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The Conquest Theme in the Bible

The gap between a popular understanding of the book of Joshua and the biblical understanding is so wide that one may well wonder whether it can ever be eliminated or even narrowed. Since the Enlightenment, Joshua has seemed to many people as so primitive, as so gross an example of man's inhumanity to man, using God's word as the excuse for indiscriminate killing, that many have queried how the book can be considered sacred Scripture. All one can do with it, it has often been said, is to consider it the earliest and lowest point in Israel's history, out of which she emerged with her prophets and wisemen to become the conscience of the Western world. Theologically, this emergence has been dealt with as a spectacularly vivid example of what used to be called "progressive revelation."

On the other hand, the introduction of history of tradition methods has overcome the technical fragmentation of source criticism. Thus, now we have been taught to see that Israel's ancient epic is confessional in nature, centering on the themes: God's promise to the Patriarchs; the deliverance of the newly created and chosen people from Egyptian slavery; and the gift of the Land of Promise to those who had no power, for whom the world's powers would provide no justice or righteousness. These themes are set in the context of a view of the world (Gen 1-11) in sordid disarray, in violent rebellion against the conditions of creation. Hence, God's actions with Israel are his positive answer to the problem of man and his civilization. And man's warfare on earth, in the context of his life as rebellion, can, from the larger perspective, be viewed as God's warfare, his use of human agency for his own purpose, to the end that the world become his Kingdom.¹

This recalling by the new scholarship of the classic Old Testament themes means that the book of Joshua can no longer be considered an ugly and fanatical primitivism. It is squarely at the center of Israel's most "advanced" confessional theology. The tradition centers in God's deliverance from bondage, with its accompanying themes of crossing the sea and leading through the wilderness, and finally the entrance into the Promised Land.

At this level, Old Testament scholarship has finally come abreast of what the historian has all along seen to be the formative influence of these traditions of Israel, so understood and interpreted, on the Western world, and especially on America. The sociologist Robert N. Bellah has written about an American "Civil Religion" that exists in certain formal public documents from the Puritans through Washington to Johnson. It is a religion that is precisely in neither church nor synagogue, but exists beside them. The God of this religion

has much less to do with natural law than with ancient Israel; the equation of America with Israel in the idea of the "American Israel" is not infrequent . . . [This, always implicit] becomes explicit in Jefferson's second inaugural when he said: "I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities of life." Europe is Egypt; America, the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light to the nations.²

Theodore P. Greene, professor of American history at Amherst College, in assessing the history of higher education in this country, affirms that the full dimensions of the present student unrest "are fundamentally religious impulses and that neither the categories of Enlightenment liberalism nor those of Marxist radicalism can do full justice to them." Nineteenth-century colleges had at the center of their education certain impulses, biblically centered, which can be summarized as: a sense of community, a sense of mission, a strong sense of vocation, and an intimate concern for salvation, which with all its variations of meaning meant, and still means, at its center "a state of wholeness, a sense of being at one not only within one's self but with the whole universe and society in which one lives . . ." In the words of a certain Reverend David Clark, at the dedication of the first building of Amherst College, all this endeavor was "to fertilize the boundless wastes of a miserable world."³ Here again, the basic themes were drawn from the Bible, with Joshua as central with Exodus to Israel's confessional epic: a chosen community to be a blessing to the world, each individual called by God's "Thou shalt" to labor for the common good, until the weapons of war become those of peace.

From Israel's prose narratives, von Rad, as is well known, separated a number of pericopes which narrate God's mighty acts, or saving activity, in the formation of the new people. The conquest of Canaan is always the climax, but it is not a tale of heroes and great acts of bravery. Joshua and Israel are simply God's instruments, but the work is God's work. He is the only hero, and the only one to receive full praise and credit. The land was not won by Israel; it was won by God. It is a Promised Land which God gives to Israel. One result in Jerusalem regulations was the forbidding of land profiteering: "The land must not be sold in perpetuity; the land belongs to me" (from the Holiness Code, Lev 25: 23).⁴ The Apostle Paul's sermon, as summarized in Acts 13: 16-19, is simply the epitome of an age-old manner of confession:

Men of Israel and you who fear God, hear [this]: The God of this people Israel chose our fathers and exalted the people during their time in the land of Egypt. Then with great power he led them from it And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he allotted them the land

In Israel's Psalms and hymns, the recital of the *magnalia Dei* may be used in two basic ways: On the one hand, God's acts may be sung as a paean of praise and worship whereby he is magnified and blessed by the community. On the other hand, the recital may be made, but God's powerful goodness to Israel then becomes the background for the story of Israel's infidelity, the hymn thus serving the purposes of confession. The prophets frequently used the second manner as one of their forms of speech (cf Hos 11 and Jer 2). In the Exilic or post-Exilic trilogy (Pss 104-106) Ps 105 is an example of the first type, and Ps 106 is an example of the second.

