

Joshua: Genocide Or A Tale Of Two Time-Streams?

—by Colin Green

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Joshua: Genocide Or A Tale Of Two Time-Streams?

—by Colin Green

PART 1 of 3:

One of the Old Testament's more interesting conundrums: the violent, strange *Book of Joshua*. This post is a precis of Dr Matthew Lynch's series of blogs on it, in which he seeks to know what the Book of Joshua is telling us. (Links to Matthew's articles are at the foot of this post.) Matthew teaches at Westminster Theological Centre. I've sat in some of his classes at a WTC event. I can only say he is an impressive academic who knows his onions and can "think outside of the box".

By the way, bear in mind that the Book of Joshua makes no claims about who its author is or when it was written. So, it would not be necessary to put forward an idea that it was written at one particular time or another, or by whom. This should be of interest to all who want to follow the evidence wherever it leads.

Below the surface

Dr Lynch has taken on a difficult task. As he points out, the book of Joshua is disturbingly violent, but it isn't entirely as it seems on the surface either. It starts out as the story of Joshua being the one to conquer the Canaanites but it splits into two tracks, like two alternative time-streams.

("Two time-streams" being my analogy, not Matthew's, and it's not an analogy I will press too firmly – it's just to give a frame of reference that I think works to advantage. It's taken from science fiction where

two people can walk through the same door at separate moments and find themselves in two alternative versions of the same reality, as if alternative futures can be entered at the same time. Like I say, I'm not pressing the analogy too firmly into service, but I will use it throughout this article so that it is easy to tell which reality I'm talking about at this or that moment.)

So here are the two 'realities':

- In one time-stream, God sends his holy army to war, with one set of expected results – ruthless total wipe-out of the enemy. There's hyperbole in this, but the story gives the impression at some points that it's for real: "Thus Joshua conquered the whole country ... he let none escape, but proscribed [destroyed] everything that breathed—as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded (Josh 10:40)."
- In the other time-stream, there is merely a flawed and incomplete defeat of their enemy: "when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labour but did not drive them out completely." (Joshua 17:3) In this time-stream, as we will see, the reputation and strength of Israel's less than holy army is embarrassed, and God's will is shown in surprising ways.

This is a riddle. Why would Joshua be written like two versions, in alternative time-streams, overlapping each other? It's almost as if the warts and all time-stream doesn't treat the 'holy victory' time-stream completely literally. The first time-stream is like a paradigm story. The second time-stream, as it develops, seems to have its own function – to call into question the supposed virtue of us-and-them violence.

Lynch:

"I refer to these as 'narratives' though they're at times juxtaposed to one another within the space of two verses. It's probably most accurate to refer to these as two perspectives on the conquest within Joshua".

That is, there is a paradigm version, and a realism version, all within the framework of an ancient Israelite worldview.

As we will see, other parts of the Old Testament give due recognition to the second version, so the total wipe-out version shouldn't be taken for granted. And it's the non-wipe-out version that Christians tend to prefer. But why two time-streams anyway, so to speak?

What is the book of Joshua doing?

Examining this conundrum benefits from a bit of academic know-how. Dr Lynch, on a proper method for getting to the bottom of it, says: "I'm convinced that navigating the challenging waters of violence in the Old Testament requires a multi-pronged interpretive approach."

He asks, "What might the book of Joshua be doing?" This is a question of its function: 'function, not just content, determines meaning.' Lynch says that "there's far more at work in Joshua than an attempt to provide Israel with an unambiguous founding story of destructive victory".

We will need to keep in mind the fact that the book serves a function, and Lynch will argue that the function of its story-telling is liturgical – that is, it's a story with a certain rhythm, one that is so similar to religious services that it almost mirrors the script for one (without violence in the service!). If its function

suggests something liturgical, then we need to factor that in to what we think the book is saying. Function and message, they are the things.

Dr Lynch as a scholar is after an authentic Old Testament reading. He also wants it to be a fair and reasonable Christian reading. He is quick to establish that there is a need for a fresh look at the problem. Joshua's violence seems contrary to Jesus' command to love your enemies and can shock us today. Therefore, this is how Lynch sets out the task before him, to "read Joshua in a way that's faithful to the story of Jesus". He does so by asking these questions (some converted into bullet points) ~

(a) IF Jesus' story is inextricable from the OT story of God and Israel, and in particular, Deuteronomy, where the command to commit genocide first takes shape

AND

(b) IF Jesus is to be the fulfilment of the OT narrative and

(c) IF his identity is that of an obedient Jewish Messiah,

(d) THEN is there anything in the OT story as a whole that would engender the kind of life Jesus lived and the teachings he taught?" (caps added)

Yes, it's not only about the book of Joshua, but also about Deuteronomy – this is actually the second most cited book by Jesus in the gospels, second only to the Psalms in Christ's use of the Old Testament, so we can't factor out books like Deuteronomy when we try to understand Jesus, or when we try to understand Joshua.

In terms of working out an authentic Old Testament reading, Lynch notes the shift between what I call the two time-streams, away from something we may find most unpalatable towards something that chimes a little bit better with Christian thought (although still quite shocking at times), the second time-stream, the liturgical reading: "while Joshua could be read in such a way that warfare is seen as a form of worship, I'm suggesting that the momentum of the book was in the other direction, toward the idea that worship was a form of warfare." That is, godly struggle is more effective in singing songs to God, not in swinging swords at people. Warfare fought in unseen spiritual realms.

