ. 4*, he would have said so. See “Preface of Rufinus,” in Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2013), lxxix.

“according to the letter,” and even blames the crucifixion of Christ on the failure to look beyond the letter (or the literal meaning of a text):

Seeing none of these things visibly happening in the sojourn of him believed by us to be Christ, they [in this case, the Jews who rejected Christ] did not accept our Lord Jesus, but they crucified him as having improperly called himself Christ. (*Princ.* 4.2.1)⁷

At the very least, Origen believes that a refusal of Christ is the logical outworking of a rejection of the spiritual aspect of scripture. Later in the section, he says that his interpretations are “speculations” and that the Holy Spirit’s words are confined and “shut up within the frail vessel of the common letter” (2 Cor 4:7) (*Princ.* 4.3.14).⁸ He simply does not see a need to provide an interpretation for every single Bible verse in *On First Principles* because it is more important to him *that* there is an allegorical meaning than *what* that meaning is.⁹ He goes on to say that heretics err by interpreting in a literal manner passages that speak of God’s anger or jealousy. Although these heretics would still affirm that these passages are “scriptures of God,” (*Princ.* 4.2.1), they deny that these passages are speaking of the same God proclaimed by Christ. For these heretics, Christ

⁷ This article uses John Behr’s new translation of Origen’s *On First Principles*, 487 (already cited above). In this instance, I am using Behr’s translation of the Greek text. In any instance where the Greek text is not available, I will specify that I am using Behr’s translation of Rufinus’ Latin translation of the Greek.

⁸ Latin text.

⁹ Origen’s understanding of scripture and allegory has been the subject of many monographs over the years, and this article only briefly highlights the most recent work on Origen. For more on Origen’s exegetical method, see e.g. David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001); Henri DeLubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007); Richard Patrick Crosland Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen’s Interpretation of Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), Elizabeth Dively Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture Within Origen’s Exegesis* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill Academic Pub, 2005); 112; Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

came to proclaim “a more perfect God, who they say is not the creator” (*Princ.* 4.2.1). For Origen, a literal interpretation of scripture ascribes to God attributes that He does not possess and leads people into heresies which pit the God of the Old Testament against the God of the New. However, Origen still sees these passages as having an important purpose. He says that these depictions and absurdities in the law are inserted by the Holy Spirit as “stumbling blocks” (σκάνδαλα) in order to direct the reader to the more divine meaning of a passage (*Princ.* 4.2.9). Because of these contradictions in scripture and these troubling depictions of God, we can be directed to contemplate spiritual realities.

Origen goes on to state that scripture will always have a spiritual sense, but there are occasions in scripture where no “bodily sense” is to be found (*Princ.* 4.2.5). The ensuing example he gives of the six stone jars at the wedding at Cana only having a spiritual meaning is perplexing, but he provides other examples throughout *Princ.* 4 that are easier to comprehend. He points to the days in Genesis as not having occurred according to their narrative meaning because there was evening and morning without a sun or a moon (*Princ.* 4.3.1). He then points to the tree in the garden of Eden as another example of a “type” that points “toward certain mysteries.” It seems absurd to Origen that eternal life was literally available by eating “with corporeal teeth” from a tree. After turning to the gospels and asking how it was that Jesus could view all the kingdoms of the world by simply going up a high mountain, he says,

The careful reader will observe innumerable other passages like these in the Gospels so that he will be convinced that with the narratives of things which happened according to the letter are interwoven others, which did not occur. (*Princ.* 4.3.2)

One may, of course, wonder why Origen believes he has the right to interpret passages in this way. From where does he derive his notion of the spiritual sense of scripture? His understanding certainly has

resonances in Alexandrian Judaism, especially Philo,¹⁰ but he draws the main thrust of his argument from the Apostle Paul. He cites Paul's odd use of Deuteronomy 25 in order to prove that Paul believed there was a spiritual sense to the scriptures that went beyond the mere letter. This particular passage in Deuteronomy forbids the Israelites from muzzling an ox when it is "treading out the grain" (Deut 25:4). Origen comments on Paul's use of scripture:

Then explaining this precept, he adds: 'Is it for the ox that God is concerned? Or does he speak altogether for our sake? It was written for our sake, so that he who ploughs ought to plough in hope and he who threshes in the hope of partaking.' And most of the interpretations in circulation, being adapted to the multitude and edifying those unable to understand the higher meanings, have somewhat the same character. (*Princ.* 4.2.6)

