

Christians as Levites: Rethinking Early Christian Attitudes toward War and Bloodshed via Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine*

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■ Abstract

This article seeks to break the scholarly deadlock regarding attitudes toward war and bloodshed held by early Christian thinkers. I argue that, whereas previous studies have attempted to fit early Christian stances into one or another “unitary-ethic” framework, the historical-textual data can be best accounted for by positing that many early Christian writers held to a “dual-ethic” orientation. In the latter, certain actions would be viewed as forbidden for Christians but as legitimate for non-Christians in the Roman Empire. Moreover, this dual-ethic stance can be further illuminated by viewing it in connection with the portrayal in the Hebrew Bible of the relation between Levites and the other Israelite tribes. This framing enables us to gain a clearer understanding not only of writers like Origen and Tertullian, who upheld Christian nonviolence while simultaneously praising Roman imperial military activities, but also of writers such as Augustine, whose theological-ethical framework indicates a strong assumption of a dual-ethic stance in his patristic predecessors.

■ Keywords

pacifism, just war, Levites, Origen, Tertullian, Augustine

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■ Introduction

Much scholarly ink has been spilled in recent decades on the best way to understand attitudes toward war and bloodshed during the first three centuries of the Christian tradition. While scholars tend to agree that many of the early church fathers wrote against Christian participation in the Roman army, and that no extant Christian writings prior to Constantine explicitly affirm Christian participation in bloodshed,¹ there has been considerable dispute as to the *reasons* why such writers would have opposed participation in military service.² Some have argued that the dominant view among such authors was that Christians should not engage in bloodshed at all—and hence participating in the organized bloodshed involved in military battles would be ipso facto illegitimate for Christians.³ Others, however, have pointed to Christian writers during this period, notably Origen and Tertullian, who wrote in praise of the Roman Empire, and who seem to have affirmed the military force needed for upholding the empire's stability. In light of this apparent condoning of military bloodshed, such scholars have argued that much Christian opposition to military service was due to concerns about idolatrous religious practices in army life, rather than to any principled or pacifist opposition to bloodshed.⁴

In this essay, I argue that analyzing early Christian writers in light of the biblical portrayal of the normative differences between Levites and the other tribes of Israel can point to a third position that can contribute to overcoming this scholarly dispute. To this end, I first put forth an account of the ways in which, in the biblical text, the Levites are enjoined to refrain from the military bloodshed in which the other Israelite tribes participate. The Levites' special calling entails that they must avoid bloodshed in order to uphold the purity necessary for their task of ministering before God in the tabernacle. Yet, this nonengagement in bloodshed does not entail a condemnation of the military violence of other tribes; indeed, because God is the ultimate source of military success or defeat, the Levites are portrayed as directly

¹ In this essay, I use the term “bloodshed” to refer to acts causing the death of human beings; I do not address the related issue of shedding the blood of animals.

² For overviews of the scholarly debate, see David G. Hunter, “A Decade of Research on Early Christians and the Military,” *RelSRev* 18:2 (April 1992) 87–93; George Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) 3–6.

³ See, e.g., John Howard Yoder, “War as a Moral Problem in the Early Church: The Historian's Hermeneutical Assumptions,” in *The Pacifist Impulse in Historical Perspective* (ed. Harvey L. Dyck; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) 90–110; 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; rev. ed.; Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*, 39–68.

⁴ E.g., John Helgeland, “Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine,” *ANRW* II.23.1 (1979) 724–834; John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly, and J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010) 255–78; cf. Alan Kreider, “‘Converted’ but Not Baptized: Peter Leithart's Constantine Project,” in *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate* (ed. John D. Roth; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013) 25–67.

contributing to Israel's military victories precisely by tending to God's presence in the tabernacle. The biblical account thus portrays a "dual ethic," in which the Levites and the other tribes have roles and norms that are practically quite different from one another, yet at the same time complementary.

Subsequently, I examine the ways in which other texts in the Hebrew Bible extend a Levitical-priestly status to the whole of Israel as distinct from the other nations of the world, and, furthermore, the ways in which this dynamic is continued in the New Testament portrayal of the Christian community of believers as God's people. I then turn to an analysis of the thought of Origen and Tertullian. We will see that their portrayal of the role of Christians in society vis-à-vis non-Christians closely parallels the relation between the Levites and the other tribes of Israel. Through a Levite-like dual-ethic approach, they can endorse the emperor's military battles while simultaneously holding that Christians cannot legitimately engage in military bloodshed and killing. This analysis will enable us to re-examine the broader scholarly debates over religious/cultic versus moral/ethical objections to Christian military service.⁵ Much previous scholarship, I argue, has failed to take sufficiently into account the basic dual-ethic orientation and has been misled by trying to fit the available evidence into a unitary-ethic account.⁶ By contrast, the turn to a Levitical framing can illuminate the historical evidence in new ways, and in this light, we will even discover that Augustine, despite his own affirmation of Christian engagement in military bloodshed, serves as a witness to this earlier Christian stance.

On a methodological level, my main approach to the relation between the Bible's dual-ethic with regard to the Levites and early Christian writers' dual-ethic is one of phenomenological similarity. That is, when we examine the latter alongside the former, we find that they display strikingly similar conceptualities to one another, and that the juxtaposition of the biblical texts can enable us to discern aspects in

⁵ Although many scholars use the contrast of "religious" versus "moral/ethical" to refer to "concerns about idolatry" versus "concerns about bloodshed," such terminology is problematic, insofar as early Christian objections to bloodshed can be seen as also having a religious or cultic dimension, and objections to idolatry can be seen also as having a moral dimension. The conceptual binary between religious/cultic and moral/ethical may itself reflect a failure to properly take into account the dual-ethic orientation displayed in both biblical and early Christian texts.

⁶ One partial exception can be found in Louis J. Swift, whose account rightly highlights certain aspects of the apparently doubled elements. However, his failure to recognize the priestly-Levitical dynamic leads him to present the Christian thinkers as having an ambivalent attitude toward questions of war and bloodshed, rather than having, as I argue, a deliberate duality of roles. See Swift, "War and the Christian Conscience I: The Early Years," *ANRW* II.23.2 (1979) 835–68, at 841, 851, 854–55, 859–60, 866, 868; and idem, *The Early Fathers on War and Military Service* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1983) 39, 49–50, 55, 78. Moreover, even when he rightly describes Origen as having a "bifocal view," he then goes on to cast this as "coming perilously close to a double standard of morality, one for Christians and one for non-Christians" ("War and the Christian Conscience," 854–55). This more pejorative language of "perilously" and of "double standard" reflects an attempt to account for the data from an assumed norm of a unitary ethic, rather than taking into account the possibility of a normative dual-ethic framework.

the later writers that have been less noticed by recent scholarship. In addition, while Tertullian's and Origen's accounts of Christian identity may well have been shaped by various factors in addition to the model of the biblical Levites, both authors, as we shall see, do engage prominently with the broader early Christian notion of God's people as a priestly nation, and both repeatedly apply priestly-Levitical pentateuchal texts to Christians' practical calling in the world. Thus, while I do not seek to determine the precise degree of causal influence of the Levitical dual-ethic on the early Christian dual-ethic concerning bloodshed, the available evidence points toward the likelihood of a historical exegetical trajectory of concept-reception alongside the basic phenomenological correspondences. Finally, my argument does not seek to assess the extent to which, sociologically speaking, some Christians during this period *may in actuality* have served in the Roman army but focuses specifically on analysis of authored texts, seeking to illuminate the reasons why many Christian writers in this period held that Christians *ought not to* serve in the military.⁷

■ The Levites among the Tribes

In assessing the biblical presentation of a Levitical orientation, we must first note that different biblical books and sources present somewhat differing portrayals of the role of the Levites, especially in relation to the question of whether all Levites can serve as priests, as appears to be the case in Deuteronomy's presentation, or whether the priesthood is reserved to a subgroup of the Levites, such as the descendants of Aaron (in Leviticus and other priestly source passages) or the descendants of Zadok (in Ezekiel).⁸ However, my argument here focuses on elements that are broadly found in common across the different biblical books and so presents a more synthetic account. Specifically, I highlight the fact that the Levites constitute a tribe set apart from the other tribes for the purpose of participation in the cultic sphere (whether as priests or as secondary assistants to priests), that they have no

⁷ John F. Shean (*Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army* [History of Warfare 61; Leiden: Brill, 2010]) helpfully emphasizes that in this regard it is "no longer possible to speak of a single Christian mindset" during this period (105), and that the views of the church fathers must be distinguished from the question of whether certain other Christians on the ground viewed joining the army as less problematic (80, 121–22, 163). For further evidence regarding the phenomenon of Christians in the military, see also Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army," 765–97. Conversely, one contemporary source regarding this issue, not treated by Helgeland, may be Celsus, who, in generalized formulations, appears to view Christians in his day as rejecting military service and thus criticizes them for this. See Origen, *Cels.* 8.55, 68–69, 73 (Origen, *Contra Celsum* [trans. Henry Chadwick; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953] 493–94, 504–6, 509).