Bearing in mind those two time-streams, does either of them provide real grounds for a truly fair and reasonable Christian reading of Joshua? If so, it's not the story of total wipe-out. Lynch: "The book 'permits' both readings, but only one leads toward the one who later took up the name Joshua/Jesus." (NB Joshua and Jesus are different versions of the same Israelite name.)

After my writing this article, and prior to my posting it, Matthew shared with me the following point in addition. This is with reference to what theological scholars refer to as an "already but not yet" theology. This idea means that God's Kingdom has already come into the world in part, but not yet in full, with a future day awaiting when God will "put the world to rights", injustice and all. Matthew's view is that:

"Joshua portrays an 'already' scenario, where the land was completely settled and the people entirely obedient, and a 'not yet' scenario, where the land was not settled and the people were not entirely obedient. Joshua thus gives us a picture of the already/not yet kingdom. That doesn't resolve the violence issue, but at least gives us a picture of what Joshua might be doing."

What some apologists have said

It's not possible to just pull a Christian meaning out of the hat, but Lynch seeks out one methodically. Whereas Christian apologists have suggested ways to see the violence in Joshua as less problematic, Lynch (not an apologist) sees shortcomings in traditional apologetic answers. "You can't just quote 'love your enemies' when confronted with the challenge of violence in Joshua," Lynch says. Nor can we just look to Jesus' self-sacrifice. He argues that "We run into trouble when we assume that the cross—or even Christ—reveals all God wants to say about himself and enemies." Lynch points out how obvious it is that Jesus had a wider-view of dealing with evil than just self-sacrifice: "For instance, he tells his followers to 'head for the hills' rather than 'submit to crucifixion' when they saw Rome surround Jerusalem (Lk 21)."

Lynch finds further weaknesses in some traditional apologetic approaches, such as:

- "Ignoring troublesome passages by quoting other verses more loudly and often."
- "Brushing aside concerns over violence with moralistic answers: [such as] 'Of course the Canaanites were all sacrificing their children to Molech, so they had to be wiped out.'"
- Or settling for a nice meaning, e.g., "Joshua can become a model for leadership in the face of challenges." (It can be that, but that does not explain away the violence.)

Those approaches do not make the disturbing violence actually go away. So, that kind of approach "leaves problems unaddressed. It also leaves Christians unprepared for external critiques or their own faith crisis... we need to consider how to respond to questions about a God who apparently asked his people to kill every man, woman, child, infant, and animal in the land of Canaan."

We need to do better than re-using those traditional apologetic arguments. Indeed, on the second bullet point above, Lynch observes that some apologists argue that the Canaanites were so evil that this explains why they should be entirely wiped off the map: "Yet the call to wipe out the Canaanites included children and animals, infants and the disabled. It is impossible—I humbly submit—to maintain any kind of moral argument (based on moral culpability) that includes such groups." Lynch also clarifies the data in Scripture about this child sacrifice:

"...apologists usually assume that the Canaanites were sacrificing their children on a regular basis. Yet, only one text associates child sacrifice with all the Canaanites (Deut 12:31). Every other text associates child sacrifice with the Moabites (to Molech). Yet the Moabites were not one of the 7 nations that Israel was to destroy (Deut 2:9). This leaves the question: Why would Deut 12:31 lump all the Canaanites together in this way? One possibility is that Deut 12:31 is written with a view to the potential behavior of Canaanites, if left alive, and then influenced by neighboring peoples like the Moabites. The NRSV captures this potential reading: 'They would even burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods' (Deut 12:31)...."

That approach poses this question: was Canaanite life meant to be cut short before its full horror could unfold, like the sort of cutting short that some people wish God had done to the Nazi party in 1930s Germany? Maybe, but apologists should think twice before making an argument that Joshua doesn't, as Lynch observes:

"...the book of Joshua itself does not make a moral case for the conquest. In fact, as Ellen Davis points out, '[T]he only recorded sins in the Promised Land are those committed by Israelites.' Instead, within Joshua itself, the rationale for the conquest is religious. Because the Canaanites worship other deities Israel was to wipe them out. Granted, their worship of other deities may

have involved immoral practices, but Joshua focuses instead on the disloyalty [among Israelites] their worship would entail...”

That is, there was a risk down the line of Israel becoming disloyal to their God. Is that a right interpretation of the book’s justification of the violence?

Context: The Exodus

We need to take a fresh look at the context of the violence. As uncomfortable as it makes us feel, we need to get closer to its meaning. It should first be remembered that these stories are a continuation of the Exodus story. The Israelites have escaped the land of Egypt but not its far-reaching influence. In the Exodus story, it’s not just about what the Israelites do. It’s about what Egypt (especially Pharaoh) does too. The Egypt-Israel tension was not over: “so the Canaanite kings are judged on the basis of their response to Yahweh. In this way, the conquest was seen as a continuation of Israel’s liberation from the royal power of Egypt. This is not surprising, since the Canaanite city-states were themselves strongholds of Egyptian colonization, set up to drain all local resources.”

