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Amy Wen

*College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, xwen001@csbsju.edu*

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# An Exegesis Paper on the Hanging of the King of Ai

by Amy Wen

## **ABSTRACT:**

This paper analyzes Joshua 8 on the Hanging of the King of Ai. By utilizing contemporary biblical scholarship, this paper attempts to highlight elements of Ancient Near Eastern crucifixion and torture practices to shed new light on Jesus' own crucifixion.

## **SYNOD:**

This work contributes to conversation in the global Church by putting patristic-era hermeneutical practices in conversation with contemporary biblical scholarship. It hopes to demonstrate that there are ways of honoring the legacy of typological interpretation while also being willing to learn from other disciplines of biblical scholarship.



*So Joshua burned Ai, and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day. And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening; and at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree, threw it down at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.*

*(Josh 8:28-29 NRSV)*

In the time of salvation-history which we currently find ourselves, it is difficult to read about public hangings on trees without immediately jumping to perhaps the most prominent hanging in the Christian consciousness—that of Jesus Christ. Interpreters such as Origen of Alexandria have made the interpretive move of reading the hanging in Joshua 8:29 via the shadow cast upon Old Testament Scripture in the full revelation of Christ’s crucifixion. In doing so however, his interpretation is vulnerable to certain points of rebuttal. For instance, if all Old Testament accounts of public hangings are to be understood merely as background details that prefigure Christ’s crucifixion, how might knowledge of the cultural circumstances surrounding these hangings actually help us better understand the uniqueness of Christ’s crucifixion? To engage this rebuttal, this paper will attempt to understand the significance of ‘hanging on a tree’ in the context of Joshua 8 and the rest of the Old Testament. After doing so, it will engage in a word study of the key verb הָלַךְ, inquire of Ancient Near Eastern traditions of warfare and mutilation, assess other Old Testament accounts of hanging and public mutilation, and finally look into the broader function of the King of Ai’s death and display in Joshua 8.

### TRADITIONS OF INTERPRETATION: STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

First, in order to affirm the endeavor of this text without dismissing the work of interpreters such as Origen, I will explore Origen’s interpretive strategy and show why—although his impulse to esteem the revelation of Christ is a good one—the archaeological data and Hebrew vocabulary scholarship now available may give us reason to pause when making the same moves in contemporary interpretation. In his *Homilies on Joshua*, Origen writes that

“The king of Ai” is said “to be hanged on twofold wood.” In this place a mystery is hidden very deeply...In the preceding things, we said that

the king of Ai could be connected with the Devil. How the Devil was crucified on twofold wood is worth the trouble to learn. The cross of our Lord Jesus Christ was twofold...For the Son of God was indeed visibly crucified in the flesh, but invisibly on that cross the Devil “with his principalities and authorities was affixed to the cross.”<sup>1</sup>

Origen arrives at this conclusion by rightly affirming the sentiment of Ephesians 6:12 — that “our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”<sup>2</sup> Origen’s move to map the hanging of the King of Ai onto the circumstances of Jesus’ crucifixion are right in that it acknowledges the primary enemy in the enemies of Israel as the work of Ephesians’ “spiritual forces of evil.” In doing so however, he does not provide enough space for the Joshua text and other Old Testament accounts to inform the nature of crucifixion already present in the Jewish consciousness. Origen fails to affirm how a *Hebrew* crucifixion consciousness informs another element of Paul’s work—the curse which we are redeemed from via Christ’s suffering for us, as stated in Galatians 3:13.<sup>3</sup> Origen’s interpretation and focus on the cosmic powers at play rightly emphasizes the struggle against spiritual forces, yet falls short when it unintentionally dismisses the Hebrew context of Christ “becoming a curse for us” in the line with the Deuteronomistic curse of the cross.<sup>4</sup>

## תָּרַח WORD STUDY

To make up for this shortcoming, we now turn to a word study of the key verb at play in Joshua 8:29—תָּרַח—to articulate a Hebrew crucifixion consciousness. תָּרַח, according to *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament* is a fairly ambiguous verb whose occurrence generally falls into one of two categories: the first related to death and public display, the

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1 Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*. The Fathers of the Church, V. 105. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 87.

