

## REDISCOVERING THE ANCIENT CHRISTIAN READING OF JOSHUA

### **How Scripture Should be Used to Interpret Scripture**

Now that we are going to begin our interpretation of the Psalms, let us preface our remarks with a very pleasing tradition respecting all Divine Scripture in general, which has been handed down to us by the Jew [that is, one of Origen's teacher's]. That great scholar used to say that inspired Scripture taken as a whole was on account of its obscurity like many locked-up rooms in one house. Before each room he supposed a key was placed, but not the one belonging to it; and that the keys were so dispensed all round the rooms, not fitting the locks of the several rooms before which they were placed. It would be a troublesome piece of work to discover the keys to suit the rooms they were meant for. It was, he said, just so with the understanding of the Scriptures because they are so obscure; the only way to begin to understand them was, he said, by means of other passages containing the explanation dispersed throughout them. The Apostle [Paul], I think, suggested such a way of coming to a knowledge of the Divine words when he said, "Which things also we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but which the Spirit teaches; comparing spiritual things with spiritual things." Origen of Alexandria (AD 185-254), *Caesarean Commentary on the Psalms*, Prologue

### **The Clear Text that is the Key to the Door of Joshua**

For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.

St. Paul, *2 Corinthians* 10:4 (See also *Ephesians* 6:11-17).

### **Progressing through More Advanced Levels of Meaning**

What are the places we ascend with the souls of our feet? The letter of the law is placed on the ground and lies below. On no occasion, then, does the one who follows the letter of the law ascend. But if you are able to rise from the letter of the law, ascend. But if you are able to rise from the letter to the spirit and also *ascend from history to a higher understanding*, then truly you have ascended the lofty and high place that you will receive from God as your inheritance.

Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 2.3

### **What Meditation on Joshua Accomplishes in the Christian Soul**

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. But after the presence of my Lord Jesus Christ poured the peaceful light of knowledge into human hearts, since, according to the Apostle, he himself is "our peace" (Eph 2:14), *he teaches us peace from this very reading of wars*. For peace is returned to the soul if its enemies—sins and vices—are expelled from it. And, therefore, according to the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we indeed read these things, we also equip ourselves and are roused for

battle, but against those enemies that “proceed from our heart”: obviously, “evil thought, thefts, false testimony, slanders” (Matt 15:19), and other similar adversaries of our soul. Following what this Scripture sets forth, we try, if it can be done, not to leave behind any “who may be saved or who may breathe” (Jos. 10:40). For if we gain possession of these enemies, we shall fittingly also take possession of “the airy authorities” (Eph 2:2) and expel them from his kingdom, as they had gathered within us upon thrones of vices. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 14.1.

### **Fighting the War for the “Inner Land”**

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 disciples of Christ, who came to teach peace, so that they could be read in the churches. For what good was that description of wars to those to whom Jesus says, “My peace I give to you....” Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, 15.1

### **The Real Question, “Who are the Canaanites?”**

To proceed to capture Jericho ought to be apart from all these things, because when we cross over the Jordan River [that is, Baptism after the catechumenate which commenced at the Red Sea], we cross over to battles and wars. Do you wish to learn again which battles, which wars, await us after baptism? Do not learn them 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. 6:12). 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 war, so that we may subdue the chief city of this world, malice, and destroy the proud walls of sin.* You look around, by chance, for the road you must take, which field of battle to seek after. Perhaps what I am about to say will seem strange to you, but nevertheless it is true: you require nothing from without, beyond your own self; *within you is the battle* that you are about to wage; on the inside is that evil edifice that must be overthrown; your enemy proceeds from your heart. This is not my voice; it is the voice of Christ. Indeed hear him saying, “For from the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies, slanders” (Mt. 15:19). You see how great and what sort of army of your enemies proceeds against you from your heart. We must cast them out with the first onslaught; we must overthrow them with the first battle line. If we should be able to demolish their walls and strike them down to utter destruction, so that we do not leave anyone to carry back word or recover, if none of these soon sprout up again, utterly alive in our thoughts, then through Jesus that rest [peace in the inner land] will be given to us. Then, “everyone may rest under his own vine and under his own fig tree since there is no longer anyone to frighten the sons of Israel” (Micah 4:4). Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 5.2

**We Fight Nonviolently with Words and Spiritual Practices**

Jericho is surrounded: it must be captured. How, therefore, is Jericho captured? The sword is not drawn against it; the battering ram is not arranged, nor is the spear hurled. The priestly trumpets alone are employed, and by these the walls of Jericho are overthrown (Jos. 6:20). We frequently find Jericho to be placed in scripture as a figure of this world. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* 6.4.

Cities such as these, therefore, are demolished by every wise person who proclaims the word of truth. And they overthrow the walled towns of falsehood with the battering ram of truth.... But you too, if you are willing to give attention to studies and wisely to contemplate the law of God and to be made a “heart” in the law of God, you can overthrow these great and fortified towns, that is, the assertions of falsehood. *Homilies on Joshua* 18.3