Context: following Deuteronomy

And context also brings us back to the two time-streams issue. The fact that Joshua reads like two time-streams doesn’t appear out of the blue. But you wouldn’t know that unless you read Deuteronomy first. That is, as well as Exodus, a wider context is found in Deuteronomy, one of the other books in the Torah. It is found after the Book of Exodus, and before the Book of Joshua, and in it you read divine orders for war. And here’s the thing. Deuteronomy first gives the impression that invasion will be slow progress and not a total wipe-out of the enemy in battle - but it later gives an impression that it will be a quick and total wipe-out. Both time-streams are already in the story, before we get to the book of Joshua. It seems to be a riddle that is meant to be there to make us think. So, first, a prediction of *not* being total wipe-out in battle— Deuteronomy chapter 7:

- “The LORD your God will drive out those nations before you, little by little. You will not be allowed to eliminate them all at once, or the wild animals will multiply around you.” (Deut 7:22)

Lynch points out that “This passage, and those like it, expect a slow and gradual conquest whereby the Canaanites are displaced and not destroyed (‘drive out’).” Yet only two chapters later, Moses tells the people that invasion will mean a quick total wipe-out of the enemy:

- “the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you.” (Deut 9:3)

What a contrast! Lynch comments, “This text uses the language of driving out, but also envisions destruction and annihilation. Which were the people to expect? Surely slow and steady displacement and quick annihilation are incompatible!”

To be clear, in the total wipe-out narrative, which Lynch calls the “herem” narrative:

- “the promise was that God would utterly destroy the inhabitants of the 7 ‘-ite’ (e.g., Hivite) nations singled out for destruction”
- “the result of the herem wars was total settlement of the land and total military success“
- “Thus Joshua conquered the whole country . . . he let none escape, but proscribed [destroyed] everything that breathed—as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded (Josh 10:40).”

The Hebrew word ‘herem’ signals that the destruction of the enemy is as complete as any ritual sacrifice. And that’s the total wipe-out ‘surface narrative’, as Lynch calls it.

So, it does read rather like Deuteronomy is expecting a two-time-stream story in Joshua, a riddle indeed. Thus, as Lynch says: “the Torah seems to envision two kinds of invasion.” And in Joshua, that’s what we get.

It would not make sense to presume that Deuteronomy is just contradicting itself, any more than in the case of Joshua. These two time-streams run continually side-by-side. That is why we need to work out what the function of the text is.

So what is Lynch on to? On the violence, he admits that “we are still not going to make the problem go away. Sometimes we have to simply admit that such texts are deeply disturbing”. However, there is a ray of light. He suggests that, for understanding the book of Joshua, each of the two time-streams “has its own function in the book, and each says things that couldn’t be said otherwise with just one narrative.”

How It’s Done

There are a few things to look at here in a little more depth - how the second time-stream

- transforms a still dangerous story into a safer liturgy story
- tones down the violence of the story
- undermines the image of a holy army
- undermines us-and-them stories

In my following post, I will show how Lynch sets about doing this.

End Part 1 of 3.

PART 2 of 3:

We are thinking about one of the Old Testament’s interesting conundrums: the violent, strange *Book of Joshua*, based on Dr Matthew Lynch’s series of blogs on it.

The book of Joshua has violence of a degree that may well seem problematic to the modern mind, but isn’t entirely as it seems. It starts out as the story of Joshua being the one to conquer the Canaanites but it splits into two tracks, like two alternative time-streams. (“Two time-streams” is my analogy, if you’ll indulge me in using an analogy from science fiction, where two people can walk through the same door at separate moments and find themselves in alternative realities, as if alternative futures can be entered at the same time.) These are the two ‘realities’ we’re looking at:

- In one time-stream, God sends his holy army to war, with ruthless total wipe-out of the enemy spoken of: “Thus Joshua conquered the whole country ... he let none escape, but proscribed [destroyed] everything that breathed—as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded (Josh 10:40).”
- In the other time-stream, there is merely a flawed and incomplete defeat of their enemy: “when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labour but did not drive them out completely.” (Joshua 17:3)

It’s a riddle: why would Joshua be written like two versions, in alternative time-streams, overlapping each other? Lynch: “I refer to these as ‘narratives’ though they’re at times juxtaposed to one another within the space of two verses. It’s probably most accurate to refer to these as two perspectives on the conquest within Joshua”.

As I said previously, it would not make sense to presume that Joshua is just contradicting itself. These two time-streams run continually side-by-side. We need to work out what the function of the text is, and what it is telling us. Lynch suggests that each of the two time-streams “has its own function in the book, and each says things that couldn’t be said otherwise with just one narrative.”

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Transformation into a safer liturgy story

There are two aspects to making a safer liturgy story here. First, making the drama about the Israelites ridding themselves of Canaanite religion rather than genocide. And then turning the story into something that has use in a liturgical setting (like how church services are sometimes built around stories, such as at Christmas).

On the Israelites ridding themselves of Canaanite religion rather than genocide, Lynch puts it this way:

- “Here’s what Deuteronomy and Joshua suggest: Whatever earlier practices of extermination through warfare these texts transmit have been reframed in terms of differentiation in worship” [i.e. worshipping different gods, and how to worship the true god.] And:
- “the book [Joshua] is designed to critique the ethnocentric and nationalistic assumptions on which a genocidal ideology depends”

The second time-stream, the ‘deep narrative’ as Lynch calls it conveys this more developed Israelite thought, something forged through a history of Israel’s engagement with God. It interprets stories in a surprising way that would have been helpful for new eras that Israelites were living in when they were reading the book. Crucially, Old Testament authors knew that this deep narrative is there, and presented it to their readers: “Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Kings read the call to genocidal war as a metaphor for separation from idols.” Lynch cites the Old Testament book of Kings:

“...we read how the High Priest Hilkiah found the long lost ‘Book of the Law’ in the Temple, which most think is the book of Deuteronomy. When Josiah heard the book read, he was horrified that he and the people were not in compliance. So, Josiah went on a rampage, tearing down every known place of illicit worship. The narrator of Kings makes a point of the fact that Josiah carried out all the commands of Deuteronomy 7:5 (the herem text), but not against Canaanite peoples. Instead, he carried out herem against (Israelite!) places of worship....”

