Joshua

Fall Bible Study 2017

Assembly Mennonite Church

The six sermons collected here were prepared for oral presentation, and not for written publication of this sort. Yet, if read with this in mind, one can glean the insights shared by the preachers of this sermon series.

Long Ago, and Far Away

Paul Keim; Oct 15, 2017
Joshua 24:1-15

> *When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the Lord your God will choose to establish the name of the LORD. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say: "I acknowledge this day before the LORD your God that I have entered the land that the LORD swore to our ancestors to assign us."*
> *The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God.*
> *You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: "My ancestors were fugitive Arameans. They went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there they became a great and populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. The LORD brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Therefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which you, O LORD, have given us."*
> *You shall leave it before the LORD your God and bow low before the LORD your God. And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the alien in your midst, all the bounty that the LORD your God has bestowed upon you and your household. (Deuteronomy 26:1-11)*

Long ago. And far away. What does it have to do with us? Not our time. Not our place. Long ago and far, far away. Isn't that the phrase we use to dismiss, to disparage, to distance ourselves? We are people of here and now. So modern it hurts. Do we really have the patience, the attention span, the fortitude for this so long agoness? this far, far awayness?

The pastors and worship leaders of our community have determined in their wisdom that the Fall Bible Study will involve reading, interpreting and discussing the book of Joshua. Starting today you will hear six weeks of sermons and teachings on its themes, buffeted by its images, thrown off guard by the mention of prostitutes, conquest, spies, and wars of total annihilation. But they didn't just foist it upon us without a word. As you will have noticed, the information sheet about the Fall Bible Study distributed last Sunday, lovingly stuffed into every mailbox, there were seven bulleted themes articulated from Joshua that, and I quote, "fit well with our current journey as a congregation."

When you first heard this news, were you nonplussed? chagrined? confounded? perplexed? dismayed? Or are you among the rare and special types among us who revel in all things Old Testament and Ancient Near Eastern? The older the better? Whose heartbeats pound when hearing about storms of biblical proportions? Whose heartbeats pound at the mention of "knowing in the biblical sense?" Whose heartbeats pound after a visit to Rise 'n Roll? (sorry, different group – or maybe not). For the special ones, I do not have much more to say to you this morning. Let your hearts pound for Joshua. You are not far from the kingdom.

But for the others, I have a word – of encouragement and admonition. Learn from the example of the pristine, unmarked pages of the first 39 books in Pastor Karl's Bible. What a contrast to the dog-eared, beverage-stained leaves of its final 27 booklets. And yet, when the text of Joshua was located for him, and he read it - as if for the first time, his enthusiasm waxed even more than it waned. And he now is scheduled to deliver Week 5's message on "Cities of Refuge," entitled "Cities of Refuge: How the book of Joshua changed my life forever." (I confess, that may have been the provisional sub-title)

From the introductory video, you have learned what the basic structure and content of the book of Joshua is. It is crucial to remember that although this is a narrative prospectively anticipating conquest and settlement, it was written retrospectively, after the land had already been lost. Just as crucial is its position in the longer narrative of which it is a part. Gordon Matties, in his excellent commentary on the book in the Believers Church Bible Commentary series, writes of Joshua "in the middle of time," and stresses the need to understand this story in its own narrative world. "The book of Joshua is situated in the middle," he writes, "between the promise of land (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and the loss of land (Judges through Kings)." Like all biblical books, NT as much as OT, each text is linked to others by a host of semantically charged allusions and evocations. "The recognition of patterns and paradigms in the Joshua narrative," Matties continues, "allows us, for example, to see echoes and connections that situate this narrative in the middle of a long and complex narrative rather than as a fixed point whose 'message' must be applied to our time."

Joshua's function in the longer story of salvation is not the heroic, divinely sanctioned genocide, but a plausible explanation for their own violence expulsion from the land.

And so, from its very first chapter, it is not difficult to see how closely related the book of Joshua is to the reiterated Mosaic constitution of Deuteronomy which it immediately follows. Together with the book of Judges, which comes on its heels, Joshua recounts a past that is not remote or obsolete, but painfully relevant to the experience of the conquered rulers of the northern kingdom, whose ten tribes had been whisked away into the oblivion of the Neo-Assyrian captivity; and to the exiles in Babylon more than 135 years later, who needed desperately to understand the catastrophe that had befallen them – loss of temple, kingdom and land. Loss of face, and loss of faith. Its idealized depiction of conquest and allotment of the land of Canaan reimagines the immigration and settlement of their ancestors as flowing from obedience to the LORD through adherence to the Mosaic Torah-constitution. But it also firmly establishes the principle that a people, ANY people, which corrupts themselves and their land will likewise be vomited out. Its function in the longer story of salvation that runs through the books of Samuel and Kings is not the heroic, divinely sanctioned genocide of native inhabitants that might justify future hegemony, but a plausible explanation for their own violent expulsion from the land.

To understand the maelstrom out of which the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua through Kings) was carefully crafted out of older traditions, we might recall the feeling many of us had in the immediate wake of the election of a certain current president. The elevation of someone like Donald Trump, and there are many like him, to the highest office in the land, making him arguably the most powerful person in the world, demanded an explanation, a predicating cause, something or someone to blame. But there was mostly just bafflement, consternation, lament. Do you remember that feeling? The Germans say: Die Welt hat keinen Sinn mehr, i.e., "the world doesn't make sense anymore." The feeling lingers still. What does it mean about us as a nation, about our ideals and identity, our history and cherished institutions? The prevailing narratives could not and cannot answer those questions. It will require a new story, idealized and shaped by older traditions, embedded in a longer, complex narrative. We may notice now, in retrospect the long, slow slippage of constitutional principles, the cracks in the old colonial and frontier paradigm, the persistent sins of racism, greed, consumerism and militarism – long there for all to see, but not taken to heart until it was too late. The current shape of the Pentateuch and the biblical histories, with Joshua in the middle of time, owes much to the even greater crisis represented by the exile. How could this have happened? Where's God?

We don't know exactly who wrote the book, or exactly when. And I don't want to say that it doesn't matter, because it may imply that professional biblical scholars should have gone to dental college. But it doesn't matter decisively. Certainly not for our purposes. What you should be listening for in the coming weeks are the voices interwoven into the surface text. Images of women, ostensibly

powerless, whose faith and courage and cunning turn social, theological and literary conventions on their head.

How might we read Joshua well? If you've studied Hebrew, and some of you have (heartbeats pounding, etc.), you will notice the word play that constantly evokes other texts and other contexts. You will hear the echo of Jesus/Yeshua in the name of Joshua/Yehoshua. You will wonder about the meanings of place names and personal names. You may feel compelled to do a word study on the term _zonah_ translated "prostitute." How is it rendered in other texts, in other versions? What are we to think when the quintessential "other" is more heroic, more crucial to the outcome, than the native born? Much of this information is available in English commentaries as well, of course, and accessible to any conscientious reader.

To read Joshua well means to READ Joshua, from beginning to end, more than once, perhaps once each week for the duration of the study. (hearts pounding, blood pressure rising, attention waning) If you do so, take notes and mark up the text. Keep track of questions that come to mind. Consider bringing your insights and challenges to 2nd hour discussions. Move between the world of the text and our own troubled world. Which Joshuan themes remain long ago and far away, and which are as current as today's newspaper? In which parts of the book do we find reflections of our own struggles with the human condition?

As the video noted, there are parts of the book which consist of lists of towns or kings or depictions of battles. Don't be afraid to skip over those parts fail to inspire – something. If a text makes you angry, however, do not pass it by, but stop and confront it. What is it that most disturbs? Is the problems historical? Theological? Literary? Moral?

What are the themes of the book of Joshua that seem to resonate with Assembly at the crossroads? God's abiding presence (1:6). Reassurance about walking a way we have not walked before (3:4). If God is neither on our side nor on the side of our enemies, then how does God want us to live in a world of conflict? Are we ready to allow heroes to work from unexpected quarters, to work in our midst? To become one of us? Can we be a city of refuge, a place of hope and security in a hostile environment? Whom will we serve, and how? How will we tell our stories, reflecting on our origins, our journey and our future paths?

The book of Joshua seems to assess every victory as the result of obedience to the Mosaic Torah, and every defeat to its violation. That may seem stilted and unrealistic to our modern literary sensitivities. But there are many examples from our own lives of a similar principle at work. Following the "Protestant Ethic" we tend to believe that success is the result of some virtue (hard work, honesty, reliability, integrity, sacrifice, etc.), if not direct, nevertheless decisive. We don't like to attribute our success to fate, or luck. At most we may admit to a kind of impersonal divine providence, which is also somehow grounded in our worthiness. Similarly, we often attribute setbacks in life or work to something wanting or perverted on the moral plain - laziness, stupidity, lack of self-control, dishonesty, lack of integrity, etc.).

This is not much different than the way the "law of Moses" works as a literary device to explain the ups and downs of traditional accounts of the conquest. What is crucial to keep in mind is that this rubric does not come from the traditions themselves, but from the concerns of the writers and editors of these materials in the importance of following the Mosaic Torah. In other words, the laws of the Pentateuch become the constitutional foundation of the new, post-exilic society, and so the values and virtues of this constitutional document become the lens through which earlier traditions are viewed, and by which success and failure are rationalized. Indeed, this impulse is so strong that over half of Americans report they believe that God is involved in some way in determining who wins the Super Bowl. We simply cannot let success and failure stand as alternating parts of our experience, but they must be grounded in the principles of the moral universe that we cherish and promote. Illustrations of the "truth" of our moral principles is created in the way we construct our own history, arbitrarily picking and choosing those accounts that seem to affirm our values and ignoring those that are in tension with or contradict it. (Cf. the selective historiography of The Anabaptist Vision, as revisionist historians gleefully pointed out)

The violence of these accounts is upsetting for pious, middle-class moderns. But the analogies with more recent experience, even our own, are striking

This principle is also at work in the conquest narratives. The violence of these accounts is upsetting for pious, middle-class moderns. But the analogies with more recent experience, even our own, are striking if for the most part obscured. We settled on land that had only recently been cleared of Native Americans by the US Army. We didn't fight and kill or drive into exile, but we benefited from the actions of those that did. There is no land allotment and settlement without conquest. Those of you who have seen Allison Brookins' brilliant play, "Discovery: A Comic Lament," know that the Doctrine of Discovery has also shaped our lives. The long ago and far away distance we perceive between those events and our own experience is in fact negligible and morally insignificant. The extermination and forced expulsion of native populations was justified by many American Christians at the time as "Manifest Destiny," i.e., a God-ordained program of "promise and fulfillment" based on the perceived moral superiority of Western, Christian civilization at the expense of the cultures, religions and identity of the native population, read Canaanites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites and Jebusites.

