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AS FOR US, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD:
PREACHING JOSHUA FOR THE CHURCH'S MISSION

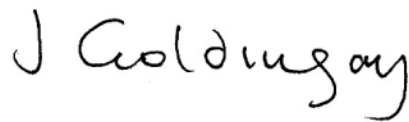
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AS FOR US, WE WILL SERVE THE LORD:
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ABSTRACT

As For Us, We Will Serve the Lord: Preaching the Theology of Joshua for the Church's Mission

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The purpose of this dissertation is to provide a theological interpretation of the book of Joshua, with special attention to the ethical problem of violence in the book, and to set forth a homiletical model for preaching the theology of the book to shape the church's mission. The homiletical model includes suggestions for both how to handle the violence of the book in the pulpit and how to appropriate the theology constructively in the life of the church. This model is applied specifically to the ministry of Brookdale Presbyterian Church in St. Joseph, Missouri.

This study surveys the relevant literature for handling the violence of the conquest, assessing the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches, before arguing that the book of Joshua is a highly ritualized and sacralized account of Israel's early history, initially written during the years of Josiah's reforms and intended to be a metaphor of the religious life in service to the one true God. Based on this approach, a constructive theological reading of the book is then offered, highlighting the four key theological themes of the narrative. These four themes are reframing the identity of God's people, encouraging faith in the power of God, combatting idolatry and urging an exclusive devotion to the Lord, and identifying bold and courageous obedience as the path to rest.

Finally, the theological interpretation of Joshua is applied to the specific task of preaching. The four key theological themes are refracted through the New Testament witness to demonstrate how each theme should shape the life and mission of the church. Then, a practical homiletical model for the preaching the book is developed, providing a practical strategy for handling the violence in the book and applying the four theological themes to the mission of Brookdale Presbyterian Church.

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PART ONE
MINISTRY CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

According to the Old Testament prophets Isaiah and Micah, there will come a day when God will intervene in the history of the world and bring about a radical transformation of the present order. “He will judge the nations and rebuke many people; and they will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations will not lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3). On this day, God will put an end to injustice, trample down evil, vindicate his people, and establish his kingdom – a kingdom characterized by justice, peace, and righteousness. Thus, there will no longer be any need for swords or spears. Instruments of war and bloodshed will be converted into instruments of planting and harvesting. Tools of death will become tools of life.

Naturally then, when the New Testament portrays the mission of the church, it describes it in terms that are congruent with this Old Testament vision.¹ The church is

¹ This understanding of the church’s mission is not rooted in a collection of isolated passages but an understanding of the identity, proclamation, and work of Jesus. In the Gospels, Jesus proclaims the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God through his ministry – a proclamation that could have been understood and interpreted only against the backdrop of the Old Testament kingdom of Israel and the prophetic promises of God’s coming reign. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, Jesus’ life, death, and especially his resurrection are seen as the inauguration of this kingdom and the beach-head irruption of the long-hoped for new creation. Thus, in the book of Acts, the apostles announce the good news of the resurrection, which for the followers of Jesus would have come with all these same kingdom and new creation connotations. Throughout Paul’s epistles, it is the crucifixion and resurrection which shape the church’s identity and mission. As people have faith in Jesus, whether Jew or Gentile, they become new creations themselves (2 Corinthians 5:17), a reality which should produce counter-cultural holiness (Colossians 3:1-14), a distinctive way of living and seeing the world, and a life of good works that show forth this reality (Ephesians 2:8-10). As N. T. Wright has written, “The revolutionary new world, which began in the resurrection of Jesus – the world where Jesus reigns as Lord, having won the victory over sin and death – has its frontline outposts in those who in baptism have shared his death and resurrection.” (N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 249). Thus, to follow Jesus means to embody this new creation, to announce this good news to the nations of the world (Matthew 28:18-20), and to pray as Jesus himself taught “your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” – a prayer that, if Jesus’ own ministry is our guide, should be expressed not just in word but in deed. For further detailed arguments of this kingdom / new creation

called to be a people of life, a people who cooperate with God's work of renewal in the world, a people who join God in bringing about justice, peace, and righteousness upon the earth. As people in whom the new creation has already become a reality through faith, they are called to be agents of this new creation in the world, in anticipation of that coming day when God's work of transformation of the world will be complete. They are called to help the world move ever closer to that day when swords will finally be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks.

However, the church faces a serious challenge in this mission. Its own sacred texts include an extended account of the people of God engaging the world through bloodshed and violence in the book of Joshua. This account has become increasingly problematic for the church because an escalation of terrorism and violence around the globe, especially religious violence, has created a heightened sensitivity to portions of Scripture that seem to record similar kinds of events. For some, the resemblance between modern examples of holy war (Islamic jihad in particular) and the conquest in the book of Joshua is too much to ignore. For others, it is almost impossible to read the extermination of the Canaanites except through the lens of recent ethnic cleansings in places like Bosnia, Rwanda, and Darfur. For still others, the forcible expulsion of native peoples is uncomfortably reminiscent of the plight of Native Americans, Palestinians, Aborigines in Australia, and Africans in South Africa. Not surprisingly then, the conquest of Canaan

perspective of the prophets should shape the church's identity and mission, see Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 185-289; Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, and New Creation* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 13-205; Richard J. Mouw, *When the Kings Come Marching In: Isaiah and the New Jerusalem*, rev. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002); Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005).

has become a point of embarrassment for many inside the church and a point of critical attack for many outside the church.²

To complicate the matter, the critical attack has come on three separate but inter-related fronts. First, in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks, the New Atheism movement has presented strong objections to religion in general and Christianity in particular, arguing that faith is both irrational and immoral.³ It is irrational because it cannot meet the modern demands of reason; it is immoral because violence and suppression are inextricably part of its sacred texts, history, and outlook. Citing the book of Joshua as well as other parts of Scripture, God is described as a vindictive, bloodthirsty, genocidal, ethnic cleanser.⁴ As a result, the conquest of Canaan is held up as evidence *par excellence* of what is wrong with the Bible, Christianity, and the church.

Second, postcolonial theory as an academic discipline has raised formidable concerns about the conquest narrative. Highlighting the effects and consequences of imperialism on conquered, subjugated, and exploited people (and their lands), postcolonial historians have given a voice to the losers of history. As postcolonialism has influenced the task of biblical interpretation, it has trenchantly criticized the conquest in Joshua by reading the narrative through Canaanite eyes, underscoring the injustice

² For a survey of how the conquest has been used historically to justify violence, see Rannfrid I. Thelle, "The Biblical Conquest Account and Its Modern Hermeneutical Challenges," *Studia theologica* 61 (2007): 73-77.

³ The major works, in chronological order are Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005); Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Mariner, 2008); Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2009).

⁴ Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51; Dan Barker, *God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All of Fiction* (New York: Sterling, 2016), 63-114, 135-142.

against, and victimization of, the prior inhabitants of the land.⁵ Moreover, it has also gone on to relate the experience of the Canaanites to other conquered and dispossessed peoples throughout history, creating both a persuasive intellectual argument and a powerful emotional objection to the conquest of Canaan. As John J. Collins puts it, “One of the most troubling aspects of this biblical story is the way it has been used, analogically, over the centuries as a legitimating paradigm of violent conquest – by the Puritans in Ireland and in New England, by the Boers in South Africa, and by right-wing Zionists and their conservative Christian supporters in modern Israel.”⁶

Third, studies in comparative religion have sometimes made the claim that religion qua religion engenders violence. For instance, in the widely praised book, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, Mark Juergensmeyer argues that religion by its very nature is violent. The reason is that “the nature of religious imagination ... always has had the propensity to absolutize and to project images of cosmic war.”⁷

Regina Schwartz has leveled a similar criticism, but more narrowly focused on monotheism in particular. In her book *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of*

⁵ A representative example is Edward W. Saïd, “Michael Walzer’s ‘Exodus and Revolution’: A Canaanite Reading,” *Grand Street* 5 (Winter): 86-106.

⁶ John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 62-63. For an examination of the link between the conquest narrative and modern Zionism, see Nur Masalha, “Reading the Bible with the Eyes of the Canaanites: Neo-Zionism, Political Theology and the Land Traditions of the Bible (1967 to Gaza 2009),” *Holy Land Studies*, Vol. 8, Issue 1 (2009): 55-108. For the link between the conquest narrative and the expulsion of Native Americans, see Robert Allen Warrior, “A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians,” in R. S. Sugitharajah, ed. *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), 235-241.

⁷ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 248.

Monotheism, she argues that the idea of monotheism produces *ipso facto* a conception of identity (and collective identity) that excludes the other. As a result, it implies a competition with the other over available land, food, power, and favor in a world with a scarcity of resources. And this competition encourages violence, coercion, intolerance, and exclusion.⁸ Or, as S. Radhakrishnan writes, “The intolerance of narrow monotheism is written in letters of blood across the history of man from the time when first the tribes of Israel burst into the land of Canaan. The worshippers of the one jealous God are egged on to aggressive wars against people of alien cults. They invoke divine sanction for the cruelties inflicted on the conquered.”⁹ From this perspective, the conquest of Canaan in the book of Joshua cannot be regarded as an isolated or unique event but as essential to, and paradigmatic of, monotheism itself – and therefore also as a basis for its rejection.

In my own life, these challenges have had both intellectual and pastoral dimensions. Intellectually, I have wrestled for a number of years with how to make sense of the conquest narrative theologically. To begin, the relationship between the textual account and the facts of history is itself a complicated matter. Yet, even if the textual account should not be simplistically equated with the facts of history, there is still the problem that the canonical witness testifies to a God who commands the wholesale slaughter of another people. Turning to the New Testament, the theological and ethical problems become more complicated. After all, if the conquest is spiritualized, then

⁸ Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xi. For brief but helpful criticisms of both Juergensmeyer and Schwartz, see Miroslav Volf, “Christianity and Violence” in *War in the Bible and Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Richard S. Hess and Elmer A. Martens (BBRSup 2; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1-17.

⁹ S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life* (New Delhi: Indus, 1993), 40; quoted in Arvind Sharma, *A Primal Perspective on the Philosophy of Religion* (Netherlands: Springer, 2006), 29.

further difficulties are introduced for our understanding of the nature of revelation before Christ and our doctrine of the Old Testament as a canonical witness to God. However, if the conquest is not spiritualized, then it is not clear what positive theological contribution it might offer the church. As a result, the conquest narrative in Joshua has become the primary intellectual struggle in my faith over the last seven years, forcing me to wrestle with the hermeneutic, historical, theological, and ethical issues involved as well as their interrelationship with one another.

Pastorally, the theological appropriation of the conquest in Joshua began to take on new significance four years ago when I moved to St. Joseph, Missouri to become the senior pastor of Brookdale Presbyterian Church. The church is situated in the old midtown area, which has high rates of drug addiction and violence. Soon after I arrived, the leadership of the church began to develop a vision for the future in which we became convinced that the church is called “to bring the beauty of the gospel to the brokenness of life.”¹⁰ Implicit in this vision is that the church’s mission is to be a transformational force within the city as we cooperate with God to see his kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. As the vision began to take shape in my own mind, I began to long for a future for the city in which there would be an end to injustice, evil would be trampled down, and the kingdom of God would come in concrete and visible ways, such that the city would become a place that is characterized by justice, peace, and righteousness. As this picture formed, it was almost impossible, given the focus of my intellectual struggles, not to begin thinking more about how the conquest narrative might be theologically

¹⁰ A summary statement of the church’s vision, adopted by the Session of the church on May 17, 2016.

appropriated in this city, for this church. But almost immediately this became complicated because it was not clear how the theology of the book of Joshua might supply us with a framework for thinking about conquering the evil that is so entrenched in this city. At the same time, it was also not clear how the theology of the book could be appropriated in a local context of rising rates of violence, if the book itself is so fraught with the very violence we long to see replaced by a kingdom of peace, justice, and righteousness. The challenge, then, has been to find a theological approach to appropriating the book of Joshua constructively for the mission of the church without the book itself undermining its own contribution.

Therefore, this dissertation aims to present a theological interpretation of the book of Joshua that will do several things. First, it will address the intellectual challenges that arise from the violence in the book. While fully satisfying answers to the hermeneutic, theological, and ethical problems of the conquest are probably too much to expect, a responsible interpretation can help alleviate some of the difficulties. Second, it will apply this theological interpretation of Joshua to the mission of the church, showing how the theological message of the book can positively guide, shape, and empower the church to cooperate with God's kingdom-work of bringing renewal to a city plagued with brokenness and violence. Third, it will develop a practical homiletic model for preaching the book of Joshua. This model will include practical strategies for handling the violence of the book, applying the theological themes of the narrative to the missional life of the church, and moving the hearts, minds, hands, and feet of the congregation to live out this mission within the city of St. Joseph.

CHAPTER 1

COMMUNITY CONTEXT: THE CITY OF ST. JOSEPH, MISSOURI

St. Joseph, Missouri is a mid-sized city that sits on a bend in the Missouri River along the state's western border with Kansas. According to the most recent census data, it has a total population of almost 77,000 residents, making it the eighth largest city in the state.¹ The city is commonly known for two things, both of which are historical. The first is that St. Joseph was the starting point for the Pony Express, the famous mail service that delivered mail, newspapers, and messages to the western frontier from 1860-1861, before being rendered obsolete by the invention of the telegraph.² The second is that it became the infamous place of death for the outlaw Jesse James in 1882.³ In many ways, it is both revealing and fitting that these two events are the city's greatest claims to fame, for the first is about something that was glorious in its day but was eventually left behind in the wake of historical development and the second is about the dying of a legend. In their

¹ "QuickFacts: St. Joseph city, Missouri." *United States Census Bureau*. U.S. Department of Commerce, 2016, accessed March 9, 2017, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/POP060210/2964550>.

² Winifred Gallagher, *How the Post Office Created America: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2016), 131.

³ Frank Triplett, *Jesse James: The Life, Times, and Treacherous Death of the Most Infamous Outlaw of All Time* (New York: Skyhorse, 2013), 374.

own ways, both are representative metaphors for the city. Like the events themselves, St. Joseph reached its apogee in the late nineteenth century but was eventually left behind as other cities in the region became more significant and, as a city that was once legendary in its early days, it has suffered from a tragic but steady decline over the last century.⁴

A Story of Decline

In a letter to Willard Hall on May 6, 1850, the railroad surveyor Colonel M. F. Tiernan wrote, “St. Joseph occupies so important a geographic position with reference to all parts of this Continent, and is surrounded by such extraordinary natural advantages, that it requires no uncommon degree of sagacity to foresee the influence she is one day destined to wield, and the consequences she will assuredly attain in the future chronicles of the West.”⁵ It is hard to imagine a more glowing description and forecast for the young frontier town.

This promising outlook was all the more remarkable since the town was only seven years old at the time. Its founding can be traced back to the summer of 1800 when a young trader named Joseph Robidoux came ashore from a dugout canoe and started a fur trading post near the banks of the river. Because of the steep and curving bluffs, the dark winding waters of the area, and the presence of Blacksnake Indians, the site became known as the Blacksnake Hills.⁶ By 1840, the site had a post office, by 1842 a courthouse

⁴ As will be described below, the steady decline has been of a qualitative rather than a quantitative nature. Interestingly, the population of the city has stayed relatively flat over the last century.

⁵ Quoted in Robert J. Willoughby, *Robidoux's Town: A Nineteenth-Century History of St. Joseph, Missouri* (St. Joseph, MO: Platte Purchase Publishers, 2006), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

was planned and financed, and in 1843 the legal paperwork for the town plan was filed in St. Louis, signed by Robidoux himself.⁷ Only four years later, the town had surpassed Independence, Missouri as the primary departure point for the Oregon Trail, with twice as many wagons departing from St. Joseph as from Independence.⁸

With the establishment of the Pony Express in 1860, St. Joseph had solidified itself as an important city, with not only regional but national significance. During the second half of the nineteenth century, St. Joseph continued to grow and quickly became a transportation hub that connected the major cities to the East – Chicago and St. Louis – with the major cities to the West – Salt Lake City and San Francisco. Wagons were passing through on the roads the city had developed, steamboats were arriving and departing along the Missouri River, and trains were passing through on the railroad coming from Hannibal to the east. On the eve of the Civil War, “St. Joseph could rightly claim to be the most cosmopolitan place west of the city of St. Louis.”⁹ And by the turn of the century, “St. Joseph could rightly claim to be a regional center for the meat packing industry, a center of wholesale distribution, the home of one of the nation’s largest stockyards, and a rail junction for at least ten lines serving the American West.”¹⁰

⁷ Ibid., 20-22.

⁸ Ibid., 33. One of the main reasons that St. Joseph became such a desirable departure point in the days of the massive westward migrations after the discovery of gold in 1848 in California was that it “was the optimum northern and western point which could be reached in the relative security and comfort of the steamboat, saving many miles in distance and days in time before embarking on the hazardous wagon trips across the plains and mountains.” Sheridan A. Logan, *Old Saint Jo: Gateway to the West, 1799-1932*, Second edition (Mansfield, OH: Bookmasters, 2002), 3.

⁹ Willoughby, *Robidoux’s Town*, 94.

¹⁰ Ibid., 180.

Furthermore, the city could boast of high-end shopping, impressive banks, elegant hotels, stunning cathedral-like churches, and beautiful well-manicured parks throughout the city.¹¹

However, St. Joseph's fate had been permanently altered with the plans of the transcontinental Pacific Railroad. Early on, there was a battle between Kansas City and St. Joseph over which city would be the main connecting point to the Great Plains. Ultimately Kansas City was chosen, partly due to political reasons outside the city of St. Joseph and partly due to failures by the leaders inside the city.¹² For St. Joseph that proved to be the critical turning point. Even though the city continued to prosper for the last few decades of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth century, its trajectory was effectively set. Having started with so much potential and so much promise, St. Joseph was now destined to be left behind, consigned to be in the shadows of growing Kansas City to the south and growing Omaha to the north.

Much of the twentieth century was then a playing out of this trajectory and, as with the original turning point, it was due both to factors beyond the city's control as well as to a failure of leadership within the city itself. The Great Depression plunged the city into an economic crisis as many of the wealthy citizens suffered huge losses, several

¹¹ Marshall White, *Postcards from the Past: Images Stamped from St. Joseph, MO* (St. Joseph, MO: St. Joseph News-Press, 2007), 50-82, 94-106. David W. Lewis, Jr. *Expressions of Faith: An Architectural History of Houses of Worship in St. Joseph, Missouri & A History of Wesley house and Interfaith Community Services, 1909-2009* (St. Joseph, MO, 2009) 3-94. In fact, the Patee House Hotel was known as the finest hotel west of the Mississippi River. See Robyn L. Davis and J. Marshall White, *St Joseph Missouri: A Postcard History* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 1999), 12. Additionally, the area was so affluent that yacht races were held at the upscale recreation area on Lake Contrary. Davis and White, *St Joseph*, 74-75.

¹² Willoughby, *Robidoux's Town*, 119; Logan, *Old Saint Jo*, 127-128.

major financial institutions failed, and numerous large firms had to close.¹³ Already handicapped by the effects of being surpassed by Kansas City, the economic impact on the city was serious and can still be felt today.¹⁴ After World War II, passenger rail service declined steeply and stopped for good by the late 1960s.¹⁵ In 1952, a massive flood devastated the area around the already struggling city. The effects were so great that the course of the Missouri River had permanently been altered and the entire decade of the 1950s has been remembered as the “Decade of the Flood.”¹⁶

In the 1960s the city suffered two more economic blows. First, in 1965 a large shopping center was built east of the town, prompting scores of businesses to evacuate the downtown area and move eastward. As a result, the downtown and midtown areas began to collapse. In the decades to follow, picturesque but vacant buildings became dilapidated structures that attracted illicit activity. Second, in 1967 both the Swift and Armour Meat Packing Companies left the city, casting 10 percent of the city’s work force into unemployment almost overnight.¹⁷ Since then other large companies, such as Quaker Oats and Wire Rope, have left as well.

Throughout the twentieth century, the economic problems have been compounded by failures in leadership. For instance, in the summer of 1960 the federal government

¹³ Mildred Grenier, *St. Joseph: A Pictorial History* (Virginia Beach, VA: Donning, 1981), 153, 169.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

filed a suit against St. Joseph in order to force the city to halt pollution of the Missouri River and to build proper sewage and waste treatment facilities, making it the first city in the country to be sued for pollution under U.S. law.¹⁸

In the late 1970s a federal grant pumped money into the city of St. Joseph for the construction and maintenance of roads. Capitalizing on the opportunity at the time, the civic leadership rolled back taxes in order to curry favor with the citizens. However, when the grant money ended in the late 1980s, the civic leadership did not respond by raising taxes or allocating money for the roads, fearful of the political consequences for doing so. The result was massive underfunding, with roads being scheduled for repair or repaving only once every ninety-four years. Consequently, the roads have progressively deteriorated over the last thirty years.¹⁹

Finally, in 2014, a scandal in the city's school system broke. Leadership at the highest levels had misappropriated more than forty million dollars through a corrupt system of stipend distribution and illegal accounting practices.²⁰ The scandal precipitated investigations by the Missouri State Auditor, the FBI, and a federal grand jury in Kansas City, resulting in a scathing audit score and the eventual incarceration in federal prison of the former superintendent.²¹

¹⁸ "1st City Sued Under U.S. Law on Pollution." *Chicago Daily Tribune*. September 30, 1960, accessed April 20, 2017, <http://archives.chicagotribune.com/1960/09/30/page/19/article/1st-city-sued-under-u-s-law-on-pollution>.

¹⁹ This history was related orally from the current city manager, J. Bruce Woody.

²⁰ John P. Tretbar, "It Started with Stipends; \$40 million and Counting." *St. Joseph Post*. February 17, 2015, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.stjosephpost.com/2015/02/17/it-started-with-stipends-40-million-and-counting/>.

²¹ Sam Zeff, "St. Joseph School District Braces for Fallout in Wake of Federal Investigation." *KCUR 89.3*. September 8, 2014, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://kcur.org/post/st-joseph-school-district->

In response to the decline over the years, a remarkable number of charities, programs, and agencies to serve the poor and the disadvantaged have grown in the area and they tend to be well-funded by unusually generous residents.²² Volunteerism is also relatively high. Most ministries and agencies are well staffed by those in the community who desire to provide a helping hand and to make the community a better place to live. Nevertheless, the result of all these economic hardships and leadership failures over the years has left the city beset with numerous interrelated problems.

Realities of Brokenness

According to a recent demographic study, the midtown area of St. Joseph falls below the national average in most indicators of individual, family, and community well-being. Moreover, the area also exceeds the national average in most indicators of ill-being.²³ These trends are most conspicuously seen in the areas of family, socioeconomics, education levels, employment, and crime.

In terms of family units and family structure, the midtown area of St. Joseph is classified as “*extremely non-traditional* due to the below average presence of married persons and two-parent families.”²⁴ Those who have never been married make up 35.9

braces-fallout-wake-federal-investigation#stream/0. “Former St. Joseph School Superintendent Pleads Guilty to \$662,000 Fraud Scheme.” *United States Attorney’s Office, Western District of Missouri. United States Department of Justice*, June 13, 2016, accessed March 9, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdmo/pr/former-st-joseph-school-supeintendent-pleads-guilty-662000-fraud-scheme>.

²² As one example, the local United Way is annually in the top 10 (and frequently in the top 5) nationally in financial support per capita. This data is internally distributed, not published publicly, but was reported to me by the local president of the United Way, Kylee Strough.

²³ Percept Group, Inc. (2015), Ministry Area Profile: Brookdale Presbyterian Church. Unpublished raw data.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis in original.

percent of the area (above the national average of 32.5 percent), those who have been divorced or widowed make up 22.9 percent (above the national average of 17 percent), leaving the number of married adults at 41.2 percent (below the national average of 50.4 percent). The same patterns can be seen in the family structures as well. Only 36.8 percent of households have both a father and a mother residing in the home (far below the national average of 50.3 percent) and nearly twice as many children in the midtown area live with someone other than their parent(s) than the national average.²⁵

Socioeconomically, the area is considered poor to very poor. The average household income is \$49,708 per year, which is far below the U. S. average of \$74,165 per year.²⁶ Within the income brackets themselves, nearly twice as many households subsist on less than \$15,000 per year than the national average, while only a quarter as many households live on more than \$150,000 per year than the national average (a similar rate is also seen in the second to highest income bracket, \$100,000-\$149,999).²⁷ As a result, the poverty rate in the midtown area is almost 20 percent higher than the national rate and the property values of homes in the area are approximately half the rest of the country (\$101,209 compared to \$191,227).²⁸ Not surprisingly, the three most pressing concerns for families are divorce, securing adequate food, and alcohol/drug abuse.²⁹

²⁵ Ibid., 6.

²⁶ Ibid., 1.

²⁷ Ibid., 2.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Ibid., 16.

Related to the socioeconomic problems are the levels of education and the prospects of employment. “Based upon the number of years completed and college enrollment, the overall education level in the area is *very low*.”³⁰ Fewer children graduate from high school than those in the rest of the country and fewer attend or graduate from college/university. The number of those with a graduate degree is approximately half the national average. As a result, the number of white-collar jobs in the area is about 20 percent less than in other parts of the country, while the number of blue-collar jobs is about 20 percent more and the unemployment rate is about 15 percent higher.³¹

Given the other endemic problems in the community, it is not surprising, then, that the levels of crime and violence are escalating. In fact, a recent study by the FBI reported that St. Joseph has one of the highest increases in violent crime over the last five years, rising by nearly 40 percent. However, not only are the year-to-year incidences increasing at record rates but, when adjusted for population, the single-year murder rate itself is one of the highest in the nation.³²

The statistics, however, cannot capture the experiences and stories of those who live in the city and are touched by the violence. In June 2016, a pillar of Brookdale Presbyterian Church stopped to help someone in need and was carjacked and murdered, only a few blocks away from the church. The tragedy devastated the church community,

³⁰ Ibid., 1. Emphasis in original.

³¹ Ibid., 8-9.

³² Michael B. Sauter and Samuel Stebbins, “Cities Where Crime is Soaring.” *MSN News*. February 15, 2017, accessed March 9, 2017, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/crime/cities-where-crime-is-soaring/ar-AAmLaY8>.

both because they lost a beloved friend and because it was such a senseless act of violence. Later in the summer, a steep escalation of gang activity in the midtown area was reported by the local police and a multiple homicide was committed by gang members a few houses down from another member of the church, while he and his wife witnessed it on a Sunday morning. The result was that eight gang members were indicted on charges of one murder, five attempted murders, drug trafficking, armed robberies, as well as other crimes.³³ Another member of the church works at a shelter for women and children who are victims of domestic violence and has had the building of the shelter shot with bullets. A partner ministry of the church, which provides help for the homeless to move toward self-sufficiency, was preparing to meet with the pastor when a gunman who was high on crystal meth burst into the building with the intention of shooting everyone inside, a mass murder barely averted by the quick arrival of a police officer in the area who was able to restrain him.

Defining Perceptions

As a result, these realities have shaped the perceptions of those in the city in some important and defining ways. First, there is a nearly palpable sense of eroding morale. In the summer of 2014, the Center for Disease Control released a study identifying the happiest and the unhappiest cities in the country. Among all cities in the United States,

³³ “Eight St. Joseph Gang Members Charged in Federal RICO Indictment: Violent Gang Charged with Murder, Armed Robbery, Drug Trafficking.” *United States Attorney’s Office, Western District of Missouri*. *United States Department of Justice*, January 13, 2017, accessed March 16, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-wdmo/pr/eight-st-joseph-gang-members-charged-federal-rico-indictment>.

St. Joseph ranks as having the second lowest reported happiness in the nation.³⁴ Two years later, a community survey “show[ed] more people are losing faith that St. Joseph is a good place to raise a family,” with safety being reported as a top concern.³⁵ The loss of confidence was an incredible 9 percent in one year and was due to a variety of factors, ranging from the recent scandal within the school district to the rising levels of violence within the city. Most people, especially if they are young, have an almost resigned sense of hopelessness about the city. They have come to accept the reality of the city and do not believe that anything will get better and, perhaps most revealing, they do not believe that anything will get better for them. Presumably that is why gang activity, drug abuse and trafficking, and criminal activity have had such an appeal.

