



Reading Joshua for Spirituality



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If spirituality is the 'lived experience of the faith', then to approach the book of Joshua with 'spiritual' intent is to ask how it might serve or enhance that experience. This is strictly a different question from that which often exercises Christian and other readers alike, namely how to think morally and theologically about the divine command to annihilate the Canaanites. To read spiritually is not to sidestep such questions, of course; rather the reverse, for as honest readers we are bound to engage with Scripture as it is. Even so, there is an angle of approach to biblical texts that asks: how has this text been used in the spiritual life of believers, and how might or should it be used? Thus one might properly find the sentiment expressed in Psalm 137.9 utterly repugnant ('Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!' RSV), yet resonate with the expression in prayer of the profoundest longing for freedom from tyranny that the Psalm contains. The shock of the Psalm's closing line plays into the reader's response both in empathy with the suffering faithful and in candid self-examination.

In principle, the same holds for Joshua. All readings of the book have somehow to face and account for the main ingredients of the narrative: the charge to Joshua and Israel to live according to Torah and covenant (Josh 1.7–8); the crossing of the Jordan (Josh 3–4) in a miraculous echo of the crossing of the Reed Sea (Exod 14–15); the systematic conquest of the land of Canaan, with the more or less rigorous application of the terrible *hērem*, the command to destroy utterly the population of defeated cities (Josh 6.17–19; see also Deut 2.34). This last has found iconic status in the story of the fall of Jericho, with the sound of trumpets, circumambulations,

and walls collapsing by act of God, to allow the final deed to be done.

Not surprisingly, symbolic readings of Joshua have been powerfully attractive. William Williams' moving hymn takes the promised land of Canaan as symbolic of the destination of the faithful beyond death, and the crossing of the river as the passage through death itself:

When I tread the verge of Jordan
Bid my anxious fears subside.
Death of death and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.

The well-known 'Spiritual' homes in on the fall of Jericho:

Joshua fit de battle of Jericho
Jericho, Jericho,
Joshua fit de battle of Jericho
And de walls came tumbling down.

There is an echo here of that other traditional song, based on Joshua's twin narrative in Exodus:

O Mary, don't you weep, don't you mourn
O Mary don't you weep, don't you mourn.
Pharaoh's army got drowned,
O Mary don't you weep!

It is noteworthy that while Williams' hymn resolves the symbolism into pictures of death and heaven, the 'Spirituals' resist this, allowing the resonances of the biblical stories to impact on the situations of enslavement and harsh oppression in which they no doubt originated, by way of the imagination. (Who is Mary in the song, and what has she to do with Pharaoh, Moses and Egypt?)

Perhaps the success of Joshua as a book for spiritual instruction has depended somewhat on developing a knack of looking away at the last moment, in the case of the Jericho story, and so not dwelling on the X-certificate final scene (Josh 6.21) – certainly the case in its rather remarkable record of adaptation for the teaching of young children. Yet the power it has exerted on the spiritual imagination is undeniable. In what follows, we will try to understand why this is so, and how it might be turned to the most profitable use.

A story of resistance to evil

The power of Joshua no doubt resides fundamentally in its surface storyline, with its essential premise of the triumph of the good purposes of God over the stubborn resistance of the powers of evil. Within the Old Testament's foundational narrative, beginning with Genesis, Joshua has traditionally provided the looked for 'happy ending' in the fulfilment of the promise of land first made to Abraham (Abram) in Genesis 12.1–3. It is a trajectory recognised in critical scholarship in the concept of a Hexateuch,¹ where Joshua is the sixth instalment, beyond the 'five books of Moses', which themselves leave the action tantalisingly still outside the land. One recent influential treatment characterises Genesis–Joshua as a 'salvation-history' ('Heilsgeschichte'), before the story turns decisively into a 'judgment-history' ('Unheilsgeschichte') in Judges-Kings.² At the heart of this is the memory of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt and his gift of life in a secure and bountiful land, in which justice prevails. The deep attractiveness of this to the human spirit is clear.

To read it so, of course, depends upon accepting the premises of the surface narrative, in which the cities of Canaan, like Pharaoh's Egypt before them, are judged unequivocally to manifest evil, so that their destruction may be regarded as an enactment of God's good and righteous purpose. The reader of Genesis–Joshua is unmistakably nudged towards this view, beginning in Genesis 15.12–16. Pharaoh's Egypt in Exodus has been perceptively characterised as an eruption of Chaos in the political sphere, that is, profound hostility to God's created order.³ In Joshua, Jericho flies the same symbolic flag, a barren and deadly spiritual landscape, sullenly turned inward on itself in silent defiance of the armies of God (Josh 6.1). Seen thus, the story of triumph is a harbinger of the eschatological righting of all wrong, and coheres with a theology of Christian hope.