And even if we no longer take other people's land, we exploit their labor and their raw materials. We are part of a society that consumes an inordinate percentage of the world's raw materials and products made from them. We do this without conscience, without losing sleep, without changing our lifestyles. The encroachment of civilization, usually for the purposes of economic development and urbanization, leads directly to the loss of animal and human life, of cultures and languages, of decreasing diversity and narrower margins; leads to deforestation and other forms of environmental degredation. So when we read the book of Joshua and flinch at the violence of the conquest, of genocide and resettlement, we dare not imagine ourselves looking down upon that divinely sanctioned violence from some putative moral high ground. We are the Israelites, hearing and obeying the voice of their God to conquer and settle, to wipe out the memory of those who lived here before us, who were deemed not worthy to live here, or to live at all.

Reading scripture, and especially Joshua, requires much more theological imagination that we have been willing to devote to it. Rejecting the false dichotomy of "either-or," i.e., of "historically accurate or false." Overcoming our aversion to narratives of supposedly divinely inspired violence, we may learn something not only about biblical history, but about our own propensity as an historically self-righteous, pacifist people, to silently enjoy the benefits of other people's violence.

Over the coming weeks we will hear about Rahab, the Harlot-Hero, about the Conquest from a Canaanite perspective, about the cunning Gibeonites, the cities of refuge and about covenant renewal. Let the reading begin. Let the heartbeats pound. Let the organs of our theological imagination be stretched like never before. If any community of faith can do it, Assembly can.

****

What's Going on with Rahab?

Mary Lehman Yoder, Kristy Shellenberger Yordy; October 22, 2017
Joshua 2, 6:22-25 [see appendix for translation]

KRISTY: I identify myself as one of those people Paul Keim described last week— one of those whose heart races when encountering a Hebrew text in the Old Testament. Like the poet Mary Oliver when counting the number of leaves on a single tree, I too lose myself in the wonder—of words—Hebrew word in a Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament). I too, like Assembly's esteemed

resident scholar of dead languages, Paul Keim, become half-crazy with the abundance of it all. But more on that later.

Last week, Paul kicked off our journey into the messy and complex Old Testament book of Joshua—a book about the community of Israel's entrance into a perceived "promised land," and its subsequent takeover and displacement of this land's indigenous people—a book and a story situated within a larger book and a larger story, that includes, as Paul reminded us last week, this same community (Israel) being vomited out of this "promised land" centuries later and becoming itself taken over and displaced by the political and religious powers of that day—the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

Interestingly, both the prophecy foretelling Israel's entrance into Canaan, as told in the book of Joshua, and the prophecy foretelling Israel's demise, as told in the books of Kings and Chronicles, are given by women: the Canaanite prostitute Rahab and the Hebrew prophet Huldah.

And even though they are spoken nearly a thousand years apart, Huldah's prophecy of Israel's demise lies not so far from Rahab's prophecy of Israel's ascension in the land of Canaan. In fact, by looking at several key Hebrew words in the Joshua reading for this morning, we will see that lurking just beneath the story of the two Israelite men sent to spy out this "promised land"— written into the very words of the text itself—is a judgment and a stench—a reckoning inherent in any action of digging around in someone else's land, even in a land and a people we think God is telling us—the righteous ones—to overthrow, to displace, to correct—a reckoning, perhaps, of our understanding of what the divine *really* is and what it *really* does and does not call us to do and to be as people of love.

Rahab reminds the two men that their own lives and the lives of their families not so long ago also needing 'saving.'

MARY: What's going on with Rahab? Many of us know the story of Rahab. I remember the red rope coming down on the flannelgraph. But as I began to work with the story in preparation for this sermon, I realized there was a lot going on that i didn't "know," that I didn't understand, that I hadn't noticed before. That was when I called Kristy, lover of the Hebrew text and advocate for biblical women, who often remain in the background of the main narrative. Kristy and I have had lots of conversation about this text, and we hope to carry on in second hour in greater depth, but here are a few things we want you to notice with us:

First, as I pointed out to the children: Rahab has a name. And her name is remembered. When we sing our favorite setting of the Magnificat in this congregation we sing over and over: *I am lowly as a child, but I know from this day forward that my name will be remembered, for all will call me blessed.*

What a bold thing - that a Canaanite, a woman, a prostitute (we'll get to that) should be named and remembered. Her name, her faith, her action are remembered - and not only in the book of Joshua. You heard how Rahab appears in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus/Jeshua. In the book of Hebrews Chapter 11 she is cited for her faith, along with the vast cloud of witnesses. In the letter to James Chapter 2, she is cited for her action, her good works.

Rahab's story and the way it is written in Joshua 2 and Joshua 6 is complex and multi-layered, so that we can only begin to touch on the complexities during first hour. Second hour will focus on a discussion of the meaning of the Hebrew term *zonah*, translated in English as "prostitute." Kristy's translation of the text and translation notes, which have been placed on your chairs with your songbooks, explores the text in more detail than we will be able to give this morning. This morning, we will highlight two Hebrew words in the text of Joshua 2 which give light both to the complexity of the israelites' entrance into Canaan and to the character of Rahab herself.

KRISTY: When I began to look at the Hebrew text of Joshua 2, I first got derailed by the word that is usually translated in verses 2 and 3 as "to search out" (ESV, NRSV) or "spy out" (JPS) the land—"It was told to the king of Jericho: 'Some Israelites have come here to search out the land.'" I was puzzled because the two primary meanings of the Hebrew verb used here refer not to "spying" or "surveying" something, like "the land," but, to "digging"—digging a well, digging in order to lay a trap, digging for

prey, digging for something hidden, and even digging for death—and, also, to "being shamed" by having one's wrongdoing "dug up" and exposed. The prophet Isaiah uses the term as a noun, to refer to a "mole," which digs for its food.

MARY: So your use of "moles" to describe the Israelite spies is perfect because moles dig around under the ground and do a lot of damage—many of us know that very well!

KRISTY: Yes, and it seems that the text itself, the word itself, is judging this action of digging in someone else's land, even if unconsciously so on the part of the writer, for the action is paralleled, through uses of the verb elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, with the action of "digging" for prey, "digging" for death, "digging" in order to set a trap, or "digging" to bury (and expose) one's shame and guilt. (In this regard, it is fascinating to note that earlier, in Numbers 13, when Yhwh orders Moses to send his men to "spy out" the hill country of the Negeb—a land the Israelites never were able to invade or to conquer—the verb that is used there *six times* to signify the action of "spying out" the land is different than the verb used in Joshua.)

We see a similar word play the second time Rahab "hides" the Israelite spies. We do not know where Rahab hides the spies the first time, when the king's messengers come to her house to ask her to turn the men over, but the second time, we are told that Rahab takes the spies up on her roof and hides or *buries* them (a better translation of the word) in the stalks of flax drying there. Other examples in the Hebrew Bible of the use of this verb reveal, like the "to dig" verb a couple sentences earlier, a sense of deception, guilt, wrongdoing, or doom associated with this action: tricksters "bury" (*tmn*) their snares and traps; Moses buries (*tmn*) the man he murders in Egypt; thieves bury (*tmn*) their stolen wares; Jeremiah buries (*tmn*) his loincloth, to rot; and Rahab buries the Israelite men in stalks of flax atop her roof.

MARY: So this is tricky. Rahab is doing something heroic from the Israelite perspective by "hiding" the spies, and she is also betraying her own people.

For Rahab knows with certainty the fate of her land and her people, and she speaks this certainty to the two Israelite spies she has "buried" or "hidden" under the flax on her roof, words that have come to be known as Rahab's prophecy of Israel's ascension in Canaan. She says:

"I know that Yhwh has given you the land, that terror of you has fallen over us, and all the inhabitants of the land tremble before you. For we have heard how Yhwh dried up the waters of the Red Sea when you came out of Egypt, and we have heard what you have done to the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan, to King Sihon and to King Og, whom you devoted to destruction—together with all the people (men, women, and children) of their lands. As soon as we heard of it, our hearts melted with fear, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you. Yhwh, your god, is god in the heavens above and on the earth below."

KRISTY: But not only does Rahab foretell Israel's takeover of Canaan, she also recounts Israel's salvation from its own enslavement in Egypt—how Yhwh dried up the Red Sea for their escape from their previous "pursuers."

In this way, Rahab subtly or not-so-subtly reminds the two men that their own lives and the lives of their families, like Rahab's life and the lives of her family, not so long ago also needing "saving."

Our understanding of who is an insider and who is an outsider are too narrow.

MARY: Having reminded them of their own oppression at the hands of the Egyptians, and out of love and loyalty to her father, mother, brothers, and sisters, and all connected to them, Rahab demands that the Israelite spies swear an oath with her. You can almost picture her standing on her rooftop, the two Israelite men buried in the stinky, wet flax, perhaps her hands on her hips, instructing them: "Now, swear to me by Yhwh that as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house. And give me a sure sign that you will keep alive my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters and all that is to them, and that you will deliver our lives from death."

KRISTY: And the Israelite spies immediately agree, saying, “Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when Yhwh gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.”

MARY: So Rahab lets the spies down through her window by the same red cord she will later hang over the outer city wall to mark her residence when the Israelites return to take over the city.

Both Rahab and the spies keep the word they swore to each other: Rahab does not tell of the spies’ business of “digging around” in the land beyond the Jordan, and the spies do not take the lives of Rahab, her family, and “all who belonged to them,” instead integrating them into their own community of Israel.

We read in Joshua 6:25: “But Rahab the prostitute and her father’s household and all who belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And she has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.”

KRISTY: Clearly, then, the Israelites did not kill *all* the inhabitants of the land they invaded.

MARY: Clearly, our understandings of who is an insider and who is an outsider are too narrow. And our understandings of steadfast love and mercy - both divine and human - are too small.

KRISTY: Clearly, the story of Israel’s conquest of Canaan deconstructs itself and judges its own actions of aggressiveness, infiltration, and murder through curious word plays and through the deconstruction of the text itself. And, clearly, the Canaanite prostitute Rahab stands at the center of such a narrative....

MARY: ....foretelling Israel’s future of rise to power,

KRISTY: ....orchestrating the salvation of the Israelite spies and her own large family,

MARY: .... insisting on lovingkindness even across borders,

KRISTY: ... and securing her red cord of connection through her window in the wall of her house which was in the the wall of the city.

MARY: What’s going on with Rahab? A whole lot more than we may have thought. Thanks be to God.

****

Conquest: A Canaanite’s Perspective

Daniel Aramouni; October 29, 2017
Joshua 11

Thank you for inviting me to be with you in this way today. I want to acknowledge, first, that we are gathered here this morning on the ancestral land of the Potawatomi people. The home of the Pokagon band is just to our north.