Second, and related to the eroding morale, there are growing feelings of frustration, angst, and cynicism toward the city and the city’s future. Regular letters to the editor in the newspaper give voice to these feelings. As one resident vented, “People, let me clue you in. You are never going to get anything done in St. Joseph as long as it is run the way it is.”³⁶ The only other letter published that day was entitled “It’s No Wonder St. Joseph is Going Downhill.”³⁷ Around town, people pejoratively refer to their own city with nicknames like “Dirty Joe” and “Third World St. Joe.”

³⁴ “Passage: The Happiest and Unhappiest Cities.” *CBS News*, July 27, 2014, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/passage-the-happiest-and-unhappiest-cities/>.

³⁵ Amber Smith, “More People Feel St. Joseph Is Not a Good Place to Live.” *St Joe Channel*, June 29, 2016, accessed March 9, 2017, <http://www.stjoechannel.com/news/local-news/more-people-feel-st-joseph-is-not-a-good-place-to-live/495067975>.

³⁶ Clarence Jacobs, “Nothing Will Ever Get Done This Way.” *St Joseph News-Press*, March 3, 2017: A4. Print.

³⁷ Thomas Lewin, “It’s No Wonder St. Joseph is Going Downhill.” *St Joseph News-Press*, March 3, 2017: A4. Print.

Third, there is a strong sense of an insider/outsider mentality between natives and newcomers that both impedes progress and conditions the way that many people think about potential solutions to community problems. Though St. Joseph has a population of almost 77,000 people, the town functions much more like a small town, with small-town dynamics and small-town mentalities. Part of the reason for this comes from the geography of the city and how that has shaped the social dynamics over the years. Because the city lies along the bluffs of the Missouri River, it is a long north-south city and thus falls easily into three segments. The south side of the city is referred to as South St. Joe and was originally where much of the canning industry, meat packing plants, and stockyards were. Almost everyone who lives in South St. Joe has historically been connected with these blue-collar facilities and there has been a lot of pride tied up with working in them. On the north side of town is the North End, which has its own identity as well. In the center of the town, extending from the old downtown on the river, eastward through the midtown area, and out to the eastern edge, is the central part of the city. Each of the three sections has its own high school and, in some ways, its own culture. As one example, South St. Joe has repeatedly entertained ideas of trying to break off from the other two sections and become its own city. And some of those who grew up or live on the south side have a strong (and sometimes exclusive) preference for others on the south side. In fact, the phone prefix for South St. Joe is 238 and a regular jingle among those from the south side is “don’t date her unless she’s a 2-3-8er.”

Historically, this has gridlocked the city in its effort to make progress for the simple reason that any proposal for the city is voted down by the two sections that do not benefit from it. For example, a proposal to renovate an area of the old downtown years

ago was voted down by those on the south side and those on the North End because, in their own minds, they did not want to pay taxes for something that would not benefit their area of the city. Proposals to develop projects on the south side have been voted down by those in the central part of the city and the North End for the same reason. Consequently, progress in the city is much more difficult than in most other cities of similar size because any effort is almost automatically opposed by two-thirds of the residents.

The dynamic that drives all of this is an insider/outsider mentality that is deeply entrenched within the identity not only of the city, but of the three different sections of the city as well. Those who grew up in St. Joseph have very strong familial and relational bonds and networks that have existed for years and sometimes for generations. Those who move into the city from outside are treated with general friendliness but have a very difficult time breaking into those networks. As a simple example, young families that moves into the area will find it extremely difficult to find sports teams for their children to join. The reason is because almost all the teams have been formed for years and are closed (and many times those teams were formed because the parents themselves were on a team with each other when they were growing up in the city).

This native/newcomer dynamic regarding the city as a whole is then further complicated by the insider/outsider dynamic that also exists within each of the subsections themselves. Within each of the three sections of the city, there are also subsets of relational networks that, though they sometimes overlap the three sections of the city, are largely confined within them. Therefore, someone from the North End who moves to South St. Joe would have certain advantages from being a native of the city, but

would also face some significant relational challenges by being an outsider in the eyes of those on the south side.

This kind of relational and geographic tribalism has shaped the way churches and other non-profit agencies in the city operate as well. The churches and agencies in South St. Joe largely keep to themselves and if they partner with other churches and agencies do so almost exclusively with other churches and agencies on the south side. Similarly, churches in the central part of the city largely network only with each other but not with those on the south side or the North End. The same holds true for the churches and agencies on the North End.

As a result, any missional ministry effort or attempted solution to community problems will require an appreciation for the social dynamics of the city and the subsections within it. Therefore, on one level, it would have to be able to overcome the current eroding morale within the city, as well as address the frustration, angst, and cynicism among many of the residents. However, on an even deeper level, it would also need to account for the insider/outsider mentality that shows up not only in the city as a whole but also in the geographic tribalism of the city's subsections.

CHAPTER 2

MINISTRY CONTEXT: BROOKDALE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Brookdale Presbyterian Church is an evangelical church of approximately 350 members and regular attenders in the midtown area of St. Joseph, Missouri. The congregation is multi-generational, with a mostly even distribution across all age ranges. Some members have been part of the church family for almost ninety years and have formed an integral part of the church's story through its history, while approximately one-sixth of the congregation has been at the church for three years or less. Like the surrounding community, the vast majority of the congregation is Caucasian, though there are members or regular attenders who are black, east Asian, central Asian, and European. The socioeconomic range of the church is quite large, with the distribution resembling a standard bell curve; some are wealthy, some are quite poor, but most are what would be considered middle class. The religious background of the congregation is equally diverse. A significant number of congregants come from Roman Catholic, Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and non-churched, as well as Presbyterian traditions. This gives the congregation a broadly evangelical flavor. Within the city, the church has enjoyed an overwhelmingly positive reputation and has a long history of involvement within the

community. This history has both shaped the church's current ministry context in numerous ways and contributed to its outlook for the future.

Defining Story

The church's story began in the summer of 1899 when the Presbytery of College Springs in Iowa, with the support of the Home Mission Board, established a new work in St. Joseph.¹ The presbytery appointed the Rev. W. R. Leeper to begin pastoring a small nucleus of people. For the first year, meetings were held in the Unitarian Church on 9th Street, between Edmond Street and Felix Street. During that first year, in January 1900, the small group of nineteen people established themselves as the First United Presbyterian Church. Later that year, the congregation moved to King Hill Hall at the corner of 9th Street and Frederick, not far from their original meeting place. By 1902 the church had grown to the point where the congregation was able to build a substantial church and parsonage nearby, on the corner of 12th Street and Felix.

After seven years of church-planting work, W. R. Leeper resigned his position as pastor and three other pastors followed in quick succession. During the tenure of the fourth pastor, the congregation had grown to eighty-three members and moved eastward about a mile and a half to a small building near the corner of 29th Street and Sylvania. It changed its name to Brookdale United Presbyterian Church.

Due to continued growth over the next several years, the congregation decided in 1922 to begin construction on a new building at the corner of 31st Street and Edmond,

¹ This historical summary is based on unpublished notes compiled by the current Clerk of Session, Vernalee Carter, based on session records and oral histories from elderly members of the congregation.

just a few blocks away. The funds were raised quickly and the cornerstone was laid on the tenth of September of that same year. The new building was modern in its architecture, with a beautiful sanctuary, facilities for Sunday School rooms, and a fellowship hall with an attached kitchen in the basement to accommodate youth activities, dinners, and other events at the church. Construction was completed by the next spring and the new facility was dedicated on April 15, 1923. This has been the church's location ever since and has made the church a permanent fixture in the midtown area of the city.

Over the years the church has gone through some sort of significant change every twenty to thirty years. After moving into their new facility in 1923, the church had five pastors over the next quarter century but continued to experience steady numerical growth and was able to purchase a parsonage one block south of the church. The first significant change came as the church moved into the second half of the twentieth century. With a membership just under 300, the congregation called Rev. J. Wilbur Curry, a pastor who would shepherd the church from the early 1950s until his retirement in December of 1988. During his early years, membership began to soar and the church's facilities quickly became inadequate for the needs of the congregation. In 1957, the church began construction on a new education building, which provided 6,000 square feet of space for classrooms, a nursery, restrooms, and office space. Again, the funds were raised quickly and the project was completed and dedicated the following year.

The second significant change took place in the 1980s. Inside the church, Dr. Curry was aging and was beginning to plan for his retirement and the church's transition. The church was continuing to grow to the point that a second service was needed to accommodate the numbers on Sunday mornings. And the session of the church was

beginning to look to the future and prayerfully considering what God was calling them to do. A central part of that forming vision was to be a focus on children and youth ministries. Meanwhile, a shift was occurring outside the church as well. With the development of a shopping mall east of town in the mid-1960s, businesses had been leaving their downtown and midtown locations and moving eastward. Not surprisingly, new housing developments were trending that way as well. By the 1980s many of the churches in the downtown and midtown area, influenced by the church-growth movement, began relocating to this area of the city too. Brookdale's leadership decided to enter into a discernment process. As they discussed and prayed, they sensed God calling them to stay right where they were.

With their newly forming vision for children and youth ministries and a desire to stay and minister in a declining area of the city, they made a decision that would anchor them into the community for years to come. They began two construction projects. The first was a complete renovation of their current building. They expanded the building outward and built a new sanctuary in the addition, transformed the old sanctuary into a large fellowship hall, and made the basement a large cutting-edge children's ministry area. The second construction project was an entirely new facility. They bought property one block away from the church and built a large student ministry center, complete with a basketball gym, an indoor amphitheater, classroom space, a kitchen, as well as restrooms and shower facilities. Both projects were a message to the congregation and the community that they were staying in the neighborhood in order to serve it.

For the next twenty years, the church continued to grow, reaching a membership of more than 700. For some leaders, the church appeared to be trending towards mega-

church status and ministry structures began to be developed that would accommodate that kind of growth. However, a season of change came for the church, not of explosive growth but just the opposite. The senior pastor at the time, envisioning and committed to this kind of growth, began to adopt morally questionable practices, regularly bullying and lying to staff, leadership, and the members. The dissent began to grow and turmoil began to overtake the life of the congregation. At the same time, a young man in the church decided to start his own church nearby and began to recruit members of the church through private conversations without talking first to the pastor or session. The result was a divisive period, in which a large number of people left the church – some because they were joining the new church plant, some because they could not tolerate the senior pastor, and some because they found the whole situation sickening. On the heels of this season of conflict, it also came to light that the youth pastor had been carrying on an adulterous affair with a girl in the youth group. Even more people left the church. By the time the dust settled, the congregation was deeply hurting and significantly smaller.

However, they were not able to begin the healing process because there was also growing tension between the church and the presbytery. The congregation had always been evangelical in spirit and orthodox in doctrine, but the presbytery (and the mainline denomination of which they were a part) had grown increasingly progressive in theology and antagonistic in spirit. Thus, the leadership of the church, after much prayer, decided to begin the process of leaving the mainline denomination and joining with the Evangelical Presbyterian Church. The congregation supported the decision with a unanimous vote. Nevertheless, the process was painful, trying, and exhausting, and the senior pastor decided to leave during the transition.

In retrospect, as difficult as this third significant season of change was, it had a galvanizing effect. The church became much more unified, the leadership became much more convictional, and the desire for a new and fresh future for the church began to grow. As a result, the church immediately followed the denominational transition with a pastor search and a commitment to develop a new vision for the church that would posture it to minister to the hurting and broken community around it for years to come. However, the difficult season it had endured had prepared it to develop that vision not from a self-assured posture of those who have it all together and are equipped with all the answers for the hurts and brokenness around it, but from a humble posture of those who know firsthand what it means to suffer pain and experience brokenness.

Forming Vision

In December 2014, the session appointed a group of lay leaders within the church to begin an eighteen-month long vision discernment process. The goal was not to develop a set of ministry programs or church projects. It was much more foundational in nature. The goal was to develop a vision that would shape the church's direction and ethos for the foreseeable future. It would provide a framework with which to evaluate all current ministries and out of which to develop all future ministries.

At the end of the process, the Vision Team presented the forming vision to the session and then to the congregation. In summary form, the vision was that Brookdale is called to bring the beauty of the gospel to the brokenness of life.² Each part of that

² What follows is taken from an internal but unpublished document written by the author during the vision process of Brookdale Presbyterian Church. It has also been adapted from a paper submitted for the course, "Transforming Your Leadership Development Process" (OD786) at Fuller Theological Seminary.

summary statement was then defined through a series of three questions. The first question was, what is the gospel? As the Vision Team defined it, the gospel is the good news that Jesus the Messiah, through his life, death, and resurrection, is saving his people and eventually all of creation.

Unpacking that further, the first aspect of the gospel is that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. In the beginning of Israel's story, God made a promise of blessing to Abraham and his descendants. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, God continued to build on that promise by telling his people through the prophets that one day he would come and triumph over evil and rescue his people. These prophetic promises became focused on a particular individual known as the Messiah. The good news is that Jesus is that Messiah – the fulfillment of all those prophetic promises who brings the story of Israel to its beautiful climax.

The second aspect of the gospel is that, as the Messiah, Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, is saving his people. In fulfilling all those prophetic promises and bringing the story of Israel to a climax, the way of salvation has been opened. The problem has always been that people are broken because of sin. In choosing to turn away from God and go their own way, human beings have suffered alienation from God and from each other, bondage to all sorts of things that promise them life but leave them only with death, and a profound sense of guilt and shame. However, Jesus is the solution to this deep-seated problem. Jesus lived a perfect life, free from sin and perfectly obedient to God. Jesus died on the cross, taking upon himself the full penalty for sin that human beings deserve. Then, Jesus rose again, in victory over death to bring about new life. Thus, through his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus the Messiah saves his people. He

takes their sin upon himself and pays the full penalty for it so that it is cancelled for good. As a result, when God looks at his people he no longer sees them as sinners but as perfectly righteous in his Son. They are no longer transgressing rebels, but forgiven sons and daughters. And this amazing change in their standing before God comes entirely by God's grace and received through faith alone.

The third aspect of the gospel is that, as the Messiah, Jesus is not only saving his people but eventually all of creation as well. The gospel does not just pertain to individual salvation; it is more cosmic than that. The original heralds of the gospel in the Old Testament promised that one day God would come and heal the brokenness of the whole world and transform this creation into a new creation, free from sin, evil, and death. In the New Testament, Jesus embodies this new creation in his life, conquers the sin, evil, and death of the old creation in his death, and inaugurates God's new creation in his resurrection. Thus, all those who have faith in Christ become new creations in him already. But one day, Christ will return and finish transforming the world into a place of peace, justice, and righteousness. Sin, evil, and death will be no more and all of creation will be restored and renewed into something beautiful and glorious.

The second question was, why is the gospel so beautiful? In answering that question, the Vision Team outlined several reasons. First, the gospel is beautiful because Jesus Christ is beautiful. His birth is full of wonder and mystery. His life embodies truth, goodness, compassion, grace, love, and humility. His death expresses sacrificial and redeeming love. His resurrection shows forth glory, majesty, and triumph. And all of it brings the story of the world, the story of history, and the story of humanity to such a beautiful, amazing, and awe-inspiring climax. All themes, all promises, all prophecies, all

hopes, and all longings converge and are fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

Second, the gospel is beautiful because God has done for his people what they could never do for themselves. The gospel is fundamentally different from religion. Religion says that human beings must save themselves through moral improvement. But this is something they cannot do. In contrast, the gospel is about what God has done, is doing, and will do for his people in Christ. It is not something they do or earn. It is about what God does entirely out of his grace - for his people and for the world.

Third, the gospel is beautiful because it sets his people free to live with God according to grace. Because the gospel is fundamentally different from religion, it radically changes how they live. Religion says that human beings have to obey in order to be accepted, but the gospel says that God's people are accepted because of what Christ did and therefore they can obey. Religion motivates people with fear and insecurity, but the gospel motivates people with gratitude and joy. Religion says a person's identity is based on how good he/she is, how successful he/she is, or how well he/she performs, but the gospel says a person's identity is based on God's love for him/her in Christ and his/her adoption as his child. Religion makes a person radically insecure in his/her relationship with God and with other people because everything is dependent upon how he/she performs, but the gospel makes a person radically secure, radically free, radically joyful, and radically gracious because everything is based on what God does for his people. Religion has the ability to change people externally in their behavior, but the gospel has the power to transform a person internally in his/her hearts and character.³

³ Drawn from Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 65.

Fourth, the gospel is beautiful because it is a message of hope for the whole world. What God has done, is doing, and will do in Jesus is the antidote for everything that is wrong in the world. Evil will eventually be defeated through Christ. Injustice will eventually be set right through Christ. Suffering will eventually be redeemed through Christ. Pain will eventually be healed through Christ. Death will eventually be conquered through Christ. Thus, the gospel is the hope of the world because the gospel says that a new creation has already arrived in Christ and one day will arrive in all its fullness. Already it is renewing hearts, lives, relationships, communities, and cities. And one day Christ will bring his work of renewal to its full completion.

The third question was, how does the beauty of the gospel address the brokenness of life? According to the Vision Team, the brokenness of life is a shorthand way of describing everything that is wrong with the world. Sin, evil, injustice, suffering, pain, and death have shattered lives, relationships, and communities. This can be seen at every level. It can be seen in homes and families, in neighborhoods and towns, in communities and cities, in nations and in the global community. And it can be seen in every sphere. It can be seen in business, education, politics, social structures, economics, and culture.

Yet, the beauty of the gospel is that what God has done, is doing, and will do through Christ - through his life, death, and resurrection - is so comprehensive in its scope that it can and does address everything that is wrong in the world. It touches the brokenness of life at every level and in every sphere, bringing healing and transformation that is equally deep and comprehensive. Indeed, because of what Christ has done, the Holy Spirit is now present with his people, applying the gospel to each of these areas and empowering them to see change in every one of these spheres.

In light of this vision, the Vision Team worked out the implications for the four key areas of the church – prayer, worship, spiritual formation, and mission. For each of them, a picture was described of what the vision might look like and a plan was developed in order to begin moving toward that picture. In all of it, however, the emphasis was on the church’s own humble need of the gospel. In fact, as the vision was forming, one of the initial proposals was, “Brookdale is called to bring the beauty of the gospel to the brokenness of the city.” The heart behind that suggestion was to capture and emphasize the church’s missional calling. However, as discussion continued there was a concern that such phrasing might unintentionally communicate that brokenness exists only outside of the church. In order to avoid that impression, the decision was eventually made to adopt the version, “Brookdale is called to bring the beauty of the gospel to the brokenness of life,” because that version of the statement correctly acknowledges that brokenness is both inside and outside the church.

With this newly adopted vision, Brookdale Presbyterian Church has committed itself to a gospel-centered missional posture toward the community. It is focused on identifying areas of brokenness both inside and outside the church, and then bringing the beauty of the gospel to those areas of brokenness so that they might experience the renewing power of God’s kingdom. Given the deeply entrenched problems within the city, and particularly the midtown area, including poverty, family dysfunction, and violence, this vision is both broad in scope and deep in potential applications.

PART TWO
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW: A SURVEY OF STRATEGIES

The main problem with the book of Joshua is not that there is violence in the narrative. After all, the world is a violent place and ancient Israel was part of the ancient Near Eastern world. They would have known no other way to negotiate their own existence than to engage in violent struggles with other peoples and nations. Neither is the problem with the book of Joshua that God himself is involved in the violence. After all, God carries out violent acts elsewhere in Scripture (e.g. Genesis 6-8; 11; Exodus 7-14; Leviticus 10; Numbers 16; Isaiah 13-23; Jeremiah 45-51; Revelation 6, 8-10, 16-18) and though that may disturb some readers, God is ultimately the sovereign Lord and has a right to carry out actions that are consistent with his justice and purposes in the world. To borrow an image from the Apostle Paul, God is the potter and we are the clay (Romans 9:21) and, therefore, we are not in a position, nor do we have the requisite understanding, to be able to question God on matters related to his will and the ways in which he carries out that will. No, the problem with the book of Joshua is the more particular problem of divinely-commanded human violence. It is that God commands his people to take up the sword and perpetrate violence against other people. That is what is so troubling.

It is troubling for a number of reasons. First, it raises the theological question of why God must put a sword in the hand of his people to accomplish his purposes. Second, it raises the uncomfortable epistemological question of whether or not God tells people, even today, to kill other people, and how God's people can know or discern it if he does. Third, for Christians, it raises the hermeneutical question of how such an understanding of God can be harmonized with Jesus' command to love one's enemies and turn the other cheek. Fourth, it raises the ethical question of how God's people are supposed to live out their discipleship in the world if they at times are asked to carry a sword and at times are asked to carry a cross. Not surprisingly, then, many Christians throughout the history of the church have frequently felt a kind of instinctive discomfort with a straightforward reading of the text.¹

In response, a number of strategies have been proposed for dealing with this problem. These strategies may be organized into three major families of approaches.² Each family has numerous variations within it but all proposals within the family share certain common foundational convictions that undergird their proposed solution to the problem.

¹ Though this discomfort has been felt throughout the history of the church, perhaps most notably in the early church through Marcion's trenchant critique of the Old Testament based on this very issue, the issue has become especially acute in the modern world.

² These three families of approaches are loosely adapted from Michael Bergmann, Michael Murray, and Michael Rea, "Introduction" in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 7. The titles of the three families and the various subdivisions of proposals within each are my own.

The Sub-Revelational Approaches

The first family of approaches is what might be called the Sub-Revelational Approaches. These are proposals that, in one way or another, deny that the text is fully inspired by God. In the early church period, this kind of approach was advocated most notably – and most radically – by Marcion of Sinope in the second century. Marcion argued that the God of the Old Testament was the author of many evils and took delight in warfare. He was a capricious being who incited people to commit evils just so he could punish them for it. He was a lesser god, a Jewish tribal deity, who was full of contradictions and jealousies. In contrast, the God of the New Testament was a transcendent God of love and compassion who had brought salvation through Christ.³ Thus, Marcion simply rejected the Old Testament in favor of the New Testament, dismissing any theological or ethical problems in the book of Joshua along with it.

Though Marcion was condemned as a heretic in the summer of 144 C.E., his views continued to exert influence in the church for years to come. In the modern period, his view of the Old Testament has had something of a revival among some Old Testament scholars. One example is Friedrich Delitzsch, who at one point stated, “The more deeply I immerse myself in the spirit of the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, the greater becomes my mistrust of Yahweh, who butchers peoples with the sword of his insatiable anger; who has but one favorite child [Israel], while he consigns all other nations to darkness, shame, and ruin.”⁴ As a result, Delitzsch believed the Old

³ Philip Jenkins, *Laying Down the Sword: Why We Can't Ignore the Bible's Violent Verses* (New York: HarperOne, 2011), 171-172.

⁴ Quoted in Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 64-65.

Testament should be excluded from the Christian canon. Similarly, his colleague Adolf von Harnack believed that it was time to set aside for good the Old Testament and its portrait of a warlike God in order to preserve the proper image of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the New Testament.⁵

Another proposal within the family of Sub-Revelational Approaches is to argue that the text is a primitive account that is part of an inferior stage in the progressive revelation of God and therefore is compromised by the limitations of that age. Thus, the Israelites thought God commanded them to slaughter the Canaanites but they were mistaken. This is less radical than the proposal of Marcion, Delitzsch, and Harnack, but still diminishes the inspiration of the Old Testament to the point that the problematic portions can simply be bracketed out as belonging to the primitive perspective of the Israelites. In the late nineteenth century, George Adam Smith developed this kind of hermeneutical approach as he grappled with the implications of historical-criticism. In his Lyman Beecher lectures, delivered at Yale University in 1899, he argued that the early Israelites understood Yhwh to be a tribal god exactly as the Moabites conceived of Chemosh. Thus, Israel “prayed to him to let them see their desire on their enemies, ascribed their victories to His love for them, their defeats to His anger, and they devoted to Him in slaughter their prisoners of war, and the animals they captured from their foes; all exactly as their Moabite neighbors are reported, in very much the same language, to have done to Chemosh, the god of Moab.”⁶ Only later did Israel come into a higher and

⁵ Ibid., 65-66.

⁶ George Adam Smith, *Modern Criticism and the Preaching of the Old Testament: Eight Lectures on the Lyman Beecher Foundation, Yale University* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1901), 128.

more developed view of Yhwh, along with a superior ethic. Thus, the Israelites' belief that God had commanded them to slaughter their enemies was merely due to their primitive (and typical) but mistaken ancient Near Eastern understanding of God.

More recently, others have developed this line of thinking in their own ways. In his Old Testament theology, Walter Eichrodt suggests that the offensive features of the Old Testament “are simply the concomitants of a tremendous spiritual struggle which was bound to burst into flame with the introduction into Israel of the religion of Yahweh.”⁷ And thus “the dubious features in the ancient history of the nation derive from an overwhelming sense of the holy majesty of Yahweh as yet unqualified by any sort of ethical reflection.”⁸

Coming from a slightly different angle, Peter Enns has developed what he calls an incarnational approach to Scripture that tries to take seriously the very human qualities of the Bible.⁹ Applying this to the book of Joshua, he concludes that early Israel, like other ancient Near Eastern people, understood their God to be a tribal God who acts violently and wages war. But that was only their mistaken perspective. God did not actually tell them to slaughter the Canaanites; Israel just thought he did. Nevertheless, God has let his children tell the story, even with all their misconceptions and misunderstandings.¹⁰

⁷ Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1961), 284.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

¹⁰ Peter Enns, *The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable to Read It* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), 27-70, especially 54, 61.

Though the Sub-Revelational Approaches certainly have some appeal, they raise serious problems for those who want to maintain some sort of affirmation of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Methodologically, these approaches leave unanswered how the church arrives at an appropriate criterion for determining which parts of the Bible are inspired and which parts are not. Without such a criterion, it is all too easy to take those parts that offend our sensibilities and simply decide that they are not the inspired part of the Bible and should be bracketed out. Left unchecked, the Bible ends up becoming a text that can only confirm and reflect back to us what we already think instead of challenge or disrupt us.

The Traditional Approaches

The second family of approaches is what might be called the Traditional Approaches. Whereas the Sub-Revelational Approaches deny that the text is fully inspired and thus deny that God actually commanded the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites, the Traditional Approaches affirm both that the text is divinely inspired and that the apparently problematic command was in fact the command intended and revealed by God. However, these approaches argue that the command is unproblematic because there was a sufficient reason for it. One of the most common reasons suggested is that God commanded the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites as a just punishment for their sin. For example, John Calvin writes,

The indiscriminate and promiscuous slaughter, making no distinction of age or sex, but including alike women and children, the aged and decrepit, might seem an inhuman massacre, had it not been executed by the command of God... If anyone object that children, at least, were still free from fault, it is easy to answer, that they perished justly, as the race was accursed and reprobated.... [He] was pleased in this way to purge the land

of Canaan of the foul and loathsome defilement's [*sic*] by which it had long been polluted.¹¹

If such a punishment still seems harsh, Calvin, argues, it must be remembered that “the judgment-seat of heaven is not subject to our laws.”¹²

Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan take a similar approach. Though they acknowledge that the account is hyperbolic and highly stylized, they maintain that it is still rooted in historical events. However, these events are a one-time occurrence and they offer several reasons why this one-time command was just, all of which revolve around the theme of God's justice. First, the Israelites had a legitimate right to the land, based on God's earlier promises. Second, the Israelites had to wait until the sin of the inhabitants had reached its full measure (i.e., the Canaanites were not innocent but perpetrators of horrific atrocities). Third, the Israelites were also accountable such that if their sin reached its full measure they too would be dispossessed of the land. Fourth, the Israelites needed to be safeguarded from the corrupting influence of the Canaanites.¹³

Walter Kaiser has argued along the same line. According to Kaiser, God patiently waited for the Canaanites' cup of iniquity to fill all the way up, but once it did he employed the Israelites to slaughter them as a just punishment for their sins. In this

¹¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. IV: Joshua, Psalms 1-35*, trans. Henry Beveridge and James Anderson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 97. Comments on verse 6:20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 163. Comments on verse 10:40.

