

RESEARCH ARTICLE

“We Slay Demons”: Moral Progress and Origen’s Pacifism

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This article evaluates Origen’s criticism of Christian participation in the Roman army in relation to two prominent themes in his writings: the moral progress of the Christian and the role of demons in God’s providence. I argue that, for Origen, to be a Christian is to be a soldier, albeit one whose adversaries are not human combatants, but the Devil and his angels. The battle is won when Christians refrain from sinning, attaining moral perfection through their study of the scriptures, and adoption of ascetic practices. By avoiding the physical battlefield, Christians remain unsullied by the passions that inflame the soldier, enabling them to fight demons more effectively. But this spiritual combat is not without risks to the physical body. As Origen’s *Exhortation to Martyrdom* attests, execution could be the providentially ordered outcome of a Christian’s combat against demons. Origen presents the violent persecution of Christians as consistent with divine providence and martyrdom as a gift of God to the church. His opposition to Christian military participation is rooted neither in a wholesale rejection of warfare nor a deep respect for embodied life, but in his concern for human moral progress—progress that could be advanced by providentially sanctioned violence.

Keywords: Origen; Demons; Early Christianity; Warfare; Pacifism

Stretching back to the Reformation, one stream of scholarship investigating Christianity’s early centuries has claimed that, prior to the ascension of Constantine, pacifism was either the official or the predominant position of the Christian church.¹

¹Examples include Cecil J. Cadoux, *Early Christian Attitudes to War: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics* (London: Headley, 1919; reprint, New York: Seabury, 1982); Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes Toward War and Peace* (Knoxville, TN: Abingdon, 1960); Jean-Michel Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes toward War, Violence, and the State*, trans. Alan Kreider and Oliver Coburn (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); John Howard Yoder, *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, eds. Theodore J. Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009); A. James Reimer, *Christians and War: A Brief History of the Church’s Teachings and Practices* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 55–65; Ronald J. Sider, *The Early Church on Killing: A Comprehensive Sourcebook on War, Abortion, and Capital Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012); and George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and* © The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of American Society of Church History. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

A handful of passages in the writings of Origen (c. 185–254 CE), which are critical of Christian military participation, feature prominently among the evidence cited in support of this position. Origen’s reasons for criticizing Christian soldiers are, however, contested. John Helgeland and Peter J. Leithart have argued that Origen primarily opposed the participation in pagan sacrifice required of soldiers in the Roman army, an objection later resolved by its Christianization in the fourth century.² Ronald J. Sider disagrees, contending, “Origen’s primary reasons for opposing Christian participation in war are that Christians do not take vengeance on their enemies, but seek to love their enemies and follow Christ’s teaching.”³ Similarly, George Kalantzis attributes to Origen “an ardent defense of the non-violent character of the Christian faith and practice,”⁴ while Jean-Michel Hornus counts Origen among the early Christians whose opposition to warfare was based “on a fundamental decision: to reject violence and to respect life.”⁵

In this article, I evaluate Origen’s statements regarding Christian military participation in relation to two prominent themes in his writings: the moral progress of the Christian and the providential role played by demons in that process. I argue that a consideration of Origen’s criticism of Christian military participation in light of his theological anthropology—that is to say, his understanding of the origin, nature, and destiny of human beings⁶—reveals that his objections cannot be reduced either to a rejection of Roman idolatry or to a condemnation of violence motivated by respect for human life. For Origen, to be a Christian *is* to be a soldier, albeit one whose enemies are not human combatants but demons, the “principalities and powers,” “against whom we maintain a struggle and wrestle.”⁷ To battle against demons is in no way a metaphor; the fact that a Christian’s enemies were not human soldiers did not make them any less physically present, nor any less real.

I begin by providing a brief account of Origen’s theory of the relationship between humans and demons. As rational beings, demons share a common origin with humans and play a crucial role in stimulating their moral progress. I then turn to the practicalities of battling against demons as addressed in by Origen in his *Homilies*, in which he instructs Christians to defend against demonic attacks via skillful biblical exegesis and

Military Service (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012). Studies that have challenged the pacifist interpretation of early Christianity include John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); John F. Shean, *Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010); Despina Iosif, *Early Christian Attitudes to War, Violence, and Military Service* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2013); and Valerie A. Karras, “Their Hands Are Not Clean: Origen and the Cappadocians on War and Military Service,” in *Orthodox Christian Perspectives on War*, eds. Perry T. Hamalis and Valerie A. Karras (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 125–158.

²John Helgeland, “Christians and the Roman Army A.D. 173–337,” *Church History* 43, no. 2 (June 1974): 149–163, 200; Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2010), 266–273.

³Sider, *The Early Church on Killing*, 68.

⁴Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 134.

⁵Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight*, 16.

⁶I owe the concept of theological anthropology to Benjamin W. Blosser, *Become Like the Angels: Origen’s Doctrine of the Soul* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009). See also J. José Alivar’s overview of the concept, “Origen’s Theological Anthropology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Origen*, eds. Ronald E. Heine and Karen Jo Torjesen (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022), 373–392.

⁷Origen, *On First Principles* 1.5.2. I quote the Latin text and English translations of *Origen: On First Principles*, ed. and trans. John Behr (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 95.

ascetic practices. As we shall see, for Origen, to battle against demons was not merely a figure of speech denoting a struggle within the mind of the Christian. Rather, as Gregory A. Smith has demonstrated, “It is very hard, and very important, to remember that ancient demons had bodies.”⁸ Fighting demons thus carried with it the very real possibility of the mortal body of the Christian suffering pain, injury, and even death. In his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen asserts that a violent and painful death could be the providentially ordered outcome of a Christian’s combat against demons. In the final section of the article, I read Origen’s criticism of Christian participation in the Roman army in the context of the Christian war against the demons. While Origen certainly opposed the idolatry inherent in Roman military campaigning and affirmed Jesus’s teachings against vengeance and self-defense, I argue that his opposition to Christian military service is primarily rooted neither in his disdain for Roman idolatry nor in respect for the value of human life. Rather, Origen objects to Christians soldiering on Rome’s behalf because fighting on physical battlefields impeded their success as soldiers in the more consequential war against the demons.

The Opposing Powers and Moral Progress

Like many of his contemporaries working in the Platonic philosophical tradition, Origen was deeply interested in questions concerning the provenance of human souls and the possibility of human salvation.⁹ His thinking on these matters finds expression throughout his corpus but is most directly addressed in his treatise *On First Principles*.¹⁰ At its outset, Origen draws a distinction between doctrines clearly taught by the scriptures or church tradition and matters open for further investigation.¹¹ Among the former he includes the doctrine that “every rational soul possesses free will and volition [*omnem animam esse rationabilem liberi arbitrii et uoluntatis*]” and that human souls are engaged in “conflict against the devil and his angels, and opposing powers [*contrarias virtutes*], because they strive to burden it with sins.”¹² No clear statement is set forth, however, on the question of how human souls come into being. Similarly uncertain is the provenance of the devil and his angels, whose existence is nevertheless

⁸That demons possessed bodies of a special kind was widely accepted by both Christian and Hellene thinkers in late antiquity. Commenting on Porphyry’s *On Abstinence* 2.39, Gregory A. Smith writes that demons have “bodies made of pneuma, which is to say bodies made of air (or something very like it, only thinner). Like the air, this pneumatic cloak was usually invisible—but not always, for it also enabled demons to change shape, even to be seen.” Gregory A. Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 479–512, here 486.

