

Origen and Hebrew: Reading and Possessing the “Hebrew Scriptures” in Late Antique Christianity

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Abstract

This essay argues that, in certain circumstances, Hebrew literacy and engagement with Hebrew manuscripts played a crucial role in the construction of elite Christian identity in late antiquity. More specifically, it argues for the rhetorical role of the Hebrew language in claims for Christian superiority to Jews and their texts. Particular attention is given to the role of Hebrew knowledge in the legend of Origen’s production of the Hexapla and Origen’s *Epistula ad Africanum*.

Keywords

Origen, Septuagint (LXX), Hexapla, Hebrew language, book culture, manuscripts, parting of the ways

1. Introduction

This essay focuses upon the rhetorical value of the Hebrew language for the construction of a certain elite brand of Christian identity in late antiquity and, more specifically, the contribution of third-century material supersessionism to the so-called parting of the ways, ways that never parted, and ways that often parted between Jews and Christians.¹ I address two sources—the legendary

¹ The phrases are taken from the titles of key contributions to the discourse: James D. G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christian Identity*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM, 2006); Alan H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed, eds., *The Ways that Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Lori Baron, Jill Hicks-Keeton, and Matthew Thiessen, eds., *The Ways that Often Parted: Essays in Honor of Joel Marcus*, ECL 24 (Atlanta: SBL, 2018). This essay was originally offered as a paper at the Association for Jewish Studies annual meeting in 2021. I thank the panelists Susannah

accounts of Origen's production of the Hexapla and the *Epistula ad Africanum*—and two interrelated issues: (1) Origen's Hebrew literacy and (2) Origen's consultation, and possession, of what he called "Jewish Scriptures," manuscripts of the Hebrew Scriptures written in Hebrew, in contrast to the Greek manuscripts of the Septuagint. The discourse surrounding these issues illustrates the malleability of the social capital associated with aspects of ancient book culture. Origen and his later devotees alternately maximize and minimize his facility with Hebrew and, in so doing, reveal the porous border between Jewish and Christian book cultures.

2. Origen and the Hexapla

In book six of his *Ecclesiastical History*, likely written in the closing years of the third century CE,² Eusebius of Caesarea praises Origen of Alexandria's creation of the Hexapla with the following statement:

Origen undertook such an accurate examination of the divine words that he even (ὡς και) learned the Hebrew language (τὴν Ἑβραϊδα γλώτταν) and made the original writings preserved among the Jews in the Hebrew wording itself his own possession (τάς τε παρὰ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις φερομένας πρωτοτύπους αὐτοῖς Ἑβραίων στοιχείοις γραφὰς κτῆμα ἴδιον), and searched out the versions of the sacred writings of other translators besides the Seventy, and went beyond well-worn translations—those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion—to find others, searching out what had long escaped notice—in what recesses I know not—and bringing it out into the light. About these, on account of their being utterly unknown and not knowing who [had made the translations], he indicated only, for example, that he found this one in Nicopolis near Actium, and that one in some other place. Indeed, in the *Hexapla* of the Psalms, after the four famous versions he includes not only a fifth, but a sixth and a seventh translation, and he has indicated that one was found in Jericho in a wine cask during the time of Antoninus, the son of Severus. He gathered all of these in the same [place], diving them by *cola* and placing

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² Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 128, dates books 1–7 to "before the end of the third century"; cf. also p. 111. Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2007), 228, dates the writing of books 1–7 to "before 303," and the addition of books 8–10 to "by 325."

them opposite each other along with the Hebrew signifiers themselves (αὐτῆς Ἑβραίων σημειώσεως), and has left us with the copies of what is called the *Hexapla*, and also arranged the version containing Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion together with the Seventy, separately, in the *Tetrapla*.³

This account of Origen was repeated, sometimes verbatim, numerous times in subsequent centuries⁴ and it has relevance for several topics relating to early Christian book culture.⁵ For present purposes, I underscore the role that Hebrew and Hebrew manuscripts played in Eusebius's curation of Origen's reputation as a scholar. Eusebius considers Origen's usage of Hebrew and even possession of Hebrew manuscripts to be outside the norm, an extraordinary measure reflecting his abnormally high devotion to Scripture. According to Eusebius, Origen loved Scripture so much, that he "even" studied Hebrew! Eusebius twice uses the intensive αὐτός for the Hebrew letters on his manuscripts—"Hebrew itself" or, as Oulton translated in the LCL edition, "actual Hebrew."⁶ Although the intensive αὐτός may function in a mundane fashion to distinguish between the Hebrew words in Hebrew letters in the first column of the Hexapla and the Hebrew words in Greek letters in the second column,⁷ it is also clear from the context and the reception history of this tradition that the emphasis on Origen's usage of "actual Hebrew" underscores the novelty and significance of the Hebrew language for these Christians.⁸ Eusebius rhetorically deploys Origen's engagement with Hebrew to paint Origen as the scholar's scholar.

3. The Rarity of Hebrew

Eusebius is right to highlight the novelty of Origen's Hebrew. By the time of Origen in the third century, literate abilities in the Hebrew language were severely restricted among Christian intellectuals to the point of extinction and

³ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.16.1–4 (Schott). Greek text is from Oulton, LCL.

⁴ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.3.5–7; Rufinus, *Hist.* 6.16.4; Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 3.9; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 54.6–8.

⁵ See especially Anthony Grafton and Megan Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 86–132; John D. Meade, "Hexapla," in *The Dictionary of the Bible and Ancient Media*, ed. Tom Thatcher et al. (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 170–172.

⁶ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.16.1–4 (Oulton, LCL).

⁷ This distinction is more evident in the later reception of this tradition in Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.3.5–7 (Williams): "Thus this is, as is called a Hexapla, and besides the Greek translations <there are> two parallel texts, of the Hebrew actually in <Hebrew> letters, and of the Hebrew in Greek letters (Ἑβραϊκῆς ... δι' <Ἑβραϊκῶν> στοιχείων καὶ Ἑβραϊκῆς δι' Ἑλληνικῶν στοιχείων)." For Greek, see *Epiphanius 2: Panarion haer.* 34–64, ed. Karl Holl and Jürgen Dummer, 2nd rev. ed., GCS (Berlin: Akademie, 1980), 407–408.