⁸ For an overview of the differing portrayals of Levites in different biblical texts, see Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns 1985 [1978]) 58–64. For an approach that seeks to uncover the social-political historical background to these portrayals of the Levites, see Mark Leuchter, *The Levites and the Boundaries of Israelite Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). Leuchter's introductory chapter (1–33) provides a good account of recent scholarly debate on the Levites and their status.

territorial inheritance, and that their role in Israel's physical warfare differs from that of the other tribes.⁹

We can first note the geographical-territorial distinctiveness of the Levites, in contrast to the other tribes of Israel. While each of the other tribes is assigned a specific and bordered portion of land within the land of Canaan as a whole, the Levites are specifically denied such a portion.¹⁰ As stated in Deut 18:1–2: “The levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no allotment or inheritance within Israel. They may eat the sacrifices that are the Lord's portion, but they shall have no inheritance among the other members of the community; the Lord is their inheritance, as he promised them” (see also Num 18:20, 24; Deut 10:9; Josh 18:7). Here, instead of being designated a broad territorial inheritance of their own, like the other tribes, their inheritance is instead God himself: a specifically nongeographical inheritance. Moreover, even when other biblical texts describe certain cities as being set apart for the Levites (Lev 25:32–34, Num 35:1–8, Josh 21:1–40), these cities are specifically dispersed throughout the territories of the other tribes; there is no separate Levitical territory in which they are located. Thus, the distinctive geographical dispersion of the Levites among the other tribes constitutes a consistent emphasis throughout the biblical text.

Second, this distinctive geographical dispersion goes along with a distinctive task before God. The Levites are “chosen,” “taken,” and “separated” from among the other tribes, in order to fulfill the crucial role of ministering before God in the sanctuary (Num 3:5, 12; Num 8:14; Deut 10:8; Deut 18:5). The priests (*kohanim*) themselves come from the tribe of Levi, and the remainder of the Levites, even in portrayals in which they are not priests themselves, are also part of the broader priestly sphere, with the role of assisting the priests in carrying out their duties. In the context of this special designation, the Levites can perform actions in the task of ministering that are not appropriate for the other tribes to engage in (see Num 1:51; Num 8:19), and the Levites accordingly play a special mediatory role in relation to God before and for the sake of the other tribes.

While this distinctiveness consists, on the one hand, in positive tasks and actions, it is also manifested, on the other hand, in a negative duty: to refrain from certain actions in which the other tribes engage. In Num 1:2–3, God commands Moses to “number” the children of Israel in relation to engagement in warfare: “Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names, every male individually; from twenty years

⁹ For elements found in common in presentations of the Levites across the different biblical texts, see Haran, *Temples and Temple-service*, 70–71, 112–13.

¹⁰ My presentation of the theological conceptuality of the biblical portrayal of the Levites shares much in common with John C. Nugent's account in *The Politics of Yahweh: John Howard Yoder, the Old Testament, and the People of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011) 105, 122–23, 191–210, and see also the further secondary sources he cites on 191–92. However, my primary aim in this presentation is to highlight the dual-ethnic aspects of the biblical presentation, a theme which receives less emphasis in Nugent's account.

old and upwards, everyone in Israel able to go to war. You and Aaron shall enroll them, company by company.” In this context, Moses and Aaron compile a list of those who can be called up to fight Israel’s battles, when and if such military action is necessary.¹¹ The biblical text then sequentially details the numbers of eligible soldiers from each of the various tribes—with the notable exception of the Levites. The text then states:

These are those who were enrolled, whom Moses and Aaron enrolled with the help of the leaders of Israel, twelve men, each representing his ancestral house. So the whole number of the Israelites, by their ancestral houses, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war in Israel—their whole number was six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty. The Levites, however, were not numbered by their ancestral tribe along with them. The Lord had said to Moses: Only the tribe of Levi you shall not enroll, and you shall not take a census of them with the other Israelites. Rather you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the covenant, and over all its equipment, and over all that belongs to it; they are to carry the tabernacle and all its equipment, and they shall tend it, and shall camp around the tabernacle. (Num 1:44–50)

In other words, after listing “everyone able to go to war in Israel,” God specifically decrees that the Levites are *not* to be included among those “able to go to war.”¹² This exclusion is not due to any physical inability or infirmity on their part; rather, it is due to their distinctive task of tending to the tabernacle. Thus, just as the Levites have no geographic portion of land, unlike the other tribes, so too they differ from the other tribes in not engaging in the physical violence of warfare.¹³

However, the fact that they are to refrain from physical military acts of warfare does not mean that the Levites have no role to play in Israel’s national and military

¹¹ See the analysis of military terminology in Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (AB 4; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 134.

¹² See John R. Spencer, “PQD, the Levites, and Numbers 1–4,” *ZAW* (1998) 535–46, at 543; Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 125.

¹³ See Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*, 200–202. The commandment for the Levites to refrain from the physical violence of warfare is all the more notable given multiple narrative passages in which the tribe of Levi or representatives therefrom are directly linked to acts of violence, e.g., Gen 34, Gen 49, Exod 32, and Num 25. This priestly-Levitical connection to violence has been noted by Joel S. Baden, “The Violent Origins of the Levites: Text and Tradition,” in *Levites and Priests in Biblical History and Tradition* (ed. Mark Leuchter and Jeremy M. Hutton; Ancient Israel and its Literature 9; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011) 103–16, and by Yonatan S. Miller, “Sacred Slaughter: The Discourse of Priestly Violence as Refracted through the Zeal of Phinehas in the Hebrew Bible and in Jewish Literature” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015). However, Baden and Miller do not discuss the commanded legal separation of the Levites from the physical violence of Israelite warfare (although cf. Miller’s brief reference to the association of Phinehas with “peace and peacemaking” [“Sacred Slaughter,” 237]). Leuchter (*Levites*, 12) briefly points out that “none of the narratives” regarding Israel’s settlement of the land “feature Levites actually waging war” but also does not address in depth how the latter point meshes with “the Levites’ tradition of violence.” As such, sustained analysis of the ways in which the Levites’ distinctive nonviolence in Israelite warfare relates to narratives of priestly violence remains a scholarly desideratum.

life. Immediately after listing the military census of the other tribes, and after stating that the Levites are not to be included in this grouping, the text states, “When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And any outsider who comes near shall be put to death. The other Israelites shall camp in their respective regimental camps, by companies; but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the covenant, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the Israelites; and the Levites shall perform the guard duty of the tabernacle of the covenant” (Num 1:51–53). Thus, precisely by their separate task, the Levites protect the lives and well-being of the battle-enrolled other tribes, by preventing God’s wrath from descending upon them. The theological conceptuality appears to be that maintaining God’s presence in the tabernacle-sanctuary is crucial for Israel’s life as a whole, and that upholding God’s connection to Israel is especially crucial in the risk and precarious situations of going forth to battle. In this conceptuality, Israel will be successful in battle only when God’s presence is behind them, as it is ultimately God, and not human strength, who determines victory and defeat. Accordingly, although the Levites do not themselves participate in physical acts of fighting, their acts of service before God in relation to the tabernacle are crucial for helping to ensure that the other tribes will in fact emerge victorious in their military endeavors. The Levites and the other tribes thus play complementary roles in the overall project of military victory.¹⁴

This dynamic can be seen in the biblical portrayal of the ark of the covenant in the context of war. The ark, as part of the domain of the tabernacle and its equipment, falls specifically under the remit of the Levites’ task of ministering (Num 3:31, 1 Chr 15:2). Yet, at the same time, the ark plays a crucial role in the Israelites’ divinely directed campaigns against its enemies, as indicated in Num 10:35: “Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, ‘Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you.’” Here, the underlying theological assumption is that God’s presence is linked to the ark, so that the ark’s going forward with Israel’s troops is a crucial factor in God bringing about the victory of the latter. By contrast, in Num 14, the ark *not* going forth is linked to God’s absence from Israel’s military endeavors, and in such a situation Israel will meet with defeat at the hands of its enemies: “But they presumed to go up to the heights of the hill country, even though the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and Moses, had not left the camp. Then the Amalekites and the Canaanites who lived in that hill country came down and defeated them, pursuing them as far as Hormah” (Num 14:44–45).¹⁵ Accordingly, insofar as they

¹⁴ As Spencer (“PQD,” 546) puts it, “The Levites are the militaristic defenders of the cult and its cultic centers.” Leuchter (*Levites*, 90) also notes the “militaristic overtones” to the Levites’ cultic duties.