¹³ Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, “The Ethics of ‘Holy War’ for Christian Morality and Theology” in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem*, ed. Heath Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 229-233. A more extensive argument is found in Paul Copan and Matthew Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide?: Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014), where they take up the argument from the philosophical angle of divine command theory.

respect, the conquest was no different in principle than the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the destruction of the whole world in the flood. However, the Canaanites were even more culpable because God had given many signs and wonders so that they would know that he was the Lord and yet, with the rare exception such as Rahab, they ignored the signs.¹⁴

The main problem with the various proposals that argue that the conquest was a just punishment on the Canaanites for their sins is that the book of Joshua never actually gives this as the rationale for the slaughter of the Canaanites. The book of Deuteronomy does raise the issue of the Canaanites' wickedness but this is cited as a justification only for their dispossession (Deuteronomy 9:5); the text says nothing about this justifying their extermination. Moreover, it still leaves unexplained why the Canaanites would receive this form of punishment for their sins, while other equally wicked nations do not receive such treatment.

A similar suggestion to that of Calvin and Kaiser is the proposal that God commanded the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites as a type or intrusion of final eschatological judgment. Daniel Gard argues for this sort of proposal by tracing the biblical-theological connection between the *herem* of the conquest and the judgment at the end of history.¹⁵ As the Old Testament unfolds, the martial destruction of other nations is raised to a cosmic dimension. This can most easily be seen in Chronicles where the Chronicler transforms the holy war tradition by describing battles as events decided

¹⁴ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 268.

¹⁵ Daniel L. Gard, "The Case of Eschatological Continuity" in *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 135-136.

through divine and angelic action. Later, in apocalyptic literature, holy war is transformed once again by moving it from events in the middle of history to the final climactic event of the eschaton when God's enemies are defeated and a new age is inaugurated.

Meredith Kline has drawn a similar connection but with the distinctive feature that the slaughter of the Canaanites is actually an intrusion of the eschatological judgment itself.¹⁶ That is, the just judgment of the eschaton is brought forward in history and visited upon the Canaanites as a form of anticipated and proleptic eschatology. Like Calvin and Kaiser, Kline understands this to be a just command by God because of the Canaanites' wickedness but, unlike them, he expressly connects it to the broad sweep of God's eschatological judgment of all nations. Only the timing differs.

The main weakness of the eschatological interpretations of Gard and Kline is that they must proceed from larger theological considerations instead of exegetical argumentation. That is, nothing in the book of Joshua itself would support, or even suggest, such readings. In the case of Kline, it suffers from the additional weakness that no other text in the Bible – Old or New Testament – interprets the conquest as an eschatological intrusion. Moreover, each of the eschatological interpretations faces further criticisms as well. Even if Gard is correct about the biblical-theological development of the *herem* theme, such a development still does not address the question of why God would command the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites at the beginning of this trajectory. Nor does his schema of diachronic development from historical warfare in

¹⁶ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1989), 162-164.

Israel's early history to cosmic warfare in Israel's later warfare fit the data. For instance, the struggle between Israel and Pharaoh in the exodus is described in decidedly cosmic terms (i.e., Yhwh vs. the Egyptian gods). As for Kline's proposal, it runs into a similar problem as that of Calvin and Kaiser. Even if the conquest is an eschatological intrusion, his proposal still does not explain why the Canaanites would be subjected to a proleptic judgment while other nations are afforded much more time.

Another reason suggested for God's command to slaughter the Canaanites is because, as horrible as it was, it ultimately served a greater good. For example, Gleason Archer suggests that the slaughter of the Canaanites was a tragic necessity for Israel to be able to flourish spiritually in the land. Comparing the extermination of the Canaanites in the land to radical surgery to remove cancer from a patient, he argues that,

the baneful infection of degenerate idolatry and moral depravity had to be removed before Israel could safely settle down in these regions and set up a monotheistic, law-governed commonwealth as a testimony for the one true God. Much as we regret the terrible loss of life, we must remember that far greater mischief would have resulted if they had been permitted to live on in the midst of the Hebrew nation. These incorrigible degenerates of the Canaanite civilization were a sinister threat to the spiritual survival of Abraham's race.¹⁷

Thus, as tragic and horrible as the slaughtering of the Canaanites was, it was a necessary means to the greater end of establishing Israel in the land, protecting her from moral corruption, and promoting Yhwh worship.

John Walton and J. Harvey Walton have offered another kind of greater good argument. Comparing Leviticus 18 and Deuteronomy 9 to other ancient Near East

¹⁷ Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 158.

literature, they argue that the portrayal of the Canaanites invokes a common trope of invincible barbarians who trouble the people. As a result, the conquest is depicted as a recapitulation of the creation story in which God drives out the chaotic forces and establishes a new order based on his covenant. Thus, the historical event of slaughtering the Canaanites, violent though it was, was integrated into the biblical story in a particular literary way so that the essential nature of the event could be understood. And that essential nature is that God was bringing about the triumph of order over chaos.¹⁸

The greater good arguments suffer from one significant weakness, namely that they do not actually address the root of the problem. They merely counterweight the issue with appeals to something good that may outweigh the wrongfulness of the slaughter, but they do not explain why the slaughter was actually necessary to accomplish that greater good. For instance, they fail to explain why God could not have converted the Canaanites, as the individual Rahab was, or integrated them, as the Gibeonites were, or established monotheistic worship or covenant order through nonviolent means. After all, to use the example of Walton and Walton's proposal, the act of creation in which God established order over chaos was done, unlike other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, nonviolently. On that basis alone there is no plausible reason why the recapitulation could not have been accomplished nonviolently too.

Finally, the family of Traditional Approaches includes those who argue that the conquest served several purposes, typically some combination of the options listed above. For instance, Eugene Merrill contends that God commanded the slaughter of the

¹⁸ John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest: Covenant, Retribution, and the Fate of the Canaanites* (Downers Grove IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 166, 256.

Canaanites in order to accomplish the hardening of the heart of God's enemies, protection of Israel from the inroads of paganism, the eradication of idolatry, and the education of Israel and the nations about God's power, sovereignty, glory, and grace.¹⁹ Peter Craigie notes that God involves himself in the realities of human existence and human history towards the ends of both judgment and redemption.²⁰ But it is also a shadow of the eschatological reality of God's kingdom, in which God the warrior becomes the Crucified God in order to conquer evil and defeat the powers and principalities.²¹ Christopher J. H. Wright argues that the conquest was a unique and limited event of God's sovereign justice, as well as a necessary part of God's larger salvific purposes for all, which would eventually culminate in a new creation of peace and nonviolence, established through Christ.²² Though the combinational approach is able to add together some of the strengths of the reasons already discussed, it is also susceptible to the same critiques as well.

The Conditioned Approaches

The third family of approaches is what might be called the Conditioned Approaches because they suggest that a proper reading of the book must be conditioned in some way. The Sub-Revelational Approaches deny that the text is inspired and

¹⁹ Eugene H. Merrill, "The Case for Moderate Discontinuity" in *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 63-94.

²⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *The Problem of War in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 95-96. Patrick Miller takes a similar approach, arguing that the Divine Warrior works for the purposes of judgment and redemption. See Patrick D. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, HSM 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99-100.

²² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 86-108.

therefore deny that God issued the command. The Traditional Approaches do the opposite; they affirm that the text is inspired and affirm that God issued the command. However, the Conditioned Approaches separate those two, arguing that the text is indeed inspired but then denying that God issued the command. This is achieved through the introduction of some mitigating hermeneutic condition that makes this sort of interpretation possible.

The first way of doing this is to suggest that a proper reading of the book must be conditioned by a recognition of the limited historical accuracy of the text. In other words, the text is still treated as sacred Scripture, but it is understood to have certain historical limitations that are intrinsic to it. Nevertheless, these historical limitations do not corrupt the essential theological message of the text, which it turns out is morally unproblematic. One example is the approach of Paul Hanson. He argues that in the exodus account, the contest between Yhwh and Pharaoh is really a clash between impartial justice and royal power. Yhwh's victory over Egypt in the deliverance of his people is the triumph of the former over the latter. In the rest of the Old Testament, the entire dynamic of war and peace must be understood as the struggle to bring about this fundamental norm of justice and compassion (i.e., the order of shalom). Within the people of Israel this was promoted through the framework of covenant, which intended to provide a life-sustaining order and keep chaos at bay. Israel's early history in the land reflects this same concern. According to Hanson, the stories in Joshua derive from the period of the monarchy and betray their ideology of royal power, while a passage like Judges 5 gives a clearer window into Israel's early existence in the land, describing a Canaanite attack and Israel's dependence

on Yhwh to restore shalom in the face of a hostile threat.²³ Thus, through careful historical reconstruction, the morally problematic part is deemed to be part of a later shaping of the text, while the morally unproblematic part is the historical reality underneath it.

Another example is the approach of Walter Brueggemann.²⁴ Arguing that the command in Joshua 11:6 (“Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will hand over all of them, slain, to Israel. You shall hamstring the horses and burn their chariots with fire.”) is theologically normative, he asserts that the most we can reasonably believe God to have authorized in the conquest narratives is the hamstringing of horses and the destruction of chariots – horses and chariots being symbols of monarchial power and oppression. The form we have now is a result of Israel’s leaders interpreting oracles and other putative modes of revelation in light of their own preconceptions, biases, fallible memories, and faulty understandings. Thus, the real message of the text is that God stands on the side of the weak and oppressed, over against the powerful and oppressive. Therefore, God has indeed mandated violence, but it is in the form of warrant or permit and it is “of a specific kind: tightly circumscribed, in the interest of a serious social experiment, in the interest of ending domination.”²⁵

The main difficulty with Brueggemann’s proposal is that it is selective in its use of texts. It prioritizes Joshua 11:6 as the theological norm, but it is not clear why,

²³ Paul D. Hanson, “War, Peace, and Justice in Early Israel,” *BR* 3 (1987): 32-45.

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Divine Presence amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

methodologically speaking, God's command in chapter 6 to exterminate the inhabitants of Jericho or his command in chapter 8 to exterminate the inhabitants of Ai ought not to be equally normative. Even within chapter 11, verse 15 seems to imply that the slaughter of the people was in fact commanded by God, via Moses. And even focusing directly on the verse Brueggemann takes as the normative standard, it is hard to see why the language of handing over the people is not to be understood as the language of conquest. Yet, even if that were not conceded, it is hard to see how the hamstringing of horses is any less brutal.²⁶

The second way of doing this is to suggest that a proper reading of the book must be conditioned by a recognition of divine accommodation, frequently (but not always) paired with a Christocentric hermeneutic. For instance, Stephen Chapman adopts an incarnational stance to argue that warfare in the Old Testament is a "divine concession to the brutal reality of human sin" in order to preserve Israel as he moved things toward nonviolence in Christ.²⁷ To the objection of why God needed to accommodate himself to human sin, Chapman confesses that there is no good answer to this other than that God

²⁶ Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Reading Joshua" in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 240-241.

²⁷ Stephen B. Chapman, "Martial Memory, Peaceable Vision" in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem*, ed. Heath Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 63-64. This has some strong similarities to the approach of Enns above. The key difference, however, is that Enns does not believe that God ever told the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites; the Israelites were mistaken and God allowed them to carry on with their misconceptions. Chapman, on the other hand, seems to suggest that God did in fact tell the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites but that he did so as an accommodation to a sinful world in order to carry out his purposes. Both employ an incarnational approach but do so in different ways.

apparently was not able to do it any other way, even as “Israel’s history witnesses to and moves toward nonviolence as it moves toward Christ.”²⁸

Eric Seibert advocates a similar kind of accommodationist hermeneutic but develops it in a more expressly Christological way. He begins by arguing that every text must be morally evaluated before it can be deemed theologically usable. The reason is because, as Seibert puts it, “For all the truth the Bible contains, it is not always a perfect guide when it comes to matters of ethics, morality, and theology.”²⁹ Instead, the only perfect guide is Jesus himself. Thus, all of Scripture must be evaluated against the standard of what Christ reveals to us about the character of God. Whatever does not correspond with that, such as the violence of the conquest, should be acknowledged as God’s accommodation to the ancient world and then set aside.³⁰

Gregory Boyd has developed an even more robust accommodationist proposal. He argues that God originally intended to displace the Canaanites nonviolently. This can be seen in texts that refer to God’s plan to use hornets to drive them out (Exodus 23:21-22), God’s plan to have the land vomit them out (i.e., make the land temporarily uninhabitable so that the people would pick up and leave; Leviticus 18:24-25), and God’s plan to intervene in a miraculous way just as he did in the exodus (Deuteronomy 7:17-19). However, the Israelites succumbed to the common ancient Near Eastern assumption that when God wants his people to acquire a piece of land they must wage war in order to take

²⁸ Ibid., 64.

²⁹ Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 26.

³⁰ Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, 185.

it. As a result, God cruciformly accommodates himself in a sin-bearing way in order to mirror the ugliness of their sin so that his original nonviolent command is now mixed and diluted with the sinful, untrusting, and culturally-conditioned attitudes of his people.³¹

An accommodationist and Christological approach has much to commend it and will be appropriated in what follows. However, there are weaknesses in some of the ways it has been developed. In response to Chapman's proposal that God could not preserve Israel in any other way, it might be asked why the same God who elsewhere was able to create the world, sovereignly orchestrate events in history, and even raise the dead was not able to accomplish the preservation of Israel nonviolently. If, then, the argument is that God chose not to do it some other way, then the original theological/ethical problem simply reasserts itself. Seibert's proposal, though it offers a coherent hermeneutic, only works at the canonical level. But it does not offer a solution to the problem on a historical or literary level. That is, it fails to explain what value the narrative of an Israelite conquest has on its own. The main weakness with Boyd's proposal is that it does not actually solve the problem, namely that it does not explain why God would be less culpable for mirroring sin than for actually commanding it in the first place. That seems to be a distinction without a difference. Nor does it even turn out to be consistent with the cross itself, for on the cross God takes on sin but he does so in order to deal with it, not to continue to propagate it within the world.³²

³¹ Gregory A. Boyd, *Crucifixion of the Warrior God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), 964-986.

³² Boyd's work is broader than the particular issue of the conquest, seeking to deal with all depictions of violence in Scripture. To this general issue, Boyd's approach is to argue that the cross is the norm for evaluating all other claims about God in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus, it is a nonviolent Jesus, suffering on the cross, that is the true picture of God; all other depictions must be filtered

The third way of doing this is to suggest that a proper reading of the book must be conditioned by spiritualizing or allegorizing the text. This approach is usually associated with the early church theologian Origen. In Origen's view, God included certain stumbling blocks, inconsistencies, and impossibilities in Scripture in order to point us, with the Spirit's help, beyond the letter of the text to a deeper spiritual meaning.³³ For instance, when the book of Joshua says that those across the Jordan, in the mountains, in the plains, and on the coast, the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Gergasites, and Jebusites assembled against Israel, it is actually pointing us to the assembling of the kings of the earth and the leaders of Rome against Jesus and describing his spiritual triumph over their attack.³⁴ When the text talks about putting to death the people of the land, it is really pointing Christians to the spiritual truth that a kingdom of sin was reigning in each of them but Jesus came and struck down the rulers of that kingdom. Now, he orders Christians to destroy all those rulers and leave none of them alive, meaning that Christians are to be soldiers in the kingdom of Jesus and put to death the reign of avarice, ostentation, pride, and lust in their flesh.³⁵

As evidenced in much popular preaching and teaching, this approach can produce some spiritually beneficial readings. However, the problem is that it actually avoids the

through this lens. The most significant problem with this approach is that Jesus himself affirms the veracity of the Old Testament's portrayal of God, including its depiction of his active judgment.

³³ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 284-287. Book IV, Chapter II, 8-9.

³⁴ Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, ed. Cynthia White, FC 105 (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 108-19. Homily 9, Section 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 145. Homily 15, Section 4.

problem of the text itself. After all, if the actions reported in the book are actual historical events, then spiritualizing or allegorizing them for our own spiritual benefit does nothing to address the problem of those events. As Christopher J. H. Wright has put it, “It was not allegorical Israelites who attacked or allegorical Canaanites who died.”³⁶ Therefore, even if helpful spiritual lessons can be extracted from the stories in Joshua, there is still the pressing issue of what to make of the purported events narrated by the text.

Finally, the fourth way of doing this is to suggest that a proper reading of the book must be conditioned by a (re)consideration of the book’s genre. Instead of assuming that the book was originally written to be a straightforward record of historical events, this approach reexamines that assumption and first asks, what kind of literature the text is to begin with, for what purpose it was written, and how that should impact how it is read. One example is the proposal of Nicholas Wolterstorff. Noting the frequent use of formulaic phrasings throughout the book, the highly ritualized nature of the descriptions of events, and the sacral categories that are employed, Wolterstorff suggests that the book of Joshua is a non-literal, highly stylized, metaphorical, and hyperbolic account of Israel’s early skirmishes in the land, intended to encourage Israel to resist idolatry and worship Yhwh alone.³⁷

Another example is the theological interpretation of the book offered by Douglas Earl. Employing anthropological approaches to identity construction in communities,

³⁶ Wright, *The God I Don’t Understand*, 84.

³⁷ Wolterstorff, “Reading Joshua”, 248-256.

Earl argues that the book of Joshua is mythical.³⁸ Aware that the term is frequently misunderstood and often carries with it negative associations, he carefully defines it as follows: “What a scriptural ‘mythical narrative’ presents us with is a symbolic, revelatory ‘world of the text’ that invites us as individuals and communities to be imaginatively transformed and shaped by such a world in a more faithful and fuller relationship with God worked out in everyday life.”³⁹ Once the text is understood as myth instead of literal history, the moral problems of the text begin to evaporate. As Earl puts it, “at the literal level the narrative is amoral or even immoral. But that is a common trait of myths, and it is often not where their significance lies. In other words, myths do not provide description or models for behavior, at least not at the literal or descriptive level of the text taken at face value.”⁴⁰

Of course, some will be wary of reconsidering the genre of the book of Joshua, arguing that the most natural reading of the book is that of historical narrative, especially in light of its narrative similarities to the historical books that follow it. To redefine its genre, then, is merely a convenient way to cut the Gordian knot. However, this concern can be alleviated if the reconsideration of the genre proceeds not from trying, first of all, to find some sort of genre that can deal with the theological, moral, and ethical problems of the book, but by starting with the exegetical data, examined in their ancient Near Eastern context, and then letting the data itself inductively drive the question of the

³⁸ Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 14-48.

³⁹ Douglas S. Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?: Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 27.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

work's genre, after which the problems of the book may appear in a new light. As will be argued in the next chapter, this approach, though not without its own challenges, is the most fruitful approach for not only addressing the problems in the narrative but also for offering a constructive theological interpretation of the book itself.

CHAPTER 4

A RECONSIDERATION OF THE CONQUEST

Determining the genre of the book of Joshua must begin with assessing whether the book is in fact a straightforward narrative of historical events. Early work in the field of so-called Biblical Archaeology attempted to provide just such a scientific confirmation of the historicity of the events narrated in the book. However, as Syro-Palestinian archaeologists have done their work, just the opposite has happened.¹ To date, archeological research has not only failed to substantiate the biblical portrayal of a conquest in the book of Joshua, it has ended up calling into question the historical reliability of many of the events portrayed in the book. Though the archaeological evidence for Hazor can be potentially aligned with the biblical account (it was the largest Canaanite city in the Middle and Late Bronze Ages and did indeed suffer destruction sometime in the thirteenth century BCE²), the other important locales in the book of Joshua have not borne out the same kind of possibilities. Lachish was destroyed several

¹ For a helpful account, see Thomas W. Davis, *Shifting Sands: The Rise and Fall of Biblical Archaeology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

² Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible – 10,000-586 B.C.E.*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 332-333.

decades after Hazor, meaning it could not have been part of the same sweeping military campaign.³ Though there was a settlement at Jericho during the Late Bronze Age, it does not show evidence of mass destruction (it was destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, but not the Late Bronze Age).⁴ As for Ai, presuming that the identification of the site is correct, there was no Canaanite city at the site during the Late Bronze Age.⁵ Similarly, Hebron was probably uninhabited through the Late Bronze Age.⁶ Thus, at the very most, the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua integrates some historical memories of conflicts in the land, but it cannot be said to be a straightforward account of a military campaign in the Late Bronze Age.

William Dever has summarized the data well. “We must confront the fact that the material evidence supports almost nothing of the biblical account of a large-scale, concerted Israelite military invasion of Canaan, either that of Numbers east of the Jordan, or of Joshua west of the Jordan. Of the more than forty sites that the biblical texts claim were conquered, no more than two or three of those that have been archaeologically investigated are even potential candidates for such an Israelite destruction in the entire period from ca. 1250-1150 B.C.”⁷ Indeed, as Gary Anderson has wryly commented, “It is

³ Ibid., 334.

⁴ P. Bienkowski, “Jericho was Destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, Not the Late Bronze Age,” *BAR* 16.5 (1990): 45-46, 69.

⁵ Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, 331.

⁶ Ibid., 332.

⁷ William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William. B. Eerdmans, 2003), 71.

rare indeed for biblical scholars to agree on almost any question, but historical critical scholars are virtually unanimous on this one.”⁸

This, of course, does not solve the theological and ethical problems of the book. As James Barr has succinctly put it, “The problem is not whether the narratives are fact or fiction, the problem is that, whether fact or fiction, the ritual destruction is *commended*.”⁹ In other words, regardless of whether or not the text is historical there is still the problem that within the text God commands (and commends) the wholesale slaughter of a people. Nevertheless, the disagreement between the storyline of Joshua and the archaeological reconstruction of historical events does raise the issue of genre, which may end up recasting what this commanding and commending is understood to be. After all, if the book of Joshua is not a straightforward historical record, then the kind of literature it is and how that might influence the way it should be read become live questions.

To answer these questions, several important pieces must be brought together. The first piece is the presence of literary and structural tensions within the book, which suggest that something more is going on than merely a straightforward historical narrative. Even a cursory reading of the book reveals a running tension between passages that portray Israel as conquering their entire land, and even completely exterminating the

⁸ Gary Anderson, “What About the Canaanites?” in *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham*, ed. Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 271, n. 4. It would be beyond the scope here to discuss the various models of Israel’s early emergence in the land. At the risk of being simplistic, Albright and Wright believed that the early Israelites came from the outside in quickly and violently, Alt and Noth believed that the early Israelites came from outside in slowly and peacefully, while Mendenhall and Gottwald believed they emerged from the inside quickly and peacefully. My own view is that there were elements of all three.

⁹ James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology: The Gifford Lectures for 1991* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), 209. Emphasis in original.

inhabitants of Canaan (10:28-42; 11:12-23; 12:7-24; 21:43-45; 23:9-10; 24:11-13) and passages that indicate Israel's failure to exterminate the inhabitants fully or take the whole land (9:14-27; 11:19, 22; 13:1-7; 15:63; 16:10; 17:11-12; 19:47), as well as a running tension between passages that indicate Israel was eager to obey Yhwh's commands (1:16-18; 4:10; 8:30-35; 24:16-18, 21) and passages that indicate Israel was slow or unwilling to obey Yhwh's commands (2:1-21; 7:1; 9:1-27; 18:1-10; 24:19-20). This is most pronounced in chapters 10-11 where the text goes back and forth between assertions of comprehensive victory and repeated indications that there were still remaining people and areas not conquered. Even if these tensions can partially be explained by the existence of two different sources, that still does not explain why these tensions were allowed to stand in the final form of the book.

These tensions become even more pronounced when the book of Joshua is compared to the beginning of the book of Judges. For example, in Joshua the inhabitants of Hebron are put to the sword and not a person remained (Joshua 10:36-37); however, in Judges the town of Hebron still remains unconquered, even after the death of Joshua (Judges 1:10, 20). In Joshua the inhabitants of Debir are utterly destroyed and not a person remained (Joshua 10:38-39); however, in Judges Debir seems to have been untouched until Othniel goes up and captures it after the death of Joshua (Judges 1:11-15). In Joshua the inhabitants of the hill country, the Negev, and the foothills are devoted to destruction and none of them was left remaining (Joshua 10:40); however, in Judges the Canaanites still live in these places after the death of Joshua (Judges 1:9). Moreover, the overall strategy is different as well. In the book of Joshua the campaign is organized and unified under Joshua; however, in the book of Judges the fighting is largely tribal.

Of course, there are possible explanations. Some of the inhabitants could have fled before the destruction and thus reappear later. Or, the towns could have been quickly repopulated after Joshua's campaign and thus show up again in the book of Judges. However, the simple fact that the literary tensions are so evident in the final form of the book of Joshua, especially in its canonical placement next to the book of Judges, and have not been eliminated or smoothed out suggests that something else is going on rather than a straightforward account of a literal historical conquest that went through the land wiping out the inhabitants.

The most likely explanation is that the work has deliberately been crafted for a particular homiletical-rhetorical purpose and these tensions are indispensable for accomplishing that purpose. For example, L. Daniel Hawk sees these tensions as evidence for two conflicting plot lines that structure the book, one plot line that concerns obedience/disobedience and one that concerns integrity/fragmentation, which then converge in the final section of the book (chapters 22-24). The point of these contesting plot lines is homiletical. That is, the tensions in the book are meant to challenge the implied readers to resolve the tension in their own day: will Israel serve other gods and incur wrath or will they serve Yhwh and remain faithful to him?¹⁰

¹⁰ L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991). As another example, Gordon Mitchell sees the tensions as producing a back-and-forth between dream and reality that is intended to help post-exilic Israel navigate the tension between disillusionment and hope, between the challenge of living with other people in the land and the hope of their eventual removal. Gordon Mitchell, *Together in the Land: A Reading of the Book of Joshua*, JSOTSup 134 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 190.

This is reinforced by the second piece, which is an understanding of the nature of ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts. In a comparative study of Assyrian, Hittite, and Egyptian conquest accounts, K. Lawson Younger has concluded that ancient Near Eastern narratives of military campaigns typically follow a fairly standard transmission code.¹¹ They often describe battles as taking place in a single day. They frequently exaggerate the numbers of soldiers and casualties. They regularly describe dramatic divine interventions, with some of them including phenomena such as a god hurling hailstones or using a meteor and extending daylight long enough for the battle to be won. And, most significantly, they describe their military victories in clearly hyperbolic ways. They talk of total victory, complete destruction of the enemy, and of leaving no survivors. The similarities to the book of Joshua are obvious, leading Younger to conclude that the account in Joshua 9-12 is figurative in nature and much of the language and phrasing must be understood as hyperbolic.¹²

Related to this is the third piece, which is the nature of *herem*. Much scholarly effort has been spent on trying to determine the precise nature of the *herem*, or the ban (typically translated in English as “devoted to destruction”).¹³ Part of the difficulty has been the dearth of comparative examples from the rest of the ancient Near East. The only two uses of the root in conquest accounts outside of Israel are found in the Mesha

¹¹ K. Lawson Younger, Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing*, LHBT 98 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press 2009).

¹² *Ibid.*, 243-244.

¹³ For a helpful survey of scholarly work, see K. Lawson Younger, “Some Recent Discussions on Herem” in Duncan Burns and John Rogerson, ed., *Far From Minimal: Celebrating the Work and Influence of Philip R. Davies*, LHBT 98 (Edinburgh, U.K.: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 505-522.

Inscription and the Sabaean text, RES 3945.¹⁴ Among biblical scholars a range of theories have been proposed, typically involving some combination of the concepts of sacredness, sacrifice, justice, divine ownership, and ritual destruction.¹⁵

Though the question is unlikely to be settled definitively, a number of striking insights emerge from a careful reading of the most pertinent biblical texts. One of these is Deuteronomy 7:1-2, in which Israel, after defeating the nations in the land, is commanded to carry out *herem* upon them. The term has typically been translated as “destroy them totally” or “utterly destroy them” or “devote them to complete destruction.” But the immediate context suggests that a literal interpretation of the term is misleading, for the following verses then command them not to make covenants with them or intermarry with them. Those would certainly be strange commands if Israel is to destroy them completely. After all, if Israel completely destroys all the people of the land, then there would be no need to prohibit covenants and intermarriage. Such possibilities would be

¹⁴ Lauren A. S. Monroe, “Israelite, Moabite, and Sabaean War-Herem Traditions and the Forging of National Identity: Reconsidering the Sabaean Text RES 3945 in Light of Biblical and Moabite Evidence,” *VT* 57 (2007): 318.

