



# The Theology of the Divine Warrior in the Book of Joshua

PAUL R. HINLICKY

## THE BOOK OF JOSHUA—A MINEFIELD!

“Fools rush in where angels fear to tread”—the meme has run continuously through my sorry brain ever since I agreed to write a theological commentary on the book of Joshua for the Brazos series. What a *minefield*—ugh, an aptly *militaristic* metaphor to boot!

Genocide and dispossession in the name of the Lord. Miraculous victories in improbable warfare along with a similarly magical taboo on booty. The equivocating “devotion” of the conquered as holy sacrifice to the Lord,<sup>1</sup> which categorically dooms all that is conquered to annihilation yet sometimes, without explanation of the exception, permits repossession of livestock and other spoil. Obsession with matters of identity and boundaries at the expense of the Other, alongside frank acknowledgment of failure to establish either.<sup>2</sup> The failure is on display in the

<sup>1</sup>I don’t have space in this article to discuss it, but the much-remarked phenomenon of *herem*, designating war booty sacred to God, may be illuminated by Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>This is the special focus of the literary study of L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua*, BERIT OLAM Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000). Hawk, however, contends for a reading of the canonical book of Joshua in which wrestling over the identity of the people of God finally detaches from the idols of land, race, and ritual to consist in divine election.

*The book of Joshua can present troubling issues for Christians—how to deal with the bloodshed and brutality within the book without wholly rejecting it, and falling into a form of anti-Judaism that implicitly rejects the entirety of the Old Testament.*

tricksterism of the Canaanite Gibeonites and of Rahab the foreign prostitute, although Rahab tricks the Canaanite king of Jericho and the Canaanite Gibeonites trick Joshua and the Israelites. The expansive claim to the land, the overlapping distributions of territory to the twelve tribes, the conflict thereafter between tribes east and west of the Jordan over a central worship site—all of the above indicate a book beset with unresolved questions.

---

*unsurprisingly, the book's claim and counterclaim over territory still echoes down through the centuries to the conflict between contemporary Israelis and Palestinians*

---

On top of such unsettling discontinuities within the surface narrative of canonical Joshua comes the bizarre exchange in the conclusion of the book. After recounting how the people obeyed Joshua religiously in the purportedly sweeping victory, the book culminates in reproach. Joshua avers that the people, who have just sworn their everlasting fidelity, cannot and will not keep the covenant. The book of Joshua, it seems, cannot make up its mind about what story it is trying to tell!

Unsurprisingly, then, the book's claim and counterclaim over territory still echoes down through the centuries to the conflict between contemporary Israelis and Palestinians. In another echoing ringing through the centuries, the figure of Joshua becomes an ideological inspiration not only of modern Zionism but also for revolutionary militancy—as I shall shortly document. The question of identity in Joshua, correspondingly, has been a perennial problem for Christian theology. In New Testament terms, we might ask whether Joshua is a *zealot* in his militant zeal for the Lord, for the law of Moses, for the purity of the nation. *Joshua*—the Septuagint's name *Iesous* is identical to the New Testament's Greek name translated into English as *Jesus*. Is Moses's prophetic heir apparent, liberator and mediator between the Lord and the people, a model for Mark's apocalyptic Jesus invading Galilee to make war upon the unholy spirits defiling the land, dispossessing them? So Joel Marcus suggests in his commentary on the Gospel of Mark.<sup>3</sup>

What further troubles appear in historical-critical perspective! First of all, there is the text-critical problem: *Which* canonical book? The Hebrew Masoretic text (MT) tells a somewhat different story than the Greek Septuagint (LXX). This is understandable from the observation that Greek readers of Joshua would be situated in the Diaspora,<sup>4</sup> inclined then to downplay in translation the subversive implications of Jews penetrating, colonizing, and finally dispossessing Gentile lands.

<sup>3</sup>Joel Marcus, *Mark 1–8, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) 406, 421, 499, and *Mark 8–16, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 758, 763, 765.