⁸ Again, see Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.3.5–7; Rufinus, *Hist.* 6.16.4; Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 3.9; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 54.6–8.

had been for some time. Kamesar even opens his monograph on Jerome by identifying Origen as “the first Christian scholar to concern himself in a serious fashion with the text of the Old Testament,” by which he refers to Origen’s inclusion of Hebrew with Greek in the production of the Hexapla.⁹ Devotion to Jesus began in Palestine in the first century CE, and already among the Jewish population at that time and place advanced Hebrew abilities, such as would be required to read or copy the Torah or compose literary texts in Hebrew, were restricted to the educated elite.¹⁰ Aramaic was the colloquial language of Jews in Palestine,¹¹ and the practice of providing Aramaic translations in some synagogues had likely begun.¹² Koine Greek was the language of Diasporan Jews such as Philo,¹³ the *lingua franca* of the Empire, and possibly the language of some synagogues in Palestine, depending on what one thinks of the linguistic practices of the Synagogue of the Freedmen in Acts 6:9 or the synagogue attested by the Theodotus Inscription.¹⁴

⁹ Adam Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: A Study of the Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesisim*, OCM (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.

¹⁰ See the classic study of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, “The Languages of Palestine in the First Century A.D.,” *CBQ* 32 (1970): 501–530; repr. in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, combined ed. in *The Semitic Background of the New Testament*, BRS (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 29–56, the update to the discussion that comes to largely the same conclusions by John C. Poirier, “The Linguistic Situation in Jewish Palestine in Late Antiquity,” *JGRChJ* 4 (2007): 55–134, and now Holger Gzella, *Aramaic: A History of the First World Language*, trans. Benjamin D. Suchard, ELR (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 109–110; Annette Yoshiko Reed, *Demons, Angels, and Writing in Ancient Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 54–59; Michael Owen Wise, *Language and Literacy in Roman Judaea: A Study of the Bar Kokhba Documents*, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 279–355. Sang-Il Lee, *Jesus and Gospel Traditions in Bilingual Context: A Study in the Interdirectionality of Language*, BZNBW 186 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 77–212, provides an intricate and helpful discussion of bilingualism (and multilingualism) in first-century Palestine and the Diaspora. Alan Millard, *Reading and Writing in the Time of Jesus*, BS 69 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 123–125, shows that at least some knowledge of Hebrew is attested at the popular level on ossuaries and masonry markings.

¹¹ Gzella, *Aramaic*, 110–113.

¹² Fragments of targumim of Leviticus (4Q156) and Job (11Q10) were discovered at Qumran.

¹³ See further John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 30–31.

¹⁴ Cf. Wise, *Language*, 335. Further on the possibility of Greek-speaking Palestinian synagogues, see Stephen K. Catto, *Reconstructing the First-Century Synagogue: A Critical Analysis of Current Research*, LNTS 363 (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 120–121; Charles Perrot, “The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue,” in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 155; cf. however, Lee

In the first century CE, Latin in Palestine was primarily restricted to the Roman bureaucracy. It is in such a context of government-sanctioned execution that Latin makes an appearance on Jesus' trilingual *titulus* in John 19:20. Texts that became part of the Bible were translated into Latin in North Africa by the end of the second century, and in the third century, North African church fathers Tertullian and Cyprian were writing in Latin.¹⁵ Most church fathers of the second and third centuries still preferred to write in Greek, but during this period it remains that Greek and Latin were the two main languages of the Christian educated, as was the case for their pagan counterparts. The reason is simple: followers of Jesus never developed a primary education system of their own, so what literate education future church leaders received was normally gained outside the church, often pre-conversion.¹⁶ As one moves geographically and chronologically away from first-century Palestine, therefore, the general presence of Semitic languages among followers of Jesus wanes significantly.

Centuries before the emergence of the Christ cult, beginning in the third century BCE, the Jewish Scriptures were translated into Greek in a collection of texts that came to be known as the Septuagint (LXX).¹⁷ The LXX continued to circulate among Greek-speaking Jews, and by the second century CE, revisions of the Greek Jewish Scriptures attributed to Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion were also in circulation.¹⁸ Shortly after these revisions were

I. Levine, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Congruence?* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 161–162.

¹⁵ Pierre-Maurice Bogaert, "The Latin Bible," *NCHB* 505–506.

¹⁶ Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 6, 10. See also H. I. Marrou, *A History of Education in Antiquity*, trans. George Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1956), 325. Eusebius notes that, initially, Origen needed to teach literacy to those who came to study with him, a practice that he eventually passed to Heraclas (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.3.8–9; 6.15.1). In the fourth century, Julian, *Adv. Galil.* 229e–230a challenges Christians to provide their children with their own education system and then compare them to those receiving a pagan education. More generally on the relationship between Christians and pagan education, see M. L. W. Laistner, *Christianity and Pagan Culture in the Later Roman Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1951); E. G. Welton, *Athens and Jerusalem: An Interpretive Essay on Christianity and Classical Culture*, *AARSR* 49 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1987), 5–20.

¹⁷ The legendary account of this translation in the Letter of Aristeas sets it in the context of Ptolemy II and at the prompting of Demetrius, head of the Alexandrian Library (Let. Aris. 9). See further Francis Borchardt, "The LXX Myth and the Rise of Textual Fixity," *JSJ* 43 (2012): 1–21. For the relevance of this legend for matters discussed below, see Judith Lieu, "The Early Christian Reception of the Legend of the Greek Translation of the Scriptures," in *The Reception of Jewish Tradition in the Social Imagination of the Early Christians*, ed. John M. G. Barclay and Kylie Crabbe, *RJT* 8 (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 15–30.