⁹On conceptions of the soul’s embodiment and salvation among Platonist philosophers contemporary with Origen, see Heidi Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies and Ritual Authority: Platonists, Priests and Gnostics in the Third Century CE* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 29–37.

¹⁰Already before his death, *On First Principles* was a flashpoint in the debates surrounding Origen’s orthodoxy. See Peter W. Martens, “The Modern Editions of *Peri Archōn*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 303–331, here 305. Unfortunately, the most complete version of the text extant is the Latin translation of Rufinus, who admits to having deleted statements he judged to be corruptions inserted into the text by Origen’s enemies, as well as to adding clarifying comments to sections he deemed obscure. Estimations of the reliability of Rufinus’s translation vary among scholars, although most concur that he preserves much of Origen’s thought, if not his actual words. For recent summaries of this debate, see Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, xix–xxiii; Martens, “Modern Editions of *Peri Archōn*,” 306–313.

¹¹Origen, *Princ.*, *Preface* 10.

¹²Origen, *Princ.*, *Preface* 5, English translation in Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, 16–17.

affirmed by the scriptures. Clear instruction on these matters being lacking, Origen offers his own (admittedly speculative) account of the origins of humans and of demons.

Humans, angels, and demons, Origen proposes, are all rational beings who share a common nature, created for the purpose of worshipping their creator but endowed with free will to pursue either what is holy or what is wicked.¹³ What distinguishes an angel from a demon—or a human—is the degree to which each participates in the divinity of the Trinity.¹⁴ In the words of Rufinus's translation, "But, if they are negligent and careless about such participation, then each one, by fault of his own slothfulness, becomes—one more quickly, another more slowly, one to a greater extent, another to a lesser—the cause of his own lapse or fall."¹⁵ Most rational beings have fallen from their created state of beatitude.¹⁶ As the ardor of their initial love for God became sluggish or satiated, these rational beings transformed into souls through a process likened to cooling, which was thought to be indicated by the similarity of the Greek word for soul, *psychē*, with the word for cold, *psychros*.¹⁷ Those beings who have sustained their love for God most fully are now angels.¹⁸ Others have fallen from their original state of blessedness, but not "irremediably"; rather, "reformed by instruction and salutary discipline, they may be able to return and be restored to their former state of blessedness."¹⁹ It is from these beings, Origen speculates, that the human race has been established.²⁰ Still other rational beings, however, have embraced evil so fully that they have become unworthy of God's chastening attention.²¹ These, Origen proposes, are the devil

¹³On rational beings, see Origen, *Princ.* 1.5.1–1.6.4. That rational beings share a common nature is asserted in *Princ.* 1.8.2. The capacity of rational beings to choose good or evil is a key component of Origen's anthropology. See Origen, *Princ.*, *Preface* 5; 2.9.6; 3.1.3.

¹⁴Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.2. On the concept of angelic participation, see Adam Ployd, "Participation and Polemics: Angels from Origen to Augustine," *Harvard Theological Review* 110, no. 3 (July 2017): 421–439, here 424–427. Origen's insistence on the free will of rational beings opposes the claim that God has created intellects of various natures, some inherently superior, other inherently inferior, a position he attributes to Marcion, Valentinus, and Basilides. See Origen, *Princ.* 1.5.5.

¹⁵Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.2. English translation in Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, 109.

¹⁶The pre-existence of the soul has long been one of the most controversial teachings ascribed to Origen and remains a point of disagreement. For a recent review of the scholarship on this contested doctrine, see Blosser, *Become Like the Angels*, 157–163.

¹⁷*Princ.* 2.8.3. Heidi Marx-Wolf observes that Origen draws on "key Platonic ideas that associate divinity with fire. In the cosmos of the Timaeus and Heraclitus, for instance, divinity was associated with the element of fire." Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies*, 45. The question of whether Origen understood intellects to have been created initially as embodied or as incorporeal beings remains open. His exact teaching regarding the fall of rational creatures and their subsequent embodiment is contested in the translations of Rufinus and Jerome. See *Princ.* 3.5.4, Jerome, *Ep.* 124.9.3–5. On the current debate, see Peter W. Martens, "Origen's Doctrine of Pre-Existence and the Opening Chapters of Genesis," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 16 (2012): 516–549; and the reply of Mark Edwards, "Origen in Paradise: A Response to Peter Martens," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 23 (2019): 163–185.

¹⁸It is debated whether Origen believed that the highest order of angels, or perhaps even all angels, escaped the fall initiated by Satan. See Blosser, *Become like the Angels*, 211. On the taxonomy of rational beings developed by Origen in *On First Principles*, see Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies*, 43–49.

¹⁹Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.2. English translation in Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, 111.

²⁰Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.2.

²¹Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.3. Jerome's translation differs from Rufinus's here, attributing to Origen the teaching that demons could theoretically regain their angelic status: "Any rational creature can come to be out of any other, not once or suddenly but repeatedly: we may become angels and, if we live negligently, demons, and, in turn, demons, if they desire to possess virtues, may attain to the angelic dignity." Jerome, *Ep.* 124.3.6 in

and his angels, who no longer pursue their own reformation but exist as adversaries for humans pursuing moral progress. As a result, the human mortal life “is full of conflicts and struggles, for opposing and attacking us are those who have fallen from a better condition without looking back, who are called the devil and his angels and the other orders of wickedness, which the Apostle names amongst the opposing powers [*contrariis virtutibus*].”²²

The purpose of human life, then, is to return to the state of union with and contemplation of God that is both the soul’s origin and its *telos*. Demonic temptation functions as a goad, spurring humans out of complacency and toward the soul’s perfection.²³ The assaults of the demons therefore constitute part of God’s providential plan for human salvation. The question of whether Origen taught that demons, like humans, would eventually be restored to beatitude as part of a final *apokatastasis* has long been contested²⁴; his detractors condemned him for teaching that even Satan himself would ultimately be saved, while Rufinus maintained that Origen taught no such thing.²⁵ Whatever his views on the final fate of the opposing powers, in the present age, demons are understood by Origen to be rational beings whose attacks on human souls function providentially to spur their moral progress. As David Brakke observes, “Origen treated demons primarily in terms of their resistance to the human being’s efforts to love God and do the good . . . demons paradoxically facilitated that progress by providing the resistance they had to overcome.”²⁶

“He Teaches Us Peace by This Very Reading of Wars”

As presbyter in the church at Caesarea Maritima, Origen had a clear message for the novice Christians who gathered to hear his homilies²⁷: confessing Christ is fundamentally a declaration of war: “You must know that when you decide to keep the command

Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, 114. On the early intra-Christian debate over the mutability of rational beings, see Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Ancient Christianity* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013), 29–57.

²²Origen, *Princ.* 1.6.3. English translation in Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, 113. See also Origen, *Princ.* 3.2.

²³On this theme, see *On Prayer* 29.17, in Origen, *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979).

²⁴See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 137–213, 384–391.

