

# Preserving Scriptural Harmony

## *Origen on Jude 3 and συμφωνία in the Commentary on John*

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### Abstract

Only one allusion to the phrase “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) survives from the early church, in Book 10 of Origen's *Commentary on John*. This article establishes that Origen is offering a close paraphrase of this saying, and suggests that it appears as a slogan, possibly reflecting use by other Christians, in favour of overriding the implications of the spiritual reading of John 2.20–22. It shows how Origen's interpretative procedures – distinguishing literal and spiritual senses, and invoking the key principle of Scripture's internal harmony – interact and combine to resist this deployment of Jude 3. Although this requires Origen to admit some kind of “change of good things once given to the saints”, it constitutes an application and further elucidation of his careful exegetical method which, ultimately, “preserves the harmony of the narrative of the Scriptures”.

### Keywords

Epistle of Jude – Origen – spiritual exegesis – literal exegesis – συμφωνία – harmony

### 1 Introduction

The phrase “the faith once delivered to the saints” (v. 3) is one of the few parts of the short and obscure Letter of Jude to be cited with some frequency today,

alongside its closing doxology (vv. 24–25).<sup>1</sup> Multiple examples could be given, both from popular Christian writing and in scholarly work.<sup>2</sup> The situation was rather different in the early church, if extant citations can be relied upon to give a sufficiently accurate picture. In the early centuries it is v. 6, which mentions the Watchers, that receives the most attention,<sup>3</sup> in keeping with early Christian interest in this story – not least in its extensive treatment in the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36), and in the Enochic literature more generally. In combination with Jude's own familiarity with this literature, evident at numerous points, it is unsurprising that these parts of the letter should have garnered such attention. By contrast, the phrase "the faith once delivered to the saints", so popular today, is almost entirely overlooked. There is nevertheless at least one extant reference to v. 3 in early Christian literature, in Book 10 of Origen's *Commentary on John*.

This part of Origen's work comments on Jesus's clearing of the temple courts in John 2.12–25. Because of the disagreement between John's account and the Synoptic chronology, which places the temple clearing during the final days of Jesus' life, Origen rejects the historical sense of the entire passage in favour of its spiritual sense. I therefore begin with a brief treatment of Origen's account of the senses of Scripture, drawing on the *Commentary on John* and *On First Principles*, before turning to the specific passage in *Com. Jn* 10.289–90.

- 1 Douglas Rowston made the same observation nearly a half century ago, noting that "Only its benediction may be familiar to an average churchgoer and a Bible reader may be acquainted with its plea for a defence of 'the faith which was once for all delivered to God's people' (Jude 3)." "The Most Neglected Book in the New Testament," *NTS* 21 (1975), 554–63 (at 554).
- 2 A few examples will suffice: "there is no distinctively Anglican faith as such but rather the explicit claim of adherence to nothing but 'the faith once for all delivered,'" Henry R. McAdoo, *Being an Anglican* (London, 1977), 12. Cf. also Peter Forster, "The Significance of the Declaration of Assent," *Ecclesiastical Law Journal* 8/37 (2005), 162–72 (at 165); Gregory K. Cameron, "A Tortoise in a Hurry: The Ordering of the Anglican Communion," *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8/2 (2008), 69–80 (at 70). Andreas Köstenberger and Michael J. Kruger hope their book will contribute to "a defense of the 'faith once for all delivered to the saints' in our generation," *The Heresy of Orthodoxy: How Contemporary Culture's Fascination with Diversity Has Reshaped Our Understanding of Early Christianity* (Nottingham, 2010), 19. Michael Wilson writes of how missionary William Wallace Simpson "felt the Lord tell him to 'earnestly contend for the faith once delivered to the saints,'" that is, the faith as encompassing Spirit baptism evidenced by glossolalia, "Contending For Tongues: W.W. Simpson's Pentecostal Experience in Northwest China," *Pneuma* 29/2 (2007), 281–98 (at 289).
- 3 The Biblindex database has v. 6 as by far the most cited (39×), followed by v. 4 (condemnation of the ungodly intruders, 16×), v. 9 (Michael and the devil's dispute over Moses' body, 14×), v. 5 (delivery from Egypt, 12×). On the relationship between the reception of Jude and of the Enoch literature, see Nicholas J. Moore, "Is Enoch Also among the Prophets? The Impact of Jude's Citation of 1 Enoch on the Reception of Both Texts in the Early Church," *JTS* 64/2 (2013), 498–515.