¹⁸ Kristin de Troyer, "Septuagint," *NCHB* 267, 280–286.

made, the rabbinic reading circles associated with the Tosefta (ca. 300 CE) permitted the reading of the Scriptures in Greek and other vernacular languages as long as the reading begins and ends in Hebrew. Yet it specifies that if even one man can read Hebrew, that is what should be read: “A synagogue comprised of those who speak a foreign language—if they have someone who can read Hebrew, they begin in Hebrew and conclude in Hebrew. If they have only one who can read, only one reads.”¹⁹ These instructions reflect the reality of the colloquial diminishment of Hebrew, but equally the resilient prominence of and preference for Hebrew as the special language of the Scriptures and their public reading in assembly, a preference reflected much earlier in the manuscript collection of the Qumran community, which included Greek and Aramaic manuscripts but was overwhelmingly Hebrew.²⁰

As noted, this preference for Hebrew as a sacred language was not replicated among later, Greek-speaking Christians.²¹ When Origen included the Scriptures in Hebrew in the first column and a Greek transliteration of that Hebrew in the second column of his Hexapla, he seems to have reinvigorated interest in the Hebrew language among at least some Christian intellectuals, though the extent of genuine reinvigoration is open to debate.²² At least until Jerome, Origen’s interest in Hebrew and willingness to learn it to whatever extent he did was, in the words of Elliott, “almost unknown.”²³ Jerome himself

¹⁹ t. Meg. 3:13 (Neusner). Cf. also the observation of Wise, *Language*, 303: “If Greek was the language in which Josephus told their story to the Romans, Hebrew was the language in which the Judaeans told it to themselves.” Wise continues, “As with Romans on the path to literary literacy, so, too, Judaeans elites would need to master a difficult body of literature presented in a challenging format and learn to reanimate it with a pronunciation markedly different from that of ordinary speech” (305).

²⁰ Poirier, “Linguistic,” 69, estimates that over 82 percent of the Qumran collection was Hebrew.

²¹ Similarly, John C. Poirier, *The Tongues of Angels: The Concept of Angelic Languages in Classical Jewish and Christian Texts*, WUNT 2.287 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 29: “Despite their conviction that Hebrew was the language of creation, the church fathers did not translate their conviction that the scriptures were written in Hebrew into any sort of concern to preserve Hebrew within the church....”

²² Cf. Kamesar, *Jerome*, 40, “Between the time of Origen and Jerome, there was little movement in the direction of the Hebrew text.”

²³ C. J. Elliott, “Hebrew Learning among the Fathers,” in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects, and Doctrines*, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace, 4 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1877–1887), 2:851–872. See also Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in Service of the Church*, OCTC (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), vii: “It was in Alexandria that Origen did what no other Christian theologian of his day had done, and very few did after him in the Patristic period. He learned the Hebrew language so that he could work with the Hebrew Scriptures.” As I will show, Origen was not exactly alone in his acquisition of Hebrew abilities, but one can trace the notion that Origen went against the grain of Christian culture in this regard at least back to Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 54.6–8. Kamesar, *Jerome*, 38–40, notes Eusebius of Emesa, Diodore of

reflected this opinion when he said of Origen: “Who does not also know that he was so assiduous in the study of the Holy Scriptures that contrary to the spirit of his time and of his people, he learned the Hebrew language.”²⁴ Origen’s interaction with Julius Africanus, discussed below, shows that he was not entirely alone in this regard, but he was a rarity.

4. Hebrew, Greek, and Whose Are the Scriptures

Prior to Origen, then, knowledge of Hebrew among followers of Jesus was scarce. This is not to say that there is no evidence that pre-Constantinian Jesus followers interacted with the Hebrew texts—scholars often make arguments that a given citation of the Scriptures in a first- or second-century text reflects familiarity with the Hebrew rather than the Greek of the Jewish Scriptures.²⁵ But generally speaking, the “Old Testament” of followers of Jesus was the LXX.²⁶

The dominance of the LXX among later Christians is partially reflective of the general linguistic situation of Koine Greek dominating the broader imperial literary scene but also partially reflective of a theology of the text. The rendering of the Jewish Scriptures into Greek, a Gentile language, and commissioned by a Gentile according to legend (Ptolemy II Philadelphus),²⁷ led some later Christians to claim the LXX as their own, which allowed them “to claim a historic”—and Jewish—“heritage” as their own.²⁸ Thus, in the third century, Origen refers to the LXX as “ours” frequently and says that it was given to Christians through God’s providence.²⁹ Throughout the *Epistula ad Africanum*, he consistently refers to the LXX as unqualified “Scriptures” but Hebrew-language authoritative texts as the “Hebrew Scriptures,” and I will return to this matter. In the early fourth century, Eusebius gave clear

Tarsus, and Theodore of Mopsuestia as exceptions between Origen and Jerome who, to different extents and for different reasons, took an interest in Hebrew.

²⁴ Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 54.6–8 (Halton, FC).

²⁵ For a study of Paul’s engagement with LXX and Hebrew tradition, see Francis Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); more briefly on Paul’s usage of the LXX, see Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 105–111. Richard Bauckham, “Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John,” in his *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 246–247, argues that the author of John’s Gospel worked with both the LXX and the Hebrew (cf. *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015], 49, 52, 54; “Jewish Messianism according to the Gospel of John,” in *Testimony*, 229).

²⁶ See especially on this topic Law, *When God Spoke*.

²⁷ Let. Aris. 9. Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3.21.2, instead attributes the commissioning to “Ptolemy son of Lagus,” cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 1.22.

²⁸ Law, *When God Spoke*, 5. See further on the idea of a “gentile chain of transmission of the Old Testament,” see Kamesar, *Jerome*, 29–34, quotation from p. 30.

²⁹ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 4.

articulation of the view that the LXX was part of God's plan to prepare the world for Christianity and that the prophecies relating to Jesus were not clear in the Hebrew language while they were clear in the Greek.³⁰ In providing his adaptations to a Latin translation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*, Rufinus similarly mentions the LXX but adds, "which is our own" (*quae nostra est*).³¹ Well before these Christians, Justin Martyr in his second-century *Dialogue with Trypho*, which portrays his conversation with a Jewish interlocutor, refers to "your Scriptures, or rather not yours, but ours."³²

The inherent ambiguity reflected in Justin's statement—specifically how he affirms that the Scriptures are, in some sense, the Jews', but, in another sense, the Christians'—enabled various exploitations of the book culture(s) around those Scriptures. It is precisely in the crosshairs of this kind of rhetoric that I place the significance of Origen's Hebrew language abilities. De Troyer is correct that Justin's statement shows "that both Jews and Christians were using the Septuagint,"³³ but we can observe further that it was sometimes a touchstone of contention and difference. When late antique Christians claim divine inspiration for the LXX or attribute its composition to providence,³⁴ from one perspective, they are doing nothing more than the author(s) of the Letter of Aristeas had implied or Philo had claimed outright.³⁵ From another perspective, however, the claim could take on a different inflection when deriving from Christians. For them, it has sometimes functioned as a claim that God inspired *their* LXX, and it allowed them to construct the LXX and its Greek in contradistinction to the Hebrew-language Scriptures (in a way that is not

³⁰ Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8.1 (Gifford): "For when the salutary preaching of our Savior was all but ready to shine forth unto all men in the Roman empire, more than ordinary reason required that the prophecies concerning Him, and the mode of life of the pious Hebrews of old, and the lessons of their religious teaching, hidden from long ages in their native tongue, should now at length come forth to all the nations, to whom the knowledge of God was about to be introduced; and then God Himself, the author of these blessings, anticipating the future by His foreknowledge as God, arranged that the predictions concerning Him who was to appear before long as the Savior of all mankind, and to establish Himself as the teacher of the religion of the One Supreme God to all the nations under the sun, should be revealed to them all, and be brought into the light by being accurately translated, and set up in public libraries."

