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If Jericho was Razed, is our Faith in Vain?

So Joshua defeated the whole land . . . he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded. (Josh. 10:40, NRSV)

Facing the historical problem: If Jericho was *not* razed, is our faith in vain?

In his 1982 book, *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Reconstructing Israel's Early History*, G.W. Ramsey devotes a chapter to the question, 'If Jericho was not Razed, is our Faith in Vain?'¹ The question is a witty allusion to 1 Corinthians 15:14 (if Christ has not been raised, then . . . your faith has been in vain). Ramsey asks the question in order to consider how the 'historical truth' of an Old Testament narrative affects its theological value. In other words, if Jericho was not utterly destroyed as described in Joshua 6, then does the story lack truth and theological value? Does a history-like narrative have to describe accurately events that have 'happened' for it to be 'true' and thus theologically valuable? Written in 1982, Ramsey's book emerged at about the time when 'literary' approaches to Old Testament narratives were becoming popular, approaches that began to make concerns with the question of what actually happened seem less important – it was what

the story taught, as a story, that was coming to be seen as what was theologically significant. Theologically speaking, this kind of approach to the Bible might be said to reflect the coming of age of the ground-breaking work of Karl Barth earlier in the twentieth century. Barth argued that to become fixed on historical questions, with the actual events that may or may not be *behind* the story, could be unhelpful in terms of faithfully reading Scripture, suggesting that

the idea that the Bible declares the Word of God only when it speaks historically is one which must be abandoned, especially in the Christian Church. One consequence of this misunderstanding was the great uncertainty of faith which resulted from an inability wholly to escape the impression that many elements in the Bible have the nature of saga, and an ignorance of where and how to draw the line which marks off what is finally historical and therefore the true Word of God. But in other cases it led to a rigid affirmation that in the Bible, as the Word of God, we have only 'historical' accounts and no saga at all – an affirmation which can be sustained only if we either close our eyes or violently reinterpret what we see. In other cases again it resulted in an attempt to penetrate to a 'historical' kernel which is supposed to give us the true, i.e., 'historical' word of God – the only trouble being that in the process it was unfortunately found that with the discarding of saga we do lose not only a subsidiary theme but the main point at issue, i.e., the biblical witness. We have to realise that in all three cases the presumed equation of the Word of God with a 'historical' record is an inadmissible postulate which does not itself originate in the Bible at all but in the unfortunate habit of Western thought which assumes that the reality of a history stands or falls by whether it is 'history.'²

In other words, by concentrating too much on questions of history we start to lose sight of the Bible itself and what it wishes to teach us.

However, the force of Ramsey's question with regard to the book of Joshua was acute in the twentieth century. Indeed, the historical difficulties that gradually emerged with Joshua may

well have gone beyond what Barth envisaged, for in the early twentieth century the German Old Testament scholar Albrecht Alt argued that there never was an Israelite conquest of Canaan. But perhaps more famously the results of Dame Kathleen Kenyon's archaeological research on Jericho in the 1950s suggested that Jericho's walls had not fallen in an era that would correspond with the biblical record of its conquest by Israel. Hence Ramsey's question, for in the twentieth century many Christians were brought up in a context where 'history' was prized over against 'fiction' or 'myth', where what was 'historical' was 'truthful' whilst what was 'fictional' was 'false', and what was 'mythical' was regarded as naïve and untrue. So many Christians would naturally be worried that their faith may be in vain if indeed Jericho had not been razed – for the Bible's 'truth' seems to be eroded if it is not historically accurate. However, whilst today many, and perhaps most Old Testament scholars would probably assume that Israel did not conquer Canaan and settle in the land in the way that the book of Joshua presents it, several scholars have run against the tide and argued for another look at the archaeological data, scholars such as John Bimson and Peter James.³ If their work is along the right lines, it might be possible to suggest that Jericho was indeed razed by the Israelites. And then the 'crisis of faith' can be averted – or can it?

Facing the ethical problem: If Jericho was razed is our faith in vain?

