



# The Myth of the Emptied Land: Biblical Conquest and American Nationalism

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Lyman Frank Baum was a prolific author of children's books, fantasy novels, and short stories. His best-known book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was published in 1900 and became the best-selling children's book for two years running. Two years after its publication, Baum teamed up with W. W. Denslow, the book's illustrator, and composer Paul Tietjens to render the book into an equally-acclaimed musical stage production for an adult audience.

Ten years earlier, Baum was contemplating a different fantasy. After a series of financial failures, he had moved his family to Aberdeen in the Dakota Territory and began publishing a newspaper called *The Aberdeen Saturday Pioneer*. On December 20, 1890, he wrote an editorial on the murder of Sitting Bull. After extolling Sitting Bull as the last of those who bore the proud spirit of the land's original inhabitants, he wrote:

[With his fall] the nobility of the Redskin is extinguished, and what few are left are a pack of whining curs who lick the hand that smites them. The Whites, by law of conquest, by justice of civilization, are masters of the American continent, and the best safety of the frontier settlements will be secured by the total annihilation of the few remaining Indians. Why not annihilation? Their glory

*Many readers of the biblical narrative find in the events of the past parallels to the actions of their own history, connecting the two. Here the narrative of Joshua and the Israelites is linked with American history, especially with the treatment of Native Americans.*

has fled, their spirit broken, their manhood effaced; better that they die than live the miserable wretches that they are. History would forget these latter despicable beings, and speak, in later ages of the glory of these grand Kings of forest and plain that Cooper loved to heroism.<sup>1</sup>

Eight days later, over one hundred fifty men, women, and children were slaughtered at Wounded Knee Creek by the U. S. Seventh Cavalry. The massacre led to a follow-up editorial, less than a week later, in which Baum opined that “our only safety depends on the total extirmination [*sic*] of the Indians. Having wronged them for centuries we had better, in order to protect our civilization, follow it up by one more wrong and wipe these untamed and untamable creatures from the face of the earth.”<sup>2</sup>

The sentiments that Baum expressed were by no means uncommon at the turn of the twentieth century. The degrading caricature of the indigenous peoples, the feigned sympathy for their plight, the claim to the land by right of conquest, the appeal to civilized justice, and the reconstruction of the Indian into a noble figure who occupies the nation’s past—all had become stock elements of a developing national mythology.<sup>3</sup> At the core of the myth was a vision of America as a nation of immigrants, destined to become a beacon of liberty to the nations of the world. In this vision, the indigenous peoples represented a primitive and moribund humanity that had no place in the new civilization emerging in the New World.

The idea that indigenous peoples have no place in the new nation, thus justifying their erasure, resonates powerfully with the book of Joshua, Israel’s narrative of conquest. Biblical texts render the peoples of Canaan so great a threat to Israel’s existence that the land must be wiped clean of every trace; the peoples must be annihilated and their sacred places pulverized (Deut 7:2–5; cf. Exod 23:32–33; Num 33:50–56; Deut 12:1–3; 20:16–18; Josh 23:1–16). The reason? Their continued presence, even if they are allowed to remain as a subjugated minority, exerts a deleterious force that will turn the Israelites away from the God whose mighty acts have constituted the nation and whose wrath may bring it to an end.

What makes the Canaanites so potent a threat that even a single decrepit altar, if left to stand in a land filled with YHWH worshipers, may tempt Israelites to abandon their God and heritage? So dangerous a presence that even Canaanite babies must not be allowed to live? Along similar lines, what drove the American impulse to erase indigenous presence from conquered lands and the nation’s vision? While they differ in the rationale and mechanisms of indigenous erasure, the biblical and American conquest narratives share a common objective. Both lay claim to the land and bind themselves to it. In short, the erasure of indigenous presence is necessary to transform conquered land into a national homeland.

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in David Stannard, *American Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992) 126.

<sup>2</sup>For the complete editorials, see [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/second/en213/term1/l/frank\\_baum.pdf](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/english/currentstudents/undergraduate/modules/fulllist/second/en213/term1/l/frank_baum.pdf) (accessed April 21, 2017).

<sup>3</sup>Entry points into the literature include Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1981) and Robert F. Berkhofer Jr., *The White Man’s Indian* (New York: Random House, 1978).