Not against another people but against sacred spaces set up by Israelites themselves. The second-time stream in summary presents a social ideal that “Joshua envisions the people keeping true to the ‘Book of the Law of Moses’ by ‘not mixing’ and ‘not serving’” the gods of their enemies. It’s about taking responsibility for their own religious purity. And this is rather than total wipe-out of the enemy. Lynch lays out the evidence in a table to show that this is how the book of Kings regards the call to total wipe-out as fulfilled merely by demolishing sacred spaces. See the matches:

<u>Deut 7:5</u>	<u>2 Kings 23</u>
‘tear down’ (Heb. natats) altars	DONE (Heb. natats; 23:7, 12, 15)
‘shatter’ (Heb. shabar) the pillars	DONE (Heb. shabar; 23:14)
‘hew down’ (Heb. gd’) the Asherim	DONE (Heb. gd’; 23:14)
‘burn’ (Heb. saraph) the images	DONE (Heb. saraph; 23:4, 6, 11, 15)

So, this series of matches demonstrates that in this much later story “Josiah carried out the herem command of Deuteronomy 7:5, yet without exterminating entire people groups. He didn’t go hunt for Hivites and Girgashites, but instead, understood the true sense of the law by seeking radical differentiation from all forms of ‘Canaanite’ religion.” So that’s an eyeopener. That how Josiah – long after the time of Joshua – interpreted the holy requirements. Lynch asks whether this is how the herem texts in Joshua are meant to be understood.

To recap the second time-stream, going through those books in brief:

- *Joshua*: in this book, as well as the ancient rhetoric of total wipe-out of the enemy, we find more modest claims too, and with a sting in the tail. Lynch notes: “The promise of God was that Israel would displace the inhabitants of Canaan little by little.” Thus: “Israel settled on only a portion of

the land. Canaanites were still running around everywhere, and eventually, Israel would be exiled from the land it failed to fully settle (Josh 23:13).”

- So next question: how do you live as a holy people in a land that isn't wholly holy? Well, not simplistically through holy war, but particularly through holy worship, with the Israelites taking responsibility for their own failings: “Joshua twice asks the people of Israel (!) to rid themselves of idols (23:14, 23).” No point in pointing a finger at native idolaters when you are idolaters yourselves. So, part of the message is that the risk of Israelite idolatry is greater in a land where there are native idolaters, but wipe-out of the enemy doesn't make you yourself religiously pure – that comes from taking responsibility for yourself.
- Thus, *Deuteronomy* and *Kings*: in these books, “the herem texts were read not as a call for genocide, but instead as a summons to remain loyal to Yahweh and get rid of all ‘Canaanite’ religious influences.”
- With other people groups remaining in the land with their own gods, the book of Joshua could provide a subtle answer to their problem, as it could be read by Israelites as a call upon themselves to stay devoted to Yahweh alone, the God of Israel: “the stories of Jericho and Ai, and the herem texts in Joshua 10-11 are meant to be read metaphorically as calls for radical loyalty.”
- Next question: how in practice do the Israelites avoid contact with their enemies' gods, without going in for mass slaughter? Well, this meant something that we might be tempted to see as cultural vandalism, smashing the enemies' religious objects, especially if they themselves were tempted to use them: “the enduring challenge of Joshua is to forsake all competing loyalties, in fact, to destroy idols and altars, to show them no mercy”. Lynch adds, “if you prefer more pious language, this is a ‘reform movement,’ not a genocidal campaign.” Recognising modern sensitivities, Lynch says, “While that intolerance might be unpalatable, it is of a different order than genocide.” So pagan altars were smashed up.

In short, the ancient Israelite reader was led to interpret Joshua according to the second time-stream, the somewhat less violent one. It's about keeping different groups of people differentiated, not about the other side being wiped out. And the Old Testament really does tee it up that way. Lynch: “Deuteronomy, Joshua and Kings ‘re-frame’ extermination commands in terms of differentiation. Interpretive shifts were already under way that dislodged the story of conquest from any essential association with genocide.”

Therefore, within Old Testament interpretation, “The story of herem warfare was understood to mean: Don't cavort with idolatrous nations, and even more importantly, remain true to the Torah.”

That is all very well, but a possible problem - does it undermine the Torah, that which comes before the book of Joshua? After all, the terms of engagement with the Canaanites were written in the law (Deut 7:20). Were they in one sense not obeyed? Or is it a valid interpretation of the law? Lynch goes with the latter: “This suggests that the story may have been written as a conscious interpretation of the law—a law that seems uncompromising when read apart from the story. The book opens up the possibility of creative adaptation of the law to accommodate the enemy within Israel's own community.”

This is leading towards Lynch arguing that the book of Joshua is leading towards another meaning: “liturgizing warfare”. This means “the reception of such stories in worship settings for a totally different purpose, namely, to celebrate the power of Yahweh effected in the praise of his people.” This is the crucial thing to keep in mind.

How does Lynch get to that conclusion, then?