²⁵Jerome, *Ep.* 124.3.5, attributes to *Princ.* 1 the statement, “The demons themselves and the rulers of darkness in any world, if they desire to turn to better things, become human beings and thus revert to their original beginning, in order that, being disciplined in human bodies through punishments and torments, whether they bear them for a long or short time, they may reach again the exalted heights of the angels.” Rufinus’s translation of *Princ.* 1.6.3 reads, “But whether any of these orders, which live under the rule of the devil and obey his malice, will be able in some future age to be converted to goodness, through the faculty of free will which is in them, or whether persistent and inveterate wickedness might be changed, by habit, into a kind of nature, you, reader, must judge.” English translations in Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, 113.

²⁶David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 13.

²⁷Approximately 300 homilies survive from Origen’s time as a preacher in Palestine. Most of Origen’s homilies are extant only in Latin translation. In 2012, twenty-nine previously lost Greek homilies on Psalms were discovered in a twelfth-century Greek manuscript, *Codex Monacensis Graecus* 314. See *Origenes XIII: Die Neuen Psalmenhomilien. Eine kritische Edition des Codex Monacensis Graecus* 314, eds. Lorenzo Perrone et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

of this precept and reject all other gods and lords and have no god or lord except the one God and Lord, you have declared war on all others without treaty [*hoc est bellum sine foedere denuntiaste omnibus ceteris*].²⁸ Candidates preparing for baptism were required not only to desist from pagan worship, but to embark on a process of transformation that would reorient their desires away from created things and toward union with God.²⁹ To accomplish this goal, catechumens undertook a program of training (*askēsis*) involving both intensive ascetic disciplines and instruction in the scriptures' proper spiritual interpretation.³⁰ To an outside observer, the training required of catechumens may have appeared more bookish than bellicose. Yet Origen consistently described the gatherings he addressed as a kind of preparation for warfare.

Origen describes two different kinds of battles, and two kinds of opponents, that the newly recruited Christian soldiers will face:

We have often said the battle of Christians is twofold. Indeed, for those who are perfect, such as Paul and the Ephesians, it was not, as the Apostle himself says, "a battle against flesh and blood, but against principalities and authorities, against the rulers of darkness in this world and spiritual forces of iniquity in the heavens." But for the weaker ones and those not yet mature, the battle is still waged against flesh and blood, for those are still assaulted by carnal vices and frailties.³¹

As they begin their training toward perfection, new Christians must first gain mastery over their flesh and blood, which Origen takes to indicate the inordinate desires that arise as a result of their embodiment. The body, Origen insists, is not itself evil. Rather, its manifest limitations spur the soul on in its pilgrimage of return to its divine source. In the words of Peter Brown, "For Origen, the fall of each individual spirit into a particular body had not been in any way a cataclysm; to be placed in a body was to experience a positive act of divine mercy."³² Life in the body may be "burdensome" but, as Benjamin Blosser observes, Origen understands embodied life in the physical cosmos to be "not a penitentiary, but a gymnasium," a training ground that prepares

²⁸Origen, *Homily on Exodus 8.4*. Latin text in Origène, *Homélie sur L'Exode (Sources Chrétiennes 321)*, ed. and trans. Marcel Borret (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1985); English translations adapted from those of Ronald E. Heine in Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

²⁹On the requirements of the catechumenate in Origen's context, see Joseph T. Lienhard, Introduction, *Origen's Homilies on Luke* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), xx.

³⁰Susanna Drake observes that exegesis is described by Origen as a kind of *askēsis*, and that both are presented in violent terms: "The spiritual interpretation operates hand-in-hand with a bodily training whereby one 'puts to death' one's members from the dangerous passions of 'lust' and 'rage.' Allegorical reading is, for Origen, an *askēsis* unto itself." Susanna Drake, "Origen's Veils: The *Askēsis* of Interpretation," *Church History* 83, no. 4 (Dec. 2014): 815–842, here 835. J. Albert Harrill points out that Origen's description of exegetical inquiry into the "body" of scripture employs the vocabulary of the torturous cross-examination required of slaves in the Roman legal system. See J. Albert Harrill, "'Exegetical Torture' in Early Christian Biblical Interpretation: The Case of Origen of Alexandria," *Biblical Interpretation* 25, no. 1 (Feb. 2017): 39–57.

³¹Origen, *Homilies on Joshua 11.4*. Latin text in Origenes: *Werke mit deutscher Übersetzung Band 5: Die Homilien zum Buch Josua*, trans. Marietheres Döhler and Alfons Fürst (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020); English translations are revised from Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

³²Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 164. See also Origen, *Princ.* 3.5.4.

catechumens to face yet more fearsome foes.³³ In *Hom. Ex.* 11, Origen interprets Exodus 14:14, “The Lord will fight for you and you shall hold your peace,” to suggest that demons are too dangerous for immature Christians to oppose directly. Connecting this verse to 1 Corinthians 10:13 (“He does not permit us to be tempted above that which we are able,”) and Mark 3:27 (“Nor does he allow weak men to encounter ‘the strong man’”), Origen concludes that, during the initial stage of the catechumen’s instruction, God himself takes up the battle against demons on behalf of believers.³⁴ Mature Christians progress to battle the host of demonic enemies listed in Ephesians 6:12, however their continued embodiment prevents them from fully transcending the temptations of the flesh, with which the demons work in tandem.³⁵

In his *Homilies on Joshua*, Origen delivers a series of sermons that serve as basic training for the Christian soldier in the twofold battle against demons and the flesh. When it is read literally, the biblical *Book of Joshua* narrates the Israelites’ conquest of the Promised Land. Interpreted spiritually, however, Origen contends 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 [*liber hic non tam gesta nobis filii Naue indicet quam Iesu mei Domini nobis sacramenta depingat*].”³⁶ In *Joshua*, we meet Jesus in the guise of a general, one who “leads the army” comprised of Christian soldiers.³⁷

The Battle of Ai, narrated in *Joshua* 8, serves as a paradigmatic plan for the battle against the demons. Read literally, the text appears to sanction genocide, as it depicts God commanding the wholesale slaughter of Ai’s inhabitants. At the level of the letter, it is a “text that kills”; in order to “give life,” it must be interpreted spiritually.³⁸ Taking the narrative as an allegory for the soul’s battle against the forces that compel it to sin, Origen argues that the enemies Joshua slaughters should not be interpreted as literal humans, but figurative representations of the demonic enemies that oppose the people of God. Ai, Origen contends, means “chaos,” which is the dwelling place of the “opposing powers” (*contrarias virtutes*), over which the Devil himself rules as “the king and commander” (*rex et princeps*).³⁹ The hanging of the king of Ai is revealed to be a profound mystery signifying the crucifixion of the Devil together with Jesus on the cross at Golgotha.⁴⁰ Joshua/Jesus’s initial “flight” from the warriors of Ai is interpreted as a

³³Origen, *Princ.* 1.7.5; Blosser, *Become like the Angels*, 203.

³⁴Origen, *Hom. Ex.* 11.3.

³⁵See Origen, *On Prayer* 29.2.

³⁶Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 1.3. English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 29. In Greek, both Jesus and Joshua are rendered Ἰησοῦς. Origen contends that scripture’s literal interpretation is often valid and instructive, although of less value than its moral and spiritual interpretations. Sometimes, however, the literal meaning is either impossible or unintelligible, a stumbling block intended to rouse the careful reader to search out the spiritual interpretation. Origen identifies interpretation “according to the mere letter” (πρὸς τὸ ψιλὸν γράμμα) as the primary cause of exegetical errors. See *Princ.* 4.2.1–9. On Origen’s exegetical method see Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1986); Elizabeth A. Dively Lauro, *The Soul and the Spirit of Scripture within Origen’s Exegesis* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2005); and Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁷Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 1.1. English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 27. On Jesus as leader of an angelic army, see *Hom. Jos.* 6.2. On the church as an army, see *Hom. Jos.* 12.