¹⁵ We can note, from passages such as 1 Sam 4:1–11, that the presence of the ark itself does not inherently mean that God is with Israel in battle; however, the biblical text still indicates that the ark (and hence the role of the Levites) constitutes a necessary, even if not sufficient, element in Israel’s warfare.

are charged with the maintenance and upkeep of the ark, the Levites play a crucial role in mediating God's presence to the rest of Israel, and they thereby play an essential role in Israel's war efforts, even though they themselves do not engage directly in military bloodshed.

Moreover, in addition to the framework of complementary roles, another reason for the Levites' refraining from acts of physical military violence is that warfare is directly associated with contact with dead bodies—indeed, one could even say that the *producing* of dead bodies through military violence is precisely one of the prime means of typical warfare. Yet, at the same time, contact with corpses makes people impure and thereby prevents them from approaching the tabernacle and its equipment, due to the holy status of these elements (see Num 19:13, 31:19). Thus, in order to uphold their task of ministering over the tabernacle properly—and thus of helping to ensure Israel's victory in battle—the Levites must distance themselves from corpse-impurity during such campaigns. As such, the Levites' separation from warfare is not simply because they are otherwise occupied in terms of time and attention, but also because engagement in the death and bloodshed of warfare would render them impure in a manner that would directly interfere with their ability to carry out the tasks of ministering that have been allotted to them.

Thus, the overall picture presented by the biblical text is a dual ethic, corresponding to the separate roles played by the Levites and by the other tribes of Israel. The text does not indicate that killing in warfare is prohibited in a *general* sense, but it does indicate that the Levites are prohibited from engaging in the physical violence of warfare. The Levites must refrain from warfare not because all killing is bad but because God has ordained a distinctive and different role for them—and also because even the authorized killing on the part of Israel's military is incompatible with the Levites' separation from corpse impurity in their task of ministering. So while in the context of warfare commanded by God, the other tribes *ought to engage* in the physical acts of warfare, the Levites *ought not to engage* in these same acts, just as the Levites ought to engage in the ministering activities of the tabernacle, while the other tribes ought not to engage in these acts. In this framework, the other tribes do not see the Levites as cowardly or as shirking their national duty, and the Levites do not see the other tribes as barbarous or unethically violent; rather, each sees the other as playing an important role in the life of the nation, even though the two roles are quite different from one another. Thus, there is no single or universal norm of ethical action within the Israelite community in this regard; rather, God has ordained different norms for the different sub-groups.

■ God's People as the "Levites" among the Nations

As noted above, God repeatedly says that "the Levites are mine" in a manner different from the other tribes of Israel and that they have been chosen out of the other tribes for a special role of direct service to God. This relation between the Levites and the other tribes of Israel is paralleled in the biblical text by the language used to describe the relation between Israel as a whole and the other nations of the world. Thus, just as Deut 18:5 says that "the Lord your God has chosen Levi out of all your tribes, to stand and minister in the name of the Lord, him and his sons for all time," so likewise Deut 7:6 states of Israel as a whole, "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession." Just as the tribe of Levi is chosen from among the other tribes for a special task of relating to God in a special way through ministering in the holy context of the tabernacle, so too Israel as a whole is chosen from among the other peoples for a special task of holiness in relation to God. Similar priestly-Levitical language is applied to Israel as a whole, for instance in Lev 20:26—"You shall be holy to me; for I the Lord am holy, and I have separated you from the other peoples to be mine"—and in Exod 19:5–6: "Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites." In this sense, just as the Levites are God's tribe in a special way and for a distinctive task, even though God also has a relation to all the tribes, so too Israel is God's people in a special way and for a distinctive task, even though God also has a relation to the other peoples as creator of all humankind. An underlying theological theme is thus that Israel occupies a ministering, mediating, and priestly role vis-à-vis humanity as a whole, just as the Levites occupy a ministering, mediating, and priestly role vis-à-vis Israel as a whole.¹⁶

In addition to these pentateuchal texts, the application of a Levitical frame to Israel as a whole can also be found in the Bible's prophetic books. Thus, Deutero-Isaiah states, "You shall be called priests of the Lord, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory" (Isa 61:6). As Benjamin Sommer notes, by applying the priestly-Levitical language of a ministering role to all Israel, Deutero-Isaiah can be understood as "democratizing" the priestly status, just as, similarly, the same prophetic book engages in a democratization of the royal status and language previously applied only to the Davidic kings, transferring it to the people as a whole.¹⁷ Again, the

¹⁶ See Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 115. For ways in which related themes are taken up in various ways in different streams of Second Temple Judaism, see Martha Himmelfarb, *A Kingdom of Priests: Ancestry and Merit in Ancient Judaism* (Jewish Culture and Contexts; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

¹⁷ Benjamin Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford

dynamic seems to be that the structure of the Levites as God's ministering tribe in relation to the other tribes is paralleled on the macrocosmic level, with Israel as God's ministering people in relation to the nations of the world.

Likewise, as an additional bridge between these texts and the early Christian thinkers we shall shortly examine, these themes are carried over to the New Testament as well. The book of Revelation speaks of Christ as the one who "made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father" (1:6; see also 5:10).¹⁸ Likewise, 1 Pet 2:5 states that believers should "let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"; a few verses later, the text proclaims: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:9–10). Here, the intended audience is portrayed as a distinct nation (*ethnos*) and people (*laos*) and as a chosen race (*genos*) with a priestly-ministering role before God, thus standing conceptually in continuity with the portrayal of the role of the Levites and of Israel as a whole in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹

■ Christians as Levites in Origen

With this theological-conceptual background in mind, I argue, we can better understand the stance put forth by Origen and Tertullian regarding war and bloodshed. Specifically, we will see that they can be viewed as adopting a functionally priestly conception of Christians as the people of God vis-à-vis non-Christian others (who play the part of "the nations of the world"), and furthermore that this distinctive role for Christians parallels in fundamental structural ways the non-bloodshedding role that the Levites played vis-à-vis the biblical portrayal of Israelite warfare. Although neither author upholds a directly literal sense of Levitical priesthood (involving animal sacrifices, etc.), they nevertheless appear to treat the basic structure of the Levites' distinctiveness from the other tribes, when properly reinterpreted, as retaining a practical normative status for Christian life.²⁰ Through

University Press, 1998) 84–87, 114–15. See also Sommer's commentary in *The Jewish Study Bible* (ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 895, 903, 906.

¹⁸ See Himmelfarb, *Kingdom of Priests*, 135–42.

¹⁹ For more on aspects of the New Testament that portray the entire Christian community in priestly terms, see, e.g., Ernest Best, "Spiritual Sacrifice: General Priesthood in The New Testament," *Int* 14 (1960) 273–99; John Scholer, *Proleptic Priests: Priesthood in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991); Peter J. Leithart, "Womb of the World: Baptism and the Priesthood of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10.19–22," *JSNT* 78 (2000) 49–65.

²⁰ Origen emphasizes that his affirmation of the lasting normative status for Christians of the Old Testament (when properly interpreted) sets him apart from those, such as Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament and restricted its meaning to the literal sense. See Christian Hofreiter, *Making Sense of Old Testament Genocide: Christian Interpretations of Herem Passages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 58–65, 78.

analyzing their thought, we can also potentially gain, by extension, a clearer sense of the broader stance of early Christian writers concerning these issues.

Let us begin with Origen. On the one hand, Origen praises the Roman Empire as a providential manifestation of God's will. For Origen, it is not coincidental that Jesus was born during the reign of Augustus, as the conquering acts of the latter facilitated the spread of the gospel message. He writes, "God was preparing the nations for his teaching, that they might be under one Roman emperor, so that the unfriendly attitude of the nations to one another, caused by the existence of a large number of kingdoms, might not make it more difficult for Jesus' apostles to do what he commanded them when he said, 'Go and teach all nations.'"²¹ Although Origen knows that Augustus's act of imperial conquest and unification involved many acts of military bloodshed, he does not condemn such actions; he appears to see them as a legitimate part of the process by which God can cause his providence to manifest itself in the world.