2 Eph. 6:12

3 Gal. 3:13

4 Gal. 3:13

other to the hanging up of everyday objects.<sup>5</sup> In the first category, there is a deadly association to the instances of תִּלְחַת in the story of the Pharaoh’s baker and cupbearer in Genesis, the hanging of five Canaanite kings in Joshua, multiple military deaths in 2 Samuel, and the hanging of Haman and family in Esther.<sup>6</sup> In these cases the verb is translated “to hang,” with the term hang referring either to the method of one’s death or to the display of a body after one’s death. John Kohlenberger notes that the lexical range of תִּלְחַת extends to cover non-death related uses, as shown by the suspension of the earth over nothing in Job, and the hanging of harps on poplars in Psalm, and the hanging up of shields and helmets in Ezekiel.<sup>7</sup> In his book *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, scholar John Granger Cook looks at the usage of the verb תִּלְחַת a little closer. In it, Cook looks at the phrase עָלָה לְחַת as a construct most often translated as “suspend on a tree/gibbet.”<sup>8</sup> This particular construct is used in Genesis 40:19, Deuteronomy 21:22-23, Joshua 8:29, and Joshua 10:26. The usage in our specific passage is silent about the kind of suspension that occurs but in almost all other uses of this construct it is indicated that the type of suspension is a post-mortem display of a body.<sup>9</sup> All in all, the conclusions to be found from this brief word study are that 1) the lexical range of the term תִּלְחַת is loosely translated to depict a type of physical hanging; 2) the specific construct עָלָה לְחַת as used in Joshua 8:29 can be translated as “suspend on a tree/gibbet”; and 3) that from the instances in which we see this particular construct used, the type of suspension points to *post-mortem* displays of the dead.

## ANE WARFARE

From this working definition of תִּלְחַת, let us next consider cultural practices that may have been at play during the time of the conquest of Canaan. In the essay “Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death,” scholar Erika Bleibtreu

5 John R III Kohlenberger. *The Hebrew English Concordance to the Old Testament: With the New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Pub. House, 1998), 1662.

6 Kohlenberger *Hebrew English Concordance*, 1662. More examples of death uses of תִּלְחַת: Gen 40:19, Gen 40:22, Josh 10:26, 2 Sam 4:12, 2 Sam 18:10, 2 Sam 21:12, Esth 2:23, Esth 7:10, Esth 9:14.

7 Kohlenberger *Hebrew English Concordance*, 1662. More examples of non-death uses of תִּלְחַת: Job 26:7, Ps 137:2, Song 4:4, Isa 22:24, Lam 5:12, Ezek 15:3, Ezek 27:10-11.

8 John Granger Cook. *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*. (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen Zum Neuen Testament, Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 316.

9 Cook, *Crucifixion in the Mediterranean World*, 316.

gives a broad history of Assyria as a territorial state. Bleibtreu reminds readers that Assyria emerged in the 14th century BC in what is now the northern part of modern Iraq, that from the outset they projected themselves “as a strong military power bent on conquest”.<sup>10</sup> It was in the ninth century that the Assyrians began moving beyond their borders to expand their empire, “seeking booty to finance their plans for still more conquest and power.”<sup>11</sup> Bleibtreu speculates that by the mid-ninth century BC the effects of the Assyrian empire would have “posed a direct threat to the small Syro-Palestine states to the west, including Israel and Judah.”<sup>12</sup> Although lacking direct archaeological data from the Assyrian period, evidence from the Neo-Assyrian period *does* exist, from which we can derive a working knowledge of the culture of Israelite’s violent neighbors.

Returning to Bleibtreu’s essay, she focuses her study on Assyrian national history as preserved in inscriptions and pictures from the Neo-Assyrian period. Bleibtreu references a relief found at Nineveh depicting the reign of Sennacherib. She writes:



Two Assyrian soldiers erect a stake with an impaled, naked man beside two others. The heads of these captured men in Lachish sag forward, suggesting that they were already dead. This detail comes from a series of reliefs, found at Nineveh, in which Sennacherib (704-681 BC) recorded the exploits of his invasion of Judah in 701 BC.<sup>13</sup>

Bleibtreu further notes that the two principal tasks of the Assyrian king were to “engage in military exploits and to erect public buildings. Both of

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10 Erika Bleibtreu. “Grisly Assyrian Record of Torture and Death.” (*Biblical Archaeology Review* 17, no. 1 1991: 52-61), 52.

