# Reading Joshua

Over recent decades, the Book of Joshua came to trouble people. Hardly a month goes by without the publication of another volume or another conference on violence in the Scriptures. But we won’t get to understand Joshua unless we set its accounts of war-making in the context of the book as a whole. And in addition, thinking more broadly about the nature of migration and settlement provides some illumination on the story Joshua tells. So for much of this paper I want to stand back a bit. I’m going to talk for half an hour, then we’ll look at some questions that you might have asked by then, and then I’ll talk some more.

First, what was the book of Joshua for? If you were an ordinary Israelite, the Book of Joshua might answer two questions for you. One is, how did we come to be here in this country, how did it come to be ours? The other is, how did the different clans (they’re more clans than tribes) come to live where they do? Suppose you were someone from Naphtali, a fisherman on Lake Galilee—how did this come to be your clan’s area? The two halves of Joshua answer those two questions: first, how God enabled the Israelites to take control of Canaan under Joshua, and the second, how Joshua and Eleazar distributed this beautiful land among the clans. Both halves tell a story that Israel told and retold over the centuries.

The book actually gives two levels of answer to those questions. One is, “God directed us to come here and made it possible and told us how to divide the land up.” The other is, “We came here by the same sort of process as other people come to live where they do, and we divided it up the same way as other people do, by drawing lots.”

For the first question, how did we come to be here, God implies both levels of answer in a comment he makes in Amos. “I brought Israel from the country of Egypt,” God said, “and I brought the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Qir.”

So the first level of answer speaks of God acting. I made it possible, says God. He made a promise to Israel’s ancestors about this land, that was related to a concern for the nations to come to acknowledge him. The aim was that “all the peoples of the earth may acknowledge that Yahweh’s hand is powerful.” That’s the way the New Testament looks at it, as well. One level of answer to the question, “How did we come to be here,” is that God brought us.

But God also implies in those words through Amos, “I brought you here the same way as I brought the Philistines and the Syrians to their countries.” They all came by a similar process of migration from one country and settlement in another country. The word England comes from the word Anglia, which is part of Germany. Oxford is in an area that was colonized by people from Germany more than a millennium ago. The same process took Europeans to the Americas five or six centuries ago, and it took modern Jews to Palestine over the past century or so. I imagine it compares with stories that some of you know about your people.

Part of the background to migrations is often that things are tough where these peoples came from. And then the migration and settlement commonly involve a combination of invasion, killing, displacement, assimilation, and cultural change. In all those examples I just mentioned there was probably conflict. There was more assimilation with the Israelites in Canaan and the Anglo-Saxons in Britain than there was with the Europeans in the Americas and the Jews in Palestine, but in due course there was more cultural and religious change with the Israelites in Canaan and the Europeans in the Americas. Displacement was a big factor with the Europeans in the Americas and with the Jews in Palestine, and with the Anglo-Saxons in Britain, so the Celts ended up on the fringes of Britain.

The numbers of British settlers in Jamestown in the seventeenth century, the number of kibbutzniks draining swamps in Jezreel in the twentieth century, and the number of Israelites cutting down woodland in Canaan in Joshua’s time, would all be in the same ballpark. All are examples of the time-wide and worldwide phenomenon of settler colonization. I distinguish that from settler colonialism. It’s not something organized by an imperial power, like European colonization in Africa, and it doesn’t mean newcomers arriving in a country as temporary residents or merchants or gold-hunters. Before the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain, the Romans came here as empire-builders, and my DNA suggests I might be descended from one of those Romans who stayed behind when most of the Romans left. But Chris Sugden’s name looks Anglo-Saxon, and most people in our area are more likely descended from those Anglo-Saxons who came here to find somewhere better than their marshy, boggy land in Germany. Settlers come as people looking for a new place to live, though ultimately they may take the country over.

In the Americas, sometimes people welcomed the settlers or simply accepted the fact that they had come, sometimes they resisted them and there was fighting. In Joshua, Rahab and the Gibeonites fit the first picture; some stories in Joshua indicate conflicts. The Israelites attack the local people, and the local people attack the settlers. In the Americas, in due course the settlers mostly killed the local people or removed them elsewhere. In Joshua, dispossession is the main thing Joshua wants and God wants, but the book often refers to the Israelites not dispossessing people but living among them. Joshua does talk about avoiding the influence of Canaanite religion, but it didn’t seem to destroy the Canaanites’ culture, to judge from things like pottery and style of housing.