For Origen, the most important part of this passage from 1 Corinthians 9 is Paul's assertion that the commandment was written "entirely (πάντως) for our sake" (1 Cor 9:10, NRSV). Neither Paul nor Origen make a concession that God originally gave the commandment for the Israelites. The certainty of Paul that these Old Testament commands were written for us gives Origen warrant for his own certainty. Origen goes on to cite many other passages from Paul to illustrate his point. Paul spoke of Christ as the rock which followed the Israelites in the desert (1 Cor 10:4) and also said that the story of Sarah and Hagar was an allegory (ἀλληγορούμενα) for those born "according to the flesh" (Hagar's son) and those born "through the promise" (Sarah's son) (Gal 4:23-24, NRSV). Paul's use of the participle form of ἀλληγορέω (literally meaning to speak allegorically) in Galatians leaves the door open for Origen to use the word to describe other Old Testament passages.

¹⁰ See Henri DeLubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 182-188.

Origen also sees Paul putting forth a distinction between “Israel according to the flesh,” and “Israel according to the spirit” (*Princ.* 4.3.6-4.3.8). Origen takes Paul’s phrase “Israel according to the flesh” in 1 Corinthians 10:18 to imply there was also an Israel according to the spirit (*Princ.* 4.3.6). Because Paul also speaks of a “Jerusalem which is above” (Heb 12:22-3), Origen postulates that “whatever, then, is either narrated or prophesied of [earthly] Jerusalem...[is to be understood], in accordance with [Paul’s] mind, to have been said of that city, which he calls the heavenly Jerusalem, and of all those places or cities, which are said to be cities of the holy land, of which Jerusalem is a metropolis” (*Princ.* 4.3.8).¹¹ According to Origen, whenever we see a narrative about the earthly Jerusalem, it is, more importantly, a narrative about the heavenly Jerusalem. However, it is not just benevolent things and events that correspond to earthly realities. He also believes that “it is possible” that there also exist malevolent regions like Egypt and Babylon close to the “heavenly Jerusalem and Judaea” (*Princ.* 4.3.10). According to patristic scholar John Behr, this earthly and heavenly correspondence is part of Origen’s “apocalyptic vision created by the intersection of eternity and time, with the former opened up to us in and through the Passion of Christ, while we yet remain in the latter.”¹² We will see Origen work with this notion of earthly and heavenly correspondence later in his homilies on Joshua.

At times, Origen seems to base his exegetical method in more abstract principles. For example, he says that scripture has a threefold sense (a bodily sense, a “soulish” (my word) sense and a spiritual sense) because it mirrors the trichotomy of the human person: body, soul and spirit (*Princ.* 4.2.3). Yet, as we will see with his homilies on Joshua, he rarely treats scripture this way. Instead, he usually draws out a twofold sense of scripture: its bodily and spiritual sense, which correspond to his

¹¹ Latin text. Both the Greek and Latin make the same exact point but Rufinus’ translation helps to make the point more pointedly than the Greek.

¹² Behr, lxxxviii.

conception of “Israel according to the flesh,” and “Israel according to the spirit.” His reasons for doing this are quite simple: He believes St. Paul interpreted scripture in this manner. In order to eventually see exactly how he uses the Apostle Paul as his guide to scriptural exegesis, we must now turn to his interpretation of the book of Joshua with some brief notes on Rufinus’ translation and date.

III. ORIGEN’S HOMILIES ON JOSHUA

Background

Like some parts of *On First Principles*, Origen's homilies on Joshua exist only in Rufinus' Latin translation (other than a few fragments found in *The Philokalia* of Origen and Procopius's *Catena on the Octateuch*).¹³ However, these homilies differ from *On First Principles* in that they are assumed to be a more literal translation from Origen's Greek originals.¹⁴ In Barbara Bruce's introduction to her English translation of the homilies, she cites Annie Jaubert, who translated Origen’s homilies into French, in support of this claim:

[Jaubert] noted constructions that were more dependent on Greek than Latin syntax and a curttness of speech and density of expression that gave the feel of unpolished notes [Rufinus] may have been working from. Her careful comparison with extracts from Procopius's *Catena on the Octateuch* even substantiated the validity of the trinitarian passage in Homily 3.2 that has been considered an interpolation of Rufinus."¹⁵

¹³ Barbara J. Bruce, “introduction,” in Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, ed. Cynthia White (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 17. As stated above, this article has mostly been able to use Origen’s Greek text of *On First Principles*, and we have not needed to refer hardly at all to Rufinus’ translation.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