³⁸Origen frequently draws on 2 Cor. 3:6, “The letter kills, but the spirit gives life,” to defend his twofold interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures, for example, in *Contra Celsum* 7.20 and *Hom. Jos.* 9.8.

³⁹Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 8.2.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 8.3.

flight from the vices of fornication, pride, deceit, and falsehood.⁴¹ The subsequent ambush of Ai signifies the utter destruction of demonic foes. Far from sanctioning indiscriminate killing of humans, Origen contends, the text instructs Christians to slay demons by holding fast against the temptation to sin:

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. We slay demons, but we do not annihilate their essence [*Interimimus autem daemones non ipsam eorum substantiam perimentes*]. For their work and endeavor is to cause persons to sin. If we sin, they have life; but if we do not sin, they are destroyed. Therefore, all holy persons kill the inhabitants of Ai [*Interficiunt ergo habitores Gai sancti*], they utterly destroy them and do not let any escape.⁴²

The wars of ancient Israel are revealed as an allegory for the extirpation of the chaos-causing demons from the soul. Read in this way, Jesus, in the guise of Joshua, “teaches us peace from this very reading of wars [*pacem nos docet ex ipsa lectione bellorum*].”⁴³

Christians can improve their efficacy as demon slayers by adopting ascetic practices. In *Hom. Jos.* 15.3, Origen considers the command in Joshua 11:8–11 that the Israelites hamstring the horses of their conquered opponents. The horses he interprets figuratively as both demons and as the passions of the body, that is, lust, licentiousness or pride, and fickleness, “by whom the unfortunate soul, just as a rider, is borne and carried headlong to danger.” Disaster can be averted by hamstringing these figurative horses by acts of endurance: “The horse, of course, is hamstrung when the body is humbled by fastings and vigils and by every pain of self-denial. . . . If we wage war properly under the leadership of Jesus, we ought to cut off their vices in ourselves and, taking ‘the spiritual sword,’ hamstringing that whole stable of pernicious vices.”⁴⁴

Moral progress therefore requires corporeal exertion and can cause physical pain. By foregoing food, sleep, and other material comforts, the Christian learns how to resist the temptations of gluttony, sloth, and luxury. Moreover, ascetic training prepares the Christian body to withstand the temptation to sin even when faced with the threat of suffering physical violence. With a nod to Hebrews 12:4, Origen asks his listeners, “Do you see that the fight proposed for you is against sin and that you must complete the battle even to the shedding of blood?”⁴⁵ The physical pains that result from ascetic self-denial thus serve as a foretaste of—and a preparation for—an even greater corporeal struggle that awaits an elect few: the contest of martyrdom.⁴⁶

⁴¹Ibid., 8.6.

⁴²Ibid., 8.7. English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 92.

⁴³Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 14.1.

⁴⁴Ibid., 15.3. English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 143.

⁴⁵Origen, *Hom. Jos.*, 8.7. English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 94.

⁴⁶Martyrdom is the result of God’s election; therefore, Origen rejects the legitimacy of “voluntary” martyrs, as in *Exhortation to Martyrdom* 34: “The Lord teaches us that no one comes to the contest of martyrdom without providence.” I use the Greek text of *Exhortation to Martyrdom* in P. Koetschau, *Origenes Werke, vol. 1 (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller 2*. Leipzig, Germany: Hinrichs, 1899). English translations are based on those in *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, trans. Rowan A. Greer (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), with modifications. On the legitimacy of voluntary martyrdom in early Christianity, see Candida R. Moss, “The Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom: Ancient and Modern,” *Church History* 81, no. 3 (Sept. 2012): 531–551; and Matthew Recla, “Autothanatos: The Martyr’s Self-Formation,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82, no. 2 (June 2014): 472–494.

Martyrdom as Combat

In the *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, Origen presents the martyr's death as the ideal end of human moral progress.⁴⁷ Martyrs are not victims, nor are their deaths tragic. Rather, they are victorious champions in the battle waged against the demons and the weakness of the flesh. By defeating these foes, the martyr wins salvation and accrues benefits for the Christian community. Origen describes martyrdom not as a humiliation to be passively endured, but active combat contested against demonic opponents.⁴⁸ In this extended paraenetic treatise addressed to his friend and wealthy patron, Ambrose, and to Protocetus, a presbyter in the Caesarean church, Origen encourages his addressees not to apostatize should they be arrested. By declaring their allegiance to God in the covenant of baptism, Ambrose and Protocetus assumed "the entire citizenship of the Gospel," including its stark requirement to take up the cross.⁴⁹ The terms of this covenant are clear: "Whoever would save his soul would lose it, and whoever loses his soul for my sake will save it."⁵⁰

Continuing a well-established tradition in Christian martyrdom literature, Origen encourages his addressees to see themselves as athletes, and he urges them to imagine themselves as combatants preparing to do battle in the arena.⁵¹ He employs the analogy already in the opening lines of the *Exhortation*, addressing Ambrose and Protocetus as no longer babes in need of milk but as weaned athletes who welcome their present afflictions on the basis of hope for future reward.⁵² He urges his readers to "look not at the present sufferings but at the prizes kept for athletes who by their endurance of these tests compete according to the rules in Christ."⁵³ Returning to the image of athletic contest in section 18, Origen paints a vivid scene of the would-be martyrs as fighters preparing for combat in the arena:

A great theater is filled with spectators to watch you contending and you being summoned to martyrdom, just as if we were to speak of a great crowd gathered to watch the contests of combatants supposed to be champions. And no less

⁴⁷Origen, *Exhortation* 28: "Nothing else can be given to God from a person of high purpose that will so balance his benefits as perfection in martyrdom (τὴν ἐν μαρτυρίῳ τελειότητα)."

⁴⁸On the transformation of patient endurance (ὑπομονή/hypomonē) into an active virtue in Christian martyr narratives, see Brent D. Shaw, "Body/Power/Identity: Passions of the Martyrs," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 269–312.

⁴⁹Origen, *Exhortation* 12.4: "ἢ κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον πολιτεία."

⁵⁰Origen, *Exhortation* 12.4–5, quoting Matthew 16:24–25.

⁵¹Numerous studies have examined Christian martyrology in the context of Greek athletic and Roman gladiatorial contests. On the blending of these two discourses in the writing of Paul, see Cavan W. Concannon, "'Not for an Olive Wreath, but Our Lives': Gladiators, Athletes, and Early Christian Bodies," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 193–214. On the relationship between Christian martyrdom and other forms of violent spectacle in the Roman Empire, see Donald G. Kyle, *Spectacles of Death in Ancient Rome* (London: Routledge, 1998), especially 242–264; and Christopher Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 27–38. On martyrdom as athletic combat, see Nicole Kelley, "Philosophy as Training for Death: Reading the Ancient Christian Martyr Acts as Spiritual Exercises," *Church History* 75, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 723–747, here 727; L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men: Gender and Language in Early Christian Martyr Texts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 33–59; and Susan M. Elliott, "Gladiators and Martyrs: Icons in the Arena" *Forum* 6 (2017): 29–59.