Indeed, the land on which we live and move and have our being is stolen land. This is true for all of us who are not Indigenous Americans. And yet, here we are, mostly good and caring people, I would say, in this land of Goshen. Goshen, platted in 1831, was initially settled by descendants of the English Puritans who settled New England in the 1600s. These settlers identified with the Israelites of the Old Testament, thought of themselves as the “chosen people,” and considered North America their Canaan, according to Eran Shalev in *American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to…* and he leaves it at that. Meaning until now, of course. The conquest of North America is certainly not

over. If we needed a reminder, the Dakota Access Pipeline, which delivered its first oil on May 14, 2017, makes it abundantly clear that service to our gods is more important than any semblance of justice.

But really, we can make gods in whatever image we want so that our purposes are served. In the case of the Dakota Access Pipeline, we might name our god "profit." Even if Profit is god rather than YHWH, however, Shalev argues that American settlers, from the initial settlement to the present, are modeling themselves after the Israelites of the Hebrew Scriptures. If this is the case, and I believe it is, then we need to look at who YHWH is to the Israelites of the Book of Joshua. And, unfortunately, I think the summary of the conquest narrative that we read this morning makes it clear that the god being followed, at least during the conquest, is a tribal god like all the others of the Ancient Near East, a god uncomfortably like the god named Profit. I would argue that the violent, petty, racist god described in this morning's reading, who proves godhood based on superior violence, is not only inconsistent with the God of Jesus, it is challenged by other parts of the Old Testament and even by other parts of Joshua.

Joshua has been used to justify conquests, illegal occupations, ethnic cleansing, and killing of Indigenous peoples.

Before we get to that, though, it is important to seriously consider the harm caused by a theology of conquest. During this Fall Bible Study, we are in conversation with the Book of Joshua. This book has been used to justify conquests, illegal occupations, ethnic cleansing, and killing of Indigenous peoples. With Joshua in our canon, shared with Jews and Christians all over the world and across ages, we cannot responsibly leave the book untouched. We cannot pretend that it has not been used to justify genocide; rather, we are obligated to debate the text. We can decide to throw it out if we deem it necessary after seriously engaging with it, but we are not allowed to simply pretend that it doesn't exist.

The UN definition of genocide is "any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; [and] forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." By this definition, the modern Israeli oppression of Palestinians is genocide. Not only is it ethnic cleansing--it is genocide.

The U.S., of course, does not have the moral high ground here--we've committed, and are still committing and contributing to, our fair share of genocide--but I think it is still important to call it out wherever it is happening. The genocide of Palestinians is of particular importance to me because of my background. My paternal grandmother, whom I call Teta, the Arabic word for "grandmother," was forced out of her home in Jaffa with her family in the Nakba in 1948, when the State of Israel was created. Now, Jaffa is known as an Israeli city. Teta fled to Lebanon with her family, where she met my grandfather and had a long and happy marriage that produced five children, including my father. Modern genetic studies have shown that the Lebanese are the descendants of the ancient Canaanites. Which means not only does the modern State of Israel hate me and my family, the ancient Israelites did, too.

And lest we think that the modern State of Israel is not defending their actions with the Scriptures, and in particular the Book of Joshua, Israeli politicians make it almost humorously obvious. According to the Midrash, Joshua sent the Canaanites three letters in which he set out three conditions. Citing this, the Israeli Knesset Member Bezalel Smotrich said regarding the Palestinians: "When Joshua ben Nun [the biblical prophet] entered the land, he sent three messages to its inhabitants: those who want to accept [our rule] will accept; those who want to leave, will leave; those who want to fight, will fight. The basis of his strategy was: We are here, we have come, this is ours. Now too, three doors will be open, there is no fourth door. Those who want to leave – and there will be those who leave – I will help them. When they have no hope and no vision, they will go. As they did in 1948. Those who do not

go will either accept the rule of the Jewish state, in which case they can remain, and as for those who do not, we will fight them and defeat them."

So we can see that bad theology has real effects, even on the level of geopolitics. A blind acceptance of the conquest of Canaan as inspired by God justifies genocide and racism. I experienced a miniscule part of this during my month in Palestine this summer. Upon landing at Ben Gurion airport in Tel Aviv at midnight, the sixteen of us in the travel group from Eastern Mennonite Seminary, like everyone else coming off of that flight, were directed to passport control. Most people were going through the lines without a problem, including everyone in our group. Eliana was right in front of me in line, and, nervous, stumbled a bit over her words when asked where she was going in the country and what she was doing there. Reassured by the official that it was okay, she could relax, Eliana said that she was with a group from a Christian university and we were going to visit Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and other sites of interest. The official politely directed her through, and I stepped forward and handed over my passport. My name is Daniel Fadi Aramouni. I am not part of the "chosen people." The land is not my Promised Land. Eretz Yisrael, "The land of Israel," needs to be cleansed of me and my sort in order to be pure. In the words of this morning's text, it is my sort that is relegated to "utter destruction." Conquest--utter destruction--means my Teta, my father, my culture.

About four hours after handing over my passport, following lots of waiting and a couple interrogation sessions--yes, my father is Lebanese; yes, I've been to Lebanon; no, I'm not a terrorist--I was released.

This tiny experience informed the rest of my time in Palestine. Everything Israel said and did seemed to be a celebration of the displacement of my family and the destruction of their home. Like Columbus Day in the U.S. does with Indigenous people, it seemed like Israel was going out of its way to be offensive, to make me feel like I wasn't welcome.

My other grandmother, my mom's mom, was very patriotic. She was also displaced from her home and forced to flee. On foot, she crossed the border from North Korea to South Korea as a child, already an orphan. In South Korea, after having sold a ring of hers to pay her way through cosmetology school, she met my grandfather, a US soldier. They were married, had my mom while still in Korea, and then came back to the States. This new country, a land of opportunity, provided a chance for my grandma to work very very hard, which she did her whole life, and in doing so to maintain some level of stability. Still on land stolen from Indigenous people, my maternal grandmother made a living, raised a child, and proudly raised the American flag--I remember she gave me a teddy bear that sang "America the Beautiful" when you squeezed it--all out of thankfulness for this land that had given her stability, a husband, a child.

This is also my story. Yes, I identify with the Canaanites, whose land is stolen and who live with displacement because they are told they are less than Chosen. But I can also identify through family with people who are suffering, who have long been "wandering in the desert," and who take the chance placed in front of them for stability.

It is sometimes hard for me not to fume at Israel, both ancient and modern. The story I shared with you this morning is just one of many instances of injustice that I either experienced or, far more often and with far greater intensity, witnessed, so I think that anger is a fair response. But, by some act of divine irony, I can learn from Joshua. In many ways, Joshua teaches the opposite of what Joshua tells. I cannot make the same mistake as the Israelites, who tried to excuse their genocide of the Canaanites by making the blanket claim that they were all "unrighteous," in contrast to the Israelites' own righteousness under YHWH. This fallacious statement of the Israelites is also made by the US: it is known as "American exceptionalism," and it justifies imperial domination all over the world and the genocide of Native Americans at home. It is also the claim of the modern State of Israel when they engage in "pinkwashing," or arguing that Palestinian culture is inherently oppressive of women and LGBTQ+ folks, and Israel--with its Western values, from feminism to colonialism--therefore deserves to push Palestine into the sea.

This is the error I refuse to make. Remembering Grandma's story in addition to Teta's, I will call out genocide wherever it occurs, but I will also not claim that those benefiting from it deserve to be "utterly destroyed."

I don't have the answer that will fix colonialism and bring peace to the Middle East, I am sorry to tell you. But I will say that I think it has something to do with tearing down walls, both physical and psychological. Though we can pick out parts of Joshua that seem to resonate with Jesus' message of nonviolence and a God of peace who says that "the meek will inherit the land" rather than the strong conquerors, on the whole the Book of Joshua sends the opposite message. Joshua offers a prime example of a disgusting god, a tribal god, a god of war. One of my friends, after reading Joshua twice, has written in all caps, "NOPE" on the first page. And this, I think, is an acceptable response. It is not ignoring the text, pretending it doesn't exist. It is engaging with it and rejecting it, in the vein of Jesus. Jesus, whose name is the same as Joshua's in Greek and is very similar in Hebrew, Yeshu'a, is the new Joshua. Rejecting the Book of Joshua is a perfectly acceptable and actually quite involved form of relating to it. This occurs throughout the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments. As Paul pointed out the first week, Joshua is not the end of the story, and the conquest really does not turn out well for the Israelites, who end up in exile. The Book of Jonah offers a rebuke to the idea of one "chosen people," when God tells Jonah--a stark nationalist--to go minister to the Ninevites, whether or not he wants to. Jesus, for his part, makes a parody of the idea of imperial conquest. The anti-triumphal entry into Jerusalem is one example of this, but the crucifixion is an even stronger example of Jesus' total rejection of a conquering God. God is conquered, and is still with the conquered even as God rises up in the form of Jesus.

The land of Israel needs to be cleansed of me and my sort in order to be pure.

When the Eastern Mennonite Seminary group was walking in Jerusalem along the Via Dolorosa, in front of a sign that read, in Latin, "here they took Jesus and flogged him," we saw a group of Spanish Catholics carrying a cross. Shortly after they passed in front of the sign, a group of Israel Defense Forces soldiers followed behind, carrying their machine guns. Machine guns following the cross. This is still happening, and it is a parody of the conquest narrative. As we read it and see it, we can reject it with Jesus. It is very much like the oxymoronic end to the Joshua text this morning: "And the land had rest from war." After totally destroying everyone in the land, the author of this text dares to say that "the land had rest from war." This is the myth of redemptive violence that justifies preemptive strikes and so-called "peacekeeping forces," "defense forces," or "peacekeeping missiles." It lies that if we can just use the right amount of violence in the right way and against the right people, we can end violence. It is very unlike the understanding of God granted through Jesus, who teaches that the whole of the Law and the Prophets hang on love of God and neighbor, and who is so devoted to nonviolently resisting imperial conquest that he is executed by the forces of empire.

We can do better than simply taking the text of Joshua at face value. We can argue with it and learn from its mistakes, we can remember that "utter destruction" means genocide against Indigenous Americans, Palestinians, my family. And we can reject this. Refusing to allow racism and violence to conquer our religion, which we commonly hold as meaningful with people of faith all over the world, we can hold to the divine irony shining through the painful rhetoric. We can say that God will find ways to break through our walls, even when we try to use God, blasphemously, to set them up. God is not in the conquest. God is on the cross, crying with us for liberation, proclaiming release to the captives and letting the oppressed go free. God rises up out of conquest, with the conquered, and calls us to join them.

May it be so. Amen.

****

The Gibeonites: A cunning response to conquest

Anna Yoder Schlabach; November 5, 2017
Joshua 9

Each of us who have preached in this series so far have been drawn to the book of Joshua for one reason or another. For Paul, who revels in all things Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern, this book was an easy sell. For Kristy and Mary, it was the chance to dig deeper into the story of Rahab by doing some complex Hebrew word study. Last week, Danny drew on his own family identities and helped us look head-on at the conquest narratives, naming their role in justifying the destruction of native peoples in this country and in the continued oppression of Palestinians in the Holy Land. The violence in this book and it's historical justification of violence is unsettling. And yet, you all keep showing up. And engaging during second hour. There are still things to talk about and new ways to look at this text. Let's not throw it out just yet.

