

Origen on the Ministry of God's Word in the *Homilies on Leviticus*

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IN HIS apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI begins the section on the homily with these sober words: “Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved.”¹ His concern is that the liturgical homily should “foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it bear fruit in the lives of the faithful.”² Recalling *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Dei Verbum*, Pope Benedict asks homilists “to preach in such a way that the homily closely relates the proclamation of the word of God to the sacramental celebration and the life of the community, so that the word of God truly becomes the Church’s vital nourishment and support.”³

Mindful of this need, we can return to the tradition for examples of preaching God’s Word for the people’s benefit. Origen of Alexandria in this regard arguably holds a certain pride of place. Less than three months after signing *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Benedict XVI devoted two Wednesday

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¹ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis, On the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church’s Life* (promulgated on February 22, 2007), §46. (On a related note, the recent Synod of Bishops, which took place October 5 through 26, 2008, was dedicated to “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church.”)

² Ibid.

³ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §52 and Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, §21.

general audiences to catechesis on this “true ‘maestro’.”⁴ On April 25, 2007, in reviewing aspects of Origen’s life and his theological achievement, the pope considered that Origen offers “a perfect symbiosis between theology and exegesis.”⁵ Besides highlighting Origen’s careful reading of Scripture, textual work in the *Hexapla*, and systematic commentaries, Pope Benedict spoke of the Alexandrian doctor’s preaching. “[E]ven before his ordination to the priesthood,” the pope says, “Origen was deeply dedicated to preaching the Bible and adapted himself to a varied public. In any case, the teacher can also be perceived in his *Homilies*, wholly dedicated as he was to the systematic interpretation of the passage under examination, which he analyzed step by step in the sequence of the verses.”⁶ The pope then continued with Origen’s three-pronged biblical preaching for the people’s edification in the faith:

Also in his *Homilies*, Origen took every opportunity to recall the different dimensions of the sense of Sacred Scripture that encourage or express a process of growth in the faith: there is the “literal” sense, but this conceals depths that are not immediately apparent. The second dimension is the “moral” sense: what we must do in living the word; and finally the “spiritual” sense, the unity of Scripture which throughout its development speaks of Christ.⁷

In the following week’s address, Benedict XVI continued his reflection on Origen, this time focusing on Origen’s doctrine on prayer and the Church. For the latter, the pope selected Origen’s ninth homily on Leviticus and particularly his teaching on the priesthood of the laity contained therein.⁸

Given Pope Benedict’s call for better preaching and his treatment of Origen as one who can teach us, this essay unites these two aspects by exposing Origen’s theology of preaching. While some may regard preaching and teaching as quite distinct, Origen considered himself in preaching as a *didaskalos*, or teacher, for no term particularly designated the preacher in his day.⁹ With an unparalleled knowledge of the Sacred Scriptures, Origen, the consummate teacher, preached several hundred

⁴ Benedict XVI, general audience in St. Peter’s Square, April 25, 2007. Translation found in “Origen: life and work,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, May 2, 2007, p. 12.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Benedict XVI, general audience, May 2, 2007. Translation found in “Origen: the teaching,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English, May 9, 2007, p. 3.

⁹ Pierre Nautin, *Origène: Homélies sur Jérémie*, vol. 1 (Homilies 1–11), *Sources Chrétiennes* (SC) 232 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1976), 152. Nautin’s treatment of “Origène

homilies, rather than compose additional biblical commentaries, because of his great desire for what he considered to be the goal of preaching: the edification of the Church.¹⁰ Eusebius reports that only after Origen turned sixty did he feel that his powers were sufficient to allow stenographers to record his public talks (*dialexeis*).¹¹ Therefore, the homilies we have result from decades of intensive labor over Scripture by this most brilliant mind. Only 279 of his homilies remain, most preserved in Latin translation.¹² The number extant, although a fraction of Origen's preaching, is remarkable considering that very few homilies have survived from the time before Origen.¹³

Known as the Church's most influential exegete, loved and imitated or hated and excoriated, Origen should be ranked no less than pre-Nicene Christianity's most significant preacher after the apostolic era. Many specialists on the history of preaching and on Origen offer profuse praise. Thomas K. Carroll calls Origen "the first and foremost of all Christian homilists."¹⁴ David Dunn-Wilson remarks, "Above all else, Origen is the prince of exegetical preachers."¹⁵ William G. Rusch regards Origen as certainly "one of the most impressive homilists in the history of the church."¹⁶ Henri de Lubac, S.J., speaks of Origen the preacher in these terms: "Everywhere he is Teacher, man of the Church, attentive to the present situation, concerned

Prédicateur," 100–91, offers an important discussion. Although seemingly not familiar with Nautin's work, Werner Schütz also has a useful study of the sermon in Origen's writings. See his *Der christliche Gottesdienst bei Origenes*, Calwer Theologische Monographien (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1984), 82–119. In this section, Schütz treats the following four areas: the nature and function of the sermon, scriptural interpretation in the sermon, the role of the listeners in the sermon, and the sermon and rhetoric.

¹⁰ Cf. the comment of Rufinus and Origen's own distinction between commentaries and homilies as treated below, 156–57 and 161.

¹¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiae* 6.36.1. Cf. Henri Crouzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 29, where he discusses interpretations of what this means.

¹² Only twenty-one are preserved in Greek. The Latin translations were completed by Jerome and Rufinus.

¹³ Crouzel lists as extant from the time before Origen only the homily called 2 Clement, *On Pascha* by Melito of Sardis, Clement of Alexandria's *Quis dives salvetur*, the *De Antichristo*, and some fragments of Hippolytus. See Crouzel, *Origen*, 29.

¹⁴ Thomas K. Carroll, *Preaching the Word*, Message of the Fathers of the Church 11 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 42.

¹⁵ David Dunn-Wilson, *A Mirror for the Church: Preaching in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 37.