<sup>4</sup>“The promises of the covenant that established the Jews as a people, gave them the land of Canaan, and promised them a king who would reign forever had to be rethought in the Hellenistic period, when most of the Jews lived outside the land, did not speak one language, and were governed not by a theocratic descendent of David but

But in parallel to this tacit revisionism in the LXX, it is not so easy simply to prioritize the much later MT Hebrew text of Joshua. Not only text-critical but also redaction-critical considerations complicate matters in this connection. The relation between MT Hebrew Joshua and the traditions of JE, and of the Priestly and especially the Deuteronomistic schools synthesized in the Torah/Pentateuch, cannot be easily explained.<sup>5</sup>

This fact among others has led Thomas B. Dozeman in his recent and impressive *Anchor Bible Commentary* to argue that an earliest Hebrew version of Joshua seems both to presuppose the existence of the postexilic compilation we know as the Pentateuch, especially Deuteronomy, and at the same time to be providing in some respects a critical, even polemical alternative to it. On the one hand, a central, indeed unmistakable, literary motif is the solemn procession and final arrival of the Ark in the north country of Israel;<sup>6</sup> this, with other evidence, inclines Dozeman to regard original Joshua as a polemic against the Jerusalem temple being reestablished.<sup>7</sup> This polemical cast suggests that at least the narrative of the procession of the Ark to a new home enshrined on the mountains of Ebal and Gezerim, as found in Joshua 1–12, indicates a postexilic work representing a northern perspective, critical of the Judean tendencies of the recently codified Pentateuch in reestablishing Jerusalem with its urban and royal pretensions.

On the other hand, the manifest further redactions present in canonical Joshua by the Priestly and Deuteronomistic schools would have served the retooling and subsequent incorporation of this original polemical, northern-oriented book of Joshua into the master narrative told by the canonical Former Prophets. In this case, a history that originally went immediately from Deuteronomy to Judges was now expanded by the insertion of reworked Joshua. The contemporary polemic of original Joshua against reestablishing Jerusalem-centered worship was thus historicized into something in the distant past. A complicated history of composition! Yet Dozeman's reconstruction accounts smartly for Joshua in its present form as the assemblage of the diverse if not contradictory tendencies that it in fact appears to be.

In any event, there is also the now impressive archeological fact of a dearth of evidence for the claims to conquest in Joshua's purported blitzkrieg. This external evidence supplies further support for the thesis of postexilic Deuteronomistic and

---

by a pagan king. The cherished promises of a national leader of a united people were preserved in the Greek version, but a sensitivity to the political situation of the Jews is also evident." Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015) 100.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas B. Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2015) 16–24.

<sup>6</sup>It is striking that the text-critical effort to establish the *Vorlage* of the book of Joshua undertaken in Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster, 1997), and to locate the book historically in the Deuteronomist school at the same time virtually ignores this striking literary observation of the procession of the Ark. Pointing to one authorized site of worship in the north ill comports with Deuteronomist identification of this site in Jerusalem.

<sup>7</sup>Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*, 24–32.

Priestly recensions, if not previously the construction of the original book *ex nihilo* as Dozeman argues. Perhaps this historical skepticism regarding the Conquest to which contemporary biblical scholarship is coming, however, is a relief in the case of Joshua—a relief to know that genocide in the name of the Lord did not actually happen as represented in the book of Joshua.

But such relief would be short-lived. Genocide in the name of the Lord was all the same invented, survived its canonical retooling, and hence made its way into the scriptures of Israel to become a definite source for Christian traditions of crusade/holy war, Jewish Zionism, and spin-off traditions of revolutionary violence. Interestingly, it is the latter that is surely closest to the original antimonarchic ideology of the book of Joshua, if we accept Dozeman's reconstruction of Josh 1–12. So, for notable instance, Thomas Müntzer argued in his *Sermon to the Princes* against passive waiting on miraculous intervention from above: we should not “understand Daniel to say that the Antichrist should be destroyed without human hands when it really means that he is intimidated already like the inhabitants of the promised land when the chosen people entered it. Yet, as Joshua tells us, he did not spare them the sharp edge of the sword... the sword was the means used, just as eating and drinking is a means for us to stay alive.... For the godless have no right to live, unless by the sufferance of the elect, as it is written in the book of Exodus, chapter 23.”<sup>8</sup>

What Müntzer sees rightly is that the holy violence of the divine warrior saturates the scriptures of Israel. “The LORD is a warrior! The LORD is his name!” (Exod 15: 3). This is the verse of the ancient poem celebrating the Lord’s victory for Israel at the Red Sea, which Gerhard von Rad isolated as an expression of surprise and amazement at the deliverance provided by the as yet little-known YHWH.<sup>9</sup> What Müntzer fails to see, accordingly, is that the element of the miraculous in the book of Joshua cannot be reduced psychologically to the panic experienced by the enemy at the specter of violent opposition. The motif of the “hornet” descending from the deity upon the enemy in fact appears to be common in ancient Near Eastern military accounts<sup>10</sup> and as such, to be sure, is taken up and appears in Joshua. and certainly the human wielding of the sword in obedience to the Lord is instrumental, as Müntzer argued, to the execution of divine war.