³¹ Rufinus, *Hist.* 6.16.4. For Latin, see *Eusebius Werke 2.2: Die Kirchengeschichte*, ed. Eduard Schwartz and Theodor Mommsen, 2nd unchanged ed., GCS 6:2 (Berlin: Akademie, 1999), 553.

³² Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 29 (ANF 1:209).

³³ De Troyer, "Septuagint," 279. Justin is likely referring to the LXX, but the text does not specify.

³⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Haer.* 3.21.1–2; Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8; Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 4; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Lectures* 4.34. Cf. Jerome, preface to *Chron.* 2; preface to *Qu. hebr. Gen.*

³⁵ Let. Ari. 301–311; Philo, *Mos.* 2.25–44, respectively. Cf. Josephus, *Ant.* 12.5–13 §40–109. See further Law, *When God Spoke*, 129–131. Augustine eventually articulated a theory of two revelations, one in Hebrew and the other in Greek, in *Civ.* 18.43.

entirely different from how Christians may have used the codex for their authoritative writings in order to distinguish their Scriptures from Jewish Scriptures in bookroll format).³⁶ Eusebius, for example, explicitly places God on his own side of an us/them dichotomy when he states that “God himself” inspired King Ptolemy to order the translation of the LXX, “for we should not otherwise have got from the Jews those oracles which they would have hidden away for their jealousy of us.”³⁷

Collectively, this evidence points to several features of the reading culture of late antique Christian intellectuals such as Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome. To read the Jewish Scriptures in Hebrew was, in some circumstances, to do what Jews did. For a Scripture manuscript to be written in Hebrew instead of Greek was to render it automatically a “Jewish” rather than a “Christian” manuscript. For the sake of clarity, the present point concerns not whether there is an intrinsic connection between language choice, manuscript usage, and “ownership,” but how this confluence of factors can be *portrayed* or *viewed* from specific perspectives. From at least one such perspective, that of some followers of Jesus in late antiquity, to study Hebrew manuscripts was to occupy space on the border of two reading cultures or, better stated, to pass through the permeable border.

5. Origen’s “Actual Hebrew”

Regarding Origen’s Hebrew, prior scholarship has addressed a number of matters, such as his knowledge of Hebrew or possibly lack thereof,³⁸ the significance of Hebrew in Origen’s production of the Hexapla,³⁹ Origen and

³⁶ For this possibility, see Chris Keith, *The Gospel as Manuscript: An Early History of the Jesus Tradition as Material Artifact* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 223–230.

³⁷ Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 8.1 (Gifford).

³⁸ Elliott, “Hebrew,” 2:851–872 covers Origen’s Hebrew in the context of a dated, but still valuable, discussion of Hebrew knowledge among church fathers from Justin Martyr to Bede. He concludes that only Jerome, and possibly Origen, “possessed any knowledge of Hebrew that was worthy of the name” (2:872), and that Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus, Theophilus, Clement of Alexandria, the Clementine Homilies, Eusebius of Caesarea, Ephraim the Syrian, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Augustine show various levels of familiarity with Hebrew words and their meaning (for example, the name ישראל), as well as Jewish interpretive traditions, but do not provide clear evidence of their ability to consult Hebrew manuscripts themselves, and often show evidence of the contrary. Similarly, Epiphanius had some familiarity with Hebrew, “but not of a critical character” (2:864), and Theodoret knew some Hebrew, but it was a “superficial acquaintance” (2:869), as did Bede (2:872). Jerome exceeded all, for Elliott, but the exact limits of his ability are also hard to determine.

³⁹ Ruth A. Clements, “Origen’s *Hexapla* and Christian-Jewish Encounter in the Second and Third Centuries,” in *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, ed. Terence L. Donaldson, *ESCJ* 8 (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2000), 303–329; “*Peri Pascha*: Passover and the Displacement of Jewish Interpretation

Scripture generally,⁴⁰ and Origen's references to and contact with Jews.⁴¹ To address the initial matter in an anachronistic manner, we can at least say that Origen had a facility for Hebrew. Even if the first two columns of the Hexapla were acquired prior to his move to Caesarea or created later by "Jewish members of his scribal staff,"⁴² either of which theory removes responsibility for their direct production from Origen, his inclusion of them in the Hexapla reflects an effort to interact with the Hebrew language. I consider two brief examples of Origen's engagement with Hebrew textual variants and etymology before giving more extended consideration to his engagement with Hebrew in *Epistula ad Africanum*.

6. Hebrew Variants

In his writings, Origen gives evidence of some facility with Hebrew manuscripts and the Hebrew language.⁴³ In his *Homiliae in Jeremiam*, Origen discusses the variant readings of the LXX and Hebrew manuscripts at Jer 15:10:

For the Scripture is in two texts. In most copies there is, *I have not helped; no one has helped me*, but in the most accurate copies of and in accord with the Hebrew is, *I have not owed, no one has owed me*. So it is necessary both to discuss the text most common and carried in the churches, and not to leave undiscussed the view from the Hebrew Scriptures.⁴⁴

This type of textual conundrum is precisely what the Hexapla was designed to help address. Origen identifies the two differing LXX readings as "the Scripture" and the Hebrew-language manuscripts as "the Hebrew Scriptures," specifying that the former is what circulates "in the churches." His description of the LXX as unqualified Scripture and his location of it in Christ assemblies reveal an assumed distinction between a Christian reading culture associated with the

within Origen's Exegesis" (ThD diss., Harvard University, 1997); Grafton and Williams, *Christianity*, 23–132; Kamesar, *Jerome*, 4–28.

