Joshua and the problem of modern warfare.

Dom Turner, 29th April 2026.

The book of Joshua, with its accounts of warfare, retribution, and holy destruction, makes for uncomfortable reading today. Culturally, we think of war as a deeply undesirable outcome, only to be resorted to when other diplomatic avenues have failed. For many in our society, war is seen as a necessary evil: a last resort, and something to be avoided at almost all costs. Certainly, the concept of a 'righteous' or 'holy' war is abhorrent to many.

With this in mind, how should we understand the ancient text of Joshua? It seems to reveal a warlike side to God, if not in character then at least in the outworking of his will. It is understandable that modern readers will ask questions about God's love, and wonder how we can understand a God who seems to go from warlike in the Old Testament to peace-loving in the New. As well as these questions about the nature of God, we must also consider how the text relates to modern warfare. Does God want us to go to war with those who oppose him today? Can this text be used to justify war, and if so, when, and how do we decide?

These are deep and difficult questions. In this short essay I will attempt to provide an approach to the text which begins to answer them.

There is debate about the exact date and authorship of the book of Joshua. What is clear is that this is an ancient text, which describes events that happened roughly at the end of the Bronze Age, somewhere around 1200BC. The narrative follows Joshua, the successor of Moses, as he leads the tribal peoples of Israel into the promised land: the land of Canaan (roughly equivalent to modern-day Northern Israel / Palestine).

At the start of Joshua, the people are mourning the loss of their leader, Moses. He had been the one who, under God's direction, had led the people to freedom from Egypt. He had brought them to the edge of the promised land, only to be turned back through their lack of faith and vision (Numbers 13). He had held them together in the intervening years, despite their sometime desire to return to Egypt. But Moses is now dead, and the people must learn to accept their new leader, Joshua.

Joshua had been one of only two spies who had encouraged people to cross the River

Jordan many years before, but who had been overridden by the louder voices of those with significant doubts. He had a hard task to replace Moses, and needed to show the people that he was the man called by God to lead them. Throughout the early chapters of Joshua, we see the ways in which his leadership is validated: the parting of the waters of the Jordan (an echo of the crossing of the Reed Sea under Moses); the miraculous fall of the walls of Jericho, and the merciful treatment of Rahab; the clear way in which God communicates with Joshua, and the way in which these conversations lead to action. His confirmation as leader continues throughout the book, with every moment of conquest driving home the point that this man was called by God to lead the people into this place.

Throughout the text, there is a significant emphasis on the way in which God keeps his promises. In Exodus 6, we read that God wants the people to know that:

> *"I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord." (Ex 6:6–8).*

In Joshua we see the fulfilment of this promise. The people take possession of the land, and they know that it is the Lord who has done this both through the miraculous signs (the crossing of the river; the falling of the walls), but also through the symbolic presence of the Ark of the Covenant going with them. The conquest is not a power-grab by an established nation or the act of a capricious deity, but actually the homecoming of a migrant people, guided by God.

All of this indicates that the text has a deep meaning beyond the 'surface level' of warfare and attrition. The narrative points towards the faithfulness of God to both

Joshua and the people of Israel.

This deeper reading becomes even more apparent when we read the text as an ancient battle account, rather than a modern-day news report. The book of Joshua, like all such historic accounts, uses hyperbole and exaggeration in order to reinforce its main point (that God is faithful). We see an example of this exaggeration when we compare 11:23 ("so Joshua took the entire land, just as the Lord had directed Moses") to 13:1 ("when Joshua had grown very old, the Lord said to him, 'you are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.'")

Another example of this hyperbolic language is found when we examine what happens to the city of Gezer. In 10:33, we read that Joshua defeats Horam, the king of Gezer, and completely destroys the army. The same king is named in the list of thirty-one destroyed kings, in chapter 12, whose cities had been given to the Israelite tribes. Again, in 16:3, we find that Gezer is part of the package of land given to the descendants of Joseph. And yet in 16:10 we find that "they did not dislodge the Canaanites living in Gezer" at all, and that the Canaanites there are actually forced to work as slaves for the tribe of Ephraim.