¹⁵ A representative sampling may be seen in the views of Stern, Niditch, and Nelson. Philip Stern, in one of the earliest treatments of the biblical *herem*, argued that it is “deeply rooted in mythic conceptions” and shows “the cosmogenic character of the perpetual struggle for order against chaos.” Thus, it was the means by which the people entered into a new sacred order. See Philip D. Stern, *The Biblical Herem: A Window on Israel’s Religious Experience*, *Brown Judaic Studies* 211 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 141-142, 220, 226. However, since its original publication, his model has received significant critique for focusing merely on texts concerning warfare against humans. In a study of warfare in the Old Testament, Susan Niditch has argued that *herem* was principally about sacrifice and justice. See Susan Niditch, *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 28-77. Richard Nelson has argued that *herem* was not originally a war practice but instead part of Israel’s categorization of religious states or qualities, namely “the state of inalienable Yahweh ownership.” Thus, anything that was classified as *herem* had to be either killed or dedicated. In the specific context of warfare, it was used to keep Israel from idolatry and syncretism. See Richard D. Nelson, “Herem and the Deuteronomic Social Conscience,” in *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomic Literature: Festschrift C. H. W. Brekelmans*, ed. M. Vervenne and J. Lust (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1997), 39-54.

moot points. Instead, a better reading of the verses is to assume a consistent theme across them pertaining to religious theory.¹⁶

This reading is strengthened as the line of thought is followed into verses 4-5, where it becomes clear that the essential issue under discussion is that of religious identity. Comparing verse 2 with verse 5 is especially revealing. In verse 2, the Israelites are to deal with the people in the land by enacting *herem*. In verse 5, the Israelites are to deal with the people in the land (the verse reads as if it is recapitulating the command of verse 2) by breaking down their altars, dashing their pillars in pieces, chopping down their Asherim, and burning their carved images with fire.

The location of the verses in Deuteronomy also encourages this sort of reading. Deuteronomy 6-11 are an outline of what fidelity in the covenant looks like.¹⁷ At the beginning of this section comes the Shema, with its command for Israel to hear that the Lord and the Lord alone should be the object of Israel's worship. Therefore, Israel is to love the Lord their God with all their heart, soul, and strength. The rest of chapter 6 spells out how Israel is to express this exclusive love for the Lord. Significantly, it is immediately after these verses that the commands of Deuteronomy 7:1-5 are issued, with the implication that the issue at hand is still worship and devotion. Therefore, the initially

¹⁶ C. H. W. Brekelmans, *De Herem in het Oude Testament* (Nijmegen: Centrale Drukkerij N. V., 1959); A. Dekkers, 'Der Kriegsherem und das Naturrecht mit einem Religionswissenschaftlichen Vergleich', Unpublished dissertation (Vienna, 1964); G. Schmitt, *Du sollst keinen Frieden schliessen mit den Bewohnern des Landes: Die Weisungen gegen die Kanaanäer in Israels Geschichte und Geschichtsschreibung*, BWANT 91 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970); A. C. Welch, *The Code of Deuteronomy: A New Theory of its Origin* (London: James Clark, 1924); cited in Mitchell, *Together in the Land*, 15.

¹⁷ The influence of Deuteronomy 6 on Deuteronomy 7:1-5 is persuasively argued by R. W. L. Moberly. See R. W. L. Moberly, "Toward an Interpretation of the Shema" in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 124-144.

harsh commands of Deuteronomy 7:1-2, when seen in the context of chapter 6 before it and verses 3-5 after it, begin to look increasingly like a figurative, not literal, way of expressing uncompromising religious devotion to the Lord.¹⁸

Moreover, that is precisely the way that later Israel seems to have understood the significance of the text. During the postexilic years, the author of Ezra 9:1-2 alludes to Deuteronomy 7:1-2 and yet nowhere in the following verses is there any indication that Israelites believed they should put other people to death.¹⁹ Instead, the significance of the Deuteronomy passage is understood entirely in terms of maintaining holiness by refusing to intermarry with other peoples. In fact, in the very next chapter (Ezra 10:8), a verbal form of *herem* is used but only in order to describe the forfeiting of property.

This understanding of the use of *herem* in Deuteronomy is significant because Douglas Earl has shown that *herem* is used in three different types of Old Testament literature, each of which uses it in a distinctive way. The first way it is used is in a deuteronomistic sense, as in Deuteronomy 7:1-5, the second is in a priestly sense, as in Leviticus 27:21, 28-29, and the third is in a prophetic sense, as in Jeremiah 51:1-3. In the deuteronomistic literature, *herem* “evokes the idea of separation from idolatry using the image of past annihilation.”²⁰ In the priestly literature, *herem* “evokes the idea of

¹⁸ This is not to suggest that *herem* never existed in Israel as a military practice. It likely did. But its usage in the text of Deuteronomy gives evidence of being figurative or metaphorical.

¹⁹ R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 68-69. This is reinforced by the fact that later God threatens to execute *herem* on Israel itself and then indicates that he has done precisely that (Isaiah 43:28; Jeremiah 25:9), but clearly “the language involves monumental hyperbole.” John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume 3: Israel’s Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 570.

²⁰ Douglas S. Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?: Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 62. For a full treatment, see Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 94-112.

irrevocable separation to God.”²¹ In the prophetic literature, *herem* “develops the image of annihilation as the future fate of those who disregard God to evoke a response to God in the present.”²² Significantly, Joshua 1-12 are generally regarded as belonging to the deuteronomistic tradition²³ (chapters 13-22 are generally regarded as belonging to the priestly tradition), and thus operates within that tradition’s definition of *herem*.

However, the book of Joshua develops it in a fresh way, namely that the application of *herem* becomes reoriented based on faithfulness to Yhwh. In fact, immediately before the first battle is undertaken, the commander of the Lord’s army appears to Joshua. When Joshua asks whether he is for the Israelites or for the inhabitants of Jericho, the commander refuses to answer the question, implying that he is not automatically for one side and against the other. From there, the application of *herem* is not carried out according to the neat delineations of Deuteronomy 7. Rahab, a Canaanite, is not subjected to *herem* because of her faithfulness to Yhwh. Yet Achan, an Israelite, is subjected to *herem* because of his faithlessness to Yhwh. Thus, *herem* is narratively reconfigured from an ethnic-military category to a covenant-faithfulness category. In sum, the deuteronomistic usage of *herem* “shapes attitudes toward idols – avoid idols and separate yourself from anything that is likely to lead to idolatry, with the symbol perhaps

²¹ Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?*, 62.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ The two exceptions are found in Joshua 6:19, 24, but those may be later priestly additions since, in them, the Israelites are commanded to bring the gold, silver, bronze, and iron into the sanctuary instead of destroying them. See Joel Kaminsky, “Joshua 7: A Reassessment of the Israelite Conceptions of Corporate Punishment” in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta Ahlström*, ed. S. W. Holloway and L. K. Handy, JSOTSup 190 (Sheffield, U.K.: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 330-331.

evoking a sense of conflict in the struggle to do so,²⁴ with the book of Joshua playing this out, not along neatly drawn ethnic lines, but along the lines of faithfulness to Yhwh.

The fourth piece is the distinctively liturgical character of the conquest narrative. That is, the conquest narrative is not so much a military chronicle with some typical ancient Near Eastern cultic flavoring. It is more like a liturgical drama that results in sweeping battle victories throughout the land. This can be seen from the very moment Israel crosses into the Promised Land. After all, it is precisely at the point of crossing into the land in Joshua 3-4 that the ark is introduced into the narrative.²⁵ That becomes even more noteworthy when it is realized that crossing the Jordan is not something that is ordinarily difficult. It was not difficult for Jacob (Genesis 32), or the Israelites later in the book of Joshua (Joshua 22), or the Israelites during the period of the judges (e.g., Judges 3:28; 8:4; 10:9; 12:5), or David and his people (2 Samuel 17:22). Therefore, the fact that it required such a miraculous event for the Israelites to cross over seems like a deliberate attempt to link it with the exodus out of Egypt and suggests that it has a primarily symbolic function.²⁶

After crossing into the Promised Land, the first thing the people are told to do is consecrate themselves. Therefore, Joshua circumcises the new generation (Joshua 5:2-9) and they celebrate the Passover together (Joshua 5:10-12), as the central acts of their battle preparations. The implication seems to be that entrance into the land is primarily

²⁴ Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, 111.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 127-130.

²⁶ Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?*, 69.

about Israel's own identity as the people of God and their call to embody a new way of life in the land that leaves the reproach of Egypt behind.

Immediately, following these sacral acts, Joshua encounters the commander of the Lord's army on the eve of the battle of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-15). When Joshua asks a battle question – are you for us, or for our adversaries? – the commander redirects the focus to the fact that he is the commander of the Lord's army and he has come. Then he tells Joshua to take off his sandals because the place where he is standing is holy ground. The next day the battle of Jericho commences but it is anything but a typical battle (Joshua 6:1-27). It more closely resembles a liturgical celebration, with trumpets that are unconnected to their battle situation, blown by the priests, a seven-day time frame, and seven circumambulations on the seventh day around the city. As a result, the walls of the city fall without any use of human force.

Joshua then sends spies to Ai but when they come back and report that the city is weak and the inhabitants are small in number, it is clear that Israel is the far superior military force. Nevertheless, they suffer a humiliating defeat because "Israel broke faith" (Joshua 7:1) and sinned against the Lord (Joshua 7:11). The remedy must be to deal with the transgressor (it turns out to be a man named Achan) and to re-consecrate the people (Joshua 7:13). Once that is done, the people are then able to defeat Ai, culminating in the erection of an altar and the reading of the Law (Joshua 8).

Once the land is conquered, the allocation of the land begins with the description of the land's division among the tribes (Joshua 13-19). However, the geographical markers and boundary lines do not follow any historical administrative borders (in fact, they are rather imprecise), but instead the description uses a unique literary form that

follows the boundary lines like a surveyor following an itinerary-like tour through the land, inviting the reader to come along and appropriate the land. Thus, the chapters might be described most aptly as a kind of sacral geography.²⁷ The book then concludes with a dispute over an altar and the proper place of worship (Joshua 22), a challenge to the people to worship the Lord rather than foreign gods (Joshua 23), and a covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem (Joshua 24), all of which serve to bring the focus of the preceding events into a liturgical focus.

Stepping back and assessing the book at a structural level reveals the same kind of liturgical shaping. Robert Polzin has argued for an overall structure of the book that frames the events as a liturgical narrative. “The ‘ordinary world’ of Joshua has its outer frame in 1:1-2:24 on the one hand and 24:29-33 on the other. Within this outer frame there is added a contiguous liturgical frame that is formed by 3:1-5:1 at its beginning and 24:1-28 at its end. In between these two extremes, that is, within 5:2-23:16, the story alternates between the world of ordinary narrative and that of ritually stylized narrative.”²⁸ The cultic (or ritually stylized narratives) are the battle at Jericho (6:1-27), the ceremony of Mount Ebal (8:30-35), the major parts of the apportioning of the land (13-21), and the covenant ceremony at Shechem (24:1-28).

²⁷ Mikhail G. Seleznev, “The Origin of the Tribal Boundaries in Joshua: Administrative Documents or Sacral Geography?” in *Memoriae Igor M. Diakonoff*, ed. L. Kogan, et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 330-361, especially 349-353.

²⁸ Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part I: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 93.

Thomas Dozeman has also detected a structural significance to the ark and its geographical movement within the book.²⁹ At every key narrative episode in the book of Joshua the ark shows up as a central feature, namely at the crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 3:1-5:12), the destruction of Jericho (Joshua 5:13-6:27), the intercession of Joshua after the sin of Achan (Joshua 7:1-26), and the covenant ceremony on the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim (Joshua 8:1-35). Thus, he argues, the narrative is “a story about the cultic process of Yahweh into the promised land.”³⁰ Not only that, but the geographical movement of the ark in Joshua is unusual. In Samuel-Kings and Chronicles, the procession of the ark moves southward (reflecting a pro-Judean viewpoint). However, in Joshua, the ark processes from Shittim to Gilgal and Jericho and then on to Ai before finally coming to Shechem in the north. Of course, the climax of the book of Joshua is the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem, which gives the sense that the entire narrative direction of the conquest is in fact a “ritual process to a cultic site,” with the goal being covenant fidelity and exclusive worship of Yhwh.³¹ In sum, the book of Joshua appears to have been carefully shaped as a liturgical drama, both in the narration of individual episodes and at the larger structural level of the book. This would suggest that the primary purpose of the book is a liturgical one, rather than merely a historical one.

²⁹ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1-12*, AYB 6B (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 44-51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

The fifth piece is the most likely *Sitz im Leben* of the account. Historical-critical scholarship has long identified the Josianic years as the most likely date for the original composition of Joshua. More recently, some have argued for a later date, with some preferring an exilic date and others preferring a post-exilic date. However, the years of Josiah's reign still remain the most persuasive option, even if further shaping took place later on. Though there are various reasons for this, one of the most suggestive is the portrayal of Joshua himself. As Stephen Chapman has observed, the person of Joshua "appears... to be oddly two-dimensional, like a cardboard cut-out."³² In cataloging the support for this characterization, Chapman notes, "Throughout the book of Joshua, the narrator never relates the substance of Joshua's thoughts or reports an interior monologue by him. The narrator never attributes to Joshua a physical characteristic or an emotion. There is neither any interpretation of Joshua's words or deeds ever explicitly offered by the narrator or advanced by another character in the form of either third-person description of direct discourse.... Indeed, through the entire book, the narrator never portrays Joshua as engaging in wrongful or questionable behavior."³³ That is decidedly strange for a protagonist and the idealistic portrait points to a symbolic rendering.

In an illuminating article, Richard Nelson has provided just such a rendering.³⁴ The key to his argument is the observation that Joshua is depicted as a royal figure. In 1:7-8 Joshua is commanded to meditate on the book of the law, day and night, a directive

³² Stephen B. Chapman, "Joshua Son of Nun: Presentation of a Prophet," in *Thus Says the Lord: Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R. Wilson*, ed. J. J. Ahn and S. L. Cook, LHBOTS 502 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 13.

³³ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

³⁴ R. D. Nelson, "Josiah in the Book of Joshua," *JBL* 100 (1981):531-540.

given to the king in Deuteronomy 17:18-19. The charge to Joshua in 1:1-9 is typical of the form used for a king's installation (cf. 1 Kings 2:2-4).³⁵ In Joshua 8:30-35, Joshua leads a covenant renewal ceremony, a responsibility usually held by a king. The transition of power from Moses to Joshua resembles a typical dynastic succession (as in 1 Kings 2:2) and it is authenticated with a sign of divine favor (cf. 1 Kings 2:12; 3:12-13, 28). In Joshua 1:16-18, the people pledge submission and obedience to Joshua, with death being the appropriate penalty for those who do not obey, as people typically do to a king. In Joshua 1:5, the promise of God to the people has changed the wording of Deuteronomy 11:24-25 into a second person singular, indicating that the promise is now concentrated on an individual, which is a typical aspect of royal ideology. Thus "Joshua is a sort of proto-king sketched out along the lines of the ideal deuteronomistic monarch."³⁶ But there are clues that the Deuteronomist had more than just a generic royal figure in mind, but a specific king in Israel's history. For there was one particular king who kept the book of the law (as in Joshua 1:7-8), mediated a covenant (as in Joshua 8:30-35), and

³⁵ The argument for this correlation has been weakened as the idea of a royal installation genre has become increasingly unpersuasive to many scholars, especially if Joshua 1:7-9 is a secondary addition to the Deuteronomistic History. See Chapman, "Joshua Son of Nun: Presentation of a Prophet," 19. Chapman argues that the portrait of Joshua is more prophetic than royal. Part of his reasoning is that the first edition of the Deuteronomistic History would also have been ambivalent about kings. However, it is hard to dismiss the distinctively positive elements in the accounts of Solomon, Hezekiah, and Josiah. For a fuller treatment, Gary Knoppers offers a more pro-monarchical reading in Gary N. Knoppers, "The Deuteronomist and the Deuteronomistic Law of the King: A Reexamination of a Relationship," *ZAW* 108 (1996): 329-346. Moreover, a modified version of Frank Moore Cross' theory of a double redaction of the Deuteronomistic History still has much to commend it, with the first edition terminating during the reign of Josiah and written to support that reign. See Richard D. Nelson, "The Double Redaction of the Deuteronomistic History: The Case is Still Compelling," *JSOT* 29 (2005): 319-337. If this is the case, then Joshua could still have originated as a literary cipher for Josiah during the first redaction, though, as Chapman notes, the most persuasive version of this reconstruction "would be the idea that Dtr¹ embraced an account of Joshua as an ideal figure, who may therefore have attracted some of Josiah's admirable qualities and aspirations, but who also, as an authoritative figure of the past, continued to stand over Josiah and even, in a certain sense, to judge him." (p. 25).

³⁶ Nelson, "Josiah in the Book of Joshua," 534.

re-established the Passover (as in Joshua 5:10-11), and that was Josiah. According to the Deuteronomist, Josiah was the only king after David who meditated on the book of the law and was perfectly faithful to it (2 Kings 22:8, 11; 23:25). Josiah is the only king who served as a royal covenant mediator (2 Kings 23:1-3). Josiah was the first king to celebrate the Passover without deficiency (2 Kings 23:22). Thus “it is Josiah who hides behind the mask of the deuteronomistic Joshua.”³⁷

Archaeological research has discovered other significant correspondences. The list of towns in the territory of Judah in Joshua 15:21-62 corresponds exactly to the borders of Judah during Josiah’s reign. Also, the place-names in the list bear a striking resemblance to the settlement patterns of the seventh century BCE and, in fact, some of the places were occupied only in the latter parts of the seventh century.³⁸ Moreover, the first two battles (Jericho and Ai) were the first expansionist efforts of Josiah after Assyria withdrew from Samaria, and the conquest of the Shephelah follows the same progression as Josiah’s expansion into that region. And the northern territories described in the conquest of Joshua match the fallen areas of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians.³⁹ Thus, the book of Joshua (at least the original composition) seems to have been written during the years of Josiah’s reform in order to serve the goal of religious purification in the nation.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., 540.

³⁸ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology’s New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), 92.

³⁹ Ibid., 93-94.

⁴⁰ This is not to deny the existence of earlier traditions, particularly in the north. See Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 125-136.

The sixth piece is the redactional trajectory of the book after its initial composition. More specifically, the potential offense of the conquest seems to have been partially neutralized on the redactional and literary level on the way to its final canonical form. In a study of the redaction of the book of Joshua, Lawson Stone has identified six recurring transitions that structure the conquest narrative, each of them following a report-response formula.⁴¹

- 2:10-11. Report: The people of Jericho heard how Yhwh dried up the sea and what Israel did to Sihon and Og. Response: Their hearts melted and they lost their nerve.
- 5:1. Report: The Canaanite kings heard that Yhwh dried up the Jordan River. Response: The kings' hearts melted and they lost their nerve.
- 9:1-2. Report: The kings heard what had happened. Response: The kings assembled to fight Joshua and Israel.
- 9:3-5. Report: The Gibeonites heard what Joshua did to Jericho. Response: The Gibeonites concocted a ruse.
- 10:1-5. Report: Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem heard that Joshua destroyed Jericho and Ai and made peace with Gibeon. Response: Adoni-zedek was terrified and enlisted four other kings to join him in making war against Gibeon.
- 11:1-5. Report: Jabin of Hazor heard what happened. Response: Jabin assembled the kings of the land to fight against Israel.

⁴¹ Lawson G. Stone, "Ethical and Apologetic Tendencies in the Redaction of the Book of Joshua," *CBQ* 53 (1991):28-31.

Stone notes that the first two characterize the actions of the Canaanites as a response to something that Yhwh had done, as a kind of preface to the significant battles at Jericho and Ai. Then the last four frame the ensuing narrative as one of Canaanite aggression and Israelite defensiveness. The transitions therefore construct a theological framework that guides “the reader to a nonmilitaristic, nonterritorial actualization of the text” and recontextualizes the events to suggest that “the holy war traditions in their earliest form represented an unusable past.”⁴²

Building on Stone’s work, L. Daniel Hawk argues that “the redactional program... defuses the ethnic antagonism of the conquest traditions by redefining the ‘enemy’ in political rather than ethnic terms and by dissolving the internal boundaries that separate Israelites and Canaanites.” It advances this agenda “by presenting the kings of the land, rather than its peoples, as the enemy that threatens Israel.”⁴³ This takes place through three vignettes. The first is the account of the spies and Rahab. When the spies cross into the land, there is a marked difference between the inhabitant (Rahab) and the king. When the king of Jericho hears the report that men from Jericho have come into the land, he responds aggressively (much as the other kings do in chapters 9-11). However, the inhabitant, Rahab, responds with hospitality and assures the spies that the people of the land are not a threat to them (2:9-14). That this is the first encounter between Israelites and Canaanites is significant. From the beginning the message is that the kings

⁴² Ibid., 36.

⁴³ L. Daniel Hawk, “Conquest Reconfigured: Recasting Warfare in the Redaction of Joshua” in *Writing and Reading War: Rhetoric, Gender, and Ethics in Biblical and Modern Contexts; Society of Biblical Literature Symposium*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Frank Ritche Ames (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 147.

in the land are opposing and threatening powers that will need to be (or perhaps, deserve to be) devoted to destruction. However, the people of the land are potential friends and even fellow Yhwh worshippers. The second is the battle of Ai. Once again, the king reacts aggressively. He launches an attack against the Israelites and then disappears from the narrative until the battle is over when he is brought to Israel and then executed and buried like the apostate Achan (cf. 7:26 and 8:29). The third is the battle at Gibeon. This time the inhabitants respond to Israel's presence in the land by presenting to them an offer of friendship (albeit through a ruse) and seeking peace, while five kings respond with coordinated aggression. Thus, it is the kings, not the people, that Joshua executes after the battle, and they are executed in the same way as the king of Ai and the apostate Achan (10:26-27). At the end of the conquest portion of the book, the kings hold the place of prominence in the summary lists (chapters 10-11), culminating in a long list of defeated kings (12:1-24). The implication, according to Hawk, is that the real enemies of Israel are the kings and rulers of the land, not the people.⁴⁴ This is reinforced by the fact that each of the three major battles (Jericho, Ai, Gibeon) is preceded by a narrative that calls into question the demarcating lines between the people of the land and the people of Israel (the Canaanite Rahab sounds like a faithful Israelite, the Israelite Achan acts like an unfaithful Canaanite, the Gibeonites offer to join together with the Israelites).⁴⁵

In sum, the book of Joshua seems to have gone through a redactional process in which the potential offensiveness of the story has been blunted. As Jerome Creach has

⁴⁴ Ibid., 147-152.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 152-156.

put it, “The editorial summaries almost deny that Israel acquired the land through aggressive military action; rather, they suggest that the Israelites defended themselves and their covenant partners (the Gibeonites) against Canaanite aggression. Hence those who brought the larger story together from its constituent parts seem quite concerned from an ethical perspective about the means by which Israel came into possession of the land.”⁴⁶

When drawn together, these several pieces suggest that the book of Joshua, in its final form, is most accurately treated, not as a straightforward historical account of genocidal conquest, but as a highly ritualized and sacralized account intended to be a metaphor of the religious life in service to the one true God. That is, the book of Joshua was originally written during the years of Josiah’s reform in order to urge the people to eliminate all signs of idolatry and to be devoted completely to the worship of Yhwh. To accomplish this, earlier memories and traditions of fighting in the land were crafted into a conquest narrative, using the literary form of typical ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, with its typical use of hyperbolic and figurative language. To make this point urgent and sharp, the deuteronomic concept of *herem* was employed to depict what their attitude should be toward pagan religious practices. All of this was intended to impress upon the people the value of Josiah’s religious reforms and the necessity of purging the land of all these pagan practices if they were to experience victory and rest in the land. Later, as the book continued to be shaped, it was redacted in such a way as to blunt

⁴⁶ Jerome F. D. Creach, *Violence in Scripture; Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 117. This is significant for people of faith since it is the canonical (final form) text that is considered inspired and normative for faith. As Douglas Earl has put it, “it is the text that the church has accepted as authoritative and *not the history behind the text.*” Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?*, 5. Emphasis in original.

its militaristic tone and to try to ensure that it would not be used to underwrite a militaristic agenda in their own day.⁴⁷

However, if this is what the book of Joshua is, two questions still remain. First, if the book of Joshua is a highly ritualized and sacralized account intended to be a metaphor for the religious life, then one still wonders why the form of a military conquest was chosen as the form best suited to communicate this. The simple answer is that describing Yhwh's victory in battle was a primary way to exalt and celebrate his sovereign kingship.⁴⁸ Or, as Richard Nelson has put it, "To extol Yahweh as the Divine Warrior was to engage in doxology (Exod. 15:1, 3). This was a common form of religious and political expression in the ancient Near East. Recounting tales of conquest was a way of praising Yahweh's power and graciousness. In this sense then, the book of Joshua is a theological confession, summarized in the creedal statement: 'Yahweh fought for Israel' (10:14, 42; 23:3, 10)."⁴⁹ Thus, during the days of Josiah's reform, it was only natural to encourage these reforms by gathering up the memories of early battles in the land and then casting them into a battle narrative in which Yhwh, as the divine warrior, leads

⁴⁷ It is important to note that this is not an allegorical interpretation of the book. An allegorical approach moves beyond the literal reading to heavenly mysteries or spiritual realities. The reading offered here does not seek to do this, but instead to understand the original message of the book (i.e., determine what the literal reading actually is) in its original historical context(s). For a helpful discussion of this distinction as it applies to the book of Joshua in the preaching of Origen, see Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 105-130.

⁴⁸ Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel*, HSM 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 174.

⁴⁹ Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 17.

Israel in a victorious campaign throughout the land, destroying all signs of paganism and idolatry, as a means of establishing his sovereign kingship in the land.

Second, if the book of Joshua is a highly ritualized and sacralized account intended to be a metaphor for the religious life, then one might still ask why it is grouped with other books that are (more or less) historical narratives. That is, if Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings make up one long narrative story, known as the Former Prophets or the Deuteronomistic History, and the latter three are historical narratives, then one might wonder whether that presumes that Joshua must be a historical narrative too. The answer is, not necessarily. It is not unheard of in the Old Testament to have double accounts, each with its own emphasis. A particularly instructive example is the beginning of the Torah. According to the classical documentary hypothesis, the book of Genesis begins with two creation accounts.⁵⁰ The earlier account is found in Genesis 2:4b-3:24, commonly attributed to J (or J/E). This account is earthier. It emphasizes agriculture, a garden, and trees and results in the cursing of the ground, banishment, and exile. The later account, commonly attributed to P, is found in Genesis 1:1-2:4a. It was placed in front of the J account and has a distinctly sacral quality to it. It is systematic, ordered, and symmetrical. It is crafted to look like a liturgical week and contains a number of striking parallels to the construction of the sanctuary. It proceeds through a series of separations, much as the ritual laws distinguish between clean and unclean.⁵¹ The result is that

⁵⁰ I am not here entering the continuing source-critical debate over the Pentateuch, but merely pointing out an instructive example on a section that is most commonly attributed to two different sources with two distinctive emphases.

⁵¹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 61-62.

creation looks like a dramatic liturgy of cosmic temple construction.⁵² So the Torah begins with a double account of creation: a sacral account intended to encourage the worship of Yhwh that is placed at the head of, or before, a second more earthier account of the world's formation.

In a sense, this particular reading of Joshua suggests an analogous situation at the beginning of the Nevi'im, which describes Israel's earliest days in the land. The earlier account is found in the book of Judges and is earthier. It describes the messy process of tribal struggles with other peoples in the land. It emphasizes the Israelites' propensity to go after other gods and to endure years of judgment and subjugation because of it. And it ends with Israel morally degenerate, slaughtering one another, and kingless. The later account is found in the book of Joshua and it has a distinctly sacral quality to it. It is (more or less) a systematic and orderly conquest of the land. It is crafted to look like a liturgical procession through the land and emphasizes the absolute separation between Israel and the pagan idolatry of the Canaanites, followed by a division of the land itself among the tribes, and concluding with a covenant ceremony intended to solidify Israel's commitment to Yhwh over against pagan gods. The result is a highly ritualized and sacralized account of Israel's early days, intended to encourage the exclusive worship of Yhwh. In that sense, one can read the beginning of the Former Prophets much as one can

⁵² See Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 78-99; John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 78-92.

read the beginning of the Torah. It begins with a sacral picture that is placed at the head of another parallel account, which itself begins the longer narrative.⁵³

⁵³ This is not to suggest that the beginning of the Former Prophets was structured intentionally to parallel the beginning of the Torah, or vice versa. It is simply used as an instructive analogy.