Here, however, we have space to call attention only to certain hymns which have special features to be observed. Ps 78 is, in its overall form, a meditation on the fall of Shiloh to the Philistines ca. 1050 B.C. and the reasons for God's rejecting the people of Joseph but, instead, choosing David and Jerusalem of Judah for leadership and the seat of his temple. The Jerusalem Psalmist of the royal court explains that Ephraim failed to keep God's covenant:

- (11) They forgot his deeds,
His marvels which he had shown them.

Reciting God's great deeds in the Exodus on Israel's behalf, the Psalmist continues:

- (54) He brought them to his holy territory
 (To) this mountain his right hand created.
 (55) He drove out nations before them;
 He allotted them (land) in a measured inheritance;
 He settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.⁵

One thing to be noted in this early pre-Exilic Psalm is that the land is God's allotment to Israel. The Hebrew words strongly suggest that God not only gave the land to Israel but distributed it among the tribes. The only way at the time the tribes of Israel could have known about their portions is on the presumption that the land had been surveyed and parceled out by lot. This Psalm, then, gives strong support to the supposition that what has seemed to scholars in Joshua as late and artificial is, indeed, very old—that is, the tradition that each tribe and clan had received its "inheritance" from God. To this tradition, the affirmation of the lottery in Josh 13–19 seems also to testify. Can those chapters therefore be a gloss on the book by a post-Exilic priesthood, as literary criticism has commonly supposed? Would the Deuteronomic historian of Israel in the Promised Land be expected to compose a book out of old sources which narrated God's victories and not God's gift of "inheritances"? It seems to this writer hardly a likely hypothesis.

A second theme is one of great sophistication—that is, the reference to the conquest as God's bringing of his people to the holy mountain which he has created (vs 54). This is a mythological allusion; the holy mountain is that one of Canaanite mythology existing in the far north at the juncture of heaven and earth where the gods abide. The conquest of Canaan—what does the poet mean by referring to it as God's creation of the holy mountain? For explanation, let us turn to an even older poem, the Passover Hymn found in Ex 15 and now often referred to as the Song of the Sea.

My colleague Frank M. Cross, Jr., has written about this poem as follows:

We have argued elsewhere⁶ that the language of Exodus 15 is more consistently archaic than that of any other prose or poetic work of some length in the Bible. The poem conforms throughout to the prosodic patterns and canons of the Late Bronze Age. Its use of mixed metrical structure, its baroque use of climactic parallelism, internal rhyme and assonance, place it alongside of the Song of Deborah [Judg 5].⁷

Cross' argument is that this is one of the earliest poems in the Bible, though it may not have been put into writing until the tenth century B.C.

After celebration of Yahweh's deliverance of Israel from pharaoh and his hosts at the Egyptian Reed Sea, the poet turns to the conquest of Canaan as follows:⁸

- (13) You have faithfully led
 The people whom you have delivered.
 You have guided [them] in your might
 To your holy encampment.
 (14) The peoples heard, they shuddered;
 Horror seized the dwellers of Philistia
 (16c) When your people passed over, Yahweh,
 When your people passed over whom you created,
 You brought them [in], you planted them
 In the mount of your heritage,
 The dais of your throne
 Which you made, Yahweh,
 The sanctuary, Yahweh,
 Which your hands created.
 Yahweh will reign
 Forever and ever!

In these forceful words, we have a mixture of Israel's historical experience, expounded partly in her ordinary language of event and partly in the language of Canaanite myth. The conquest is God's bringing his people into the Promised Land. Yet that event has cosmic significance. It is his planting them there on the mountain of his "heritage," the place of his temple (probably both cosmic and earthly in replica), all of which he has created and from which he will exercise his sovereignty forever. The holy mountain at earth's centrally crucial point, where his people live, gathered about his throne, and from which he will forever reign—this is precisely the central theme of that beautiful hymn quoted in both Is 2: 1–4 and Mic 4: 1–4. There the temple mountain will become the highest and central point of earth, to which the peoples of the world shall stream to learn the ways of the sovereign Judge of all the earth. Only then will there be universal peace, so that a man may lie down under his vine or his fig tree and "none shall make them afraid" (Mic 4: 4).

The peculiarity of the early employment of this mythical language is two-fold: On the one hand, it demanded a high degree of sophistication on the part of both Israelite poet and his hearers if they were to comprehend both the allusions and the high degree of complexity in the prosody. On the other hand, at the very time when Israel was battling for her distinctive life against Canaanite religion, Israelite poets were free to make such use of Canaanite mythical expressions and to expect to be understood. So deeply rooted is the Yahwism of these passages that we cannot for a moment suppose that the Israelite poet believed the myth he was quoting. Nor does the old pattern of argumentation that Israel was historicizing myth or was mythicizing history seem quite appropriate for this usage. Instead, we must

suppose that the symbolic power of the mythic pattern was fully understood. Thus, to speak of the conquest as God creating his holy mountain and the temple upon it, and planting his people there to observe and to obey his eternal sovereignty—all this was to set these seemingly minor events in a tiny corner of world history and place them apart from all other earthly happenings. The conquest was a deed of cosmic and eternal significance, the mythical expressions revealing the truly transcendent meaning of the event without any loss of its historical nature.