If we read these contradictions through the perspective of a modern-day war report, we might think that the author is either badly-informed or deceitful. However, the text is not a blow-by-blow account of the battles: instead, it reinforces the notion that God has fought on behalf of his people, and his promises have been fulfilled. The important thing is that the people of Israel end up inhabiting the promised land, not that the conquest is described with complete accuracy.

Even with this gloss, a modern reader might still struggle with the picture of God that is painted by the text. It seems that God endorses, or at least authorizes, the conflicts, and therefore encourages the slaying of innocents. After the fall of Jericho, for example, the place is given wholly to God, and it is made pure through destruction and fire (including the death of its inhabitants). Even if the text is hyperbolic, questions about the goodness of God remain.

This is where an understanding of the wider context can also help us. It is easy to

think that the land of Canaan was a unified place (after all, it was at least nominally under the auspices of Egypt). It is easy, too, to expect that the people who lived there would have the same view of warfare that we do. We could well assume that the Canaanites, who we know feared the approach of Israel and the rumours of war that preceded their arrival, would have thought of Israel's actions as illegal, immoral, and perhaps even downright evil.

However, this assumption should not be made. For a start, 'the people of Canaan' were not one entity, but many small kingdoms. There were many city states (chapter 12 lists thirty-one separate kings, remember), and no overall sense of national identity. Alliances were formed in need, and rivalries arose easily. Warfare between city-states was common, and it would have been usual to view this fighting as the outworking of the will of the gods, not as an evil. The difficulty was not that God fought: it was that Israel's God was more powerful than their existing gods. This points us to a deep truth: Israel's God is greater.

So rather than being an account of atrocities, Joshua actually highlights the faithfulness of God and the truth that he is greater than all other gods. The text is not emphasising destruction for its own sake. However, people were still killed in the name of God. Even if this was an expected mode of life for people in this era, and culturally acceptable, it is still unpalatable for modern readers.

Before we move on to other approaches which might help us read the text through modern eyes, we have to acknowledge that nothing we do will entirely remove this difficulty. We must remember, however, that it is not our responsibility to excuse the text. Instead, we should seek to understand it, learn from it, and apply this learning to our own context.

We have already noted that the text highlights God's faithfulness to his promises; specifically that he miraculously frees the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and he literally opens the way into the promised land at the parting of the River Jordan (chapter 3). Moreover, he acts decisively against Jericho ("I have delivered Jericho into your hands", 6:2). The battle for Ai is more complex: initially, the Israelites are routed because of the sin of Achan (chapter 7), but are successful after Achan is

destroyed (chapter 8). This episode highlights the covenantal relationship between God and his people: he keeps his promise to them, but they must also live in obedience to him.

The relationship between God and his people has always been expressed in terms of covenant. That is to say, there is always an element of promise and a legal requirement of obedience. Adam and Eve had the freedom of the garden, and perfect relationship with God, as long as they did not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:16-17). Noah, a man whose obedience to God leads to his salvation, is told that he must not eat meat with the lifeblood still in it, and that he must not spill another human's blood. In return, the Lord promises never to bring another flood to destroy the earth (Gen. 9:1-17). Abram is promised that he will become the father of nations, and will be a blessing to all the earth (a promise which is ultimately fulfilled through Christ), and this covenant is marked by obedience to the sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:9-14). Moses is promised freedom for the people, and a land to dwell in (a promise which Joshua continues to explore), and must obey the law as laid down by God on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24). Jesus fulfills all these promises and more, and strikes a new covenant of love with us, sealed by his blood, and with his laws written on our hearts (Hebrews 8). Our response is to live in obedience to him (John 15:10).

It is important to understand this deep root of covenant as we read Joshua. God fulfilling his promises is a covenant agreement, and the people must live in obedience (and, when they don't, disaster falls as we see in chapter 7). The covenant is a binding agreement, and God always keeps his word. Specifically, God is keeping his promise here to liberate and home his people, who were enslaved in Egypt.

In other words Joshua is not a story of conquest but of liberation. The Israelite people were not a power-hungry nation, out to expand, but a vagrant people, looking for a home. They were not so much oppressors as they were freed slaves. Their goal was not to destroy the Canaanites, but to find a place to call home, where they could live in freedom. This is what God had promised them, and this is what is delivered through Joshua's conquest of the land.