CHAPTER 5

A THEOLOGICAL READING OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

As has been argued above, the book of Joshua is best understood as a highly ritualized and sacralized account, originally written during the years of Josiah's reform to be a metaphor of the religious life in service to the one true God. With this understanding in mind, the book may be seen to unfold four key theological themes through its telling of the story.¹ Each of these themes serves the purpose of reform within the community, intending to shape them into a particular kind of people with a particular kind of calling. These four theological themes are a reframing of their identity, faith in the power of God, combating idolatry and worshipping Yhwh, and bold and courageous obedience as the path to rest.

¹ I am not here using the term theological in the strict sense of those themes pertaining to the attributes and activity of God, but in the more general sense of describing the implications for the life and faith of the church. In this sense, I am doing something similar to J. Clinton McCann's approach to the book of Psalms. His introductory work to the book is a theological introduction, though it primarily focuses on how the psalms aim to shape the praise, prayer, and profession of Israel. See J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1993). Of course, strictly speaking, these themes might be more properly described as religious themes rather than theological themes since they pertain to attitudes toward God rather than descriptions about God.

Reframing Identity

The issue of identity is a major theme in the book of Joshua. As the narrative unfolds, it repeatedly deals with the issue of the boundary markers of the community, of who is part of Israel and who is not. As becomes clear, these boundary markers are not so easy to draw. Some who seem to be outsiders reveal themselves to be insiders, while some who seem to be insiders reveal themselves to be outsiders. Moreover, the boundary markers themselves end up being fuzzy and permeable. Therefore, the story both raises the question of how you define an Israelite as well as challenges how that identity should be constructed. In the end, the story's cumulative force suggests that the identity of the community must be based not on ethnicity or geography, but on confession.

The book begins with the death of Moses and the Lord's charge to Joshua to lead the people across the Jordan River into the Promised Land. However, when Joshua issues his orders to the officers of the people, he immediately introduces an implied distinction between the Cisjordanian tribes and the Transjordanian tribes, indicating from the very outset that, as the story unfolds, there will be a significant concern over the identity and boundary markers of the people. Significantly, this tension between the Cisjordanian tribes and the Transjordanian tribes occurs here in the first chapter, where it is an ominous hint of what is to come, in the middle of the book in chapter 13, where it becomes more pronounced, and then again at the end of the book in chapter 22, where it reaches its climactic point of tension. Thus, the very fact that it occurs at the beginning, middle, and end of the book, with an escalating tension, indicates that this is a crucial structural feature of the book.

As the narrative moves into the second chapter, another tension begins to develop as well. At the end of chapter 1, the people indicate that they will do whatever Joshua has commanded them to do. They will be unswervingly faithful. But at the beginning of chapter 2 a number of narrative details immediately begin to cast doubts upon their fidelity. First, by sending spies into the land, Joshua adopts the strategy of his predecessor, which had turned out disastrously (Numbers 14). Second, the spies depart from Shittim, which itself has overtones of infidelity (Numbers 25). Third, the spies go to the house of a prostitute and lie down there, which is a typical euphemism for sexual intercourse. Whether they engage in any illicit behavior remains ambiguous; however, the text at the very least seems to hint in that direction. Thus, the narrative seems to be constructed to suggest at the outset that the Israelites are not acting faithfully, but unfaithfully. They are acting like Canaanites or Moabites, in short like non-Israelites.

However, as the chapter unfolds, there is someone who acts like an Israelite but surprisingly she is not. In fact, she is a paradigmatic outsider. She is a Canaanite. She is a woman. And she is a prostitute. Yet, despite all of this, she demonstrates the faith and the conduct of the model insider. This can be seen not only from the fact that she gives one of the clearest confessions of Yhwh-faith in the Old Testament but also from the fact that she is allowed to settle in the land on the very same terms as the Israelites themselves.² That is, she is allowed to remain in the land only because she acknowledges Yhwh as the true God, though she will forfeit that right if she does not remain faithful to the oath she has made to the Israelite spies. So, just as the issue of boundary markers among the tribes

² Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part I: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 89.

of Israel was raised in the first chapter, so in the second chapter there is the suggestion that a certain kind of porosity exists in the boundaries of Israel.

After the entire nation crosses the Jordan River, the issue of identity becomes central once again. The people are camped at Gilgal and the first commandment the Lord gives to the people through Joshua is to make flint knives and circumcise themselves, for all those born during the wilderness years had not yet been circumcised. In doing this, the Lord rolls back (the pun is significant) the reproach of Egypt from the people. Then, the very next thing the Israelites do is celebrate the Passover, the memorial meal of their exodus from Egypt. This is enormously significant. The fact that circumcision and Passover are at the center of their battle preparation indicates that entrance into the land is primarily about Israel's own identity as the people of God and their call to embody a new way of life in the land that leaves the reproach of Egypt behind.

Yet, once again, any simplistic notion of what that means is then immediately challenged. On the eve of the battle of Jericho, Joshua looks up and sees a man standing in front of him with a sword drawn in his hand. Wondering whether this man is friend or foe, Joshua naturally asks him, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" In other words, whose side are you on? But the man answers, "No. But as the commander of the army of the Lord I have now come," indicating that Joshua's categories do not work. The Lord is not simply for Israel and against the inhabitants of Jericho in a straightforward way. It is not simply us and them, with God being for us and against them. No, what matters is being aligned with Yhwh and his ways. That, not Israel's own ethnic identity, is what is determinative.

That is further reinforced in the fall of Jericho and its aftermath. When the city falls, Rahab proves her faithfulness and is thus spared and included in the community through her faithfulness. However, the reverse happens for a particular Israelite named Achan. He decides to take some of the devoted things and hide them in his tent. As a result, the ensuing battle against Ai is a dramatic failure. An investigation is held, Achan is identified, and then he, his family, and the devoted things he had taken are stoned and burned. Thus, Achan, though ethnically Israelite, ends up acting like, and therefore being treated like, a Canaanite. In fact, the contrast between Rahab and Achan is illuminating. Rahab is a woman, a Canaanite, and a prostitute; Achan is a man, an Israelite, and from the tribe of Judah, the largest and most politically powerful of all the tribes. In faithfulness to Yhwh and Israel, Rahab hid the spies; in faithlessness to Yhwh and Israel, Achan hid the devoted things. Rahab shows *hsd* and thus embodies covenant fidelity; Achan does *hmd* and thus embodies covenant infidelity. Thus, Rahab is the paradigmatic outsider who becomes included in the community and lives; Achan is the paradigmatic insider who becomes excluded from the community and dies.

Once Achan is purged from the community, Israel reengages in a battle with Ai and is successful. After the battle, a covenant ceremony is held at Mount Ebal. Significantly, the ceremony twice includes “aliens and citizens alike.” Once again, the lines are not necessarily drawn on a strict ethnic basis, indicating that Rahab and Achan are not unique cases. All who serve the Lord and follow in his ways, even aliens, are part of the people and can be included in his covenant.

But even the reversed status of Rahab and Achan does not mean that there are sharp lines of demarcation between the two groups. It is not simply that some insiders

become outsiders and some outsiders become insiders. The text then immediately raises the difficult status of the Gibeonites who are somewhat like Rahab and somewhat like Achan³ and therefore an ambiguous borderline case. As a result, they do not get the full benefit of the covenant but neither are they subjected to annihilation. Instead, they have a kind of liminal status, having the qualities of both Israelite and non-Israelite.⁴

Consequently, the Gibeonites are a reminder that defining identity is not always clean-cut. There are vagaries at the boundary lines and sometimes there are not easy resolutions to the questions this problem raises. Identity, therefore, cannot be defined too precisely.

However, the Gibeonites are also important because they provide a kind of foil to the Transjordanian tribes at the beginning and end of the book as well. Just as Rahab and Achan provide an important point of contrast (outsider but faithful, insider but unfaithful), so the Transjordanian tribes and the Gibeonites provide an important point of contrast too (right ethnicity but wrong location, right location but wrong ethnicity). But in both cases, the determining issue is their allegiance and alignment to Yhwh.⁵

After describing the southern campaign and the northern campaign, the narrator then lists the kings throughout the land that were defeated. Two things are striking about the list. First, the area covered is not only the territory of Cisjordan but also that of the Transjordan, adumbrating the issue that arises near the end of the book as to whether the Transjordanian tribes are truly part of Israel if they live geographically outside the land.

³ Douglas Earl helpfully catalogs the similarities to both. Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 157-158.

⁴ Ibid., 198-200.

⁵ Lori Rowlett, "Inclusion, Exclusion and Marginality in the Book of Joshua," *JSOT* 55 (1992): 17-19.

Here, there is already a hint of what the answer will be. Yes, they too are part of Israel. Second, there is a distinctive contrast between the plurality of the peoples in Canaan and the unity of the people of Israel.⁶ The implication is that the peoples and kings already in the land are self-interested and only come together when it is in their interest to do so. Israel, however, is a unified people who come together because of their common confession in Yhwh. They may be separate tribes but they are still one people bound together by their allegiance to him.

The conquest portion of the book (chapters 1-12) is followed by the allotment section of the book (chapters 13-21), in which the land is divided up among the tribes. In this section the reported speeches of Caleb in 14:6-12 and 15:18 and Achsah in 15:19 all address how it is that certain aliens (non-Israelites) received allotments in the land, once again indicating that the issue of identity cannot be constructed merely on an ethnic or tribal basis. Then, after the tribal territories are listed, the allocation of cities is described. However, it is surely strange that the cities of refuge are so numerous and occupy such a prominent place in this section of the book, leading one to wonder whether there could really have been that many accidental deaths. It seems unlikely, which raises the question of why the narrator would place the cities of refuge in this section. Perhaps it was less about what was actually needed for the tribes and more about what kind of community the tribes were supposed to be. That is, perhaps the list of these cities was supposed to

⁶ L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 176.

impress upon Israel then need for justice and a mutual interconnection among the tribes, which as one people would together be governed by God's law.⁷

The final section of the book (chapters 22-24) brings the theme of identity to its theological conclusion. After the allotment of the land, the Transjordanian tribes return home and the first thing they do is build an altar on the border of Canaan (22:1-11). Interestingly enough, it is unclear exactly where the altar is located. Verse 22:10 seems to indicate that it is built on the west side of the Jordan, while verse 22:11 seems to indicate that it is built on the east side of the Jordan. Elie Assis insightfully suggests that "the confusion may be intentional. After all, the story deals with the question of what the borders of the Land are and who may be included in Israel."⁸ In other words, the geographical ambiguity in the text is actually a literary reflection of the main issue at stake in the altar itself – determining what is in and what is out.

Hearing of the altar, the Cisjordanian tribes are immediately concerned and accuse the Transjordanian tribes of breaking faith, thus generating a conflict between the two. Ironically, both parties – the Transjordanian tribes and the Cisjordanian tribes – come into conflict with each other over the altar precisely because they are both concerned about preserving the unity of the nation. The Transjordanian tribes build the altar because they want to maintain their identity as part of Israel in the eyes of the Cisjordanian tribes. They are worried that in years to come inclusion in Israel will be defined by geographical boundaries and their children will be excluded. But the

⁷ Stephen B. Chapman, "Hebrew Exegesis of Joshua" (Doctoral Seminar, Duke University, Durham, March 26, 2012).

⁸ Elie Assis, "'For It Shall Be A Witness Between Us': A Literary Reading of Josh 22," *SJOT* 18 (2004): 217.

Cisjordanian tribes object to the altar because they see it as threatening their view of the tribes' collective identity and responsibility. Though both sides have legitimate concerns, the very conflict itself emphasizes how important the issue of identity is and how crucial tribal unity will be for the people. In the end, however, the comparative length of the two arguments, the tight logic of the Transjordanian counterclaim, and the eventual acceptance of the Transjordanian tribes' explanation by the Cisjordanian tribes seem to indicate that the narrator sides with the Transjordanian argument, for the simple reason that identity should not be defined geographically or even tribally but confessionally.⁹ In the end, the point being made by the narrative is that geography is not critical to identity. One can live outside the land and still be a faithful Israelite.¹⁰

Nevertheless, as has happened again and again in the book, affirmations of identity are then followed with complicating developments that force the reader to resist drawing the lines too sharply. In this case, the Cisjordanian tribes are initially scandalized by the action of the Transjordanian tribes because they see in it the error of Achan all over again. But actually, it turns out that the Cisjordanian tribes are the ones in danger of divine wrath and the Transjordanian tribes are not, once again calling into question any

⁹ Ibid., 226.

¹⁰ Interestingly, this coheres with James Sanders' theory, followed by Brevard Childs, of why the Pentateuch ends with the death of Moses and Israel outside the land. Based on the dominant theme of the promise of the land running throughout the Torah, nineteenth century literary critics were fond of speaking of a Hexateuch in order to include the fulfillment of that promise in the book of Joshua. However, the first five books have clearly been shaped as a canonical unit, raising the question of why the unit would end with the promise as yet unfulfilled. Sanders' suggestion was that this was an intentional message to the landless community in Babylonian exile, that possession of the land was not necessary for faith. Faith and faithfulness could exist outside the land. Though Sanders' based his argument on the earliness of creedal statements (which many scholars have preferred to date much later), the suggestion is still compelling from a canonical perspective and fits nicely with the development of this theme in Joshua. See James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1972). Cited in Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979), 131-132.

attempt to draw the lines of identity too cleanly. In the end, one may end up finding that the outsiders (in this case those outside the land) are actually regarded as insiders, while those who are insiders (those inside the land) are in danger of coming under judgment.¹¹

In sum, the theme of identity is continually raised and reframed through the narrative events of the book. Through the examples of Rahab, Achan, and aliens who had joined themselves to the community, the narrative makes clear that identity is not strictly based on ethnic makeup. Being ethnically Israelite is no guarantee against being excluded from the community, while being ethnically non-Israelite is not necessarily an impediment to being included. Moreover, through the examples of the Gibeonites, as well as the conflict between the Transjordanian tribes and the Cisjordanian tribes, the narrative makes clear that identity is not strictly based on geography either, nor is it always clear-cut. Sometimes there are liminal cases on the borders that make the issue of identity complex. Nevertheless, throughout the narrative the overriding concern is that identity is based ultimately on confessional grounds – on acknowledging Yhwh and living faithfully in his covenant. That is what marks someone as being part of the community.

Faith in the Power of God

Faith in the power of God is another significant theological theme in the book. In fact, the book begins with direct discourse from Yhwh to Joshua, hinting from the outset that the Lord will be the prime actor in what unfolds. In the discourse, the Lord assures Joshua that he will give to him every place where he sets his foot. No one will be able to

¹¹ Douglas S. Earl, *The Joshua Delusion?: Rethinking Genocide in the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 91-92.

stand up against Israel, for the Lord will be with them wherever they go. When Joshua relays this to the officers of the people, he emphasizes that they are to cross over the Jordan River because the Lord is already giving the land to them. Thus, the success of the upcoming campaign will primarily be the result of the Lord acting on the people's behalf. He is the one who will accomplish it.

This is reinforced in the following chapter when the spies slip into the city of Jericho. While doing their reconnaissance, they encounter the Canaanite prostitute Rahab who offers what turns out to be the most theologically pure confession in the book and one of the purist in the entire Old Testament. At the heart of her confession is an affirmation of the sovereignty of God in heaven above and on the earth below and his power to give the Israelites the land, as has already been demonstrated in his drying up the water of the sea and his defeat of Sihon and Og. Standing out as it does, the confession is not only the affirmation of Rahab, but of the book itself. This is the kind of faith one is supposed to have – to believe that Yhwh is the one who will give his people the land.

Indeed, it is exactly the kind of faith that the spies themselves take away from the encounter. When they return to Joshua, they say with confidence, “The Lord has surely given the whole land into our hands; all the people are melting in fear because of us” (2:24). That is particularly interesting not only because it reiterates the basis for the victory to come – the power of the Lord working on their behalf – but also because it reveals that they do not actually bring back any useful intelligence. From a human perspective, the reconnaissance mission has not provided them with any kind of military

advantage. Thus, when they cross into the land, they will still be entirely dependent on God's power to accomplish the victory for them.

This is seen even in the crossing itself. When the Israelites cross the Jordan River to enter the land, the event is depicted as a recapitulation of Moses and the exodus. Moses sent spies into the land and two came back with a good report, insisting that the Lord had given the land into their hands. Now, Joshua sends two spies into the land who both come back with a good report, insisting as well that the Lord has given the land into their hands. Moreover, there are other parallels as well. In Egypt the Israelites put the Passover blood on the doorposts of their houses as a protection against death; in Canaan Rahab (who acts like the quintessential Israelite in the story) puts a scarlet cord outside her house as a protection against death. In the future the celebration of the Passover is to be a sign to their children when they ask in the future; similarly, the memorial stones are erected at the Jordan to be a sign to their children when they ask in the future. In the exodus the sea was dried up so that the Israelites could cross over on dry land; in the same way, the Jordan River is dried up so that they could cross over on dry land. Thus, the portrayal of crossing into the land seems intended to evoke the exodus and therefore impart the expectation that Israel will succeed in the land only because of God's miraculous power that will go before them. Not surprisingly, then, as soon as the people cross over the Jordan, word immediately begins to spread to all the Amorite kings west of the Jordan and all the Canaanite kings along the coast of how the Lord had dried up the Jordan, causing their hearts to melt and their courage to collapse.

Once in the land the people begin to prepare for battle against the heavily fortified city of Jericho. That this is the first battle suggests that it has a certain paradigmatic

quality to it. However, the Israelites barely do anything at all. The defeat of Jericho is overwhelmingly divine and miraculous. This is indicated right from the beginning. Verse 6:1 emphasizes how tightly shut up the city was. It was impossible for anyone to go out and come in. That is, the wall around the city is, by all human estimations, impenetrable. But then immediately the Lord says to Joshua, “See, I have delivered Jericho into your hands, along with its king and its fighting men” (6:2). Significantly, this is said before anything has happened. All Joshua can see with his eyes is a fortified city with an impenetrable wall. But the Lord tells him to look and see that the city is already defeated. God has already won the victory. It is already as good as done, for the most fortified city and the most impenetrable wall have no hope of standing up against God’s power. Indeed, this is exactly what happens. The people march around the city and the priests carry the ark and blow the trumpets but it is God who brings down the walls.

This is in marked contrast to the very next battle against Ai. Whereas Jericho is a heavily fortified and impenetrable city, Ai is a small and weak city. In fact, its name means ruin. However, because of Achan’s sin, God does not fight for them and, without God fighting for them, Israel cannot stand even against the people of Ai. Indeed, now the Israelites become just like the peoples of the land; now they are the ones with hearts that are melting.

After the sin of Achan is addressed, the Lord tells Joshua to go back to the city of Ai for now the Lord will fight for them and they will be victorious. In fact, the beginning of chapter 8 parallels the beginning of chapter 6. In both, the Lord tells Joshua that he has already delivered the city into his hands. Then, the Lord draws an explicit connection between the two. He tells them to do to Ai and its king just as they did to Jericho and its

king. Then he follows it with a specific command to set an ambush behind the city, meaning that the people will have to walk around the city in a way loosely similar to the circumambulations at Jericho. Thus, the divine directive sets the expectation at the beginning. The kind of power they saw on display at Jericho, they are about to see again at Ai. And indeed, once again, the victory takes place before the slaughtering and burning, making clear that the Lord is the one who accomplishes the victory.

After the victory at Ai, the residents of Gibeon initiate a ruse against the Israelites that results in a covenant of peace between the two. But when Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem, hears of Joshua's victory against Ai and his covenant with Gibeon, he decides to call together four other kings and besiege the city of Gibeon. As a result, the city is in trouble. Even though it is an important city, like one of the royal cities, and even though it is larger than Ai and its inhabitants are good fighters, it is still outmatched by the five kings of the Amorites who are marching against it. Therefore, they send word to Joshua, asking for help. Yet, even though Joshua takes his entire army to Gibeon, including all his best fighting men, the victory, once again, is portrayed as overwhelmingly the act of God, the Divine Warrior. He tells Joshua at the outset that he does not need to be afraid for he has already given them into Joshua's hand. Indeed, not one of them will be able to stand against Joshua. Then, in the subsequent battle report, God is the subject of all the decisive actions. He causes confusion/panic, hurls large stones from heaven, and even stops the sun. The narrator reports twice that the Lord fought for Israel (10:14, 42) and twice that the victory comes because the Lord is the one who gave them into Joshua's/Israel's hands (10:8, 19). When Joshua moves on to the southern cities, those too are given into Israel's hand by the Lord and the summarizing statement at the end of

the chapter declares that “all these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the Lord, the God of Israel, fought for Israel” (10:42).

The same elements are utilized for the northern campaign as well. The chapter begins with a description of how great and powerful the enemy is. They come out “with all their troops and a large number of horses and chariots.” Indeed, it is a “huge army, as numerous as the sand on the seashore” (11:4). But again, the Lord tells Joshua not to be afraid because in the space of one day God will hand all of them over to Israel, slain and defeated. Again, with an economy of words, the narrator simply reports that Joshua and his whole army went out against them and attacked them and “the Lord gave them into the hand of Israel” (11:8). In fact, just as he once hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order to deliver the people of Israel from the slavery in Egypt, so he now hardens the local kings’ hearts who come out against Israel in battle so that they might be completely destroyed.

In the allotment section of the book (chapters 13-21), the same kind of emphasis is found. The section begins with the admission that large parts of each tribal area still remain to be taken. Nevertheless, these parts too will come into Israel’s possession for the Lord declares that he will be the one to drive out the people before the Israelites. Then the tribal allotment section concludes with the summarizing perspective, “So the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the Lord handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the Lord’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled” (21:43-45). In other words, the entire gift of the land, which is mapped

in the allotment section, is portrayed as the fulfillment of God's promises and accomplished by God's power.

In the final section of the book, the theme is brought to its climactic expression. Joshua's farewell speech begins by reminding the people that the Lord is the one who fought for them and accomplished the victories over the nations in the land. Then he reminds them that, as they continue to try to take possession of the rest of the land, it will be the Lord their God who will drive the nations out of their way. At the end of the speech Joshua concludes by reminding them once again that not one of all the good promises that the Lord their God gave them has failed, indicating that all the success they have had throughout the entire book has been due to the Lord faithfully and powerfully keeping his promises to them.

The book ends with a covenant renewal at Shechem, with the narrative preamble indicating that Israel's very existence is more the result of what God has done for them than what they as a people have done. Long ago Abraham was worshipping other gods but it was the Lord who took him, led him throughout Canaan, and gave him many descendants. When Israel was suffering helplessly in Egypt, it was the Lord who afflicted the Egyptians and brought them out of Egypt. When Israel had come to the sea and was trapped by the pursuing Egyptians, it was the Lord who drowned the Egyptians in the sea. When the Amorites fought against Israel, it was the Lord who gave them into Israel's hand. When Balak prepared to fight against Israel and enlisted Balaam to curse them, it was the Lord who forced Balaam to bless them instead. When Israel crossed into the land, it was the Lord who delivered the inhabitants of the land into their hands. Indeed, it was because the Lord sent the hornet ahead of them, not because of Israel's sword or

bow. Therefore, Israel now dwells in a land on which they did not toil, live in cities they did not build, and eat from vineyards and olive groves they did not plant. The people then agree with this interpretation of their history and, in their answer, they commit themselves to serving the Lord by rehearsing all the things the Lord has done for them and by giving a threefold commitment of loyalty. Even when Joshua contradicts them, telling them that they are not able to serve the Lord, it only highlights the contrast between the Lord's ability to keep his promises and the people's inability to keep theirs.

Combatting Idolatry and Worshipping Yhwh

Another significant theological theme in the book is the dichotomy between worshipping other gods and worshipping Yhwh and the urgent imperative to cut off the former and embrace the latter. Throughout the early chapters of the book, the narrative contains several indications of how easily the people are drawn away from Yhwh through their contact with Canaan. In chapter 2, the first Israelites who enter the land to spy it out immediately enter the house of a prostitute and lie down, a morally ambiguous action at the very least and an ominous indication that Israel will be susceptible to the temptations that will confront them in the land. In chapter 7, Achan finds the treasures of Jericho too tempting to resist. In chapter 9, the Israelite leaders are easily deceived by the Gibeonites and are thus lured into a compromised position. All these examples highlight the weakness and susceptibility of the Israelites to the allure of other gods.

Therefore, the Israelites are to carry out *herem* as they conquer the land. Though *herem* was certainly a practice in the ancient Near East, its literary function within the

book of Joshua is to drive home the need to reject idolatry and to worship Yhwh, the one true God. As John Goldingay has concluded, Israel

knew it was not to assume a literalistic understanding of the Deuteronomic command to devote the Canaanites. Moses did not mean the instruction, and Joshua did not feel bound by it; or rather, Moses absolutely meant it, but also meant it not to be taken literally. Literally, Israel was to dispossess the Canaanites and destroy their forms of religion and have nothing to do with them; metaphorically or hyperbolically, it was to give them over to Yahweh. . . . The commission to devote the Canaanites is chiefly an expression of how radically Israel must avoid being influenced by Canaanite religion, or how radically it should have avoided it.¹²

Thus, even though explicit references to idolatry in the book of Joshua are relatively few, the significant presence of *herem* in the book indicates that it is in fact a central concern.

Moreover, the highly liturgical and sacral character of many of the narratives indicates the same thing. This is most clearly seen during the entrance into the land and first battle after entering the land. When the people enter the land, the moment of crossing the Jordan River is marked by two things, the consecration of the people and the procession of the ark of the covenant ahead of the people. This makes clear to the people that their presence in the land is predicated on their willingness to set themselves apart to God and to follow where he leads.

When the people come to the city of Jericho, it is the liturgical actions, not the military actions, of the people, particularly the priests as they blow their horns, that usher in the divine victory. Then, in the aftermath, the Israelites keep away from the devoted things so that they will not bring about their own destruction by taking them. Instead, the city and all that is in it (excepting Rahab and her family) are devoted to the Lord,

¹² John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology, Volume 3: Israel's Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 571.

meaning that they are to be put to the sword. As for the silver, gold, articles of bronze and iron, they are to be treated as sacred to the Lord and placed into his treasury. Then the whole city is burned. Thus, similar to the portrayal of the people's entrance into the land, the victory at Jericho is described as an act of worship and the elimination of idolatry.

The next battle then portrays just how dangerous even a little idolatry is. After the battle of Jericho Achan decides to keep some of the devoted things for himself. So he takes them and hide them in his tent. The result is that Israel suffers a stunning defeat against a much weaker foe. This highlights an important theological point. Even a little idolatry, committed by only one person, tucked away privately in his tent, is still enough to bring disaster on the whole people. That is the danger of idolatry and false worship. Therefore, through the events, the Lord makes clear that syncretism is not an option. Taking the devoted things of the Canaanites and experiencing the presence of the Lord are mutually exclusive. The only remedy is for the people to re-consecrate themselves to the Lord and purge the devoted things from their midst.

Once the people do this things go much better. The people go up against Ai again but this time they are successful. To make the contrast clear the ending of chapter 8 parallels the ending of chapter 7. At the end of chapter 7, Joshua stones Achan and his family and then burns the devoted things. At the end of chapter 8, Joshua erects a stone altar and then burns sacrifices to the Lord. Taken together, they picture what devotion should be – purging the corrupting vestiges of the Canaanites and serving the Lord in the way that Moses had prescribed.