11 Bleibtreu, “Grisly,” 52.

12 Ibid.

13 Bleibtreu, “Grisly,” 55. Photograph credit is attributed to Erich Lessing.

these tasks were regarded as religious duties...acts of obedience toward the principal gods of Assyria."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in all inscriptions Bleibtreu evaluated, she found that

the king stands at the top of the hierarchy—the most powerful person; he himself represents the state. All public acts are recorded as his achievements. All acts worthy of being recorded are attributed only to the Assyrian king, the focus of the ancient world.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the pictorial relief pictured above, Bleibtreu references the bronze bands of the city's grand gates, reliefs carved on obelisks, and engravings from cylinder seals.<sup>16</sup> In a relief taken from stone slabs of the palace walls in Nineveh, Bleibtreu writes the following:



Assyrian headhunters gather their trophies. In a relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, two scribes, standing side by side at right, record the number of the enemy slain in a campaign in southern Mesopotamia. Heads lie in a heap at their feet.<sup>17</sup>

These reliefs are said to mirror inscriptions about the same events, corroborating the legacy of Assyrian violence and treatment of conquered peoples. Bleibtreu writes that “in his official royal inscriptions, Ashurnasirpal II calls himself the ‘trampler of all enemies...who defeated all his enemies [and] hung the corpses of his enemies on posts.’”<sup>18</sup> He further records his punishment in the case of a city resisting submission:

I flayed as many nobles as had rebelled against me [and] draped their skins over the pile [of corpses]; some I spread out within the pile, some

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Bleibtreu, “Grisly,” 56.

17 Bleibtreu, “Grisly,” 55.

18 Ibid.

I erected on stakes upon the pile...I flayed many right through my land  
[and] draped their skins over the walls.<sup>19</sup>

In another account meant to frighten any who might resist, Ashurnasirpal II writes that

I felled 50 of their fighting men with the sword, with their blood I dyed  
the mountain red like red wool, [and] the rest of them the ravines  
[and] torrents of the mountain swallowed. I cut off the heads of their  
fighters [and] built [therewith] a tower before their city.<sup>20</sup>

Throughout the rest of her essay she references the legacies of Sargon II (father of Sennacherib, who was referenced earlier), Sennacherib, Esarhaddon (son of Sennacherib), and Ashurbanipal (son of Esarhaddon).<sup>21</sup> By tracking the reliefs and legacies of each of these kings from the Neo-Assyrian time period, Bleibtreu paints a gruesome and bloody picture of conquest. To summarize her findings, Bleibtreu writes

There is no reason to doubt the historical accuracy of these portrayals and descriptions. Such punishments no doubt helped to secure the payment of tribute—silver, gold, tin, copper, bronze and iron, as well as building materials including wood, all of which was necessary for the economic survival of the Assyrian empire.

In our day, these depictions, verbal and visual, give a new reality to the Assyrian conquest of the northern kingdom of Israel in 721 BC and to Sennacherib's subsequent campaign into Judah in 701 BC.<sup>22</sup>

These depictions of Neo-Assyrian conquest remember in vivid detail the gruesome warfare of one of the main actors of the ANE. A fair question to be raised, however, is that of its transferability to the conquest of Canaan. Arguably, the Assyrians (let alone Neo-Assyrians) were not the people

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19 Ibid. Bleibtreu directly credits the work of scholar Albert Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Royal Inscriptions, Part 2: From Tiglath-Pileser I to Ashur-nasir-apli II* (Wiesbaden, Germ.: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976), p. 124.

20 Bleibtreu, "Crisly," 55. Referencing Grayson, 126-127.

21 Bleibtreu, "Crisly," 56-60.

22 Bleibtreu, "Crisly," 60.



who the Israelites were warring against in the book of Joshua. How is it that understanding *Neo-Assyrian* violence is an aid for reconstructing the context of Canaanite warfare? From this section, I believe we can come away with a few key conclusions: 1) despite lack of evidence from the Canaanite conquest itself, the generation-bridging histories of Neo-Assyrian kings helps us reconstruct a residual violence characteristic of Assyrian—and possibly broader—ANE warfare. 2) the hierarchical, representative role of kings is a prevalent aspect of ANE kingship. 3) Neo-Assyrian violence is gratuitous beyond the necessary means—the fear invoked by human torture (flaying) is a key strategy in maintaining domination. 4) *If* the final compilation of the book of Joshua is rightly attributed to the period of Babylonian exile, it is altogether likely the atrocities of Neo-Assyrian warfare were deeply impressed in the consciousness of Israelite peoples. As such, it is possible Neo-Assyrian violence was influential in depicting the symbolic (if not literal) nature of the gruesome warfare during the Canaanite conquest.