So it makes sense to think of the story in Joshua fitting in with what Amos says, and indicating that God brought the Israelites to Canaan by the ordinary processes of migration, conflict, assimilation, displacement, and cultural appropriation.

Now that’s a different picture from the one that people often have in their minds. The song “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho” encourages us to put the emphasis on invasion, and there are verses in Joshua that encourage readers to think in terms of genocide, but the narrative as a whole suggests a more complex and more nuanced picture. To start with, there was no battle of Jericho; all the Israelites did was blow trumpets. You might say, “That doesn’t sound very likely. I bet that’s a retelling of a story that involved a battle.” But if you go behind the story and try to work out what must have happened, you discover that Jericho seems to have been destroyed long before the Israelites arrived. There was no city of Jericho in Joshua’s day. There could have been a village there, but that’s all. And the same’s true about the other big story, about Ai. It wasn’t there, either.

The Israelites actually settled in highland areas, where there weren’t many people, and they gradually assimilated with the indigenous people there. In the stories that do involve a fight, the Israelites are usually defending themselves or defending someone else. The story does say that they conquered the entire land, but it also says that there was much land still to get possession of. And when it says the Israelites killed everyone, it also regularly indicates that the local people carried on life, so it’s evidently exaggerating. Hyperbole, exaggeration, is a common feature of battle reports in the ancient Middle East, as it is today. It’s common in the New Testament: “the gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven,” says Paul (Col. 1:23). Statements like that are expressions of faith and hope. In Joshua they telescope the process whereby the Israelites gained control of Canaan, which took until David’s time. There was no genocide, no ethnic cleansing.

So that’s something of what the book of Joshua was for, what sort of understanding it has of how Israel came to be Israel in Canaan. Second, who wrote this story, and why? It contains all sorts of material—sermons, stories, lists of people and places. That makes it look as if more than one author was involved. Now, many television scripts and movie scripts issue from people working together, not from an individual working on their own, and it looks as if Joshua was like that. In television they call it a writers room. There’s something else about this book. It knows about some things in Joshua’s day, but it also talks about things from after Joshua’s day. It talks about the clan of Dan moving from where Tel Aviv is now to the far north. Sometimes it speaks as if it doesn’t know about Jerusalem being Israel’s capital, which suggests a time before David. Yet it also talks about things that are in Israel “until this day,” which sounds like a later period. Again, Joshua is part of the Former Prophets, which tell Israel’s story up to the fall of Jerusalem in 587. So the writers room that produced Joshua didn’t just exist for a short time. It met from time to time for centuries.

The story preserves Israel’s memory of a vital period in its history. It articulates the way Israel understands itself. Joshua notes some of the means whereby Israel’s memory will be sustained over time. There are the rocks that commemorate the crossing of the Jordan and that mean Gilgal becomes a place of pilgrimage. There are those notes about things that are realities “until this day” that would stimulate the memory of Israelites who lived in “this day.”

Now memory is selective. And cultures combine recollection of events with reformulations that develop over the centuries. The story shapes the memory. Israel’s selectivity makes it say little about assimilation to the Canaanites in Joshua, and it could beguile inattentive readers into overestimating the factor of speedy military conquest as it telescopes the process in the way that a movie “based on fact” may telescope events. One can think of reasons why this process worked in order to bring God’s word home to people. Assimilation continued to be a danger over the centuries. And there is illumination on this question from Rahab, the first great theologian in Joshua. When Rahab tells the Israelite spies why she wants to change sides, she talks about what Yahweh had done in drying up the Red Sea and about what kind of God that showed Yahweh to be. Key to the faith of the Scriptures is what Israel brought into Canaan from outside. In his power and compassion Yahweh rescued some Israelites from serfdom in Egypt, put down its imperial power, thereby fulfilled promises to the Israelites, and sealed a relationship of mutual commitment with them. They brought this new reality into Canaan, and the distinctiveness and profundity of what they brought was more important than what they had in common with the people who were there already. That would be good reason to stress the difference from the Canaanites, even though they also came to share their culture and their life.