One sophisticated variation of this reading is found in the notion of 'culture-critique', in which the uncompromising attitude to the occupants of the land now given to Israel can be translated for modern readers into a mandate to uphold and nurture Christian faith, hope and values in a secularised and sometimes hostile world.⁴ The emphasis laid on the motif of 'crossing' in the book, notably in chapters 3–4, creates a strong metaphor for entering a new moral and spiritual territory, embracing all the dimensions of human life. Joshua's participation in the biblical story of the ultimate overcoming of cosmic evil is an indispensable part of its understanding.

In the context of this reading of Joshua as a 'salvation-history', the figures in the narrative can be offered to the imagination as exemplars and heroes. Joshua is a model of obedience to God's Torah, a worthy successor of Moses, who maintains personal faithfulness to God until the end (Josh 1.5–9; 24.15b). His lack of personal ambition, in terms of wealth or desire to establish his own dynasty in Israel, and his ultimate self-effacement (Josh 19.49–50; 24.29–30), are striking and unusual in Old Testament biography. Caleb emerges as another spiritual giant, one who matched Joshua in courageous faith against extraordinary odds (Josh 14.6–15; see also Num 13.30–33).

Critique of self and tradition

I have used the term 'surface narrative' in the foregoing. This is not by way of a prelude to a 'deconstruction' of the 'salvation-history', for the surface-narrative is part of the narrative. However, I do mean to suggest that there is more to reading Joshua, and to reading it spiritually, than following the simple storyline as I have sketched it briefly above. Such sketches are always abstractions. And there are signals to the reader in Joshua quite different from those which point to a straightforward salvation-history. Those signals invite the reader, I think, to a process of critical examination of the self in relation to one's belief and practice.

It is a well-recognised feature of Joshua that it oscillates between contrary perspectives of total and incomplete conquest. Thus the various accounts of victories by Joshua and Israel in chapters 6–11 culminate in the affirmation, in 11.23, that the land had been completely possessed, and distributed to the tribes. Chapter 12 catalogues the thoroughness of the rout of the Canaanites. So it is a surprise to find, in 13.1, a renewed charge to Joshua, now an old man, that 'there remains very much land to be possessed'! The account that ensues, in which territories are allotted to the tribes, regularly notes areas within those territories that had not been subdued, but where Israel could not expel the former inhabitants (e.g. 15.63 – here regarding Jerusalem; 16.10; 17.18). The ambivalence over the extent of the conquest runs through the rest of the book (contrast 21.43–45 and 23.7). The discrepancy has occasioned literary-critical solutions, on the grounds that the two perspectives could not logically come from the same source, notably in Martin Noth's belief that chapters 13–19 originated from a different hand than chapters 1–12.⁵

However, putting literary-critical solutions temporarily aside, it is possible to read this rather fundamental discrepancy as belonging to the deeper meaning of the book. That is, it invites the reader to question what appear to be its major premises – about Israel's rightful possession of the land, and about the nature of Israel itself. When once this cat is out of the bag, it is hard to put it safely back. For example, why is that Joshua feels the need to send spies to Jericho (2.1), when he has already heard from the LORD that the land has already been given over to him (1.6–11)? What becomes of the notion of the utter destruction of the Canaanites, when Rahab and her family – and later the Gibeonites

NOTES

1. Classically in Gerhard von Rad, 'The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch' in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), pp. 1–78.

2. Konrad Schmid, *Erzväter und Exodus: Untersuchungen zur doppelten Begründung der Ursprünge Israels innerhalb der Geschichtsbücher des Alten Testaments* (WMANT, 81; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1999).

3. TE Fretheim, *Exodus* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991).

4. CJH Wright, *Deuteronomy* (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), pp. 8–17.

5. M Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1938).

6. The insider-outsider aspect of Joshua has been effectively explored by L Daniel Hawk, *Joshua* (Berit Olam; Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2000).

7. Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

8. This point has been put persuasively by Mark Brett, 'Reading as a Canaanite: Paradoxes in Joshua', in *Interested Readers: Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of D. J. A. Clines* (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), pp. 231–46 (233).

(ch. 9) – are exempted from it? What indeed becomes of the notion of Israel itself, when it is no longer the unified people that came out of the wilderness, but now accepts admixtures of this sort? On closer inspection, we find that what has appeared clear in terms of boundaries begins to break down. The definition of Israel is put in question. The obverse of the inclusion of Rahab and the Gibeonites in Israel is the exclusion of Achan and his family, when they are found to have trespassed against the command of complete destruction of the booty taken at Jericho (Josh 7). The question ‘who is Israel?’ is being answered here, not in terms of evident dissimilarity from Canaan as in the story of an incoming people crossing a border and replacing an equally clearly defined indigenous population, but rather in terms of actual loyalty to Yahweh.⁶