Making The Story Work For Liturgy

Lynch says that his Bible-reading journey here is going *with the text*, rather than looking for *a way out of it*. He says that *the purpose* of warfare stories *changes* when, as calls it, “reading along the grain of the Old Testament as it reframes violence against enemies.” This is where it gets fun. He explains what he finds: “I’m calling it a priestly re-framing, from warfare to liturgy.” That is to say, “Joshua is ‘liturgizing’ an earlier story of conquest, with Yahweh’s lone military action in the foreground and Israel’s participation in worship as the accompaniment.” This is taking military glory away from the Israelites.

What are the signs of this reframing? Well, Joshua is

“participating in a broader biblical pattern of liturgizing warfare—i.e.,

- (a.) heightening the drama of divine victory,
- (b.) downplaying or completely eliminating any meaningful human contribution to the victory, and
- (c.) heightening the significance of the worship system within the battle scene.”

(I’ve split Lynch’s sentence up into paragraphs again there.) Indeed, Lynch observes that “Joshua 3-6 reads like a liturgical procession. It takes two whole chapters for Israel to process across the Jordan, stopping at each significant site to mark it for later re-enactment.”

It looks like a religious pilgrimage, or a bit like a play acted out in a religious service.

In a telling observation, Lynch notes that “The 7 day pattern of walking around the city (Josh 6) recalls the 7-day Passover celebration in Joshua 3-4.”

Being able to read the book of Joshua this way would have meant a lot to Israelites in later eras:

“The effect of this liturgizing was to render an older story of conquest meaningful for a people whose land had been effectively taken away... a powerless and vulnerable people in the land. They had no standing army, no king, few defenses, and little political clout. But they did have a temple. They did have priests. So when they looked back on their history to ask, where is the powerful God of the past in our day? they answer, He’s present in our worship.”

In the ‘deeper’ narrative then, the second time-stream, “As in the story from 2 Chronicles 20, the people were accompanying Yahweh into the land, but were in essence standing back in worshipful reverence to watch him win a victory.”

See how this influences the story of Joshua at the crucial moment: “the army had no role, the Levitical Priests took center stage. Their special duty was to accompany Yahweh into battle and announce his arrival.”

And here is another difference from older stories of war: “In the past, the Levites would have carried Yahweh’s ark, or throne. Throne or standard-bearing was a common motif in ancient Near Eastern warfare.” However, as we read Joshua we find that, without the ark present – the throne-like box containing holy objects - the Levites act as singers at the crucial moment, and, “Their praises formed a veritable throne for Yahweh as he went forth to fight for his people. This concept is likely behind the psalmist’s claim that Yahweh is ‘enthroned on the praises of Israel’ (Ps 22:3). Rather than the ark, the priests bore Yahweh into battle, lifted up so to speak on the praises of Israel.” (The ark was kept safe in the sanctuary by now, not out in the battlefield.)

That understanding of things will probably be popular with a lot of Christian worship leaders!

The singing of the Levite priests has a dramatic impact on the warfare zone, as God goes into action: “At the moment they began to sing and praise, the LORD set an ambush against the Ammonites, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed” (2 Chr 20:22). It’s not clear how the Lord set an ambush from how the story is told, but the important thing is that it was the Lord’s ambush, not the army’s ambush.

Thus, as part of liturgising, the story itself has an unexpected emphasis, as interpreted in the later Old Testament book of Chronicles. Lynch:

“Chronicles emphasizes the co-ordination between singing and Yahweh’s visitation. In the previous verse, Jehoshaphat appointed the Levites to literally ‘praise [God’s] holy theophany,’ or dramatic visitation. As they sang, Yahweh came in power (cf. 2 Chr 5:13). In sum, this post-exilic story paints the image of a God who achieves victory over the enemy, accompanied by the praise of the powerless.”

In my next, and final post, on this subject, I will look at Matthew Lynch’s argument for how the violence is toned down (in the second-time stream), and how us-and-them violence is undermined.

End Part 2 of 3.

PART 3 of 3:

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The book of Joshua is famous for violence of a degree that may well seem problematic to the modern mind, but isn't entirely as it seems. It starts out as the story of Joshua being the one to conquer the Canaanites but it splits into two tracks, like two alternative time-streams, as if two potential futures in Joshua's mission start mysteriously to unfold side by side, producing two alternative realities. Dr Lynch calls them a 'surface' narrative and a 'deeper' narrative. It's a mystery that is not asking to be left unexplained. These are the two 'realities' we're looking at:

- In one time-stream, ruthless total wipe-out of the enemy: "Thus Joshua conquered the whole country ... he let none escape, but proscribed [destroyed] everything that breathed—as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded (Josh 10:40)."
- In the other time-stream, merely a flawed and incomplete defeat of their enemy: "when the Israelites grew stronger, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labour but did not drive them out completely." (Joshua 17:3)

It's a riddle, and seems to be meant to be that way. But why would the Book of Joshua be written like two versions, in alternative time-streams, overlapping each other? Lynch: "I refer to these as 'narratives' though they're at times juxtaposed to one another within the space of two verses. It's probably most accurate to refer to these as two perspectives on the conquest within Joshua".

Dr Lynch sets out to work out what the function of the text is, and what it is telling us. He suggests that each of the two time-streams "has its own function in the book, and each says things that couldn't be said otherwise with just one narrative."

We have seen that the second time-stream takes an ancient warfare story and tells it as if it were describing a pageant, structured like a church liturgy version of a story – like we might see in a Christmas nativity story. Joshua's army is reduced almost to non-combatants watching God win a victory, while their main contribution is to have the priests leading worship on the battlefield. That is, godly struggle is more effective in singing songs to God, not in swinging swords at people. It's warfare fought in unseen spiritual realms. But how does the book deal with Joshua's army if that is the case?