⁵²Origen, *Exhortation* 1.

⁵³Origen, *Exhortation* 2.

than Paul, you will say when you enter the contest, “we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.” (1 Corinthians 4:9)⁵⁴

In this arena, the athletes of Christ submit to the judgment not only of human spectators, but also of the other rational beings, both beneficent and malign:

The whole cosmos and all the angels of the right and the left, and all people, those from God’s portion and those from the others, will hear of us when we contend for the sake of Christianity [ἀγωνιζομένων τὸν περὶ χριστιανισμοῦ ἀγῶνα]. Indeed, either the angels in heaven will cheer us on . . . or, may it not happen, the powers from below which rejoice in evil, will cheer.⁵⁵

Not only do demons occupy the grandstands, but they themselves are the opponents to be faced in the ring. In a homily on Exodus, Origen contends that the human persecutors of the Christians operate under demonic influence. “If,” he submits, “you ever see your persecutor raging very much, know that he is being urged on by a demon as his rider and, therefore, is fierce and cruel.”⁵⁶ Origen urges his charges to withstand the persecutors’ ferocity in the language of active, combative resistance. Borrowing a pugilistic image from the Apostle Paul, Origen exhorts, “Let each one of you say when you smite the opposing spirits, ‘I do not box as one beating the air.’”⁵⁷ By the very act of shedding his blood, the martyr “beats down aerial troops of demons who are attacking it.”⁵⁸ While the martyrs refrain from lashing out against their human persecutors, their endurance is described by Origen as “beating,” “smiting,” and otherwise counter-attacking their demonic enemies.

In *Exhortation* 42, Origen shifts the setting from the arena to the battlefield. Evoking the imagery of a Roman military triumph, he urges prospective martyrs to envision themselves as soldiers returning victorious from war. Although those condemned to martyrdom may appear outwardly to be defeated, it is the Christians who are “celebrating a triumph rather than being led in triumph.” “The martyrs in Christ,” Origen writes, “disarm the principalities and powers with Him, and they share His triumph as fellows of his sufferings, becoming in this way also fellows of the courageous deeds wrought in his sufferings.” Among the defeated foes are “the principalities and powers which in a short time you will see conquered and put to shame.” Origen presents the torture and execution that awaited the martyrs not as a fate to be feared but as the ultimate opportunity to demonstrate their demon-disarming skills so as to secure the supreme prize.

The stakes of the martyr’s battle therefore could not be higher. Repeatedly, Origen impresses on Ambrose that the desire for union with God must outstrip love for any earthly attachment.⁵⁹ If the purpose of human life is to overcome material desires in pursuit of union with God, then any attachment that binds the soul to fleshly

⁵⁴Origen, *Exhortation* 18: Μέγα θέατρον συγκροτεῖται ἐφ’ ὑμῖν ἀγωνιζόμενοις καὶ ἐπὶ τὸ μαρτύριον καλουμένοις· ὡς εἰ τὸ τοιοῦτον ἐλέγομεν γίνεσθαι ἐπὶ τινων νομιζόμενων παραδόξων ἀγωνιστῶν συναγωνιζομένων ἐπὶ τὴν θέαν τοῦ ἀγῶνος μυριῶν ὄσων. καὶ οὐκ ἔλαττόν γε τοῦ Παύλου ἐρεῖτε, ὅταν ἀγωνίζησθε “θέατρον ἐγενήθημεν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις.

⁵⁵Ibid., 18.

⁵⁶Origen, *Hom. Ex. 6.2*. English translation in Heine, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, 287.

⁵⁷Origen, *Exhortation* 48, quoting 1 Corinthians 9:26.

⁵⁸Origen, *Homilies on Judges*, 7.2. English translation in Origen, *Homilies on Judges*, trans. Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 98–99.

⁵⁹Origen, *Exhortation* 11, 14–16, 18, 37.

concerns—even familial love and patriotic duty—provides an opening to sin that can be exploited by demonic foes. By choosing a martyr’s death over life with his family, Origen argues, Ambrose entrusts his children to the providential care of God. In so doing, he does them more benefit than he would by remaining alive.⁶⁰ Moreover, the benefits provided by the martyrs extend beyond their kin, unleashing a great flood of blessings upon the entire Christian community.⁶¹ God’s purpose in permitting martyrdom may be, Origen suggests, to remedy post-baptismal sin the church⁶²:

Let us also remember the sins we have committed, and that it is impossible to receive forgiveness of sins apart from baptism, that it is impossible according to the gospel laws to be baptized again with water and the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, and that the baptism of martyrdom has been given to us. . . . Consider, as well, whether baptism by martyrdom, just as the Savior’s brought purification to the world, may not also serve to purify many.⁶³

Like the crucifixion of Christ, the executions of the elect have redemptive power; to submit to martyrdom is to imitate Christ in the fullest sense.⁶⁴

The crown of martyrdom is therefore neither to be feared nor reviled, but desired. “Death comes to us as ‘precious,’” Origen concludes, “if we are God’s saints and worthy of dying not the common death, if I may call it that, but a special kind of death, for the sake of Christianity, piety, and holiness.”⁶⁵ By submitting to a martyr’s death, Christians dramatically affirm their desire to be delivered not only from the demons, but from the weight of the material “body of death” and the temptations of the flesh. Submitting to violence in the form of “beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors” is therefore to be embraced as an opportunity to acquire the virtue that God will richly bestow.⁶⁶ “If such a view seems hard to anyone,” Origen asserts, “then he has not thirsted for God, the Mighty One, the living God.”⁶⁷ In the *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, the preservation of human mortal life and the avoidance of physical suffering are presented by Origen not as goods to be pursued but as temptations to be overcome.

Military Participation and Moral Progress

We have seen that Origen describes human life as a struggle waged against the temptations of the body and the assaults of demons. The battle is won when the Christian refrains from sinning, achieving moral perfection through intensive study of the scriptures and the adoption of ascetic practices. For a select few, the pursuit of

⁶⁰Ibid., 38.

⁶¹Ibid., 42.

⁶²On the roles of baptism and martyrdom in the remission of sins, see *Homilies on Leviticus* 2.4, where Origen compares baptism and martyrdom: “And you, therefore, when you come to the grace of baptism, you offer ‘a calf,’ for ‘you are baptized into Christ’s death.’ But when you are led to martyrdom, you offer ‘a he-goat,’ because you kill the devil, the originator of sins.” English translation in Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus, 1–16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 48.

⁶³Origen, *Exhortation* 30. See also *Exhortation* 50; *Hom. Jud.* 7.2.

⁶⁴On the soteriological power of martyrs, see Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 75–112.

⁶⁵Origen, *Exhortation* 29.

⁶⁶Ibid., 42.

⁶⁷Ibid., 3.

perfection may result in torture or death at the hands of persecutors. To suffer such violence is not a humiliation or a tragedy but a gift, a means by which God bestows salvation on those whom he deems worthy.

A very real battle against demons and the flesh is therefore ever incumbent upon every Christian—which is why they ought not join the Roman Army. Below, I review a selection of texts frequently cited as evidence of Origen’s pacifism. As we shall see, in each case Origen’s rejection of military participation is premised not on a rejection of violence and warfare in the abstract, but on the need for Christians to maintain the ascetic discipline required to ensure their moral progress and effectively fight foes more consequential than human soldiers.