Here I establish that we are indeed dealing with a close paraphrase of Jude 3, and suggest this may reflect a slogan used by Christians known to Origen. In relating the temple to the church, Origen stumbles upon a seemingly intractable dilemma between “changing the good things” (thus contravening Jude 3 and leading to absurdity), and “preserving unchanged the good things” (thus, apparently, maintaining Jude 3, but leading to acting like heretics). I trace this dilemma through to Origen’s resolution, in which he invokes the principle of harmony, a notion that holds particular importance for him. This resolution rules out the implication that the envisaged change or adaptation actually contravenes Jude’s phrase. The passage thus offers not merely an illustration of Origen’s hermeneutical approach, but a further explanation and vindication of it: the careful negotiation of literal and spiritual senses promotes an integrated, harmonious, and therefore faithful reading of the Scriptures, in contrast to an alternative reading, apparently scripturally motivated yet ultimately discordant and therefore erroneous.

## 2 Spiritual and Literal Exegesis in Origen

Book 10 of Origen’s *Commentary on John* deals with the temple-clearing episode in John 2.12–25.<sup>4</sup> Immediately, because of the discrepancy in chronology between John and the Synoptics (namely, whether the temple clearing occurs at the outset or at the end of Jesus’s ministry), Origen rejects the historical sense of the passage. He states that we must instead seek its spiritual or anagogical sense (*Com. Jn* 10.10–14).<sup>5</sup> To understand this move, it will help to set out briefly Origen’s understanding of the nature of Scripture and its interpretation. At the outset of the *Commentary on John* Origen distinguishes between inward and outward (1.40) and physical and spiritual (1.43) aspects of a Christian’s life; by a similar token, Christ himself came spiritually to the patriarchs and prophets

4 The original opening to Book 10 appears to have been lost, and replaced with a citation of the relevant verses, as no other book of the *Com. Jn* opens with a citation of the full passage to be treated; Ronald E. Heine, ed., *Origen: Commentary on the Gospel According to John, Books 1–10*, trans. by Ronald E. Heine, Fathers of the Church, 80 (Washington, D.C., 1989), 8. Quotations are from this edition.

5 “Anagogical” is at times used synonymously with “spiritual”; it refers to the drawing up (ἀναγωγή) of the interpreter into higher, spiritual meanings. It is a specifically Christian and Origenian approach, unlike the more widely available philological tools (including allegory) that Origen knows from his training. See Karen J. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis* (PTS 28; Berlin, 1986), 144 and n. 110. On Origen’s philological training see Bernhard Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe* (SBaw 18; Basel, 1987); Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (OECs; Oxford, 2012), 41–66.

before he came in a body (1.37). What is required in approaching Scripture is similar: in the case of John's Gospel, the task is "to translate the gospel perceptible to the senses into the spiritual gospel" (1.45).

This approach is expounded more fully in *On First Principles*, a treatise Origen wrote, like the first books of the *Commentary on John*, in Alexandria, during the earlier phase of his life and teaching.<sup>6</sup> Here Origen distinguishes between simpler, common doctrines, made clear "in the plainest terms to all believers", and hidden, complex doctrines, available only to "those who train themselves to become worthy and capable of receiving wisdom" (*Princ.* Pref. 3; cf. 8).<sup>7</sup> Later, in Book 4, Origen draws an analogy with the threefold division of the person into body, soul, and spirit (*Princ.* 4.2.4); in practice, however, he largely operates with a twofold division between body, letter, literal, or historical sense on the one hand, and spirit, spiritual, anagogical, or mystical sense on the other. The literal sense has value for so-called "simpler" Christians (4.2.6, 8), and some historical narratives or laws are true at the literal level (4.3.4), but the letter also serves as a vessel for the deeper, spiritual sense.