There are clues within Origen's homilies on Joshua and Jeremiah that lead most scholars to date the Joshua homilies to around 249-50 CE.¹⁶ In his homilies on Jeremiah, Origen speaks of missing the days when martyrdom served to intensify the believer's faith, which leads most scholars to date the Jeremiah homilies to shortly after persecution lessened around 240. In his Joshua homilies, he refers to his homilies on Jeremiah, and there also seem to be indications that Christians were once again undergoing a persecution. These factors point to a date around the time of the Decian persecution (249-50), during which Origen died, which means that his homilies on Joshua are among his last works. To consider the homilies "works" however, does not mean to imply that Origen ever wrote them down. The presbyter Pamphilus, a devoted follower of Origen, reported that Origen gave his homilies extemporaneously while scribes wrote down what he said.¹⁷

The Allegorical Plot Within Joshua

Old Testament scholar H.J. Koorevaar neatly divides the book of Joshua into four sections. In order to put Origen's "allegorical plot" into a simple description, I will use Koorevaar's divisions, then draw out the allegorical meaning from these different divisions. The following divisions are Koorevaar's: Joshua 1:1-5:12 (cross), 5:13-12:24 (take), 13:1-21:45 (divide), 22:1-24:33 (serve).¹⁸ For Origen, the *crossing* of the Jordan river is a figure of baptism (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 4.1). Christians leave behind the things of this world (Egypt) and cross over into a life that was promised to them by Moses, who died (who symbolizes the law). Those about to be baptized are led into the promised land by Jesus (Origen rarely refers to him as Joshua; an exegetical practice that we will look at later). Origen's spiritual

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Pekka Pitkänen, *Joshua* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 25.

interpretation of the *taking* of the land transforms violence against human kings, armies, women and children into spiritual violence against the passions and the demons (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 12.1*). For Origen, the division and inheritance of the land is the inheritance of the kingdom of God that the believer inherits when Christ distributes the “land” to “the true and spiritual Israel” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 18.1*). He differentiates between Moses' distribution of inheritance and Jesus' distribution by highlighting Joshua 14:15, which says that the “land ceased from wars.” When Moses distributed land, Origen notes that the text never says that the “land ceased from wars.” He immediately allegorizes Joshua 14:15, which he takes to mean that the “land of the flesh” can only inherit the kingdom of God when it has conquered the passions. He exhorts his listeners to be “fortified in every respect and surrounded by a wall of continence,” so that they might become a “city of God” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 19.4*). The last division that Koorevaar makes — verses 22:1-24:33 (serve) — is only touched on in the second half of Origen's final homily. When the sons of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built an altar across the Jordan, Origen points to the altar being a “shadow” of the true altar, who is Christ (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 26.3*). He ties the story of the altar to Hebrews 5:6, which states that Christ is “the *true* high priest, according to the order of Melchizedek,” who offers *true* sacrifices on behalf of the *true* Israel (the Church) (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 26.3*).

Origen divides Joshua to correspond to the progression of the spiritual life. We begin our spiritual life by crossing over from death and sin (Egypt) into life through baptism (the crossing of the Jordan), after which we are led by Christ into battle with the passions the demons. If we have successfully rid our flesh (the land) of the passions, Christ distributes to us eternal life (the promised land). Our flesh can then cease from battle and worship the true high priest at the true altar in the heavenly or eschatological Israel of God. If Koorevaar's divisions of the book are *cross*, *take*, *divide* and *serve*, Origen's allegorical divisions might be *baptism*, *struggle* (a struggle against the flesh and the demons), *inherit* and *worship*.

We will now look at a few isolated people and events within Origen’s allegorical plot—particularly Origen’s treatment of Joshua as Jesus in his first homily and his allegorizing of the story of Rahab in his third homily. A close look at these characters and their role within Origen’s allegorical interpretation will help to flesh out how Origen transforms the physical violence in the book into spiritual violence.

First Homily: Joshua as Jesus

In his first homily, Origen introduces the main character of his allegorical plot: Jesus his Lord: “[The book of Joshua] does not so much indicate to us the deeds of the son of Nun, as it represents for us the mysteries of Jesus my Lord” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.3). Although the book of Joshua is literally about a Jewish military leader, for Origen, it is primarily about Jesus, who leads Christians into battle against passions. Origen uses a number of different arguments to support his Jesus/Joshua typology. Although he does not explicitly state it, Joshua and Jesus are spelled exactly the same in the Greek: Ἰησοῦς. Origen also points to the way that Joshua is introduced in scripture, which is as a great military leader, “not as one with whom Moses joined his leadership, but the one to whom Moses granted primacy” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.2). This “primacy” is understood in terms of the New Testament’s fulfillment of the Old Testament. For Origen, the event of Moses’ death symbolizes the death of the law. Later in his homily he says, “‘Moses, the servant of God, is dead,’ (Deut 34:5) for the Law is dead, and the legal precepts are now invalid” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.3). However, Moses is not always a symbol of the passing of the law. This is evident in Origen’s explanation of the raising and lowering of Moses’ hands in warfare (Exod 17:11). As Moses raised up his hands, Jesus:

grows stronger and conquers. When Moses, however, did not lift up his hands but let them sink downwards, the people were conquered by