What part of this book draws me in? Delights my biblical imagination? Makes my heart pound? It's humor. It's when a story surprises me or catches me off guard. I was part of the conversation at worship committee when we chose the book of Joshua, and yet I couldn't remember ever reading it start to finish. So I read through it with fresh eyes and a sharp pencil. I underlined repeated phrases, like "be strong and courageous" (Joshua 1:6, 1:7, 1:9, 1:19). I starred familiar lines like, "when your children ask you" (Joshua 4:6, 4:21). And I put a frowny face when twelve thousand people were killed at Ai (Joshua 8:24).

But when I encountered the Gibeonites, I wrote "WHAT?!" Later I put a smiley face when they showed the Israelites their moldy bread. I was delighted by this story. The gullibility of the Israelites, the foresight of the Gibeonites… their commitment to their story and the props to back it up. The burst wineskins, the worn-out sandals and garments, the moldy bread that was "still warm" when they left. When they left their "very far" country. Maybe it's because this Sunday falls just after Halloween, a time when we celebrate costumes and dressing up and playful trickery. In any event, I told the Bible study group that I want to preach this story. I don't know what it means for us. But this story ought to be a part of our preaching, if no other reason than right here midway through our Bible study we may need some comedic relief. (I mean, it's not laugh-a-minute, but compared to the rest of the book, it's pretty funny… I think).

What began as a trick to enter a treaty became an ironic story about the inclusion of outsiders.

As we've mentioned before in this series, the Bible does not speak with one voice on violence, and even the book of Joshua does not speak with one voice. This book holds within it disagreements, challenges to the total and utter destruction of towns and their inhabitants. We have already heard about Rahab and her family. And with the Gibeonites we have another group of Canaanites who buck the trend of utter destruction.

A little context about where we are in Joshua, because we're backing up a little bit from where we were last week in chapter 11. At this point in chapter 9, Jericho and Ai have been destroyed. The first attempt at invading Ai did not go so well, but the second time, after things are made right with God, they are triumphant. There's a sneak attack and everything. It's very *Game of Thrones.*

At the beginning of chapter 9 we learn that the northern kings have decided to form an alliance after they hear of these most recent Israelite military successes. Together they make a plan to fight Israel.

But when the inhabitants of Gibeon hear the same thing, they have an altogether different response. One reason may be that they do not have a king. The inhabitants of Gibeon consult with their elders when making a plan, but they have no king to lead them into battle, so perhaps they weren't invited to be a part of the alliance.

So instead of military strategizing, they make a different kind of plan. They act with cunning. The Gibeonites appear to be tricksters, but the word used here to described their action "with cunning" has a variety of meanings in the Old Testament. Once it means treachery (Exodus 21:14), but three times it means shrewdness or prudence (Proverbs 1:4, 8:5, 12). And it's related to the Hebrew root used in Genesis 3:1 to describe the serpent (which was my text the last time I preached... I like cunning, crafty characters). So the Gibeonites prudently come up with a plan unlike that of their neighbors. A plan to disguise themselves as a tribe from farther away than where they actually live.

And it's a risky move, but pretty well thought out, down to the wineskins and moldy bread (many of the commentaries I read questioned this part actually. If they had come from very far away, would they have not been able to acquire fresh bread along their journey? Why continue to journey with moldy bread unless you're just using it as a prop?) But the Israelites do not notice this flaw in their logic. From Gibeon to Gilgal could be traveled in one day. These cunning Gibeonites made their journey look long and arduous. They arrive at the Israelite camp well-weathered and worn out and demand a treaty; we have come from very far, so now make a treaty with us.

A little background about why this was so sneaky and why they were so motivated. Deuteronomy 20:10-15 spells out clearly out who the Israelites can make a treaty with.

10 *When you draw near to a town to fight against it, offer it terms of peace.* ***11*** *If it accepts your terms of peace and surrenders to you, then all the people in it shall serve you at forced labor.* ***12*** *If it does not submit to you peacefully, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it;* ***13*** *and when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword. Etc etc… Thus you shall treat all the towns that are very far from you, which are not towns of the nations here.* ***16*** *But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive.* ***17*** *You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded,* ***18*** *so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.*

That's pretty explicit. It's almost as though the Gibeonites are familiar with Deuteronomy, because while they're ambiguous about what country they're from, they're insistent that it is a *very far country* and they've made a *very long journey.* Like Rahab, they profess to have heard what the God of Israel has done, what God did in Egypt and all that Yahweh did to the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan. And they stick to their story of worn-out sandals and long journeys, and Joshua and the others are fooled. So, the leaders partook of their provisions, they sampled their moldy bread and Joshua made peace with them, guaranteeing their lives by a treaty and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them.

Here's a fun fact about the tradition "cutting a covenant" in the ancient near east: a number of ratifying ceremonies were used depending upon the era and culture, but the most widely used rite was that of cutting the bodies of animals in halves and placing them in two rows with enough space between for the two parties of the treaty to walk side by side. As they walked between the pieces, they were vowing to each other, "May what has happened to these bisected animals happen to me if I break this covenant with you."[1] "Cutting a covenant" was serious business.

What's interesting here is that it is usual in a treaty for the inferior party to swear an oath, whereas here it is the Israelites who swear, much like the spies who make an oath with Rahab. It's also the kind of covenant that Yahweh, as the more powerful party, makes with the Israelite people over and over again. Just a reminder here that Deuteronomy 2 clearly spells out, "make no covenant with them and show them no mercy... for that would turn away your children from following me to serve other gods."

---

[1] http://www.fivesolas.com/suzerain.htm ***"Suzerain Treaties & The Covenant Documents the Bible"*** *Notes from lectures of Dr. Meredith Kline, presented at Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California.*

In other words, the reason this ban is so important is fidelity to God. You are to leave no survivors alive near you because they might convince you to abandon Yahweh and follow other Gods. We may rightly squirm at this tribal God and his demand for absolute religious purity. And yet, it also sounds familiar; here in our nation, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic rhetoric and hate crimes are on the rise. We have a president who, for all intents and purposes, tried to ban Muslims from our country. That kind of thinking clearly still exists.

At the same time, we live in an era when multiculturalism and religious pluralism are the norm, many of us value our relationships with the people and writings of other faith traditions. We know that more contact with people of other faiths rarely threatens our faith, but rather expands and enlivens it. However, at the time Joshua was written, the cult of Yahweh was one of many religious options, and it certainly wasn't guaranteed to last. And we know from the golden calf incident that the Israelites *were* tempted by the religious practices of the people around them. Especially when the going got tough. Yahweh was probably right to be a little worried.

But the plot thickens because, of course, the Gibeonites were not from a far away country, they were, as I said before, a day's walk - 17-20 miles from Gilgal. It takes the Israelites three days to realize their mistake, and when they do, they head to Gibeon and demand an explanation. Joshua summons them and says, "Why did you deceive us, saying 'we are very far from you' while in fact you are living among us?" Joshua seems genuinely befuddled as to why they would try to trick him. So they answer, "Because it was told to your servants for certainty that the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you; so we were in great fear for our lives because of you and did this thing. And now we are in your hand, do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us." It should be clear that the Gibeonites are not con-artists, attempting to scam gullible Israelites. They are people desperate to survive whose lives are at stake.

So, Joshua's in a bit of a pickle. The covenant he made with them cannot be broken because it has been sworn in the name of Lord, the God of Israel. And remember that cutting in half bit? So what's a leader to do?

The people of the congregation murmured against Joshua and the leaders (as their forefathers and mothers murmured against Moses and the wilderness). Joshua and the elders have to be creative. They can't kill them, as Deuteronomy dictates and as it seems the other Israelites are possibly clamoring for. So what to do? Here's an idea: Make them hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord to continue to this day, in the place that the Lord should choose.

What?!

Pay attention to the tricksters, the risk takers, the outsider, the creative problem solvers, the underdogs.

Include these foreigners and make them temple employees? This took a strange turn. In fact, Gordon Matties writes, "The story transforms the Gibeonites as those who declare themselves to Joshua as, "your servants" into being God's servants, the holy precincts. God has validated the treaty with the Gibeonites and transformed them into God's people."[2]

Why hewers of wood? Why drawers of water? Matties notes that the Gibeonites already had a successful shrine in Gibeon, including wood and water resources, so it made good sense for the Israelites to set up their own shrine in Gibeon and use the Gibeonites, who already knew how such a site might be operated, to become managers of the physical plant for the Israelite shrine in Gibeon. It just makes sense. You want good people running the phys plant at any shrine.

What began as a trick to enter a treaty became an ironic story about the inclusion of outsiders. Now, not only Rahab and her family, but also four entire towns have become participants in the covenant community.

[2] Matties, Gordon H. "Joshua." Herald Press. Harrisonburg, Virginia. 2012 pg 223.

It is worth noting, as the text does, that Joshua and the congregation did not seek God's direction when they made the initial covenant. And yet, I'm reluctant to make this the take-away for a number of reasons: First, the God of Joshua rarely waits to be sought. God speaks quite a bit in this book, so if Yahweh wanted to give Joshua a heads up about the Gibeonites, it would have happened. God demands absolutes fidelity, but not frequent check-ins.

And secondly, God doesn't seem displeased by this covenant with the Gibeonites. God is the one who will choose the place where they will serve. When the other Amorite Kings decide to gang up on the Gibeonites in the very next chapter, and the Gibeonites seek protection from the Israelites, it is Yahweh who reigns down hail. Joshua 10:11, "the Lord threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword. **14** There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord heeded a human voice; for the Lord fought for Israel." Right, the Lord fought for "Israel," but this fight was a fight protecting the Gibeonites from the Amorite Kings. So, it appears God honors the covenant and isn't too upset about circumventing certain laws in Deuteronomy. Perhaps it was even a part of God's plan.

So why is this story here?

Well, it tells why the Gibeonites hew wood and draw water to this day. It explains a tradition that lasted a long time, even into 2 Samuel the Gibeonites are mentioned. Apparently, King Saul tried to kill the Gibeonites and a famine ensued and David must restore the relationship with the Gibeonites to avoid a famine. It explains the role of this people group.

But I think there are two other potential take-aways here:

Welcome the outsider and don't worry too much about how those outsiders entered in the first place. Matties writes, "There will always be those who grumble when leaders of the community do not tightly preserve the boundaries."[3] Just read the opinion page in *The Mennonite* every month. But in the end, the narrator interprets Joshua's acceptance as an act of salvation. The story challenges Israel's own extreme efforts to preserve itself. Some of the old rules from Deuteronomy need to be loosened. The boundaries get widened. New people get grafted onto the covenant community, not because of loopholes but because it is God's desire for all people. That's pretty good news.