But the Israelite sword for the most part executes a mop-up operation in Joshua. Walls falling down at the sound of trumpets in the front-and-center paradigm story of warfare at jericho claims far more than panic seizing the enemy. moreover, apart from the Lord’s miraculous aid in sending stones from heaven or causing sun and moon to stand still, military disaster befalls the Israelites in the book of Joshua. The reason is that the election of the Lord consists in the Lord’s

<sup>8</sup>The *Collected Works of Thomas Müntzer*, trans. and ed. Peter Matheson (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1994) 250–251. See in this connection, Paul R. Hinlicky, “Luther in Marx,” *Oxford Encyclopedia of Martin Luther*, ed. Derek R. Nelson and Paul R. Hinlicky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017) 2:322–341.

<sup>9</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Holy War in Ancient Israel*, trans. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 73.

<sup>10</sup>Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*, 67–70.

sovereign purpose—so the captain of the hosts of the Lord tells Joshua in the theophany on the cusp of the battle of Jericho. Consequently, the differentiation of the elect from the godless cannot be assumed or taken for granted, as the story shows of disobedient Achan’s secretive and covetous seizure of devoted things immediately following Jericho’s destruction. Thus the identity of Israel as God’s people must continually be tested and proved in Israel’s obedience.

This emphasis on the miraculous fighting of the Lord for his own sovereign purposes, disallowing usual motives of human greed in warfare, in tandem with the procession of the ark designating his uncanny kingship, is the key to the theology of the divine warrior in Joshua. In Joshua the ark is also the throne from which the invisible Lord reigns, also in leading the people into battle.

#### ATTEMPTS AT CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING<sup>11</sup>

In Christian theological understanding, the standard for interpreting Joshua was set by the ingenuous *Homilies on Joshua* by Origen. The third-century Origen was still battling the Gnostics, who reiterated the second-century arguments of Marcion against receiving the Hebrew Scriptures. Their trope juxtaposing the gentle God of Jesus over against the warrior God of Joshua and the Jews has echoed through the centuries down to us today, for example, in the recent *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*’s selection and revisioning of hymnody;<sup>12</sup> this trope is to our shame still an acceptable pretext for theological anti-Judaism.

---

*the third-century Origen was still battling the Gnostics,  
who reiterated the second-century arguments of Marcion  
against receiving the Hebrew Scriptures*

---

To be sure, Origen not only could not, he would not defend a superficial reading of Joshua, taking it at face value and thus isolated hermeneutically from the canonical narrative in which it was preserved and passed down to him. For the Christian theologian Origen, then, “our Jesus” is the key to the story of old Joshua, and without this key one is indeed exposed to the Gnostic criticism. But with this key, the Christian theological reading of Joshua reverses field and goes on the offensive. “You will read in the Holy Scriptures about the battles of the just ones, about the slaughter and carnage of murderers, and that the saints spare none of their deeply rooted enemies. If they do spare them, they are even charged with sin.... You should understand the wars of the just by the method I set forth [in the Homilies], that these wars are waged by them against sin. But how will the just ones

<sup>11</sup>For a discussion of the hermeneutical issues, see Paul R. Hinlicky, “*Prima Scriptura: Saving Sola Scriptura from Itself*,” *Dialog* 55/3 (Fall 2016) 223–230.

<sup>12</sup>See the incisive review and critique in Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, “*Peace, Peace, When There Is No Peace*,” *Lutheran Forum* 42/1 (Spring 2008) 3–6.

endure if they reserve even a little bit of sin? Therefore, this is said of them: ‘They did not leave behind even one, who might be saved or might escape.’”<sup>13</sup>

I called Origen’s sermon series on Joshua “ingenuous” because it is filled with clever readings of the text in “discovering” under every stone, as it were, “a greater and truer account...in a spiritual understanding rather than in the literal text.”<sup>14</sup> The statement of Paul in Rom 15:4 that “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by the steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” authorizes Origen’s Christian theological reading. Likewise the text of Eph 6:12, “For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh...but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places,” specifies who the Christian is who reads Joshua in this spiritual way, battling not flesh and blood but spiritual forces of evil beginning in one’s own self. In the main, Origen is right, and if, as previously mentioned, Joel Marcus is right, there is precedent in the First Gospel for just this way of Christian theological appropriation of the book of Joshua.

