

The Promised Land

Biblical Narratives and Gaza Now: A Theological Reflection

On 26th January 2024, the International Court of Justice gave a ruling that Israel was ‘plausibly’ committing genocide in Gaza.

Three months earlier, as he announced the decision to send ground troops into Gaza, the Israeli Prime Minister made reference to ‘Amalek’, thereby proclaiming Israel’s intention to commit a devastating, remorseless assault on the people of Gaza.

Amalek was the clan leader of a nomadic tribe, the Amalekites, and in the Hebrew Bible, King Saul was called upon to avenge an ancient grievance against them – and it is God’s command! “Samuel said to Saul, ... listen to the words of the LORD. ‘... Now go and attack Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey’” (1 Samuel 15.1,3). It was a command to commit genocide!

The ancient grievance stemmed from Amalek’s fight with Israel during the wilderness wanderings, and in response, on Moses’s instructions, Joshua fought and “defeated Amalek and his people with the sword. Then the LORD said to Moses, ‘... I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven’” (Exodus 17.13-14).

This, then, became the prototype for Israel’s annihilation of the people of Canaan, as told in the Book of Joshua: Jericho and many other cities, such as Ai, and five kings, including Jerusalem and Hebron. In Ai, for example, all 12,000 inhabitants were killed, the king was hanged and “Joshua burned Ai, and made it forever a heap of ruins” (Joshua 8.28). All this is of God: “Then the Lord said to Joshua, ‘... See, I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city and his land’” (Joshua 8.1).

This is how the book of Joshua recounts the occupation of ‘the Promised Land’.

What does this biblical ‘then’ have to do with our ‘now’?

For the State of Israel, quite a lot, apparently! The current Prime Minister has likened the Gazans to Amalek; the finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich, has cited Joshua as one to be emulated; and even for the first Israeli Prime Minister, David Ben-Gurion, Joshua was an inspiration and model. Professor Rachel Havrelock writes that “modern Israeli militarism ‘resonates’ with Joshua and [Joshua] informs ‘the lexicon of Jewish nationalism’”. For the religious settlers of the West Bank, in particular, the book of Joshua is an ‘instruction manual’.¹

What does the biblical ‘then’ *really* have to do with our ‘now’? How are we to understand it?

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

Firstly, there is the question of the historicity of the book. This is an important question. The New Testament scholar, Marcus Borg, has written that the way “we address the question of historicity affects (and is affected by) how we see God and the ways that God interacts with the world”.²

¹ Rachel Havrelock, “The Joshua generation: conquest and the Promised Land” (*Critical Research on Religion*, 3, 2013), quoted by Jeremy Salt, “The First Enemies: On Reading Joshua’s Mandate for Genocide”, in *The Palestine Chronicle*, 29 February 2024.

² Borg, Marcus, *Reading the Bible again for the First Time*, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, p. 102

The book of Joshua has been linked to the Pentateuch – the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures – thereby forming the Hexateuch. This linkage gives to the book of Joshua, which tells of Israel’s conquest of Canaan, the appearance of bringing to a climax the long opening story of the Bible, beginning with the promise of land to Abraham, the freedom from slavery in Egypt, and ending with the conquest of land in fulfilment of the promise.

However, the book of Joshua is the first scroll of the Former Prophets, and thus stands at the beginning of the second great section of the Hebrew Scriptures, consisting of Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, and 1&2 Kings, presenting a monumental history of the Hebrew people from the death of Moses to the Exile.

The book of Joshua itself has two extended parts: chapters 2-12, which gives an account of the conquest of the land; and chapters 13-21, which details how the land was redistributed to the tribes of Israel.

The account of the conquest is a confident story of sweeping success in taking the land of Canaan from its inhabitants (approximately in the period 1250-1225BCE). The conquest is presented as a rapid, victorious – and brutal – onslaught, occurring within the lifetime of Joshua. The narrative reads as a celebration of the amazing way in which God has brought about the fulfilment of God’s promise. The mission was accomplished.

However, to go beyond a superficial reading, it is necessary to consider the extent to which the text reflects historical memory. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the “evidence for this conquest is quite problematic”.³ He and other commentators point out that even in the text itself there is evidence that the ‘conquest’ was not so complete, but more complex: there is an agreement to save Rahab and her family (6.22-23), another agreement with the Gibeonites, due to their cunning (9.1-27), and the next book, Judges, begins with the question, “Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites to fight against them?” (1.1) and goes on to describe continued warfare with the Canaanites. The conquest under Joshua was not so successful and complete after all! This leads Brueggemann to say that one alternative reading sees the ‘conquest’ as “more of an *infiltration* whereby smaller groups of Israelites occupied the land here and there and made themselves what gains they could, all the while being realistic about the indigenous population that did not simply disappear”. He says that, however, while making it clear that he is taking the historicity of a ‘conquest’ only “provisionally”.⁴

Another scholar, Professor Robert Coote, goes further: “Settlement shifts are not uncommon in the history of Palestine ... [but] it is improbable that the Early Iron Age settlement shift was prompted by an onslaught of tribal outsiders of the sort described in the book of Joshua”.⁵

Such observations indicate that the literary composition of the book of Joshua and the historical memory it reflects is much more complex than any surface reading might suggest.

