

Sunday

BACK TO SCHOOL

Bible-study: 2020/11/08 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Joshua 24:1-3a,14-25

[Ask for volunteer to read passage.]

We continue to *fly* through the Old Testament, merely glancing at its foundational stories; and today, as promised, we're allocated by the Lectionary – our schematic of Sunday readings – a second *and final* moment from (the Book of) *Joshua* for this year. And it is an extract from his 'farewell speech', in which he – Moses' protégé – speaks to: 'the absolute necessity for the Israelites to maintain their unique identity as God's special people.'¹ '[A]nd threatens', as biblical commentator Ron Hubbard observes, 'that a furious Yahweh will annihilate them if they abandon [H]im and worship other ["gods"].'²

Does that language surprise you? "*Annihilate*." Look again at verse twenty – I quote: 'If you forsake the LORD...then He will turn and do you harm, *and consume you*'. Not "nibble" you in annoyance; a little bite here and a little bite there. Not just "*chew* you out." – As you Americans like to say. Rather: '*Consume* you'. Meaning, 'to do away with completely: [i.e.] destroy', says "Mr. Merriam-Webster."³ Which, similarly – and probably not coincidentally, is *exactly* what God commissioned the Israelites to do to the Canaanites at the beginning of the book; at the beginning of their invasion: 'to destroy *all* the inhabitants of the land before you': [9:24]. And again and again we hear that word being used to describe what Joshua's armies did to their opponents:

They 'utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of [the city of "Ai"].' For example: [8:26]. And 'utterly destroyed every person' at 'Makkedah' too: [10:28]. And 'left no one remaining' at 'Libnah' either: [v.30]. After that, they 'utterly destroyed' 'every person' at 'Lachish': [v.32]. 'King Hiram of Gezer' then attempted to arrest their progress but 'Joshua struck him and his people, leaving...no survivors.' [v.33] Next, 'every person' living at Eglon was 'utterly destroyed': [v.35]. The same happened to those in 'Hebron'[v.36-37]; as well as 'Debir' [v.38-39]. ← This triumphal march through 'the whole land' finally provoked a "last stand" from a coalition of five kings at 'Merom' [11:5 & 7], but, with God's help, His people were successful and, when they were through, 'there was no one left who breathed' on the field of battle [v.11]. Doesn't this quick summary cause your blood to run cold? Isn't it shocking to you? For famous atheist Richard Dawkins, this bloody account exposes God as an 'evil monster'.⁴ And certainly it *sounds* "monstrous," right?

'One time-honoured solution' for grappling with this type of material in the Scriptures 'is what may be termed the "evolutionary" approach, which was in vogue during much of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth... This approach developed largely as a result of the scientific

¹ Hubbard, Robert L., Jr. (2009), *The N.I.V. Application Commentary: Joshua*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 58.

² *Supra*.

³ See: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/consume>.

⁴ *The God Delusion* (2006), London: Bantam Press, 248.

principle of evolution and the idea of progress. Scholars of the period argued that the whole sweep of human history should be interpreted in accordance with the evolutionary laws of science, and on this basis it was concluded that all cultures must have evolved gradually from a lower to a higher level of civilization. The crude, primitive, superstitious beliefs and practices of earlier epochs[, therefore,] inevitably gave way with the passage of time to...more advanced and cultured ideas as God's people gradually developed... [Thus,] Israel's morality was seen as historically conditioned, and the Hebrew Bible was interpreted as bearing witness to a gradual refining and modification of the people's ethical understanding.... This development was frequently depicted in terms of a process of "education"... Just as a child advanced in knowledge and discernment on the way to adulthood, so human beings progressed under divine guidance...⁵