To put it in the terms of my image, Joshua issue from a process in an ongoing writing room that continued over a millennium. Teams of curators or storytellers or theologian-scribes kept reworking the story of Israel’s origins in Canaan, in light of situations and events of their day. But they didn’t leave concrete traces of these situations and events in their story. They and the people who preserved it thought the story could feed the memory of their people without them needing to know when each layer of the story was composed, as people were expected to be able to feed on the memory articulated in the Gospels without knowing where each Gospel came from. What the writers room eventually produced in Joshua was a long narrative work, with a beginning and a middle and an end, something that could stand on its own as a drama. It’s a drama, but it’s based on fact. In Britain we’ve had a series of television dramas called The Crown, about the reign of Queen Elizabeth the Second. They tell a basically factual story, but the writers have used their imagination in telling their story. That’s how Joshua is.

But there’s something else. The Crown is a series of six seasons each with ten episodes. And Joshua is also a drama that relates to the books on either side in Israel’s story. So to push my image, Genesis to Kings resembles a boxed set of the nine seasons of a television drama, with Joshua in a pivotal place as Season Six. Within each season in a boxed set, each episode is self-contained. So Joshua is like a series of self-contained episodes, like a series of short stories.

That’s my image for answering the question what sort of book this is, and who wrote. Third, who are the people in it, and what sort of stories does it tell about them?

The main characters in Joshua are God and Joshua himself, but the story does not paint them as graphically as it paints some of the players with cameo roles. There’s Achan who falls understandably for some trinkets, makes confession frankly though also ambiguously, and pays a price shockingly. There are the Gibeonite envoys who think things through shrewdly, disguise themselves convincingly, reason plausibly, and fool Joshua thoroughly. There’s Caleb, the foreigner, who can claim to have shown a trust in God that equals Joshua’s trust, who still has his mojo, who knows what he wants, and is prepared to claim it. There’s the aggressively faithful Phinehas; the Israelites know what they are doing when they send him to sort out the easterners, though he proves open-hearted.

The more intriguing characters are the women. There’s Caleb’s daughter, Aksah, who doesn’t pout when her father treats her as a battle prize, isn’t overawed by him or by the man she is given to, tells Caleb what she needs, and gets it. There are Maḥlah, Noah, Ḥeglah, Milkah, and Tirsah who insist that they are given the endowment that they had persuaded God and Moses to give them even though they are women. But first of all there is Rahab, yet another foreigner, the whore whose theological insight is the equal of Joshua’s, and whose commitment to Yahweh is more remarkable and risky.

The simplest form of a short story involves describing a problem or a question, then relating how the problem got solved or the question got answered. There are no episodes in Joshua that are quite that simple, and the stories are complex and sophisticated in the way they communicate and use technique. They are full of drama, and suspense, and ambiguity, and repetition and variation, and humor, and irony, and surprise. If their plot looks simple at first, they then have unexpected aftermaths. For instance, when the Israelites have started moving into the Galilee, that causes a problem to the king of Hazor. In Joshua 11, he attempts to solve his problem by planning to attack the settlers, which causes a problem for them. God tells Joshua how to solve the problem and he does what God says. End of story. The surprise is that the story doesn’t stop there. There turns out to be a lot more in the way things turn out and in what the narrative builds on it.

The way the Hazor story works had already appeared in the Jericho story. It’s got a threefold problem: Jericho is sacred ground, Yahweh is committed to surrendering it to Israel, but its people are barricaded in. So God gives Joshua instructions about how to solve the problem, Joshua implements them, and everything works out. End of story. The surprise is that here too the story doesn’t stop there. The Israelites go on to “devote” the people in Jericho. The word for “devoting” (*ḥērem*) is commonly translated “annihilate,” but it means more and less than that. It means more, in the sense that it means dedicating something to God, so that you keep off it. But it means less, in the sense that in other contexts you can devote something to God without killing it.

So the Israelites killed the people in the city of Jericho. Except that they didn’t, because the city of Jericho didn’t actually exist at the time. The story is an example of the interplay of fact and imagination in the book of Joshua. The book is about how God really did bring the Israelites into Canaan, but don’t press it for too many hard facts. The same sort of thing is true about Ai.