These two meanings are nevertheless not opposed to each other. Karen Torjesen makes a distinction between the "historical pedagogy of the Logos", as that which was "once taught", and the "contemporary pedagogy of the Logos", as that which "transforms today".<sup>8</sup> Both are given by the Logos through the Spirit who inspired Scripture (4.3.15), and both have a function. The spiritual meaning is not a later development but pertains to the nature of Scripture: "It is the very literalness of Scripture which demands a spiritual interpretation. The words are written in order to be understood in a spiritual way."<sup>9</sup> This is not an easy task, however: it requires intelligence, training, and spiritual inspiration (Pref. 3, 8; 4.3.15); but through it the soul of the interpreter is led by stages of ascent towards perfection.<sup>10</sup>

When it comes to the mechanism by which the interpreter discerns the spiritual sense, Origen clarifies that while all Scripture has a spiritual meaning, certain passages have no bodily sense at all (4.2.5; 4.3.5). In many cases the

6 For a chronological approach to Origen's work see Pierre Nautin, *Origène: sa vie et son œuvre*, Christianisme antique 1 (Paris, 1977), 363–412. Note also Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church*, Christian Theology in Context (Oxford, 2010).

7 Quotations from G.W. Butterworth, ed., *Origen: On First Principles*, trans. by G.W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA, 1973).

8 Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 13.

9 Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 139. Cf. Martens' comment: "at least some of the Scriptures for Origen were composed as a twofold communication: words had their basic referent, but they were also symbolic of some other referent," *Origen and Scripture*, 66 (emphasis original).

10 See Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 115–17, 120–24. For particular attention to the role of the interpreter, see Martens, *Origen and Scripture*.

Logos “has arranged for certain stumbling blocks, as it were, and hindrances and impossibilities” (4.2.9) as a prompt to move beyond the letter and seek the spiritual meaning. This is precisely what occurs in Book 10 of the *Commentary on John*: the entire book is a search for the spiritual meaning, because the literal meaning is impossible.<sup>11</sup>

### 3 “Good Things Once Given to the Saints”: Jude 3 and an Interpretative Dilemma

Towards the end of Book 10 (§§ 263–287), Origen establishes and illustrates a correspondence between the features of the temple and the spiritual house of Christ’s body, the Church (John 2.20–22). He then turns his attention to the *events* which befell the temple, and what an anagogical interpretation of these might look like.<sup>12</sup> He immediately runs into a dilemma:

[...] if we shall say that something analogous [τι ἀνάλογον] to the events in the historical account of the temple can happen, or has happened, our hearers will be unwilling to admit to a change of such great good things, first because they are unwilling, and second because a change of good things will be absurd. But if we wish to preserve unchanged [ἄτρεπτα τηρεῖν] the good things once given to the saints [τὰ ἅπαξ δοθέντα τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀγαθὰ] and will not adapt [οὐκ ἐφαρμόσομεν] the events of the historical account, we will, in such action, appear to do something like the heretics do by not preserving the harmony of the narrative of the Scriptures from beginning to end [τὴν συμφωνίαν τῆς διηγήσεως τῶν γραφῶν ἀρχήθεν μέχρι τέλους μὴ φυλάττοντες]. (*Com. Jn* 10.289–290)<sup>13</sup>

The CNRS Biblia Patristica database records this as a citation of Jude 3; due to the verbal disagreements, we need to look more closely before making a firm judgment:

ἐπαγωνίζεσθαι τῇ ἅπαξ παραδοθείσῃ τοῖς ἁγίοις πίστει (Jude)<sup>14</sup>  
τηρεῖν τὰ ἅπαξ δοθέντα τοῖς ἁγίοις ἀγαθὰ (Origen)

11 Heine, *Commentary on John* 1–10, 19–20.

12 He has in mind primarily the temple’s destruction, the people’s exile or ‘captivity’, and their subsequent return to Jerusalem and restoration of the temple, cf. *Com. Jn* 10.291–295.