For those who adopted this strategy: 'This meant, in effect, that only those ethical pronouncements in the Hebrew Bible that were consonant with the teaching of Jesus could truly be regarded as normative; all else represented outgrown stages in human religious development and could therefore be discarded.'⁶ And it *feels* like the savagery – clashing swords; chariot-charges – in *Joshua* is starkly at odds with our meek and mild Savior who wandered quiet villages in Galilee, teaching "the turning of the other cheek." But can we *really* say that the New Testament – or its sensibility – has *unequivocally* "outgrown" the earlier text? "The *Apocalypse* [(the Book of) *Revelation*, that is]...describes a number of scenes in which' – something the scholar Eugene Merrill calls – "[Y]ahweh War["] reminiscent of that of the Old Testament will be waged."⁷ Consider 'the great battle of the End, the titanic battle of Armageddon that has lent its name to blockbusters and pulp Christian fiction.'⁸ [Rev. 16:12-16] Reflecting on this and the like, Merrill concludes that: 'The eschatological texts of the New Testament...provide clear evidence for a resumption of Yahweh War in the end times, war to be understood in physical as well as spiritual terms.'⁹

Putting the contentious matter of "progressive" or "dispensational" hermeneutics to one side, Clay Jones of Biola University argues if 'most of our problems regarding God's ordering the destruction of the Canaanites come from the fact that God hates sin but we do not.'¹⁰ And because, I think, we forget that '[t]he Bible is unambiguous' in accusing the Canaanites of a number of particularly heinous sins,¹¹ including bestiality¹² - *yikes(!)*, and, even more horrifically, *child* sacrifice.¹³

There are scholars who have wondered if this last charge is a myth,

⁵ Davies, Eryl W. (2005), 'The Morally Dubious Passages of the Hebrew Bible: An Examination of Some Proposed Solutions', *Currents in Biblical Research*, Volume 3, No. 2, 197-228, 199-200.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

⁷ 'The Case for Moderate Discontinuity' (2003), in Gundry, Stanley N. (Ed.), *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, pp. 61-94, 89.

⁸ Leithart, Peter J. (2018), *Revelation: Volume II – 12-22 (International Theological Commentary)*, London; New York, N. Y.: Bloomsbury / T. & T. Clark, 155.

⁹ Merrill (2003), 91.

¹⁰ Jones, C. (2009), 'We Don't Hate Sin So We Don't Understand What Happened to the Canaanites: An Addendum to "Divine Genocide" Arguments', *Philosophia Christi*, Volume 11, No. 1, pp. 53-72, 53.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹² Lev. 18:23-24

¹³ See: Lev. 18:21-24 & 20:2-5; 2 Kgs. 3:27 & 23:10.

fabricated (perhaps) for the purposes of propaganda;¹⁴ and according to Moshe Weinfeld, the human authors' allegation 'rests on an extremely flimsy foundation.'¹⁵ But on the contrary, one may derive independent confirmation for the practice from a number of other sources: (1) the wider Phoenicio-Punic world – in North Africa, archaeologists have determined that, for centuries, among a people-group closely related to the Canaanites, hundreds if not thousands of young children 'were voluntarily given up by their parents to the state (annually, or in times of crisis)', to be drugged and then 'incinerated one by one, possibly in front of a statue';¹⁶ and (2), in Egypt, in the war reliefs of the New Kingdom Pharaohs Seti (the) Ist, Ramesses (the) IInd and Ramesses (the) IIIrd – which relate to their battles in the Levant, the limp, plump bodies of babies are depicted being tossed to the ground by Canaanite priests from the heights of citadels besieged by the royal forces.¹⁷ (These are images that, in spite of their gawky hieroglyphic style, instantly eroded any sympathy I personally might have had for the Canaanites as "victims." As *innocents*.) Thus, observes John Day, in his 'excellent monograph' on the topic,¹⁸ 'there is no reason to doubt the Old Testament allusions.'¹⁹

Hearing this, you may find, then, the following paragraphs from Reformed theologian Vern Poythress more palatable – I certainly think he speaks the truth: 'God's punishments in the Old Testament always foreshadow God's final judgment. ...[they] symbolize on an earthly plane [its] character'.²⁰ And: 'The[se] punishments are easy to accept once we deal with the perversions and misunderstandings in our own hearts. Modern culture is averse to punishment because it does not understand God nor does it understand the seriousness of sin. We need to reject many ideas of modern culture in order to accept God's word. God is infinitely holy and good. Sin is rebellion against him, an infinitely serious violation of his majesty and a despising of his goodness. The righteous punishment for sin, according to the standard of God's own righteousness, is eternal death. If we can see the true seriousness of our sin, we will no longer object to God's supposed severity but marvel at his mercy.'