The failure to recognize the centrality of the early Christian war against the demons has caused some readers mistakenly to interpret the *Homilies on Joshua* as a rejection of Christian participation in all warfare. Origen begins his fifteenth *Homily on Joshua* with the caveat, “Unless those 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 disciple of Christ, who came to teach peace, so that they could be read in the churches.”⁶⁸ George Kalantzis interprets this passage as teaching that “Christians have no place in war; nor do they have any use for it.”⁶⁹ This gloss, however, misses Origen’s point, which is to demonstrate that scripture must be interpreted according to the spirit if it is to be properly understood. If the Hebrew scriptures were mere historical accounts of Israel’s wars, they would indeed be useless for Christians, whose lives are understood by Origen to consist of “contests of the soul against spiritual adversaries.”⁷⁰ As we have already seen, however, Origen interprets the Book of Joshua not as history but as a battle plan for Christian warfare against bodily passions and demons. It is precisely because the scriptures have a spiritual interpretation that Joshua’s account of Israel’s wars is useful for Christians, as it provides instruction, in figurative form, for the warfare against spiritual adversaries in which they very much still have a place. The wars of ancient Israel are useful because they instruct Christians to do battle against “the swarms of opposing powers from among the spiritual races that are called ‘spiritual wickedness in the heavens,’ and that stir up wars against the Lord’s Church, which is the true Israel.”⁷¹

In his essay, “Torture and Origen’s Hermeneutics of Nonviolence,” Paul R. Kolbet argues that in the *Homilies on Joshua* Origen teaches a “hermeneutics of nonviolence that strikes at the root of violence in the self and society.”⁷² While Kolbet is indeed correct that the *Homilies on Joshua* aim to train Christians to achieve moral perfection, the goal of Origen’s preaching is the eradication not of violence, but sin, from the soul. Recourse to violence in pursuit of vengeance, or even in self-defense, is rejected as inimical to the covenant inaugurated by Jesus; however, in these homilies, Origen frequently ascribes virtue to violent actions when they are rightly directed against demons. Once again, we must remember that for Origen, to battle demons is no mere metaphor.

⁶⁸Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 15.1: “Nisi bella ista carnalia figuram bellorum spiritualium gererent, numquam, opinor, Iudaicarum historiarum libri discipulis Christi, qui uenit pacem docere, legendi in ecclesiis fuissent ab apostolis traditi.” English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 138.

⁶⁹Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 146.

⁷⁰Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 15.1.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 15.1.

⁷²Paul R. Kolbet, “Torture and Origen’s Hermeneutics of Nonviolence,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 545–572, here 558.

Demons are rational beings with bodies and are every bit as real as the human Amorites, Jebusites, and Canaanites vanquished by the ancient Israelites. As Gregory Smith warns, "It is far too easy to assume that invisible things were conceived as (merely) mental things, in the Cartesian sense: internal or imagined things, devoid of spatial extension, products or objects of pure thought."⁷³ And so when Origen pleads, "If only my Lord Jesus the Son of God would 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," he is expressing a desire not to eradicate violence, but to train his violent impulses upon appropriate recipients.⁷⁴

In his commentary on Matthew 26:52, Origen again makes the argument that Christians do not so much give up warfare as exchange battlefield engagements against human enemies for combat against demons. Commenting on Jesus's instruction to Peter to return his sword "to its place," Origen writes, "There is, therefore, some place for the sword, from which he who is not willing to perish by the sword is not permitted to take it. For Jesus wants his disciples to be peacemakers that they might put away this 'sword' of war and take up the other peacemaking 'sword' that the Scripture calls 'the sword of the Spirit.'"⁷⁵ Origen interprets the "sword of war" to indicate not only weapons issued to soldiers, but also the machinations of "those who are tumultuous and agitators of war and disturbers of human souls, especially of the churches." While he instructs his charges not to "take out a 'sword' on the occasion of warfare or vengeance for our own injuries or for any other reason all of which this Gospel teaching of Christ abhors," Origen reiterates the priority of the battle against the demons, noting that Jesus follows his command to put the sword in its place in Matthew 26:52 with an assurance that he commands an angelic army that stands at the ready in verse 53. Christians have no need for physical swords, for "wherever there are those who fear God, there are camps of angels around them," and "an angel of the Lord will send help around those who fear him, and will deliver them."⁷⁶

John Helgeland and Peter Leithart have argued that Origen's objections to military service derive not from a principled rejection of violence, as proposed by Kolbet and Kalantzis, but because soldiers were required to participate in rituals venerating the traditional Roman gods.⁷⁷ This impression is supported by passages such as a fragment preserved from a homily on 1 Corinthians 5:9–11, where Origen criticizes Christian soldiers who contend that "participating in idol worship is of no consequence." He derides their excuses: "I am forced into it," they say. "The army demands it. I risk my life if I do not sacrifice or if I do not put on the white robe and offer incense according to the customs of the army." And yet such a person calls himself a Christian!⁷⁸ While Helgeland and Leithart are correct that the army's sacrificial practices were offensive to Christians,

⁷³Smith, "How Thin Is a Demon?," 489.

⁷⁴Origen, *Hom. Jos.* 12.3. English translation in Bruce, *Homilies on Joshua*, 123.

⁷⁵Origen, *Comm. Ser. in Mat.* 102, in *The Commentary of Origen on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2018), 709–711.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 710.

⁷⁷John Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine," *ANRW* II.23.1 (1979): 724–834; Leithart, *Defending Constantine*, 255–278.

⁷⁸*Or. Comm. in 1 Cor., 5:9–11.* Origen's homilies on 1 Corinthians, from which this fragment is drawn, are extant only in medieval catena fragments, published in Claude Jenkins, "Origen on I Corinthians II," *Journal of Theological Studies* 9 (July 1908): 353–372. See Judith L. Kovacs, *1 Corinthians Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), xxiii.

they overlook the relationship between these sacrifices and the Christian war against the demons. As Heidi Marx-Wolf observes, “In the second and third centuries, one of the most interesting rhetorical moves developed by Christian apologists, philosophers, and polemicists was to demonize the traditional Greek and Roman gods, repeatedly associating these gods with evil spirits”—in other words, the gods of the pagans were demons.⁷⁹ Like humans, demons needed to eat, and burnt offerings provided them sustenance.⁸⁰ Origen is therefore adamant that Christians must not equivocate and offer sacrifice under the pretense that the Roman gods do not really exist because, while it may be true that the statues venerated by pagans are simple objects of wood or stone, the sacrifices offered to them are not without effect.⁸¹ As he explains, “To remain in this thick atmosphere of earth [demons] need the food of rising smoke, and so they keep an eye on places where there are always the smell and blood of burnt sacrifices and incense fumes.”⁸² By requiring Christians to offer sacrifice, military authorities forced Christians to feed demons, turning them into either martyrs or idolaters. The choice, for Origen, was clear: “Let us take great care never to commit idolatry and subject ourselves to demons; for the idols of the Gentiles are demons.”⁸³

Of Origen’s vast corpus, it is his apologetic *Contra Celsum*, a sprawling, eight-volume answer to a polemical treatise written by an otherwise-unknown Hellene philosopher named Celsus, that is most frequently cited to support claims of Origen’s pacifism.⁸⁴ Although Christian objections to joining the army are discussed more extensively here than in any other of his surviving writings, Origen’s purpose in *Contra Celsum* is not to provide a systematic consideration of the ethics of warfare. Rather, Origen’s comments on Christian military participation are made in the context of a larger defense against “slanders” leveled by Celsus against Christians. In his responses, Origen reiterates that the Gospel of Jesus prohibits Christians from acting out of vengeance and self-defense. But he also concedes that warfare has been commanded by God in the past and suggests that Christians play an important role in securing victory for Rome’s emperors on the battlefield through the efficacy of their demon-slaying intercessions made on Rome’s behalf.