In that ancient world, it was the storyteller who created the memory that gave meaning to people’s lives in later generations. Behind the narrative of the ‘conquest’ there would have been many hero tales and other stories going back to earlier times but brought together into a narrative by an editor c.900BCE, with Joshua, who was a tribal leader of Ephraim, being idealised into the leader of all Israel and the conquest under his leadership being portrayed as totally complete.

³ Brueggemann, Walter, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003, p.111.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary (NIB)*, Vol. II, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015, pp. 20-21

But the book in its present form went through its final editing much later.

Joshua is a Deuteronomic book. It is part of the magisterial work consisting of the books Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, and 1&2 Kings – the Deuteronomistic History. That history was the product of older available historical material being shaped by writers working in different contexts. One context was the reign of Hezekiah (714-687BCE), the first Davidic king of the southern kingdom of Judah after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722BCE. Another, and most significant, context in which the Deuteronomistic History was edited was the reign of Josiah, the Davidic king of Judah 640-609BCE. Those editors cast their material in the framework of their own distinctive style and viewpoint. In the account of the ‘conquest’ in the book of Joshua that framework is supplied by an introduction (1.1-18) and a conclusion (11.21-12.24). That framework is a theology of promise and fulfilment.

Both Hezekiah and Josiah had ambitions to reconquer what had been the northern kingdom of Israel, and the conquest under Joshua is presented in this History as a precursor for that ambition. The Deuteronomistic History (Deuteronomy to Kings) “begins with the proclamation and recording of the law of Moses and the conquest of the land. It ends with the rediscovery of the law of Moses and the reconquest of the land. Thus, the earlier conquest prefigures the later reconquest. Joshua prefigures Josiah and may be said to be modelled on Josiah. In essence, the book of Joshua is a representation, incorporating sources of various kinds, of either a plan for or the course of the House of David’s reconquest of Israel under Josiah”.⁶

A few minor changes may have been made to the book Joshua in another context, namely during the Exile in Babylon. So, the final stages of shaping the book occurred in very “troubled times” during the period “of Babylonian domination in the late 600s and 500s. So, the writers placed emphasis on possession of the land as the fulfilment of promise. They stressed the faithfulness of YHWH [LORD] to his word, for they too were looking to retain or reclaim their ancestral homeland”.⁷

In summary, the book of Joshua reached its final form through editing in three contexts – the reign of Hezekiah, the reign of Josiah, and the Babylonian Exile – in all of which there were ambitions and hopes for the reclaiming of land. Cast in the framework of a theology of promise and fulfilment, the book of Joshua thereby gave an ‘historical’ precedent, with divine legitimation, for realising later ambitions.

It clearly serves the interests of the current State of Israel to appeal to the book. But is that an authentic use of it?

THE ‘PROMISE’

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the first utterance of the ‘Promise’ is found in Genesis 12.1-3:

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”.

Regarding ‘the land that I will show you’, the text goes on in 12.5b-7a:

...and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan, ... At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land”.

⁶ Ibid., p. 26

⁷ Bandstra, Barry L., *Reading the Old Testament: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth CENGAGE Learning, 2009, p. 219.

This is the beginning point of the Hebrew people's ancestral story, which is gathered around the theological theme of *promise*. It is a theme that shapes that story as it unfolds throughout the Pentateuch, where many references to the 'promise' are to be found.⁸

In Genesis, the theme of promise is focussed on two significant matters. One is the promise of land; the other is the promise of an heir, a son (very important in a patriarchal society), so that the promise of land can be realised.