On the other hand, Origen emphasizes that the special calling of Christians means that Christians themselves are not to participate in such physical acts of military bloodshed.²² Yet, he simultaneously insists that Christians nevertheless do their part in contributing to the military efforts of the Roman Empire. In response to Celsus's exhortation to "help the emperor with all our power; and cooperate with him in what is right, and fight for him, and be fellow-soldiers if he presses for this, and fellow-generals with him," Origen insist that Christians cannot properly be soldiers or generals—and yet Christians do nevertheless help the emperor, and even "fight" for him. He writes:

[A]t appropriate times we render to the emperors divine help, if I may so say, by taking up even the whole armour of God . . . the more pious a man is, the more effective he is in helping the emperors—more so than the soldiers who go out into the lines and kill all the enemy troops that they can. . . . Moreover, we who by our prayers destroy all daemons 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, are cooperating in the tasks of the community. Even more do we fight on behalf of the emperor. And though we do not become fellow-soldiers with him, even if he presses for this, yet we are fighting for him and composing a special army of piety through our intercessions to God.²³

Here, Origen emphasizes that through their "intercessions to God," Christians can help draw down God's power and thus contribute to the emperor's victories even more than "those who seem to be doing the fighting." This dynamic seems to

²¹ Origen, *Cels.* 2.30 (Chadwick, 92).

²² Origen indicates that the distancing of Christians from physical acts of warfare and violence applies not simply to the pagan Roman Empire but as a more general principle; see, e.g. *Cels.* 7.26.

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.73 (Chadwick, 509).

parallel quite closely the conceptuality displayed in the biblical text with regard to the Levites, who, through their ministering watch over the tabernacle and the ark, directly contribute to Israel's victories, even though they do not serve as soldiers. Indeed, as we have seen, the biblical text emphasizes that victory is a matter most fundamentally of God's presence and will, and not of the physical strength of the human Israelite soldiers. Thus, through their intercessory actions, the Levites, as in Origen's description, "are of more help to" Israel than "those who seem to be doing the fighting." Origen thus places Christians in a complementary role, alongside those who do the physical fighting for the Roman Empire. He does not condemn the soldiers who shed blood for the empire or say that they should all lay down their swords; rather, he simply says that *Christians* should not be physically engaging in bloodshed. Thus, as in the biblical text, there appears to be a dual ethic with regard to bloodshed and warfare: Origen can approve of the actions of the soldiers and of the actions of the non-bloodshedding Christians, without having to categorize the soldiers as ethically in the wrong.

Thus, while saying that it is wrong for Christians to engage in bloodshed, he does not appear here—at least not explicitly—to put forth a universalized principle whereby he says that it is wrong for *human beings* to engage in bloodshed. While Origen may think that all human beings ought to become Christians, and that all Christians should lay down their swords, he does not insist that those who have *not yet become Christians* ought to lay down their swords. Indeed, his portrayal might even seem to indicate that, insofar as a given soldier has not yet become Christian, he is doing his proper duty to the emperor by engaging in military battle. Through this stance, wherein the distinctive Christian duties need not entail an inherent condemnation of the actions of non-Christians, Origen's account seems quite in keeping with the Levitical dual ethic displayed in the biblical text.²⁴

At the same time, we also need to take Origen's apologetic context into account when analyzing his dual-ethic portrayal. In seeking to respond to Celsus's accusations of insufficient loyalty to the empire, Origen may not be in a position to state his full opinion on the matter. Though he does not condemn the actions of non-Christian soldiers explicitly, this need not mean that he truly considers their actions to be a good thing. Rather, he may ultimately think that their present actions of bloodshed, as human beings, are displeasing to God, and that they should turn from these actions and adopt the Christian non-bloodshedding way of life. Thus, while bloodshed on the part of non-Christians may not be *singled out* for condemnation within the already-problematic context of a generally idolatrous way of life, Origen may simultaneously hope that more and more individuals will

²⁴ Notably, Origen does not assign significance to the respective numbers of people in each role. He holds (*Cels.* 8.69) that even if all people in the Roman Empire became Christians, God would still provide victory: even though the people, as Christians, would be prohibited from engaging in physical warfare, God would save the people as a whole, as he did in the context of Exodus 14, where God defeats the Egyptians while commanding the Israelites themselves to "stand still" (Exod 14:13–14).

join the way of life in which such bloodshed is not permissible.²⁵ In other words, for Origen, Christian rejection of idolatry and Christian rejection of bloodshed are bound up with one another, and his call to all human beings to turn away from the former by becoming Christians is inseparable from a call to turn away from the latter. As such, we should bear in mind throughout that his noncondemnation of non-Christian soliders does not necessarily mean an in-principle positive approval, although this caveat need not detract from the dual-ethic, Levite-shaped character of his portrayal of Christian life within the empire.

Origen further reinforces this Levite-like portrayal by responding to Celsus through an appeal to the example of those who serve as priests in Celsus's own pagan context. He writes:

We would also say this to those who are alien to our faith and ask us to fight for the community and to kill men: that it is also your opinion that the priests of certain images and wardens of the temples of the gods, as you think them to be, should keep their right hand undefiled for the sake of the sacrifices, that they may offer the customary sacrifices to those who you say are gods with hands unstained by blood and pure from murders. And in fact when war comes you do not enlist the priests. If, then, this is reasonable, how much more reasonable is it that, while others fight, Christians also should be fighting as priests and worshippers of God, keeping their right hands pure and by their prayers to God striving for those who fight in a righteous cause and for the emperor who reigns righteously, in order that everything which is opposed and hostile to those who act rightly may be destroyed?²⁶

Here, Origen emphasizes that the pagan "priests" and "wardens" are not enlisted in military efforts, precisely because the sacrifices that they offer need to be offered "with hands unstained by blood and pure from murders." Again, while his text is written in order to respond to Celsus on his own (pagan) terms, it is notable that Origen's description of the pagan priests and wardens sounds very similar to the biblical portrayal of the Israelite priests' and Levites' restrictions in their special task before God.²⁷ He even emphasizes that the elements of purity/impurity are carried over to the context of Christians, who are "fighting as priests . . . of God" and must

²⁵ In this regard, Origen's dual ethic may differ in certain ways from the Hebrew Bible's dual ethic, insofar as in the latter there is not an expectation (or even a possibility) of more and more non-Levites *becoming* Levites. Likewise, unlike the biblical portrayal, those who in Origen correspond to non-Levites (i.e., Roman pagans) are not presented as commanded directly by God to wage war. I thank Julia Snyder for emphasizing this point.

²⁶ Origen, *Cels.* 8.73 (Chadwick, 509).

²⁷ As we shall see, in other writings intended primarily for Christians, Origen does indeed explicitly link the Christian calling more broadly to pentateuchal priestly-Levitical portrayals. Thus, while the more outward-facing argumentation in *Contra Celsum*, assuming a largely pagan audience, may speak of pagan-priestly roles, it is likely that a biblical-priestly orientation plays a significant role in shaping the basic substance of his argument here. Notably, Helgeland, with regard to Origen's stance in this passage, states, "In arguing that Christians were set apart, like Roman priests, he may have been thinking of the Old Testament priesthood" ("Christians and the Roman Army," 765; see also Helgeland's comment [755] linking Cyprian's concerns about bloodshed to

thus keep “their right hands pure.” Thus, notably, while Origen’s understanding of the Christian role as priests could be understood, in certain ways, as a “spiritualization” of certain aspects of the biblical priestly functions (for example, Christians do not perform their tasks in a physical temple-building), he nevertheless retains a quite concrete sense of upholding priestly purity by refraining from the physical act of bloodshed. That is to say, unlike some later Christian thinkers such as Augustine, he does not spiritualize the prohibition against priestly-Levitical bloodshed by, for instance, claiming that Christians can physically engage in military bloodshed so long as they keep their intentions pure.²⁸ Rather, in his understanding, engaging in military bloodshed would structurally undermine the Christian task of supplicating God, in which Christian prayers “are sent up as from priests on behalf of the people in our country.”²⁹ Thus, for Origen, Christians refrain from physical participation in warfare, not out of a lack of care for their broader community, but precisely out of care for the latter. While this might appear to some as a mere apologetic ruse, seeking to avoid Celsus’s accusation that Christians are insufficiently patriotic and social-minded, we can say, to the contrary, that his stance closely parallels the biblical portrayal of the Levites performing a form of national service in the context of war precisely by refraining from bloodshed and instead upholding the tabernacle and its equipment.