The notion of a homeland constitutes an intrinsic element of a nation's myth of origins and shared memories. Anthony D. Smith, who has written widely about the myths, symbols, and traditions that configure national and ethnic identity, describes the bond between people and land as "an alleged and felt symbiosis between a certain piece of earth and 'its' community."<sup>4</sup> The natural features of the land are held to give rise to, shape, and nurture the nation, evoking a profound sense that the land belongs to "us" and is a partner in the people's travails and triumphs. The homeland is the arena for the formative events, victories, and trials that configure collective memory. It is the burial place of the nation's ancestors and the setting for the heroes and heroic deeds that exemplify national virtues. The land may be "felt to influence and contribute to the experiences and memories that moulded the nation."<sup>5</sup> The people in turn transform the land into a distinctive *ethnoscape* by erecting monuments, shrines, and memorials, and reverencing them as sites where national regeneration takes place and attachments are reinforced for future generations.<sup>6</sup> Landscape (the natural terrain) and *ethnoscape* (remade terrain) together create a homeland that identifies the people with their territory.<sup>7</sup>

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Attachment to territory is attested by the amount of textual space Joshua devotes to delineating the territories of the tribes (Josh 13:1–21:51), the sprinkling of exemplary stories among the descriptions of terrain (the courage of Caleb, 14:6–15; the audacity of Achsah, 15:13–19; the faithfulness of Zelophehad's daughters, 17:1–4; the presumptuousness of Joseph, 17:14–18; the failure of Dan, 19:47), and reports of the burials of ancestors (24:32–33). It is attested as well in the lyrics of American national hymns, such as "America the Beautiful" and "My Country 'Tis of Thee," that blend divine blessing, the veneration of patriots and Pilgrims, and features of the nation's landscape. All express the deeply felt sentiment that the nation belongs to the land and the land to the nation.

The indigenous people, however, stand between the conquerors and the land. They possess a prior claim. Their presence in the land complicates new attach-

<sup>4</sup>Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 28.

<sup>5</sup>Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1999) 150.

<sup>6</sup>Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003) 131–165.

<sup>7</sup>Smith has written widely on nationalist movements and their ethnic antecedents. He has been critical of contemporary models of modern nationalism for neglecting the deep popular and affective attachments that provoke durable and passionate devotion to the nation, and for overlooking the long-term processes and structures by which ethnic identities and resources fuel the formation, rediscovery, and reinterpretation of nations. Also relevant by Smith are *The Antiquity of Nations* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009); and "Culture, Community and Territory: The Politics of Ethnicity and Nationalism," *International Affairs* 72/3 (1996) 445–458.

ments. If reciprocal bonds identify the land and its people, how does an invading people of different character and values acquire this bond? If the indigenous people embody the land's attributes, how can an invading nation do so? Conquest thus creates a contradiction at the core of national identity that must be resolved if the people is to meld with the land they have conquered and now occupy.

Reading Joshua alongside the American conquest myth exposes the deep structural logic that resolves this contradiction. When read with attachment to the land in mind, the two narrative complexes reveal a common structure, which may be summarized here and will be elaborated below. First, the indigenous peoples are depicted as wicked or savage people whose presence disorders the land. Second, invaders propelled by a transcendent destiny wage a devastating war of conquest. Third, the conquerors impose a beneficial order on the land. Fourth, the conquerors expel remnant indigenous populations. Fifth, the conquering nation initiates a new ethnoscape through the erection of monuments and the burial of ancestors.

#### ISRAEL'S NARRATIVE

Biblical texts attest to a sense of a deep attachment to the land, so that what the nation does impacts the land. As the life of both the land and its occupants are both ordered by YHWH, any practice that ruptures YHWH's order affects the land as well.<sup>8</sup> So Isaiah:

The land under its inhabitants is polluted, because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinances, and shattered the everlasting covenant. (Isa 24:5)<sup>9</sup>

Murder in particular defiles the land:

You must not pollute the land on which you exist. It is blood that severely pollutes the land, and there is no remedy for blood that has been shed on it except for the blood of the one who shed it. You must not disorder the land in which you are dwelling. I reside within it, because I am YHWH. (Num 35:33–34)

As does adultery:

You have polluted the land with your fornications and your evildoings. Therefore the showers have restrained themselves and the spring rains have not arrived. (Jer 3:2c–3a)

When polluted, the land mourns.