Another Psalm, later but actually undatable, though surely pre-Exilic, interprets the crossing of the Jordan (Josh 3) in the personalized terms of the Canaanite creation myth. The power of order overwhelming chaos was told as Baal's triumphant conflict with Sea (or Sea dragon of chaos, sometimes called Rahab or Leviathan). Ps 114 sees the crossing of the Jordan as Yahweh's victory over Sea—thus the creative event of universal history without parallel. A translation of the Psalm is as follows:

- (1) When Israel went forth from Egypt,
The household of Jacob from a foreign-tongued nation,
- (2) Judah became his holy [place],
And Israel his royal dominion.
- (3) The Sea looked and fled;
The Jordan turned backwards.
- (4) The mountains danced like rams,
Hills like the young of sheep.
- (5) What is the matter, O sea, that you flee,
O Jordan, that you turn backwards,
- (6) O mountains, that you dance like rams,
O hills, like the young of sheep?
- (7) Before the Sovereign tremble, O earth,
Before the God of Jacob
- (8) He who transforms the rock into a pool of water,
Flint into a spring of water.

In vss 3 and 5, Sea and Jordan are in synonymous parallelism, and are addressed as a person who fled, turned backward, in fear at Yahweh's approach.

Ps 66: 5–7 has another reference to this personalizing of Sea, which is made to serve God's purposes:

- (5) Come and see the deeds of God,
The Awesome One in his work among the sons of men.
- (6) He turned Sea to dry land;
Through the Stream they passed on foot;
There we rejoiced in him.

- (7) He is ruler by his power forever.
His eyes watch over the nations—
Let not the rebellious exalt themselves.

At this point, we cannot be sure whether the Sea referred to is the Jordan or the Egyptian Reed Sea, for God's victory over Sea, in language of myth, is used of both (cf Ps 106: 8–9; Is 51: 9–11). Yet it makes little difference, because by the principle of synecdoche, one major element in the complex of recital events brings to mind the whole story. If in the later period the crossing of the Jordan was absorbed into the crossing of the Reed Sea, the basic point remains. Israel's rescue and implanting in the Land of promise are in Biblical theology events in the life of earth equally important with creation itself.⁹

Furthermore, the old events became the ground of hope and interpretation for both present and future. In both prophetic and apocalyptic eschatology, God's power and purpose as shown in the old events become the promise of a Second Exodus and a Second Conquest.¹⁰ Even at Qumran, the people of the Scrolls possessed a book about *The War between the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, while awaiting God's creation of the new heavens and the new earth.¹¹ In addition to the explicit references to these final events by the Apostle Paul, in the defense of Stephen (Acts 7: 45), and especially in Revelation, we should note the more generalized interpretation of the Exodus-Conquest cycle as God's mercy and salvation in 1 Pet 2: 9–10:

Indeed, you are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own possession,¹² in order that you may proclaim the wondrous deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light, [you who] once were no people but now are God's people, [you who] had not received mercy but now have received mercy.

Here again, the Exodus-Conquest cycle is God's gracious gift to those who had been outcast.

If this, then, is the true story of the book of Joshua as biblical people understood it, how are we so to read it when we repeatedly see after major battles, such statements as this: "Then Israel placed under *hêrem* [the sacred ban or taboo, the verb then meaning "killed"] all in the city, men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys, by the sword" (Josh 6: 21). A proper commentary on the book is a task which deals with the very heart and core of biblical faith, but to my knowledge no such commentary has been produced in modern times. The best literature on war has generally been written by pacifist humanists and Christians, to whom Joshua—and,

for that matter, most of the Old Testament—makes poor reading indeed. In one of the best modern surveys, Roland H. Bainton concludes a few paragraphs on the Deuteronomic school with the words: "War is more humane when God is left out of it."¹³ This may well be true with regard to the fanaticism of a holy war crusade, but it exhibits no understanding whatever of Israel's own views on the subject, which are anything but simplistic and are the very antithesis of doctrinaire pacifism. The latter has its roots in modern idealism (in the technical philosophical sense of that term), rather than in biblical "realism," which insists upon seeing the providence of the Divine Suzerain in the mixed good and evil of human activity on earth.