Then there’s another consideration. The story doesn’t say that God told Joshua to attack Jericho, though God goes along with it. Joshua initiated things at Jericho by seeking some intel about the city and then God took charge and made the intel redundant, made clear that Joshua needed to see himself as subordinate to God’s commander-in-chief, and gave Joshua instructions, which don’t include killing anyone. This was also Joshua’s idea. Perhaps he thought the city should be devoted because it was sacred. Actually God never commissions Joshua to fight a battle. And whereas God told Joshua that he was to lead the people into possession of the country, the story doesn’t talk about God intending people to die. From the beginning God had talked about them being chased out, not killed. The killing was Joshua’s idea, but it is built into the idea of settlement colonization. When settlement colonization happens, eventually there is fighting, and people get killed. And God works with the way humanity works and the way his own people work, whether or not it fits his ideals. Through the story in Joshua, God’s intentions are being implemented, but it happens through Joshua making decisions. So the story simultaneously identifies God with what happens and distances him from it. It’s easy to see a similar dynamic in the rest of the First Testament, in what David and Solomon and the Assyrians and the Babylonians and the Edomites and so on do, and it’s easy to see it in the life of the church. Human beings do what they think is a good idea, and God maybe tweaks it and uses its energy in his direction. The whole history of European missions in Africa is an example.

The implication is not that we let God off the hook by blaming Joshua, nor that we let Joshua off the hook by blaming God. Both God and Joshua work with the world as it is. The Joshua narrative thus implies a theology of ambiguity about God and the world and Israel—in fact, several forms of ambiguity. First, there is an ambiguity about the narrative itself. It requires much reading between the lines and attentiveness to hints and gaps in the way it talks about the relationship between God’s acts and Joshua’s acts. Being attentive doesn’t always resolve the ambiguity, partly because it is a sign of other ambiguities. Thus second, there’s a theological or philosophical ambiguity or tension in its portrayal of God’s thinking and intentions. God has aims and desires, but there is a mismatch between his aims and desires and his actions, not because he is inconsistent but because the fulfillment of his aims and desires depends on working through people, and being God doesn’t necessarily make it easier to get people to do what you want—as again the story of the church shows. And thus third, Joshua is unconsciously embroiled in a moral ambiguity in the way he’s involved in leadership, working with the war-making conventions of the day—like Christian settlers in the Americas or people serving in the military today. And fourth, God accepts a moral ambiguity in the way he goes about things in the world, and presumably is more conscious of that than Joshua was. He is continually letting himself be compromised by working through Israel, through Joshua, through the church.

Part of the genius of narrative is the way it can express such ambiguities and explore them and make it possible to discuss complex and knotty matters without simplifying them or claiming to resolve the questions they raise.

There are two other key examples of narrative handling ambiguity in Joshua that are related to that first one. They’re both about the relationship between God’s actions and human actions. The Israelites didn’t dispossess the Canaanites. The Canaanites stayed in control of key parts of the land, specifically of its key cities. Why was that? The narrative combines two ways of referring to it. It can say they *didn’t* dispossess the Canaanites; it can also say they *couldn’t* dispossess them. It was failure for which they were responsible; it was a tragedy that happened to them.

The other example is the classic one of the relationship between God’s sovereignty in determining events and seeing that his aims get fulfilled, and the reality of human decision-making on the part of the people who are affected. Yahweh wished to dispossess the Canaanites and they fortuitously attacked the Israelites and found themselves dispossessed. They made their decisions to resist the Israelites; at one level their decisions were logical, and anyway, they made them. But eventually the narrative adds that “it was from Yahweh, to make their mind firm to engage in battle with Israel in order to devote them, so that there might be no grace for them—rather in order that he might wipe them out, as Yahweh charged Moses.” They made their decisions, God inspired these decisions: narrative makes it possible to juxtapose these different kinds of statement about events without claiming to explain their interrelationship.

The Joshua scroll manifests the characteristic strength of narrative theology in its subtle portrayal of mysteries and of ambiguities such as Yahweh’s relationship with the violence of Israel’s arrival in Canaan, but modern readers can miss its insight because we think and read so simplistically.

I’ll stop there for a while and let’s see it Chris has any questions.

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Now some of the background to things I have said already lies in some aspects of scholarly study of Joshua over recent decades, so let me say something about them. Then I’ll talk some more about narrative theology in Joshua. And then I’ll come back finally to the canonical authority of Joshua and the question of violence.

First, the scholarly study. To begin with, there are developments in archaeological work. From the centuries before Joshua’s day, we have copies of treaties made between Hittite rulers and other kings, and Joshua almost closes with an account of Israel making a covenant with Yahweh that parallels the form of these Hittite treaties. The treaties illustrate how Israel could articulate its relationship with Yahweh in such a covenant.