13 Greek text from Cécile Blanc, *Origène. Commentaire sur Saint Jean, Livres VI et X* (SC 157; Paris, 1970).

14 This phrase is stable in the textual tradition, and is unchanged from the NA27 in the NA28 (which, for the Catholic Epistles, is based on the *Editio Critica Maior*).

The central part of each phrase matches very closely, with the only differences being the accusative rather than dative case, which is determined by the verb, and the use of the aorist passive participle of δίδωμι in place of its augmented cognate παραδίδωμι. The latter term bears a stronger nuance of handing *over* or *down*, but in both cases a recipient is inferred (and here is explicit) and there are New Testament texts which use δίδωμι in a similar sense.<sup>15</sup> The only significant differences, then, are the verb and the use of “good things” in place of “the faith”. “Preserving” is a different action from “contending”, although both have potential militaristic or combative nuances, defensive in the former case and offensive in the latter, which might be better captured if we were to translate “guard” and “fight for” respectively. Origen’s use of τὰ ἀγαθὰ in place of ἡ πίστις merits most attention. He uses this term frequently in Book 1 of the *Commentary on John*: the apostles proclaimed “good things” (*Com. Jn* 1.47), as did Isaiah (1.51); indeed, Jesus announced good things to the prophets beforehand (1.63, with εὐαγγελίζομαι), and he himself, the Son of God, “is many good things” (1.52, 86). For Origen, τὰ ἀγαθὰ thus clearly denotes an objective, proclaimed or spoken message, which can legitimately be glossed as “the gospel” or even “the faith” in the objective sense in which it occurs in Jude (v. 3, cf. v. 20). One final point of note is the structural similarity: alongside the use of an infinitive verb, we find an identically-shaped noun phrase comprising article, ἄπαξ, participle of (παρα)δίδωμι, τοῖς ἀγίοις, noun. It is therefore evident that Origen is offering a close paraphrase of Jude 3.

As will become clear below, Origen rules out following the course of action that is undergirded by this reference to Jude. This does not mean, however, that he disagrees with the Epistle directly. Although he is apparently conscious of doubts about Jude (*Com. Mt.* 17.30), he declares it to be “filled with the healthful words of heavenly grace” (*Com. Mt.* 10.17). McDonald avers that he uses it “with some hesitation due to [...] lack of general recognition”;<sup>16</sup> this may be a fair assessment, but Origen nevertheless cites Jude at numerous points.<sup>17</sup> I therefore suggest that his reference to this phrase from Jude indicates the position of another Christian exegete or group, although given the absence of confirmation elsewhere this must remain a hypothesis.

15 Gal 3.21–22; 1 Thess 4.2; 2 Thess 3.9; 1 John 3.23.

16 Lee M. McDonald, *The Formation of the Christian Biblical Canon* (Nashville, 1988), 131.

17 Of a total of 182 citations of Jude, the CNRS Biblia Patristica database counts 28 in Origen. Note too that Jude carries some importance for Origen’s Christology: codex 1739 records a fragment of his *Hom. in Deut.* on Jude 5, a verse presenting significant textual difficulties, where Origen reads “Jesus” not “the Lord” saving his people from Egypt: ἄπαξ γ(αρ) ἰ(ησοῦ)ς λαὸν ἐκ γῆς αἰγυπτ(ον) σώσας. See Kirsopp Lake and Silva New, *Six Collations of New Testament Manuscripts*, Harvard Theological Studies, 17 (Cambridge, MA, 1932), 198.