The first problem is of course that even if archaeological evidence could prove that the Israelites did indeed raze Jericho then it in no way verifies the interpretation of the event given in the book of Joshua unless one makes the prior assumption that what the Bible describes is always automatically true. So in an 'apologetic' context (i.e., one in which one is seeking to provide evidence for the reliability of the Bible and its portrait of God, so as to convince others of this) one cannot claim for certain that God did indeed command the razing of Jericho. Archaeologically 'proving' that a group of Israelites razed

Jericho does not prove that God told them to or that the story that Joshua tells interprets events such as this correctly. But even if Joshua can be placed on a more 'historical' footing, there is a second problem – the ethical problem. The rise of ethical and postcolonial criticism of the biblical texts coupled with a raised global awareness of the horrors of religiously motivated violence and genocide in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries makes Joshua profoundly troubling reading.⁴

So, even if one could assert the historical value of Joshua after all, whilst this may well be of comfort to some Christians, it merely raises new ethical problems for others. For many Christians the ethical difficulties with the Old Testament are far more pressing than historical difficulties. So perhaps the problem now in the twenty-first century is the opposite of that which Ramsey posed in 1982. In other words for us the question is, 'If Jericho *was* razed, is our faith in vain?' Do we want to worship a cruel, violent and brutal God, particularly where religiously motivated violence is one of the biggest problems facing the contemporary world?

The Joshua Delusion?

Posing the question in this way with these concerns has led to a new kind of Christian apologetic along the following lines: we now believe that there was no conquest (according to mainstream archaeology) and so everything is OK as God is not violent and brutal after all – Israel just had an incorrect understanding of God. So the problem is shifted to a primitive and deluded concept of God in the minds of Ancient Israelites, exemplified by Joshua – the 'Joshua delusion' perhaps.

However, R.A. Warrior has drawn attention to the problem with this sort of apologetic appeal to history behind the text. He suggests that whatever the answer to the historical question of what history lies behind the text, it does not resolve the problem of the narrative. People read stories as they are, perhaps as a basis for political action, and not the history behind them.⁵ Indeed, Richard Dawkins suggests

Yet again, theologians will protest, it [the fall of Jericho as per Joshua 6] didn't happen. Well, no – the story has it that the walls came tumbling down at the mere sound of men shouting and blowing horns, so indeed it didn't happen – but that is not the point. The point is that, whether true or not, the Bible is held up to us as the source of our morality. And the Bible story of Joshua's destruction of Jericho, and the invasion of the Promised Land in general, is morally indistinguishable from Hitler's invasion of Poland, or Saddam Hussein's massacres of the Kurds and the Marsh Arabs. The Bible may be an arresting and poetic work of fiction, but it is not the sort of book you should give your children to form their morals.⁶

With what I have termed the 'new apologetic' approach it is not the biblical text that is important, but what we think did or did not happen in the past behind the text that is important. But this approach represents a reversal of Barth's suggestion, and the comments of Warrior and Dawkins draw attention to the problems of this approach: Where does such an apologetic approach leave the biblical *text* itself? Remember that it is the text that the church has accepted as authoritative and *not the history behind the text*. So does the text of Joshua itself have any positive theological value – or is it an embarrassing hindrance to proclaiming the gospel today in a world torn apart by religiously motivated violence?

In a 'post-colonial' reading of Joshua Dora Mbuwayesango concludes that

the book of Joshua can help the people of God to construct its identity in a sound way, namely by acknowledging and making explicit the revulsion we have for its narratives. Precisely because these stories of relentless massacres shock us, they warn us that the construction of identities that are exclusive and religiously sanctioned – however overt or covert this religious exclusivism might be – leads to genocide and extermination of entire ethnic groups.⁷

In other words, for Mbuwayesango, we should invert the way that the book of Joshua is used today. The text becomes a

warning, and offers a viewpoint to be firmly rejected rather than followed.

But is there something else that might be said about Joshua? According to some of those concerned with the moral use of the Bible today and throughout the history of the Church the answer would seem to be a firm 'No'. It is claimed that the story of Joshua has been used historically to justify violence. For instance, Warrior indicates the problematic nature of conquest narratives in the Old Testament, and Joshua in particular, and highlights the use made of extracts from such narratives by Puritan emigrants to America to support genocide,⁸ illustrating the point that Dawkins and Warrior himself makes above. Dawkins' (and Warrior's) point is illustrated again in the Crusades according to Roland Bainton – the narrative of Joshua, or so it is alleged, shaped the morals and actions of the crusaders. In his influential work, *Christian Attitudes to War and Peace*, Bainton titles a chapter 'The Origins of the Crusading Idea in the Old Testament', and discusses texts from Deuteronomy and Joshua, as well as other accounts of what he terms 'crusading' in the Old Testament.⁹ As the title of the chapter suggests, he links the narrative of Joshua to the idea of 'crusade', repeatedly using the category of 'crusade' in relation to this and other Old Testament narratives. He concludes this chapter by stating, 'The architects of the Christian crusade, therefore, drew their warrant from the books of the conquest and of the Maccabean revolt.'¹⁰

Whilst Bainton wrote before the rise of colonial and post-colonial studies, his work has been used in the development of these fields of study in relation to the Bible. For example, Michael Prior argues for a moral critique of the Bible and its use in colonialism. Whilst he does not discuss the Crusades at length, he discusses Joshua and the Old Testament alongside the Crusades,¹¹ and suggests that the 'Crusades provide a striking example of the link between religious and political power, and exemplify how the Bible has been employed as an agent of oppression'.

