

JOSHUA



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A CRITICAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

In Joshua 8:18–26, we read that Yahweh said to Joshua: “Stretch out the sword that is in your hand toward Ai; for I will give it into your hand . . . When the Israelites had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai . . . the total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand.” Such statements as these make critical readers of Joshua wonder how God, the creator of the whole world, would select one race to slaughter people of another race so mercilessly. In this short discussion, I first deal with this problem of privileging one people group over another by providing a way of interpreting the book of Joshua. I

conclude with a comparative study of several themes of Joshua within an African tradition.

The book of Joshua is disturbing to those who interpret it literally. To learn the object facts about God from this book, the reader must seek the purpose of its authorship. First, the book of Joshua was written by ancient Israelites for ancient Israelites. A missionary for the global community of faith of all nations did not write this book. The ancient Israelites regarded Yahweh as the mighty god who fought for them against the gods of other nations. Although ultimately Yahweh became synonymous with the universal deity, Elohim (God), there is strong evidence that originally Yahweh was Israel’s action-god appointed by the divine council over which Elohim presided (Mafico 2007).



Second, Deuteronomistic historians redacted Joshua retrospectively, reorienting the history of ancient Israel to an ideological perspective that affirmed that Yahweh blessed individual people and nations according to their just deserts. Experiencing relentless political upheavals in the seventh century BCE onward, ancient Israelites questioned the theology of Yahweh's past victories. They began to ask: "Was it not you who cut Rahab and pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to cross over" (Isa. 51:9–10)?

Joshua, like the book of Jeremiah, says that it is not that Yahweh has become weak and derelict in his protective duty. Rather, Yahweh gave the ancient Israelites what they deserved, concomitant with their commitment to the covenant. Just as Achan sinned by breaching the ban (*herem*), Yahweh handed them to be slaughtered by the dwellers of Ai. But if ancient Israel's leadership could be as obedient as Joshua was, then Yahweh would again fight for them. Thus, Joshua is a hyper-exaggerated book redacted to motivate ancient Israelites and their kings to be as faithful to Yahweh as in the blessed days of Joshua when Yahweh gave them amazing victories against their enemies.

THE INFORMED INTERPRETATION OF JOSHUA

The book of Joshua is, therefore, not relating accurate historical events of Israel's conquest of Canaan. Rather, it is a book that reflects its ideology of the conquest long after it had happened. The book of Joshua portrays an ideal Israel under the leadership of an ideal leader, Joshua, a leader said to be so theocentric and meticulously obedient to Yahweh, who was with him. By idealizing ancient Israel in this

way, the authors were criticizing the behavior of the contemporary kings who had deteriorated in their moral probity far beyond the folly of Solomon that led to the schism of the kingdom of Israel. The country of ancient Israel was languishing under great uncertainties, and the Israelites realized that Yahweh was adverse to them. The book of Joshua was therefore written to inspire them to once again rally behind Yahweh, who rewarded their predecessors with the speedy conquest of the whole country of Canaan simply because they were singularly faithful to Yahweh. Additionally, the book highlights Joshua as a model king in contrast to the monarchs of Israel who ruled without Joshua's moral probity. The reader must realize that the author's facts may be tainted by some propaganda that was prejudicial to other nations, particularly the Canaanites, whose land they had usurped. Now, the big question: Did ancient Israel succeed in annihilating the Canaanites, as the first half of the book of Joshua claims?

THE CONTRADICTORY PROPAGANDA OF JOSHUA

A careful reading of the book of Joshua unveils some enigmatic inconsistencies that are imperceptible to biblicists or literal Bible interpreters. These inconsistencies are found in the structure and content of the book and also when in comparison with the other Deuteronomistic books (Judges, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings). To give two examples, Joshua 1–12 reports ancient Israel's speedy victory over the Canaanites, achieved with no single Israelite sustaining death or injury. But in Josh. 13:1 we are shocked to read: "Now Joshua was old and advanced in years and the Lord said to him, 'You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land still remains to be

possessed.” The list of territories yet to be conquered comprises almost the entire land of Canaan. This statement entirely contradicts the statement in the summary chapters (Josh. 11:16—12:24), which underscored that the whole land was conquered, leaving only slain bodies of all inhabitants and carcasses of their livestock. In Joshua 10:40–43, we have this strong summary:

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded. And Joshua defeated from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza, and all the country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon. Joshua took all these and their land at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel. Then Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, to the camp at Gilgal.