This becomes clearer when we see that Origen characterizes this interpretation as acting “like the heretics” (*Com. Jn* 10.290), and also as understanding prophetic promises “like Jews” (10.291). These two groups are Origen’s main opponents in his exegetical work, and indeed the *Commentary on John* straddles his attention to these two. The primary concern of Origen’s Alexandrian phase, during which he wrote the first five books of the *Commentary*, was “gnostic” heresy, in particular Basilidean scriptural interpretation in the form of Heracleon’s teaching.<sup>18</sup> Once in Caesarea, where the Church encountered significant hostility from the Synagogue, Origen’s attention turned towards the Jews, and following Books 19 and 20 of the *Commentary* references to Heracleon disappear.<sup>19</sup> Book 10, written in Caesarea, falls in the transition between these two stages, and both groups make some appearance. Yet, importantly, the references in 10.290–291 do not assert that these are actual interpretations *offered by* heretics or Jews, but rather that they bear similarity to positions held or conclusions reached by heretics and Jews (ὁμοιόν τι τοῖς ἀπὸ τῶν αἱρέσεων, 10.290; Ἰουδαϊκῶς, 10.291). That is to say, they are polemical comparisons, designed to dissuade the *Christian* reader from an imprudent interpretative choice rather than to critique an actual exegetical move by either of those groups. Moreover, Origen’s target is not merely a specific interpretation offered by rival groups, whether Christian, heretical, or Jewish; he has in view their wider interpretative method, and he is able to evoke this by the mere mention of their names. This will become clearer in what follows.

The phrase “the good things once given to the saints” may, then, represent the actual or potential position of other Christian interpreters known to Origen,<sup>20</sup> and from whom he differs on this point of exegesis.<sup>21</sup> As this slogan comes from a scriptural text that Origen regarded highly, moreover, it seems unlikely that it would have originated with Origen himself, and correspondingly more likely that it reflects an actual slogan or usage of another group within the Church, even if this must remain a supposition in the absence of supporting evidence elsewhere in early Christian literature. Most significantly,

18 Nautin dates *Com. Jn* 6 to 235 CE and Book 22 after 238 CE, implying a rough date of the late 230s CE for Book 10; Nautin, *Origène*, 377–80. Cf. Heine, *Commentary on John* 1–10, 4; *Origen*, 91–92.

19 Heine, *Origen*, 191.

20 Perhaps some of the “simple Christians” Origen identifies in *Princ.* 4.2.1 and elsewhere, although there they are willing to seek a spiritual sense even if they err, 4.2.2.

21 Origen frames exegesis as the primary point of difference between himself and his opponents (e.g. *Princ.* 4.2.2), although Martens (*Origen and Scripture*, e.g., 13, 107) argues that the rule of faith is in fact of equal or greater importance for him. As I will show below, it is the hermeneutical principle of harmony that plays a similar role in this part of *Com. Jn*.

TABLE 1      The horns of the interpretative dilemma in *Com. Jn* 10.289–90

Relation of historical temple to spiritual temple	Effect on “good things” of the Church	Result
something analogous can happen/has happened	a change of such great good things	absurdity
not adapt the events of this historical account	preserve unchanged the good things once given to the saints	we act like heretics by not preserving harmony of narrative of Scriptures

the phrase functions here as a convenient shorthand for an erroneous interpretative stance, a point that Origen will substantiate by reference to the key notion of harmony.

4      “Preserving Harmony”: Resolution by Appeal to *συμφωνία*

We now return to the wider argument of the closing section of Book 10 of the *Commentary on John*. The two opposite interpretative possibilities in Origen’s dilemma can be laid out as in table 1.

Because John 2 identifies the temple as Christ’s body, and because the body of Christ is the Church, Origen in the preceding context relates the literal meaning of the Jerusalem temple to the Church (cf. esp. his comments in 10.267, 273). Then he considers events involving the temple rather than its physical features, and this is where the dilemma arises. The temple was destroyed, the people exiled, and the temple later rebuilt in less glorious form. How can these events be attributed to the Church? This would seem to entail a change of the “good things”, which is not only unpalatable to a Christian audience but ultimately absurd. The other horn of the dilemma involves refusing to make the connection, preserving unchanged the “good things”, and thus apparently avoiding the problems of the first horn. However, the end result is in fact to disrupt “the harmony [*τὴν συμφωνίαν*] of the narrative of the Scriptures”, and in so doing to act more like a heretic than a Christian. This mention of *συμφωνία* might appear to be a passing reference, perhaps of a literary nature, but it in fact evokes a principle that holds great importance for Origen, and which bears some elucidation.