Amalek. Such people are those to whom Jesus said, 'if you believed Moses, you would certainly believe me.' (*Orig. Hom. Jos.*, 1.2) (John 5:46)

While Moses remains a symbol of the Torah, this symbolism is much more positive. In this case, Moses leads us to Christ. Moses often stood for the Torah when Jesus refers to it in the gospels, and Origen follows Jesus in this regard. The Old Testament's (Moses') words are necessary to lead us to Christ, and if we do not accept them, then neither will we accept Christ's words. Also notable in this passage is the ease by which Origen moves from the Old Testament to the New Testament. He does not see a need to differentiate at all between the Old Testament Jesus (Joshua) and the New Testament Jesus. As we will see below, the best way to make sense of the way Origen moves back and forth between the Old and New Testament is by seeing the earthly Joshua correspond to the heavenly Jesus in the same way that "Israel according to the flesh" corresponds to "Israel according to the spirit."

Origen does make a distinction between the Old Testament Ἰησοῦς and the New Testament Ἰησοῦς in the very next part of his homily, but his reasons for doing so quickly become clear. He draws attention to the fact that Joshua was called the son of Nun (which obviously differentiates him from Jesus Christ who has no human father):

But why is it that when Jesus is first mentioned, the name of his father is not indicated, even in the second or third time? But when his father, Nun, is mentioned, Jesus is not called Jesus, but Hoshea. For his name is written as Hoshea among the list of those who were sent to spy out the land. It seems to me that possibly for the purpose of his office of spying, he is called Hoshea, not Jesus, and he is named the son of Nun. But when he returns after that work is completed and all the people are terrified, and when he alone encourages the people who stumbled and raises up their despair, then he was named Jesus by Moses. Not the son of Nun, but the one to whom Moses had said, "Lead the army and fight with Amalek." (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.2)

The human ancestry of Joshua, or more precisely, of Hoshea, is brought up only to maintain the correspondence between Joshua and Jesus. Joshua is called Hoshea in one particular instance in scripture (Num 13:8, 16) “for the purpose of his office of spying” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.2). Since spying is usually connected with a secret or hidden identity, Origen seems to be implying that Hoshea the son of Nun is a designation concealing Joshua’s true identity as Jesus Christ. When Joshua “encourages the people who stumbled and raises up their despair,” then “he is named Jesus by Moses...not the son of Nun, but the one to whom Moses had said, ‘Lead the army and fight with Amalek’” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.2). Origen seems to be toggling back and forth between the Ἰησοῦς “from below” and the Ἰησοῦς “from above.” It is Joshua or Hoshea who leads “Israel according to the flesh” into battle, while it is Jesus Christ who leads “Israel according to the spirit” into spiritual warfare. This level of correspondence is made clear in the latter part of the homily when Origen discusses the promises that Joshua made to Israel. After “expelling the unworthy inhabitants” from Canaan and other regions, Joshua promises Israel that it will take the land as its inheritance (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.5). When Origen considers “what is promised to us in these words,” he says that Christians are to wage war against “certain diabolical races” and to “seize their territory, their provinces, and their realms, as Jesus our Lord apportions them to us” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.5). This description corresponds perfectly to what he says in *On First Principles* regarding the battles of the heavenly realms. In book four, Origen says that when a narrative describes warfare, many times the events described could not have occurred in a “bodily sense,” so we must see “in what way [the events] are more appropriate to those nations of souls who dwell in that heaven which is said to pass away, or who may be supposed to dwell there even now” (*Princ.* 4.3.10). For Origen, the events of Joshua are not merely symbolic; they are events which actually occur, in some way, in the heavenly realms. Once we understand this, the force of many of his words intensifies.

For example, at the beginning of his first homily when he says that “[The book of Joshua] does not so much indicate to us the deeds of the son of Nun, as it represents for us the mysteries of Jesus my Lord” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 1.3*), he means that it represents the heavenly wars that Christ is fighting with Christians in the spiritual realms. As difficult as this concept is to grasp, one must not interpret Origen with preconceived notions of what the contemporary reader thinks he is saying just because the face value of his words seems so strange to our modern sensibilities.