A similar dynamic can be seen with regard to Celsus’s insistence that Christians, if they truly care for the preservation of society, should agree to accept public office. Because many public offices in Origen’s time, particularly those of judicial magistrates, involved issuing sentences of death, Origen held that Christians cannot take up such roles. However, against Celsus’s insinuations, he writes: “If Christians do avoid these responsibilities, it is not with the motive of shirking the public services of life. But they keep themselves for a more divine and necessary service in the church of God for the sake of the salvation of men.”³⁰ Here, Origen points to a dual notion of public service. While Christians do avoid engaging in the activities entailed in holding state-level public office, he presents Christians as called by God for a distinctive type of divine service (λειτουργία)—echoing the biblical presentation of the Levites’ role³¹ while also perhaps referencing pagan priestly exemptions—which also contributes in important ways to the public

“the Old Testament concept of ritual purity”). However, Helgeland does not pursue the further implications of this observation.

²⁸ See, e.g., Augustine, *Faust.* 22.74, where he emphasizes that the problematic aspect of warfare lies not in striking, wounding, or causing death per se, but only in engaging in such actions out of base motives. By contrast, he argues, if those same acts of warfare are engaged in out of virtuous intentions, they are ethically-religiously unproblematic.

²⁹ Origen, *Cels.* 8.74 (Chadwick, 509).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.75 (Chadwick, 510).

³¹ As J. Patrick Ware (*The Mission of the Church in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians in the Context of Ancient Judaism* [NovTSup 120; Leiden: Brill, 2005] 272) notes, the “noun λειτουργία . . . in contrast to λατρεία, which is in the Septuagint frequently used of the worship of the entire people of Israel, is in the LXX used only of the sacerdotal service of the priests and Levites.”

life of society more broadly. Just as the Levites do not do certain things, yet are crucial for the physical preservation of the Israelite community, so too, Origen argues, one should not be misled by the apparently antisocial nonengagement of Christians in public office. In reality, the Christian's Levite-shaped calling is just as important for upholding the structure of society as is that of the magistrates who condemn wrongdoers to death. Again, Origen does not say that non-Christian public magistrates should not be issuing death sentences (although he also does not explicitly say that they should); he simply says that Christians should not do so, as they have a different, yet complementary, social role to play.³²

Finally, although Origen's discussion of bloodshed in *Contra Celsum* does not explicitly draw a connection to the biblical portrayal of the Levites' special calling, we know, from his biblical commentaries, that his broader thought drew prominently from the latter framework. For instance, in his homilies on Joshua, Homily 17.2 ("Concerning why the Levites did not receive land for an inheritance," focusing on Josh 14:1–4), he writes, "Thus, therefore, also at this time the Levite and priest, who have no land, are bidden to dwell together with the Israelite who has land, so that the priest and the Levite may obtain from the Israelite earthly things that they do not have, and so the Israelites may obtain from the priest and Levite heavenly and divine things that they do not have."³³ Thus, we see a dual-role framework, in which one party contributes material elements, while the other contributes spiritual elements, but each party is dependent on the efforts of the other. In the specific context of Homily 17, Origen primarily applies "the figure of priests or Levites" to different subgroups within the Christian community,³⁴ but his basic description also serves as an apt description of the picture he paints of broader society in *Contra Celsum*, wherein the Christians, as "priests on behalf of the people in our country," contribute to the good of society and of the empire through their "heavenly" role of prayer and intercession, while the non-Christians contribute through their "earthly" role of physically fighting the empire's military battles.³⁵

Similarly, in his homilies on Leviticus, Origen reiterates the notion that the Christian community as a whole constitutes a priestly nation and a royal priesthood, drawing repeatedly on 1 Pet 2:9. To take one of multiple examples, he comments as follows on Lev 16 and the priestly duties commanded by God:

Or are you ignorant that to you also, that is, to all the Church of God and to the people of believers, the priesthood was given? Hear what Peter says about the faithful: You are "an elect race, royal, priestly, a holy nation, a chosen

³² On Christian separation from bloodshed and warfare, see also Origen, *Cels.*, 3.7, 3.8, 5.33, 7.26.

³³ Origen, *Hom. Josh.* 17.2 (Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* [ed. Cynthia White; trans. Barbara J. Bruce; FC 105; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002] 161).

³⁴ See Origen, *Hom. Josh.* 17.2 (FC 105:159). See also Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 1.9–11 (Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John, Books 1–10* [trans. Ronald E. Heine; FC 80; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989] 33–34).

³⁵ For a similar portrayal of Origen's stance in this regard, see Gerard E. Caspary, *Politics and Exegesis: Origen and the Two Swords* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 125–36.

people” [1 Pet 2:9]. Therefore, you have a priesthood because you are “a priestly nation,” and for this reason “you ought to offer an offering of praise to God” [paraphrasing Heb 13:15], an offering of prayers, an offering of mercy, an offering of purity, an offering of justice, an offering of holiness. But in order to offer these things worthily, you must have clean clothes separated from the common clothing of the rest of humanity.³⁶

Here, in reinterpreting and reapplying Levitical priestly roles, Origen does not explicitly specify the extent to which Christian duties of keeping “clean clothes” separated from the ways of the rest of humanity entails a refraining from the impurity of bloodshed. However, the basic structure of his presentation harmonizes closely with his insistence in *Contra Celsum* that Christians should keep “their right hands pure” by abstaining from physical and military violence. Accordingly, his homiletical casting of all Christians as taking up the mantle of Levitical priests further reinforces our reading of his broader attitudes toward bloodshed as enacting a biblically informed Levite-like dual ethic.

Moreover, Origen’s engagement with Levitical texts, vocabulary, and conceptuality was by no means exceptional among Christian thinkers in the early church. Rather, a wide range of early Christian thinkers, from Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus to Origen and Tertullian, drew upon and reapplied priestly-Levitical scriptural portrayals of biblical Israel in constructing Christian identity. These applications were employed both in the context of differentiated roles within the Christian community and in the context of the broader Christian community’s priestly separation from the nations of the world.³⁷ When the widespread phenomenon of explicit Christian engagement with priestly-Levitical tropes is borne in mind, the presence of such a pattern in Origen’s division between Christian and non-Christian engagement in bloodshed need come as no surprise.

³⁶ Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 9.1 (Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 1–16* [trans. Gary Wayne Barkley; FC 83; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990] 177); see also his similar comments in 4.6 (FC 83:78), 6.2 (FC 83:118), 9.9 (FC 83:196), 13.5 (FC 83:242).

³⁷ For priestly-Levitical applications to inner-Christian differentiation, see Bryan A. Stewart, *Priests of My People: Levitical Paradigms for Early Christian Ministers* (Patristic Studies 11; New York: Lang, 2015). For priestly-Levitical applications to the Christian community as a whole, see James Leo Garrett, Jr., “The Pre-Cyprianic Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Christians,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity in Church History: Essays Presented to George Hunston Williams on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (ed. F. Forrester Church and Timothy George; Studies in the History of Christian Tradition 19; Leiden: Brill, 1979) 45–61; Laurence Ryan, “Patristic Teaching on the Priesthood of the Faithful,” *ITQ* 29 (1962) 25–51; Hank Voss, *The Priesthood of All Believers and the Missio Dei: A Canonical, Catholic, and Contextual Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2016); see in particular the summary listing of early Christian applications of the “royal priesthood” in Voss, *Priesthood*, 247–50.

■ Christians as Levites in Tertullian

When we turn to Tertullian, we can discern a similar dynamic at work. In his *Apology*, he emphasizes that Christians pray to God for the stability of the empire, including the military might that enables this stability: “We Christians . . . constantly beseech Him on behalf of all emperors. We ask for them long life, undisturbed power, security at home, brave armies [*exercitus fortes*], a faithful Senate, an upright people, a peaceful world, and everything for which a man or Caesar prays” (*Apol.* 30.4).³⁸ Here, although in carrying out the task of upholding the empire, the strong armies that Tertullian mentions would clearly be required to shed blood,³⁹ he does not express any condemnation of such actions. Indeed, he portrays Christians as ceaselessly praying for everything for which a military-minded emperor would wish!