Origen's deployment of *συμφωνία* is not wholly new, but it does represent a pinnacle of the development of this term in Greek antiquity.<sup>22</sup> In this musical image, that which is harmonious or melodious signals not only beauty but also truth. Morlet highlights two primary meanings which *συμφωνία* is used to signal in Greek Christian writers: the agreement between the Bible and Greek thought, and the interior harmony of Scripture.<sup>23</sup> Origen can give *συμφωνία* a wide range of applications, including individual ethical consistency, accord with the divine, unity among Christians,<sup>24</sup> and agreement on doctrinal matters,<sup>25</sup> whilst nevertheless regarding these as fundamentally compatible (indeed, harmonious) with one another. Of primary interest to our discussion is the harmony of Scripture with itself.<sup>26</sup> As Origen states, "all Scripture is one harmonious instrument of God, producing one saving melody from different sounds for those who desire to learn, a melody that calms and hinders every action of the evil spirit".<sup>27</sup> This unity corresponds to the nature of God,<sup>28</sup> and it can be discerned in the coherence of any one part of Scripture with any other, as well as in the fully self-consonant nature of Scripture taken as a whole. This principle mandates the detailed philological and exegetical searching of the Scriptures in which Origen engages in a work like the *Commentary on John*, in order to uncover their harmony.

If there were any doubt as to whether this more technical sense of *συμφωνία* is in play in our passage, it is quickly dispelled by consideration of the context of Book 10 of the *Commentary on John*. As indicated above, the text under

22 On this see Sébastien Morlet, *Symphonia: La concorde des textes et des doctrines dans la littérature grecque jusqu'à Origène* (Paris, 2019). He describes Origen's work as "un point d'aboutissement dans l'histoire de la réflexion chrétienne sur le lien entre concorde et vérité" (p. 14) and devotes pp. 269–394 to an extended treatment of Origen.

23 Morlet, *Symphonia*, e.g. p. 15.

24 Morlet highlights the interdependence of these three: agreement with oneself, with others, and with God, most notably in *Hom. 1 Reg. 1.4*; cf. the other texts he cites and his discussion, *Symphonia*, 269–80.

25 See esp. *Com. Mt.* 14.1, where Origen mentions these latter two points side by side. On this passage and Origen's deployment of *συμφωνία* polemically against the divisions and disagreements of the heretics, see Alain Le Boulluec, *La notion d'hérésie dans la littérature grecque, II<sup>e</sup>-III<sup>e</sup> siècles*, Etudes augustinienes. Antiquité, 111, 2 vols (Paris, 1985), 2.504–5.

26 This is one of Morlet's two primary focuses; see *Symphonia*, 289–348, for a treatment of *συμφωνία* in Origen's exegesis.

27 *Philocalia* 6.2, preserving a fragment of the lost *Com. Mt.* 2. This translation is Martens' (p. 205); see his discussion of harmony specifically in regard to exegesis, *Origen and Scripture*, 201–5.

28 "Origen grounded the harmony of the one scriptural message that ran through both testaments in the same God, same Word and same Spirit who helped author both testaments," Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 203.

consideration, John's temple-clearing scene, is a blatant example of apparent *discord* between the Gospels, and Origen's response is to rule out any literal sense for the John passage. In focussing only on the spiritual sense, as the divine author of Scripture intended, Origen preserves its harmony. We see, then, that spiritual exegesis and harmony are intimately linked, as Morlet also notes: "l'exégèse spirituelle [peut] être fondée sur une lecture symphonique du texte biblique, ou [...] inversement, la lecture symphonique mène au sens spirituel".<sup>29</sup> In keeping with his concern to deal with the perception of discord between the Gospels, Book 10 contains eight occurrences of the term διαφωνία (hitherto not mentioned in the *Com. Jn*) and the only instance of ἀσυμφωνία in Origen's extant oeuvre.<sup>30</sup> As he counters a perceived disharmony, Origen does not hesitate to elucidate the principle of συμφωνία explicitly and positively: "We must approach all the Scripture as one body, and not break or cut through the most vigorous and firm bonds in the harmony [ἐν τῇ ἀρμονίᾳ] of its total composition." (*Com. Jn* 10.107)<sup>31</sup> As he transitions to the spiritual interpretation of chasing the money-changers from the temple, Origen comments that those who remain with the historical meaning alone cannot "show that the apparent disagreement [τὴν δοκοῦσαν διαφωνίαν] is an agreement [σύμφωνον]", and states that he will set forth "the things which move us to the harmony [τὰ δὲ κινοῦντα ἡμᾶς εἰς τὴν ... συμφωνίαν] of these texts" (*Com. Jn* 10.130–131). By the time we arrive at 10.290, then, readers are well attuned to this interpretative principle and its importance.