¹⁶ William G. Rusch, s.v. "Preaching," in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 177–78, at 178.

about the duties and needs of souls.”¹⁷ However, others give a more guarded assessment. For example, Joseph Trigg notes Origen’s complaint that his congregation’s members were not listening or not wanting to hear what he had to say.¹⁸ Trigg comments, “Although his thoughtful homilies pointedly address moral and spiritual concerns, Origen evidently was not a preacher who could (or necessarily wanted to) control a congregation like John Chrysostom or Augustine.”¹⁹

This essay focuses on Origen’s theology of preaching, or more precisely “the ministry of God’s Word,” found in his *Homilies on Leviticus*, which Pope Benedict recalled for the priestly dignity of all the faithful.²⁰ Origen preached these sixteen homilies in Caesarea probably between 239 and 242 on what some consider to be the most difficult of scriptural books to preach.²¹ Yet before we approach this set of homilies, a preliminary caution must first be given. These Greek homilies have been preserved only in a Latin translation by Rufinus, who thought the original too homiletic! ²² Rufinus observes that Origen preached “not so much with the intention of explanation as of edification.”²³ In looking back on his translation of various homilies, Rufinus says that he especially

¹⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L’intelligence de l’Écriture d’après Origène*, reprinted in *Complete Works* 16 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002), 126: “Partout il est Docteur, homme d’Église, attentif à la situation présente, soucieux des devoirs et des besoins des âmes.” This is found within de Lubac’s “Le point de vue du prédicateur,” 125–38.

¹⁸ Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 10.1 and *Homilies on Jeremiah* 20.6.

¹⁹ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen, The Early Church Fathers* (London: Routledge, 1998), 40. Origen’s preaching does not display the rhetorical flourish expected in the greatest orators. Nautin writes, “En résumé, on voit qu’Origène connaît les règles classiques de composition d’un discours et qu’il prend avec elles beaucoup de liberté.” Nautin, introduction in SC 232: 121.

²⁰ I am using the text of Marcel Borret, S.J., *Origène: Homélies sur le Lévitique*, vol. 1 (Homelies 1–7) and vol. 2 (Homelies 8–16), *Sources Chrétiennes* 286–87 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1981). A convenient English translation is Gary Wayne Barkley, *Origen: Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, *Fathers of the Church* 83 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990). Having consulted published translations, I have made my own translation of these homilies and other texts, unless otherwise noted. For the phrase “ministerium verbi Dei,” see, for example, *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.7 (SC 286: 238).

²¹ For this dating and a remark about the difficulty to preach on Leviticus, see the introduction in Borret, *Origène: Homélies sur Le Lévitique*, vol. 1, 11–62, esp. 12 and 52.

²² Rufinus, *Praefatio atque epilogus in explanationem Origenis super epistulam Pauli ad Romanos*, ed. Manlio Simonetti, *Tyrannii Rufini Opera, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* 20 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1961), 276–77.

²³ Rufinus, *Epilogus* (CCSL 20: 276).

made changes to the homilies on Leviticus, where Origen spoke in a hortatory manner. "For this reason I took the trouble to fill in things lacking," Rufinus explains, "lest the striking and unanswered questions, which in the homiletic style of speaking he often had, generate weariness for the Latin reader."²⁴ This Latin adaptation detracts from our appreciation of Origen in the act of preaching, but it should not wholly prevent us from deriving aspects of Origen's authentic ministry of God's Word.²⁵ By studying the *Homilies on Leviticus*, we can take Origen as a model preacher to assist the Church now in making Scripture better understood and bear fruit in the lives of God's priestly people.

Origen's Preaching on Leviticus: Letter and Spirit

My argument that Origen can teach us about preaching the Word of God runs quickly into opposition. As Origen's preaching ministers and completes his scriptural interpretation, one would not likely accept Origen's theology of preaching if one rejects his treatment of the Bible. R. P. C. Hanson's view epitomizes the modern critique:

Origen was generally speaking not seriously restrained by the Bible; he knew very little about the intellectual discipline demanded for the faithful interpretation of biblical thought; his presuppositions were very little altered by contact with the material in the Bible. . . . Where the Bible did not obviously mean what he thought it ought to mean, or even where it obviously did not mean what he thought it ought to mean, he had only to turn the magic ring of allegory, and—Hey Presto!—the desired meaning appeared.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ For assessments of the benefit of studying Origen's homilies, recognizing limitations imposed by Rufinus's translation, see Barkley, *Homilies on Leviticus*, 23, where he concurs with Ronald Heine, Annie Jaubert, and Henri de Lubac on the genuineness of Origen's thought in the homilies. Similarly, see Robert J. Daly, S.J., who thinks that the homilies can be used as guides to Origen's thought, in his "Sacrificial Soteriology in Origen's Homilies on Leviticus," in *Studia Patristica* 17, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Eighth International Conference on Patristic Studies, 1979 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), 872–78, at 871. For Daniélou's reservation on the translated homilies' inaccuracies, see Jean Daniélou, S.J., *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), x–xii.

²⁶ R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory & Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture*, with an introduction by Joseph W. Trigg (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 371. Trigg's introduction to this reprint of Hanson's 1959 work provides an update on Origen studies biased toward Hanson's critique against de Lubac. In fact, Frances W. Young calls Hanson's portrayal "the standard English account of Origen's exegesis." See her *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 3.

Much of the rest of this essay will implicitly answer Hanson's objection by considering how biblical images control and thoroughly inform Origen's ministry of God's Word. Yet, it can be conceded to Hanson that Origen does not offer a modern "historical" approach to Leviticus.²⁷ Rather, Origen accepts the letter as containing something that initially cannot be seen. This approach has currency in contemporary approaches to reading, including reading Leviticus. For example, Jewish scholar Jacob Milgrom begins his commentary on Leviticus in the following way:

Values are what Leviticus is all about. They pervade every chapter and almost every verse. Many may be surprised to read this, since the dominant view of Leviticus is that it consists only of rituals, such as sacrifices and impurities. This, too, is true: Leviticus *does* discuss rituals. However, underlying the rituals, the careful reader will find an intricate web of values that purports to model how we should relate to God and to one another.²⁸

Milgrom relies in part upon Mary Douglas's anthropology beyond his own rabbinic and historical-critical training; but more importantly for the present purpose his view expresses a wider phenomenon of seeking textual readings of what underlies the letter.²⁹

Milgrom's own teaching at a Protestant seminary in Germany made him think, "Leviticus would be useless to seminary students in preparing their sermons."³⁰ Indeed, the third book of the Pentateuch poses challenges too often deemed insurmountable for the Christian pulpit.³¹ Origen, on the other hand, demonstrates an enthusiastic love for preaching Leviticus and seeks to win his listeners over to the mysteries contained in this book of

²⁷ John David Dawson considers Hanson's critique to be the fullest elaboration of Erich Auerbach's negative assessment against Origen's allegorical hermeneutic. For Dawson's own response to Auerbach on figural reading and history, see his *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 83–137, esp. 125–26 concerning Hanson.