To Celsus’s charge that Christianity originated in a violent revolt led by Jesus, Origen responds that, had the movement indeed begun as an uprising against the Roman Empire, “the lawgiver of the Christians would not have forbidden entirely the taking of human life.”⁸⁵ The proscription against killing humans is introduced by Jesus and marks a break with the Law of Moses. Origen concedes that wars of self-defense

⁷⁹Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies*, 14.

⁸⁰Gregory Smith notes, “It is worth stressing at the outset that the kapnophagic demons in Origen’s *Exhortation* were not distinctively Christian. In the last third of the same century the philosopher Porphyry wrote about both good and bad spirits in his treatise *On Abstinence*. Bad demons, naturally, are the kind interested in sacrifice.” Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 485. See also Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies*, 14–23.

⁸¹Origen, *Exhortation* 45. Although he adamantly opposes equivocation in sacrifice, Origen permits flight as an alternative to apostasy. See *Hom. Jud.* 7.

⁸²Origen, *Exhortation* 45.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁴I use the Greek text of M. Borret, *Origène. Contra Celse, 4 vols. Sources chrétiennes* 132, 136, 147, 150 (Paris: Éditions de Cerf, 1976). English translations are my own, in consultation with Borret’s French translation and Henry Chadwick’s English in *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1953; repr. 1965; 1979).

⁸⁵Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.7.

were lawful for the ancient Israelites, but he argues that Christians have been taught to submit to a new law that precludes the possibility of taking up weapons for any purpose, including self-defense.⁸⁶ For this reason, Christians refuse even to defend themselves against their persecutors:

And if the Christians had had their origin in sedition, they would not have submitted to laws so gentle (ήμέρους) that they sometimes cause them to be made away with “like sheep” and render them incapable of ever avenging (όμύνασθαι) themselves on their persecutors, since, having been instructed not to avenge themselves on their enemies, they have kept the gentle and philanthropic legislation (έτήρησαν τήν ήμερον και φιλόανθρωπον νομοθεσίαν).⁸⁷

Following Christ’s law and its command not to avenge themselves on their enemies, Christians do not rise up together to defend their common interests with weapons, as did the Israelites governed by the Law of Moses. This is not because they are cowardly or ineffective as soldiers, but because they have a more potent warrior who comes to their defense:

What they would not have achieved if they had had the authority to make war, even if they had been all-powerful, they received from God, who always made war on their behalf and, at just the right time, stopped the adversaries of the Christians and those wanting to destroy them. As an example for others, a few people, at the right time and who are easily counted, have died for the religion of the Christians, so that, gazing upon those few fighting for piety, they may become more proven and despise death. But God prevented the provocation of war against the whole people, for he wanted them to endure and for the whole earth to be filled by this salvific and most pious teaching.⁸⁸

It is God himself who protects Christians from “annihilation,” Origen contends. Yet God also permits a few Christians to be killed by their persecutors. As in the *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, in his answer to Celsus, Origen describes the experience of violent persecution in beneficent terms. The suffering of the martyrs is permitted by God as a means of inspiring other Christians to piety. With God on their side, Christians do not need to take recourse to self-defense as their Jewish predecessors once did, for “the more emperors and rulers of nations and peoples in many places have humiliated them, the more they have increased in number.”⁸⁹

In the closing chapters of *Contra Celsum*, Origen responds to Celsus’s charge that Christians abandon the emperor by refusing to offer sacrifices to the gods, serve in public offices, or fight wars on his behalf. Here Origen reiterates his claim that the idols

⁸⁶Ibid., 3.7.

⁸⁷Ibid., 3.8.

⁸⁸Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.8: Διά τοϋθ’ όπερ οϋκ άν έξουσίαν λαβόντες τοϋ πολεμείν, ει και πάνν ήσαν δυνατοί, ήγνυσαν, τοϋτ’ από θεοϋ ειλήφασι, τοϋ ύπερ αυτών πολεμήσαντος άει και κατά καιρους παύσαντος τοϋς κατά Χριστιανών ισταμένους και άναίρειν αυτούς θέλοντας. Υπομνήσεως μεν γάρ χάριν, ίνα ένορώντες όλίγοις άγωνιζομένοις ύπερ εϋσεβείας δοκιμώτεροι γίνωνται και θανάτου καταφρονώσιν, όλίγοι κατά καιρους και σφόδρα ευαρίθμητοι ύπερ τής Χριστιανών θεοσεβείας τεθνήκασι, καλύοντος θεοϋ τϋ παν έκπολεμηθηναι αυτών έθνος· συστήναι γάρ αυτό έβούλετο και πληρωθηναι πασαν τήν γην τής σωτηρίου ταϋτης και εϋσεβεστατης διδασκαλίας.

⁸⁹Ibid., 7.26.

venerated in Greco-Roman rites are not deities of a lower order, as supposed by Platonist philosophers, but demons “who drag the souls of men down to created things.”⁹⁰ Far from putting Rome at risk, he argues, the empire would be better protected if all its inhabitants refused to propitiate demons and prayed only to the God of the Christians. Origen speculates that if “all the Romans were convinced [of Christianity] and prayed, they would be superior to their enemies, or would not even fight wars at all, since they would be protected by divine power,” as evidenced by God’s intervention on behalf of the people of Israel.⁹¹ A Roman Empire converted to Christianity would have no need for a military as God’s favor would guard them against the aggressions of enemies more effectively than could any armed resistance.

To Celsus’s plea that Christians come to the emperor’s assistance, joining the ranks of his army and taking up weapons on his behalf should he ask them to do so, Origen replies that

At appropriate times we render to the emperors divine help, if I may say so, by taking up even the whole armor of God. And this we do in obedience to the apostolic voice which says: “I exhort you, therefore, first to make prayers, supplications, intercessions, and thanksgivings for all men, for emperors, and all that are in authority” (1 Timothy 2:1). Indeed, the more pious a man is, the more effective he is in helping the emperors—more so than the soldiers arranged in battle lines and destroying all the enemy fighters that they can.⁹²

Origen contends that Christians contribute to the success of Rome’s wars without involving themselves in the bloodshed of the battlefield. As Daniel H. Weiss has argued, here Christians are presented by Origen as occupying a role in the Roman Empire analogous to that of the priestly tribe of the Levites in ancient Israel, whose work upholding Israel’s sacrificial order required them to avoid the ritual pollution inherent in the shedding of human blood. The Levites’ non-engagement in military combat, however, did not entail a condemnation of the other tribes’ armed campaigns.⁹³ Rather, “Because God is the ultimate source of military success or defeat, the Levites are portrayed as directly contributing to Israel’s military victories by tending to God’s presence in the tabernacle.”⁹⁴ Like the Levites of old, Christians support the army’s campaigns through their unceasing prayers. Christians do not oppose the emperor’s wars but assist him by playing “a complementary role, alongside those who do the physical fighting for the Roman Empire.”⁹⁵ Origen contends,

⁹⁰Ibid., 8.62. On third-century Platonist conceptions of demons/daemons, see Blosser, *Become Like the Angels*, 152–156; Smith, “How Thin Is a Demon?,” 486–487; and Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies*, 52–70.