⁴⁰ Heine, *Origen*, 65–82; Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, OECs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁴¹ Paul M. Blowers, "Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible: Toward a Picture of Judaism and Christianity in Third-Century Caesarea," in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen, CJA 1 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 96–116; Heine, *Origen*, 147–151; N. R. M. de Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

⁴² Clements, "Origen's Hexapla," 327. Similarly, Elliott, "Hebrew," 2:859 posits "Origen's Jewish amanuenses" as responsible.

⁴³ I present several examples in the main text but draw readers' attention to the still-valuable study of Kamesar, *Jerome*, 4–28.

⁴⁴ Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 14.3.1 (Smith, FC).

LXX and a Jewish reading culture associated with the Hebrew. The problem for Origen is that the LXX tradition attests to two readings in this case, the most common of which is “I have not helped; no one has helped me.” Origen, however, describes the less common reading (“I have not owed, no one has owed me”) as the one found in manuscripts that are “most accurate” and “more accurate,” and notes that this reading also “accords with the Hebrew.”⁴⁵ *In this case*, then, Origen employs the Hebrew in order to choose between two readings in the Greek, ultimately siding with the reading that aligns with the reading of Jewish manuscripts over “the text most common and carried in the churches.”⁴⁶ As Kamesar observes, this position stands in tension with Origen’s theological assertion of the superiority of the LXX and his allowing the Hebrew to correct the LXX is “the furthest he moves towards recognition of the importance of the original.”⁴⁷

7. Hebrew Etymology

At one point in his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen solves a problem of variant readings by invoking the Hebrew meaning of words in transliterated Greek.

We are not unaware that “these things were done in Bethania” occurs in nearly all the manuscripts. It also seems likely that, in addition, this was the earlier reading. And to be sure, we have read “Bethania” in Heracleon. But since we have been in the places, so far as the historical account is concerned, of the footprints of Jesus and his disciples and the prophets, we have been convinced that we ought not to read “Bethania,” but “Bethabara.”⁴⁸

He then supports this argument with an etymological argument: “In addition, the meaning of the name Bethabara is appropriate for the baptism of the one who prepares for the Lord a prepared people, for it is translated, ‘house of preparation.’ Bethania, however, means ‘house of obedience.’”⁴⁹ As Knust and

⁴⁵ Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 14.3.1, 4 (Smith, FC).

⁴⁶ Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 14.3.1. As Kamesar, *Jerome*, notes, “As far as his textual position is concerned, there is a tension between the support of a LXX ‘corrected’ according to the Hebrew on the one hand, and of a ‘pure’ LXX on the other” (6), and, “From Origen’s own perspective, this method is not self-contradictory” (18); cf. also Kamesar’s description of Origen’s “conflicting tendencies” that are “perceptible in Origen’s work” (28).

⁴⁷ Kamesar, *Jerome*, 20.

⁴⁸ Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 6.204 (Heine, FC).

⁴⁹ Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 6.206 (Heine, FC).

Wasserman observe, “Origen is arguing from the Hebrew, though he does not supply” the Hebrew.⁵⁰

8. Susanna

In another famous example, Julius Africanus and Origen correspond over the latter’s acceptance of Susanna, an account of a young Jewish woman and voyeuristic elders that appears in the LXX tradition of Daniel but not in Hebrew manuscripts.⁵¹ The battleground for the dispute includes a wordplay in the Greek of Sus 54–59. Africanus asserts that the wordplay does not work in Hebrew and thus shows that Susanna is “plainly a more modern forgery”⁵²:

And when the one said, “Under a holm-tree” (*prinos*), he answered that the angel would saw him asunder (*prisein*); and similarly menaced the other who said, “Under a mastich-tree” (*schinos*), with being rent asunder (*schisthenai*). Now, in Greek, it happens that “holm-tree” and “saw asunder,” and “rend” and “mastich-tree” sound alike, but in Hebrew they are quite distinct. But all the books of the Old Testament have been translated from Hebrew into Greek.⁵³

Africanus’s logic is clear: Susanna cannot have been in the Old Testament because it was composed in Greek, as this wordplay shows. Africanus ends the correspondence by inviting Origen’s response: “I have struck the blow; do you give the echo; answer, and instruct me.”⁵⁴

Origen’s response is fascinating in several ways, but perhaps most so concerning the current topic because of the sheer amount of knowledge *about* Hebrew, Greek, and Hebrew and Greek manuscripts he marshals, implicitly asserting his status as an expert on such matters without ever actually answering Africanus’s question. He starts by moving away from the specific issue of the (im)possibility of a Hebrew wordplay and onto other LXX additions to Daniel, such as Bel and the Dragon,⁵⁵ and then even further to “thousands” of passages where the LXX and Hebrew do not align: “thousands of other passages also which I found in many places when with my little strength I was collating the

⁵⁰ Jennifer Knust and Tommy Wasserman, *To Cast the First Stone: The Transmission of a Gospel Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 86.

⁵¹ According to Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 1, he wrote to Africanus from Nicomedia; acknowledging the considerable difficulties in dating the correspondence, N. R. M. de Lange, “The Letter to Africanus: Origen’s recantation?” *StPatr* 16.2, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie, 1985), 242–243, suggests the late 230s at the earliest.

⁵² Julius Africanus, *Ep. Orig.* 1 (ANF 4:385).

⁵³ Julius Africanus, *Ep. Orig.* 1 (ANF 4:385).

⁵⁴ Julius Africanus, *Ep. Orig.* 2 (ANF 4:385).

⁵⁵ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 2.