²⁸ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus: A Book of Ritual and Ethics*, A Continental Commentary (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 1.

²⁹ For the work of Mary Douglas, see especially her *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1966) and *Leviticus as Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁰ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, xii.

³¹ This assessment derives from not merely the anecdotal, but the structural. The Roman Catholic lectionary, proven influential for other Christian lectionaries, has only two truncated readings from Leviticus in its three-year cycle of Sunday readings. Moreover, their appearances on the Sixth Sunday of Year B and the Seventh Sunday of Year A come at a time often passed over in the transition between the Ordinary Time before Lent and the Ordinary Time after the Easter Season. For example, in 2008 the Fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time was celebrated immediately

the Law.³² He finds that one who is still an infant in spirit gladly hears books such as Esther, Judith, Tobit or the commandments of Wisdom. "But if the book of Leviticus is read to that one," Origen says, "the mind is continually offended and refuses it as if it were not its own food."³³ Although realizing the common people's lack of attention and refusal to accept the Word in Leviticus, Origen does not reserve this book to some gnostic elite or discard it. Rather, the *Homilies on Leviticus* demonstrate Origen's attempt to overcome these obstacles and move his people further into spiritual maturity. He does this first by connecting what his people hear with what is experienced in Christ himself. For Origen's careful listener in the Church, the letter of Leviticus communicates through a spiritual interpretation the Word of God that is none other than Jesus Christ.³⁴ Origen's allegory to discover the hidden meaning is unabashedly at the service of Christ, and not Christ at the service of allegory.³⁵

In his introduction to the first homily, Origen announces his incarnational interpretation of Scripture and applies it to Leviticus.³⁶ The preacher begins:

before Ash Wednesday and the Sundays of Ordinary Time resumed with the Ninth Sunday of Ordinary Time on June 1.

³² "The chief task of a Christian preacher on Leviticus," comments Robert L. Wilken, "was to ensure that the book was not ignored and continued to be read. This could only be done by making it intelligible and applicable to the lives of Christians. Its language, its images, as well as its ideas, had to find a place in Christian practice and belief." Wilken, "Origen's *Homilies on Leviticus* and *Vayikra Rabbah*," in *Origeniana Sexta: Origen and the Bible*, Acts from the Sixth Origenian Colloquium, Chantilly, 1993, ed. Gilles Dorival and Alain le Boulluec (Leuven: University Press, 1995), 81–91, at 89.

³³ Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 27.1 (SC 461: 272).

³⁴ De Lubac emphasizes that the Word in Scripture and the Word incarnate are not two Words, but the same Word for Origen. See de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 336. Origen's exegesis of course has been the subject of numerous studies since de Lubac's 1950 classic. Here, I simply want to refer to the lucid case made more broadly about the Christological reading of patristic exegesis in John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

³⁵ In an interesting but unsatisfying argument, Patricia Cox Miller's inverted conclusion makes Origen's Christological reading awaken the mind to the allegory of poetics. See her "Poetic Words, Abysmal Words: Reflections on Origen's Hermeneutics," in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 165–78.

³⁶ Cf. de Lubac, "Les Incorporations du Logos," chap. 8 in *Histoire et Esprit*, esp. 339–40. De Lubac comments on the opening of the first homily on Leviticus: "Dans la lettre de l'Écriture, le Logos n'est donc point incarné d'une façon

Just as *in the last days* the Word of God, clothed with flesh from Mary, came into this world and there was one thing which was seen in him and another which was understood—for the appearance of flesh was evident in him to all, but knowledge of his divinity was given only to the few chosen ones—so too when the Word of God is brought forth to humans through the prophets or the lawgiver he is brought forth not without proper clothing.³⁷

Both the incarnation and Scripture have veils that cover the Word within them. In regards to Scripture, the veil is the letter whereas the “spiritual sense hiding inside is experienced as divinity.”³⁸ As for Leviticus, Origen summarizes its letter as treating various sacrificial rites, different offerings, and the priestly ministries—an assessment agreeable to historical-critical methods today. Origen then counts blessed those eyes that see the divine spirit and blessed those clean ears of the inner person that hears. For otherwise, Origen says, one will perceive in these words merely the letter that kills (cf. 2 Cor 3:6). Origen intensifies this in a later homily on Leviticus: “For even in the Gospels, it is the letter that kills. Not only in the Old Testament is the killing letter observed. There is even in the New Testament the letter that kills the one who does not spiritually perceive the things said.”³⁹

This not only summarizes Origen’s spiritual interpretation; it also stakes the mission of the preacher. The one who explains the words of Scripture does so as a matter of life and death—the *letter kills*. Origen compares himself with Susanna. If he submits himself to the presbyters who follow the letter of the Law, then in Susanna’s words, “It will be death for me” (Dan 13:22). But if he does not, then he would still not escape the wicked presbyters and it would mean sinning against the Lord. That would be not simply Origen’s death, but the death of all those who hear the Word. Origen encourages his listeners to stay faithful to the Lord under this threat of death so that the “Church, having already turned to

proprement dite comme il l’est dans l’humanité de Jésus, et c’est ce qui permet de parler encore de comparaison; déjà néanmoins il y est vraiment incorporé, il y habite lui-même et non pas seulement quelque idée sur lui, et c’est ce qui autorise à parler déjà de sa venue, de sa présence cachée.”

³⁷ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1 (SC 286: 66); cf. Acts 2:17.

³⁸ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1 (SC 286: 66).

³⁹ *Homilies on Leviticus* (SC 286: 338). This may in part lie behind Augustine’s *De spiritu et littera*, which influenced Thomas Aquinas’s famous phrase in *Summa theologiae* III, q. 106, a. 2: *Unde etiam littera Evangelii occideret nisi adesset interior gratia fidei sanans*. Such a reading points to the relationship between literal and spiritual interpretations with law and grace, and so Scripture’s spiritual interpretation should have great bearing upon the theology of grace.

the Lord, may know the truth of the Word of God enveloped by the covering of the letter."⁴⁰

After praying for the Holy Spirit's removal of every cloud and darkness in order to see the spiritual knowledge of the Law, Origen provides an insightful description of his homiletic purpose.