Hence, by way of conclusion, a few words suggest the framework of conception within which the biblical views of Joshua's conquest might conceivably make sense to the modern mind:

There is at work in the world a mysterious creative power that is experienced on the human scene in both positive and negative, redemptive and judgmental ways.¹⁴

The negative side of this power is most commonly seen in conflict, not only of individual wills but when evolutionary processes going in different directions—one advancing, the other decaying—intersect. In that intersection, innocent suffering also takes place because we are all "bound in the bundle of the living" together and there is no escape to a secure hideaway.

Our world is in disorder because it has not surrendered to the will of its Creator and Lord. Conflict as war takes place only in this rebellious world. It is fought by sinners who employ their structures of power to their own ends in the complex advance, defense, retreat of the human lust for power.

God works in this world by *mediate* means—that is, through human agents, whether or not they realize it. Yet because one is an agent does not mean that one is therefore automatically good and holy. God uses us as we are; his righteousness does not automatically make his agents righteous (cf Deut 9 or the contest between Jacob and Laban). Certainly Israel is not to think of herself as more righteous in God's sight than those she defeats.

The special institution of holy war, which still breathes through the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua and which had such a profound influence on the conception of "faith" in prophecy, can be handled by us today if we see it from the standpoint of agency. God used Israel as she was. To the prophets, the Arameans, Assyrians, and Babylonians were the instruments of God's "holy" war against Israel, the language of the old institution reappearing in part, only under different agency. Yet the foreign ruler was certainly not deemed righteous. His problem was self-deification, which meant that he, in his turn, would suffer judgment.

Early Christian pacifism is again to be viewed from the standpoint of agency. It was the tactic to be used by Christians in the vast Roman empire—until the time of Constantine, when Christians suddenly had to take part in government and the search for world order. Then Christian views changed, and Augustine was the first to attempt to set down certain guidelines for the use of force by Christians.

Because there is at work in the world a Power determined on righteousness and the Kingdom of God, mankind may have hope, even in our time. The sickness in our present is not eternal; Satan has been defeated, and will be again and again, though the outcome of any one moment is never certain.

Such a standpoint requires a view of human life as vocational. We were not born into Paradise, but into this world. Our lives achieve meaning only as they are engaged in God's conflict to make the world his Kingdom.

NOTES

¹ Cf Gen 12: 3 and parallel passages; for the new approach, see Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, tr. by E. W. T. Dicken from the German monograph first published in 1938 (London and New York, 1966), pp. 1–78; and *Genesis*, tr. by John H. Marks (Philadelphia, Westminster's Old Testament Library, 1961).

² Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* (Winter, 1967), 1–21, later reprinted in various publications. Quotations are from pp. 7–8.

³ Theodore P. Greene, "The Crisis in the Colleges and the Role of the Churches," 1970, an as yet unpublished paper, quoted by permission of the author.

⁴ Note Isaiah's charge of flagrant violation of this principle, Is 5: 8.

⁵ For defense of details of translation, see the forthcoming Anchor Bible Commentary on *Joshua*.

⁶ See his treatment (with David Noel Freedman) in "Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry" (a Johns Hopkins University dissertation, 1950, Microfilm-Xerox reprint, Ann Arbor, 1963) pp. 5–127; and Cross and Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *JNES* 13 (1955), 237–50.

⁷ Cross, "The Song of the Sea and Canaanite Myth," *Journal for Theology and Church* V (1968), 1–25.

⁸ Translation is that of Cross, except for modernizing the English from the King James pattern.

⁹ Space and time do not permit a further elaboration of the Conquest theme in Biblical theology through the citing of specific passages. For more detail, see the Introduction to the writer's work on *Joshua*, forthcoming in the Anchor Bible Commentary; and especially to the 1971 Harvard dissertation of Phyllis Bird, "Studies in the Use of the Conquest Theme." It may be remarked that such a complete study of the use of either of the confessional themes of Exodus or Conquest in the Bible to my knowledge has never been done. Cf also the writer, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York, 1969), Chap. V.

¹⁰ For a "ritual conquest" as a part of Israel's life or worship, see Frank M. Cross, Jr., *op. cit.*; and his "The Divine Warrior in Israel's Early Cult," *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations, Studies and Texts*, Vol. III (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 11–30.

For brief reference to the Divine Warrior and the Conquest theme as the pervasive background of the New Testament, see the writer, *The Old Testament and Theology*, pp. 124–25, 141–44.

¹¹ The final eschatological war and the detailed rules for it form the chief subject also of the fourth and last section of the Temple Scroll, recovered during or following the Six-Day War in 1967: see Yigael Yadin, "The Temple Scroll," *BA* XXX: 4 (Dec., 1967), 139.

¹² Quoting here in part from Ex 19: 5.

¹³ Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and Critical Re-evaluation* (New York, 1960), p. 49.

¹⁴ See Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York, 1968), pp. 51–56; and "On the Meaning of 'Act of God,'" *HTR* 61 (1968), 175–201.