A discovery relating more directly to Israel in Joshua’s day is an inscription on a slab of granite that was set up by the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah in about 1208 BC in which he claims to have won a great victory over invading forces from Libya. Near the end, he says, “Israel is laid waste; his seed is not.” The hieroglyphics apparently use a symbol to describe Israel that suggests a people-group rather than a city-state. It fits other indications that the end of the thirteen century, the period that saw the gradual transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age, is the time that Israel was coming into being as an identifiable entity in Canaan.

It would be a fortuitous time. The Canaanites were not one nation. They comprised a number of city-states with their “kings.” A city with the villages around perhaps comprised two or three thousand people. When the Canaanites wanted to fight the Israelites, they had to form ad hoc alliances. Insofar as they were part of a bigger system, it was the Egyptian imperial structure, but that was in decline in Joshua’s day. In the midst of this confusion, a number of cities such as Megiddo were devastated or burnt (and then rebuilt), and in the mid-twentieth century it was common to see Joshua as the agent of this destruction. But there’s no concrete indication that the Israelites were the destroyers or that the destructions happened at the same time, and Joshua 11 actually denies that the Israelites burnt cities.

In the late twentieth century, some different data emerged. It seems that before Joshua’s time there was little settlement in Canaan outside the big cities, but there’s more evidence for settlement during the time that followed. In the Galilee, for instance, the number of settlements increased from thirteen to sixty-five. If that came about through the Israelites settling in the highland areas, it fits with the way Joshua relates how the Israelites won victories over some cities, but doesn’t say they went to live in them, and it notes how they failed to gain ongoing control of cities they did win a victory over. Their focus was more on the land, and they sometimes lived reasonably amicably among the Canaanites.

As second theme of scholarly study has been the actual text of Joshua. Our oldest copy of Joshua in Hebrew is a copy of the Masoretic Text of the Jewish Scriptures dated 1006 AD. The Qumran scrolls are a thousand years older, and they include a few fragments of Joshua with some differences from the Masoretic Text. Then there’s the Septuagint’s translation of Joshua into Greek, from which one can try to infer the Hebrew text it was relying on, which is again different in detail from the Masoretic Text. So Joshua existed in New Testament times in more or less the form that we know it, but there are at least these other two slightly different versions. In detail the text is still developing in small ways. While some changes are accidental, others reflect expansion or abbreviation that continued the process whereby the text had been developing over the previous millennium, to enable it to continue to shape people’s identity in appropriate directions. The Scriptures thus have a vitality that finds expression as they get adapted to new situations in which they live in new ways. Overall, the situation resembles that with modern translations, where (for instance) NRSV, *The* *Message*, and the Common English Bible feel free to adapt the text in small ways for various reasons. And the situation fits the way the New Testament quotes the First Testament with liberty, sometimes corresponding to the Masoretic Text, sometimes to the Septuagint, sometimes going its own distinctive way.

The third theme is the macro-development of the book and of the books from Genesis to Kings as a whole.

Some form of Joshua seems needed to conclude the story in Genesis to Deuteronomy. Some form of it also seems needed to introduce the narrative of Israel’s subsequent history in the land, in Judges to Kings, to explain how they got there. Joshua is a bridge between the two.

At the beginning of the twentieth century the consensus about Genesis to Deuteronomy was summed up by the letters JEDP, associated with Julius Wellhausen. But JEDP petered out in Joshua.

In the mid-twentieth century, a revolutionary development followed through the work of Martin Noth. He made a leap in seeing Joshua primarily not as linking back to the Torah but as the beginning of a continuous narrative running on to the Books of King and thus relating Israel’s history from the arrival in Canaan to the fall of Jerusalem. This understanding caught on so universally that this “Deuteronomistic History” seemed real. Noth’s understanding was nuanced in the United States through the work of F. M. Cross. He posited that a first edition of this history came into being in King Josiah’s time in the 620s and promised that Judah could have a positive future. Joshua could thus become a figure designed to inspire Josiah, and the Joshua scroll could be read against the background of Josiah’s time, as it has commonly been since.

But as time went by, some understandings of JEDP became implausibly complicated, and the use of the term “Deuteronomistic” became more all-encompassing, complicated and controverted, and towards the end of the twentieth century, the double consensus about JEDP and the Deuteronomistic History largely collapsed. In scholarly circles, there’s a quite a lot of interest in asking about Genesis to Kings as a whole as something that developed over a very long period. But there’s no consensus about the questions.