Appropriation is always an act of hermeneutical violence, because in some respect authorial intention will be violated in any new claim to a text. But this appropriation is also intended and so justified by the very act of putting authorial intentions into writing, giving the written text—as *Scripture*—now a life of its own, so to speak. And this new life already begins in the incorporation of original Joshua into the Deuteronomic history, just as it continued in the Greek translations on through Mark and Origen and Müntzer. Today it occurs in the highly selective teaching of the book of Joshua in Israel.<sup>15</sup> It is also done by historical criticism, despite the conceit of claiming a purely objective representation of the past with which to debunk the putatively sacred text. So this process of appropriation is not somehow a uniquely Christian violation of a specifically Jewish scripture. Appropriation can be done well or poorly, with intellectual honesty or dishonesty. But we all do it and we are all guilty of its “violence.”

In any event, in mitigating Joshua’s zealotry, Origin is in fact following well-established lines of Jewish appropriation and redaction. What is at stake theologically in this contention that in the main Origen was right to “spiritualize” Joshua, however, is the right kinds of continuity and discontinuity in Christian theology with the Hebrew Scripture. We can illustrate this contention with the counter thesis of Adolf Harnack in his influential (and in Germany, fateful) case for Marcion, whom he lifted up as “the most remarkable reformer of the second century.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002) 94.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>15</sup>Yonina Dor and Naomi De-Malach, “Teaching Bible Stories Critically: ‘They Did Not Spare a Soul’—The Book of Joshua in an Israeli Secular Education Environment,” in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013) 39–68.

<sup>16</sup>Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries*, trans. David McInnes Gracie (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981) 46.

Harnack waxes poetically that the glory of Marcion's movement was that it "would rather cast away the Old Testament than tarnish the image of the Father of Jesus Christ by mixing in traces of a warlike God." Marcion, Harnack concludes, "undoubtedly understood the Christian concept of God in an essentially correct way."<sup>17</sup> No small praise for the heresiarch of the second century!

Yet neither Marcion nor his opponent Origen, according to Harnack, could have attained to the insight of nineteenth-century historicism of "the idea of a development of the Jewish God-concept into the Christian one." Lacking this insight of history of religions research, Marcion, for the sake of "essential" Christianity, had to "break with the antecedents" of the warlike God of Judaism; likewise opponents like Origen "had to falsify the Christian concept of God with antiquated notions"<sup>18</sup> also in spiritualizing but in this way also preserving warfare imagery as the individual Christian's personal jihad.

---

*the nub of the matter theologically is that in liberal theology the subject matter of biblical studies becomes the progressive evolution of ideas about God rather than the encounter with God in his history with humanity*

---

Harnack's Marcionite anti-Judaism had fateful consequences short decades after his study was published, which Susannah Heschel has laid bare in her pioneering study of anti-Semitism under the guise of liberal theology and its supposedly objective and disinterested historical-critical exegesis.<sup>19</sup> A further irony is that Harnack's "essence of Christianity" as the soul's inward relation to its tender God could and did coexist with public militarism—the scandal that brought the young Karl Barth to the cusp of his theological revolution.

The nub of the matter theologically is that in liberal theology the subject matter of biblical studies becomes the progressive evolution of ideas about God rather than the encounter with God in his history with humanity through a hermeneutical process of "Scriptural reasoning."<sup>20</sup> Note well: the claim just made is about liberal *theology*, not about *critical* biblical scholarship. It is a matter of profound *theological* divergence when the subject matter under investigation is taken as human representations of God, reducible to different, historically recoverable power relations, instead of God's history of self-representation to humanity amid human representations and power relations. Marcion in this light is, just as Harnack intimates, already the pioneer of liberal theology; his only deficit in

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 47.

<sup>19</sup>Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup>Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation: Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

Harnack's view was his time-conditioned lack of a proper historical method by which to discern the progressive line of evolution in the history of religions.

But Origen is the better reader of Scripture in seeing that there is wrath in the New Testament as there is mercy in the Old Testament. Marcion's view led, and would have to lead (just as it in fact did centuries later with the German Christians of the Nazi period) to wholesale de-Judaization of the New Testament as well<sup>21</sup> —all this on the thin basis of a supposedly “Christian” idea of a gentle and inclusive God.

---

*The real line of continuity and discontinuity is rather christological. With Israel, and with the book of Joshua, Christian theology is messianic, heralding Christ the Victor.*

---

The real line of continuity and discontinuity is rather christological. With *Israel*, and *with* the book of Joshua, Christian theology *is* messianic, heralding Christ the Victor. Yet in paradoxical differentiation from the book of Joshua (corresponding to the mid-narrative turn of Mark's Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem but picking up on the incapacity of human obedience with which Joshua concludes), Mark's Christian messiah triumphs by way of suffering and death for the sake of faithless disciples, indeed persecutors and murderers—it is Mark's *executioner* who is the first and only human to grasp Jesus's true identity as God's Son, “upon seeing how Jesus died” (Mark 15: 39). “Christ crucified”—this is like saying, “Joshua put to the edge of the sword” yet all the same claiming a decisive victory for the divine warrior who has thereby bound the strong man and ransomed his captives. For Mark, this event of recognition, however, is not the centurion's progressive insight into a more developed idea of God. It is divine apocalypse.