However, when the Gibeonites concoct a ruse in order to deceive their way into a treaty with Israel, Joshua is put in a thorny position. Allowing them to live would violate

the command to wipe out the inhabitants of the land, while putting them to death would violate the oath they had unwittingly made with the Gibeonites. Joshua's solution is to allow them to live but to subjugate them. However, what is theologically revealing is the role Joshua gives them. He makes them woodcutters and water carriers for the community and for the altar of the Lord at the place the Lord would choose. In other words, if pagan people are going to become a part of the Israelite community, they must become servants of the Lord and contributors to his worship.

In the allotment section of the book, the exclusive worship of Yhwh is embedded in the very act of dividing the land. When the tribal allotments are determined at Shiloh, they are done by lot, in front of the Tent of Meeting, in the presence of the Lord. This gives a certain kind of sacral quality to the organization of Israel in the land. As Gordon McConville has observed, "the conjunction of [the Tent of Meeting and the place of Shiloh] ... focuses attention on the nature of Israel as a worshipping community in covenant relationship with Yahweh."¹³ Moreover, as Mikhail Selznev has argued, instead of conforming to precise administrative boundaries, the geographical markers and boundary lines follow an imprecise itinerary-like tour through the land, suggesting that the division of the land in the book is less about offering a detailed coherent geographical map and more about imagining it as a kind of sacral geography.¹⁴ In other words, the

¹³ J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams, *Joshua*, THOTC (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 74.

¹⁴ Mikhail G. Selznev, "The Origin of the Tribal Boundaries in Joshua: Administrative Documents or Sacral Geography?" in *Memoriae Igor M. Diakonoff*, ed. L. Kogan, et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 330-361, especially 349-353.

apportioning of the land and the organization of Israel in it is meant to shape them into a worshipping community that is devoted to Yhwh.

In the final section of the book, the issue of exclusive worship comes to a climax. When the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh build an altar, the Cisjordanian tribes send Phinehas along with ten of the chief men from the other tribes to confront them. Already the prominence of Phinehas, as well as the reference to the sin of Peor, shows some sort of inter-textuality with Numbers 25, a passage that is concerned deeply about Israel's susceptibility to idolatry. When these eleven representatives go to the Transjordanian Israelites, their first concern is that this seems to break faith with the God of Israel. In fact, they pile up phrases to drive this home. It is breaking faith, turning away from the Lord (stated twice), and rebellion against him (stated three times). As their criticism continues, they are clearly working with the assumption that there should be only one altar and that should be the one of the Lord their God. From a historical-critical perspective, that would suggest a background in the Josianic reform movement. From a literary perspective, it also highlights the absolute necessity of pure worship among all the tribes. This is reinforced again at the resolution of the episode when, upon reaching a mutual understanding, it is Phinehas who says to the Transjordanian tribes that the Lord is indeed with both the Cisjordanian tribes and the Transjordanian tribes and that they have acted faithfully in the matter, a reaction very different from the one he takes in Numbers 25. As a result, the Transjordanian tribes name the altar "A Witness Between Us that the Lord is God," emphasizing that the Lord is the true God who binds all the tribes together.

The book then concludes with two chapters that function as a kind of commentary on the continuing significance of *herem*, namely that Israel is to remain loyal by separating itself from idolatry and the worship of other gods.¹⁵ First, in chapter 23, Joshua's farewell speech implores the people not to "mix with the nations remaining among them or make mention of the names of their gods or swear by them or bow down to them" (23:7). Instead, they are to be very careful to love the Lord their God, cling to him, and obey all that he has commanded them (stated twice; 23:8, 11). If they do not, then they will no longer have success in the future. Instead, the other nations will become snares and traps for them, whips on their backs and thorns in their eyes, until they eventually perish from the land. Finally, the speech ends with the ominous words, "When you transgress the covenant of Yhwh your God, which he commanded you, and you go and serve other gods, and bow down to them, then the wrath of Yhwh will burn against you, and you will disappear quickly from the good land which he gave you" (23:16).¹⁶ In other words, the book already envisions the continuing struggle against idolatry, Israel's eventual failure, and their removal from the land.

Nevertheless, this impending tragedy leads into the final chapter of the book, which seems to be crafted in such a way as to encourage not only the Israelites within the narrative but the Israelites who are reading the narrative to shun the worship of other gods and to render complete allegiance and commitment to Yhwh alone. To begin with, the very fact that this final covenant ceremony takes place at Shechem is significant.

¹⁵ Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, 197.

¹⁶ L. Daniel Hawk's translation in L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1991), 116.

After all, Shechem was the very place where Jacob (Israel) put away foreign gods (Genesis 35:14) after a disastrous incident of intermingling with people in the land that resulted in their extermination.¹⁷ This is more than just coincidental, for Joshua's words in verse 23 ("put away the foreign gods that are with you") are almost exactly the same as Jacob's words in Genesis 35:2.

Moreover, the historical prologue of the covenant ceremony is a rehearsal of the Lord's work but with the careful selection of events to showcase the Lord's superiority over, and preferability to, his three main rivals. As Richard Nelson notes,

Right from the beginning, this review is designed to pilot both audience and reader to a climactic decision for Yahweh. Each of Israel's three alternate options, Mesopotamian, Egyptian, or Amorite gods (vv. 14-15), are prepared for and dismissed as absurd. Abraham was taken from the territory of the gods beyond the Euphrates (v. 2). The Egyptians were humiliated by the events of the exodus (vv. 5-7). The Amorites were destroyed, Balaam was coopted, the masters of Jericho and the seven nations were defeated.... In contrast to their ineffective gods, Yahweh has been consistently in control of events for Israel's sake, graciously leading, increasing, defending, prevailing, and giving.¹⁸

Based on this, the people are then urged to "fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness" (24:14). They are to put away false gods and worship Yhwh exclusively. And then Joshua issues them a pointed challenge, making clear what he himself has already chosen: "Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell, but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (24:15). When the people respond that they will serve the Lord, Joshua corrects them. No, they will not be

¹⁷ Hawk, *Joshua*, 261.

¹⁸ Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 269.

able to serve the Lord! But the people double down on their choice, prompting Joshua to issue his challenge once again. “Put away the foreign gods that are among you and incline your heart to the Lord” (24:23). When the people reaffirm once more that they will serve the Lord alone, Joshua makes a covenant with them and sets up a stone as a witness against them if they deal falsely with the Lord.

Thus, the book slowly builds its case against idolatry and false gods on the one hand and its case for exclusive devotion to Yhwh on the other. Idols and false gods, even in small amounts, are portrayed as dangerous – not just to individuals who serve them but indeed for the entire community – while Yhwh is portrayed as the one worthy of Israel’s worship. Therefore, they are to consecrate themselves to him, follow him, and worship him alone. Of course, this will be a continual struggle and Israel will fail in it but that is why it is so important to “choose this day” (indeed every day) whom you will worship and serve – Yhwh or other gods.

Bold and Courageous Obedience as the Path to Rest

Finally, bold and courageous obedience is also a significant theological theme in the book. The book begins with the Lord speaking to Joshua, telling him and the people of Israel to cross over the Jordan River into the land that he is giving them. This will be to fulfill the promise he made to Moses. The very next command is for Joshua to be strong and courageous and this command is given three times (1:6, 7, 9), signaling that it is not only at the very heart of Joshua’s call and leadership of the people but also that it will be a dominant theme in the events that follow in the land. However, what is surprising is that, even though the context suggests that these commands are for the military

engagements that lie ahead, the text indicates that this strength and courage is not for military battle but for obedience to the Law of Moses! This kind of theologizing of instructions for military preparation suggests at the very outset of the book that what matters most is not so much physical prowess or martial skill but spiritual fortitude and Torah obedience.¹⁹ That is what will yield success in the campaign ahead.

That same emphasis continues when Joshua passes down the command to the officers of the people. In particular, when he reminds the Transjordanian tribes of their obligation to cross over and help their brothers until they have taken possession of the land and experience rest, the emphasis is on remembering the promise of the land they have received through Moses. In response, they bind themselves with the most extreme form of commitment to obedience – whoever does not obey what Joshua has commanded will be put to death. They then conclude with words to Joshua that have become a refrain throughout chapter 1, “Be strong and courageous!” (1:18).

Immediately after the people cross the Jordan the Lord tells Joshua to choose one man from each tribe to take twelve stones from the middle of the Jordan to serve as a memorial for future generations. In the following verses, the formula “X did as Y commanded/told/directed” occurs four times (4:8 [2x], 10, 12), emphasizing the strict obedience of the people as they crossed into the land. The effect of this refrain is to characterize the people’s entrance into the land – and therefore life in the land – as based upon their obedience to the Lord’s commands.

¹⁹ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford, U.K., Clarendon, 1985), 384.

This is reinforced as well by the first command issued to the people once they are in the land, namely that Joshua is to make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel. The reason given is because all the people born in the desert had not been circumcised, a season of which is characterized as one of disobedience. Thus, the circumcision of the next generation is an act of initial obedience before anything else is done, implying again that obedience must be central to their life in the land.

The people's first battle against the city of Jericho makes the same point. Jericho was a paradigmatically strong city. From the Neolithic period onward, the city was well-fortified, leading Michael Coogan to suggest that there may have been a folk-tradition about Jericho as a quintessentially impregnable city.²⁰ Because of this, as well as its geographical location, it could be viewed as the gateway to the rest of Canaan and the decisive key to the entire conquest. Nevertheless, the Lord tells Joshua that the city of Jericho has already been delivered into his hands. To make that a reality, Joshua is to march around the city for six days, with priests carrying trumpets in front of the ark, and then on the seventh day to march around the city seven times. Then the wall will collapse and the city will be defeated. This, of course, hardly seems like good military strategy. Yet Joshua follows the instructions exactly. As a result, the wall of the city collapses and the city is defeated. The point is once again clear: the key to victory and rest in the land is not military strength but obedience to the Lord's commands.

²⁰ Michael David Coogan, "Archaeology and Biblical Studies: The Book of Joshua" in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, ed. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 22.

The next battle serves as a foil to the battle of Jericho, showing that the inverse is also true. This is the disastrous defeat in the battle at Ai, which is caused by the disobedience of Achan and is indicated from the very first verse of the chapter. Literarily, verse 7:1 seems out of place. It would be more natural for the narrative to move straight from 6:27 to 7:2, with Achan's transgression being revealed as the story unfolds. Instead, the identification of Achan at the very beginning of the chapter brings to the front the central issue in what follows – Achan's disobedience and the catastrophic results of it.

Then, after fronting the notice of Achan's disobedience, the narrator records the advance on Ai and the subsequent defeat. The Lord then informs Joshua what the reader has known since verse 1 – that the disobedience of someone in Israel is responsible for the defeat, though Joshua does not yet know the identity of the person. However, the Lord's words to Joshua are especially revealing because he charges Israel with transgressing (*'br*) his covenant. Up to this point *'br* has been used entirely in a geographic sense (“cross/pass over”) – Joshua passing through the midst of the camp, the spies passing back over to Joshua, Israel crossing over the Jordan, the people passing over to the plains of Jericho. In chapters 1-6, the root is used thirty-six times. But here, for the first time, it is used in the moral sense of transgressing the covenant. The point seems to be that there are two kinds of crossing over. Israel can be obedient and follow Yhwh, in which case they will keep moving and nothing will be able to stop them. Or they can be disobedient, transgressing the covenant, in which case all of that will come to a grinding halt. Thus, the battles of Jericho and Ai, as the first two battles in the land, provide an important contrast. Jericho is a heavily fortified city but the people are obedient to God and therefore it falls easily. Ai literally means ‘ruin’ but the people are

disobedient (more precisely, one man is disobedient but it compromises the entire community) and therefore they are defeated.

After Achan is punished for his disobedience and the people are consecrated, the Lord issues them a new command, with the pattern of a divine command beginning a passage being resumed (as in the earlier chapters 1, 4, 5, and 6). In this command he tells the people not to be afraid (a recapitulation of his command at the beginning of the book to Joshua) and to go up once again to Ai for he has already given into their hand the king of Ai, the people, the city, and the land. Having learned the lesson, Joshua is emphatic that the people do exactly what the Lord has commanded them and set an ambush for the city. This they do, setting an ambush and defeating the city. After the victory, however, Joshua builds an altar according to the Book of the Law of Moses, offers sacrifices, and then reads the Book of the Law, with its blessings and curses, to the people. The purpose is to impress upon the people what they should learn from the incident at Ai going forward. Obedience is the key to victory and rest in the land.²¹

As the people proceed through their southern campaign, they seem to have learned their lesson. They begin by defeating the five Amorite kings who have come against them, with the narrator indicating that this military engagement was carried out in the pattern of Jericho. Then the narrative chronicles the subsequent victories in quick order, with a kind of formulaic cadence, leading Douglas Earl to suggest that “the

²¹ Christopher Begg notes that this is also reinforced by the parallels to Deuteronomy 1:19-3:11. Both use a very similar schema. The enemy advances towards Israel, Israel defeats the enemy, *herem* is applied to the enemy population, and the enemy cattle are taken as spoil. Moreover, both use the phrase “melt the heart” in the context of holy war and both combine “go up” and “spy out” in their descriptions. The point of the Deuteronomist seems to be to reinforce the idea that possession of the land is never a sure thing, but is dependent upon ongoing obedience. Christopher T. Begg, “The Function of Josh 7,1-8,29 in the Deuteronomistic History,” *Biblica* 67 (1986): 324-325.

repetitive, formulaic and stylized narrative of 10:29-42 emphasises obedience resulting in the easy sweep of conquest through the land, culminating in the report that ‘Joshua subdued the land’ (10:40).”²²

The northern campaign shows the same emphasis. Though in some ways chapter 11 tends to be the most troubling episode in the book, it is significant that Joshua’s conquest of northern Canaan is explicitly described as an act of punctilious obedience. Before the battle the Lord instructs Joshua to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots. Then, Joshua does to them just as the Lord had commanded him. He hamstringing their horses and burns their chariots. He continues by capturing cities, putting their kings and inhabitants to the sword, and taking the land. Four times the narrator reports that in doing all of this Joshua was doing just as he had been commanded (11:12, 15, 20, 23). As a result of this scrupulous obedience, the Lord gives the land to the tribes as an inheritance. The end result is given in the final statement of the chapter, “Then the land had rest from war” (11:23), which is then followed in chapter 12 by a sweeping and comprehensive catalog of the kings who had been defeated throughout the land, indicating that the sources of antagonism to Israel had been subdued.

Nevertheless, the idealized sense of complete obedience and total conquest is not entirely accurate. Along the way, there have been indications that Israel has failed to exterminate the inhabitants completely or take the whole land (e.g., 9:14-27; 11:19, 22). Indeed, in the second section of the book (chapters 13-21), the reader learns that there is in fact quite a bit of land in every tribal area that still needs to be taken (13:1-5; and then

²² Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, 165.

later in 15:63; 16:10; 17:11-12; 19:47). This has a kind of rhetorical force to it – what God has already promised and provided, Israel is to accomplish through continued obedience. There is still work to be done. The need for obedience is not yet over.

As with the other dominant themes of the book, the final section (chapters 22-24) brings the theme of bold and courageous obedience to its climactic expression. After the conquest and division of the land, the Transjordanian tribes return to their portions with great wealth and plunder which they had acquired in accordance with the command of the Lord. As they return to their land, they are charged to continue in the same way – to keep the commandment and the law that Moses gave them: to love the Lord their God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all their heart and all their soul.

In Joshua's farewell speech, obedience plays a central function, containing strong echoes of the speech at the beginning of the apportionment section (13:1-7) since they both focus on what remains.²³ Moreover, it also has strong echoes with the beginning of the conquest section as well (1:2-8) since both focus on the theme of rest in the land.²⁴ In other words, rest is the goal of the conquest as well as the overall orientation of the book and it can only be achieved through obedience to Yhwh in the matters of what still remains.²⁵ This exhortatory purpose is what the entire tension between the statements suggesting a complete conquest and the statements indicating incomplete conquest have

²³ Hawk, *Joshua*, 247.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Douglas Earl insightfully points out the *herem* is absent from this farewell speech, indicating that its "first-order sense relating to annihilation recedes into the background", leaving only "the second-order sense of separation, particularly from idolatry." Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, 185.

been driving toward – that ongoing obedience will be the key to the fulfillment of the Lord’s promises in the future.

This reaches an even greater rhetorical force in the final chapter of the book with the covenant ceremony at Shechem in which the people must choose whether they will serve the Lord or other gods. This brings the theme of bold and courageous obedience to its fullest expression. From the beginning the book has pressed the issue of how people respond but as the narrative unfolds there are frequent surprises. Sometimes the people expected to respond rightly do not and the people not expected to respond rightly do. Moreover, there are both incidences of faithful obedience and incidences of tragic disobedience. As a result, the book ends by pressing the issue on the people (and thus implicitly on the reader as well): you have to choose what kind of people you will be and whom you will serve! Of course, the question is not posed in a naively idealistic way; Joshua reminds them of how they are not able to follow through on their choice, suggesting to the readers as well that they should not be too quick to answer. But the question must be answered nevertheless and how they answer as well as how they live out that answer will ultimately determine their future. If they choose the path of Achan, they will suffer defeat and ultimately expulsion from the land, as they eventually did in the exile. However, if they choose the path of Joshua and his house, if they choose to serve the Lord and walk in his ways, then their future will be entirely different. For bold and courageous obedience is the only path to rest in the land.

PART THREE
MINISTRY PRACTICE

CHAPTER 6

PREACHING JOSHUA TO SHAPE THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Applying the book of Joshua theologically to the mission of the church requires special care due to how easy it has been to misunderstand its message and thus misappropriate it in ways that are contrary to the teachings of Jesus. As Samuel Wells has noted,

The early church believed that its own fragile and vulnerable state was deceptive. In fact, Christ had conquered the powers by his death and resurrection and ruled as sovereign. They demonstrated this faith by maintaining nonviolence, the practice of confronting evil using only the weapons that Christ himself used... Their form of life was dictated by no criterion other than faithfulness to Christ.¹

However, once Christianity became the religion of the empire,

the new Christian empire ... challenged the commitment to nonviolence. Loyalty to empire became the test of loyalty to Christ. One could hardly be loyal to the empire if one was not prepared to fight on its behalf; and in any case the struggles of the empire were in the service of Christ. Thus, whereas for the early church faith in God's sovereignty was expressed by nonviolence, for the church under the Christian empire faith in God's sovereignty required fighting God's battles.²

¹ Samuel Wells, *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2004), 25.

² Ibid.

Wells' comment highlights two challenges the theological appropriation of Joshua for the mission of the church must overcome. First, on the surface there appears to be a dissonance between the advancement of God's kingdom through violence in the book of Joshua and the advancement of God's kingdom through nonviolence in the early church. Second, there can be misguided concurrence between the advancement of God's kingdom through violence in the book of Joshua and the advancement of God's kingdom through power and force in an empire-based faith.

This has been reinforced by reformation appropriations of the book of Joshua that drew an analogy between Joshua and the kings and rulers of Christian nations as they attempt to enforce the kingdom through the administration of the state. For example, John Calvin characterized Joshua as a saintly civil magistrate among a free people, whose function was approved by the Lord.³ As another example, in the late sixteenth century Huguenot tract *Vindiciae, contra Tyrannos*, which outlines how people should respond to the king, Joshua is used as an example of how a king should govern his people according to law lest they fall under the reign of tyrants.⁴

To overcome these two challenges requires not only a nuanced theological interpretation of Joshua but also a more sensitive way of applying that theology to the church. One way to do that is by developing a homiletical approach to the book that will appropriate those theological themes in a way that shapes the church for its mission in the world. To do that responsibly, each of the theological themes needs to be followed

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1490. Book IV. Chapter XX. Section. 4.

⁴ Cited in Oliver O'Donovan and J. Lockwood O'Donovan, eds. *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: MI; Eerdmans, 1999), 715.

through the New Testament's vision for the church's mission and then carefully applied to the church's missional context today.

Preaching a Reframed Identity

In the book of Joshua the theme of identity is continually raised and then reframed. The example of Rahab and Achan shows that identity is not based on ethnicity. Being ethnically Israelite is no guarantee against exclusion, while being ethnically non-Israelite does not automatically keep one from being included. Similarly, the example of the Gibeonites, as well as the conflict between the Transjordanian tribes and the Cisjordanian tribes, shows that identity is not based on geography either, nor is it always clear-cut. Sometimes there are borderline cases that make the issue of identity complex. In the end, identity is based on confessional grounds – on acknowledging the Lord and living faithfully in his covenant. Those who do so are part of the community.

In the Gospel of Matthew a similar kind of juxtaposition takes place in the immediate build up to the crucifixion of Jesus. Just as Rahab and Achan are juxtaposed in Joshua, Matthew juxtaposes the woman with the alabaster flask and Judas (Matthew 26:6-16). She is a woman, a prostitute, and an outsider; he is a man, one of the twelve, and an insider. Yet she gives something of great cost out of love for Jesus, while he takes something of relatively little cost in order to betray Jesus. As a result, her act is the one that becomes the everlasting picture of the gospel (vv. 12-13), much as Rahab's confession becomes paradigmatic within the book of Joshua; while he suffers from judgment ending in death, much as Achan himself did. The literary implication is that this reframing of identities is right at the heart of what the cross accomplishes.

Indeed, this fits into a major theme of Matthew's Gospel. The Gospel begins with the genealogy of Jesus, which unusually and notably contains the names of four women, one of whom is Rahab herself (the other three are Tamar, Ruth, and the wife of Uriah the Hittite). Moreover, these four women are all non-Israelite – Tamar is a Canaanite, Rahab is also a Canaanite, Ruth is a Moabite, and Bathsheba is presumably a Hittite (since she was married to Uriah). Not only that but all four women have something scandalous in their stories. Tamar plays a prostitute to seduce her own father-in-law. Rahab, of course, is a prostitute who entertains the spies sent into the land. Ruth does something on the threshing floor that motivates Boaz to go make it right at the city gates as soon as possible. And Bathsheba is the woman of King David's adulterous affair. Yet the Gospel of Matthew includes all four of them in the lineage of Christ, as if to make the point right from the beginning that Jesus has the blood of the nations – and scandalous blood at that – running through his veins. That introduction is then followed by another contrast similar to that of Rahab and Achan, namely the contrast between Gentile wise men from the east who come and worship the Christ-child juxtaposed with the local King Herod who wants to put him to death. Outsiders worship Jesus; insiders plot against him.

The same pattern continues throughout his ministry. He praises the faith of a Canaanite (!) woman (Matthew 15:21-28) but pronounces woes on the scribes and the Pharisees (Matthew 23:1-36). He is loved by the socially marginal – the lepers, the demon-possessed, and the poor – but he is rejected by Jerusalem itself (Matthew 23:37-39). He is believed upon by a centurion (Matthew 8:5-13) but he is rejected by his own hometown (Matthew 13:53-57). Again and again, the lines get redrawn. Those who are outsiders find themselves becoming insiders, while those who are insiders end up

becoming outsiders. In all of it the determining factor is not one's race, gender, social standing, or geographical location but one's relationship to Jesus.

By the end of the Gospel, then, it is not surprising that Jesus tells his disciples to go into all the nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey all that he has commanded them (Matthew 28:18-20). Thus, the book that began with the nations being funneled into the bloodlines of Jesus now ends with Jesus sending his disciples back out to the nations to herald the good news. The effect is, once again, to redraw the boundary lines of identity, not along race, gender, socioeconomics, or geography but around the person of Jesus himself.

Therefore, the church is called to be a community in which the lines of identity are redrawn around faith in Jesus, rather than race, gender, socioeconomics, or geography. Through the blood of Christ those who were formerly excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenant of promise are now brought near and are made one with those who were formerly included in the citizenship in Israel and partakers of the covenant (Ephesians 2:12-14). This was made possible because Jesus Christ, through his death on the cross, has destroyed the barrier between the two and torn down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). Thus, both Israelites and Gentiles are brought together as one people, united to Christ and constituting one new man (Ephesians 2:15). Or, as Paul puts it in his letter to the Romans, the Gentiles have been grafted into the olive tree of Israel and now share in the same nourishing sap (Romans 11:17). Moreover, it is not just the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile that has been torn down but also the dividing walls between slave and free, and male and female (Galatians 3:26-29). However, this is not so much a universalist vision but a Christo-

centric one. It is in Christ that Jews and Gentiles are brought together and become part of one people; Jews and Gentiles who are outside of Christ are not part of this one new people (Romans 11:11, 19-21). The same, by implication, would be true for slave and free, as well as for male and female. The determining factor is one's relation to Jesus. In him, those who were outsiders – whether by ethnicity (Gentiles), socioeconomics (slave), or gender (female) – become insiders; outside of him, those who were insiders – whether by ethnicity (Jews), socioeconomics (free), or gender (male) – become outsiders. All the lines are redrawn around him.⁵ He is the center and the basis for identity.

It is precisely this reframing of identity that shapes the missionary activity of the church in the New Testament. In the book of Acts the mission of the church is pictured as taking the gospel outward to the nations, like ripples in a pond. Thus, the followers of Jesus begin in Jerusalem and then carry the gospel outward to Judea and Samaria and then out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). As the gospel goes out it continues to redraw the lines of identity, with insiders becoming outsiders and outsiders becoming insiders. On the one hand, Ananias and Sapphira (much like Achan) keep part of the money for themselves and therefore are struck down in judgment for their actions (Acts 5:1-11). On the other hand, Saul is arrested by Christ through a vision on the road to Damascus and called to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:1-19). This same theme plays out again and again – through Peter's vision of a sheet coming down to earth by its four corners (Acts 10:9-22), through Paul's own missionary journeys, and through the council of

⁵ For an extensive discussion of how the identity of God's people is reworked around Jesus (and the Spirit), see N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 4 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 774-1042.

Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35). Just as in the book of Joshua, those who have a genealogical pedigree within the people of God sometimes find themselves to be outsiders and those who do not have that pedigree end up becoming insiders through faith in Jesus and responsiveness to God.

Preaching the book of Joshua, then, should shape the church in light of this reality. Many in the church have constructed their identity primarily in terms of their nationality, race, political views, vocations, education level, and social circles, not by their relation to Jesus. Simply noticing the way many in the church relate to other people reveals how true this is. For instance, a white man in the church who subscribes to political nationalism may feel more affinity for, and relate easier to, a secular atheist who is also white and politically conservative than he would to an African-American Christian woman who is politically progressive, supports those kneeling for the national anthem, and participates in the Black Lives Matter movement. In doing so, he shows that the gender, racial, and political aspects of his identity are ultimately more determinative for him than his Christian identity.

Therefore, preaching the book of Joshua must help the church to reconstruct its identity by challenging those frameworks of identity which are so natural and so strongly entrenched, but this must be done sensitively and winsomely for the very reason that these identity constructs are usually deeply held and often emotionally charged. To begin challenging them can seem like an attack on those things that are most cherished. As a result, overcoming this challenge is best approached by focusing on the utter graciousness of God's inclusiveness (as seen in someone like Rahab) and the radical way that the gospel remakes the church into a community of very different people who are

held together by their union with Christ and therefore their union with one another. That is, preaching the book of Joshua must draw out the theme of reframing identity, traced through the New Testament, in order to help people see that “the church itself is not made up of natural ‘friends.’ It is made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together... because... they have all been loved by Jesus himself.... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus’ sake.”⁶ That is, to help the church move toward a Christo-centric understanding of identity, the preacher should not engage in a frontal attack on other identity frameworks; that will just provoke defensiveness and an escalation of emotions. Instead, the preacher should highlight the way that the book of Joshua, refracted through the gospel, should shape the church to be a community that overcomes divisions and barriers and expresses a unity that transcends race, gender, socioeconomics, and politics, that bases their identity primarily on confessional and Christological grounds rather than on racial, gender, socioeconomic, or political grounds. As the church begins to understand this way of constructing their identity and starts to look for ways to express this – to include the Christ-confessing Rahabs of the world, though they may be very different and even be a natural enemy – the old frameworks and constructs will begin to fall on their own. It will often be a slow deconstruction but over time the church’s identity will get reframed in a way that the book of Joshua (and the New Testament) envisions.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 61.