Therefore, as we are able, let us relate briefly a few things from many, not striving after the explanation of single words—for this is done in a writer's leisure—but making known things that pertain to the edification of the Church. We would rather give opportunities for the understanding of listeners than write down an extensive exposition, according to what is written, "Give an opportunity to the wise, and the wise will be wiser."⁴¹

Origen later in these homilies repeats the distinction between edifying the Church and providing a detailed explanation in commentaries.⁴² The preacher must know the true meaning of the Scriptures and communicate it to the listeners, viewed as "wise." Precisely because his preaching is the edification of the Church, Origen's homilies bolster the listening Christians to perceive the spiritual meaning of the Scriptures for a greater awareness of God's work in their lives.

It can be emphasized that the spiritual meaning is conveyed only through the letter. Our continuing exploration of the *Homilies on Leviticus* demonstrates the seriousness with which Origen accepted the letter in order to derive spiritual meaning for the faithful. In fact, all of his homilies are thoroughly imbued with careful textual links suggesting that the letter when properly treated does not kill, but conveys the Spirit's life.⁴³ Against Hanson's reading of Origen, Origen's theology of preaching, as

⁴⁰ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1 (SC 286: 68).

⁴¹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1 (SC 286: 70); cf. Prov 9:9.

⁴² *Homilies on Leviticus* 7.1 (SC 286: 298). For some differences between Origen's homilies and commentaries, see Éric Junod, "Wodurch unterscheiden sich die Homilien des Origenes von seinen Kommentaren?" trans. from French by Marianne Mühlenberg, in *Predigt in der Alten Kirche*, ed. Ekkehard Mühlenberg and J. van Oort (Kampen, The Netherlands: Kok Pharos Publishing House, 1994), 50–81. See especially his treatment "Zweck der Homilien ist die selektive Erklärung des biblischen Textes mit dem Ziel, 'die Kirche zu erbauen'" in 62–74.

⁴³ Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., astutely comments, "It is too often forgotten that spiritual exegesis, Origen's and others', is based on an utterly literal reading of the texts." Lienhard, "Origen as Homilist," in *Preaching in the Patristic Age: Studies in Honor of Walter J. Burghardt, S.J.*, ed. David G. Hunter (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 36–52, at 46. For an important defense of Origen's position concerning the literal sense, see de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, 92–138.

communicating the spiritual interpretation, is thus inseparable from the letter of Leviticus. Indeed, Origen frequently fills his teaching with biblical images that cannot be removed from the spiritual doctrine.⁴⁴ These images pertaining in their letter to the priestly regulations of ancient Israel spiritually signify Christ and the lives in Christ of his faithful ones, the nation of priests. The selection of terms studied here comes from Leviticus, whose letter for Origen is “as the flesh of the Word of God and the clothing of his divinity.”⁴⁵ The first section is devoted to sacrifices and offerings (as “the flesh of the Word”), the second to various garments (as “the clothing of divinity”). In each section, select homily passages are critically examined through these images in order to communicate and exemplify Origen’s doctrine of the ministry of God’s Word. Given Origen’s debt to Philo in interpreting Leviticus, the Philonic model is briefly mentioned at the end of the section on sacrifices before we proceed to consider Origen’s use of clothing imagery.

Sacrifices and Offerings

The Book of Leviticus begins with the Lord calling Moses and speaking to him from the tent of meeting about how the people of Israel should make an offering to the Lord. It then takes up the first instruction of a whole burnt offering from the herd (Lev 1:3–9). Again, to orient Origen’s preaching for our context today, we can hear first from Jacob Milgrom: “This first chapter of Leviticus ostensibly discusses the burnt offering. However, the current that runs beneath the technical description of the offering reveals much about the emerging Israelites’ efforts to distinguish their religion from the pagan religions that existed at the same time.”⁴⁶ For Origen, the “current that runs beneath the technical description of the offering reveals much” about Christ and the priestly act of preaching *in the present*. From the very details of Leviticus’s narrative, Origen in the midst of speaking of Christ as the burnt offering constructs his theology of preaching for the Church gathered around the living Word.⁴⁷ Subsequently, Origen gives the moral sense for believers in

⁴⁴ For a book running over 800 pages on images in Origen’s ecclesiology, see F. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and Its Members in Origen*, Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 156, trans. F.A. Valken (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1.

⁴⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus*, 21.

⁴⁷ For an analysis of the first homily, see Gaetano Lettieri, “Omelia I: Il sacrificio del Logos,” in *Omelia sul Levitico: Lettura origeniana*, ed. Mario Maritano and Enrico dal Covolo, Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 181 (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2003), 15–47.

Christ to offer their own flesh by a reasonable service (cf. Rom 12:1).⁴⁸ But in the former case, notice how Origen appropriates the sacrificial language to describe the ministry of God's Word.

I myself think that the priest who removes the hide of the calf offered in a whole burnt offering and takes away the skin by which its members were covered is the one who removes the veil of the letter from the Word of God and lays bare its insides, which are the members of spiritual intelligence. He also places these members of the interior word of knowledge not in some base location, but in one high and holy, i.e. he lays them upon the altar. He opens the divine mysteries not with unworthy people living a base and earthly life, but with those who are the altar of God, in whom the divine fire always burns and the flesh is always being consumed.⁴⁹

Such a statement can help us understand the sacrificial character of preaching for Origen, a topic that deserves closer attention. For example, Robert J. Daly, S.J., has studied the *Homilies on Leviticus* for their sacrificial theme. He writes, "In these homilies (once Jewish and pagan priesthood are excluded) Origen, when speaking of priesthood, has in mind either the priesthood of Jesus Christ or the priesthood of every true Christian. There is no mention of the office of a class of specially ordained hierarchical Christian priests."⁵⁰ I do not dispute Daly's recognition of Origen's overwhelming concern for Christ's priesthood and the universal priesthood of the faithful; I do point out that precisely in this concern Origen frequently presents a priestly *ministry of God's Word* that brings Christ the great priest and the priestly people together. Restriction of priesthood to only the two categories of Christ and every true Christian does not do justice to the rich complexity of Origen's understanding of priesthood, and particularly the priestly sacrifice of teaching

⁴⁸ On Origen's pneumatic (usually called spiritual) and psychic (usually called moral) readings of Leviticus 1:1–5, see Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture within Origen's Exegesis*, *The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, vol. 3 (Boston: Brill Academic Publishers, Inc., 2005), 163–75. Dively Lauro gives an engaging account of how Origen employs these two higher senses together in his preaching for the benefit of his people.