This helps us to understand some of the tensions and contradictions within the text itself. If God was really seeking to give his people rest in a land of their own (Joshua 23:1), then this does not automatically mean that the current inhabitants must all be slaughtered. There was room in the land for the people to settle in the empty spaces - and indeed, this is exactly what the archeology suggests happened (Satterthwaite & McConville, 2007, p63). In the liberation-settlement narrative, the conflicts were perhaps an inevitable result of existing people feeling threatened, rather than a divinely ordained military conquest.

Warfare in the modern world is often the result of powerful nations seeking to control resources or borders, or even ideology (attempting to 'liberate' others from ideologies with which we disagree). This is a far cry from the narrative of Joshua, where a badly treated and migrant people are searching for a home. Perhaps in our modern context, where many people are displaced by war, oppression, and poverty, and where there is an anti-immigration emphasis in our politics, we might do well to consider how the Canaanite people resisted the Israelite migrants, and in so doing how they resisted the will of God. Certainly any reading of Joshua which justifies powerful nations increasing their power through war is simply incorrect.

Notwithstanding all of this, there remains the reality of warfare in Joshua. Another way for modern readers to 'square' this with our understanding of good and evil is to remember the simple and evident truth that the vast majority of those involved in the fighting were men who had been selected and trained as soldiers. In other words, most of the fighting occurred between those who knew that they might be injured or killed, and who were there anyway.

A modern example might help to illustrate this. Many millions of men were killed during fighting in the second World War. While it would be naive in the extreme to assume that every single one of them was willing, there were neveretheless a high percentage who gladly signed up on every side in order to fight for freedom, or in order to overcome their perceived enemies. While every death was an immense tragedy, it cannot be overstated that those who died did so knowing that this was a possibility, and that their death would contribute to the overall war effort (on either side).

This is true in any war. It was certainly true during Joshua's time. Israel's fighting force was comprised of men from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh, and when they entered the land some 40,000 of them were armed and prepared for the battle (Joshua 4:13). When the city of Ai fell, the king sent out fighting men to resist Israel's army (Joshua 8:14). The five kings of the Amorites gathered their fighting forces together to come against Gibeon, which in turn was protected by its own strong army and the incoming Israelite one (Joshua 10:5ff).

None of this reduces the sheer human tragedy of lives lost in war. But it does go some way to answering the questions we might have around God's love: people have always fought for those things which they think are most important, and this speaks more of human nature than it does of God.

There remains a question about righteousness, however: it is easy to read the story through modern perspectives and to see the Israelites as mere invaders, overthrowing the indigenous people by arms. However, if we take seriously the underlying truth that the Israelites are an oppressed and freed people themselves, searching for a home, this question shifts somewhat. Instead of asking "what right did the Israelites have to enter this land?" perhaps we should instead ask "what right did those already living there have to deny them a place to call home?"

We have seen that the concept of covenant is central to Joshua. In fact, covenant- or treaty-making "pervades almost the whole history of the ancient Near East" (Fensham, 1994, p326). Certainly, the Israelites formed treaties with those they encountered. For example, in Joshua 9-10, we read about the way in which the Gibeonites formed an agreement with the Israelites. Even though this agreement was born of deception, with the Gibeonites pretending to be a delegation from a far-off land rather than an immediate neighbour (9:3-6), Joshua chose to honour it, saying:

> *"'We have given them our oath by the Lord, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now. This is what we will do to them: we will let them live, so that God's wrath will not fall on us for breaking the oath we swore to them . . . . Let them live, but let them be*

> *woodcutters and water-carriers in the service of the whole assembly.' So the leaders' promise to them was kept." (Jos. 9:19-20).*

When five kings in the South formed an alliance against Gibeon (Jos. 10:1-5), the Israelites came to their aid, as befitted a covenantal partner. If they had done any less they would have been breaking their oath to the Gibeonites. We have seen how this kind of covenantal power lies behind the conquest, as God keeps his promises.