The theme of promise is also linked to the theme of blessing. The first utterance of 'Promise' in Genesis, standing at the beginning of chapter 12, "functions as the hinge and connecting point" between chapters 1-11, regarding all peoples, and the beginning of the story of one people. According to "the theological intentionality of Genesis 1-11, that cluster of texts testifies to a deep alienation of the nations from God, ... the nations are said to be 'under curse' The initial promise God makes to Israel is that Israel 'shall be a blessing to the nations', so that the *blessing* carried and embodied by Israel is to counter and overcome and nullify the *curse*. In this juxtaposition, the role of Israel, according to God's intention, is in order that the other nations and the whole world will be blessed, that is, enjoy the abundance and well-being that was from the outset intended in the blessing of creation, as in Genesis 1.22".⁹

These references to the 'promise' in the earlier parts of the Pentateuch "give no indication that the promise of the land is to be fulfilled in a blitzkrieg and attempted ethnic cleansing. Nor is there a hint of God's command to exterminate the Canaanites".¹⁰ Though it has to be recognised that there is more than such a hint in a later part of the Pentateuch, such as Numbers 33.52-53, it also has to be said that any suggestion of a divine command to commit genocide stands in utter contradiction of the first utterance of promise that declares that the people of Israel will be the means by which "all the families of the earth will be blessed".

It also stands in contradiction of the formulaic theology of the Deuteronomist, which is that Israel itself will be blessed only if it is faithful to the covenant, and therefore the land will be forfeited if the people are disobedient to the Torah,¹¹ which contains instruction such as in Leviticus: "You shall not defraud your neighbour" (19.13); "you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbour" (19.16); "but you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19.18).

BIBLICAL MORALITY

The Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 proclaims that the State:

will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture; it will safeguard the Holy Places of all religions; and it will be faithful to the principles of the Charter of the United Nations.

In other words, it was a declaration to shape a political and social structure that reflected the moral principles found in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Those moral principles are found in the Torah, such as the teaching, mentioned above, that to be holy is not just obediently to observe certain rituals, but it is to love one's neighbour as

⁸ For example: Genesis 15.7; 17.8; 24.7; 18.13-15; Exodus 6.8; 13.5; 33.1; Deuteronomy 1.8; 1.21; 6.10; 34.4

⁹ Brueggemann, Op.cit., p.46

¹⁰ NIB, Op.cit., p.23

¹¹ For example, Deuteronomy 4.40: "Keep [the LORD'S] statutes and his commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that the LORD our God is giving you for all time". Also, Deuteronomy 5.31-33; 31.12-13; and Joshua 24.

oneself; that to live devoutly is to respect, and not oppress, the 'alien' and the stranger, to treat them as fellow citizens (Leviticus 19.33-34), and not to deprive them or any needy person of justice (Deuteronomy 24.17); and that to be faithful to the covenant is to be a co-worker with God in making the world more just.

Within the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophets leave no doubt that social justice is central to the divine purposes and therefore essential to what it means to be people of God. A few examples clearly illustrate this fact:

From Amos

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (5.24).

From Isaiah of Jerusalem

Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (1.17).

From Micah

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God (6.8)

From Jeremiah

Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed (22.3).

From Isaiah of the Exile

[God's] servant...will bring forth justice to the nations (42.1,3); [from God will go out] justice for a light to the peoples (51.4).

From Zechariah

Render true judgements, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts (7.9-10).

From Post-Exilic Isaiah

I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing (61.8).

On the other hand, the prophets are unequivocal in their condemnation of injustice, oppression, and exploitation. Again, a few examples will serve to illustrate.

From Isaiah of Jerusalem

The LORD ... expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry! Ah, you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you (5.7b-8).

From Micah

Alas for those who devise wickedness and evil deeds on their beds! When the morning dawns, they perform it, because it is in their power. They covet fields, and seize them; houses, and take them away; they oppress the householder and house, people and their inheritance (2.1-2).

From Hosea

You have ploughed wickedness, you have reaped injustice, you have eaten the fruit of lies. Because you have trusted in your power and in the multitude of your warriors, therefore the tumult of war shall rise against your people (10.13-14a).

From Jeremiah

Like fowling they set a trap; they catch human beings. Like a cage full of birds, their houses are full of treachery; therefore, they have become great and rich, they have grown fat and sleek. They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice, the cause of the orphan to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy (5.26b-28).

It is these prophetic voices that create a moral lens through which the Hebrew Scriptures are to be read. Therefore, irrespective of the historical context in which the book of Joshua and other narratives of ancient Israel's primeval history were written, they cannot remain above questioning on moral grounds. While it must be recognised honestly that such militaristic narratives have inspired violence, plunder and exploitation of people across the centuries, and continue to do so in the current destruction of Gaza, it also has to be said that the use of those narratives as justification has no credibility on the moral grounds that were cultivated by the great Hebrew prophets.