To fathom the meaning of texts like these is only possible when the reader is familiar with the ideology of the Deuteronomist historians clearly articulated in the books of Joshua to Kings. These books accentuate Yahweh’s retributive justice—that is, do right and be blessed; commit sin and be cursed. Thus, beginning with Joshua 13, the redactor painted a more realistic picture of how ancient Israelites occupied the Canaanites’ land. They won some battles and lost others (Judg. 2:11–15) and even served foreign rulers like Cushan-rishathaim for eight years (Judg. 3:8). The Israelites were even tempted to worship the gods of the Canaanites, a theme that recurs throughout the book of Judges and *passim*.

A final note regarding the misconception of the so-called holy war is this: the Canaanites were not subdued completely until the time of David when he conquered the Jebusites to build his capital on neutral land that belonged

neither to the northern nor the southern tribes (2 Sam. 5:6–10). One could surmise that the Israelites coexisted with the Canaanites and in some cases even intermixed with them (Josh. 10:1–26). The polemic against syncretism is a good testimony to the threat that Baalism posed to Yahwism (compare to 1 Kings 18:20–24). The attempt to resolve the enigma of the holy war has left us little space to focus on the texts that reflect African traditional viewpoints. Contemporary commentaries adequately present the Western perspective on major themes of the book of Joshua. Hence it behooves us to hear the perspective of Black people on some of these themes.

WAR PREPARATION BY CIRCUMCISION OF THE ANCIENT ISRAELITES

In Joshua 5:1–8, we read of Yahweh’s injunction to Joshua to circumcise the children of the warriors who had left Egypt and then died in the wilderness. Their children, however, had not yet been circumcised (Josh. 5:7). Significantly, Joshua must use a flint stone that reminds us of what Zipporah used when she vicariously circumcised Moses. On his return to Egypt from Midian, Yahweh wanted to kill Moses (Exod. 4:24–26). Zipporah perceived that it was because he was uncircumcised, according to the text. She circumcised their son and touched Moses’s feet with the son’s foreskin to appease Yahweh. Circumcision served as the cement that cohered the Israelites across tribal lines as they fought to occupy the land of the Canaanites. The Israelites were not alone in seeing the value of circumcision in war.

Circumcision among the Gikuyu people of Kenya played a very pivotal role in their tribal cohesion. As with the ancient Israelites, the circumcision rite was performed by an elder using the most traditional circumcision tool, a sharp



stone knife. Circumcision was a prerequisite for marriage as it also served as a rite of passage for boys ages thirteen to sixteen. By this rite, boys instantly transitioned from youth to adulthood. Significantly, the circumcised group stayed together for several months before and after circumcision. Elders disclosed to them the esoteric secrets of their tribe and the responsibilities for a man to his family and tribe. All elders present shouted together to ask the Deity to bless them. At that moment, youth swore to keep tribal secrets, to cohere, and to defend their tribe against enemies. This covenant was sealed with the rite of circumcision. Each circumcision “boot camp” was given a distinct name and became a military troop that could be called to duty by its group name (Kenyatta 1965: 132).

Analogically, for the Israelites to remain resolutely united against the Canaanites, they needed their young warriors to be a covenanted military force. Their fathers had been united both by the Egyptian experience and by their sojourning together in the wilderness, where they witnessed Yahweh’s glorious acts. Therefore, it is reasonable to argue that the circumcision at Gilgal was a covenant the Israelites were making with one another and with Yahweh in preparation for the war against the Canaanites. It also was a requisite for marriage (compare to Gen. 34:13–17).