Preaching Faith in the Power of God

A casual reading of the book of Joshua may give the impression of a violent military conquest. However, a closer reading of the book suggests that not only is the martial aspect of the narrative employed as a metaphorical way of talking about the religious life but the most critical factor for success in battle is faith in the power of God. Throughout the book victory is achieved through divine action, not human strength or ability. At times that requires the people to lift up the sword and fight, though even then they must do so believing in God's prior promise and depending on him to grant them the victory. However, at other times the people do virtually nothing at all (as at Jericho) and what they do actually do is religious in nature, looking in faith to God to accomplish the miraculous defeat of their enemies.

In the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, any lingering notion of violence as a tool for accomplishing God's purposes is finally sublimated by the life and death of the Messiah himself. As Richard Hays has written,

Despite his stinging criticism of those in positions of authority, [Jesus] never attempts to exert force as a way of gaining social or political power. ... He imposes an order of silence to keep his disciples from proclaiming him as Messiah until he has redefined the title in terms of the cross, and he instructs the disciples that their vocation must be the same as his (Mark 8:27-9:1). He withdraws from the crowd that wants to 'to take him by force to make him king' (John 6:15). At every turn he renounces violence as a strategy for promoting God's kingdom (e.g., Luke 9:51-56, where he rebukes James and John for wanting to call down fire from heaven to consume unreceptive Samaritans), and he teaches his followers to assume the posture of servanthood (Mark 10:42-45; John 13:1-17) and to expect to suffer at the hands of the world's authorities (Mark 13:9-13; John 15:18-16:4a). The hope of vindication and justice lies not with worldly force –

that is the satanic temptation rejected at the beginning of his ministry – but in God’s eschatological power.⁷

This is seen most dramatically in his death on the cross. He does not take any actions in his own defense, he chides those who do try to defend him with the sword, and he refuses to call down legions of angels to fight against his enemies. Instead, he willingly accepts the suffering of the cross, all the while interceding for his enemies and faithfully entrusting himself into his Father’s hands. Nevertheless, what by all appearances looks to be a defeat turns out, in the Lord’s providence, to be victory and salvation. Through the cross and then the resurrection the Lord accomplishes the definitive conquest of sin, evil, and death. Thus, in ways that pick up the theme from the book of Joshua but then develop them more purely and fully, the life and death of Jesus embodies a faithful posture towards God who accomplishes the victory through the working of his own divine power.

According to the Apostle Paul, it is this kind of faith in the power of God which is at the very heart of the gospel message. In what is commonly regarded as the thematic summary of his whole letter to the church in Rome he writes, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, as it is written: ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (Romans 1:16-17). That is, through the death and resurrection of Christ, God’s power to save has been put on full display and this salvation becomes a reality through

⁷ Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 329-330.

faith. Indeed, it is only through faith, apart from observing the law, lest there be some basis for boasting (Romans 3:27-28; Galatians 2:15-21). Of course, this message of the cross is foolishness to the wisdom of the world (much like a battle strategy of marching around the walls of a city and blowing trumpets), but the church knows in faith that it is actually the power of God for salvation (1 Corinthians 1:18). Consequently, the church is by definition a community that exists through faith in the power of God to accomplish salvation and victory on its behalf.

Therefore, the church's life in the world must always be an act of faith in the power of God. The church does not carry out its mission from a place of strength, self-sufficiency, or human power, but only from a posture of humility and dependency on divine power. Invoking Promised Land imagery, Paul writes to the church in Ephesus, "I pray also that the eyes of your heart may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:18-21). In other words, the same power that was used to raise Christ from the dead is now at work in the church, energizing it with divine strength to live out its calling in the world and to do the good works he has prepared for it to do (Ephesians 2:1-10). In fact, this power is most evident precisely when the church is weak and impotent (2 Corinthians 12:9-10) so that the power might be seen as coming from God and not from the church (2 Corinthians 4:7).

Preaching the book of Joshua, then, should shape the church into a community defined by this reality and embodying this kind of posture. For many people in the church this is uncomfortably counterintuitive. In virtually every aspect of life they have been taught through both cultural influences as well as the school of experience that victory goes to the skilled, that achievement comes to the capable, and that success belongs to the competent. The race goes to the swift and the battle belongs to the strong (cf. Ecclesiastes 9:11). Thus, many in the church almost instinctively rely on their own wisdom, their own talent, their own resources, their own effort, and their own dogged persistence to make things happen and to accomplish the goals of ministry.

Therefore, preaching the book of Joshua must help the church to see how misguided and foolish its own self-sufficiency is and instead adopt a humble but hopeful dependency on God in all things. To do this effectively the notable features of the battle narratives in Joshua should be highlighted as the keys to the church's own mission. For example, the preacher should emphasize that just as the people of Israel marched around the walls of Jericho and blew trumpets, trusting the Lord to be the one to bring down the walls, so the church is called to a life of worship and prayer, trusting the Lord to be the one with the power to topple the walls of the kingdom of darkness. Like the people of Israel, the church will never be able to gain the victory in its own strength but only through the miraculous work of the Lord. After all, in its own strength, the church would be no more effective in its mission than a compromised Israel was in its initial fight against Ai. But if the church adopts a posture of humility, dependency, and faith, trusting in the Lord's power, the church will find that not even the gates of hell can stand against

it, just as the city of Ai could not stand during the second battle or the southern or northern kingdoms could stand during those campaigns.

Preaching to Dismantle Idols and Bring About Worship

As the book of Joshua unfolds, the danger of idolatry becomes increasingly obvious and the need for their complete extermination becomes increasingly pressing. Even in small amounts idols are dangerous and one person who becomes seduced by them is a threat to the well-being of the whole community. Therefore, Israel is to consecrate itself to the Lord, serve him exclusively, and worship him alone. Through the military campaigns in the land, the division of the tribal allotments, and the ensuing covenant renewal ceremony, Israel is to separate themselves from the Canaanites and their corrupting influences, as well as exterminate them in order to eliminate any possibility of corruption in the future. The book concludes with the rhetorical challenge: choose this day whom you will worship and serve, the Lord or other gods. The book-long build up to this rhetorical challenge, as well as the recurring use of *herem* and the prominence of liturgical and sacral features, makes clear that the theme of religious devotion, expressed through the rejection and elimination of idols and exclusive devotion to the Lord, is a central concern of the book.

Within the New Testament idolatry is seen as a ubiquitous problem in the first century and an especially pernicious threat to the church.⁸ In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul indicates that the root problem of sinful humanity is that they have

⁸ Christopher Rowland is especially helpful in synthesizing and cataloging the New Testament's view of idolatry. Christopher Rowland, "Living with Idols: An Exercise in Biblical Theology" in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 163-176.

exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling humans and animals (Romans 1:22-23). In fact, the baseline condition of all people is to be influenced and led astray by the worship of idols (1 Corinthians 12:2). The result of this idolatrous worship is all kinds of social disorders, including evil, greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, slander, callousness, family disintegration, sexual immorality, selfish ambition, and factionalism (Romans 1:29; Galatians 5:20-21). Therefore, to follow Christ means turning away from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thessalonians 1:9; 1 Corinthians 10:14; 1 John 5:21) and to eliminate them entirely from the Christian communities (1 Corinthians 5:10-11; Acts 15:20), for idolaters have no inheritance in the kingdom of God (Ephesians 5:5) and will not find a place in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:8; 22:15).

As in the book of Joshua, this involves both separation and warfare. On the one hand, Paul writes to the church in Corinth, a church that was especially prone to idolatrous temptations, “What agreement is there between the temple of God [i.e., the church] and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said, ‘I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people’” (2 Corinthians 6:16). Significantly, Paul is quoting from a recurring promise in the Old Testament that is at the very heart of the covenant (Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 32:38; Ezra 37:27). Later, in the book of Revelation, this promise gets eschatologized in a vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:3). In other words, in anticipation of the exclusive worship of the Lord in the new creation, the church even now is to separate itself from all forms of idolatry and be entirely devoted to Christ. Of course, the realities of life make this especially difficult. Indeed, complete separation is not even possible since the church must live in a world saturated with idols. Therefore, the church must live with wisdom,

discernment, and self-limiting love (1 Corinthians 8-10). Nevertheless, even these nuances required by living in a culture of idols do not invalidate the primary concern, namely to keep oneself from idolatry out of an uncompromising loyalty to Christ.

On the other hand, the church is to engage in warfare as well. In his letter to the church in Ephesus, Paul uses military imagery to describe the church's mission, in ways thematically consistent with the book of Joshua but much more overtly spiritual in its application. He writes, "Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand" (Ephesians 6:12-13). Elsewhere Paul indicates that behind the practice of idolatry is really the sinister work of demons that are working through them so that to sacrifice to an idol is to sacrifice to demons and even to become participants with those demons (1 Corinthians 10:18-20). Now he describes how the church is to engage that demonic realm that stands behind the idolatry all around the church, an idolatry that is deeply embedded in the institutions of empire all around them.⁹ Like Israel in the book of Joshua, the church is to take up the divine armor and to engage it in battle. This divine armor is spiritual, however, not physical. It consists of the belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the footwear of the gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:14-17), all of which are ultimately

⁹ In reference to the principalities and powers, Andrew Lincoln argues that they are "spiritual agencies in the heavenly realm standing behind any earthly or human institutions." Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC 42 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 64. See also Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984), 60-64, 84-89.

gifts to the church from the one who has already been raised from the dead and been seated above all those rulers and authorities, powers and dominions (Ephesians 1:20-22). Therefore, the church's warfare is spiritual and its weapons are spiritual in nature.

For the church this calling to warfare is not only in external engagement with the forces of darkness but also in internal battles against sinful flesh. As Paul writes to the church in Colossae, "You died and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry" (Colossians 3:3-5; cf. Romans 6:6-7; Ephesians 4:22-24). That is, the battle is not just a struggle against the idolatrous powers embodied in imperial institutions but also a struggle against the old man, the earthly nature, that is in league with them and therefore must be put to death.

Once again, this is not a battle in which the church enters in its own strength but only through its union with the crucified and risen Christ. In a reading that is both provocative and insightful, Douglas Earl suggests that this is one way to appropriate theologically the *herem* symbolism of the Old Testament. Referring back to the *herem* usages within the deuteronomistic tradition (something that is an abomination to be destroyed) and the priestly tradition (something that is set apart and given over to God), he asks whether one might see these expressed in the crucifixion as the in-breaking of the eschaton into history. That is, in some sense Jesus' death on the cross might be construed as the Son of God bearing the idolatry of the world and thus become an abomination to be destroyed, while at the same time becoming the holy one who was set apart for God

and given over to death.¹⁰ Richard Hess is even more direct: “Christ takes upon himself the sin of the world and becomes the victim of the holy war that God wages against sin (2 Corinthians 5:21).”¹¹ Therefore, the church, united to Christ, is called to participate in the crucified life, putting sin to death and offering itself in devotion to God. As the Apostle Paul says, “If we have been united with [Christ] in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. . . . Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness” (Romans 6:5-7, 12-13).

Preaching the book of Joshua, then, should equip the church to do battle against the idols today that seek to pull the church away from its communion with God. These idols are located at the structural, intellectual, and personal levels, with all three interacting and overlapping with one another. At a structural level idolatry exists today in ways analogous to the ancient Near Eastern world and particularly the imperial institutions of the first century. Applying Paul’s language of principalities, authorities, and dominions, Max Stackhouse has argued that in the modern globalizing world, there are certain key structural principalities that shape, organize, and even animate key aspects

¹⁰ Douglas Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 206.

¹¹ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua*, TOTC 6 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 46.

of reality. These principalities are Mammon, Mars, Eros, and the Muses, and exert their influences in the spheres of economics, political science, psychology, and the fine arts and mass media respectively. At the center of these spheres and providing the center of being, morality, and meaning is the religious aspect that sustains and integrates them.¹² Thus, to the extent that idolatry exists at the core of a society or culture, that spiritual force will influence, shape, and become expressed in the various structures and spheres of that society. Therefore, the preacher must relate the challenge of idolatry and pagan gods in the book of Joshua to the church's challenge of identifying and engaging the animating values, beliefs, and norms within the various spheres of society so that the church is equipped to unmask those forces of idolatry, to dismantle them to the extent they have influence to do so, and to replace them with the values of God and his kingdom.

Related to the structural idols are the intellectual idols that shape the way people think and operate within the structures and spheres in which they live. At the academic level the most prominent in the Western world today are the ideologies of materialism and post-deconstruction humanism, while at the cultural level the most prominent are consumerism, individual autonomy, and nationalism.¹³ Thus, the preacher must also help the church see the powerful influence these thought-forms have exerted on the church's

¹² Max L. Stackhouse, "General Introduction" in *God and Globalization, Volume 1: Religion and the Powers of the Common Life*, ed. Max L. Stackhouse and Peter J. Harris (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 1-52.

¹³ At the academic/philosophical level, see, from a Christian perspective, Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida & Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), and, from a postmodern humanist perspective, Luc Ferry, *A Brief History of Thought: A Philosophical Guide to Living*, trans. Theo Cuffe (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 199-264. At the cultural level, see Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 182-276.

way of thinking of its faith and its calling in the world. This can be particularly difficult because many in the church are not necessarily aware of the extent to which these intellectual idols have shaped them. Therefore, the preacher must first help the church become aware of the intellectual idols that have influenced them, demonstrate how they have influenced the church, and then help the church, as Paul says, “to take every thought captive” (2 Corinthians 10:5) by discarding those intellectual idols for a new way of seeing the world and being human in the world.

Nevertheless, the preacher must help the church to see that such structural and intellectual engagement (or, iconoclasm) should never be done in a triumphalist way since idolatry exists within the perspective and practices of the church as much as in the structures and thought-forms of society, meaning that the battle is internal as well as external. Therefore, the preacher must help those in the church to identify those things that are substitutes for God in their own lives and then turn away from them in repentance, mortifying the old nature, so that they might live in exclusive devotion to Christ. To that end the preacher will find especially helpful many of the church fathers who apply the conquest narratives in precisely this sort of way.¹⁴

Preaching Bold and Courageous Obedience as the Path to Rest

The book of Joshua begins and ends with exhortations to obedience. As Israel is preparing to enter the land, the Lord commands Joshua to be strong and courageous, expressed through an obedience to the Law of Moses. The book ends with Joshua’s

¹⁴ See, for example, John R. Franke, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, Ancient Christian Commentary IV (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 1-98. For a modern example of this approach, see David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 13:2 (1995): 35-50.

farewell speech and the covenant ceremony at Shechem in which he challenges Israel (and implicitly the readers of the book) to choose whom they will serve – the Lord or other gods. How they answer this question will ultimately determine their future in the land. Obedience is the only path to eventual rest, while disobedience will bring only defeat and ongoing struggle. In between those two bookends the narrative impresses upon the reader how critical this issue is. When Israel is obedient to the Lord, they experience success and victory. When Israel is disobedient to the Lord, they experience setbacks and defeat. Thus, the unfolding story of the book of Joshua is largely a narrative exposition of the theme that bold and courageous obedience is the key to achieving rest in the land.

In the New Testament, entrance into and rest in the Promised Land becomes a type of entrance into and rest in the new creation, when “the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ and he shall reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:5).¹⁵ This can most clearly be seen in the book of Hebrews. Quoting from numerous places in the Old Testament the author of Hebrews draws a typological connection between Israel in the wilderness and Christians in the current age (Hebrews 3-4). This connection is made in the interest of exhortation: though the generation in the wilderness disobeyed and therefore failed to enter into God’s rest, the church should not make the same mistake. They should make every effort, through obedience and faithfulness, to enter into God’s promised rest (Hebrews 4:11). By drawing the connection in this way the author essentially equates the Old Testament rest in Canaan

¹⁵ For a full treatment of this theme and its typological development, see Oren R. Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God’s Redemptive Plan*, NSBT34 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

with its ultimate eschatological fulfillment that still remains to be entered by the people of God. Thus, the book of Hebrews “treats Christians as a pilgrim people, as though [they] are still the wandering people of God, suffering now, but looking over across the Jordan into the promised land.”¹⁶ Of course, Christians are not alone in this pilgrimage. Jesus himself has already gone before them, the author and pioneer of their faith who has, through his obedience, already opened the way and secured for them the inheritance (Hebrews 5:8-9; 12:1-2). Therefore, the church journeys in faith toward the promised inheritance, led by their great high priest, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, among them the Israelites who marched around Jericho as well as Rahab (Hebrews 11:30-31), and expressed through obedience to Christ (note the series of imperatives that follow in Hebrews 12-13).

Though most pronounced in the book of Hebrews, this sort of typological schema shows up elsewhere in the New Testament as well. In 1 Peter, the opening chapter describes the church as a people who have been born again to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for them and ready to be revealed in the last time (1 Peter 1:3-5). This is clearly a theological extension of the land in Joshua into the eschatological hope of the church. As Thomas Schreiner points out, “In the Old Testament the inheritance is the land God promised to his people (Numbers 32:19; Deuteronomy 2:12; 12:9; 25:19; 26:1; Joshua 11:23; Psalm 105:11; Acts 7:5). The word is especially common in Joshua for the apportionment of the land for each tribe or family. Peter understood the inheritance, however, no longer in terms of a land promised

¹⁶ Lewis R. Donelson, *From Hebrews to Revelation: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 30.

to Israel but in terms of the end-time hope that lies before believers.... [which] will be realized in a new heaven and a new earth (2 Peter 3:13; cf. Revelation 21:1-22:5).”¹⁷

The Apostle Paul utilizes the same theological typology as well. In a suggestive article N. T. Wright has proposed that the entire Old Testament sequence of exodus, Sinai, and Promised Land actually forms the underlying narrative substructure of Romans 3-8.¹⁸ Just as Israel was enslaved in Egypt and was set free as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea, so Christians were enslaved in the Egypt of sin but have been set free as they pass through the waters of baptism (Romans 6). Just as Israel then arrived at Sinai and received the Torah to be their guide, so now Christians receive, not the Law which is able only to condemn them for their sin, but instead the Spirit who writes the covenant on their hearts and guides them so that they will not fall back into slavery again (Romans 7). And just as Israel’s wilderness wanderings eventually culminated in their promised inheritance of the land, so the Christian journey will eventually culminate in the inheritance of a renewed restored creation (Romans 8). Thus, there is a kind of typological connection between the Promised Land in the Old Testament and the redeemed cosmos of the new creation.

Within this typological framework of the New Testament, bold and courageous obedience would then become a life of discipleship oriented toward Christ’s already and coming kingdom, culminating in the final transformation of this world in the new

¹⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, NAC 37 (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 62.

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, “New Exodus, New Inheritance: The Narrative Substructure of Romans 3-8” in *Romans and the People of God: Essays in Honor of Gordon D. Fee on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, ed. Sven K. Soderlund and N. T. Wright (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 26-35.

creation. That has both positive as well as negative implications. Negatively, that requires boldness and courage to follow Christ even when doing so brings the church into conflict with the kingdoms of this world. In the book of Acts, for instance, the church repeatedly collides with Gentile idolatry and imperial claims due to the fact that it affirms that Jesus, not Caesar, is the true Lord. As a result, the church is perceived as strange, as “upside down,” and as a potential threat.¹⁹ Part of what Luke is doing in the book, therefore, is to affirm both the radical counter-cultural (counter-imperial) nature of the early Christian community, while at the same time arguing for its legal innocence and providing assurance that the community is not a violent threat to the empire.²⁰ Nevertheless, this produces an uneasy tension between the church and the Graeco-Roman world.

Such a tension is even more pronounced in the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3. The imperial authorities are variously described as instruments of Satan (Revelation 2:10), the domain of Satan’s reign (Revelation 2:13), and the dwelling place of Satan (Revelation 2:13). As a result, the churches face constant pressures to deny Christ (Revelation 2:3), eat food sacrificed to idols, and participate in sexual immorality (Revelation 2:11, 20-22). Therefore, the churches must repent (Revelation 2:5, 16; 3:19), be faithful to the point of death (Revelation 2:10), and hold on to what they have in Christ (Revelation 2:25; 3:2-3, 11). What makes them able to do this is their identity in Christ and their focus on the promises waiting to be fulfilled for them in the new creation. This is why, literarily, the letters exist in between a vision of Christ

¹⁹ C. Kavin Rowe, *World Upside Down: Reading Acts in the Graeco-Roman Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 136.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

(Revelation 1) and a vision of heaven (Revelation 4-5). It is also why each letter shows the same literary structure within itself, commencing with a description of Christ that links back to the vision of him in chapter 1 and concluding with a promise that links ahead to the vision of the new creation at the end of the book.

Positively, the typological framework means having the boldness and courage to pray and work for the kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, to follow Christ in his work to bring about the just and peaceable reign of God's kingdom in the world. Thus, the church's manner of conquest takes the form of cooperation with God's work to conquer evil and injustice in the world. But this is precisely the point where the Christocentric cruciform dimension must come into play. The church cooperates with God in the work of his kingdom not through the power of the sword but through the power of the cross, not by taking life but by laying down its life, not through violence but through self-sacrifice. That is, the martial imagery of Joshua must be refracted through the cross-bearing way of Jesus so that the church's conquest is one of cruciformly cooperating with God to overcome the kingdoms of this world until that day when they become the kingdom of our Christ (Revelation 11:5).

When the church does this – that is, when its conquest becomes cruciform in shape – it has the assurance that God will come alongside it with his power that is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9). This, of course, requires humility, self-awareness, and self-reflection. Otherwise the church can, like Joshua on the eve of the battle of Jericho, unwittingly end up trying to align God with its own purposes instead of seeking to align itself with God's purposes.

Preaching the book of Joshua, then, must help the church make the typological transition from the stories of military conquest in the land to the New Testament's eschatological framework of kingdom and new creation. This can be challenging because many people are not used to thinking this way about Scripture. Instead, many are accustomed to reading the Bible as discreet sections that give moral guidance. Therefore, the preacher must spend time tracing those typological connections in order to help people apply the book of Joshua in responsible and faithful ways.

Having developed the typological framework the preacher must then help people to situate the notion of conquest within that New Testament framework so that it is translated into a missional calling oriented toward the eschatological kingdom of the new creation. That is, the preacher must help the church see that the notion of conquest in the Old Testament, when refracted through the New Testament, becomes a form of missional discipleship in which the church participates with Christ in conquering the evil and injustice of the kingdoms of this world. But the preacher must place special emphasis on the cruciform nature of this calling, lest the church adopt the same kinds of forceful and even violent strategies already prevalent in those kingdoms.

Finally, the preacher must then help the church to see the practical ways that it can cooperate with Christ in his work of kingdom conquest in the world. In other words, the preacher must help the church see the places of injustice in the world and how they might cooperate with God to overcome those injustices with the justice of the eschatological kingdom. He/she must help the church see the places where evil has ravaged people, communities, and relationships, and how they might cooperate with God to overcome those evils with the peace and righteousness of the kingdom. He/she must

help the church see the places of brokenness and pain in the world and how they might cooperate with God to bring the healing, reconciliation, and restoration of the new creation to those places.²¹ In doing so, the church will carry out the true kind of conquering to which it is called – a conquering whereby they are not overcome by evil but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:9-21).

²¹ A particularly helpful series of books in this regard is the Resources for Reconciliation series put out by professors and practitioners associated with Duke Divinity School. The most helpful for this topic are Emmanuel Katongole and Chris Rice, *Reconciling All Things: A Christian Vision for Justice, Peace and Healing* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008) and Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen, *Living Without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). Also helpful is Raymond J. Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

CHAPTER 7

PREACHING JOSHUA IN PRACTICE

Preaching the book of Joshua in practice can be especially challenging due to the violence in the book. Therefore, a homiletical model is needed in order to do this effectively and sensitively. Such a model must have both an apologetic aspect as well as a constructive aspect. That is, the homiletical model must furnish the preacher with both a practical strategy for handling the violence in the book as well as a practical strategy for setting forth the theology of the book in order to shape the church's mission.

A Practical Strategy for Handling the Violence in Joshua

Handling the violence in the book of Joshua is a delicate task for the preacher. It takes care, patience, and wisdom. In all likelihood, all the questions the book raises or objections it provokes cannot be handled in a single sermon (unless the preacher devotes an entire sermon to addressing that one issue and even then, it would be very difficult). Therefore, the preacher may find it helpful to preach one or more sermons on the particular issue of violence in the book, addressing key parts of the issue in different sermons. Alternatively, the preacher could do a series of sermons on the book, with an introductory sermon on the issue as well as an assurance that different aspects of the

problem will be addressed throughout the series as they arise. However, regardless of how the preacher chooses to address the issue, a practical strategy for doing so is crucial.

First, the preacher must understand and anticipate what is offensive and why. In the book of Joshua, the most obvious point of offense is the violence carried out in the book. This is especially objectionable because it is done in the name of God. For many, it will be impossible not to equate what they read in the book of Joshua with modern day examples of holy war or ethnic cleansing. Therefore, the preacher must understand that many will be silently asking how what is described in the book of Joshua is any different from modern day jihad or from the recent genocides in Europe, Africa, and Asia.

However, there are other points of offense as well. Those with a sensitivity toward animal rights, or even those who simply love animals, will find disturbing the brutal treatment of them. For instance, in the aftermath of the battle of Jericho, the Israelites put to the sword not just men and women, young and old, but also cattle, sheep, and donkeys. In their fight against the northern kings, they hamstring the horses. Therefore, the preacher must be sensitive to how such commands will strike those with a sensitivity to animals and understand how much this will likely upset them.

Those with a sensitivity towards imperialism will likely find the entire story of Joshua objectionable on a fundamental level. It will be only natural to associate it in their minds with the displacement and killing of Native Americans in the history of the United States, with the displacement of Palestinians in the Middle East, and with other well-known examples of cultural and political imperialism in South America, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Therefore, the preacher must understand how a story of Israelite conquest of native peoples and the forcible acquisition of their land will be offensive from the start,

especially to those who have experienced firsthand the negative effects of colonialism and/or are predisposed to interpret events through the eyes of the oppressed.

Moreover, the preacher must not simply become aware of which parts of the story may prove problematic for modern day readers and listeners but must also learn to feel the offensiveness of those parts as well. That is, the preacher should not approach these aspects of the story as an intellectual exercise in identifying them so that an apologetic answer can be attempted but instead approach them through the viewpoint of those likely to be offended, emotionally identifying with them and seeking to feel the offense oneself. Doing so prepares the preacher to guide the potentially offended reader or listener into the text from a place of understanding and empathy.

To that end, the preacher should, second of all, articulate the offensiveness from the pulpit with clarity, fairness, and empathy. In other words, the preacher must give voice to the offensiveness of the violence in Joshua, without dismissing the objections that many people raise or engaging in strawman arguments against those objections. To do this the preacher should voice the potential thoughts, feelings, and objections that the listeners may be wrestling with and, if possible, express those thoughts, feelings, and objections so articulately that the listeners can sense that the preacher truly understands why the stories are offensive, has wrestled with them in the same ways that the listeners are wrestling, and is not dismissing the problems superficially. The preacher gains even more credibility if he/she is able to express the thoughts and objections that the listeners have not formulated in their own minds but with which they would also agree. Doing so persuades them that the preacher has thought deeply about these issues and has taken them seriously.

One way to do this is to acknowledge honestly the violence in the story but then help people see that this is because the Bible works with the messy and sometimes disturbing raw material that makes up our broken world. For instance, Zack Eswine suggests saying something like: “The Bible lets us see what reality is actually like sometimes; it is true to what is there in this way. Sometimes what is there frightens or repulses us; so it is with the Bible. It provides a token to us that God is not squeamish or unable to handle the worst this world can dish out. We long for an authentic accounting of life. We don’t want to whitewash what is. The Bible gains our respect this way.”¹ In the case of Joshua, the preacher can acknowledge that there were indeed military conflicts and skirmishes in the land during the period of Israel’s early history but the authors of Joshua have not whitewashed them or pretended that they did not happen; instead they have taken them up as the raw material for developing a new and powerful theological vision. In doing so, the preacher both acknowledges the reality of violence in the world and even among God’s people, yet at the same time points the reader to something beyond it. Depending on the congregation, the preacher may also find it helpful to point out the ways that the text has been redacted to blunt the militaristic quality of the text as a way to discourage the military re-application of the passage and instead to appropriate it in ways consistent with the theological emphases of the book.