Implications

Origen’s treatment of the person of Joshua has important implications for his overall understanding of the violence portrayed in the book. The violent Hoshea is transformed into Jesus Christ the warrior of peace. Joshua is not merely the symbolic leader of symbolic wars against the devil and the passions; the book of Joshua describes the actual Jesus Christ as our leader in real spiritual battles. It is important to remember that whether or not Origen always mentions Jesus as the leader in our battle against our own flesh, his allegory is *not* simply an allegory for our individual fight against our passions. It is primarily an allegory of Christ *leading us to victory* against our passions. This “Christocentricity” keeps Origen from both an arbitrary hermeneutic and a semi-Pelagianism. Christ’s spiritual military leadership through his death on the cross is made explicit in one of Origen’s homilies on 1 Kings:

It is necessary for us to have those ‘horns’ that can rightly refer to the points of the cross of Christ, *so that by means of them* [emphasis added] we may destroy and cast out of our soul the powers of the enemy. Once those powers have been laid low and expelled, the vine can be planted within us (*Hom. 1 Reg. 1.10*).¹⁹

¹⁹ This quote was taken from DeLubac, *History*, 214.

It is by the *means* of the cross of Christ that we are victorious in the battles of the soul. Behind each spiritual interpretation of Origen stands the crucified messiah.

Whether or not the historical Joshua actually fought every battle described in scripture does not keep Origen from allegorizing what he believes did not occur. It became commonplace with Diodore of Tarsus (330- 390 CE) to insist that any such spiritual or allegorical interpretation of scripture must be attached to something that actually occurred in history,²⁰ but it is clear that Origen does not think in this manner at all. For example, at the end of his fifteenth homily, he states he does “not see that Jesus the son of Nun took possession of all the earth. For how much of the earth does one take who seizes only Judea?” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.7). Yet he goes on to say that “our Lord Jesus truly took possession of all the earth, because a multitude of believers from all over the earth and out of all the nations flock to him” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.7). Patristic scholar Hans Boersma is correct when he says that Origen did not *disregard* the historical aspect of scripture, but it is difficult to fully agree with Boersma when he seems to imply that for Origen, a historical event *must* occur in order for a there to be a concrete “spiritual reality” connected to it.²¹ Although Origen most often *grants* that the historical events in scripture occurred, it is clear from our discussion of *On First Principles* that it is not always *necessary* for them to occur in order for a spiritual reality to be connected to the “event” depicted in scripture. Although it would be reductionist to deny that there is a spiritual reality present in a historical event that *does* occur according to scripture, we can much more readily account for Origen’s exegetical method by seeing the *words* of scripture as carrying within them a spiritual

²⁰ Cf. John Behr, *The Case Against Diodore and Theodore: Texts and Their Contexts*, OECT (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 66-82.

²¹ Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence*, 125. Boersma writes: “if it is *historical events* that carry a sacramental dimension, then this means that the spiritual reality is present *in historical events*.” It is not clear how Boersma reconciles his statement with his acknowledgment that Origen still ties spiritual realities to events Origen believes *did not occur* in history.

reality rather than the earthly events of which the words speak. As Origen says in *On First Principles*, “wherever the Word found that things that have happened according to the narrative could be harmonized with these mystical events, *He made use of them* [emphasis added]” (*Princ.* 4.2.9). Almost opposite Diodore of Tarsus, Origen states later in *On First Principles* that “with respect to the whole of the divine Scripture all of it has a spiritual meaning, but not all of it has a bodily meaning” (*Princ.* 4.3.5).

Surprising as it may be to the modern reader of Joshua, Origen never deals at length with the question of whether God *did* order Joshua the son of Nun to destroy so many people, but this is probably because Origen sees himself as following Paul’s example of treating the Old Testament as written “entirely (πάντως) for our sake” (1 Cor 9:9-10). Origen seems to dismiss an exhaustive inquiry into what we would probably today call the historical-critical meaning of the book of Joshua at the very beginning of his homily when he says (quoted above) that the book “does not so much indicate to us the deeds of the son of Nun, as it represents for us the mysteries of Jesus my Lord” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 1.3). Given that Origen does not believe that every event in scripture had to occur, we are left somewhat in the dark as to what he thought God did and did not command Joshua the son of Nun to actually do, which is certainly frustrating and understandably off-putting to today’s Hebrew Bible expert. However, for Origen, answering what the book of Joshua originally *meant* would distract from his main exegetical goal, which is to show his listeners how the book is primarily about Jesus Christ, our leader in spiritual battles. Now that we have looked thoroughly at Origen’s treatment of the character of Joshua, we can move on to consider his treatment of Rahab, who is another key player in his allegorical plot.