⁴⁹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.4 (SC 286.78–80).

⁵⁰ Robert J. Daly, S.J., "Sacrificial Soteriology in Origen's Homilies on Leviticus," in *Studia Patristica* 17, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Eighth International Conference on Patristic Studies, 1979 (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), 872–78, at 875.

Scripture.⁵¹ Origen himself exercises this priestly role by interpreting Leviticus to the Church within a liturgical setting.⁵²

Leviticus further specifies in its first chapter that priests should separate the whole burnt offering limb by limb before adding the firewood. Origen explains that this separation occurs when the priest “can explain in order and discuss with proper distinction” the Gospel’s portrayal of contact with Christ in threefold fashion.⁵³ The priest must discuss the causes of these things for those beginning, those progressing in the faith, and those already perfect in Christ’s knowledge and love. Thus, the animal is separated “limb by limb.” The addition of the firewood occurs, for Origen, when the preacher treats not only Christ’s bodily virtues but also his divinity. For all should understand that the whole burnt offering of Christ’s flesh through the wood of the cross unites heaven and earth, the human and the divine.⁵⁴

Origen’s third homily treats Leviticus 5. When speaking on the guilt offerings mandated from one who sins against the holy things of the Lord, Origen actualizes this as the example of what preaching is and the fact that people sin against what they have heard in preaching. Knowing that he is a sinner, Origen says, “Nevertheless, because the dispensation of the Lord’s Word has been entrusted to me, I seem to have the holy things of God committed to me.”⁵⁵ Origen understands these holy things as the money of Matthew 25:27. He dispenses the holy things so that they may multiply in the lives of the people. But when the faithful people sin against the holy things through forgetfulness of what they heard, they return without a multiplication. Origen thus makes clear the productivity that is to occur in the daily Christian life that comes from listening to and enacting the homily. Again, Origen emphasizes the priestly role of the preacher as a steward dispensing God’s gifts and expecting a profitable return.

⁵¹ Cf. Pamela Bright, s.v. “Priesthood,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 179–81. Bright recognizes six distinct considerations of priesthood for Origen, not including the ordained priesthood, which Bright acknowledges that Origen presumes.

⁵² Thomas K. Carroll notes that Origen preached before his ordination (as Pope Benedict more recently notes), but Carroll confusingly adds a dichotomy: “as preacher he remained more prophet than priest.” See his *Preaching the Word*, 42. For Origen, preaching is eminently priestly.

⁵³ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.4 (SC 286: 80). For Origen’s Gospel portrait here, see Matthew 9:20, Luke 7:44, 7:46, and John 13:25, 21:30.

⁵⁴ Another important treatment of the whole burnt offering appears in *Homilies on Leviticus* 9.9.

⁵⁵ *Homilies on Leviticus* 3.7 (SC 286: 148).

In his fourth homily, when speaking on Leviticus 6:1–6, Origen finds that it is written about the fire for sacrifice: “the fire will always burn upon the altar and not be extinguished.” Origen actualizes this in preaching how each believer is called to be a priest, a favorite theme inspired by Isaiah 61:6 and 1 Peter 2:9. “If therefore,” Origen preaches, “you want to exercise the priesthood of your soul, never let the fire depart from your altar.”⁵⁶ In a later homily, Origen makes known that people not only have the altar’s fire in the soul, but also the animals. Origen proclaims that those living reasonably in faith as Abraham’s descendants have herds of cattle, sheep, and goats as well as the birds of the sky within them to offer up as sacrifice. But the faithful have so much more than altar, fire, and animals within them. Origen asks the people, “Do you wish to hear further something about your very self, lest perhaps thinking little and lowly things about yourself you neglect your life as something vile?”⁵⁷ He tells them that they have the Son of God and the Holy Spirit within them. In short, Origen actualizes the sacrifices of Leviticus within the souls of the Christian faithful so that they can consider the awesome hidden dignity that God has given them in their ability to offer priestly sacrifice.

When addressing the sin offerings described later in Leviticus 6, Origen reads that everyone who touches the offering will be sanctified. He gives multiple interpretations of this, emphasizing how different people touch the flesh of the Word. He then applies this to the one who examines the inner realities and can explain their hidden mysteries. In a moving self-referential passage, he states:

And we, if we were to have such an understanding, so that we may understand particular things which are written in the law, to discern with a spiritual interpretation, and to draw out the covered sacrament of any passage in the light of a more subtle knowledge—if we were able to teach the Church so that nothing from these things read would remain ambiguous, nothing left obscure—perhaps it could be said about us that we touched the holy flesh of the Word of God and were sanctified.⁵⁸

Such a statement witnesses to the sanctification of preachers in their calling to interpret God’s Word for the people.

Also on Leviticus 6, Origen discusses the sacrifice of fragments for an odor of sweetness to the Lord and what it means in this same homily’s rich theology of preaching. “I think the fragments of the priests are understood,” reflects Origen, “when the priests break the letter of the

⁵⁶ *Homilies on Leviticus* 4.6 (SC 286: 180).

⁵⁷ *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.2 (SC 286: 212).

⁵⁸ *Homilies on Leviticus* 4.8 (SC 286: 190–92).

Law; the hidden, inner spiritual food is brought out from the letter so that the listening *crowds* are refreshed.”⁵⁹ He makes a comparison with Christ’s miracle of the feeding of five thousand: “Just as also the Lord is said to have done in the Gospels, where he blessed the loaves and gave them to the disciples and they distributed the pieces to the *crowds*. When they had all been satisfied, it says that *they filled up twelve baskets of fragments*. This is therefore the sacrifice of fragments, when we discuss in small pieces the holy things of the law so that we may take the pure, spiritual food from them.”⁶⁰ Granted that Origen does not have the leisure of a commentary’s minute explanation, he as a preacher still discusses the holy things “in small pieces,” verse by verse.

In Homily 5, Origen continues with the image of bread because of Leviticus 7 and its regulation to offer sacrifice together with loaves of leavened bread in salutary offerings. Origen considers that the leaven symbolizes the human doctrine that should be avoided (cf. Matt 16:6). He then applies this to preaching. The human doctrines of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectics should be avoided as leaven. In their place, Origen says, “lucid speech and the splendor of eloquence and the reason for disputing should be rightly ordered for the ministry of God’s Word.”⁶¹ Here we can deduce that Origen wants the preacher not simply to set aside merely human resources, but to transcend them for their highest expressions. Again, he prefers lucid speech to grammar, the splendor of eloquence to rhetoric, and reason for disputing to dialectics. In other words, the goals of these human disciplines are transformed when applied to Origen’s chief concern—the ministry of God’s Word.