In light of these comments and the all too frequent images of religiously motivated violence that we see on our TV screens there would seem to be little that one might intelligently say in

response. For many, Calvin's reading of Joshua 10:18 seems rather hollow, and indeed closer to the problem than to a solution:

The enemy having been completely routed, Joshua is now free, as it were, at leisure, to inflict punishment on the kings. In considering this, the divine command must always be kept in view. But for this it would argue boundless arrogance and barbarous atrocity to trample on the necks of kings, and hang up their dead bodies on gibbets . . . It would therefore have been contrary to the feelings of humanity to exult in their ignominy, had God not so ordered it. But as such was his pleasure, it behoves us to acquiesce in his decision, without presuming to inquire why he was so severe.¹³

But it is all too common to assume that, on the one hand, Calvin represents the only kind of Christian voice on the matter in which the value and perhaps truth of the Bible is upheld, and, on the other hand, that Bainton, for example, is correct in his analysis of the role of texts such as Joshua in a bloody history of the church. Both these points seem so plausible – that, roughly speaking, Calvin represents the only kind of 'sound' Christian voice, and that the book of Joshua has often provided the warrant for religiously motivated violence, and the Crusades in particular.

But both these very plausible assumptions are in fact incorrect – traditionally Joshua was not usually read in the way that Calvin read it, and traditionally Joshua has seldom been used to justify violence in the name of God. Very little of the material relating to the justification or preaching of the Crusades, for example, made any reference to Joshua. As a matter of fact, the gospels played a far more prominent role in justifying the Crusades than the book of Joshua, which is conspicuous by its absence.¹⁴ It seems that Bainton, and those that have used his work, simply assumed this since it seems so plausible.

Remembering the forgotten pathways: Listening to Origen

So what other ways might there be of reading Joshua in a faithful way as a Christian? To consider this question we must go back further in the history of the Church to the third century, and look to Origen, whose reading of Joshua became, generally speaking, the standard way of interpreting it as Christian Scripture at least until the time of the Reformation. How then did Origen, and the 'premodern' church, tend to read Scripture? Did they trust it as the word of God? Were they unaware and naïve in relation to historical and ethical difficulties? Well, Scripture was certainly trusted as the word of God. And whilst the premoderns were unaware of many of the historical and archaeological issues that we are now aware of, it is clear that they were well aware of historical and ethical difficulties in Old Testament narratives. But precisely because they had an unswerving trust in Scripture, an awareness of historical and ethical difficulties in the narratives did not lead to a crisis of faith or to a rejection of problematic texts. Rather, the premoderns were led to understand texts with difficulties like these as having their real meaning somewhere other than in the 'literal' or 'plain' sense of the text (i.e., what the text seems to say 'at face value'), the level where the ethical and historical difficulties are located. The ethical and historical difficulties in a text were, therefore, cues to the reader of the text to seek the significance of the text in a 'spiritual sense'.¹⁵ Origen, for example, was well aware that there were 'historical difficulties' in Scripture, but used them as a 'hermeneutical cue' to seek the value and truth of Scripture in something other than its 'historicity'.

Let us look at an example in Joshua. The narrator's note that Rahab's house is in the wall of Jericho (Josh. 2:15) sits rather uneasily with the famous collapse of Jericho's wall and saving of Rahab in Joshua 6 when coupled with the comment that she and her family were to remain in her house when Jericho was attacked (Josh. 2:18–19). One might of course seek to 'harmonize' the texts by appealing to the miraculous preservation of her house, or to the wall only partly collapsing, or perhaps, as