THEOLOGY: AN UNDERSTANDING OF GOD

In several of his writings, Marcus Borg speaks of the 'domination system'. It is the way of human history. The rich and powerful disregard and exploit the rights and humanity of the vulnerable and powerless. It is the way most societies were [are] organised. Borg says they are marked by three features: "*economic exploitation ... , political oppression* (ordinary people had no voice in the structuring of society), and *religious legitimization* (the religion of the elites affirmed that the structures of society were ordained by God)".¹²

This kind of 'system' is reflected in the ancient narratives such as Joshua. Those who eventually gained control of the land through exploiting and oppressing the indigenous people justified it by declaring it was their right given by an utterance of God.

God is, beyond question, at the centre of the Hebrew Scriptures, the central reality of the whole story. But it is also beyond question that the concept of God matured through the biblical writings, reflecting an evolving human understanding of God at different times. Affected by historical events and communicated through the human medium of poetry and stories, within the Scriptures we discover a development in the understanding of God.

Inevitably, human beings will speak of God in anthropomorphic terms, attributing to God characteristics of human appearance and personality. In parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, one could argue with God and bring God to a change of mind (Genesis 18.22-34; Exodus 32.11-14). God can come and go (Genesis 18.35). God has eyes, ears, hands, can see and hear. Sometimes, God does not know and needs to be told (Exodus 19.9b). God can be awakened, as from sleep (Psalms 35.23, 78.65). God is motivated by self-glory (Exodus 14.4, 17, 18). God rejoices and becomes angry. God is revengeful and war-like. Against that, Isaiah of the Exile was able to come to the break-through insight into the nature of God: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ..." (Isaiah 55.8-9).

Also, at a primitive stage of development, the concept of God was tribal, a nationalist god, whose power and presence were confined to a particular land. But the Scriptures cannot be read uncritically in the light of such a primitive understanding of God. Removed to a foreign land during the Babylonian Exile, the Hebrew people despaired at knowing how to relate to the God of their land: the psalmist cried, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps.137). A far broader, more universalist, concept of God began to crystallise. Removed to a foreign place, the Hebrew people could no longer understand God as belonging to a particular land. They began to understand that God's concern was not limited to or even primarily focussed on one land but on all lands, not on one people but on all people. No longer could the divine love for human beings be seen as exclusive, it had to be seen as inclusive. While the voice expressing the exclusivist understanding was not lost in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the inclusivist understanding that came to dominate, especially through the later prophets who

¹² Borg, *Op.cit.* p. 104

articulated profound truths about the universal and inclusive nature of God – a God whose love is for all people and who uncompromisingly yearns for justice and peace for every person.

Given that humans are limited by the scientific and historical knowledge of their time, it is remarkable that such truths were discerned and flowed into an inclusive understanding of humanity, such as found expression in the first creation poem: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1.27).

However, to step forward to the knowledge of our time, the discoveries of science and the ever-expanding understanding of the story of the universe, enables us to see, and not to escape, the connectedness that is a fundamental reality.

Judy Cannato, in her book *Radical Amazement*, has put it this way: “All creation has come about through a single cosmic event, often called the Big Bang. Creation is not a static, fixed event, but a cosmogenesis, an ongoing act of creation and creativity. Because all life is part of this single cosmic event, all life is connected at its most basic level”. Again, she writes, “All of us are fired with love’s urgent longings because we are part of the original flame that brought all life into being”.¹³

It is amazing! For people of faith, it expands our image of God and expands our hearts to include all creation. It challenges us to think more creatively because it upsets old ‘truths’ and takes us beyond the biblical tension between inclusive and exclusive, nationalist and universalist conceptions of God and humankind. It enlarges our vision to discern God as Holy Mystery, Love and Light, as Creator of all that is, whose “presence is woven throughout all creation”,¹⁴ and to regard every person as part of the one inter-connected human family – and therefore to see that every act of discrimination and injustice against any person is a denial of this fundamental conviction of faith.

In a similar way, Rowan Williams, in his book *Token of Trust*, speaks of “God’s action burning intensely in every moment of the world’s existence”, and he portrays a picture of God, whose “power is more of a steady swell of loving presence, always there at work in the centre of everything that is, opening the door to a future, even when we can see no hope”.¹⁵

All this severely challenges the exclusivist and supremacist ideologies that operate in our world. It contradicts any suggestion that God has favourites. It challenges the idea that God desires violence of any kind by one person against another. It speaks to us, in the *now* of our time, of what it means to be human, living in the presence of a gracious God. It challenges us and people of all religious faiths to pray for every division to be removed and for equity and justice to be established in human society, and to walk and work together in striving to be instruments of the reign of God, building an inclusive world of hospitality, compassion, justice and peace.

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¹³ Cannato, Judy, *Radical Amazement*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 2006, pp. 33, 133.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 137

¹⁵ Williams, Rowan, *Tokens of Trust: an Introduction to Christian Belief*, Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2007, pp.48, 44