Continuing his discussion of the salutary offerings, Origen quotes Leviticus 7:15: “It will be eaten in the day and nothing should remain from it in the morning.” This prompts him to compare this with other injunctions concerning time in the Law, such as the command that the Passover sacrifice should be offered in the evening that nothing should remain from the flesh in the morning (cf. Exod 12:6, 10). Origen links this prohibition to Ezekiel’s assertion, “Even yesterday’s meat never entered my mouth” (cf. Ezek 4:12). From this careful attention to the letter, Origen declares the meaning for a spiritual teaching in the Church:

Hear this, all you priests of the Lord, and understand more attentively the things said. The flesh, which is set aside from the sacrifices for the priests, is the *Word of God*, which they teach in the Church. For this

⁵⁹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 4.10 (SC 286: 198).

⁶⁰ *Homilies on Leviticus* 4.10 (SC 286: 198–200); cf. Matt 14:15.

⁶¹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.7 (SC 286: 238).

reason, they are reminded by mystic figures so when they begin to bring forth speaking to the people they may not bring forth something from *yesterday*—that they should not proclaim old things which are according to the letter—but they should always bring forth new things through the grace of God and always find spiritual things.⁶²

Later in this same homily, Origen comments on the instruction of Leviticus 7 concerning the portions of priests from the salutary offering (*salutaris hostia*, which more frequently appears as “peace offering” in translations from the Masoretic text). Again, Origen is explicit about the need to interpret the Law for the edification of those hearing it. Otherwise, why would one read it in Church?⁶³ Applying Leviticus 7 within his ministry of God's Word, Origen gives a long and important sentence: “If, therefore, the priest of the Church, through words, and doctrine, and his great concern and work of vigilance, could convert a sinner and teach that one to follow a better way so as to return to the fear of God,” the sinner should bring the priest a “salutary offering” in thanksgiving to God.⁶⁴ This does not mean that the converted should pay the preacher! Rather, the salutary offerings are the parts described in Leviticus 7, now parts not of an animal sacrifice but of the faithful themselves who are sacrificed. Their breast and right limb, which the Law commanded to be given to the priest, are offered back to the priest to express how the priest's labor had converted them from evil thoughts so that they may see God.

Before concluding this section, we note Jean Laporte's assessment from his study of Philonic models in Origen's teaching on sacrifice: “For the explanation of Origen's doctrine of sacrifice the best methodology is to recognize his real models in his sources, i.e., Leviticus as interpreted by Philo. Origen repeats Philo's teachings on sacrifice without much alteration.”⁶⁵ Yes, Origen is heavily indebted to Philo, as for example we can read in Philo that “the true altar of God is the thankful soul of the wise

⁶² *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.8 (SC 286: 242). For an application of this in twentieth-century theology, see Hans Urs von Balthasar's conclusion to his “Priestly Existence,” trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. in *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 373–419. For further analysis in Balthasar's theology of preaching, see Andrew Hofer, O.P., “Proclamation in the Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Worship* 79 (2005): 20–37, esp. 32–33.

⁶³ *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.12 (SC 286: 260).

⁶⁴ *Homilies on Leviticus* 5.12 (SC 286: 260).

⁶⁵ Jean Laporte, “Sacrifice in Origen in the Light of Philonic Models,” in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 250–76, at 274.

person.”⁶⁶ But this comment “without much alteration” at the end of Laporte’s study seems exaggerated. Origen’s interpretation differs in important respects from Philo’s treatment of the Word, not least of which is Origen’s constant Christological interpretation.⁶⁷ Indeed, Laporte knows that according to Philo the mediation of Word between God and humans vanishes away, that the Word does not have a distinct individual or “personal” existence for Philo, and that the Word did not become flesh as Jesus Christ with the scriptural and soteriological meaning that Origen understands from the incarnation.⁶⁸ Particularly pertinent to the present study, Philo does not develop an understanding of the preacher’s sacrificial role within the ministry of God’s Word. Philo himself is not preaching to an assembly of common people gathered when he gives his learned study. Moreover, Philo’s reliance on Moses the lawgiver and his emphasis on the interiority of the wise person do not elicit reflection on ministering the Word to the faithful in the same way as is found in Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus*. For Origen, the priestly ministry of God’s Word forms an integral part of interpreting the Levitical sacrifices for the Church’s benefit.

While more could be said, this brief treatment can serve to exemplify Origen’s original use of sacrifices and offerings for his theology of sacrificial preaching. I have concentrated on the first five homilies because Origen follows the letter of Leviticus, which treats the various types of sacrifices and offerings in its first seven chapters. To complement this part, we now approach even more briefly another image of Leviticus that Origen finds essential in discussing the proclamation of the Word.

The Clothing

As we already saw in Origen’s opening to Homily 1, the clothing metaphor has a particular prominence in Origen’s thought.⁶⁹ The Word of God took the clothing of the letter in order to approach human beings. This covering both permits and requires a sacrificial teaching to

⁶⁶ Philo, *On the Special Laws* I.52.287 (Philo VII: 266 in Loeb). Cf. Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.4, treated above.

⁶⁷ Cf. Frances M. Young’s study of Origen’s similarities with and differences from Philo in her *The Use of Sacrificial Ideas in Greek Christian Writers from the New Testament to John Chrysostom*, Patristic Monograph Series 5 (Cambridge, MA: The Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, Ltd., 1979), 120–26. Most importantly, Young writes, “But Origen’s scheme is quite different because all sacrifices are regarded as types of the sacrifice of Christ” (123).

⁶⁸ Cf. Laporte, “Sacrifice in Origen,” 260.

⁶⁹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.1.

uncover the spiritual meaning. Now we consider how Origen treats the priestly vestments described in Leviticus so as to have a further appreciation for his ministry of God's Word. For Origen, priests must be properly clothed to meet the needs of their people and the priestly people must be properly clothed in order to advance to God.