And, I think a second takeaway is: Pay attention to the tricksters, the risk takers, the outsiders, the creative problem solvers, the underdogs. The Israelites thought of themselves as the constant underdogs. They were enslaved for a long time, they wandered in the wilderness a long time with few resources. In fact, the Hebrew Bible is filled with good trickster underdog stories: Joseph and his brothers; Moses's mother placing him in a basket; Jacob stealing the birthright from Esau; Laban and Jacob's whole relationship is filled with trickery.

Israel forms its identity around these scrappy underdog stories and generally it sees itself that way, but as we talked about last week in second hour, it doesn't take long for the oppressed to become the oppressor. Trickster stories in which characters act in creative subversive, shrewd ways shed light on oppression and injustice. They name the reality that it is not a fair playing field and they remind us that if we are not resorting to cunning and trickery, we may be too comfortable. We probably have too much to lose and that may mean, like the Israelites we have become the oppressors without noticing. Even if our narratives do not reflect that new identity yet.

May we learn from Joshua to be gullible and wise, and willing to reinterpret traditions and expand boundaries. May we learn from the Gibeonites to be courageous and cunning, responding to injustice and oppression with creativity, shrewdness and prudence. And may we receive the gifts of unexpected and humorous stories especially in midst of violence and pain.

May it be so.

****

[3] Matties. pg 227

The Justice of Joshua

Karl S Shelly; November 12, 2017
Joshua 20:1-9

Over the past four weeks of our study of the book of Joshua, you've heard from one of Goshen College's best and brightest students, from two certified preachers with Master of Divinity degrees, and from two most extraordinary Hebrew scholars who, by their own admission, stiffen up and fall over like rapturous fainting goats at the sight of Old Testament scrolls.

And now you get me; the voice of the people! The one who dares to ask the question – "Is Joshua in the Old Testament … or the Apocrypha? I'm not really familiar." In fact, before this study, the only thing I knew about Joshua is that it's the first word of that great Lyle Lovett album "Joshua Judges Ruth" which, I'm told, names two other Old Testament books as well! Who knew?!?

But I've taken up Paul Keim's challenge. I read the entire book of Joshua. And then I read it again. And again. Granted, I used an abridged version called "*the Twible: All the Chapters of the Bible in 140 Characters of Less*."[4] Very handy if one is a little unfamiliar with a particular Bible book, and needing to quickly write a sermon on it.

So for those of you who have fallen behind in your Joshua reading, or never left the starting gate (I'm looking at you Dave Ostergren!), here's their overview of the entire book of Joshua in 140 characters or less: "*Toto, we're not in the Torah anymore. And as we enter the Land of Oz, remember to slay anything that moves, ok?"*

I think that covers it pretty well, yes? And since I've been asked to preach this morning about chapter 20, we might as well just cut to the chase. Chapter 20: "*After shedding innocent blood for 19 chapters, now the Bible gets touchy-feely about finding asylum for manslaughter perps. Aaaaw*."

There you have it. Not sure what else there is to say. … But since I am paid by the hour, we might as well go a little deeper.

In touchy-feely chapter 20, God instructs Joshua to create "cities of refuge" in the Promised Land. These are places to which anyone – Israelite or alien -- who unintentionally kills a person, can flee. When you get there you just explain the unfortunate details to the elders, and if your account is credible, you can live there in peace, safe from those who would avenge the death, as long as you stay within the city limits.

You might think of cities of refuge as kind of like bases in a baseball field where as long as a baserunner – or in our case, an accused murderer – is standing on a base – or in our case, a designated city of refuge – then they are safe and can't be tagged out – or in our case, murdered in revenge. See, it's just like baseball.

Cities of refuge are about instituting God's justice in tangible and practical form.

In Joshua, we read that these cities of refuge are one of two kinds of specially designated cities established in the new territory. The other is cities for Levites, and is described in chapter 21. Levites, who are descendants of Levi, came to have special responsibilities among God's people; they were, among other things, the teachers of Torah, and they were the only tribe of Israel who did not inherit land like the other tribes, because, as it is written in Deuteronomy, "the Lord God of Israel Himself is their inheritance" (Deut. 18:2). Now, the Lord God is not a particularly bad inheritance, but it seems the Levites were a little underwhelmed. They responded to their plight by saying, "No offense, but we'd kind of like to have some land too." So the other tribes of Israel made a concession and allowed them to live in these specially designated cities for Levites.

So, why two chapters devoted to the creation of these two types of cities – cities of refuge and cities for Levites? Is this but an odd and trivial footnote in the establishment of the Promised Land? And especially cities of refuge – why the big deal for something that certainly benefits only a relatively small

[4] Riess, Jana. "The Twible (Jana Riess, 2013).

number of people? I mean, how many accidental killings could there be per year? Granted, there would have been the strong memory among God's people of Moses fleeing for safety after he committed murder – not quite by accident, but arguably in a way that didn't deserve a punishment of death. But did that memory really warrant the commissioning of all these special cities just to protect a similarly situated few? Or is something else is going on here?

I recently read a modern day account of a woman who – if she'd have lived in ancient times – would have benefited from a city of refuge. She is one of those who killed accidentally. Maryann Jacobi Gray tells her story in a 2016 issue of Tikkun[5], that progressive Jewish magazine edited by Rabbi Michael Lerner. She writes that her nearly absent Jewish faith completely disappeared after "the accident." How, she wondered, could a benign and loving God allow an eight-year-old boy named Brian to dart into the street in front of her car? She writes: "I spent the first few weeks after the accident hiding inside my apartment. I was ashamed to show my face and afraid of being attacked if anyone recognized that I was the girl who killed a local child. Although I had moments of despair I mostly felt dull and frozen. I thought about the accident all the time, while a continuous loop of flashbacks ran in random sequence: The boy flying up into the air after I hit him. His mother in a house dress, knees buckling on her front stoop. A crowd of onlookers. Blood. Sitting in the back of a police car, arms wrapped around myself, while an officer told me the boy had died."

Yes, she was exonerated and no blood avengers were on her trail, but she never stopped running from that incident. After marrying, she decided against having children. "I don't think I'd be a good mother," she would say, but what she meant was "I'm afraid my child would get run over. I don't trust myself."

Decades later, she saw a news report about an elderly driver who accidently plowed through a farmers' market near her home. Ten people were killed. Her flashbacks came back with a vengeance. In response she started surfing the web, desperate for some sort of answer for people who accidently kill. It was then that she came across a website hosted by a rabbi, telling about this ancient provision for cities of refuge. There, she exclaimed, in the Torah of all places, "it is speaking about me!" Obsessed, she unearthed every detail she could find, beginning with accounts in Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua which all speak about cities of refuge. They say the accidental killer should be admitted into the city and given a place to live among the villagers. Moreover, if the blood-avenger came to the city seeking revenge, the residents were obligated to protect the manslayer. Rather than being ostracized or confined to a ghetto, accidental killers were to be fully integrated into the community.

Jacobi Gray envisions this reality, and writes: "The residents of the cities of refuge, most of whom were not accidental killers, welcomed strangers and outcasts into their communities. They did not set quotas. They did not turn them away. Rather than complaining that the killers were a burden, they helped them become productive members of the community. Some accidental killers – traumatized and perhaps otherwise troubled – undoubtedly needed lots of support, while others were more resourceful. I expect that some were grateful for the safety of the city while others resented the confinement. It didn't matter – they needed sanctuary, so the community took them in."

Are you getting the picture? The big picture of what's happening? The shelter, the sanctuary, and the welcoming of strangers? Cities of refuge may, on one level, be about providing refuge to a few accidental killers, but more importantly this is about instituting God's justice in tangible and practical form. It's a way of protecting the vulnerable, standing with the marginalized, and prioritizing the persecuted.

You see, in Joshua, after God makes good on God's promises to secure and distribute land to the former slaves of Egypt (which takes up most of the book of Joshua), the first order of business is to make sure the people don't just recreate a new empire. To do so would make a mockery of God's promise. Rather, God's kingdom is to be marked by a different order and a different way of living. That requires real, functional mechanisms that prioritize justice (hence, the cities of refuge) and it requires a continual focus on ethical living (which was maintained by Levites through their teaching of Torah). That is what is

[5] "Cities of Refuge," Tikkun Magazine, Volume 31, Number 2, Spring 2016, p. 52ff.

being established here. No surprise that a commitment to this sort of justice and ethical living has inspired similar acts of refuge throughout the centuries; whether that be the underground railroad for slaves, safe house for Jews in WWII, sanctuary churches for immigrants, or domestic violence shelters to name but a few.

So the point of Joshua chapters 20 and 21 is to establish cities devoted to reverencing God's law and caring for threatened neighbors. Hmm. Starting to sound pretty close to some New Testament teaching about the importance of loving God and neighbor, no?

"Hold your horses!" I hear some of you saying. "Let's not get carried away and say the book of Joshua is the harbinger of the way of Jesus. You've merely noted that there's a hint of justice and ethical living sprinkled on a pile of embarrassing and deplorable violence. Maybe we can keep chapters 20-21, but we need to throw out most of the rest of the book and do so *in the name of Jesus*!"

Rather than being a mostly brutal, blood-thirsty narrative of a conquering, tribal god; Joshua is an invaluable testimony to the counter-cultural justice that Yahweh wills.

See, I *can* read your mind. And you're partially right in that there is no denying that the first 19 chapters of Joshua seem consistent with the observation of Walter Benjamin, a Jewish victim of the holocaust, who said, "There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism."

And yet, my thesis about the book of Joshua is even more audacious than you think. Rather than being a mostly brutal, blood-thirsty narrative of a conquering, tribal god; Joshua is an invaluable, albeit primitive, testimony to the counter-cultural justice that Yahweh wills. That's right; I'm doubling down on the whole justice thing! So maybe Paul's oracle of four weeks ago was right; against all expectations, this book has left its mark on me. And with the help of Walter Brueggemann[6], I've been inspired once again to see beyond my New Testament parochialism and catch a glimpse of how the Hebrew Scriptures are the fertile soil for prophetic faith.

To make my point, let us look briefly but closely again at chapter 11, the text Danny preached powerfully on; and the text considered one of the most problematically violent in the book of Joshua. And what we notice is that there is only one verse – verse 6 – that is attributed to God as God's direct revelation. And that's ultimately what we're after, right? We want to know what the book of Joshua reveals to us about God and God's will for God's people? We miss that if we read the many accounts of warfare as proscriptive; as revealing how we should respond to enemies. And we miss that if we read Joshua as a historical description of what actually happened because – as we've noted -- the very text is inconsistent on that point. Rather, Brueggemann suggests <u>we should read Joshua as tales of God's alternative power that triumph's over empire's mode of domination</u>. This is imaginative narrative and has a power that flat narrative does not.