Yet, when expressing his views on what *Christians* ought normatively to do, he puts forth a quite different picture. In opposing the emperor’s persecution of Christians, he argues that Christians represent no threat to the empire, for “if we are forbidden to return an injury [*laesi*], lest, through our action, we become wrongdoers like them, who is there for us to injure [*laedere*]?” (*Apol.* 37.1). Thus, while the soldiers who defend the borders of the empire may need to inflict physical injury upon others, Christians are, in his view, forbidden to do so.⁴⁰ Likewise,

³⁸ English translations drawn from Tertullian, *Apologetical Works*, and Minucius Felix, *Octavius* (trans. Rudolph Arbesmann, Sister Emily Joseph Daly, and Edwin A. Quain; FC 10; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950).

³⁹ Cf. *Apol.* 25.14 (FC 10:80): “[E]very kingdom or empire is acquired by wars and extended by victories. Yet, wars and victories generally consist in the capture and destruction of cities . . . there is indiscriminate destruction of city walls and temples, slaughter of priests and citizens without distinction.” As in the case of Origen, we should note that while Tertullian acknowledges the reality of bloodshed in warfare, and while he does not explicitly say that non-Christians ought to refrain from such actions, we need not see Tertullian as positively endorsing such bloodshed on the part of non-Christians. Indeed, since he holds that non-Christians ought to become Christians and thus cease from bloodshed, there may be an implicit condemnation of bloodshed on the part of human beings more generally, even if he simultaneously asserts a dual ethic insofar as the non-Christians have not yet become Christians.

⁴⁰ In a number of places in his *Apology* (5.6, 42.3, and see also 37.4), Tertullian (using the term *militare*) does indicate awareness of the fact that some Christians were serving in the Roman army. Yet, as R. F. Evans argues, the actual wording of these passages does not appear to indicate Tertullian’s personal or normative endorsement of such behavior; rather, Tertullian may be making use of such facts to further his apologetic argument, to a pagan audience, on the general social integration of Christians in society. See R. F. Evans, “On the Problem of Church and Empire in Tertullian’s Apologeticum,” *StPatr* 14 (1976) 21–36. (I thank Simeon Burke for this reference.) In this regard, Evans (23–29) argues that while Tertullian’s views on other topics may have changed in his later Montanist period, his basic normative stance against military service should not be viewed as substantively different in his earlier writings than in his later writings; the differences in formulation are more likely rhetorical differences in writings geared toward pagan audiences or inner-Christian audiences, respectively. For a recent related analysis of early and late Tertullian, see Geoffrey Dunn, “Tertullian and Military Service: The Scriptural Arguments in *De corona*,” in *Sacred Scripture and Secular Struggles* (ed. David Vincent Meconi; Bible in Ancient Christianity 9; Leiden: Brill, 2015) 87–103, at 100–102. In this sense, Tertullian, particularly in the *Apology*,

in insisting that Christians should not be seen as cowardly or inherently weak, Tertullian writes, “For what wars would we not have been fit and ready, even though unequally matched in military strength, we who are so ready to be slain, were it not that, according to our rule of life, it is granted us to be killed rather than to kill?” (37.5). Thus, he writes that *if, hypothetically and counterfactually*, Christians were to engage in warfare, their martyrly courage would make them a formidable force; however, because, according to the Christians’ normative rule of life, it is better to be killed than to kill another, actual engagement in the bloodshed of war is not legitimate for those who seek to follow the Christian rule. Thus, as in Origen, we see in Tertullian a dual-ethic stance, condoning the physical military violence necessary to uphold the empire against its enemies, while simultaneously saying that Christians cannot properly engage in such violence.⁴¹

Yet, despite this opposition to engagement in military bloodshed, Tertullian nevertheless emphasizes that Christians do directly contribute to the political good of the empire. With regard to the prayers offered for the emperor and the empire, he writes: “Such petitions I cannot ask from any other save Him, and I know that I shall obtain them from Him, since He is the only One who supplies them and I am one who ought to obtain my request. For, I am His servant; I alone worship Him; for his teaching I am put to death; I offer him the rich—and better—sacrifice which He Himself has commanded, the prayer sent up from a chaste body, an innocent heart, and a spirit that is holy” (*Apol.* 30.5). Here, we have a quite Levitical framing of the matter. While Christians, who are not themselves to shed blood in defense of the empire, might be seen by some as irrelevant to upholding its security, it turns out that, because of their intimate service and sacrifice before God, Christians are able to ask for and receive the imperial victories necessary for the upkeep of the empire. Because it is in truth God, and not the number of human soldiers, that is actually determinative of victory, Christian service of God is in reality a major military and political boon to the empire. In this sense, far from an avoidance of civic involvement, Christian prayer is presented as a type of concrete and practical military service, and the most decisive type for imperial victory at that. Furthermore,

can be seen as holding a normative opposition to Christian military service, yet without feeling obliged to focus on condemning or anathematizing individual Christians who did happen to serve in the military. Cf. Shean, *Soldiering*, 121–22.

Furthermore, even in relation to Tertullian’s acknowledgment of some Christians engaging in *militare*, we can note that Alan Kreider, building upon Jean-Michel Hornus and John Howard Yoder, has pointed to the potential difference between *militare* (acting as a soldier) and *bellare* (engaging in physical violence of warfare), suggesting that typical Roman army life meant that some Christians could have remained in their soldiering roles without engaging in the violence and killing of warfare per se. See Kreider, “Military Service in the Church Orders,” *JRE* 31 (2003) 415–42, at 424–25; Yoder, “War as a Moral Problem,” 99–100; and Hornus, *It is Not Lawful*, 158. We can also observe, from a different but related angle, that the notion of engaging in (a certain type of) *militare* alongside a refraining from *bellare* fits quite well with the biblical portrayal of the Levites’ role in Israel’s warfare, serving in the military camp (Num 1:53), yet not with weapons.

⁴¹ Other places where Tertullian explicitly asserts the normative incompatibility of bloodshed and military violence with Christian commitment include *Idol.* 17.2–3 and 19.1–2 and *Cor.* 11–12.

Tertullian indicates that such mediatory access to God is specifically correlated to Christians' holiness and unstainedness of soul, a status that appears directly tied up with distancing themselves from bloodshed. Christians' distinctive contribution within the empire thus parallels the Levites' distinctive role within the polity of Israel, which likewise helped to ensure victory for those who engage in physical battle precisely by refraining from bloodshed in order to uphold the service of God in the tabernacle.⁴²

■ Implications for Broader Scholarly Understandings

In light of the foregoing discussion, we can now reconsider ways in which these observations can contribute new perspectives on scholarly debates concerning attitudes toward war and bloodshed among early church writers. As highlighted in this essay's introduction, it has been observed that, based on the available textual sources, Christian writers prior to Constantine appear not to have promoted Christian military service. As John Helgeland puts it, "[N]o Father urged that Christians enlist."⁴³ Furthermore, beyond this universal non-urging of enlistment, many church fathers, including Origen and Tertullian, actively indicated that Christians *ought not* to enlist. While not all of the broad masses of Christians on the ground necessarily heeded these thinkers' stance,⁴⁴ the widespread negative attitude toward participating in the military is a prominent theme among extant Christian writings from this period. Yet, these widely agreed-upon observations have not given rise to a scholarly consensus as to the conceptual-theological *reasons* for this paradigm of military noninvolvement.

Helgeland has argued that Christian objections to military service stemmed not from "ethical" or "moral" reasons, in the sense of an opposition to bloodshed, but rather from "religious" reasons, in the sense of an opposition to idolatrous practices that were part of the military life of the Roman army. This dichotomy between bloodshed and idolatry, while problematic, can nevertheless be useful in analyzing differing scholarly assessments of Christian attitudes toward the military.⁴⁵ If the main reasons for the opposition concerned idolatry rather than bloodshed, then this would imply that Christians could not engage in military bloodshed in the specific context of the Roman army, where idolatrous religious practices were interwoven with the fabric of army life; however, there would be no inherent opposition to

⁴² As in the case of Origen discussed above, while Tertullian does not explicitly link these discussions of bloodshed to scriptural portrayals of the Israelite Levites and priests, he does draw explicitly upon the latter in other writings, thus lending additional weight to a reading of his dual-ethnic approach in priestly-Levitical terms. See the discussion in Garrett, "The Pre-Cyprianic Doctrine," 58–60; Ryan, "Patristic Teaching," 32–33; Stewart, *Priests of My People*, 27–43.

⁴³ Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army," 764.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 765; Shean, *Soldiering*, 80, 121, 142, 163.