In Homily 4, Origen connects the commands for priestly attire from Leviticus 6 with the Lord's injunction, "Let your loins be girded" (Luke 12:35). The priest ought always to be girded with purity. However, Origen knows from Leviticus 6 that the priest takes off his linen garments needed for the sanctuary and puts on other garments to go outside. Applying this to preaching, Origen sees that the priest should change his clothes depending upon the audience, as did Paul. When Paul was with the perfect, as placed in the holy of holies, he put on the robe of perfection. For Paul says, "We speak wisdom among the perfect" (1 Cor 2:6). When going out to the people, Paul changes this robe and puts on one far inferior, as in saying, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2). Jesus Christ, the "high priest of the good things to come" (Heb 9:11), also had different sets of garments. To the people he spoke in parables, but to his disciples he explained them (cf. Matt 13:34; Mark 4:34). Ultimately, Origen then sees the Levitical regulation of garment changing as something especially appropriate to Christ. He ends this section not with an emphasis on being clothed for the sanctuary, but with an emphasis on being found worthy to be with Christ the high priest who is himself clothed for the sanctuary. Origen bids his people that together they may be found worthy to hear Christ's words, "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God" (Matt 13:11).⁷⁰ Therefore, Origen uses this clothing metaphor for a homiletic principle of accommodation or condescension, which in fact raises those lower to be united with Christ himself, clothed in heaven's sanctuary.

In Homily 6, concerning the clothing of the high priest and the priests, Origen offers several insights about the task of the preacher through a meditation on the garments specified by the Law.⁷¹ Origen reads from Leviticus, "He placed upon him the *logium*," that which is rational, "and he placed upon the *logium* communication and truth, and

⁷⁰ *Homilies on Leviticus* 4.6.

⁷¹ Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., includes a translation of this homily in his *Ministry, Message of the Fathers* 8 (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 58–69. His introduction is quite brief and says that this selection shows Origen to be "a determined allegorist" (57).

he placed the miter on his head" (Cf. Lev 8:8–9).⁷² For Origen, the *logium*, is a sign of reason's wisdom. But wisdom is not enough; the high priest must have communication in order to hand on what he knows to the people. Moreover, his communication is accompanied by truth, so that "*truth* may always remain in his every word."⁷³ This sequence leads to the miter, on which the name of God is engraved (cf. Exod 28:32, 36).⁷⁴ This shows that the knowledge of God surpasses all things known about creation.

Now, who can know these wondrous things and do them? Origen says that it is his listener! He preaches, "For you are also able, as we have often said."⁷⁵ He qualifies with a series of "ifs" to explain what is expected of his listener as baptized and consecrated. It is noteworthy that he speaks of his listener clothed with two garments, "of the letter and of the spirit," thus making that one "pure in flesh and spirit."⁷⁶ This testifies to Origen's strong belief that preaching incorporates the audience to be along with the preacher, together aspiring to the heights of divine knowledge, while still retaining both letter and spirit.⁷⁷

Origen describes priests and teachers as those who beget their children, as did Paul, "in Christ Jesus for the Gospel" (1 Cor 4:15; cf. Gal 4:19).⁷⁸ Origen considers that the girdles, or thigh coverings, given to the priests signify that teachers of the Church sometimes abstain from begetting because they know that their hearers would not bear fruit. Their seed would die and so would not yield offspring. As support for his interpretation that teachers should sometimes not teach because of the unworthiness of hearers, Origen quotes the Gospel: "Do not give what is holy to dogs" (Matt 7:6).

Precisely within this homily on clothing, Origen says that anyone who aspires to be high priest should imitate Moses and Aaron. Of them it is said, "They did not depart from the tabernacle of the Lord" (cf. Lev 10:7). Origen asks, what was Moses' work? He names two things, the same two that are the work of the high priest: to learn something from God and to teach the people. The high priest learns something from God by reading the Scriptures and frequently meditating on them. As for the high priest's

⁷² *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.1. Leviticus 8:8–9a in the RSV reads, "And he placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim. And he set the turban upon his head."

⁷³ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.4 (SC 286: 284).

⁷⁴ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.5.

⁷⁵ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.5 (SC 286: 288).

⁷⁶ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.5 (SC 286: 288).

⁷⁷ Cf. Carroll, *Preaching the Word*, 43 for a slightly different emphasis.

⁷⁸ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.6.

teaching, Origen preaches, "But let him teach those things which he learned from God, not from *his own heart*, nor from a human mind, but things which the Spirit teaches."⁷⁹ But before leaving his point, Origen remembers a third thing that Moses does. Drawing upon the description of Israel's battle against Amalek, Origen sees that Moses does not rush into the battle. Rather, he prays. As long as he prays, Israel prevails against the enemy. The Church's priest must likewise pray unceasingly so that the people under the priest may defeat the invisible Amalekite armies, that is, the demons, for those who want to live in Christ should fight these armies. Therefore, we can infer that the teacher must not only meditate upon the Scriptures but also assiduously pray for his people who hear him. Elsewhere in the *Homilies on Leviticus* Origen makes clear that effective preaching demands also the prayers of the people so that their teacher may receive the Word in the opening of his mouth (cf. Eph 6:19).⁸⁰

Origen resumes his attention to clothing in Homily 9 when addressing Leviticus 16.⁸¹ He emphasizes that those preparing to enter the holy place must put aside their sordid clothes and put on clean garments of the priesthood. If they do not don the priestly garments and perform the other necessary preparations before approaching the altar, they will die. Origen says, "This passage touches us all, because what the Law says here pertains to all."⁸² The Law commands how priests, that is, all of Origen's listeners, ought to approach the altar. The altar, Origen teaches, is where prayers to God are offered; the dirty clothing of uncleanness, vices, and stains of passion must be removed in preparation. Origen then asks, "Or are you ignorant that the priesthood has been given also to you, i.e., to all the Church of God and to the people of believers?"⁸³ Quoting 1 Peter 2:9, Origen says in a rhythm of words that conveys the vibrancy of his homily: "You have the priesthood because you are a priestly nation, and therefore *you ought to offer God an offering of praise*, an offering of prayers, an offering of mercy, an offering of purity, an offering of righteousness,

⁷⁹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.6 (SC 286: 296); cf. Ezek 13:2.

⁸⁰ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.1. Cf. *Homilies on Leviticus* 12.4. For an insightful and suggestive study, see Daniel Sheerin, "The Role of Prayer in Origen's Homilies," in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen, Christianity and Judaism in Antiquity, vol. 1 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 200–14.