In any case, it is crucial that the preacher demonstrates humility in discussing the difficulties. That is, the preacher should be forthright that the theological and ethical

¹ Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World: Crafting Biblical Sermons That Connect with Our Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 197. This statement is made with regard to Ehud’s assassination of Eglon, but is applied more widely to warfare passages in the Old Testament. Eswine holds to the view that the conquest narrative of Joshua reflects historical reality but is warranted as God’s unique act of judgment against those in the land.

questions raised by the stories of the conquest are real issues and should not be met with simplistic answers. He/she should freely admit that his/her understanding is not exhaustive, but preliminary, and that he/she does not claim to be able to answer every question satisfactorily, nor does he/she pretend as if his/her proposals are not without their own weaknesses.

Nevertheless, the preacher should not leave the matter there, but, thirdly, reduce the perceived offensiveness by pointing out the parts of the text that mitigate those popular but inaccurate perceptions. For instance, the preacher should point out that many of the battles are actually not offensive in nature, but defensive. That is, they are responses to Canaanite aggression. Moreover, there is scant evidence in the book that the Israelites ever attacked farming settlements or peasant villages. In fact, there is not a single story of a battle against the central part of the land (the heartland of Ephraim and Manasseh). That would suggest that this is not a sweeping military campaign intent on slaughtering masses of people. Not only that but, as Lawson Stone has pointed out, “All the battle narratives name city kings as the enemy. These kings were all appointed by Egypt to suck every morsel of economic and military benefit out of Canaan for the greater glory of Pharaoh. Joshua’s mission seems to have been to destroy the network of city rulers who controlled Canaan, breaking Egypt’s exploitation of Canaan and defying Pharaoh’s claim to be God.”² In other words, the text itself seems to indicate that the conquest is not about the genocidal slaughter of a people but principally about liberating

² Lawson Stone, “7 Keys to Understanding Violence in the Book of Joshua.” *Seedbed*. 2 Sept 2013. <https://www.seedbed.com/7-keys-to-understanding-violence-in-the-book-of-joshua/> (accessed February 15, 2018).

the land from oppressive pagan rule. By pointing out these aspects of the text the preacher helps readers and listeners realize that some of their objections to the story are in reality not founded on what the text actually says.

Finally, the preacher should then reframe the passage theologically. This involves helping the listeners move from a primarily historical frame of reference to a more literary/theological frame of reference. This is critical because most people will automatically come to the book of Joshua asking what historical events this book has recorded. The problem with this question, however, is that it positions the reader along a hermeneutical line of approach that will inevitably dead-end into the theological and ethical problems of the text from which it will be very difficult to handle them. Instead, the preacher should help the listeners come to the book from a different angle of approach, namely asking what theological point(s) this book is trying to make and what theological vision this book is trying to offer. Doing so is important because when the readers or listeners come to the book with that kind of question they will be approaching the book from the necessary hermeneutical angle to hear what it is actually trying to say.

For many congregations this will be an extremely difficult shift to make. For some it will be difficult because treating any book or passage of the Bible as anything but a straightforward historical narrative is to call into question the inspiration, authority, and reliability of Scripture. For others it will be difficult because such a shift will be difficult to understand conceptually. Yet for others it will be difficult because it will seem as if the preacher is simply using a clever trick to sidestep the issue. Therefore, the preacher must

understand what the congregation's point of difficulty is likely to be and then be able to address that sensitively, patiently, and winsomely.³

A Practical Strategy for Preaching the Theology of Joshua

The preacher must not only have a practical strategy for handling the violence in the book of Joshua but for preaching the theology of the book in order to shape the church's mission as well. This is critical because it is tempting to focus on the theological and ethical problems, engaging in apologetic arguments to try to salvage the book, but the preacher must at some point turn to showing what is positive, helpful, and instructive about the stories too. Indeed, faithfulness to the text demands that this becomes the dominant focus of the sermon. Typically, this will mean developing one or more of the four main theological themes of the book – the reframing of identity, faith in the power of God, combatting idolatry and exclusively worshipping the Lord, and bold and courageous obedience as the path to rest.

If the preacher is working through the book using a *lectio continua* approach, different aspects of the themes may be highlighted in certain passages while other aspects may be set aside until they can be addressed in later passages in which they are more prominent. For instance, though Rahab's story is found in both chapters 2 and 6, the preacher may choose to focus on the theme of reframed identity in chapter 2, not address it much at all in a sermon on chapter 6, instead focusing on the theme of faith in the power of God, and then revisit the theme again in chapter 7 when it makes sense to

³ A succinct and helpful way of talking about this issue is given in R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The Enduring Possibility of Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 4-8.

contrast Rahab and Achan. Or, to take another example, though the theme of reframing identity occurs repeatedly throughout the book, the preacher may choose to highlight one aspect of the theme when preaching the Rahab story in chapter 2 (the moral and gender issues), another aspect when preaching the Gibeonite ruse in chapter 9 (the liminal nature of identity boundaries), and yet another aspect when preaching the conflict between the Transjordanian and Cisjordanian tribes in chapter 22 (the issues of geography and tribalism).

The preacher should then apply the theology of the passage to the church's mission. This should be done by carefully tracing those theme through the New Testament's vision of the church's mission. Within the Reformed tradition, of which Brookdale Presbyterian Church is a part, this is typically done through a biblical-theological approach that shows how the themes in an Old Testament passage point ahead to the person and work of Christ and then, through him, find application in the life of the church.⁴ To do this effectively the preacher must have both an understanding of the book's theology and a sensitivity to the realities of the church as well as the community where it is living out its mission. For the preaching ministry at Brookdale Presbyterian Church, that requires taking into account both the realities of the congregation as well as the challenges of St. Joseph.

⁴ Representative examples are, Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2003); Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

Preaching the Reframing of Identity to Address the Challenge of Tribalism

Tribalism in the city of St. Joseph is one of the greatest challenges facing Brookdale Presbyterian Church. The most obvious evidence of tribalism is in the three-part division of the city. The central part of the city, South St. Joe, and the North End are all fairly distinct geographical areas with their own sense of identity, their own schools, and to some extent their own culture. Historically, churches have operated within those geographical boundaries and cooperation and partnership across those boundaries has been minimal. The same has been true of Brookdale. As a church that is located in the midtown, or central, part of the city, it has almost no relationships with churches in South St. Joe or the North End and only a few relationships with churches, ministries, and agencies in the central part of the city.

However, there are other kinds of tribalism in the city as well. St. Joseph has been overwhelmingly Caucasian for most of its history. However, that has been changing recently. The growth of Missouri Western State University from a community college to a regional university has attracted many non-white students, while the canning and industrial plants downtown and in South St. Joe have attracted various minority groups including a growing Sudanese population. Therefore, Brookdale faces the same problem that many other churches face. It is a predominantly white church (though not exclusively) and finds it difficult to express hospitality (though they desire to express it) toward those of other races and ethnicities.

Socioeconomically, St. Joseph has historically been a town of the haves and the have-nots. Currently, there are many more of the latter than the former, meaning that overall there is a growing problem of poverty, crime, and drug trafficking. At the same

time, the lower-than-average tax base limits the city in their attempts to address these problems. The result is distrust among the residents of the town toward their leaders and growing frustration. This socioeconomic problem is an especially large challenge for Brookdale because the congregation, though economically diverse, is still significantly wealthier than the surrounding neighborhood. Many visitors from the neighborhood express a noticeable, if nonverbal, level of discomfort.

Therefore, preaching the book of Joshua at Brookdale Presbyterian Church should seek to help the church reframe their understanding of their identity in order to address the challenge of tribalism in the city. To do this effectively from the pulpit I will need to draw conceptual parallels between the stories of Joshua and the realities of St. Joseph. For instance, the examples of Rahab and Achan can address the racial divisions within the city, the example of the conflict between the Cisjordanian tribes and the Transjordanian tribes is conceptually similar to the divisions between South St. Joe, central St. Joe, and the North End, and the example of the Gibeonites puts a check on the insider/outsider mentality of the city and our natural tendency to draw the lines of identity within our community too quickly or too neatly. Furthermore, by emphasizing the centrality of confession in the construction of identity, I hope to show how a confessional center of identity is superior to the ways that identity is normally, and to some degree unconsciously, defined by the people within the city.

Not only that but preaching this theme should be done in such a way that it stirs the emotions, passions, and concerns of the church. One way of doing this is to encourage the church to wonder about where the Rahabs are in our own city and where God might show up in completely unexpected people and situations. After all, as in the book of

Joshua, the church might be surprised where God is at work. It may not be where the congregation would expect or where they would have thought. But if the church does not reach across those tribal boundaries, it may miss out on the joy and the surprise of getting to discover the Rahabs in the city and the surprising work of God that they would not get to see if they do not cross those boundary lines.

However, preaching must not stop there. It must also set forth some steps and strategies that will help the church to reach across those tribal barriers. In the city of St. Joseph, efforts in this direction are just beginning. Several other pastors and I, as well as several laity, are beginning to work on something called One Church that would allow all our congregations to work together collaboratively on mercy ministry, service, and mission within the city, as well as linking more effectively and efficiently with religious and social service agencies in the city. In the initial formational stage, twenty-seven churches representing the three different parts of the city have already indicated a desire to be part of this effort. In addition, seven other pastors and I, all from different denominations/traditions are meeting every other week to pray for the city and build connections between our churches, across the historic boundary lines that have kept us separated. Therefore, a significant part of helping the church to live out the reframing of their identity will be to explain this city-wide effort as a natural outworking of the theology of Joshua and then follow-up with members of the congregation by helping them find a place within this larger collaborative effort and to begin serving alongside others from different denominations and traditions for the greater kingdom work of bringing renewal to the city.

On a smaller scale, Brookdale has recently seen an increase in the number of visitors from different races and socioeconomic backgrounds. Therefore, as the theme of reframing identity is preached from the pulpit, I will also look for opportunities to facilitate the application of the theme among the congregation by introducing members to these visitors and encouraging relationships among them to develop. When possible and appropriate, I may try to encourage this from the pulpit as well but only if it can be done in a way that does not make visitors feel singled out and made into a project.

Preaching Faith in the Power of God to Address the Challenge of Demoralization

Another significant problem in the city of St. Joseph is demoralization. Morale in the city is low, as is the confidence in many of the city's leaders and institutions. Part of this stems from the high levels of poverty in the city, which provides the city with a very low tax base. This alone makes it difficult to maintain and develop key parts of the city's infrastructure. However, this is compounded by the widespread distrust among the citizens toward the leaders and institutions based on past scandals. One particularly sharp example of this kind of distrust occurred in November 2017 when the city rejected a tax levy that would help fund the school district's needs as it seeks to move forward after the recent scandal prompted by the FBI investigation. Particularly notable in the vote was not only the overwhelming defeat (72 percent to 28 percent) but the anger, even vitriol, that arose from the city in reaction to the proposal from the School Board. The failure of the levy then led the School Board to close two schools, shut down numerous services, and gut many of the advanced academic programming in the high schools. Given these

realities, as well as sharply escalating gang, drug, and crime rates, many citizens have given up hope in the city's future.

Therefore, preaching the book of Joshua at Brookdale Presbyterian Church should seek to help the church gain a vision for the power of God to do the impossible. Of course, the book of Joshua does not promise that he will but it does reassure the church that he can. Preaching the book, then, should encourage the church not to join the rest of the city in giving up hope but to look in faith to the same God who could give the Israelites victory in the Promised Land.

One way to do this is help the church imagine the problems of the city in metaphorical ways that are funded by the stories in Joshua.⁵ For instance, the congregation might imagine that the problems of the city to be like stones in a wall. Together they seem virtually insurmountable and unconquerable. But the walls of St. Joseph are, in principle, no more formidable than the walls of Jericho. The church may even think of its ministry in the city as a kind of metaphorical walking around Jericho. Every time the church seeks to engage in mercy ministry, service, and mission that challenges the seemingly unconquerable walls of the city, they are taking one more step around Jericho. Every time they speak the truth into those places of brokenness they are blowing the trumpets one more time. At times they may feel like it is not making any difference but this is an illusion. After all, many of the Israelites may have felt the same way as they walked around the city for the fourth or fifth or sixth time. Yet the church

⁵ This kind of imaginative application of the text is not meant to veer off into allegorical interpretation of the passage but simply meant to make the theology of the text rhetorically and homiletically come alive so as to motivate the hearts of the congregation.

must keep walking, keep blowing the trumpets, always knowing that God is able to topple the walls anytime he pleases. The church's calling is to walk around the walls, blow the trumpets, and trust in his power to do what it cannot do.

To take another example, the congregation might imagine the difficulties and setbacks in their ministry within the city in terms of the Israelites' battle against the five kings of the Amorites. Like Joshua, the church might feel intimidated in the face of such daunting challenges and may even have some fears about engaging them. However, God promises his people that he is with them and will fight for them. When they face opposition, God is fully able to work even within their enemies to accomplish his purposes. When they face setbacks, he is fully able to hurl down hailstones to remove any obstacles. When they are lacking in something, he is fully able to make the sun stand still to afford them what they need. The church's calling is simply to march out in faith, believe the promises of God, and, like Joshua, pray for whatever it needs. The victory belongs to God.

Having helped the church to reimagine their situation in light of the book of Joshua, the preacher should then provide some practical steps and guidelines to help the church live with this kind of faith. One way to do this is by encouraging the church from the pulpit to engage in prayer-walking before trying to accomplish anything else in ministry. If the church is going to try to work for the kingdom of God within the school system, they should first do Jericho-style prayer-walking around the central office of the school district or individual schools throughout the city. In the case of Brookdale, the church has had a long-term partnership with Mark Twain Elementary School, which is down the street. Over the years many of the children at the school have come to the

church's Children's Ministry and many of the adult members volunteer within the school shelving books in the library or tutoring the students. Moreover, the church facility hosts quarterly awards breakfasts as well as the school's graduation ceremony at the end of the year. Therefore, if the congregation were to cover that school in prayer by prayer-walking down the street, around the block, and back, it might be surprised at what kinds of walls would begin to come down. The same thing could happen at Central High School, which is three blocks from the church and has several members of the church teaching in the school.

Similarly, when the church faces difficulties in its ministry to homeless families in the area through its partnership with a local transitional housing ministry, it might begin sun-stopping-prayer efforts in which the church prays that God would do the impossible so that his kingdom might come on earth as it is in heaven. For instance, it might pray for God to supply resources that it currently does not have. Or it might pray that God would extend its efforts beyond what it could possibly do itself. Of course, it is important to remember that God does not always make the sun stand still or hurl down hailstones from heaven but even when the church faces setbacks it must remember that the victory only comes from God's working through it. Thus, it continues to move out in faith, pray for him to show his power, and then trust him for the results.

Preaching the Combatting of Idolatry to Address the Challenge of Brokenness

The city of St. Joseph falls below the national average in virtually every indicator of well-being.⁶ The percentage of households with both a mother and a father in the home

⁶ For the statistics, refer to Chapter 1.

is only a little more than a third. The average household income is a third less than the national average. The average level of education is very low. Gang activity is increasing and drug use is soaring, particularly that of crystal meth. Rates of violence are among the highest in the nation. However, even with these deeply entrenched problems, a city could theoretically move forward with capable leadership and a commitment from the citizens to address the problems and begin implementing solutions. In the case of St. Joseph, though, this sort of leadership is also lacking. The School Board is internally divided and the civic government is often compromised by good old boy networks and hamstrung by the geographic tribalism of the city. As a result, one does not have to spend much time in the city before confronting these realities firsthand. The ravages of sin and evil are everywhere and they are tearing apart families, neighborhoods, and communities.

Therefore, preaching the book of Joshua at Brookdale Presbyterian Church should seek to help the church identify the idols that are driving the dysfunction of the city and then combat those in the power of the Spirit. For the congregation of Brookdale, this would be most effectively done by starting with self-reflection on the idols in its own heart that either contribute to the problems or hold it back from engaging them. For instance, the idols of personal happiness, materialism, eroticism, and pleasure have caused the recent breakup of several marriages in the congregation, while the idols of comfort and self-preservation have held back some in the congregation from a willingness to die to themselves and get involved to address the problems of the city. As a result, there must be an effort from the pulpit to help the congregation examine their

own hearts, consign those idols to *herem* through repentance and mortification, and then turn again in faith and worship to Christ and his calling upon their lives.⁷

After first addressing the application of divine warfare in their own lives, the preacher can then move outward to the application of divine warfare to the personal and structural idols within the city. Of course, others in the city struggle personally with the very same idols – such as materialism, pleasure, eroticism, and comfort – that those in the congregation do. In order to engage in divine warfare against these idolatrous strongholds, the congregation must engage in winsome evangelism, pointing people to the emancipating power of the Redeemer. As people embrace Christ in faith, they will begin to live the crucified life as well, putting to death the old person and experiencing the new life of Christ in them (Colossians 3:5-11; Galatians 2:20). Thus, in an analogous way, the conquering of the Canaanites becomes a way of imagining the conquest of sin and evil in the lives of people in St. Joseph through the power of the gospel.

Yet it also goes beyond that as well. The theme of divine warfare must also be applied to the structural and intellectual idols too. In the city of St. Joseph, the idols of individual autonomy and nationalism are particularly strong. Thus, the congregation must be encouraged to show the city a different way of being human – to live for the sake of others rather than oneself and to live for the sake of the kingdom of God more than for the glorification of the state (where crosses and crowns are more self-defining than the stars and bars). For some in the congregation this has the potential to make a significant

⁷ Once again, such an application of the book of Joshua is not intended to advocate an allegorical handling of the text but, to use Douglas Earl's helpful phrase, "an imaginative use of the symbolism of *herem*." This comment is part of a discussion on how the book of Joshua may be read in terms of the personal spiritual task of living the crucified life. Douglas S. Earl, *Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*, JTISup 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 206.

difference in St. Joseph because they are in powerful positions within the city, the social circles of the city, or the agencies that serve the city. For others in the congregation, they will have less potential, seeking to reshape the relatively smaller spheres of influence in which they live. But for all those in the congregation this has the potential to reframe completely how they think about their lives in the city.

To motivate them to engage the city in such a way, however, will require more than simply defining the intellectual and structural idols. It will require a vision of the glory of God that will encourage them to try to dismantle the idols that are driving the brokenness of the city. They will need to see that the ultimate issue is really about worship – and not just expressing worship by trying to dismantle idols but, in the imagery of the conquest, to clear out the idols so that true worship will be free to rise up in its place. Indeed, this is the very heart of the church’s mission. As John Piper has written, “Missions exists because worship doesn’t. ... When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions.”⁸ Thus, as the church becomes more impassioned with a vision of the city being filled with the worship of God, with the praises of him rising up from this particular city like incense going up from an altar, with a vision that one day the commander of the army of the Lord will be able to say that this city is holy ground, then it will be compelled to engage the idols not only in their own lives but in the city as well for the sake of the glory of God.

⁸ John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad: The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 17.

Preaching Bold and Courageous Obedience to Address the Challenge of Fear

To move out into the city to share the good news with people, to reach across entrenched boundaries, to confront the idols of our time and town can be intimidating. The more natural reaction would be to retreat from the problems, reasoning that they are too large and too deeply entrenched for the church to make much difference. For particular problems like gang violence and drug addiction there is an added fear of personal safety. For other problems such as entering into the lives of difficult people or dysfunctional families there is the fear of rejection and pain. For yet other problems like tackling the intellectual and structural idols that are driving the problems of the city there is the fear of failure.

Therefore, preaching the book of Joshua must also help the church see that God calls it to bold and courageous obedience. In the case of Brookdale Presbyterian Church, that will mean entering into the most broken and potentially dangerous areas of the city. It will mean following God into some of the most difficult neighborhoods that are rife with some of the most difficult problems. That will certainly mean the midtown area around the church but it will also mean the downtown area west of 22nd Street. These are areas of the city in which the problems of poverty, drug use, crime, and violence are especially acute. Of course, it must be stressed that this does not mean acting with recklessness or foolishness. But it does mean that the church will have to go where fear would normally dissuade it from going. However, if the church knows that this is precisely the kind of situation that Israel faced as it entered the land, confronted with even greater dangers, then it will see that God's promises are just as surely good today as

they were back then. Thus, they are called to overcome their fear and to engage in the mission to which God has called them with the same kind of courage and obedience.

One way of doing this effectively is for the preacher to help the congregation imaginatively put themselves in the shoes of the Israelites. This can be done in a number of ways. The preacher could opt to preach the narratives in first person narrative form in order to bring the text alive and help the congregation enter the world of the text. Or, when preaching the stories, the preacher could imaginatively fill in the sensory details of the story, describing what the Israelites might have seen, heard, or even smelled. Doing so can facilitate a connection between the experience of the church as it enters into the difficult places of the city and the experience of Israel as it entered the land, including the feelings of intimidation, fear, and trepidation. By doing this the preacher can help the congregation to experience vicariously the joy and benefits of marching ahead with boldness and courage and the detriment to the church if it fails to do so.

For example, the preacher can walk the congregation of Brookdale through the two battles of Ai, as if they are experiencing the defeat and then the victory for themselves. Thus, the difficulties and frustrations of ministering in such a broken city might be connected to the experience of defeat during the first battle of Ai, such that the church imaginatively experiences the failure that results in trying to engage the city without attention to the Lord's commands and leading. In this way the church can see from inside the world of the narrative that trying to engage the problems of the city in such a way will inevitably produce failure, frustration, and ultimately cynicism.

However, as the preacher leads the congregation through the second battle of Ai, they

will experience the contrasting result of joy and victory as they seek to be obedient to the Lord's calling, even as that requires them to show boldness and courage.

To motivate them to live with bold and courageous obedience, however, will require more than simply relating the imagery of the battles to the current struggles of the church. It will also require a vision of the new creation (the Promised Land of the kingdom of God) that will grip their hearts and keep them motivated to continue to seek the good of the city, even in the face of such deep and terrible brokenness. Therefore, the congregation will need to be encouraged with the vision of a renewed and redeemed St. Joseph. They will need to begin to see with the eyes of faith what St. Joseph would look like if all idols were destroyed and the New Jerusalem were to descend from heaven and completely transform and transfigure the city into something new and glorious and beautiful (cf. Revelation 21:1-27). Then, being gripped by that wonderful vision, as far away from the current reality of the city as it may be, the congregation will be filled with fresh courage as it seeks to help the city move a little closer to the redeemed version that is its eschatological destiny in the new creation.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The book of Joshua poses a particularly difficult challenge for the church. As a book that records God instructing the Israelites to take up the sword against the inhabiting people in the land, it both offends the sensibilities of many modern people as well as seemingly contradicts the missional calling of the Church in the New Testament to preach a message of grace and work for the renewal of all things. This offense is particularly sharp in the city of St. Joseph, Missouri, a city plagued with escalating violence, and the challenges are especially great for the congregation of Brookdale Presbyterian Church as it seeks to live out its mission within the city. Thus, preaching the book of Joshua to shape the church's mission, and especially this particular church's mission, must be able to overcome these challenges and set forth the positive theological contribution of the book.

To this end, theologians, scholars, and authors have developed a number of approaches to the problem. These approaches may be grouped into three families. The Sub-Revelational approaches deny, in one way or another, that the text is fully inspired by God and thus deny that God actually commanded the Israelites to slaughter the Canaanites. In contrast, the Traditional approaches affirm that the text is fully inspired and thus affirm that God issued the command but then argue that it is unproblematic because there was a sufficient reason for it. Unlike the Sub-Revelational approaches and the Traditional approaches, the Conditioned approaches separate the inspiration of the text and the affirmation that God issued the command, essentially affirming the first and

denying the second by introducing a mitigating hermeneutic condition that makes such an interpretation possible.

Though each of the three families of approaches has strengths and weaknesses, an approach within the third family, the Conditioned approaches, holds the most promise. That is, the book of Joshua is indeed an inspired text but it should not be read as a straightforward historical account of genocidal conquest. Instead, based on the presence of literary and structural tensions within the book, the nature of ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, the nature of *herem*, the distinctively liturgical nature of the conquest narrative, the most likely *Sitz im Leben* of the account, the redactional trajectory of the book that blunts the potential offensiveness of the story, the book of Joshua is best understood as a highly ritualized and sacralized account of Israel's early history, initially written during the years of Josiah's reforms and intended to be a metaphor of the religious life in service to the one true God.

Such an approach produces a theologically rich reading of the book around four key themes. First, the book reframes the notion of identity around confession rather than gender, ethnicity, or geography. Second, the book encourages faith in the power of God. Third, the book urges an elimination of idolatry and whole-hearted exclusive devotion to the Lord. Fourth, the book identifies bold and courageous obedience as the path to rest in the land.

When refracted through the New Testament's witness, these four themes shape the mission of the church in profound ways. A reframing of identity around confession means that the church must construct its identity based on Christ rather than on nationality, race, politics, vocations, or socioeconomics. Therefore, its mission must cross

these boundaries in the world. Faith in the power of God means the church must also embody a posture of humble trust and dependency upon God to make the kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Not only that but the church is also called to dismantle idols, first in its own spiritual life and second in the world, through separation and spiritual warfare. The goal of doing this, both inside and outside the church, is to live in exclusive devotion to Christ and bring about the worship of the Lord throughout the earth. Finally, the theme of bold and courageous obedience as the path to rest means that the church is called to a life of discipleship oriented toward Christ's already and coming kingdom, culminating in the final transformation of this world into a new creation.

In the case of Brookdale Presbyterian Church, these four themes have particular applications. The reframing of identity means that the church must intentionally work to overcome the tribalism that is endemic to the city. Faith in the power of God must galvanize the church against the eroding effects of demoralization in the city. Combatting idolatry is a call to address redemptively the deep-seated realities of brokenness in the city. The theme of bold and courageous obedience should move the church beyond its fears into active ministry within the city, confident that God has destined the city for something beautiful and wonderful in the new creation.

To accomplish this the preacher must handle the violence of the book in a pastorally sensitive and theologically mature way. That requires the preacher to understand and anticipate what is offensive about the book, or an individual story within the book, and why. Then he/she must articulate the offensiveness from the pulpit with clarity, fairness, and empathy. When possible, the preacher should also take the opportunity to reduce the perceived offensiveness by pointing out the parts of the text that

mitigate the popular but inaccurate perceptions of the book. Finally, he/she must reframe the passage theologically, demonstrating the positive theological contribution the text offers and how that helpfully shapes the mission of the church in the world.

This kind of theological approach to the book of Joshua and homiletical model for preaching it from the pulpit is not without its weaknesses. Certainly not every congregation or Christian will be persuaded. However, it does help the church (even if imperfectly) withstand the frequent criticisms of the book. As a highly ritualized and sacralized account of Israel's early history in the land, the book of Joshua does not in fact present a God who is bloodthirsty and genocidal. Nor, to the point of postcolonial interpreters, does it chronicle a violent historical act of imperialism at the beginnings of Israel's history in the land. Historically speaking, the book of Judges is closer to reality. Israel's emergence in the land was likely a confluence of several things – a group (or groups) entering from the outside as well as those already in the land joining up with them due to various political and economic factors. Neither does this reading of Joshua support the claim, sometimes made in comparative religion, that the very nature of religion is violent. True, the book of Joshua does set forth a powerful vision of exclusive devotion to the Lord, but read in the proper way, most notably with an attentiveness to the inclusion of Rahab and the messy business of the Gibeonites, the book suggests that Israel as a people actually has a rather permeable boundary.

Of course, the issue of violence in the book of Joshua is only one kind of challenge in appropriating the troubling parts of Scripture for the church's use. Future projects might take up other difficult portions of Scripture and develop similar kinds of models for appropriating those texts as well. For instance, the church would benefit

greatly from a project that theologically assesses the imprecatory psalms and develops a homiletical model for how they might be preached or even a liturgical model on how the psalms might be theologically integrated into the worshipping life of the church (if they should at all). As another example, a project that addresses how the oracles against the nations in the Old Testament might be reconciled with the church's calling to take the gospel to the nations of the world would help the church make sense of those sometimes puzzling texts and what they have to say to the church today. After all, like the book of Joshua, an initial reading of the oracles seems to contradict the very calling of the church in the world. But, perhaps they too, when read properly, might also help the church to understand better its identity and live out more faithfully its calling – to be able to say with the book of Joshua, “As for us, we will serve the Lord.”

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