## HEBREW WARFARE

With these findings in mind, let us now turn to Israelite warfare in the Old Testament. In the essay “Shame and Mutilation of Enemies in the Hebrew Bible,” scholar Tracy Lemos argues that “mutilating enemies’ bodies was a common wartime practice in the ancient Near East.”<sup>23</sup> To expand upon this claim, she argues that Mesopotamian and Egyptian art both capture examples of this mutilation, as well as through verbal accounts attested to in the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha.<sup>24</sup> Lemos looks at key biblical narratives in which Israel both experiences and inflicts mutilation against others, and argues

at first glance these narratives are striking merely for their brutality, but when one looks further, it becomes apparent that violently altering the bodies of one’s enemies was not a random act of sadistic aggression in ancient Israel but was in fact one that functioned in certain striking and important ways. One of these was that mutilation signaled a newly established power dynamic between the victim and the aggressor. Another, as we shall see, was

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23 Tracy Lemos, “Shame and mutilation of enemies in the Hebrew Bible.” (*Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 2 (2006): 225-241), 225.

24 *Ibid.*, 225.

that mutilation served to bring shame upon the victim and their community by associating the victim with a lower-status group and/or by effecting an actual status change in the victim.<sup>25</sup>

In the essay, Lemos argues that mutilation—the negatively constructed somatic alteration—is used by Israelites to inflict shame. Shame is defined in three parts: 1) as an internal experience of disgrace and dishonor; 2) a “feeling that others are looking on with contempt and scorn at everything we do and don’t do; 3) a preventative attitude.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the effects of guilt, shame requires an audience, a watchful community.<sup>27</sup> Lemos then works through the examples of Nahash the Ammonite in 1 Samuel 10:27-11:11, Judith 13-14, and Judges 1 as three primary textual accounts of how public physical mutilation invoked communal shame. Specifically in the example of Judith 13-14, the beheading and display of Nebuchadnezzar’s general was done to shame the king, the empire, and men.<sup>28</sup> In the “Implications and Conclusions” portion of her paper,

It is by now clear that negotiations of power and status lie at the heart of mutilation’s efficacy. Mutilation of enemies in ancient Israel functioned to shame their victim or his community, and it did this in various ways: by effecting a change of status in the victim by transferring him or her from the status of “whole” to that of “blemished”; by associating them with a lower-status group; and lastly by signaling the newly subjugated status of the victim and/or their community...strikingly, no text in the Hebrew Bible mentions pain as a reason for disfiguring a victim.<sup>29</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND JOSHUA 8

Although far briefer than the ANE accounts of warfare, I believe the key conclusion from looking into Israelite war practices lays in its signaling of a new power dynamic. Over against the seemingly sadistic, paint-the-mountains-red-with-their-blood warfare that saturated other cultures of the

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25 Ibid, 225-226.

26 Ibid, 227-228.

27 Lemos, “Shame,” 228.

28 Ibid, 235.

29 Ibid,, 241. My italics inserted for emphasis.

ANE, I believe the particular Israelite display of the King of Ai is meant to signal to the entire Canaanite region the shifting power dynamic. In a literary interpretation of Joshua 6-8 (which we unfortunately did not have time to go into at length), the story of the King of Ai bookends Israel's unfaithfulness in the destruction of Jericho.<sup>30</sup> Just as Israel's disobedience pits YHWH against his people and brings death upon Achan and his family, so Israel's obedience beckons victory by the hand of YHWH and death of the King of Ai. Unlike the sign of moral decay within the people of Israel, the death of the King of Ai signals the faithfulness and arrival of a new monarchic order.

Returning to the original rebuttal of Origen's interpretation, I believe research into the Israelite context provides a key revelation for better understanding the uniqueness of Christ's crucifixion. Through Lemos, we see that Hebrew displays of the dead signaled a shifting power dynamic—it signaled a new cosmic order. Hebrew crucifixion was meant to publicly shame the broader community of which an individual was merely a representative. Through Bleibtreu, we see that religious role of an Assyrian king was to engage in military exploits and erect buildings. Each of these findings about Hebrew crucifixion and kingship are compatible with Christ's. However, Hebrew crucifixion has never been about torture, as evidenced by the *post-mortem* displays of the dead attributed to עֲרֵךְ הַלֵּעַ הַלְּאֵת usage. I believe that this is the key difference separating the concept of Hebrew and Roman crucifixion—the concept of *pain*. Far be it from writing off the pain of Christ in his crucifixion as a later addition however, I believe that this foreign element is precisely what differentiates Christ's crucifixion from a traditional Old Testament crucifixion. It is in his pain that we see the mark of a new cosmic order. It is in his pain that we see a people transformed from shame to glory. It is in his pain we arrive at victory in the war in Heaven. It is in his pain we see the erection of a new Jerusalem.



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30 Daniel Hawk. Joshua. (Berit Olam. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 131.

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