There is no faithfulness, no devotion, no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, killing, stealing, and adultery have broken out, and they fight bloodshed with bloodshed! Therefore the land mourns and everything that lives on it—the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky, and the fish of the sea altogether. (Hos 4:1b–3; cf. Jer 12:4; 23:9–12)

<sup>8</sup>See Norman Habel, *The Land Is Mine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 75–96.

<sup>9</sup>All translations are the author's.

The impact of sin on the land explains why the indigenous peoples must be eliminated. They are a cursed people (Gen 9:25). YHWH names their wickedness as reason for their expulsion (Deut 9:5; cf. Gen 15:6). As the indigenous peoples are bound to the land, YHWH punishes the land for their practices. The nations defile the land, and the land can no longer stomach them.

Do not defile yourselves by any of these practices, for the nations I remove before you defile themselves with them. The land has been defiled, and I have punished it for its wickedness. The land vomits out its inhabitants....For the indigenous peoples do all these repulsive things that you face. And the land has been defiled. (Lev 18:24–25, 27; cf. Lev 28, 30).<sup>10</sup>

By contrast, Israel is a nation born of deliverance and configured by boundaries. Much of the narrative from Exodus through Deuteronomy details the ordering of Israelite society, thought, ritual, and behavior as the nation travels through a wild and unbounded expanse. Israel enters the land as a well-ordered and ordering presence, carrying with it the laws, ordinances, and statutes necessary to establish harmony between God, the land, and its inhabitants. The land will benefit from the Israelite newcomers. Moses declares that the land will enjoy periods of rest just as the people do (Lev 25:1–12). And Israel's obedience to divine ordinances will bring seasonal rains, well-being, and a lavish fruitfulness that realizes the land's full potential (Lev 26:2–13; Deut 28:1–14).

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The Israelites thus enter the land as a liberating force propelled and empowered by YHWH to wage all-out war against the indigenous peoples (Josh 2–12). Throughout the campaign the repetition of the verb **הָרַס** signifies the wholesale destruction of cities and the massacre of indigenous populations (Josh 6:21; 8:22; 10:28, 30, 33–34, 36–38, 40; 11:11, 20, 21). Summaries report that Joshua “conquered the entire land” and slaughtered “everything that breathed” (Josh 10:40; 11:12–15, 21–22). The invasion account concludes with an impressive list of defeated kings that punctuates the comprehensive victory of God's people (Josh 12:1–24).

The conquest of the indigenous peoples in Josh 2–12 clears the way for the imposition of a beneficial order on the land. The second main section of Joshua (13:1–21:42) relates the delineation and allotment of tribal territories, whereby YHWH assigns a discrete territory to each of the tribes as its **נַחֲלָה**, that is, a permanent, inalienable, and legitimate possession.<sup>11</sup> The territories west of the Jordan,

<sup>10</sup>For a succinct study of defilement in priestly literature, see Richard D. Nelson, *Raising Up a Faithful Priest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993) 17–25.

<sup>11</sup>See Richard S. Hess, “The Book of Joshua as a Land Grant,” *Biblica* 83/4 (2002) 493–506; Habel, *The Land*, 54–74.

furthermore, are allocated by lot, signifying that each tribe occupies its territory by divine decree. The identities of tribes thus merge with the territories they inhabit. Stories of heroes (e.g., Joshua, Caleb, Achsah) and formative events intersperse the boundary descriptions and supplement the exploits of Joshua, testifying to the territorialization of memory (e.g., Josh 14:6–15; 15:13–19; 17:14–18; 19:47). Symmetrical schemes for the location of cities of refuge and Levitical cities point to a coalescence of the geographical and social order (Josh 20:1–21:42) and the remaking of the terrain into a distinctive Israelite *ethnoscape*.

The presence of remnant indigenous populations, however, impedes the identification of the conquering nation with the conquered land. The second half of Joshua begins with YHWH's declaration that vast tracts of land remain in indigenous hands (Josh 13:1–6), and the boundary descriptions are sprinkled with reports of residual indigenous populations (Josh 13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12–13). The repetition of a new verb with reference to the peoples signals a new program. Instead of being wiped out (חָרַם), residual populations are now to be removed (הָרַר־שׁ). YHWH assures Israel that he will carry the process through to completion ("I will remove them before Israel," 23:6b; cf. 23:5, 9–11), but only insofar as the nation continues to obey divine commandments and keep its distance from the remaining indigenous inhabitants.