In this third and final post on the Book of Joshua, I will look at Lynch's argument for how the second time-stream

- tones down the violence of the story
- undermines the image of a holy army
- undermines us-and-them stories

As we do so, we start to wonder how the story of conquest gets turned on its head in some surprising ways.

Toning Down The Violence

Let's look closer at the problem of violence in the *less* violent second time-stream, as this gives clues to resolve some of the riddles here, and to expose some of the limiting realities of ancient warfare. The first thing is to recognise when we are looking at rhetoric.

Putting to the sword everything that breathes: this really only meant 'winning a victory'

Without suggesting that there was no killing, a story can be told with exaggerated figures of speech that should not be taken literally:

“Like Chronicles, Joshua is hyperbolizing (not falsifying! Is Monet falsifying the water lilies?) its historical sources in order to make important theological points. This is a non-controversial claim. Lawson Younger detailed the many ways that Joshua's conquest rhetoric participates in standard ancient Near Eastern warfare rhetoric, where “putting to the sword everything that breathes” basically meant “winning a victory and everyone knew it”

This manner of speech is not uncommon even today. For instance, in a sports match, it might be said that the winning team wiped-out the opposition, but this does not mean the same as it would on a battlefield. It just means one team won the match by an overwhelming margin. Even on the battlefield today, to say the enemy was wiped out does not necessarily mean they all enemy fighters were killed. In ancient times, this sort of hyperbole could be very strong. An example of hyperbolic, seemingly genocidal, language with a note from Lynch in () brackets:

“When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it ... and when the LORD your God gives them [the Canaanites] over to you, and you defeat them, then you must devote them to complete destruction (from Hebrew verb *herem*). You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them”. (Deut 7:1-2)

This passage is immediately followed by the following words, showing that the intention above is actually not genocidal:

“Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire.” (Duet 7:3-5)

This is a good example of where the text almost seems to diverge into two time-streams, one genocidal, the other not genocidal, in adjacent verses. And the point of the book juxtaposing it like that seems to be that genocide does not mean genocide! That is, any genocidal impulses are sublimated into a different concept. Lynch argues that:

“The reasons Joshua took up this radically hyperbolic language of *herem* and total destruction might've been similar to the reasons Jesus used radically violent language: ‘If your right eye ... [or] right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away’ (5:29-30). Jesus didn't stop to say,

‘Now I’m speaking metaphorically here, FYI.’ His audience knew it... the force of Jesus’ summons depended on him not stopping to qualify it.”

If the book of Joshua uses hyperbole in regard to violence, then what would a description without hyperbole look like? And what would be the extent of the violence? The second time-stream gives us some really important clues. The broader picture which emerges is that “the campaigns listed in Joshua were geographically limited and most likely strategically targeted at the Canaanite city-state strongholds.” Even then, “the emphasis in Israel’s campaigns is upon the killing of the kings rather than the cities as such.” Lynch crucially observes that the book of Joshua “does not report the Israelites attacking any Canaanite peasant villages or settlements or any encampments of pastoralists, an odd omission if the text really sought to report annihilation of the entire population.”

Lynch adds more detail:

“The people engaged in conventional warfare against major urban centers and ousted some but not all of their inhabitants. From a historical perspective, the purpose of these wars was likely to dismantle the Canaanite city states, which were ruled by war lords from large(-ish) cities but facing collapse in the 13th century [BC].

This deep narrative provides a more nuanced picture of what might have actually happened when Israel fought with the inhabitants of Canaan. Israel couldn’t ‘drive out’ the Jebusites living in Jerusalem (15:63); they couldn’t ‘dislodge’ the Canaanites in Gezer (16:10); they couldn’t ‘occupy’ the towns in the Trans-Jordan (17:13); Judah took the hill country but couldn’t ‘drive out’ those living on the plains because of their iron chariots (Judg 1:19) ... and so on. These are but a few examples of the way that Israel engaged in conventional warfare against major Canaanite (Late Bronze) sites, were often unsuccessful, and ended up settling in the hill country.

If you look at a map of the actual cities Israel captured, they were quite limited...”

Lynch clarifies that:

“...the places early Israel actually settled, according to the best archaeological guesses, are precisely between the neutralized zones. In other words, the aims of the campaigns were likely to ‘de-militarize’ the royal strongholds to the north and south of regions where Israel peaceably settled...”

This made it possible to settle in the countryside. And “according to Joshua, all of Israel’s campaigns after Jericho and Ai were defensive in nature.”

The surprises keep coming: “most of Israel’s battles were against Canaanites in defense of the Canaanites!” Thus, the second time-stream undermines the idea of total wipe-out, and it undermines the ideas that it was a simplistic us-and-them thing. But isn’t this still a holy war of a kind that makes us uncomfortable? Well, the second time-stream undermines that too, because for a holy war, you need a holy army, and the Israelites had some failings on that score...

Undermining The Image Of A Holy Army

Was Israel meant to be a holy super-army? Lynch notes that according to the book of Joshua:

“Israel’s army was never its source of strength. Its strength was ‘not with your sword or with your bow’ (Josh 24:12). Rather, it was the God enthroned in the praises of Israel who defeats the enemy.”

This is warfare conducted, to take a verse from elsewhere, “not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord”. That is, the battle is waged by God rather more than by men. This partial transfer of warfare from earth to the spiritual realms is crucial to Lynch’s argument as we saw earlier. This was a war fought from heaven.