Third Homily: Rahab

Rahab is introduced in Origen's third homily through reference to the New Testament and a quotation of Matthew 21:32: “Because the scribes and Pharisees did not believe [Jesus], the Lord spoke concerning the baptism of John and said that the ‘prostitutes and publicans who believed’ were baptized. The same thing is fulfilled in the fact that the prostitute received the spies of Jesus and is snatched away and brought back from the destruction of every hostile nation” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 3.3*). Once again, it is striking how easily Origen moves back and forth between the New and Old Testament. There is no sense of chronology. Rahab is grouped in with the prostitutes who believed Christ. In the next section, Origen follows a similar hermeneutic route when he says that the one who is “snatched away and brought back from the destruction of every hostile nation” is the Church. According to Origen, who was most likely borrowing from Rabbinic sources,²² Rahab means “breadth” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 3.4*): “What is breadth, therefore, if not this Church of Christ, which is gathered together from sinners as if from prostitution?” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 3.5*).

Like other Christian writers before him,²³ Origen takes the scarlet cord that Rahab hangs from her window to save her family as a symbol of Christ's lifesaving blood shed on the cross. Sounding similar to Cyprian of Carthage in his ecclesiology, Origen remarks that it is only in the house of the one “who once was a prostitute” that sinners can be saved (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 3.5*). Just as everyone outside of Rahab's house perished, so does anyone who lives outside of the Church. It does not seem that Origen is endorsing or denying an exclusivist or “Cyprianic” ecclesiology; rather, he is allowing the context to dictate his allegorical interpretation.²⁴

²² See footnote 42 in Bruce, *Homilies*, 47.

²³ The interpretation of the scarlet cord as the blood of Christ is found in Clement, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and also Ambrose and Augustine. See Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 72.

²⁴ See footnote 62 in *ibid.*, 50.

Rahab is not only a symbol of the Church, but also of the engrafting of the Gentiles. Rahab, who was not an Israelite by birth, is "joined to Israel up to this very day" (Josh 6:25). While the historical-critical method sees the phrase "to this day" as an etiological device, Origen takes the phrase to imply the present attachment of the Gentiles to Israel (which in other places, he takes to mean the Church):

If you want to see more plainly how Rahab is bound to Israel, consider how 'the branch of the wild olive tree is implanted in the root of a good olive tree.'²⁵ Then you will understand how those who have been implanted in the faith of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are rightly called attached and 'joined to Israel up to this very day' (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 7.5*).

Although Origen's interpretation of the events surrounding Rahab are far removed from an historical-critical exegesis, his interpretation nevertheless highlights the role of identity in the story of Rahab, which is a theme that modern scholars have also pointed out.²⁶ The difference between the modern interpretation and Origen's interpretation obviously rests on the question of *which* identity is being referred to. While the historical-critical method would rightly see Israelite identity being referred to, Origen draws on the story of Rahab for a discussion of Christian identity and sees the story as an illustration of Paul's theology of the engrafting of the Gentiles.

The Function of Violence in the Allegory of Rahab

It should be pointed out that violence is the main component that shapes Rahab's identity within the narrative and also within Origen's

²⁵ Rom 11:17.

²⁶ See Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 25; Ehud Ben Zvi, *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 129-30.

interpretation. Without the extreme violence, Origen’s interpretation of the meaning of Rahab would fall flat. It is only because Joshua commanded the Israelites to destroy everyone except Rahab that she can be a symbol of the Church. If the Israelites would have spared some of the people of Jericho, then Origen could not say, “if anyone wants to be saved, let him come into the house of this one who was once a prostitute” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 3.5*). This sentence would not have any rhetorical force. If we can imagine an alternative literal history where the spies would have told a righteous old man in Jericho to hang a blue cord out of his window and a righteous young boy to hang a black cord from another window so that these individuals would be spared, the red cord of Rahab would have lost its allegorical significance. Origen could not say, “no other sign would have been accepted, except the scarlet-colored one that carried the sign of blood” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 3.5*). We can imagine that Origen would have been able to draw a different spiritual meaning from this sparing of two individuals rather than one, but the meaning would not have been bound up in the exclusivity of Christ’s saving work or the exclusive saving power of the Church. Similarly, the killing of everyone else in Jericho except Rahab highlights Rahab’s faithfulness to God, which is a major point of the allegory for Origen. The “completeness” of the violence enables Origen to set up Rahab as a symbol of the Gentiles whom Christ saves from destruction because of their faithfulness. The identity of a Christian is bound up in a person’s faithfulness to God, and outside of that faithfulness and love of God, there is no salvation.