The final episode of Joshua recapitulates two primary markers of Israelite identity: the confession of YHWH's calling and saving acts (Josh 24:2–13) and the covenant that binds God and nation (Josh 24:14–25). The account then relates actions that initiate the transformation of the land into an Israelite homeland. Joshua erects a monolith engraved with the statutes and ordinances that define Israel as a unique people (Josh 24:25–27) and the narrator concludes with three burial reports that locate ancestral graves (Josh 24:29–33). Joshua and Phinehas exemplify the conquest of the land, while the interment of Joseph's bones punctuates the fulfillment of the land promise that threads the origin narrative as a whole. The monolith, moreover, recalls other stone monuments (Josh 8:30–35; 22:10–12, 21–29) and, in the role of a covenant witness, recalls commandments to erase the indigenous *ethnoscape*.

## THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE

The American narrative of westward expansion, as rendered by the journalists and historians of the nineteenth century, depicted the indigenous peoples as savages whose practices prevented the land from achieving its potential. Francis Parkman, arguably the foremost American historian of the century, famously characterized the Indian as a "man, wolf, and devil all in one."<sup>12</sup> The indigenous peoples' moral dissolution and the disorderliness of the land were often associated in descriptions of the wilderness that frontier America encountered. "The whole

<sup>12</sup>Francis Parkman, *France and England in North America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1878) 211.

territory was an unproductive waste,” wrote historian George Bancroft in 1854. “Its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians, destitute of commerce, of political connexion, and of morals.”<sup>13</sup> The connection between indigenous barbarity and the land’s wildness was so common as to receive local expression by a historian of Ashland County, Ohio, where I presently live and teach: “the country was utterly destitute of any of the moral or material resources that bear relation to civilized life.”<sup>14</sup> White settlers, by contrast, brought civilization, a beneficial order that would improve the land. So Samuel Bowles, the influential publisher of *The Republican*, proclaimed: “The earth is the Lord’s; it is given by Him to the Saints for its improvement and development; and we are the Saints.”<sup>15</sup>

The acquisition and conquest of territory was commonly justified by an appeal to transcendence, conceived either as the inexorable advance of civilization (with American Exceptionalism at the tip of the spear) or divine determinism (i.e., Manifest Destiny), and often by both. After declaring that the conquest of the West would bring benefits to the whole of humanity, Theodore Roosevelt exclaimed, “It is indeed a warped, perverse, and silly morality which would forbid a course of conquest that has turned whole continents into the seats of mighty and flourishing civilized nations.”<sup>16</sup> Christian white people prevailed because they obediently fulfilled divine commands that indigenous peoples resisted. Historians Charles Bryant and Abel Murch put it this way:

The white race stood upon this undeveloped continent ready and willing to execute the Divine injunction, to replenish the earth and SUBDUE it. The savage races in possession, either refused or imperfectly obeyed this first law of the Creator. On the one side stood the white race in the command of God, armed with his law; on the other, the savage, resisting the execution of that law. The result could not be evaded by any human device.<sup>17</sup>

With the arrival of settlers, white opinion held that the days of the indigenous peoples were numbered, a belief so widespread that columnist and satirist Ambrose Bierce lampooned it by defining “Aborigines” as “Persons of little worth found cumbering the soil of a newly discovered country. They soon cease to cumber; they fertilize.”<sup>18</sup>

The conquest of indigenous peoples opened land for settlement and the de-

<sup>13</sup>George Bancroft, *History of the United States*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1854) 3–4.

<sup>14</sup>H. S. Knapp, *A History of the Pioneer and Modern Times of Ashland County* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1863) 14–15.

<sup>15</sup>Samuel Bowles, *The Switzerland of America: A Summer Vacation in the Parks and Mountains of Colorado* (Springfield, MA: Samuel Bowles, 1869) 124.

<sup>16</sup>Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West: An Account of the Exploration and Settlement of our Country from the Alleghenies to the Pacific* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1917) 56.

<sup>17</sup>Charles S. Bryant and Abel B. Murch, *A History of the Great Massacre by the Sioux Indians, in Minnesota* (Cincinnati: Rickey and Carroll, 1864) 48–49.