I was speaking earlier about narrative theology, and there’s a broader point about narrative theology that I should make. Narrative theology is one of the Scriptures’ two main ways of doing theology. It does theology by narrating things God did and things that happened, *and* by describing who God is and aspects of how things are (a third way it does theology is by worshiping, chiefly in the Psalms, where theology means doxology). On one hand, the Scriptures say “The Father sent the Son as savior of the world,” and on the other, “God is love.” In a narrative work like Joshua, the first kind of statement is more prominent, but the second kind of statement comes at key points and shows the link between the two. Rahab the theologian first says “Yahweh dried up the water in the Red Sea on account of you,” then she says that “Yahweh your God is God in the heavens above and on the earth below.” Near the end, Joshua first retells the story of what Yahweh has done from Abraham to the present, then makes declarations about the kind of God that Yahweh is.

And a narrative work is significant not only because this makes for lively and effective communication of truths that can be communicated more conceptually, and not only because it helps us consider and live with questions that cannot be solved, but also because in scriptural faith narrative expresses the nature of reality and truth in a way that abstract, conceptual, or discursive statements can’t. The truth and importance of some theological statements in Joshua (as in the Scriptures as a whole) cannot be expressed without being narrative, because they concern things that God did. They concern historical truths, not mere timeless truths. The fact that Jesus died and rose for us is the most important thing in the world, and you can only express it as a narrative statement.

In Joshua’s narrative theology, the most prominent verb attached to God is “give.” Joshua keeps saying God gave, God is giving, God will give. Usually the gift that God has given is the land, though the first concrete object of God’s giving is the city of Jericho. That event is not termed a miracle, but it was one, in the story. It involved no military action, not even a shout, only a crazy procession with priests, horns, and the covenant chest. The thing that’s actually called a miracle is the crossing of the Jordan, which is a kind of repeat of the crossing of the Red Sea. The effect of that first miracle was to make the spirits of the Canaanite leadership melt. Because it was hard for leaders to see what a marginal person like Rahab or a leaderless people like the Gibeonites could see. Or they could see it, but awe translated into resistance rather than realism.

First, then, God gave. One can give something only if one first possesses it. Giving presupposes ownership. Canaan belonged to God, so he could give it to anyone he wished. In this case he’d been allowing someone else to occupy it, so the other side of the coin of giving is dispossessing. Joshua doesn’t comment on what gave God a basis for dispossessing the Canaanites, beyond his sovereignty. The implicit attitude is the same as Paul’s in Romans 9. God can do what he likes, especially in fulfillment of his purpose for the world. Joshua doesn’t say anything about the Canaanites being wicked; when people get invaded, it isn’t usually because they are wicked.

The Jordan crossing and the fall of Jericho were miracles. But a miracle isn’t a miracle unless it relates to that ultimate purpose and unless it fulfills a declaration of intent. The Jordan crossing was a miracle because it related to that purpose and because it instanced the pattern whereby God first says what he intends to do, then he acts, then he says, “You see, I did it; now remember it.” Thus the second most common verb attached to God is “spoke” or “said.” The person to whom God usually spoke was Joshua himself. He was like Moses or like a prophet. God spoke to give commands and also to make promises. Hebrew doesn’t have a word for “promise” and Joshua doesn’t often uses its word for “command.” Usually God just said things. He just talked straight, not technically giving orders or promises. “Read my lips.”

God gave and God spoke. But Israel had to take, to act in response to God’s speaking. God dispossessed, but Israel had to take. So God spoke and Joshua acted, but we have noted that he sometimes acted on God’s orders and sometimes on his own initiative, like David. There was some tension between “God gave” and “Israel took.” There was also some more ambiguity in the account of the giving and taking. God’s giving and dispossessing are partly past but partly still matters of promise. Israel’s taking was also partly achieved but partly still a project.

So Joshua’s theology is mostly narrative, it’s about what God did. But what God has done makes it possible to formulate statements about who God is. When Rahab makes this move, she articulates a huge theological declaration: “Yahweh your God is God in the heavens above and on the earth below.” There are powerful forces at work in the world (supernatural forces and human forces), and Yahweh is lord over them. And there are powerful forces at work in the heavens, many deities there, and Yahweh is also lord over them. In his closing address Joshua makes the same move from key statements about what God has done to key statements about who God is: “Yahweh is a sacred God—he is a passionate God—he will not carry your rebellion and your offenses.” God is metaphysically different from human beings, extra-ordinary, super-natural, and therefore not to be messed with.