But it’s time to come to a different point, already touched upon. There is still an armed Israelite army. Yet the familiar impression of a total wipe-out holy super-army is subverted further, and here are a few pointers as to that:

- At the book’s start, the Israelites don’t seem to be circumcised, which means they did not enter the land in a state of Israelite-style ritual holiness. Lynch: “Why was Israel uncircumcised in the first place? Weren’t they coming to displace the uncircumcised?” After all, “for Israel, the term ‘uncircumcised’ acted as a kind of slur for denigrating enemies. When confronted with Goliath, David asks, ‘Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?’ (1 Sam 17:26)”. The Israelite army in Joshua was not such a ritually pure army then.
- Also, even at the book’s end, the Israelites don’t seem to be avoiding pagan idol-worship. The evidence, as Lynch picks it up: “Joshua implores the people to ‘put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD’ (Josh 24:14). Not always such a faithful people, then.
- What about Joshua himself, was he a perfect model of faith? Lynch points out: “when Joshua appoints spies to go into the land, the reader has reason to furrow her brow. It looks like Joshua lacks faith. And that’s bad, right? Remember all the guarantees Joshua had (Josh 1)? Why would he even need to spy the land?” Joshua’s faith actually seems to waver there.
- And not such a well-prepared army either - the book of Joshua “doesn’t even mention weapons until chapter 5.” And get ready to be surprised at the first two times weapons are mentioned:
 1. Firstly, it’s to put right their lack of circumcision – ouch! Lynch: “the Israelites use the sword to render themselves—then uncircumcised (!)—vulnerable and submissive”. The first time that “the people use weapons (literally ‘flint swords’) it’s against themselves.” This is what it says: “Make yourselves flint swords and circumcise the Israelites again. So Joshua made flint swords and circumcised Israel at the ‘Hill of Foreskins.’” Lynch makes a telling point: “This would have been physically excruciating, and symbolically disempowering. As Mark

Bucanan points out... ‘We know from earlier in the Bible that circumcision was a way of rendering yourself unfit for battle, vulnerable to attack.’ So no, this army was not really well-prepared for battle. And it’s almost as if God deliberately allowed things to go this way.

2. Secondly, an army commander come to the scene from heaven – yes! – but seems ambiguous about taking sides, which would be unsettling for the Israelites’ preparations. Lynch: “Yahweh’s own army commander raises his sword in a profoundly mysterious expression of non-alignment. He will not be paraded in to provide unqualified support for Israel’s army.” This is despite Joshua asking the heavenly commander explicitly, “Are you for us or for our enemies?” (5:13). Just look at the reply he got from Yahweh’s commander: “Neither! I have come as commander of the LORD’s army.’ Oh my – neither! There is a clear line drawn between God’s army and the Israelite army. So: “why doesn’t God re-affirm his earlier promises to guarantee victory for Joshua and the people? Why doesn’t the story resolve the encounter, instead of just leaving us with the image of Joshua bowed low before the non-aligned God?”

This is not the kind of preparation an army usually wants. The fact that Yahweh’s commander is neither for nor against Joshua really changes things, as Lynch explains:

“The storyteller wants to unsettle and dislodge the binary us-them categories implied by a surface reading of the book’s earlier chapters. One strand of the conquest story fosters nationalistic confidence, religious certainty, and a story of success. But Joshua (and later readers) needed to uncouple his perceptions of God from the narrow confines of his patriotic story.”

That is perhaps more appealing to modern sensibilities. And it means that the story can’t be just about cleansing pagan enemies from the land, also given the many other points above. Which brings us to...

How The Book Of Joshua Undermines Us-And-Them Stories

Cleansing the conduct of Israel

To summarize, if it’s about cleansing, then the second time-stream is making the cleansing of the conduct of Israelites a top priority, whereas total cleansing of pagans of the land is never a higher priority: “Israel needed to become the circumcised people, they needed to become non-idolaters.” Otherwise, as Lynch says, “If Israel did not cling to Yahweh, he would let the nations remain. They would become thorns in their sides until Israel was eventually ‘driven’ from the land (23:12-13).“ And that is more or less the direction in which the story that the Old Testament develops.

The issues with Israel’s conduct aren’t just to do with circumcision and idolatry. It’s also about the things that lead to idolatry. This brings us back to the fact that Israelites could become idolaters under the influence of pagan idolaters who were already in the land. I have spoken about the smashing up of pagan objects. But there’s also the problem of Israelites making treaties with the enemy. As Lynch says, “Moses’ words to the conquest...: ‘Make no covenant with them’ precedes the call to show the Canaanites no pity

(Deut 7:2).” But the people do make treaties with the enemy in the book of Joshua. It takes shape with issues like intermarriage.

Intermarriage

Lynch is referring to intermarriage of Israelites with non-Israelites: “God commanded the people to tear down the sacred altars and idols of the nations and avoid intermarriage (Deut 7, 20). Intermarriage would lead to idolatry, and vice-versa. On that basis, the people were specifically instructed to avoid making covenants with the Canaanites.”

The threat of this happening was still around towards the end of the story, as Lynch explains,

“At the end of his life Joshua told the people that many lands remained unclaimed, but promised that God would eventually ‘push back’ and ‘drive out’ the nations that remained (Josh 23:5). Yet there’s a hint of contingency to this promise. Notably, the people were not to ‘mix’ with the remaining nations through marriage or worship, for that would lead them away from their God (23:7, 12). Instead, they were to cling to Yahweh (23:7-8).”