So, back to verse 6 which follows five verses describing a comically, ridiculous scenario facing Israel: one where 15 kings representing 15 empires, all with advanced military weaponry, are conspiring to attack poorly armed, dispossessed, peasant-filled Israel who, by way, has no king. This fight has worse odds than David versus Goliath. And what does God say in verse 6? As you can see it written in your order of worship, God says to Joshua, *"Do not be afraid of them, for tomorrow at this time I will hand over all of them, slain, to Israel; <u>you</u> shall hamstring their horses, and burn their chariots with fire."*

The one word of violence God directly calls for from the Israelites is to hamstring the horses and burn the chariots. This isn't because of any divine hostility toward horses. It's because "horses and chariots" is the biblical way to speak about the military strength of monarchies and empires. The preceding verses had just emphasized how all these kings brought together their legions of troops and "very many horses and chariots" (11:4) to attack Israel – the anti-empire; the people who put no stock in horses and chariots or the surplus wealth and slave labor that militaristic empires require. And that is

[6] See especially "*Divine Presence Amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua*" (2009).

what made Israel such a threat; they followed a liberating God who practiced a social alternative, and therefore had to be destroyed, lest such liberating notions spread.

So in a pre-emptive strike reminiscent of our empire's attack of Iraq, this coalition of kings with their advanced technology, surplus wealth, systems of oppression – all things rejected by Israel – line up in the biggest military mismatch of antiquity. And what happens is another Exodus story. Just like in the original Exodus, the details are unclear [like, how exactly did the Red Sea part?], but what is clear – what is revelatory – is that God's people have another form of power which the world of kings and empires neither know nor credit.

What, therefore, the book of Joshua tells us is the following three things:

- that faithful imagination is more powerful than systems of oppression and domination;
- that the world of powerful empires is not the last word; in fact, Yahweh is a God who will invert the historical process and give land to the landless and justice to the persecuted;
- and that God calls God's people to concrete, risk-filled acts against "horses and chariots," and concrete, risk-filled acts establishing justice, sanctuary, and safety.

And one more particularly important thing: Joshua also tells us that God is aligned *against* nations who rely on "horses and chariots," and their requisite surplus wealth; and God will work through their hardness of heart until the whole enterprise collapses.

Friends, perhaps this is why we so need to be reading Joshua this year; for we live in *the* nation most devoted to the way of "horses and chariots," a nation that puts its trust in the god of militarism and wealth; a nation whose official policies are disdainful of refugees, immigrants, and others needing places of refuge; and a nation governed by arrogant and blind leaders suffering end-stage hardness of heart. Joshua says this kind of nation will not last because God is aligned against it.

So as we read Joshua, it may be best that we stop reading it imagining that we are the theological descendants of Joshua and the Israelites. It may be that we need to read with an understanding that we are actually closer in kind to the Canaanites, the people dependent on horses and chariots, the people who have prostituted themselves to other gods.

And therefore our role model, the one to whom we can best hope to emulate, is in fact the prostitute Rahab (see Joshua 2). As we learned three weeks ago, she, a Canaanite, heard somebody speak of the power and great deeds of Yahweh. She recognized Yahweh as God of heaven and earth. And as a result, she took great risk, she joined the resistance, and she became the one person in the entire book of Joshua to provide a place of refuge for those hunted by the empire; for those empowered and willing to hamstring the horses.

The book of Joshua calls us to put aside the gods of horses, chariots, and life built on violence, and choose instead the liberating God who ends oppression so that the oppressed might find rest. Or as the new Yeshua – Jesus – put it: "The kingdom of God has come near; bear fruit worthy of repentance, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 3:2, 3:8, 11:28).

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

****

What's With this "Service" Thing?

Tom Kauffman; November 19, 2017
Joshua 24:1, 14-15

We are concluding our Bible study of the book of Joshua this Sunday. We began with an overview that reminded us that this book is not an historical account in the way we think about history today. There are no video clips of the fall of Jericho or of the many battles listed to which we can refer. While these stories were circulated in oral form for centuries, the final form of the book most likely took place during Israel's Exile period. Thus the book was to be read and understood from the perspective of a people that were formed into a nation out of the Exodus and wilderness experience, they inherited a land that was already populated, and they were to follow the instructions that Moses and Joshua laid before them which can be found in the book of Deuteronomy. But Joshua is also to be read from the perspective of a nation that lived through the time of the Judges, when faithfulness was interrupted quite often by faithlessness, and by the desire for a king (like their neighbors) which resulted in a monarchy that ended in failure. It is from that perspective that the final form of the book of Joshua was settled. In some ways it could be read as a retrospective, asking the question: "Where did we go wrong?"

As we have recited each Sunday in our opening time of worship, Joshua invited the people of God to declare whom they would serve. This was not a casual or periodic act of service. This was serious business! In the Hebrew Scriptures, Gordon Matties in his commentary notes that the word translated "serve" means either "work" or "worship". And Joshua is giving the Israelites a reality check—do they really have the capacity to serve YHWH, and YHWH alone?

That's why Joshua is so concerned with idolatry. Because who or what we serve is who or what we worship. That's what we have faith in or trust with our lives. Israel isn't the only people to have had to struggle with such. We do too! In what or whom do we really believe? If we really believe that hard work is rewarded, that that is how one advances oneself, then we will work hard. If we believe that wearing the right clothes gives a favorable first impression then we will do so in order to win the approval that we are seeking. If we believe joining the right club or organization will provide us with the right connections to advance our careers or advance our goals, then we will do so. These may be minor things in which we trust, but, like Joshua, we are also invited to declare in whom or what we ultimately trust. Is our ultimate trust in our country, its leaders, in money or political power, or is it in God and God's promises?

Joshua is so concerned with idolatry because who or what we serve is who or what we worship.

For everyone, who or what we will serve is a question that cannot go unanswered. We serve someone or something either intentionally or unintentionally. So Joshua's challenge is as current today as it was for his generation millennia ago. And there are many tempting alternatives in our midst.

To place the book of Joshua in its proper context, we need to look at the entire Hebrew Scripture. Hebrew Scripture is divided into 3 major sections: Torah, Prophets, Writings/Wisdom books. Walter Brueggemann, an Old Testament scholar, observes these three excellently represent the development of human consciousness itself.

Torah (Genesis — Deuteronomy) gave the Law and formed the people—providing identity, boundaries and self-worth for a group that was beloved and came to understand themselves as a special people. The Bible begins with "order".

The Prophets (of which Joshua is one) represents the birth of good, critical thinking; moving beyond simply "following the rules" to understanding why the rules are there and how application of the rules is important; (Richard Rohr observes that when we begin to develop critical thinking in the teens and early adulthood, it is primarily oriented outward, in criticizing others. But honest and humble self-critical thinking is necessary to see one's own shadow side in order to avoid narcissism.) The biblical

material challenges us to do such critical thinking by providing the prophetic material. And it primarily invites us to look inward, to examine ourselves.

Wisdom literature (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Psalms, Proverbs) reveals the ability to be patient with mystery and contradictions. It is only (again according to Richard Rohr) when we learn to live with mystery and paradox that we develop true compassion (not only for ourselves but for others). Brueggemann talks about these three states as order, disorder, and reorder. It is important to note that "reorder" is not a return to the former order but a transformation, moving to something new.

We need to see Joshua in the context of this progression as a prophetic book. Joshua does not negate the instructions God gave to Moses, but rather Joshua examines them to understand how they fit into the current situation facing them (written from the standpoint of experiencing not only entry into the Promised Land, but also experiencing the ups and downs of life in the land, of the monarchy and the eventual loss of the land and exile). The book of Joshua is attempting to make sense of their current experience by reflecting on their past history.

Joshua, as prophet, is willing to look closely at Israel's story, and critique it from within, not as an outsider. That's why Joshua can challenge the people in 24:19 by saying, "You cannot serve YHWH…" From the vantage point of the exile the readers can agree that they were not perfect in following YHWH. What can they learn from their experience?

We also need to understand that the book of Joshua borrowed some of the literary conventions if its day as it told its story of moving into the land. But because it served a different kind of God than the gods of their neighbors, Joshua was able to adapt and shape the story in unique ways. Many of the bloody conquest stories parallel what other Ancient Near Eastern literature does in telling the story of conquering the land and its people.

But we have heard the stories of Rahab and of the Gibeonites finding their way into the community of faith. While there is much verbiage about the extermination of all living creatures (so that Israel will not be tempted to serve the wrong gods), there are also these stories where persons or groups of people who were supposed to be exterminated were not. And these peoples found their way into the very fabric of Israel as a nation, *"living within Israel to this day".*

This was not a brand new phenomenon for Israel even in Joshua's time. We remember in the Exodus account that it wasn't simply those who could trace their lineage to their ancestor Joseph and back to Jacob and back to Isaac and back to Abraham that got to come along on this exciting excursion into the wilderness. No, Exodus 12:38 speaks of a "mixed crowd" or "mixed multitude" also accompanying the Israelites out of Egypt. The purpose of the Torah was to form a people that had not formerly been a people. Even at the very beginning there were "outsiders" included into the very fabric of the exodus experience. What was happening in Joshua was simply a continuation of the process. But it must always be done carefully so that the influence of the "outsider" does not turn Israel away from YHWH. God's Kingdom has the capacity to include others who seek to follow the instruction of God.

Joshua is reminding Israel, a chastised Israel dwelling in exile remember, of the centrality of worshipping only YHWH, while at the same time being open to the inclusion of the "other" into the family of faith as long as there is clarity about what that inclusion means. When Joshua speaks of "all Israel" obeying YHWH, it means all those who have been included into this new family of God. It is an "all" that is not ethnically pure or genetically pure, but is faithful and true to the way of YHWH.

The story of Joshua is also one of displacement of the other. And that disturbs our sensibilities as modern westerners. But as we have already noted in earlier sermons, we are beneficiaries of displacement ourselves. We have benefited from the forced displacement of those who lived here first. What the readers of Joshua realize, is that the land they inherited from God still belonged to YHWH. And when they failed to be faithful, ***they*** were displaced from the land. The message is clear in the Bible, <u>the land always belongs to God</u>, not to the inhabitants. All the inhabitants are simply caretakers of the land.

So what can we say are the "takeaways" from our study of the book of Joshua?

Joshua was concerned (some might say obsessed) with the danger of idolatry. He challenged the people of God to declare whom they would be serving. The challenges of idolatry are as present today as they were in Joshua's time. In who or what do we place our security? There are more guns in this

country than there are people. Is that what we believe makes us safe? Our nation invests more in the military than the next 6 countries of the world combined. Is that what we believe provides us security? We look for status and power and financial security in many differing arenas. Is that in what we trust? Are we any more capable of following YHWH than were Joshua's listeners?

As we enter a new chapter in the life of this congregation, are we open to seeing what of the tradition still serves us well and what needs to be adapted to the changing circumstances of our day? Are we willing to be prophetic in how we understand and interpret the law that guides our faith community?