<sup>18</sup>Ambrose Bierce, *The Cynic’s Word Book* (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1906) 5. The entry originally appeared in *The Devil’s Dictionary*, a column Bierce wrote from 1881–1886 while editor of *The Wasp*, a weekly magazine in San Francisco.

lineation of boundaries. Conquests led to treaties that typically ceded large tracts of land to the federal government. Organizing the land into new territories followed immediately thereafter, followed in turn by surveying and dividing territories into counties, townships, and plots. The precedent was set by the Land Ordinance of 1785, passed shortly after the signing of treaties that acknowledged the new American government's claim to the Ohio Country by right of conquest.<sup>19</sup> The ordinance authorized government surveyors to organize newly acquired territory into a grid of townships, six miles square. Another ordinance followed in 1787 and established the process by which the territory would be divided and eventually incorporated into the nation in the form of new states. Although the government at the time had acquired only a fraction of land in the Old Northwest, it nevertheless claimed the entire region and set about organizing it. Territorial and state boundaries were drawn despite the presence of peoples within them, with the tacit assumption that they would eventually be assimilated or removed.

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Early on, residual indigenous populations therefore remained within the boundaries of states upon their entry into the Union. The question of what to do with these populations was largely settled, for states east of the Mississippi River, by the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which mandated the removal of tribes from their ancestral lands in the Southeast and Old Northwest. There was no question in the public mind that the Indians would one day vanish from the bounds of the United States altogether. Henry Clay, who in 1824 established the precursor of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, believed there would be no Indians left within fifty years. Francis Parkman wrote that the Indians “were destined to melt and vanish before the advancing waves of Anglo-American power, which now rolled westward unchecked and unopposed.”<sup>20</sup> The Indians, by most accounts, were a “vanishing race.” The only question in Anglo-American minds was how their demise would eventually take place: extermination, slow atrophy or, at best, assimilation into the higher civilization of the United States.<sup>21</sup>

No matter the means, humane sentiments in the East corresponded to Oliver Wendell Holmes's picturesque vision of the future, in which “a red-crayon sketch” would be “rubbed out...and the canvas ready for a picture of manhood a little more like God's own image.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Treaties were signed with the Six Nations at Fort Stanwix, <http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/entry.php?rec=449> (accessed April 24, 2017).

<sup>20</sup>Francis Parkman, *The Conspiracy of Pontiac and the Indian War after the Conquest of Canada*, 6th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1910) ix.

<sup>21</sup>See Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1982).

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Stannard, *American Holocaust*, 244.



America in sum looked toward a future in which the red man was gone and the land would become fully identified with the white race and the civilized world it created. The removal of the indigenous peoples, when accomplished, could then be romanticized, as it was in the words of an early historian of Ohio: “And thus every foot of the soil of Ohio passed from the red men, who had so long roved its savage wilderness, into the hands of the white man, who was destined to make the wilderness bud and bloom as the rose.”<sup>23</sup>

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The American propensity to erect monuments and commemorate sites of historical and cultural importance manifests a vigorous project to remake the landscape in the image of the nation. To date, more than 90,000 sites in almost every county in the nation have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places. These include more than a hundred sites that designate areas of the American landscape as National Monuments. To these can be added countless statues and monuments of local significance. By contrast, indigenous sites—particularly burial grounds and sacred enclosures and mounds—have largely been erased to level the ground for farming and development. Ohio again serves as an instructive example; only about 100 of an estimated 13,000 mounds and earthworks in Ohio at the time of settlement survive to the present day. By contrast, the Ohio Historical Markers program now encompasses more than 1,500 unique signs that identify and describe the people and events that tell the state’s history, with twenty to thirty new markers completed each year.

#### JOSHUA AND THE AMERICAN MYTH

With Wounded Knee, mainstream America’s program to erase indigenous presence by military force reached its conclusion. The impulse continued, however, via waves of assimilation projects—from criminalizing traditional ceremonies and languages, to privatizing reservation lands, to educating the Indian in boarding schools, to modern termination programs. Today Native Americans arguably remain invisible to the greater part of the American populace, save as caricatures in the form of sports mascots or through various expressions of colonial mimicry.

Reading indigenous invisibility with Joshua in mind suggests that invisibility is not due to benign neglect. The presence of Native people pokes uncomfortably at the American myth of civilized superiority and the appeal to transcendence that mainstream America has historically used to justify possession of this land. It is

<sup>23</sup>John S. C. Abbott, *The History of the State of Ohio: From the Discovery of the Great Valley, to the Present Time* (Detroit: Northwestern, 1874) 675.

easier to bury inconvenient truths about the past than to deal with indigenous people in the present. Easier to perpetuate caricatures than to come to terms with human beings who remind the nation of unfinished business.