the rabbis did, by appealing to ingenious schemes of city wall construction that would allow for her house to remain intact when the wall fell. But none of these ingenious solutions actually reflect *what the text tells us*. They are attempts to force the significance of the narrative and its understanding into historical terms. In some ways, such harmonizing strategies can actually ‘damage’ the narrative. For it seems that the point of the wall collapse is to testify to the power of God to bring Jericho’s wall down *completely*, removing it completely as an obstacle, thus ‘talking up’ the miraculous dimension of the story. Indeed, I rather like traditional Jewish renderings of the account in which the walls do not ‘tumble down’ but sink into the ground, indicating their *complete* removal – something that is a possible rendering of the Hebrew of Joshua 6. In other words, to appeal to a partial wall collapse to ‘save the historicity’ of the account seems to move away from a significant point of the story. Therefore it seems quite possible that the location of Rahab’s house might well be precisely the sort of ‘stumbling block’ that Origen talks about that urges us to move away from seeing the value and purpose of these stories in terms of their ‘historicity’. Another example can be seen when one considers the nature of the so-called ‘spy mission’ of Joshua 2 – the spies only go to a prostitute’s house and return to Joshua without any ‘intelligence’. So it seems that it is all the more likely that these narratives are seeking to do something other than be historical reports. For why have a spy mission that does not result in the gain of any intelligence?

Regarding the ethical difficulties, in his homily on the ethically difficult Joshua 10:20–26 Origen remarks,

But Marcion and Valentinus and Basilides and the other heretics with them, since they refuse to understand these things in a manner worthy of the Holy Spirit, ‘deviated from the faith and became devoted to many impieties,’ [1 Tim. 6:10] bringing forth another God of the Law, both creator and judge of the world, who teaches a certain cruelty through these things that are written. For example, they are ordered to trample upon the necks of their enemies and to suspend from wood the kings of that land that they violently invade.

And yet, if only my Lord Jesus the Son of God would grant that to me and order me to crush the spirit of fornication with my feet and trample upon the necks of the spirit of wrath and rage, to trample on the demon of avarice, to trample down boasting, to crush the spirit of arrogance with my feet, and, when I have done all these things, not to hang the most exalted of these exploits upon myself but upon his cross. Thereby I imitate Paul, who says, 'the world is crucified to me,' [Gal. 6:14] and, that which we have already related above, 'Not I, but the grace of God that is in me' [1 Cor. 15:10].

But if I deserve to act thus, I shall be blessed and what Jesus [Joshua] said to the ancients will also be said to me, 'Go courageously and be strengthened; do not be afraid nor be awed by their appearance, because the Lord God has delivered all your enemies into your hands' [Josh. 10:25] If we understand these things spiritually and manage wars of this type spiritually and if we drive out all those spiritual iniquities from heaven, then we shall be able at last to receive from Jesus as a share of the inheritance even those places and kingdoms that are the kingdoms of heaven, bestowed by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, 'to whom is the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen!' [1 Pet. 4:11]¹⁶

What is interesting here is that Origen's non-literal approach to the text operated precisely *in contrast* to the interpretative practices of the Gnostic 'heretics' (Marcion, Valentinus and Basilides) who asserted that the Old Testament must be understood 'literally'. Origen's reading here is strikingly different from Calvin's (compare Calvin's reading of 10:18 above), and ironically Calvin's reading of this text appears to be closer to the Gnostic heretics than to Origen's! Moreover, Origen's approach seems to start precisely with the same kind of probing of the text as the postcolonialist might – there is a recognition and acceptance of the fact that the text seems ethically problematic as it stands! So again, for Origen difficulties in the text – this time of an ethical nature – are cues to seek the significance of the text somewhere other than in its sense as a literal description of events. Perhaps then contemporary postcolonial and ethical-critical, as well as historical-critical readings of

Scripture may actually function as calls back to a more faithful reading of Scripture.

This approach was by no means limited to Origen or to the book of Joshua. In another ethically difficult passage, the plundering of the Egyptians in the book of Exodus, Gregory of Nyssa, in the fourth century work *The Life of Moses* suggests,

Do not be surprised at all if both things – the death of the first-born and the pouring out of the blood – did not happen to the Israelites and on that account reject the contemplation which we have proposed concerning the destruction of evil as if it were a fabrication without any truth.¹⁷

Indeed, it is clear that this kind of approach – a ‘spiritual’ or perhaps ‘allegorical’ approach to the text coupled with a recognition of the difficulties of texts such as Joshua at the ‘literal level’ – was widespread in the premodern period. For example, in the mediaeval *glossa ordinaria*, a compendium of established readings and notes on the biblical text, readings such as Origen’s and others similar to Origen’s dominate. It was quite possibly the pervasive influence of the traditional reading of Joshua that stopped Christians from using Joshua to justify violence.¹⁸ In other words, rather than Calvin’s reading being standard for faithful Christian reading of Joshua, it marks only one of several approaches to reading Old Testament texts in the Christian tradition in its insistence on the ‘literal sense’. In fact Calvin’s reading seems to represent something of a break with established reading practices of Scripture, a break that was to become standard in modernity, which led in the end to historical and ethical criticism of Scripture and thus to the problems with which we started this chapter.