As Matties writes in his commentary about Joshua: *"…the historians of ancient Israel wrote to invite readers to perceive their present as an occasion in which to reimagine their identity and their relationship with God in ever-new contexts so as to discern patterns of divine activity and cooperation with God's ways for an uncertain future."*

Are we willing to read our own history with a healthy dose of humility, as I'm sure the Israelites had to do in exile as they pondered their storied past, with both the successes and failures of faithfulness? Do we seek to expunge the uncomfortable parts of our past, or like Israel, be willing to record and remember both the good and the bad, to read the unvarnished truth of our heritage and to learn from it, from all of it?

The People of God do not get it right all the time; in fact quite often they do not, but that does not drive God away.

There is a fascinating story in the Talmud about the Sea of Reeds experience that was so formative in shaping Israel's history. The question is asked, "Why did Pharaoh and his army all have to drown? The "pillar of cloud" was already holding back the Egyptians so that the Israelites could cross through the divided sea. Why couldn't it have kept the army at bay for only a little longer until the waters returned and separated them from the Israelites?"

To make matters worse, Moses and the Israelites sang a triumphant song of gratitude to God for annihilating their enemies. Where is God's compassion in all this? Jewish commentaries were sensitive to that question. On seeing the drowning Egyptians, the angels were about to also break into song when God silenced them, declaring, "how dare you sing for joy when My creatures are dying" (Talmud, Megillah 10b & Sanhedrin 39b).

But if God stopped the angels from singing, why didn't God also stop the Israelites? The Jewish tradition seems to be of two minds on this matter. "We have to live with this dichotomy. If we are not happy that evil has been punished, then we do not care enough, but if we are not sad at the loss of life, then our humanity is weakened." "As I live, says God, I do not wish for the death of the wicked, but for the wicked to repent of their way, so that they may live" (Ezekiel 33:11).

The book of Joshua is a continuation of this dichotomy, valuing the lives of the "other" as well as emphasizing the need for faithfulness. This is what it looked like in the days of Joshua. We are challenged to seek to know and embody what it looks like today.

And finally, reading Joshua from the perspective of a people who lost everything and were living in exile, there is this: Do we only get one chance to "do it right"? The biblical narrative, not only in the book of Joshua, but throughout the First and Second Testaments, is one of God's constant steadfast love and persistent patience with and for the people of God. Yes, the People of God do not get it right all the time; in fact quite often they do not, but that does not drive God away. Rather it shows God to be a relentlessly creative pursuer of people, a coach who does not give up on seeking to create a more perfect believer out of each and every one of us. That was true for the people of Joshua's day, for those reading the book of Joshua centuries later, and it is still true for us today. And that is good news indeed!

****

APPENDIX 1

A translation with commentary of Joshua 2 and Joshua 6:22-25

By Kristy Shellenberger Yordy

Joshua son of Nun sent two spies, secretly, from the Israelites' camp in Shittim,[7] saying, "Go, survey the land across the Jordan, the land Yhwh, our god, has promised us to give us. And pay special attention to the city of Jericho, which lies just beyond the Jordan River, at the entry to the Promised Land."

So the men went out, and entered the house of a woman—a prostitute.[8] Her name was Rahab. And the two men lodged there.

Immediately, it was told to the king of Jericho: "Two 'moles' (spies) from the sons of Israel have entered here tonight to dig[9] (*ḥpr*) around in the land." And so the king sent word to Rahab[10], saying, "Bring out the men who have come to you, who have entered your house, for they have come to dig (*ḥpr*) around in all the land."

---

[7] Shittim would immediately be heard by later Israelites hearing the story as the site where the men of Israel began to play the 'prostitute' (*znh*) with Moabite women: "While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people began to play the 'prostitute' (*znh*) with the Moabite women. These women invited them to the sacrifices of their gods. And the people ate and bowed down to their gods. So Israel yoked itself to Baal of Peor, and Yhwh's anger was kindled against Israel" (Num. 25:1-3). Twenty-four thousand men "who had yoked themselves to Baal of Peor" through these women were killed. When the Israelite zealot Phineas stabbed the Israelite man Zimri and the Midianite woman Cozbi who had been together, Yhwh's anger and jealousy were abated, causing Yhwh to issue the "covenant of peace" with Israel.

[8] The Hebrew term *zonah* ("prostitute").

[9] The Hebrew root used here (*ḥpr*) has two definitions. The first means "to dig." in Isa. 2:20 the noun form refers to a *mole* (a "digger" in the ground) and in Deut. 23:14, the verb is used of digging *a latrine*. The action of "digging" may be done *to extract something*, like water from a well (Gen. 21:30), *to unearth something*, like *a hidden object* (Job 3:21), *to survey something*, like *the land* (Josh. 2:3), *to deposit and cover something*, like *a trap* (Ps. 7:15, Eccl. 10:8), and *to search for something*, like *prey* (Job 39:29) and even *death* (Job 3:21),

The second definition means "to be shamed or ashamed" (e.g., Ps. 35:4; 40:14; 71:24). It relates to the first meaning in the way that guilt and shame are sometimes deposited and buried, like a trap, or uncovered and exposed, like something hidden that is revealed. Jeremiah 13 provides a good case study. In this passage, the prophet Jeremiah hides his loincloth to represent the Israelites' hiding (*tmn*) their shame and guilt and later "digs" (*ḥpr*) it up to expose its ruin.

As for "digging" in the land, it is interesting to note that earlier, in Numbers 13, when Yhwh orders Moses to send his men to "spy" out the land of Canaan, the verb that is used *six times* to signify the action of "spying" (*tul*) does not carry the shades of shame, guilt, preying upon, and entrapment that *ḥpr* ("to dig") does. This seems to be significant. Could it be that the writers and/or editors of Joshua are pointing, perhaps unconsciously, to the complexity of the Israelites' invasion of "the land"? Could it be that the use of *ḥpr* here rather than the verb used in Num. 13 (*tul*) renders some judgment, even if unconsciously, on the Israelites' action of "spying," paralleling it, through uses of the verb elsewhere in Hebrew texts, with the action of "digging" for prey, for death, in order to set a trap, or to bury (and expose!) one's straying from the divine way?

[10] Rahab's house, which was located at the very edge of the city—within the city wall itself—functioned as a window through which people of other tribes and nations entered the city of Jericho. For this reason, all who entered Rahab's house may have had to be reported by law to the palace. (In the Babylonian Laws of Eshnunna, innkeepers, bartenders, and others whose "places of operation" (often located at the edge of the city) served as a melting pot for various people groups, had to report such information directly to the king.) Perhaps this why the king came to find out about the Israelites' presence in Jericho and why he immediately sent word to *Rahab* to "bring them out."

But Rahab had taken the two men, and, like Moses's mother had done for Moses, Rahab hid (*tspn*) these spies.[11] And Rahab answered the king, saying, "True, the men did come to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be shut, at dark, the men left, and I don't know where they went. Pursue them quickly: you can overtake them!"[12] So the king's men pursued the Israelite 'moles' along the road that led to the fords of the Jordan, and the city gate was closed behind them.

Meanwhile, Rahab brought the two Israelite men up to the roof, and she hid them, again. But this time time, Rahab did not hide the two men like one hides (*tspn*) a treasured child—in order to protect them. This time, Rahab hid (*tmn*) the Israelite moles under stalks of malodorous flax[13] that had been soaked in stagnant water and set out to dry on her rooftop.[14]

Before the Israelite men lay down that night, Rahab came up to them on the roof, and said this to them:

> I know that Yhwh has given you the land, that terror of you has fallen over us, and that all the inhabitants of the land tremble before you. For we have heard how Yhwh dried up the waters of the Red Sea when you came out of Egypt, and we have heard what you have done to the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan, to King Sihon and to King Og,[15] whom you devoted to destruction—together with all the people (men, women, and children) of their lands. As soon as we heard of it, our hearts melted with fear, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you. Yhwh, your god, is god in the heavens above and on the earth below.[16]

---

[11] The only two times this verb (*tspn*), "to hide," is used in the Hebrew Bible is of Moses's mother, who "hides" (*tspn*) Moses from the pharaoh of Egypt, and Rahab, who "hides"(*tspn*) the Israelite spies from the king of Jericho.

[12] Note how Rahab, speaking in imperatives, is directing *the king* and the king's men!

[13] To break down and separate the fibers, the flax was soaked in stagnant water, then laid out to dry. Imagine the smell, the sogginess, the muck!

[14] A different verb is used for this action and given its other uses in the Hebrew Bible is probably better translated "buried" than "hid," as it almost always connotes a foreboding of demise and destruction; for example, tricksters "hide" (*tmn*) snares and traps; Moses hides (*tmn*) the man he murdered in Egypt; thieves hide (*tmn*) their stolen wares; and the prophet Jeremiah hides (*tmn*) his loincloth to rot—as a sign of the Israelites' forthcoming demise and destruction; and Rahab hides (*tmn*) the Israelite spies. This could be an example of the way in which Rahab's actions foretell Huldah's prophecy of Israel's demise and displacement, as the buried Israelite "moles," like Jeremiah's buried loincloth, could be read as a sign of Israel's own impending doom. Additionally, Rahab's "hiding" or "burying" the spies may point to the guilt and shame, like the Moses's and thieves' buried shame, associated with what she's doing, at least in the eyes of her own people and her own culture, for she is hiding the very people who have come to destroy them.

[15] King Sihon and King Og are two Amorite kings who, together with their armies, their cities, their men, women, and children were utterly destroyed by Moses and his men. These victories gave the Israelites possession of continuous land east of the Jordan, from Arnon to the foot of Hermon.

[16] Rahab has a special function in the biblical narratives of Israel's existence in the land: she has heard about the events of the Red Sea and the defeat of the Amorite kings Og and Sihon on the other side of the Jordan, she knows that Yhwh will give the Israelites the land on this side of the Jordan, and she declares, quoting from the Song of Miriam (Exodus 15), that "terror" has fallen on the inhabitants of her land and that their hearts "melt" in fear (2:9)—the same message the Israelite spies will bring back to Joshua. Rahab is thus *the oracle of Israel's occupation of the land*, just as, later on, the prophet Huldah will function as *the oracle of Israel's removal from the land*. In this way, Rahab, who begins as triply marginalized—Canaanite, woman, and prostitute—moves to the center of the narrative as bearer of a divine message and herald of Israel in its new land.

> Now, swear to me by Yhwh that as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house.[17] And give me a sure sign that you will keep alive my father and my mother and my brothers and my sisters and all that is to them[18], and that you will deliver our lives from death.

And the men said to her, "Our life for yours, even to death. If you do not tell this matter of ours, then when Yhwh gives us the land, we will deal kindly and faithfully with you."