ACHAN’S SIN AND ISRAEL’S DEFEAT FROM AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

The account of Achan intends to illustrate that it was not the Israelites who were fighting the war against the Canaanites; it was Yahweh. This “holy war” fulfills promises Yahweh made to the patriarchs (Gen. 12:1; 16:17–20). Yahweh cleared the land of Canaanites. To achieve victory, the children of Israel were to adhere to the *herem*, “the ban.” Achan alone breached

the ban, and the Israelites lost the battle against the Canaanites. To Westerners, this does not make sense. To Africans, this is easy to explain. War was won not by the prowess of the army but by the support of the Deity through the ancestral spirits. This belief guided the wars for the liberation of the colonized African countries. The ban included making love with one’s wife (compare to 1 Sam. 11:8–13—Uriah refusing to go and sleep with a spouse while he was part of the troops fighting a war). Because of the bonding “covenant” that each young person made during circumcision, a breach by one was a breach by all. This solidarity concept is observed in all walks of African life. For example, the misbehavior of a child is a shame shared by the whole family and spreads to the extended family and the clan.

The sanctification of ancient Israelites following Achan’s sin was similar to the ancient African practice of extremely purging itself of army misconduct in its midst. Interestingly, ancient Israel was tainted by the presence of banned goods in their midst. According to African and ancient Near Eastern concepts of *pars pro toto* (a part represents the whole), a banned object in the midst of ancient Israel contaminated Achan and his family, who, in turn, contaminated the whole of Israel because they were a corporate people. Likewise, an African person whose wound was bleeding while walking on a path would obliterate every drop of blood because any part of a person’s body, hair, or clothing represented the whole person and thus could be used by an enemy for harm (Frankfort 1977: 12–14).

CHOOSE YOU THIS DAY

Ancient Israelite social structure is akin to African social stratification. In chapter 24, Joshua

summoned the Israelites to appear before the gods (Heb. *'elohim*) at Shechem. First, he summoned the elders—those whose age had accorded them the status of sages. These were followed by the heads of families. Today, elected African presidents work closely with elders, heads of families, mediums/diviners (so-called biblical judges), and military officers because ordinary people will continue to follow their elders, heads of families, and mediums/diviners (Mafico 1998).

To unite all ancient Israelites under Yahweh, Joshua followed Israelite social structure. He brought them before the *'elohim*, “the gods.” While they were in front of their *'elohim*, he challenged them to make a choice between Yahweh and the *'elohim* of Canaan, the *'elohim* their ancestors brought from beyond the Euphrates and those they worshiped in Egypt. To help them make the right choice, he first listed the acts of Yahweh Elohim in verses 2–13. In this text, Yahweh explicitly says: “I did to Egypt . . .”; “I brought you out . . .”; “I gave you the land . . .”; and so forth. In these ten verses, Yahweh uses the “I” thirteen times to refer to his benevolent acts toward their ancestors. By the concept of *pars pro toto*, what Yahweh did for their ancestors he did for them. Yahweh’s track record should help the Israelites choose who among the gods to follow with utmost fidelity. In one accord, the Israelites chose Yahweh as their plenipotentary deity among the other gods (compare to Exod. 15:11). This text sounds like a requisite for the making or renewing of a covenant.

CONCLUSION

Many people are disturbed by the military tone of the book of Joshua and the callous killing of the Canaanites at the command of Yahweh.

We have attempted to show that the book of Joshua should not be read literally. To get a balance of how Israel conquered the Canaanites, the book of Joshua should be read alongside the book of Judges, which shows that Yahweh was not a partial God. He was on the side of the Israelites only when they walked according to his statutes (Josh. 1:7–8). When they did not, the same deity used the Canaanites to massacre the Israelites (Judg. 2:11–16).

Joshua was written or finally edited by the Deuteronomistic historians several centuries after the breakup of the United Kingdom of Israel in order to make the kings of the eighth to the sixth century BCE emulate Joshua, whose total obedience to Yahweh won him many battles against the Canaanites; some of those victories were achieved without fighting—for example, the fall of Jericho (6:1–21). Since Joshua was written to motivate the Israelites during their political crises, the account of the battles is full of exaggerated accretions that are hideous to modern readers, especially those not acquainted with the critical methods of studying the Bible. But reading Joshua as the backdrop of the entire biblical account reveals that God was not impartial to Israel. God punished Israel harshly when they disobeyed, sometimes by calling Israel’s enemies as his servants (Isa. 10:5–6; 45:1–3). God is consistent with his justice diachronically because God is the same from time immemorial hitherto (Isa. 41:4b; 43:10c).

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