It is worth noting that in Origen’s homily on Joshua 10:20–26 (cited above) what is implied in his critique of the ‘heretics’ is that they misinterpreted the text because they read it in a manner unworthy of the Holy Spirit, a manner that ‘deviated from the faith’. This is rather like the kind of approach that Irenaeus took against the same heretics in the second century in *Against the Heretics* in order to argue that they were misreading Scripture. For Irenaeus the argument is that scriptural texts are

read as parts of a whole, as parts of the body of Scripture¹⁹ understood through the tradition that was passed down from the apostles.²⁰ So, Irenaeus, and later Origen, were confident of a generally correct reading of Scripture because they were reading the texts in their correct context traditionally and thus theologically (i.e., 'in a manner worthy of the Holy Spirit'). But this 'correct context' was *not* the original context of the text or what it 'originally meant'. Rather, it was the context of a text within Scripture as a whole *and* within the apostolic tradition in which these texts were received and used. So, for example, Scripture speaks of a loving God and of love for neighbour – whoever that might be according to the parable of the Good Samaritan. So the question is then raised as to whether Joshua is read well in terms of a God who commands genocide, if Joshua is read as being connected with the whole of Scripture and the teaching of Jesus, with the answer to the question seeming to be 'no'. In other words, reading Joshua 10:20–26 in the way that Origen does (cited above) is a way of reading the text that (a) 'fits' with the Bible as a whole as per Origen's concern and (b) the received Christian theological tradition passed down from the apostles, as per Irenaeus who was particularly concerned with rooting this 'rule of faith' in the public teaching of the apostles.

The approach of Irenaeus, that scriptural texts are understood in the light of a tradition, actually sounds quite 'postmodern' – the context of the interpreter within a tradition is recognized to be important. This practise of reading-within-the-tradition was something that was valued in the early church, as we see in the debate between Irenaeus and the Gnostics. Both Irenaeus and the Gnostics read the scriptural texts within the context of different traditions, resulting in differing understandings of the texts. So it is likely that if one seeks to read Joshua in isolation from the remainder of Scripture, or in isolation from the context of its use within the church, then it will be misread.²¹ The context of the interpreter, and the 'interpretative community' of which they are a part is important. So perhaps one might say that where Marcion's approach, and many modern and postmodern approaches to the text go wrong is that they read the text 'in the wrong context', even though they ask the important questions of the

text, such as questions regarding its morality. They ask the right questions, but point in the wrong direction for an answer. Indeed, it is interesting that Marcion's famous problem with the Old Testament – that it portrays a vengeful God different from the God of the New Testament – sounds very similar to contemporary interpretations of texts like Joshua. For Marcion, and for many contemporary readers such as Mbuwayesango, the answer to the difficulties raised by texts like Joshua is the rejection of the texts. For other Christians the answer is found in Calvin's reading – we must simply give up our ideas about morality in relation to God, as we are sinful humans before a transcendent God.²² But for figures such as Irenaeus, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa there is a different answer. They point us to a different way of reading texts such as Joshua. Are they right? Is their approach convincing?

Allegorical and spiritual reading, as found in figures such as Origen and Gregory of Nyssa often receives 'bad press' for being wild and lacking control. However, it is easy to exaggerate how unruly spiritual reading was. If one looks at the way that, for example, Rahab's story has been traditionally interpreted and used, readings of the story tend to cluster around a common core. One does not find anything wildly different from Hebrews 11:31 or James 2:25 for example, where she is seen as exemplifying or embodying faith. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that much allegorical reading often seems rather 'atomistic' (in that it develops a small detail in a story and not the story as a whole) and is unconvincing in its details.²³ It is not unproblematic, and one cannot simply 'return' to a pre-modern interpretation of Joshua and reassert it today. In other words, whilst Rahab's story might be read well in terms of what 'faith' ought to look like, it is possibly not a good reading of the text to see in the scarlet cord that she hangs from her window (Josh. 2:18) a foreshadowing of the blood of Christ.

So we need to consider what it might mean to read Old Testament texts well, especially in new contexts (i.e., reading the ancient Israelite text of Joshua in a Christian context). Should we read Joshua in terms of history and ethics at the 'literal level' of the text, or do problems in these areas suggest that it ought to be read in a different way altogether; a way that

might make statements such as Joshua 10:40 ('So Joshua defeated the whole land . . . he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded.') look rather different? My goal in this book is to argue that the traditional Christian ways of reading Scripture can be reworked for our own context.

SAMPLE