Hebrew copies with ours.”⁵⁶ Origen here portrays himself as virtually surrounded by manuscripts and refers to his “little strength” with about as much seriousness as he refers to his response to Africanus—which is over ten times longer than Africanus’s initial “blow”—as written with his “little ability,” and written in the “little time” he had.⁵⁷ Later in the letter, he brags to Africanus about his work in the Hebrew texts:

Nor do I say this because I shun the labour of investigating the Jewish Scriptures, and comparing them with ours, and noticing their various readings. This, if it be not arrogant to say it, I have already to a great extent done to the best of my ability, labouring hard to get at the meaning in all the editions and various readings.⁵⁸

After his reference to the “thousands” of manuscripts he has consulted, he gives some examples of LXX/Hebrew disagreements from Daniel and then offers a catalog of similar examples from “many other sacred books” where he found them.⁵⁹ After the tour of his accomplishments as a collator of Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, Origen eventually makes his way back to the wordplay in Sus 54–59 with the closest he comes to answering Africanus directly:

You say that you can see how this can be in Greek, but that in Hebrew the words are altogether distinct. On this point, however, I am still in doubt; because, when I was considering this passage (for I myself saw this difficulty), I consulted not a few Jews about it, asking them the Hebrew words for *prinos* and *prisein*, and how they would translate *schinos* the tree, and how *schisis*.⁶⁰

Origen explains that his conversation with his Jewish interlocutors led nowhere since the Hebrew terms for *σχίνος* and *πρίνος* do not occur anywhere in their Scriptures and concludes: “This, then, being what the Hebrews said to whom I had recourse, and who were acquainted with the history, I am cautious of affirming whether or not there is any correspondence to this play of words in the Hebrew. Your reason for affirming that there is not, you yourself probably know.”⁶¹ Origen then relays two accounts of consulting “Hebrew” intellectuals.⁶²

⁵⁶ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 2 (ANF 4:386).

⁵⁷ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 1 (ANF 4:386).

⁵⁸ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 5 (ANF 4:387).

⁵⁹ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 3 (ANF 4:386).

⁶⁰ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 6 (ANF 4:388).

⁶¹ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 6 (ANF 4:388).

⁶² Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 7–8.

A certain brand of theological argument runs through Origen's response to Julius Africanus, namely that the LXX, including its additions, cannot be inferior to the Hebrew because the LXX is "ours." He frames his response to Africanus on the wordplay with these theological categories at the outset by foregrounding the fact that Greek texts are accepted among Christians: "In answer to this, I have to tell you what it behooves us to do in the cases not only of the History of Susanna, which is found in every Church of Christ in that Greek copy which the Greeks use, but is not in the Hebrew...."⁶³ For Origen, then, this discussion is not simply about the LXX and the Hebrew manuscripts, but about Christians, Jews, and whose texts are (most) authoritative. At two different locations, he invokes the theological supremacy of "our" LXX to chide Africanus based on the implication of Africanus's argument, namely that the LXX is inferior. In *Ep. Afr.* 4, he asks a rhetorical question that juxtaposes the LXX, delivered by providence to the churches, with the Jewish copies of their Hebrew Scriptures:

And, forsooth, when we notice such things, we are forthwith to reject as spurious the copies in use in our Churches, and enjoy the brotherhood to put away the sacred books current among them, and to coax the Jews, and persuade them to give us copies which shall be untampered with, and free from forgery! Are we to suppose that that Providence which in the sacred Scriptures has ministered to the edification of all the Churches of Christ, had no thought for those bought with a price, for whom Christ died . . . ?

Africanus must have wondered how the argument made it from a Greek wordplay to questioning the efficacy of Christ's death, but such an argumentative sleight of the hand shows the stakes of the interchange for Origen. The expected answer to Origen's rhetorical question is obviously "no," since he later charges Jews with having tampered with their manuscripts, taking the theological supremacy of the LXX over the Hebrew to the level of textual conservation.⁶⁴ At this point, two other ironies associated with Origen's portrayal of Hebrew and Jews come into clear focus: first, Origen strenuously asserts the superiority of the LXX despite, at other points (see above discussion of *Hom. Jer.* 14.3.1–4), using Hebrew to correct it; and, secondly, Origen denigrates Jewish scholars, charging them with textual infidelity, despite having just invoked three of them to contradict Africanus.⁶⁵

⁶³ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 2 (ANF 4:386).

⁶⁴ Origen, *Ep. Afr.* 9.

⁶⁵ That Origen elsewhere defers to, and possibly models his work after, Jewish experts does not dilute the present point. (See, for example, on Origen and Philo, Jennifer Otto, *Philo of Alexandria and the Construction of Jewishness in Early Christian Writings*, OECIS

In this entire fascinating interchange, Origen deftly avoids proposing Hebrew vocabulary that could match the Greek wordplay, which would have been the most direct way to respond to Africanus's charge. Instead, he attempts to drown the question with assertions of just how many manuscripts he has collated and how many other linguistic problems of which he is aware. Regarding the wordplay itself, he implicitly confesses that such vocabulary was beyond his knowledge because he had to consult Jewish scholars who knew the Hebrew text. Thus, he invokes his manuscript work, consultation of Jewish scholars, and the theological primacy of the LXX to sidestep the main issue and bludgeon Africanus with a conclusion that reinforces Origen's original statement that Susanna should be accepted.

9. Origen's Hebrew Illiteracy

Based on the above evidence, we might conclude that Origen at least could have put Hebrew on his CV as a research language. Alongside such examples, however, and congruent with Origen's deft avoidance of directly addressing possible Hebrew words under the Greek wordplay at Sus 54–59, is evidence that suggests that Origen's knowledge of Hebrew was open to question. In 1880 Elliott produced an essay on "Hebrew Learning among the Fathers" that amounts to an exasperated point-by-point correction-in-minutiae of multiple church fathers' Hebrew abilities.⁶⁶ He included extensive comments on examples from Origen and concludes,

Although Origen acquired a high reputation as a scholar amongst his own contemporaries and was held in equally high estimation by later writers, especially by Jerome, it needs but a slight acquaintance with his works to perceive that his Hebrew scholarship was rather of a traditional than of a critical character, and that he was indebted for the criticisms which he introduced into his writings rather to the information of others than to any original research.⁶⁷

Elliott later drops any pretense: "Origen's Hebrew scholarship was of a very defective nature."⁶⁸ More recent scholars have concluded similarly. Grafton and

[New York: Oxford University Press, 2018], 91–135; Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Philo as Origen's Declared Model: Allegorical and Historical Exegesis of Scripture," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 7 [2012]: 1–17.) Quite to the contrary, it further illustrates that point, which is that Origen can and does alternately amplify his dependence upon or independence from Jewish scholars.

⁶⁶ Elliott, "Hebrew," 2:851–872.

⁶⁷ Elliott, "Hebrew," 2:856.

⁶⁸ Elliott, "Hebrew," 2:857.