This is where the second-time-stream really is plainly different from the first. It adds to the evidence that there was obviously no total extermination. After all, how could the risk of intermarriage ever apply to those you’ve exterminated? It couldn’t.

Intermarriage is not the only kind of treaty in the picture. Because next we come to the fascinating story of Israel treating with the street-smart prostitute Rahab. This story, we shall see, strongly undermines ancient Israelite nationalism. It embarrasses Israel by portraying Rahab showing in certain ways how Israel should really conduct itself. Israel’s conduct should make it a shining light to the world, but it needs a prostitute called Rahab to show them how to be that. There something very deliberate in the book of Joshua telling the story this way.

How this story starts off embarrasses Israel again, showing us moral weakness. Lynch: “So Joshua sends the spies from Shittim. And what did his spies do? They went straight to the house of a prostitute! What were they thinking? Well, most English translations don’t fully capture all the innuendos. They ‘go into’ the house of Rahab ... This doesn’t look good.”

As one preacher I’ve heard puts it, Rahab knew how to hide men and lie for them, perhaps using the skills of her profession!

Well, although that doesn’t reflect well on the spies, actually Rahab proves to be the hero of the hour. Lynch argues rightly that the “surprise encounter with Rahab suggests that the author is purposefully lifting up the stereotypical Canaanite outsider—the embodiment of all that threatens Yahwism—and subverting that stereotype.” And Rahab’s bravery only highlights the failings and imperfections of the Israelites. Lynch, states that – setting aside the obvious –

“Rahab proves to be the incarnation of everything Israel was supposed to be! She shows hospitality to the foreigners, protects them from harm through civil disobedience, extols the mighty deeds and character of Yahweh, and acknowledges his supremacy (‘for the LORD your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath’ 2:11).”

So, the story of Rahab contributes mightily to the overall critique that we find in the second time-stream: “Joshua is not a straightforward tale of genocide... the book is designed to critique the ethnocentric and nationalistic assumptions on which a genocidal ideology depends.”

Obviously, we may still be uncomfortable with some of the violence, and perhaps the reasons for it. As Lynch admits, “weaving those critiques into a story that includes genocide might seem like a strange brew, but there may be reasons. Maybe the simple conquest story was a cultural given that needed to be re-examined, and one way to do that was to retell it in a way that foregrounded the story of Rahab.”

Rahab is vindicated, in stark contrast to some of the Israelites. Lynch argues that this:

“...challenges us to re-consider the question: Who’s in and who’s out? Rahab the archetypal Canaanite is included in the people of God. By contrast, we read in Joshua 6 that an Israelite named Achan dies the death of a Canaanite (in accordance with Deuteronomic law) because he sought to gain from the conquest. So Rahab’s family was spared but Achan’s family was destroyed. By highlighting these two specific cases, Joshua sends a signal that ‘not all Israel is Israel; not every Canaanite is a Canaanite.’ The narrative space devoted to this subject (2 entire chapters) suggests an intentional focus on disturbing the boundaries dividing insider and outsider identities...”

One of the ways in which the book of Joshua’s message was that from time to time shows the conduct of Israel had needed to be cleansed, but cleansed to wrongful attitudes and prejudices.

Footnote

The Bible Re-Interprets

These might seem arcane and niche matters for Old Testament buffs. But they play a part in the story of Jesus, which must be of interest to many, if not all, Christians. His scriptures were what we call the Old Testament, and the book of Joshua would have been no exception to him. And Lynch picks up something very interesting in Matthew’s Gospel:

“Yeshua or Joshua in Hebrew—met a ‘Canaanite’ woman (Matt 15:22). It’s highly anachronistic for Matthew to use the term ‘Canaanite,’ since it’s the only time that the term is used in the Gospels. The use must be deliberate. In fact, when Jesus encounters her, she asks for mercy, because her daughter was oppressed by a demon. Now, for Jesus/Joshua to meet a Canaanite asking for mercy (remember: ‘show them no mercy’) sounds like a re-enactment of the conquest. But rather than applying Deuteronomy 7 literally, Jesus engages in a battle of wits about who’s in and who’s out. In other words, Jesus negotiates with the enemy. Seeing the woman’s ‘great faith,’

he heals her daughter. By moving toward the one who his disciples wanted to ‘dismiss’ (Matt 15:23), he found a Canaanite ‘outsider’ with the faith of an Israelite ‘insider.’”

So what have we found? If we look at the book of Joshua as history, we have to understand what kind of history its author was writing – this is always part of the historian’s task, to understand what kind of thing a book was meant to be in its own time. If we don’t try to do that, we are apt to miss the original author’s intentions. And that is why a two time-stream understanding gets us well past the lazy assumption that it is a book of genocide. (I hope you found my analogy of two time-streams, culled from the language of science-fiction, helpful!) Perhaps I should leave this subject with this message from Lynch:

“I don’t think Joshua tells a story of straightforward genocide, its claims are nonetheless radical and reflective of reality. We need these texts to work on us like these shocking words from Jesus in the Gospel of Luke:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)”.

Hyperbole, rhetoric from a different age, to be understood, and not just read off the surface. It’s often said that the past is a foreign country, and we are mistaken to think that it always speaks to us on our own terms. We have to understand it on its terms. Religious scripture from antiquity, Judaeo/Christian Scripture included, is a case in point.

I’m grateful to Matthew Lynch for his support in my publishing these posts based on his work on the *Book of Joshua*.

End Part 3 of 3.