Joshua, however, not only reveals but provokes. The first episode of the Israelite conquest brings the invaders face to face with an indigenous woman named Rahab (Josh 2:1–24). Like Massasoit in the Pilgrim myth, she meets the invaders with hospitality and shelter. She is shrewd, opportunistic, and energetic, qualities prized by Israel. She is a person in her own right, with a name, an identity—as opposed to the two anonymous Israelite spies who have entered her land. She, not the invaders, directs the course of events. By the end of the tale, stereotypes have been turned on their heads, rendering the quintessentially indigenous other as fully human as those who have come to wipe out her people.

Rahab's story is one of three personal encounters with Canaan, each connected to one of the first three campaigns against the peoples of the land (Rahab with Jericho, Achan with Ai, the Gibeonites with the battle at Gibeon). The three stories stand in counterpoint to the triumphalist reports of massacres that follow (Josh 10:28–12:24). Together, they humanize both the invader and the indigene, through positive renderings of Rahab and the Gibeonites and a scathing depiction of Israelite perfidy in Achan's story. In addition, the narrator reports that both Rahab and the Gibeonites survive and live with the Israelites in the land “to the present day” (Josh 6:25; 9:27), while Achan and his family, like the cities of Canaan, become a pile of rubble (Josh 7:25–26).

Taken as a whole, the three vignettes dissolve the invader/indigene binary that justifies conquest by presenting the indigenous peoples in ways that resemble Israelites and casting a pedigreed Israelite as an object of disgust. The stories destabilize the myth before it can be fully articulated, as the reader encounters indigenous people as human beings alongside accounts of their extermination and before the list of victories that portray Israel as an unstoppable, divinely empowered force. In addition, the reports that they survive in the land to the present day, as identifiable enclaves at once both within and outside of Israel, testify to the failure of the program to erase their presence from the land. The reports are all the more noteworthy because the reports contain not the slightest expression of regret or reproach. The canonical form of Israel's conquest narrative, in short, implicitly exposes and contests the myth's mechanism of erasure by rendering the surviving peoples of the land visible and human.<sup>24</sup>

In his landmark book on Native Americans and the construction of the American myth, Richard Slotkin writes:

The failure of writers and critics to recognize and deal with the real mythological heritage of their time and people has consequences that go beyond the suc-

<sup>24</sup>L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua in 3-D: A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010) 21–40, 101–123; Hawk, *Joshua* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press) 19–33; and Hawk, “The Problem with Pagans,” in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, ed. Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn (London: Routledge, 2002) 153–163.

cess or failure of their literary works. A people unaware of its myths is likely to continue living by them, though the world around that people may change and demand changes in their psychology, their world view, their ethics, and their institutions.<sup>25</sup>

National myths exert powerful, often subliminal influence on the perspectives and practices of the nation. They lend an aura of rectitude to the nation's ideology, attitudes, and values, and evoke deep-seated sentiments. These sentiments erupt when profound change challenges the nation's identity and self-understanding. At such times, a return to the past provides access to the "true nation" in its pristine form. Invoking the past, by reminding the nation of its authentic self, opens the pathway for national regeneration.<sup>26</sup>

The turn to the past, however, also brings the baser elements of the national character to the surface. So the mechanisms of erasure and exclusion now walk in lockstep with the rise of nationalist sentiments in the United States. The conquest impulse plays out in the exertion of power, the projection of strength, the rhetoric of militarism, and the rallying cry of "America First." Energized erasure erupts in programs to build the wall, deport the undocumented, block immigrant Muslims, and stigmatize minoritized groups—revealing that, at the core, it is still and always about the land and who belongs in it.

The invocation of the past as a means of national regeneration, encapsulated by the siren call to "Make America Great Again," signals a drive to recover the nation's true self in a time of confusion, crisis, and division. To be sure, the reassertion of national ideals and virtues may provoke a needed renewal of those ideals and a reconfiguration of the narrative that articulates them. But elevating the nation to its higher self, the biblical narrative intimates, must also entail working through a narrative of resistance that exposes the nation's anxieties about difference and humanizes those who elicit them. Failing the examination and critique of nationalist myths and symbols as they are invoked, the United States will likely confront new domestic and global challenges by rehearsing the same old script. ⊕

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<sup>25</sup>Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600–1800* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma, 1973) 4–5.

<sup>26</sup>Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 37–43.