Foreword

Evangelical Christians are characterized by, among other things, high regard, indeed reverence, for Scripture. The Bible is the word of God. This means, among other things, that the Bible is understood to contain the self-revelation of the one true God, who is made known in many and various ways, and supremely in Jesus Christ. As such, the Bible is to be trusted and what it says is to be carried out – this is the way to live life most fully and faithfully.

Unfortunately, there are many difficulties within the Bible. Sometimes it is a problem of understanding what the text is saying. But even more problematic is when we think we do understand what the text is saying, but what it appears to be saying makes the heart sink. This may be because of the costliness of the challenge to faithfulness. But often, especially in the Old Testament, it is because the content may appear to be at odds with Christian priorities. What should one do, for example, with the imprecatory psalms, when the New Testament directs that Christians should bless, and not curse, those who persecute them?

At present, the relationship between faith in God and violence towards those considered to be others/outsiders is a live issue, nurtured not least by the indiscriminate murder of people in their normal course of life by Islamist suicide bombers. To be sure, one of the striking things about Jesus’s death and resurrection, which Christians hold at the heart of their faith, is that it is at nobody’s expense: the only one who suffers and dies is Jesus himself, and the risen Jesus offers life
even to those who put him to death. However, although this is at the heart of Scripture, it has to be recognized that not everything in Scripture straightforwardly conforms to this pattern. Especially in the Old Testament, it is clear, for example, that Israel is given a land to live in at the expense of its former inhabitants, the Canaanites.

Difficulties about religiously-inspired violence, and God’s favour for some being at the expense of depriving others, come together with unusual force in the book of Joshua. This book can appear to be an account of divinely-sponsored ethnic cleansing. As such, it not only offers ammunition to those hostile to Christian faith; but also for evangelical Christians, who are committed to a reverential and trusting attitude towards Scripture, it can be unclear how best to handle such a text. This difficulty is not, of course, a new one, but it is perhaps particularly pressing at the present time. In recent scholarship this moral and theological difficulty has also been supplemented by another difficulty as to the historicity of Joshua’s account of the conquest, not least because the archaeological evidence poses problems.

How should all these difficulties be handled well? Generally speaking, the more something matters, the harder it can be to discuss it carefully and dispassionately – heated rhetoric, partisan arguments, unexamined assumptions, defensiveness, and point-scoring all too easily accompany, and often displace, searching engagement with the real issues.

I am delighted, therefore, to commend this book as a model of how to approach difficulties in Scripture. Douglas Earl offers a way of thinking about Joshua that will be surprising and challenging to many. Yet, whether or not his thesis fully persuades, the way in which he approaches the text will surely appeal to all thoughtful Christians; for Earl is simultaneously radical, in that he utilizes fresh resources and challenges common ways of thinking about Joshua, and traditional, in that he reconnects with certain ancient and existentially fruitful Christian ways of handling the text. Moreover, the response from Chris Wright, and Earl’s reply to this response, model respectful and attentive scholarly interaction and the shared quest of faith seeking understanding. Tolle, lege – take up, and read.

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