Joshua also makes statements about who Israel is, and where Israel is at home. Israel is a nation, a *gôy*.The word has different connotations than apply to a modern nation-state. In the United States, it would be more like talking about the Sioux nation. Maximally, a nation is a cluster of people with a common sense of identity, language, heritage, tradition, lineage, religion, law, and land, and a form of government that regulates their internal relationships and their relationship with other nations. A nation differs from a city-state, a federation, or an empire, such as Canaan had long known.

More often in Joshua, Israel is a people, a *ʿam*. Etymologically, that word itself likely suggests being a family, which is how the narrative sees Israel. Vertically, all the clans trace their history back to one ancestor, Jacob. And horizontally, they are therefore one family now. They are “brothers,” relatives. The nature of a family is to be bounded; it marks who is excluded and who is included. But the exceptions test and disprove this rule: Rahab and her family and Caleb and Aksah and their kinfolk are outsiders who are adopted into the family of Israel. The Gibeonites are similar, though they are more like family servants than full family members. Each clan comprises extended families that might comprise fifty people or so. Each family comprises households, a unit of three or four generations presided over by the senior man, that might be able to live in one house like a nuclear family. The family structure is thus patriarchal in the sense that the heads of households are the senior males but not in the sense that this excludes women from exercising responsibility, taking initiatives, and making claims. There are no hints of oppressive patriarchy in Joshua.

Having land is part of being a nation, and Israel is essentially the people of the land. The land has been called *the* theme of Joshua. Land suggests habitat, home, security, a place for settling down, and more practically, somewhere to grow your food. Canaan suggests abundance, promise, gift, divine presence, righteousness. They build an altar at the center of this land, suggesting a claim to Yahweh being the owner of the land. It is not a holy land, a sacred land; if it were, the Israelites would have to keep off it, as they have to keep off the sacred day and the sacred offerings. The land is more like the days from Sunday to Friday, the days on which one works. Each clan has its own allocation of land where it can settle and farm and fulfill the creation command to serve and care for the garden. Like family, borders have both a positive and a negative significance. They safeguard what lies inside and they protect from what lies outside. The account of the Israelites building the altar again underscores Israel’s open, non-exclusive nature. “All Israel” is there, “with the women and the little one and the resident alien who was traveling among them.” All belong to Israel as the people of this land.

One further aspect of being Israel. Israel is the people of the Torah. God charges Joshua to “be very strong and be resolute” not only in invading Canaan but in taking care to act in accordance with the Torah that Moses gave him. Time after time the story notes that Joshua and the people did as Moses said. In the story’s closing scenes. Israel’s pledge of commitment is a pledge to live by the set of instructions that Joshua reinforces. And near the middle of the scroll, the account of the altar-building at Mount Ebal conveys the implication that Israel is a people defined by adherence to the Torah. There Joshua inscribes some rocks with a copy of the document, and reads it all out. The Ebal rocks will now sit at the heart of the country reminding Israel that it is a people so defined. Once again, paradoxically, the “all Israel” who share in obligation to Torah include resident aliens as well as the regular Israelites. The Canaanites whom the Israelites don’t slaughter and who don’t migrate elsewhere will also to need to accept this obligation in due course. Conversely, Israelites who resist God’s expectations may lose their membership of Israel—and their lives, as Achan does.

So the book of Joshua told people how they came to be the people of the land and thus told them something fundamental about who they were as a people. It was designed to shape their identity, to give them a definitive understanding of who they were, where they came from, and what God intended for them. In other words, it was designed to be canonical. A canon is a rule for people’s thinking and life.

How did it become officially canonical? Works become canonical as a number of factors come together: they have inherent value, influencers advocate them and propagate them, people respond to them, and official authorities confirm their status. We have no information on how that happened with Joshua and no information about any canon-making authority in Israel. We do know that around 200 BC Sirach, Ben Sira, refers to “the Torah and the Prophets” as accepted by the Jewish people, and Joshua is part of the Former Prophets. It kept that status for people who came to believe in Jesus. Joshua pokes through the surface in Matthew, where Rahab was one of Jesus’s ancestors. In Acts, Stephen notes how Israel’s ancestors came into Canaan with Joshua and dispossessed the nations. Hebrews notes how by faith the walls of Jericho fell and people conquered kingdoms and became mighty in war. So the New Testament is enthusiastic about the actions of Joshua and the Israelites.