⁴⁵ In terms of conceptual terminology, Helgeland's contrast between ethical and religious in this regard has itself been criticized, as an opposition to bloodshed can itself be bound up with religious concerns. See, e.g., Yoder, "War as a Moral Problem," 108–9; Hunter, "A Decade of Research," 87, 93.

Christians engaging in military bloodshed in the context of an army free from such idolatrous practices. By contrast, if, in addition to concerns about idolatry, Christian authors also held a principled opposition to engagement in bloodshed, then it would not only be Roman army service that would be incompatible with Christianity; rather, military bloodshed would also be incompatible with Christianity, even in an ostensibly idolatry-free army.

Helgeland himself argues that the historical evidence regarding early Christian opposition to military does *not* point to a principled opposition to bloodshed, and that the primary reasons for opposition were “religious,” directed against idolatrous practices. Thus, he asserts that in relation to military service, “the problems Christians had were religious (as Origen, Tertullian, and Hippolytus show), not moral in nature”; he likewise argues, “If Origen had had bloodshed in mind when he prohibited enlistment, he would not have said that Christians should pray for the emperor’s success in just wars; he was too consistent a thinker to let such a contradiction escape him.”⁴⁶ The reasoning here is as follows: because the emperor’s military victories inherently involved much bloodshed, if there really were a Christian opposition to bloodshed, we would have expected to see more condemnation (or at least nonendorsement) of Roman imperial wars. By contrast, since thinkers like Origen and Tertullian not only do not condemn but even speak positively about the emperor’s wars, portraying them as just, this indicates that they did *not* hold an inherent opposition to bloodshed, and hence their reasons for opposing Christian military service must have been based in idolatry rather than in bloodshed.

Scholars who have sought to argue, against Helgeland, that Christian thinkers did hold a principled opposition to bloodshed have pointed to passages that do indeed seem to point to such a stance. In addition to the passages we have already examined above, both Tertullian and Origen also repeatedly express elsewhere a clear opposition to Christian engagement in bloodshed.⁴⁷ It is likewise the case that neither Origen nor Tertullian, nor any other early Christian writer, ever indicate that it would be legitimate for Christians to engage in military bloodshed if only the Roman army would abandon its idolatrous religious practices. That is to say, there is no indication of an in-principle willingness to engage in military bloodshed. Yet, Helgeland’s point is still notable: if one did hold an “ethical” opposition to military bloodshed, it would seem contradictory simultaneously to affirm and condone the emperor’s wars. Accordingly, since Origen and Tertullian do appear to approve the emperor’s wars, then it would appear that we must—if we assume that they were consistent thinkers—find some other way of interpreting their apparently explicit statements of opposition to bloodshed.

In other words, there are significant problems with both the “ethical” (anti-bloodshed) and the “religious rather than ethical” (merely anti-idolatry) accounts

⁴⁶ Helgeland, “Christians and the Roman Army,” 751, 766.

⁴⁷ See nn. 32 and 41 above.

of early Christian opposition to military service. The “ethical” framing seems undermined by condoning the emperor’s bloodshedding wars, while the “religious rather than ethical” framing seems undermined by the explicit statements against Christian engagement in bloodshed. If these are the only two choices, then the problems with the “ethical” framing could make the “religious rather than ethical” framing more appealing to some scholars. Conversely, the problems with the “religious rather than ethical” framing could make the “ethical” framing more appealing to other scholars. However, it may be that *both* approaches are problematic and conceptually deficient due to their failure to recognize and take into account a dual-ethic orientation within the early church. In this regard, it is notable that each camp tends to ignore or downplay, and thus fails to integrate, the passages that are emphasized by the opposing scholars.

By contrast, the Levitical framing aids in addressing the different problems that have hindered previous scholarly accounts. As we have seen, viewing Origen and Tertullian through a dual-ethic lens means that there is no inherent need for them to condemn military bloodshed in a straightforwardly universal sense, or to argue that non-Christians should never kill. At the same time, they can hold very strongly that Christians should not kill or engage in military bloodshed. Christians, as God’s special and priestly people, have a different role and calling; it may be that they welcome others who would join that calling, but insofar as those others have not yet done so, Christians do not need to condemn their participation in warfare and can even affirm it to the extent that it serves the purpose of upholding the stability of the empire.⁴⁸ To be sure, Christians can take a generally negative view of the broader idolatrous life-framework of non-Christians, but there is no need to single out or condemn their participation in warfare in particular. This stance can be viewed as one plausible understanding of Rom 13:1, in which Paul declares that “the powers that be are ordained of God.” The human rulers’ efforts to uphold the stability of their kingdoms or empires can be seen as part of God’s providential plan, even though the maintenance of such structures involves military bloodshed. Thus, Christians need not condemn the armies that uphold the empire—even though this by no means entails that Christians can legitimately engage in the bloodshed and idolatry that are a key part of those military efforts.

Instead, Christians can portray themselves as in the role of Levites, scattered throughout the different territories of the empire. They participate in the daily life of society and interact with others, even though they do not directly participate in physical acts of bloodshed. In this regard, the army need not be highlighted by

⁴⁸ While John Howard Yoder’s thought approaches this idea in certain ways, he tends to stop short of arguing for a Levite-like dual ethic in the early Christian thinkers. John C. Nugent argues that Yoder would have benefited from a more “robust canonical engagement with Israel’s priesthood” and the ways in which the latter has structural similarities to the type of identity Yoder sought to ascribe to the church. See Nugent, “The Politics of YHWH: John Howard Yoder’s Old Testament Narration and Its Implications for Social Ethics,” *JRE* 39 (2011) 71–99, at 89; see also Nugent, *Politics of Yahweh*, 105, 122–23, 191–210.

Christians as especially problematic or evil in an abstract sense; it can be treated as a normal part of the broader fabric of society—even though Christians themselves cannot engage in many of the actions typical of army life. Yet, like the Levites, they can view themselves as playing a key role in public life, and even in the successes of imperial warfare, by their intercessory prayers before God for imperial victory, since it is God who ultimately determines the outcome of battles, and Christians have a special intimate relation to the God of the universe.

Part of the difficulty in contemporary scholarly attempts at understanding this orientation lies in the fact that most ethical and political thought today eschews the notion of a dual ethic. If the more typical unitary-ethic approach is projected back onto early Christian thinkers, then it would be the case that they must *either* condemn imperial bloodshed per se if they condemn Christian engagement in bloodshed, *or* they must hold upon the legitimate possibility of Christian engagement in bloodshed if they affirm imperial wars as just wars. Because the early Christian writers do in general seem like basically consistent thinkers, we *must* assign to them one or the other of these stances or, at a minimum, view the thinkers as displaying an attitude of ambivalence or tension on this particular issue. By contrast, if scholarship can incorporate the concept of a dual ethic, with different but complementary norms or callings, like those incumbent upon the Levites and the other Israelite tribes, then thinkers like Origen and Tertullian can be seen as consistent (in a slightly different sense) and unambivalent in simultaneously affirming imperial military efforts and insisting that Christians cannot participate in bloodshed. In this framework, such thinkers can hold that opposition to Christian engagement in bloodshed is absolute—and not simply contingent on whether or not army life involves outwardly idolatrous religious practices—while still viewing themselves as part of the broader life of Roman society as a whole.

This Levitical framing can also help in gaining an understanding of early Christian thinkers more broadly, including those who held a less endorsing and more condemning attitude toward the activities of the Roman Empire.⁴⁹ According to the available evidence, we can posit two normative elements that appear consistent across different writers: nonparticipation in military bloodshed, and also not attempting to physically overthrow the existing legal-political structures.⁵⁰ Within this shared stance, there was a range of different stances on intermediate issues: some Christian thinkers viewed the Roman Empire in more negative terms, and did not endorse its military efforts, while others (like Tertullian and Origen) present Roman imperialism in more positive and even providential terms. Yet, the various thinkers can all be viewed as functionally upholding a Levitical stance for Christians, called to live among the cities and societies of those cast in

⁴⁹ See, for example, Caspary's contrast between Origen and Hippolytus of Rome (*Politics and Exegesis*, 136–39). For sources from a range of early Christian thinkers in this regard, see Kalantzis, *Caesar and the Lamb*.