Williams, for example, say, “He seems never to have learned much Hebrew.”⁶⁹ Similar is the assessment of Dorival: “Origen does not appear to have known either the Hebrew language or Hebrew characters.”⁷⁰

The evidence most cited for Origen’s illiteracy in Hebrew is a passage in his *Homilies on Numbers*. Likely written during his preaching in Caesarea in the late 230s or early 240s CE,⁷¹ in this text Origen locates himself outside those who can read Hebrew when discussing the tetragrammaton. The relevant section begins,

In the literature of the Hebrews, the name of God, that is, God, or Lord, is said to be written in different ways. For anything that is called a god is written one way, and the God himself... is written another way. Thus, that God of Israel, the one God and Creator of all things, is written with a certain determinate symbol comprised of letters, which they call the “tetragrammaton.”⁷²

Significantly, “the literature of the Hebrews” functions as the photographic negative of his reference to the LXX as unqualified “Scripture” or “Scriptures in use in the Churches” or “in our churches.”

⁶⁹ Grafton and Williams, *Christianity*, 83. Similarly, Megan Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 72: “But even Origen, for all his interest in the Hebrew text and Jewish traditions of interpretation, seems to have had only limited knowledge of Hebrew.”

⁷⁰ Gilles Dorival, “Origen,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to 600 C.E.*, ed. James Carleton Paget and Joachim Schaper (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 608. Kamesar, *Jerome*, 26, fails to consider the role that Origen’s limited Hebrew abilities might have played in his general preference for the LXX in his textual work. In discussing Origen’s dependence upon the LXX revisions, he says, “Origen’s dependence on the later versions, i.e. at least three different texts, is such that it seems to have obviated a sustained, comprehensive perception of the Hebrew text as a separate entity. For he does not normally employ the *recentiores* to understanding the Hebrew but bases his exegesis on a very literal reading of the Greek. The reason for this may be that his reliance on the letter of the Greek text, which... is a feature of his exegesis of the LXX, was unconsciously retained when he moved over to treat the other versions.” I suggest a simpler solution: Origen’s Hebrew was functional rather than fluent, and thus he depended upon the LXX and its revisions in Greek to navigate the Hebrew. He was always more heavily anchored in the Greek tradition because that is where his linguistic abilities primarily resided.

⁷¹ Heine, *Origen*, 170, dates the authorship of Origen’s homilies to his preaching in Caesarea, “probably between 239 and 244.” Similarly, Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen*, ECF (London: Routledge, 1998), 38–39.

⁷² Origen, *Hom. Num.* 14.1.3 (Scheck, ACT).

After this reference to the tetragrammaton, Origen explains that “whenever God is written in the Scriptures by this symbol,” it refers to the Creator God, but when it is not, it is not clearly referencing that God.⁷³ He then cites 1 Cor 8:5–6, which includes references to “gods” and “God” after quoting the *Shema* at 1 Cor 8:4.⁷⁴ Returning to the account of Balaam and his donkey in Num 22, in which “God” speaks to Balaam, Origen says, “Thus, those who read Hebrew literature say (*aiunt ergo qui Hebraicas litteras legunt*) that in this passage God is not recorded by the symbol of the tetragrammaton. Let this matter be investigated by one who is able.”⁷⁵ One can, though does not necessarily have to, read this passage in such a way that Origen locates himself outside the group of “those who read Hebrew letters” (*qui Hebraicas litteras legunt*). On this basis, scholars regularly point to this specific passage to observe that “Origen is so unaware of Hebrew that he was not able to read even the Tetragrammaton.”⁷⁶

10. Hebrew and the Management of Origen’s Reputation

If one interprets this passage as such, Origen’s reference to others as “those who read Hebrew letters” and seeming exclusion of himself from that group is odd given that this homily on Numbers was written in the Caesarean stage of his career when his work on the Hexapla was either completed or actively underway.⁷⁷ Elliott, the aforementioned nineteenth-century assessor of Origen’s “defective” Hebrew, was particularly perplexed by the fact that Origen was capable of producing the Hexapla when he was seemingly “so unequal to the task.”⁷⁸ It is also possible, however, to read this passage as Origen’s invocation of other scholars’ opinions (“those who read Hebrew literature say”) with no

⁷³ Origen, *Hom. Num.* 14.1.3. (Scheck, ACT).

⁷⁴ 1 Cor 8:4–6 (NRSV): “Hence, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that ‘no idol in the world really exists,’ and that ‘there is no God but one.’ Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords—yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.”

⁷⁵ Origen, *Hom. Num.* 14.1.3 (Scheck, ACT).

⁷⁶ Dorival, “Origen,” 608.

⁷⁷ Following Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.15–16, Heine, *Origen*, identifies the Hexapla as Origen’s “first scholarly work” and argues that it was likely finished before he left Alexandria (76); he dates his settling in Caesarea to “around AD 232” (1). Dorival, “Origen,” dates the commencement of work on the Hexapla to “215–217” and claims that work on it “occupied him for about thirty years” (608), which would indicate that his final work on it was in Caesarea, as Dorival dates the move to Caesarea to 234 CE (607). Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, dates the move to Caesarea to 231/232 CE (18, 35) and attributes the Hexapla to his Caesarean period (18) but also says he likely began work on it in Alexandria (45).

⁷⁸ Elliott, “Hebrew Learning,” 2:859.

explicit statement about his inclusion in or exclusion from that group, followed by a general invitation for his reader to investigate matters for themselves.

Origen's actual level of Hebrew literacy, and thus whether his reference to "those who read Hebrew letters" is an implicit admission that he cannot read Hebrew or is a stock appeal to other scholars with no implications for his own abilities, is less important for the present argument than the way he represents knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures. For, what *is* clear is that Origen's reference to *others'* expertise concerning this textual feature in "literature of the Hebrews" contrasts rather strongly with his personal claims for knowledge of Hebrew textual variants, Hebrew etymology, and consultation of "thousands" of "Hebrew Scriptures" as well as the subsequent lauding of his exemplary Hebrew abilities by Eusebius, Jerome, et al. Origen seems to have rhetorically distanced himself from Jewish book culture in some cases and rhetorically associated himself in others.