Then Rahab let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built on the outer side of the city wall, and she lived inside the wall [show picture]. And she said to them, "Go into the hills, or the pursuers will find you, and hide there three days until the pursuers have returned. Then afterward you may go your way."[19]

The men said to her, "We will be guiltless with respect to this oath of yours that you have made us swear. Look, when we come into the land, tie this red cord[20] in the window through which you let us down, and gather into your house your father and mother, your brothers, and all your father's household. If anyone goes outside of your house into the street, their blood shall be on their own head, and we will be guiltless. But if a hand is laid on anyone who is with you in the house, their blood shall be on our head. And if you tell this business of ours, we will be released from this oath that you have made us swear."

And Rahab said, "According to your words, so be it." Then, she sent them away, and they departed. And she tied the red cord in the window.

The two men departed and went into the hills and remained there three days until the pursuers returned, and the pursuers searched all along the way and found nothing.

Then, the two men returned. They came down from the hills, crossed over, came to Joshua, and told him all that had happened to them. Then they said to Joshua, "Truly, Yhwh has given all the land into our hands. And also, all the inhabitants of the land melt away in fear because of us."

Joshua 6:21-25

But not only that. In this oracle Rahab also recounts Israel's salvation history from its enslavement in Egypt—how Yhwh dried up the Red Sea for their escape from their previous "pursuers." In this way, Rahab subtly or not-so-subtly reminds the two men that their own lives and the lives of their families, like Rahab's life and the lives of her family, not so long ago also needing "saving."

[17] The Hebrew word used here (*ḥesed*) is an important concept in the Hebrew Bible. Often translated as "lovingkindness," *hesed* refers to *acts of benevolence* done out of kindness, not obligation, and often setting up an expectation of reciprocation, which may be the reason for one's own benevolent action. *Hesed* as exemplified by Rahab and later by Joshua and the two Israelite spies represents not so much a case of good people doing good things, but rather an example of how ordinary people with mixed motives become extraordinary through the cultivation of *ḥesed* (compare use of *ḥesed* in the book of Ruth).

[18] The Hebrew phrase "all that is to them" generally refers to "*all the people* and *all the things* (property, livestock, etc.) that belong to, or are related to, a person." *The phrase "all that is to them" could mean that a whole lot of people are being saved*!

[19] Again, Rahab is giving imperatives, this time to the Israelite men. She is calling the shots.

[20] The only two times this Hebrew phrase ("red cord" or "red thread") is used is in relation to Rahab and to the Shulammite of the Song of Songs.

After the destruction of Jericho and all that was in it, Joshua instructed the two men who had spied out the land: "Go into the prostitute's house and bring out from there the woman and all who belong to her[21], as you swore to her."

So the young men who had been spies went in and brought out Rahab and her father and mother and brothers and all who belonged to her. And they brought all Rahab's relatives and put them outside the camp of Israel. Then, they burned the city with fire and everything in it . . . but Rahab, the prostitute, and her father's household and all that belonged to her, Joshua saved alive. And Rahab has lived in Israel to this day, because she hid (*ḥbh*) the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho.

****

APPENDIX 2

ZONAH: Understanding this Hebrew word

Kristy Shellenberger Yordy, October 2017

I. SOCIAL-LEGAL TERM DEFINING A CERTAIN CLASS OF WOMEN WHO LIVE OUTSIDE OF PATRIARCHAL CONTROL, PATRIARCHAL MARRIAGE, AND THE ISRAELITE CLAN

A. *WOMEN WHO LIVE OUTSIDE OF PATRIARCHAL CONTROL*
An entire chapter in Proverbs (chapter 7) is devoted to a full description of this woman, who, in Proverbs 7, is also conflated with the adulteress.

According to Proverbs 7, the *zonah* is:

- Clever
- Loud
- Wayward
- Public ("in the street, in the market, at every corner," "not at home")
- Demonstrative ("she seizes him and kisses him")
- Bold
- Aggressive ("seeks eagerly")
- Persuasive (using seductive speech and smooth talk)
- Alluring (couch is spread with linens, bed is perfumed with spices)

According to Proverbs, the *zonah* is to be avoided at all costs—"for many a victim has she laid low, and all her slain are a mighty throng. Her house is the way to Sheol, going down to the chambers of death" (Prov. 7:26-27).

B. *WOMEN WHO LIVE OUTSIDE OF PATRIARCHAL MARRIAGE*

Used of two *independent women* living alone together in a single house (1 Kings 3)

Used in parallel with *"*a woman who has been *defiled*, *divorced*, or *widowed*" and is contrasted to a "virgin" (*betulah*) (Lev. 21:7,14).

[21] Very unusual to see the phrase "all that was to her" or "all that belongs to her" modifying a *woman*.

Used (three times) of Judah's daughter-in-law Tamar, who, after being sent from Judah's household following the death of her first two husbands (Jacob's two eldest sons), plays the part of a prostitute (*znh*) in order to seduce her father-in-law into securing her place again within the household from which she had been banished (Gen. 38:15, 24).

C. *WOMEN WHO LIVE OUTSIDE OF ISRAELITE CLAN*

Used in poetic parallel with a *foreign* or *alien woman* (*nokriah*):

"For a prostitute (*zonah*) is a deep pit; a foreign woman (*nokriah*) a narrow well (Prov. 23:27)

"Say to Wisdom, 'You are my sister," and call Understanding 'your intimate friend": they will keep you from the *alien woman* (*nokriah*) and from the *prostitute* (*zonah*)" (Prov. 7:4-5)

"The danger of foreign women in the Bible seems to be related to the fear that they could turn the hearts of Israelite men to other gods. The story of Solomon and his many foreign wives is a parade example." ~Paul Keim

II. RELIGIOUS TERM RELATING TO WORSHIP OF DEITIES OTHER THAN YHWH

Overwhelmingly, the dominant meaning of *znh* relates to the worship of deities *in opposition to and distinguished from* Yhwh:

A. OF NON-ISRAELITES AND THEIR GODS
"The 'inhabitants of the land' whore (*znh*) after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and they will invite you to do the same, and you will eat of their sacrifices. And you will take their daughters as wives for your sons, their daughters will whore (*znh*) after their gods and make your sons whore (*znh*) after their gods"
(Exod. 34:15).

B. OF ISRAELITES AND THEIR LACK OF FAITHFULNESS TO YHWH
This is seen especially in the prophetic literature of Ezekiel and Hosea, who associate the Israelites' (especially male Israelites') worship of other gods and goddesses with the adulteress, the prostitute, and promiscuous females in general.

"I [Yhwh] have been broken over their whoring (*znh*) heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring (*znh*) after their idols" (Ezek. 6:9).

"Rejoice not, O Israel! Exult not like the peoples; for you have played the prostitute (*znh*), forsaking your God. You have loved a prostitute's (*znh*) wages on all threshing floors" (Hos. 9:1)

The prophet Ezekiel even names the prostitute and her sister prostitute, both representing Israel: "Oholah played the prostitute (*zhh*) while she was mine, and she lusted after her lovers the Assyrians. She bestowed her whoring (*znh*) upon them . . . and defiled herself with the idols of everyone after whom she lusted . . . Her sister Oholibah saw this, and she became more corrupt than her sister in her lust and in her whoring (*znh*), which was worse than that of her sister" (Ezek. 23).

And Hosea takes this "prostitute" Israel as his wife, naming her Gomer: "When Yhwh first spoke through Hosea, Yhwh said to Hosea, 'Go, take for yourself a wife who is a prostitute (*znh*) and have children of from this act of prostitution (*znh*), for the land commits great acts of prostitution (*znh*) by forsaking Yhwh" . . . "my people . . . have left their God to play the prostitute (*znh*) (Hos. 1:2; 4:12)

III. INN-KEEPER ??

In none of the near 200 uses of *zonah* in the Hebrew is the term translated as “innkeeper.” However, first-century Jewish philosopher Josephus interprets Rahab not as a prostitute or but as one who 'kept an inn' (Greek καταγωγιον). This is followed by second-century Rabbi Jonathan and later by several medieval rabbis (e.g., Radak and Rashi).

While this interpretation could be attributed to the nature of these writers’ defense of Rahab or to their embarrassment over Rahab’s being a prostitute, it can be considered 'a distinction without a difference,’ since in the ancient world the roles of innkeeper, barmaid, and prostitute could be and were often performed by a single woman (cite source).

In the context of Ancient Near East comparisons, it is striking that *zana* can be defined as *one who has ‘intimate or friendly dealings (not necessarily physical, but more frequently economic or spiritual) with alien persons or institutions.’* (cite source)

For this reason, the old Babylonian innkeeper was required by the laws of Eshnunna to notify the palace of any stranger, especially one engaged in hostile activity, who might come to it, since the inn, which often stood on the edge of the city, was the town's link with the economy of other tribes or peoples. (Perhaps the reason the king knew of the Israelite spies’ presence at Rahab’s house is because she informed the palace.) (cite source)

IV. GROCER
The Inclusive Bible interprets *zonah* to be a biform of the Hebrew root *zun* 'to provide food or sustenance’ (cf. *mazon* [‘food’] in Gen. 45:23; Dan. 4:12, 21). However, this meaning is applied to none of the other 190 uses of the term *zonah* in the Old Testament and therefore should be used with caution.

- Described as *zonah* (three times)
- Lives outside her father’s house
- Has connections to her own people, to other people groups, and to the palace
- Like *zonah* of Prov. 7 she is shrewd, bold, compelling, persuasive, and foreign
- Like *zona* of Ancient Near East, she has “friendly relations with alien persons.”
- Like *zonah* of 1 Kings 3, she lives in her own house
- Like Tamar, she uses her clever wit to save her life and the life of her people
- Like Ezekiel’s and Hosea’s prostitute wives, she represents Israel, but not in her “whoring” after other gods and idols. Rather, this “prostitute,” Rahab, represents Israel in the lovingkindness she offers the spies (the greateRAHAB
- st kind of love an Israelite can offer, receive, and possess—*hesed*), in the recitation to the spies of their salvation history, and in her bold and persuasive actions that ultimately secure a “red thread” of connection between the Israelites and the people they are to encounter in their “crossing over” the Jordan River.

Rahab, who begins as triply marginalized—Canaanite, woman, and prostitute—moves to the center of the narrative as bearer of a divine message and herald of Israel in its new land. And even though later generations of readers are squeamish about her occupation as a prostitute, preferring to think of her as an “innkeeper,” she is remembered in Jewish tradition as the ancestress of kings and prophets, and, in the New Testament, as an ancestress of Jesus.

The prophet Jeremiah employs both these meanings (“to dig” and “to be ashamed”) when he hides his loincloth, which represents Israel, and later “digs” (*ḥpr*) it up to expose its ruin and its decay, its shame and its guilt: “ I dug up (*ḥpr*) the loincloth from where I had buried it; and found the loincloth ruined; it was not good for anything.” (Jer. 13:7)