Now that we have seen the way Origen interprets the violence in two of his homilies, we will look at his interpretation of violence throughout the book as a whole.

IV. ORIGEN AND VIOLENCE

The beginning to Origen's fifteenth homily shows us just how important it was to Origen that the violence in Joshua be taken spiritually. He says

that “unless the physical wars bore the figure of spiritual wars, I do not think the books of Jewish history would ever have been handed down by the apostles to the disciples of Christ, who came to teach peace, so that they could be read in the churches” (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 15.1*).²⁷

Two major points emerge from this beginning to his homily. First of all, Origen's reference to Jesus' statements about “teaching peace” implies that Origen interpreted Jesus to be endorsing at least a quasi-pacifist ethic.²⁸ If he only took Jesus to be speaking of peace within interpersonal relationships, he would not use the passage to argue against the literal interpretation of warfare in Joshua. Origen does not say anything here that implies he finds some wars defensible and other wars indefensible. In his *Against Celsus*, Origen affirms a pacifist approach more explicitly. According to Origen, Jesus taught his disciples that they were never

justified in [murdering] a man even if he were the greatest wrongdoer...no longer do we take the sword against any nation, nor do we learn [the art of] war any more, since we have become sons of peace...through Jesus who is our leader.²⁹

The second point that emerges from Origen's statement in his fifteenth homily is that he firmly believes that the disciples read the wars in Joshua as figures referring to spiritual realities.³⁰ As he said, if they did not interpret the wars figuratively, they would not have believed the book of Joshua should be part of the Christian scriptures. He reiterates this point again a few sentences later when he says that the Apostle Paul approved

²⁷ As was mentioned above, it is uncertain how many of these “spiritual wars” also had physical correspondents, according to Origen.

²⁸ For more on Origen's pacifism, see George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 136.

²⁹ These quotes are taken from the translation of *Contra Celsum* 3.8 and 5.33 in *ibid.*, 136.

³⁰ I will argue below that Origen does not just see the wars as “figures” but as corresponding to heavenly realities.

of reading the wars of Joshua in churches only because they were figures of spiritual wars (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.1).

Origen is only reiterating what he made clear in homily 14, where he says, “when that Israel that is according to the flesh read these same scriptures before the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, they understood 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” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 14.1). This text coincides with statements he made in *On First Principles* that the scriptures were not understandable until the advent of Christ (*Princ.* 4.1.6). What he says here however is more polemical. He argues that not only did the Jews misunderstand the scriptures before the advent of Christ, but their literal interpretation of the wars of Joshua actually led them to savagery. For Origen, those who interpret the wars on the literal level are actually “incited” to hurt each other.

Moving back to the introduction to his fifteenth homily, we can see a hint of the paradigm in which he interprets the violence. He continues:

in short, knowing that now we do not have to wage physical wars, but that the struggles of the soul have to be exerted against spiritual adversaries, the Apostle, just as a military leader, gives an order to the soldiers of Christ, saying, ‘Put on the armor of God, so that you may be able to stand firm against the cunning devices of the devil.’ (*Eph* 6:11) (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.1)

He links the nations that physically fought against Israel to the “swarms of opposing powers” in the heavens (demonic forces) and links the historical Israel to the “Lord’s Church, which is the spiritual Israel” (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.1). Once again, this language brings to mind his discussion of “Israel according to the flesh” and “Israel according to the spirit,” and the correspondence between an earthly and heavenly realm in *On First Principles* (*Princ.* 4.3.8- 4.3.9).

As is evident from this passage, the Apostle Paul helps to re-contextualize the violence in Joshua for Origen. This is not the first time nor the last that Origen applies the military imagery in the New Testament to the warfare in Joshua. In his fifth homily, he quotes Paul extensively in order to make his case for a figurative interpretation of Old Testament war:

Do not learn from me but again from the Apostle Paul, who teaches you saying, "For our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in the heavens" (Eph 6:2). For those things that were written are signs and figures. For thus says the Apostle, "For all these things happened to them figuratively, but they were written for us, for whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Cor 10:11). If therefore, they were written for us, come on! Why delay? Let us go forth to the war. (*Orig. Hom. Jos. 5.2*)

Although it is possible that Origen is linking together the Pauline ideas of the spiritual nature of the Old Testament law and spiritual warfare in order to form the basis for his allegorical interpretation of Old Testament wars, Origen may be doing something much simpler. When Paul says that "our battle is not against flesh and blood," Origen may take the negation in Paul ("not against flesh and blood") to be specifically referring to the battles of the Old Testament. In other words, unlike the physical wars in the Old Testament, our battle is now against our own flesh and against the demons.