I, therefore, emphasize once more the value of invoking the Hebrew language and Hebrew manuscripts for Origen.⁷⁹ Similar to the children of the Egyptian school papyri whom Cribiore studied, who practiced writing their names prior even to being able to read so that, if their education did not progress further, they could at least display signature literacy and be counted among the literate,⁸⁰ I suggest Origen made use of, and displayed in his writings, whatever level of accomplishment he had in Hebrew literate education because there was an inherent cultural value in even that level. Hebrew was a barbarian language for Romans, but it was the language of the "Hebrew Scriptures" for Origen⁸¹ and, as such, a crucial factor in discussions about "Scripture" with Jews and in reference to Jews. Origen's facility with Hebrew enabled him and others to display it prominently as categorical evidence of the high quality of his scholarship. That Origen's Hebrew abilities may have been, by other standards, mediocre at best is irrelevant to an extent—they were still more advanced than anyone else in his *Christian* reading culture.⁸² In the construction, maintenance,

⁷⁹ More broadly on this matter, see also Edmon L. Gallagher, *Hebrew Scripture in Patristic Biblical Theory: Canon, Language, and Text*, VCSup 144 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), which I became aware of too late to include in this study.

⁸⁰ Raffaella Cribiore, *Writing, Teachers, and Students in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, ASP 36 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996), 10: "There can be no doubt that the inhabitants of Graeco-Roman Egypt preferred to sign documents and letters in their clumsy, belabored characters than be considered among illiterates. It was better to possess and exhibit the skill in limited and imperfect degree, however difficult and unpleasant to the eye their efforts were." See further Raffaella Cribiore, *Gymnastics of the Mind: Greek Education in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁸¹ Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 14.3.1.

⁸² Cf. Meade, "Hexapla," 172: "The layout and contents of the Hexapla are best understood if we assume that Origen and later scholars could read some Hebrew but needed much help.... As special kind of media, the Hexapla reveals that only a few ancient Christians in the third and fourth centuries could read the Hebrew version, and these

and expression of this Christian reading culture, any ability with Hebrew could vault one to a high position as Scripture expert when those fashioning the image had even less ability.⁸³

For this reason, it is unsurprising that subsequent descriptions of Origen's Hebrew abilities point unequivocally to his knowledge of Hebrew precisely to paint him as the preeminent Christian scholar of his day and several later days.⁸⁴ It is important to observe that each biographer of Origen is carefully managing Origen's enmeshment within a Jewish reading culture from which the church—including Origen himself—is often trying to distinguish itself. Yet, Origen's Hebrew, as well as his contacts with Jewish scholars and possession of Jewish manuscripts, appears from our perspectives like an insect that has flown into thick sap. Try as it may to separate itself, the asserted distance also reveals more clearly just how connected it still is. The metaphor breaks down on several levels, and I would not push it further, but the point remains that it is precisely in this context of efforts-at-distinction within realities-of-connection that ironies associated with Origen's Hebrew make sense: he may have severely limited Hebrew abilities but was regarded by others who knew even less (other than perhaps Jerome) as a master of Hebrew.

In this context, I return to where this essay began and draw attention to a detail in Eusebius's reproduction of the Hexapla legend that, until Schott's 2019 translation, had gone overlooked. In describing the Hebrew-language manuscripts of the Scriptures that Origen consulted, Eusebius is fairly nuanced. He states that these manuscripts circulated "among the Jews" (*παρὰ τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις*); that is, they were produced by and part of a *Jewish* reading culture. Yet Origen was so committed that he, according to the 1932 LCL translation of Oulton, "got into his own possession" the original manuscripts. Oulton's translation has slightly misrepresented the grammar. There is no prepositional phrase ("into"), the object of the participle *φερομένης* is not in the dative case, and the sense of personal ownership is conveyed not by the personal pronoun *αὐτός* in the genitive ("of him") or the dative ("to him") but by the adjective *ἴδιος* ("his own").⁸⁵ Origen did not, therefore, according to Eusebius, "get" the manuscripts "into his possession" in the sense that he merely moved them into his library or collected them so much as he appropriated them or took ownership of them.

readers were mainly aided by Greek transliteration and the other Greek versions in the synopsis."

⁸³ I thus affirm, from this separate perspective, the observation of Martens, *Origen*, 46: "The desire to know the Hebrew text for his discussions with the Jews was perhaps a reason for constructing the *Hexapla* (or a happy result of the construction) but it was not the only one, and probably not the most important one." Martens makes this observation about Origen's philological work with the LXX, but it applies equally to the issue of Origen's reputation within Christian reading communities.

⁸⁴ Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.3.5–7; Rufinus, *Hist.* 6.16.4; Jerome, *Comm. Tit.* 3.9; Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 54.6–8.

⁸⁵ BDAG, "ἴδιος, ἴα, ον."

Literally, he “rendered them his own possession” (φερομένας ... κτήμα ἴδιον). Eusebius uses κτήμα, which technically refers to what can be possessed or even deeded.⁸⁶ Origen made the Hebrew manuscripts his *property*. Schott is thus correct to translate “made the original writings ... in the Hebrew wording itself his own possession.”⁸⁷

10. Conclusion

Significantly, therefore, we must note that Eusebius does not describe the manuscripts as circulating among Jews *and Origen*. That obviously *was* happening both in this case and in Origen’s own description of consulting Jewish manuscripts and scholars. Yet to describe the scenario as such would imply that Origen was *part of* that Jewish reading culture. It would open Origen to the charge of Judaizing, as it would later open Jerome to that charge in the fifth century CE. Instead, Eusebius claims that Origen *took possession of* Jewish material artifacts as evidence of Origen’s firm location within his Christian reading culture. Eusebius has fully absorbed and redeployed the rhetoric that Origen himself used to manage his occupation of this borderland. Eusebius’s language amounts to a visualized material culture incarnation of Justin Martyr’s reference to the LXX as “your Scriptures, or rather not yours, but ours,”⁸⁸ a visualized material culture incarnation of Origen’s own admission of dependence on Jewish teachers yet denigration of them, or even a visualized material culture incarnation of his consultation of Jewish manuscripts and occasional privileging of their readings, yet theological elevation of the LXX. *Origen was not part of Jewish reading culture; he owned it.* What could be viewed as enmeshment in shared territory, then, is instead articulated as material supersessionism.

⁸⁶ BDAG, “κτήμα,” “(1) that which is acquired or possessed... (2) landed property, field, piece of ground.”

⁸⁷ Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.16.1 and n. 66.

⁸⁸ Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 29. (ANF 1:209).