Yet Origen may be faulted, as historical-critical biblical scholarship has rightly faulted him and his tradition of theological or spiritual exegesis, for overly determining the meaning of Joshua in this Christian way, for not reading the text according to its own story line. Interestingly, this is also the kind of criticism that Luther had of Origen's allegorizing, which fails first to establish the literary baseline of the text under investigation. When Luther says that the “historical” sense is primary, of course, he is not referring to the text's representation of what really happened in the past as primary. Such is the reactionary, fundamentalist claim that arose in tandem with modern critical scholarship's deconstruction of sacred texts. Rather, what Luther means is following the story line, the “plot” of canonical narrative. Thus for Luther the book of Genesis is a “most evangelical book of divine promises”—a genuine *literary* insight. Such insight is what makes the stories in the narrative hang together in a meaningful journey through time—even Scripture as

<sup>21</sup>Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

internally conflicted and open-ended as we have seen Joshua to be. In this regard, Origen failed to notice things of literary significance in Joshua that would have constrained and even reoriented his Christian theological interpretation. These are at least two.

First, the war stories of the Lord are organized as a procession of the ark, crossing the Jordan like Moses led the escapees from Egypt across the Red Sea, to possess the land, liquidate the city dwellers, publicly to humiliate and execute their royalty. The divine warrior is going to war to establish his reign. That is his sovereign political purpose. But in Origen this public warfare reduces to the ascetic individual Christian's campaign to exorcize personal demons. But Christian baptism, typed as a crossing of the Jordan to follow the ark, is not merely to be understood as symbolizing a private, individual self-overcoming; it *is* rather a social transfer of lordship.

Second, even in the book of Joshua this military procession is precisely not an ideological rationalization of warfare as usual, also not of revolutionary insurgency. The severe proscription of greed by itself would militate against that reduction. But more importantly, the element of the fabulous attends the divine warfare at every step along the way, which is why, as von Rad saw, the prophetic tradition could turn the theology of the divine warrior against the political machinations of northern and southern kingdoms alike.<sup>22</sup> Already then in the miraculous depiction of divine warfare there is in Joshua a kind of “desecularization” (as Bultmann would have put it) going on. The miracle indicates unworldly possibilities that no king going out to war can rationally bank on. *And just that is the point.* But with Origen this fabulous aspect in Joshua becomes a trope for the moral possibility of the zealous Christian ascetic; lost from sight is the divine warrior’s sovereign campaign to restore the creation as a system of blessing after its fall into curse and violence, so that in the end the earth would have “rest from war” (Josh 11:23).

In attending more carefully to these literary themes of canonical Joshua, we might see the theological origin of the book of Joshua within the postexilic beginnings of apocalyptic theology. Adopting insights of tradition-history criticism (prima, not sola scriptura!), we might further see the various recensions of Joshua by Priestly and Deuteronomic editors and the Old Greek translations, not as contradicting its theology of the divine warrior, but as rightly interpreting its appeal to the fabulous by complicating, if not subverting, literal understandings of it along Müntzer’s line. In that case, the claim of Eph 6 stands in continuity with its genesis in texts like the book of Joshua. That account both mitigates the danger of unthinking anti-Judaism as well as requires recognition of Käsemann’s claim that “apocalyptic is the mother of Christian theology.”

What does that Christian theological reading do with the most troubling aspect of Joshua, its literal depiction of genocide in the Lord’s name? It transposes it

<sup>22</sup>See his discussion of the radicalization of the holy war tradition in the prophecy of the historical Isaiah in von Rad, *Holy War*, 101–108.

into the eschatological threat of eternal death for the rebellious powers and their minions, as we may see depicted graphically in Rev 18–19; in tandem, it has the ransomed sing *with understanding*, “This is the feast of *victory* for our God, alleluia!” And the sacred taboo placed on things conquered? Rendered by the LXX’s Greek as *anathema*, it transposes theologically to divine reprobation (Gal 1:9) upon all who offer “some other gospel” than that of “our Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age” (Gal 1: 4). 

PAUL HINLICKY is Tise Professor of Lutheran Studies, Roanoke College, and associate professor, Evangelical Theological Faculty, Comenius University, Bratislava, Slovakia. He is the author of a number of books, including *Beloved Community: Critical Dogmatics after Christendom* (Eerdmans, 2015).