⁵⁰ See Kreider, "Military Service in the Church Orders," 423.

the role of the “other nations” or “other tribes,” while simultaneously refraining from specific elements of broader social life that involved bloodshed. This stance was not simply predicated on the idolatry of wider society but, like the Levites, represented the restrictions on bloodshed entailed by a distinctive calling before God. Within the basic structure of a dual-ethic framework, some Christian thinkers may look negatively upon non-Christian engagement in military bloodshed, while other Christian thinkers may view non-Christian military bloodshed as neutral or even positive-providential. The main point, however, is that there is *no inherent or necessary connection* between a particular thinker’s prohibition of bloodshed for Christians and his stance on engagement in military bloodshed by non-Christians. Thus, while we cannot definitively assess the degree to which there may have existed Christians who normatively affirmed Christian participation in warfare or bloodshed but did not leave any written evidence available to us today, the presence of writers who affirmed *Roman* militarism need not be seen as indicating an affirmation of *Christian involvement* in militarism.

■ Augustine’s Affirmation of an Earlier Christian Dual-ethic Orientation

While a full treatment lies beyond the scope of this essay, we can also note that the above analysis indicates that a key conceptual-theological shift in the post-Constantinian era is not to be found in the endorsement by Christian thinkers of military bloodshed, but rather in the endorsement, on the literary-textual level, of *Christian enactment* of military bloodshed.⁵¹ That is to say, Christian writers’ increasing affirmation of participation in military bloodshed in the post-Constantinian era cannot be explained simply by the removal of outwardly idolatrous religious practices from Roman army life; rather, this change in practice appears to have taken place in the context of a significant reconfiguration of theological and ecclesiological principles and conceptuality, involving the loss of the previous Levite-shaped dual ethic. Notably, Augustine, as a prominent endorser of Christian engagement in military bloodshed, explicitly puts forth a version of precisely this historical narrative of theological revision. Augustine holds that God commands different things in different time periods. Thus, in response to questions of potential inconsistency between the Old and the New Testaments, Augustine affirms that “one and the same God commanded the prophets in old times to make war, and forbade the apostles.”⁵² Here, Augustine affirms the special calling of

⁵¹ Thus, as Christopher Walter emphasizes, the earliest available historical sources and evidence endorsing the notion of Christian warrior saints date specifically to “the post-Constantinian ideological climate,” even when the narratives about the saints are set in the pre-Constantinian period. As Walters states, “[t]he public expression of the cult of saints only became general after Constantine had given official recognition to the Christian Church.” See Walter, *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) 265–66. See also Hofreiter, *Making Sense*, 161.

⁵² Augustine, *Faust*. 23.77 (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1 [ed. Phillip Schaff; 14 vols.; 1886–1890; repr.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994] 4:302).

the apostles in comparison with the earlier biblical prophets. Through this dual-ethic approach (here, a temporal duality), he is able to view war as appropriate and divinely legitimated for the one group while holding it to be inappropriate for God's people upon the inauguration of the new Christian era.⁵³

Likewise, Augustine accounts for the seeming discontinuity between the pre- and post-Constantinian eras by arguing for a similar shift in divinely ordained normative tasks. He writes that in the pre-Constantinian era, Christian nonviolence was divinely mandated for that time because "the events described a little later in [Ps 2] were not yet taking place: *And now, kings, understand; be instructed, you who judge the earth. Serve the Lord in fear and rejoice with him in trembling* [Ps 2:10–11]."⁵⁴ That is to say, he holds that God had ordained one norm for Christians in the era prior to kings and rulers turning to service of the Lord through affirmation of Christianity and a different norm for Christians in the era following the affirmation of Christianity by earthly kings and rulers.⁵⁵ Thus, while in his own era Augustine affirms the use of physical force by Christians, he simultaneously says that this stance marks a sharp difference from the norms of the earlier Christian era. Although Christians can now use force, this is only *after* the period of "having waited without using force on anyone until the prophetic predictions about the faith of kings and nations were fulfilled."⁵⁶ According to Augustine's portrayal, Christians prior to Constantine viewed themselves as having been commanded by God not to engage in force and bloodshed; their refusal to engage in military service would thus have been linked not only to concerns about idolatry, but it would also have been strongly grounded in the view of bloodshed as incompatible with the distinctive Christian calling.⁵⁷ Thus, Augustine's account of the early Christian stance is functionally in keeping with the analysis of Tertullian and Origen above (although, to be sure, the earlier Christian writers do not themselves appear to indicate that their eschewal of bloodshed is simply a temporary matter of waiting for kings and nations to affirm Christianity!).⁵⁸ Augustine therefore indicates that the post-Constantinian

⁵³ In this regard, cf. Origen, *Cels.* 7.25–26.

⁵⁴ "Letter 185: Augustine to Boniface," in *Augustine: Political Writings* (ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 185.

⁵⁵ For more on this dynamic in Augustine, see Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Just War as Christian Discipleship: Recentering the Tradition in the Church rather than the State* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2009) 28–29.

⁵⁶ Augustine, "Letter 185," 188.

⁵⁷ Again, this theological-normative portrayal by Augustine should be distinguished from the historical question of whether, as seems likely, some Christians did in fact serve in the Roman army even prior to Constantine. Likewise, in historical reality, there were likely developments of a more gradual nature in the period before and after Constantine, rather than the sharp periodization Augustine presented. However, his presentation may still capture important elements and contours of an actual historical shift of substantial significance.

⁵⁸ At the same time, there may be some precedent to be found in, for example, the book of Revelation for Augustine's conception of earlier Christians as refraining from violence for a limited temporal period until a future historical shift; see Matthew Streett, *Here Comes the Judge: Violent Pacifism in the Book of Revelation* (LNTS 462; London: T&T Clark, 2012); and Paul Middleton, *The Violence of the Lamb: Martyrs as Agents of Divine Judgement in the Book of Revelation* (LNTS

Christian stance represents a substantive discontinuity (with theological, ethical, and conceptual ramifications) with regard to the earlier Christian norm—although he maintains that this is a divinely and prophetically ordained discontinuity and is thus legitimate. He appears to envision a pre-Constantinian Christian stance that affirmed a Levite-like role in broader society, supporting the stability of the empire through prayer while rejecting participation in military bloodshed, whereas God has ordained that post-Constantinian Christians can now participate in force and bloodshed in new ways.⁵⁹ In this regard, the idea of a dual ethic is seen as fully in keeping with the basic ways of God, whether a synchronic social duality, as between the norms for Christians and for non-Christians in the pre-Constantinian framework, or a diachronic temporal duality, as between the norms of the Old Testament era and those of the New Testament era, or between the norms before Constantine's affirmation of Christianity and those after.

■ Conclusion

I have argued that greater conceptual-historical clarity can be gained by analyzing early Christian thinkers' attitude toward war and bloodshed through the lens of a Levitical dual-ethic framework. This orientation stands out strongly in pentateuchal texts, wherein the Levites are chosen for a set of practical norms that differentiates them from the other tribes of Israel. The Levites are to refrain from engagement in military bloodshed in order to uphold their task of serving Israel's God in the tabernacle. However, this does not entail a condemnation of the military bloodshed carried out by the other Israelites; indeed, the activities of the Levites are viewed as contributing crucial elements to Israel's military victories. Moreover, other passages in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament present a form of Levitical-priestly status as extended to God's people as a whole. In light of this scriptural-conceptual background, we have seen that Origen's and Tertullian's thought can be understood as fitting into a similar structural pattern, in which Christians live alongside non-Christians in broader society and contribute to the broader stability of the empire, but in which they specifically refrain from military bloodshed and instead engage in the complementary role of intercessory prayer to God. This dual-ethic orientation, moreover, enables us to discern the consistency in their affirmation of the emperor's wars, alongside their insistence that bloodshed is incompatible with the norms incumbent upon Christians, and this in turn can contribute to resolving broader

586; London: T&T Clark, 2018). However, the question of the degree to which earlier notions of anticipated future eschatological triumph did play a role in shaping greater acceptance of Christian participation in bloodshed in the wake of the Constantinian transition is too complex to address here and would require a careful separate treatment in light of this essay's analysis.

⁵⁹ Augustine similarly emphasizes the temporal specificity of this shift in stating that "the church receives power through God's generosity and at the appropriate time, because of the king's religion and faith" ("Letter 185," 188). For a different but related analysis of late antique perceptions of this post-Constantinian shift, see Daniel H. Weiss, "The Christianization of Rome and the Edomization of Christianity: *Avodah Zarah* and Political Power," *JSQ* 25.4 (2018) 394–422.

disputes in previous scholarship between “religious” and “ethical” portrayals of early Christian rejection of military service. Finally, this analysis can set the stage for future studies of the character of the conceptual, theological, and ethical developments that occurred following Constantine’s affirmation of Christianity, with Augustine standing as a perhaps unexpected witness to this earlier Christian stance.