Introduction

It would be interesting to conduct an opinion poll of Christians in order to discover what the biggest obstacle to delving into the Old Testament is today. For some it might be the detailed laws; for others it might be the repetitive histories and genealogies, or it might be the alien or perhaps seemingly irrelevant world that is presented there. But I suspect that for many the problem is often that of pictures of genocide and violence, especially now that we are all too familiar with harrowing scenes of violence and its aftermath on our TV screens. How is this violent world of the Old Testament, a world of violence in which both the people of God and God seem implicated, in any way compatible with the world of the gospels, with the kingdom of God, and with a God of love?

Sadly, we have become all too familiar with religiously motivated terror attacks in the name of ‘holy war’ and genocides in the name of ‘ethnic cleansing’. In many ways the questions posed to us by some, such as Richard Dawkins in particular, are unsurprising and fair. In light of various religiously motivated terror attacks and genocides, and in light of reading the Bible, is religion simply a stimulus for violence and evil – the ultimate delusion? Or, even if one does not wish to go so far as Dawkins, might Christians now wish to abandon the Old Testament altogether as it seems to reflect a deluded view of a violent God, a view of God that seemingly led to genocide and violence in ancient times?

As Christians we need to face the problem head on. There is no denying that there are a number of stories steeped in
‘genocide’ (to use a specific modern term that does not necessarily correspond with what we find in the Bible) in the Old Testament.1 Turning to Genesis, the very first book of the Old Testament, in Genesis 34 we find a story of rape, deception and the massacre of the Shechemites by Jacob’s sons. Turning to Exodus, the next book in the Bible, we find an account of the war against the Amalekites (Exodus 17) which concludes with the report that God will blot out the memory of Amalek (Exod. 17:14). And in Numbers, the fourth book, there are several massacres reported and indeed condoned (Num 21:1–3, 21–35; 25). But perhaps it is in the following books of Deuteronomy and Joshua that we find the most comprehensive and difficult accounts of dispossession of peoples, genocide and destruction in the Old Testament. In Deuteronomy 7 Israel is commanded to ‘utterly destroy’ the local inhabitants of the land together with all their idols and altars (7:1–5). The book of Joshua reports the fulfilment of this campaign of destruction and the settlement of Israel in the land, being a book filled with reports of genocide and destruction. Reading past Joshua we come straight to the bloody history of the book of Judges, and then in the books of Samuel and Kings we have accounts of warfare and violence abounding. On the whole these accounts in Samuel and Kings seem more concerned with warfare in general rather than with genocide and conquest on the part of Israel, perhaps with 1 Samuel 15, where Saul is commanded to ‘utterly destroy’ the Amalekites, being the main exception.

The term used in the original Hebrew texts for this ‘utter destruction’ in 1 Samuel 15, Deuteronomy 7 and Joshua is the word herem.2 It is a rather rare word outside Deuteronomy and Joshua, yet perhaps it captures the essence of the problem of genocide in the Bible. So this idea of herem sums up for us in the sharpest way what is problematic in the Old Testament with regard to the problems of violence and genocide in the name of God, and I think that it is fair to say that it is the book of Joshua that provides the most comprehensive treatment of the idea of herem in the Old Testament. Indeed, in his book The God Delusion Richard Dawkins singles out the narrative of Joshua together with the commands of Deuteronomy suggesting that:
The ethnic cleansing begun in the time of Moses is brought to bloody fruition in the book of Joshua, a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so. As the charming old song exultantly has it, ‘Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a-tumbling down . . . There’s none like good old Joshuay, at the battle of Jericho.’ Good old Joshua didn’t rest until ‘they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword’ (Joshua 6:21) . . . Do not think, by the way, that the God character in the story nursed any doubts or scruples about the massacres and genocides that accompanied the seizing of the Promised Land. On the contrary, his orders, for example in Deuteronomy 20, were ruthlessly explicit.

For these reasons I would like to focus attention in this book on the problem of genocide as we find it in Joshua – it seems to be the most obvious and troublesome example of the problem. So what I would like to do is to consider what the book of Joshua is about, as a book that was significant for ancient Israel, the church through the ages, and for Christians today. What is the real significance of the book? Is it a book glorifying in genocide and ‘ethnic cleansing’ – or is there in fact something much more subtle going on? I propose that there is in fact something more subtle going on in the book, and I shall try and develop and demonstrate this as we go along.

So, in chapter 1 I shall survey the origins of both the problems that the book of Joshua has raised for Christians, and the roots of possible ways of reading it that might point to a different way of understanding the book. This chapter offers a very brief summary of some Christian approaches to reading more problematic texts in the Old Testament. In chapter 2 I turn to look at some recent approaches to literature and narrative, especially from the perspective of anthropological analysis, to consider how important (but often difficult) stories function in shaping the lives of communities generally. Here I try to show that such an approach can be used to shed light on much traditional Christian reading of the Old Testament, and how an anthropologically guided approach might be a helpful
resource for us today as Christian readers of the Old Testament. Chapter 2 is, perhaps, the most technically difficult chapter of the book, but there is important material here that lays the groundwork for the approach to Joshua that I take. In chapter 3 I take a look at some of the important background ideas for reading Joshua, especially a consideration of the idea of herem and the nature of ‘conquest accounts’ in the ancient Near Eastern world. Then in chapter 4 I develop a reading of Joshua, trying to show what it is basically about and how it might have been significant for the ancient Israelite; and in chapter 5 I consider what significance Joshua might then have in a Christian context, allowing for both continuity and discontinuity with its context in the Old Testament. Finally in chapter 6 I discuss the implications of my reading of Joshua more generally, making some brief remarks on how this might relate to other texts in the Old Testament that portray genocide, as well as giving brief consideration to the implications that this study has for our interpretation and use of the Old Testament more generally.

With this in mind, it is worth reading through the book of Joshua, and Deuteronomy 7, to familiarize yourself with the material before going further. I have tried to leave out as much of the technical detail as possible. For those who want more detail, please consult my Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, forthcoming) where full details of the arguments and discussions are supplied. In terms of commentaries on the text of Joshua, I have found L.D. Hawk’s commentary in the Berit Olam series most helpful for a literary reading of Joshua, and I have drawn upon it regularly. For a recent discussion of the more historical-critical issues involved in reading Joshua R.D. Nelson’s commentary is very useful, and for an overview of traditional reading of Joshua the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Old Testament IV) by J.R. Franke is good.