The reality of covenant is that there are benefits and penalties, but it all depends on obedience. This theme is strong in the text: right at the start God says to Joshua, "Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go" (Jos. 1:7).

This all comes to bear on the conquest itself when we examine the response that the Canaanites make. We have noted already the way in which the Gibeonites respond, and although Joshua is angry he will not break his covenant with them. Although their motives were self-preservation, and their methods underhand, the Gibeonites were nevertheless obeying God's will (that the Israelites should move into the land), and were, therefore, spared. Indeed, they were protected.

Rahab is another example of a Canaanite who, unwittingly perhaps, obeys the will of God. When the spies arrive in Jericho, she hides them, telling the king, "I don't know which way they went. Go after them quickly" (Jos. 2:5). She then goes to the spies, who are hiding on her roof, and confesses that "the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below" (Jos. 2:11). She pleads for her life, and the life of her family, and when the city is invaded they are spared. Her obedience leads to great blessing; not just in the short-term, but in the longer, too. Rahab becomes one of Jesus' ancestors (Mt. 1:5).

So Canaanites who obeyed God's will were spared. It is, perhaps, uncomfortable to consider that those who died were in fact being punished as a result of their disobedience, or resistance to God. But "we cannot deny that part of the conquest is based on God's justice to the Canaanites" (Oei, 2019, p44).

This reality underpins the Christian faith to this day: that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people" (Rom. 1:18); that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23); yet that "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1); and that all who declare that "Jesus is Lord," and believe in their heart, will be saved (Rom. 10:9). Jesus' death on the cross is sufficient for our salvation; but we need to be obedient in faith. If we refuse, we stand condemned (Jn. 3:18).

As we read of the conquest in Joshua, then, we are not reading of mere human warfare. Rather, this is a picture of the righteousness and wrath of a holy God: offering hope and life to those who accept his will, but justice to those who stand against him. This may be uncomfortable, but it is a spiritual reality even today.

This picture of the holiness of God is seen clearly when we examine what actually followed the conquest of Jericho. In chapter 6:16, Joshua tells the people that the Lord has given them the city. Yet only a couple of verses later we read:

> *But keep away from the devoted things, so that you will not bring about your own destruction by touching any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. (Joshua 6:18).*

What's going on here? Well, if we view the text as describing a simple human conflict, then it is hard to understand why anything should be 'devoted' to the Lord. Perhaps there are some especially holy things, but everything else belongs to the conquerors? This is not the case, as we discover if we read on:

> *All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron are sacred to the Lord and must go into his treasury. . . . They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it — men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys. (Joshua 6:19-21).*

In other words, everything of value was to be devoted to the Lord — this included all the precious metals, the livestock, and the people. Furthermore, this devotion to the Lord seems to involve complete destruction.

This is problematic for modern readers. Why would God send his people to conquer a city, only to then destroy it and its inhabitants utterly, before moving on and not even settling there? Surely this is unjust, and cannot easily be squared with the picture of a loving God we see painted in the New Testament?

We have already seen that one reality of the Joshua narrative is that it is the story of a displaced people seeking a home. But this is not the only reality behind the story in Joshua. There is much more at stake: "the events in Joshua are part of God's plans and purposes to restore humanity to relationship with its creator" (Wray, 2020). The conquest in Joshua points forward to the eschatalogical "clash between Christ and the minions of darkness" (Gordon, 1994, p1631) that we read about in Revelation. As the land is devoted to the Lord, it is purified and refined: in much the same way that we are purified and refined by the conquest Christ has made over sin and death.

In other words, as we read of the Canaanites resistance to God's will, and the way in which God uses his people to purify the land, we are seeing a picture of the sinfulness of all humankind, and of Christ's redeeming work.

The reality is that all of us, in our sinfulness, are worthy of destruction.

Who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap (Malachi 3:2).

In Joshua, then, we do not see a capricious and vengeful Old Testament God, who stands in stark contrast to the God of love we find in the New Testament. Nor do we find a God who orders genocide and delights in the destruction of his creation. Rather, we see a loving God who is concerned for his people's welfare, but more deeply for the redemption and restoration of his creation; purifying the land and ridding it of evil as a precursor to the refining and redeeming work of Christ.

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