⁸¹ For an analysis of this homily, see Teresa Piscitelli Carpino, "Omelia IX: I due capri," in *Omelia sul Levitico: Lettura origeniana*, ed. Mario Maritano and Enrico dal Covolo, Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 181 (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2003), 77–109.

⁸² *Homilies on Leviticus* 9.1 (SC 287: 72).

⁸³ *Homilies on Leviticus* 9.1 (SC 287: 72).

an offering of holiness. But so that you may offer this worthily, it is necessary for you to be in clean garments separated from the common garments of the rest of humanity.”⁸⁴

It is this ninth homily on Leviticus that Pope Benedict chose for a selection to make Origen accessible for the Church today. Moreover, the pope himself did not abandon Origen’s use of Leviticus’s terms for clothing and other priestly symbols when making his own point to elucidate Origen’s teaching. Rather, from his own study of the homily Benedict XVI says,

Thus, on the one hand, “girded” and in “priestly attire” mean purity and honesty of life, and on the other, with the “lamp ever alight”, that is, faith and knowledge of the Scriptures, we have the indispensable conditions for the exercise of the universal priesthood, which demands purity and an honest life, faith and knowledge of the Scriptures. For the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, there is of course all the more reason why such conditions should be indispensable. These conditions—a pure and virtuous life, but above all the acceptance and study of the Word—establish a true and proper “hierarchy of holiness” in the common priesthood of Christians.⁸⁵

Arguably in their respective preaching, Origen and Pope Benedict share the same concern as Leviticus in its sacrificial rites, different offerings, and priestly ministries. That is holiness.⁸⁶ But unlike historical studies that may leave Leviticus only in antiquity, Origen and Benedict XVI find that the Word of God in Leviticus is alive and active for all the faithful called to the surpassing dignity of being holy as a priestly people.

The Conclusion of Bearing Fruit

Origen knows that he has opposition to his understanding of preaching. In his last homily on Leviticus, he comments on Leviticus 26:4 where it says that if the people live in accordance with the commandments, the

⁸⁴ *Homilies on Leviticus* 9.1 (SC 287: 72–74); cf. Heb 13:15. Origen continues the sentence saying that the people must also have the divine fire that Christ came to bring.

⁸⁵ Benedict XVI, general audience, May 2, 2007. “Hierarchy of holiness” is a remarkable term deserving much greater attention.

⁸⁶ Robert L. Wilken states: “Much to Origen’s credit he saw that Leviticus was not irrelevant to Christian life and piety. Embedded in its regulations and prescriptions he discovered a theme that is central to the New Testament, namely ‘holiness’. From Leviticus he learned that holiness was not first and foremost a moral or ethical category, but a divine quality.” Wilken, “Origen’s *Homilies on Leviticus* and *Vayikra Rabbah*,” 89–90.

Lord will give rain and make the trees of the fields bear fruit.⁸⁷ Origen in a characteristic move gives an actualization of the verse. He preaches, "We have within our very selves *the trees of the fields which produce their fruit*."⁸⁸ Does Origen at this point notice groans and sighs of a skeptical assembly? He takes their perspective: "Perhaps the hearer says, 'What is this word-finder doing again? Why does he seek words from whatsoever place so that the explanation of the reading runs away? How will he teach that *trees* and woods are within us?'"⁸⁹ Having voiced the objection, Origen quotes Matthew 7:18: "A good tree cannot produce evil fruit and an evil tree cannot produce good fruit." Once this connection is established, Origen explains to the people how they can bear the fruits of the virtues in their hearts. He concludes, "If, therefore, we keep the commandments of God, having received the rain of the Word of God, about which we spoke above, even the trees which were planted in the fields of our soul and in the plain of our heart will also bear joyful fruit of good sweetness."⁹⁰

Origen did not win everyone over to his understanding of preaching the Scriptures, either in his own time or in ours. R. P. C. Hanson was certainly not convinced that Origen understood the Bible or taught what the Bible says. However, many people through the ages, such as Benedict XVI, appreciate the "joyful fruit of good sweetness" found in following Origen's ministry of God's Word. Origen preached so that the Church may be built up. He labored over the letter so that the priestly people may advance from the letter to spiritual understanding, without abandoning the letter—as we have seen in this consideration of sacrifices and clothing. Origen exemplifies the pope's exhortation that the liturgical homily should "foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it bear fruit in the lives of the faithful."⁹¹

Pope Benedict gives this expressed wish for those who hear about Origen: "I invite you—and so I conclude—to welcome into your hearts the teaching of this great master of faith. He reminds us with deep delight that in the prayerful reading of Scripture and in consistent commitment to life, the Church is ever renewed and rejuvenated."⁹² In the desire to

⁸⁷ For an analysis of this homily, see Manlio Simonetti, "Omelia XVI: Origene inventore di parole," in *Omellie sul Levitico: Lettura origeniana*, ed. Mario Maritano and Enrico dal Covolo, Biblioteca di Scienze Religiose 181 (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2003), 135–47.

⁸⁸ *Homilies on Leviticus* 16.4 (SC 287: 276).

⁸⁹ *Homilies on Leviticus* 16.4 (SC 287: 276).

⁹⁰ *Homilies on Leviticus* 16.4 (SC 287: 276–78).

⁹¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §46.

⁹² Benedict XVI, general audience, April 25, 2007.

see the Church edified, “this great master of faith” concludes his homilies with a doxology.⁹³ By doing so, Origen directs the assembly’s attention to the Word in praise. This essay’s last letter, in that spirit, comes from the end of one of Origen’s homilies on Leviticus.

And therefore, in meditating on these things *day and night*, recalling them in memory, being constant and vigilant in prayer, let us entreat the Lord so that he may deign to reveal and show us the knowledge of these things which we read, how we may observe the spiritual Law not only in understanding but also in deeds, and that we may merit to obtain spiritual grace, being enlightened through the Law of the Holy Spirit, in Christ Jesus our Lord, *to whom be glory and power forever and ever. Amen.*⁹⁴

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⁹³ For a study of Origen’s conclusion to the homily, which is almost always explicitly Christological in its doxology, see Nautin, *Origène: Homélies sur Jérémie*, vol. 1, 129–31.

⁹⁴ *Homilies on Leviticus* 6.6 (SC 286: 296); cf. Psalm 1:2, 1 Pet 4:11, and Rev 1:6.