Not only the definition of the people, but also of the land, is under the microscope. What after all is its eastern border? Is it the Jordan, which the storyline seems to make decisive in chapters 3–4? Yet a portion of Israel remains to the east of the Jordan (Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh). This exception is noticed repeatedly in the narrative (1.12–18; 13.15–33). But it finally becomes a problem, ending in an uneasy settlement between the ‘Transjordanians’ and the rest of Israel, narrowly averting hostilities, because of a dispute over a stone set up at the Jordan (22.10). The Transjordanians persuade Joshua and Israel that the stone is a memorial-stone, to record their actual membership in Israel (22.21–29). They expressly deny that it is an altar, with the symbolism of defection that that would entail (vv. 22–23). Yet the narrator had called it an ‘altar’ (22.10), and the western tribes had taken it as such. So what was it in fact? With this story the superficial clarity of the book’s portrayal of a unified Israel and a fully determined land becomes somewhat clouded.

Observations of this sort are not meant as some rather radical or irreverent reading of the book. Rather, they seem to me to be suggested by the book itself, and far from incidental to an understanding of it. They are there, regardless of what one thinks about matters of composition and history. From a literary perspective, one can follow the lead of Robert Polzin, and find the meaning of the book, not in isolated utterances of narrator or characters, but at the deeper level of what he calls (after Mikhail Bakhtin) the ‘ultimate semantic authority’ of the text⁷ – in effect, what it means when all has been taken into account. Alternatively, one might suppose that Joshua as we have it is the result of a complex process of composition in which numerous ‘voices’ in Israel have come to expression in a kind of internal dialogue about how to read Israel’s story about itself. (It could be both of these together). The point is not avoided even if one believes that the book is a true record of things that really happened in Joshua’s day, for the features we have noticed still have to be accounted for. And one might go further to ask: what voices have been excluded here?⁸

In any case, it is here, I believe, that the benefits of reading the book can lie. By its nature, it sets itself against all complacency in our reading of our spiritual traditions

and of ourselves within them. I want to pursue this point by thinking for a moment about its reception history.

Spiritual uses and abuses of Joshua

If biblical spirituality means considering how biblical books have been used in the ‘lived experience’ of the faith, then Joshua has a strong record in this department, though sadly not always benign. The problem with what I have called the surface narrative is its susceptibility to being appropriated for nationalistic causes. Philip Jenkins has documented the terrifying history of Christian nations – including England, the United States, Germany and South Africa – casting themselves as ‘Israel’, taking the Israel–Canaan narratives as a prescriptive paradigm, and finding a mandate for what we would call ‘ethnic cleansing’ applied to those who were regarded as ‘outsiders.’⁹ Native North Americans, Irish Catholics and Black South Africans, among others, suffered terribly as a result. The enormous power of the eschatological drama was thus tapped into for self-promoting purposes, which seemed on the surface to be justified by Scripture.

The relevance of perceiving the self-critical strain in Joshua itself could not be better illustrated by this glance at the history of Joshua’s reception. What if, instead of reading Joshua as a chapter in the advance of a higher civilization, we suppose first of all that it is addressing us, as we may expect all Scripture to do, and allow it to uncover within us any tendency to see ourselves as the rightful beneficiaries of God’s inscrutable purposes? This disposition towards the text of Scripture seems to me to be of the essence of ‘spiritual’ reading. It involves what some might call ‘reading against the grain of the text’. Yet we have seen, I hope, that the book of Joshua by its nature invites us to do precisely that.

To illustrate what this can look like, we might ponder the motif of ‘crossing’, referred to a moment ago. When we have observed that the moral and spiritual terrain of the book of Joshua may not lie openly exhibited on the surface narrative, it follows that the notion of ‘crossing’ takes on a different inflection. What if we are not, after all, crossing into enemy territory to storm the bastions of evil, but rather crossing out of some comfortable but destructive realm (like Pharaoh’s Egypt in the people’s self-deceiving memory, Exodus 16.2–3), into new and spiritually bracing territory that might bring the most rigorous challenges? Testimonies from modern Israel–Palestine provide ‘strong meat’ of this sort. Here if anywhere is fertile ground for the application of Joshua to a narrative of hostility and subjugation. Yet unexpectedly, in this very soil there flourish initiatives of ‘crossing’ that run counter to the myths of exclusion and separation. Where parents of children lost in the conflict, as in the Parents’ Circle, reach out to each other across the deep cultural divide to mourn together and find what they share profoundly as human beings, this is a powerfully redemptive reading ‘against the grain’ of Scripture and tradition.¹⁰ In such initiatives, with their radical questioning of inherited identities, and courageous quest for deeper truths, are models (whether intended or not) of truly spiritual appropriation of Scripture.

9. Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: HarperOne, 2011).

10. Testimonies from the Parents’ Circle and others are recorded in Marc Gopin, *Bridges across an Impossible Divide: the Inner Lives of Arab and Jewish Peacemakers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), e.g. pp. 17-18, 20-26.