⁹¹Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.70.

⁹²Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.73: ἀρήγομεν κατὰ καιρὸν τοῖς βασιλεῦσι θεῖαν, ἵν’ οὕτως εἴπω, ἄρξῃν, καὶ «πανοπλίαν» ἀναλαμβάνοντες «θεοῦ». Καὶ ταῦτα ποιούμενοι πειθόμενοι ἀποστολικῆ φωνῆ λεγούσῃ. «Παρακαλῶ οὖν ὑμᾶς πρῶτον ποιεῖσθαι δεήσεις, προσευχάς, ἐντεύξεις, εὐχαριστίας ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, ὑπὲρ βασιλέων καὶ πάντων τῶν ἐν ὑπεροχῇ ὄντων.» Καὶ ὅσῳ γε τις εὐσεβέστερός ἐστι, τοσούτῳ ἀνυτικώτερος ἐν τῷ ἀρήγειν τοῖς βέστερός ἐστι, τοσούτῳ ἀνυτικώτερος ἐν τῷ ἀρήγειν τοῖς βασιλεύουσιν παρὰ τοὺς εἰς τὰς παρατάξεις ἐξίόντας στρατιώτας καὶ ἀναιρουντάς οὓς ἂν δύνωνται τῶν πολεμίων.

⁹³Daniel H. Weiss, “Christians as Levites: Rethinking Early Christian Attitudes toward War and Bloodshed via Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine,” *Harvard Theological Review* 112, no. 4 (Oct. 2019): 491–516, here 491.

⁹⁴Ibid., 492.

⁹⁵Ibid., 502.

How much more reasonable is it that, while others serve in the army, Christians also should be fighting as priests and ministers [στρατεύονται ὡς ἱερεῖς τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ θεραπευταί] of God, keeping their right hands pure and by their prayers to God contending [ἀγωνιζόμενοι] on behalf of those who take the battle field in a just cause and for the emperor who reigns justly [ὑπὲρ τῶν δικαίως στρατευομένων καὶ ὑπὲρ τοῦ δικαίως βασιλεύοντος], in order that everything which is opposed and hostile to those who act justly may be overpowered?

Moreover, by maintaining the purity of their hands, Christians are better able to put their well-developed demon-fighting skills to use on the emperor's behalf:

We, who by our prayers overpower all demons which stir up wars, violate oaths, and disturb the peace, are of more help to the emperors than those who seem to be doing the fighting. We who offer prayers with righteousness, together with ascetic practices and exercises which teach us to despise pleasures and not to be led by them, work hard for the common good. Even more do we fight on behalf of the emperor. And though we do not join in his expeditions with him, even if he presses for this, yet we are serving in war for him and composing a special army of piety through our intercessions to God.⁹⁶

It is the demons who disturb the peace of human souls and disturb the peace of empires.⁹⁷ The two are merely different theaters in one cosmic war. As more people are drawn from the multitude of nations into the church, Origen suggests, they will learn to do battle with demons, becoming peaceable as they are made perfect in Christ. Peace between nations will come about only as a by-product of the peace of individual souls. One day all war will come to end, when “the *Logos* will have overcome the entire rational nature, and will have remodelled every soul to his own perfection,” for “the end of [the *Logos*'s] treatment is the destruction of evil.”⁹⁸ With some resignation, Origen concedes that “it is probably true that such a condition is impossible for those who are still in the body”—so long as humans are bound to their earthen vessels, demons will seek to disturb their perfection. “But,” Origen maintains, “it is certainly not impossible after they have been delivered from it.”⁹⁹

Conclusion: At Peace with War

The life of the Christian, as Origen presents it, is an unceasing battle against temptations arising from corporeal weakness and demonic attacks. Christian soldiers maintain their battle-readiness through an intensive regimen of Bible reading and ascetic

⁹⁶*Contra Celsum* 8.73: Ἡμεῖς δὲ καὶ ταῖς εὐχαῖς πάντας δαίμονας, τοὺς ἐγειρόντας τὰ πολεμικὰ καὶ ὄρκους συγγέοντας καὶ τὴν εἰρήνην ταράσσοντας, καθαιροῦντες μᾶλλον βοηθοῦμεν τοῖς βασιλεύουσιν ἢ περὶ οἱ δοκοῦντες στρατεύεσθαι. Συμπονοῦμεν δὲ τοῖς κοινοῖς πράγμασιν οἱ μετὰ δικαιοσύνης ἀναφέροντες προσευχάς, σὺν ἀσκήσεσι καὶ μελέταις διδασκούσας καταφρονεῖν ἡδονῶν καὶ μὴ ἄγεσθαι ὑπ' αὐτῶν. Ἡμεῖς καὶ μᾶλλον ὑπερμαχοῦμεν τοῦ βασιλέως· καὶ οὐ συστρατεύομεθα μὲν αὐτῷ, κὰν ἐπέιγῃ, στρατευόμεθα δὲ ὑπὲρ αὐτοῦ ἴδιον στρατόπεδον εὐσεβείας συγκροτοῦντες διὰ τῶν πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ἐντεύξεων.

⁹⁷The belief that warfare was the result of demonic activity was shared by some of Origen's non-Christian contemporaries, including Porphyry. See Marx-Wolf, *Spiritual Taxonomies*, 21.

⁹⁸Origen, *Contra Celsum* 8.72.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 8.72.

disciplines, extirpating their bodily passions and slaying demons by means of intensive prayer and often-painful acts of self-denial. Although service in the emperor's army is to be rejected by Christians, who have taken on the demands of the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus and abdicated from vengeance and self-defense, Origen admits that the wars fought by the ancient Israelites were God-ordained and that Christians ought actively to support wars waged "rightly" by the Roman emperors via their prayers. Since wars are themselves stirred up by demons, participating as a soldier in physical wars is inherently sinful. Yet Origen does not entertain the hope of warfare ceasing until evil itself has been conquered through the perfecting work of the *Logos*, which will not happen while rational beings remain burdened by their mortal bodies. For Christians, it is not weapons of iron but the providence of God that guards them against the physical assaults of their enemies.

Or God might permit Christians to die. While Origen precludes Christians from using violence to defend their temporal lives from harm, his soteriology accommodates the violent persecution of Christians as part of divine providence, and he describes martyrdom as a gift of God to the church. The restoration of all rational souls to the blessedness of their original creation is the goal of human moral progress, not the preservation of earthly lives or limiting violence. Christ came "not to bring peace on earth, but to the souls of his disciples—and to bring a sword on earth."¹⁰⁰ Peace, for Origen, is predicated neither on the abolition of violence nor respect for the material bodies of humans; it is the state of the soul unperturbed by the demons, a state that could be achieved through painful self-discipline—or the executioner's sword.

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¹⁰⁰Origen, *Exhortation* 37.

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