We can approach the same issue from another angle. God loved Jesus Christ his own Son supremely. And yet by God's own plan Jesus was condemned to death (*Acts 2:23; 4:25-28*). God hated sin so much that even Jesus had to suffer when sin was laid on him. Here we see the true awfulness of sin. Moreover, if there had been another way to save the world, God surely would have spared his own Son from a horrible death in order to do it. The

¹⁴ See: Carroll, Robert P. (1981), *From Chaos to Covenant: Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*, London: SCM Press Ltd., 304.

¹⁵ Weinfeld, M. (1972), 'The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and its Background', *Ugarit-Forschungen: Internationales Jahrbuch für die Altertumskunde Syrien-Palastinas*, Volume 4, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Germany: Verlag Butzon & Bercker Kevelaer, pp. 133-154, 154.

¹⁶ Brown, Shelby (1991), *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in their Mediterranean Context*, Sheffield: JSOT Press. See esp. pp. 13-14, 22, 70 & 172.

¹⁷ Spalinger, Anthony J. (February 1978), 'A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Military Reliefs', *The Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities Journal*, Volume VIII, No. 2, pp. 47-60.

¹⁸ Martin, J. D. (1991), '[A Review of] *Molech, a God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* by John Day', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, Volume 54, No. 2, pp. 358.

¹⁹ Day, John (1989), *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 83.

²⁰ 'The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses' (1990), available at <https://frame-poythress.org/ebooks/the-shadow-of-christ-in-the-law-of-moses/>, (accessed November 3, 2020).

awesome character of Jesus' death therefore shows how...[p]unishment, then, is built deeply into the order of the universe; in fact, it is an aspect of God's own order, of his way of dealing with sin. We do not like to hear about punishment because it reminds us of the seriousness of sin. But we must hear about it if we are to wake up to the true horror of our sinfulness and flee to the remedy, that is, flee to Christ.²¹

But even if this is right, would the Creator who we're told is "perfectly" revealed in Jesus [Heb. 1:3], ever desire what seems like *genocide*? Many people read *Joshua* as if this is *exactly* what is being depicted: that God commanded and the Israelites performed 'ethnic cleansing'.²² ← this is the other controversy that I said to you last week we would confront about *Joshua*.

Well, in a very illuminating and 'rigorous' study by the Near Eastern specialist Keith Lawson Younger,²³ he compared the 'syntagmic structure'²⁴ of the text and found it 'very similar'²⁵ to Hittite and Assyrian conquest accounts, which are characterised by, he tells us, 'the high use of hyperbole'.²⁶ Specifically, 'it is very common in the these texts to describe the total annihilation of the enemy.'²⁷ What does this mean for us? That (a), the Joshuanic conquest 'utilizes a common [regional] transmission code',²⁸ which entails (b), that 'likely...the account is simulated or synthetic. It is not meant to be interpreted in a wooden, literal sense.'²⁹ This is an important revelation for two reasons. Firstly, because it suggests that the scale of the military actions carried about by Joshua's army were, *in reality*, contrary to their presentation, more...modest, which is certainly what we found last time seemed to be the clear indication of the archaeology. Remember? There's no *hard* evidence of massive attack from the south, as we might have imagined. No evidence really at all. Not for either the fifteenth century – when I argue the "exodus"/conquest transpired; and *certainly* not for the "Late-Date" hypothesis of occurrence in the "Ramesside" period in the thirteenth-century.

But then, as I pointed out to you, *Joshua* itself only *explicitly* describes violence being meted out in a small area in what becomes, more-or-less, the Benjamin-tribal area, to the immediate north and west of the "Dead Sea."³⁰ And though its author leaves us with a breathless impression of wide-ranging slaughter, only three cities – Jericho, Ai and Hazor³¹ – are directly besieged and

²¹ *Supra*.

²² Dawkins (2006), 247.

²³ Meltzer, Tova (April 1996), '[Review of] *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* by K. Lawson Younger', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Volume 116, No. 2, pp. 289-291, 289.

²⁴ Younger, K. Lawson, Jr. (1990), *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 198.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 199.