We are now in a position to return to Origen's dilemma. Although its first horn apparently leads to absurdity, its second horn entails not preserving the harmony of Scripture's narrative. As this second option violates a core principle of faithful reading of Scripture, it is a course that Origen is not willing to countenance – and a course that his reader is by this point equipped to avoid too. This helps us understand how the dilemma can be so quickly resolved, even in favour of an apparently absurd option. In the following section Origen affirms: "we must say [...] that there has been a temple and the people have

29 *Symphonia*, 293. Origen himself makes this connection in *Com. Jn* 10.27.

30 *Com. Jn* 10.10 (×2), 18, 27, 31, 129, 130, 199; ἀσυμφωνία occurs in 10.14. Heine translates both terms with "disagreement" ("discrepancy" in 10.10), which is accurate but obscures the musical metaphor; Blanc's "contradiction(s)" is too strong; her translation with "désaccord" in 10.129 is much more fitting. See Morlet, *Symphonia*, 333–40 (here 334 nn. 264, 265); cf. also the study he cites, Éric Junod, "Origène face au problème du désaccord (διαφωνία) entre les Évangiles," in *Il commento a Giovanni di Origene: il testo e i suoi contesti*, ed. by Emanuela Prinzivalli (Roma, 2005), 423–39.

31 Cf. *Com. Jn* 10.229, where Origen speaks of the ἀρμονία of the living stones which make up the temple. The word can have anatomical and architectural nuances (as it does in these two instances, respectively) as well as musical.

been in captivity, and will return to Judea and Jerusalem" (10.291).<sup>32</sup> That is to say, the events that befell the temple do have an anagogical application to the Church.

Origen does not disagree that "good things" have been entrusted to the Church and must be preserved. On the contrary, he at several points speaks of a rule or deposit of faith and its preservation through succession or tradition.<sup>33</sup> He is simply being rigorous in his application of the theory of the multiple senses of Scripture, in a way that brings out their harmony. Because the spiritual meaning of John 2 indicates that the Church is the temple, and that the temple undergoes destruction and "captivity" during the period of the exile and is restored only after this, this must befall the Church as well. Preservation of the "good things" therefore cannot mean a pristine continuation of the gospel in the Church without something of this sort happening – although in 10.292 Origen candidly admits that he does not know exactly how such events can or will recur.<sup>34</sup>

Two further lexical nuances will help us to specify more precisely how Origen's resolution of the dilemma, and his interpretation of Scripture, foster a harmonious reading. First, the term Heine translates "adapt" (ἐφαρμόζω) might be better rendered "apply" or "refer".<sup>35</sup> It is not a question of *changing* the historical account so much as *applying* it to the Church. By doing this one might appear to change "the good things", but one is in fact integrating one part of Scripture closely with another. Secondly, there is a play on two terms that are both translated "preserve" by Heine: the dilemma's second horn seeks to preserve (τηρέω) unchanged the good things; but it is only the first option that in fact preserves (φυλάσσω) narrative harmony (τὴν συμφωνίαν τῆς διηγήσεως). The interchangeability of these terms can be illustrated from a comment on Heracleon a little earlier in Book 10: Origen attacks his interpretation

32 Note the alternative reading of the text, "we are now the temple," reflected in ANF 10.406; Heine, *Commentary on John 1–10*, 320 n. 399.

33 E.g.: "the rule of the heavenly Church of Jesus Christ through the succession from the Apostles," *Princ.* 4.2.2; the teaching of the Church "handed down in unbroken succession from the apostles, is still preserved and continues to exist in the churches up to the present day," and "that only is to be believed as the truth which in no way conflicts with the tradition of the church and the apostles," *Princ.* Pref. 2. On the role of "succession" (διαδοχή) in Christian heresiology see Le Boulluec, *Notion d'hérésie*, 1.162–73 (also vol. 2, ch. 6 on Origen).