Which takes me back for the last few minutes to the aspect of Joshua that most bothers people nowadays, its war-making. There’s no part of the Scriptures where our convictions, our interests, and our social context as readers more affect our reading than they do with Joshua. When Origen of Alexandria read Joshua, he did so out of a concern to have something devotionally edifying to say to his congregation in third-century Egypt. When Calvin read Joshua, he did so in the context of theological discussions and political developments in sixteenth-century Geneva. When Wellhausen read Joshua, he did so with the historical-critical interests of nineteenth-century Germany. When twenty-first Western readers come to Joshua, they are concerned about violence.

There is actually a quadruple irony in the way four questionable ideas have been brought into association with each other in connection with Joshua: the idea that the Joshua story links with Josiah, that it thus encouraged later Israelite violence, that it stands in conflict with the New Testament story of the Prince of Peace, and that the story of Israelite violence has encouraged modern violence. There is a shortage of evidence for all these assumptions. There is no concrete reason to link the Joshua story with Josiah. The Israelites apparently managed to tell these stories without being driven into becoming violent people like their overlords. There’s little evidence of Joshua being used to justify the actions of the Crusaders or European settlers in the Americas. And nowadays, Jews (and atheistic or agnostic Gentiles) can be scandalized by Joshua; it’s not a distinctively Christian reaction. It arises because Christian readers are modern people, not because they are Christian.

So why did modern people get concerned about Joshua? Does critiquing Joshua makes us feel better? Would we who wonder about the justification for Joshua’s violence be wiser to ask question about our own, not in the past but in the present? Opinions differ over whether the world is more violent than it once was, but there’s no doubt that the reality of violence and war is brought home to us relentlessly by the news. Further, Israelites had little chance to think about policies formulated by the administration in Jerusalem, or influence them; they didn’t elect their rulers. Many people in the West do elect their governments and they may then feel uneasy about them, but we are responsible in a democracy for policies that perturb us. Another thing is that past centuries accepted war as a reality of human life, but the Enlightenment and modernity dreamed up the possibility of ending war, and that’s placed a burden on us. And another modern assumption is a separation of religion and politics and a separation of God and war, so now we make war to defend democracy.

There’s a paradoxical converse point. We assume that humanity can formulate views about what God does and about what the Scriptures say, not just the other way around. We assume that modern Western values are enlightened ones. We read Joshua with the assumption that we are in a position to evaluate it in light of our enlightened values, and use the results of our study to reinforce our values. Much of our unease about Joshua, then, may be a displaced version of our unease about ourselves. We live with a strange loop between responsibility for violence and abhorrence for violence

And our (proper) concern about violence makes it difficult for us to read Joshua in a way that enables us to see what it says. Even ethically, we owe these texts a reading that seeks to understand them in their own terms and within their own framework. We then might be able to discover and question our own assumptions about the nature and the problem of violence.

One result of such a reading of Joshua is to clarify how violence is not one a-temporal thing. In Israel, the book of Joshua would mean one thing different in a clan context when living space is under threat, another thing in a monarchic context when violence is an instrument of the state, and another thing in the grim experience of being reduced to colonial status when this violent story becomes a reminder of the need to protect the community’s integrity. But our concern about violence is as unfocused as other aspects of a liberal worldview, such as our concern about justice or individual rights or sexuality.

If God wanted to bring into being a people whom he would especially bless in a way that would also lead the world to seek its blessing and turn to him, one might like to think of him doing so in a peaceful way. Instead, he made use of the world as it was in its violence. While he proved able to become a Warrior God, that isn’t what he was at the beginning of the First Testament story. But having not managed to create a world that worked peacefully, he engaged in a world that worked violently. In the Scriptures, that way of working more or less dies out after David, and while both Testaments honor Joshua and his action, they give no hint that his story is there as an example to follow.

So how is Joshua significant for us? It might make us appreciate Joshua for doing the dirty work that enables us to be and do what and who we are. And if we are concerned about the victims of a world characterized by settlement colonialization, a practical expression of that recognition would be the taking of practical action to benefit the victims of that action.