Origen may see Ephesians 6:12 as Paul's endorsement of reading the wars of the Old Testament allegorically. He may only use the verse from Paul in 1 Corinthians ("All these things happened to them figuratively....") to support what he already thinks Paul made clear in Ephesians. If this is true, Origen does not see himself as linking together two separate Pauline ideas. If he takes the Apostle Paul's battle "against flesh and blood" as primarily a reference to Old Testament warfare, it makes sense why he

says that Paul saw it as necessary to read books like Joshua in a spiritual manner when in the churches (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.1). Origen most likely believed that Paul thought of these wars as invaluable explanations of spiritual warfare and that such explanations could not be found anywhere else but in the Old Testament.

From looking at Origen's fifteenth and fifth homilies, two main sources for his allegorical treatment of the book of Joshua emerge: Jesus and Paul. Christ provides the ethical basis for Origen's hermeneutic. Because Christ taught that it was wrong to kill regardless of circumstances,³¹ the narratives of violence in the Old Testament cannot reveal the true character of God at the literal level (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.1). Paul provides the symbolic grid to make sense of Joshua on a spiritual level with his many verses about spiritual warfare.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Some very important points emerge from looking at Origen’s exegetical strategies in *On First Principles*, then watching Origen put these strategies to use in his Joshua homilies. We saw that narratives of violence, like the stories we find in Joshua, sometimes have no bodily sense (*Princ.* 4.2.5) and point to higher spiritual realities (*Princ.* 4.2.9). Origen takes the Apostle Paul’s statement that scripture is “entirely (πάντως) for our sake” (1 Cor 9:9-10) to imply that all scripture has a spiritual meaning and therefore has a relevant meaning for all Christians at all times. Origen also sees Paul as making a distinction between Israel “according to the flesh” and “Israel according to the spirit”; the Jerusalem from below and “the Jerusalem above.” It is the correspondence between these two “realms” that helps Origen work out his allegorical interpretation of the book. Joshua (or Hoshea) is the earthly leader of Israel who corresponds to the heavenly leader of the Church. Rahab identifies as a true Christian

³¹ *Contra Celsum* 3.8 and 5.33 in Kalantzis, 136.

because she was faithful to Jesus and his armies. Her life as a prostitute and then protector of Joshua's spies makes her an ideal figure of the Church, since it is only in her house (the house of the prostitute) that one can be saved. Unlike some modern apologists, Origen does not downplay the extent of the violence in the narrative.³² As we saw before, he may question whether some of the events narrated actually occurred, but he nevertheless accepts that the Holy Spirit inspired the writers to include such violent events. Rather than downplay the violence, he *transforms* the violence into spiritual violence so that it constitutes Jesus' war *in us* against the passions and the "swarms of opposing powers" in the heavens (*Orig. Hom. Jos.* 15.1). It is only *because* Origen takes the violence in the narrative at face value that the imagery of Rahab as the Church "works." If the violence had not been total, there would have been other avenues by which we could be saved. Origen takes his framework for interpreting the violence from the Apostle Paul, who said that "our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers...against spiritual wickedness in the heavens" (Eph 6:2). For Origen, the "battles of flesh and blood" refer to the Old Testament wars where the "Israel of the flesh" wars against earthly armies. Our new battles against "spiritual wickedness in the heavens" are the battles of the "heavenly Jerusalem"; of "Israel according to the spirit." Jesus our Lord kills the passions in us, leading us into the promised land so that we can take ahold of the red cord of Jesus' blood and remain safe in the house of the Harlot till Christ tramples every enemy under his feet (1 Cor 15:25) and comes triumphantly to save the Harlot and those who are in her house.

³² See Paul Copan, and Matt Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2014), 61-109. Copan and Flannagan point out instances where they believe hyperbolic language is being used. They offer evidence of such hyperbolic language by pointing out instances in the text where a group that is said to be entirely annihilated shows up later as if nothing had occurred (for instance, compare Joshua 10:39 with 11:21).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to argue *in favor* of Origen’s interpretation of Joshua, simply presenting it shows the reader an entire hermeneutical world that modern historical criticism has all but forgotten. Origen’s interpretation makes the book of Joshua entirely relevant to the modern Christian life while offering a unique way of maintaining the unity of scripture and recontextualizing the troubling violence throughout Joshua. If the book is about Jesus our Lord conquering the powers of heaven that oppose us and allowing us a safe-haven in the Church, it becomes easier to see how all of scripture could be written “entirely for our sake” (1 Cor 9:9-10).