²⁶ 253.

²⁷ 261.

²⁸ 255.

²⁹ 242-247.

³⁰ See: Collins, John J. (2018), *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: The Deuteronomistic History*, Third Edition, Minneapolis, M. N.: Fortress Press, 39.

³¹ See: Wood, Bryant G. (September, 2005), 'The Rise and Fall of the 13th-Century Exodus-Conquest Theory', *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 48, No. 3, pp. 475-489, 476. And: Heater, Homer, Jr. (10th of October, 2014), 'The Period Of The Exodus And Conquest', *Bible.org*, available at <https://bible.org/seriespage/11-period-exodus-and-conquest>, (accessed February 13, 2020).

subject to an apparent massacre of their entire citizenry, old and young, male and female, out of approximately ‘51 locations known to have been occupied [in the region] in the Late Bronze Age’.³² That’s less than 6% of the cities in Canaan. A *very* small fraction indeed. And this precision matters because it is only in *these* three cases can we – or critics – honestly and accurately say that the Israelites engaged in something approaching “genocide” (strictly understood). That is, the wholesale murder of an opposing force where no traditional distinction is made between combatant and civilian. The battles (in the open field) described in *Joshua* do not belong in this category. And though we may find the specified killing of ‘all’ the Canaanite soldiers gratuitous or distastefully heavy-handed, morally speaking such action should be discussed differently; in a separate category. The point I’m trying to make here, then, is a simple one: even if we rejected that *Joshua* is written not as straightforward, matter-of-fact historical narration of things as they happened – the way a sports-commentator might describe a football game for a radio audience, believing that Joshua’s forces were *genuinely* attempting genocide of the *Canaanites*, then they spectacularly failed. *But they weren’t*. And we: ‘must be willing to concede that the book of Joshua is[, in fact,]a glorified account of relatively small military encounters with an occasional major victory.’³³

Which brings me to the second reason why acknowledging that the special language or *genre* of *Joshua* is important – because it alleviates the impression of inconsistency about the scale of the military actions carried about by Joshua’s army with what we find in the sequel to *Joshua*, (the Book of *Judges*, which makes it abundantly clear at its outset about the conquest that there [wa]s still much to be done.’³⁴ That is, Joshua’s victories were very incomplete. And this is the only way to properly grasp the background against which the stories about Gideon, Samson, etcetera, are told: ‘the Israelites could not break the power of the Canaanite city-states in the valleys and coastal plains’.³⁵ And, having “lost the element of surprise,” and allowed their momentum to dissipate, they found themselves “on the back foot” for centuries until they were blessed by the leadership of Saul/David. But “special language” doesn’t mean that *Joshua* is recounting “fairytales” – *not even slightly*. Younger is at pains to write ‘that it would be absurd to label such stories as a symbolic, theological kind of writing, for [they use] the same language as[,] for instance[, the Assyrian emperor] Tiglath-Pileser I’s *Annals*, which clearly have the intention to refer to a past.’³⁶

³² Hansen, David G. (2003), “Large Cities That Have Walls Up To The Sky”: Canaanite Fortifications in the Late Bronze I Period’, *Bible and Spade*, Volume 16, No. 3, available at <https://biblearchaeology.org/research/chronological-categories/conquest-of-canaan/3899-the-cities-are-great-and-walled-up-to-heaven?highlight=WyJoYW5zZW4iLCJoYW5zZW4ncyJd>, (accessed November 4, 2020).

³³ See: Wood, Bryant G. (1999), ‘Beneath The Surface: An Editorial Comment’, *Bible and Spade*, Volume 13, No. 1, available at <https://www.biblia.work/sermons/beneath-the-surface-an-editorial-comment/>, (accessed November 4, 2020).

³⁴ Keller, Timothy (2014), *Judges For You*, Epsom, Surrey (U. K.): The Good Book Company, 16.

³⁵ Cundall, Arthur E. and Morris, Leon (2008), *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Volume 7 – Judges and Ruth*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 35.

³⁶ van Bekkum, Koert (2010), *From Conquest to Coexistence: Ideology and Antiquarian Intent in the Historiography of Israel’s Settlement in Canaan*, Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 24.