34 Cf. 10.296 where he refers to the "limited" understanding derived from his exegesis.

35 Used transitively ἐφαρμόζω means to fit (something on to another thing), suit, accommodate, apply, refer (LSJ, s.v., sense 11).

of Psalm 68 precisely because he “is not able to *preserve the sequence* of the prophecy [μὴ δυνάμενος τὸν εἰρμὸν ... τηρῆσαι]” (*Com. Jn* 10.223, my emphasis).<sup>36</sup>

Origen’s claim, then, is that ultimately his methods alone lead to preservation when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures. In this way, he does not allow his (imagined or actual) interlocutor to claim ownership of the phrase from Jude 3; he is instead offering a critique of a misunderstanding or misuse of this phrase, which functions as a scriptural pretext for bad exegesis of the Scriptures. By his attention to literal and spiritual senses, it is Origen who preserves “the good things once given to the saints”. Even if this entails that the Church will undergo captivity, it nevertheless ensures the kind of faithful interpretation that will carry her through it and into her restoration.

## 5 Conclusion

Origen’s exploration of an interpretative dilemma in *Com. Jn* 10.289–290 is both an instantiation of his exegetical method and a further elucidation and vindication of it. The dilemma arises in the course of pursuing the spiritual sense of John 2, in line with procedures outlined earlier in the *Commentary on John* and elsewhere in works such as *On First Principles*. Origen pauses to give voice to a concern, that pursuit of a spiritual meaning – in this instance and perhaps also in others – will disrupt what is held to be the continuation of the “good things” of the Church. Yet he perseveres with such a reading because, despite its at first sight absurd results, it in fact guards the harmony of the Scriptures, and is thus true to the Spirit who inspired them. This demonstrates the close interrelationship between spiritual exegesis and the principle of harmony: the former leads to the latter, and the latter is safeguarded by the former.

Origen’s interpretation has a practical implication: the Church will at some point undergo a “change of good things” analogous to the captivity and restoration of the Jerusalem temple. It also, however, has exegetical and methodological implications. Defending a preconceived notion of “the good things once given to the saints” unthinkingly and at all costs, in order to preserve the faith, can have the exact opposite result, instead disrupting Scripture’s internal harmony. Seeking the spiritual sense, even where this disrupts an apparently literal reading, ensures faithfulness both to the historical sequence of Scripture

<sup>36</sup> This parallel also demonstrates that Origen’s statement that the second horn involves acting like the heretics is not a casual or empty comparison. On Origen’s critique of Heracleon’s scriptural exegesis, including its offence against the principle of harmony, see Le Boulluec, *Notion d’hérésie*, 2.514–16.

and to its spiritual application. This, we can infer, is what it actually means to preserve the good things once given to the saints.<sup>37</sup> Although Jude 3 functions as a biblical slogan and proof text (whether of an imagined or actual group) for the interpretation Origen opposes, it in fact does not imply or require this interpretation.

The distinction is thus not between a spiritual reading (*Com. Jn* 10.289) and a literal reading (10.290). It is rather between a spiritual reading that sets out from and builds on the literal (both the impossible literal sense of John 2, and the sequence of the literal sense of the temple's history applied by analogy to the Church) on the one hand, and, on the other, an erroneous reading that separates the Church from the events that befell the temple on the basis of a misapplication of Jude 3 and through failure to attend to the principle of harmony. That the good things were "once given" does not mean there will be no change in the life of the Church, nor does it short-circuit the hard work of the exegete. Instead, Origen's method, through its sensitivity to Scripture's harmony, ensures the preservation and guarding of the good things of the faith.

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37 Cf. Torjesen's account of Origen's dynamic movement from "the saving doctrines of Christ once taught to the saints [...] to the same saving doctrines which transform his hearers today;" *Origen's Exegesis*, 13 (my emphasis).