

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Scripture* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_scripture-01.php

is a holy life because it is, in the full sense of the term, a sacrificial life. An immolation and an exaltation, it soars, in Christ, into the divine sphere.

In the words of M. Olier, the French divine of the seventeenth century, 'a chaste soul is a soul which is risen in spirit and shares in the very nature of the risen Christ . . . It has access with him to his perfect holiness and his divine qualities which change its deepest attitude and give it the very same longings and feelings which animate the Son of God in his risen condition.'¹

This is exactly what St Paul meant when he described virginity as a 'holy' life. It is a life assumed in God, a life in which, as far as it can be done at present, the sacrificial consecration and apotheosis of Christ has been fulfilled.

L. LEGRAND

*St Peter's Seminary,
Bangalore*

THE EPIC OF JOSHUA

The Book of Joshua has its fair share of the problems associated with the Old Testament. There are the usual literary problems of its sources and its redaction; there is the connected question whether it should be considered the last book of a Hexateuch which begins with Genesis or whether it is to be placed in the Deuteronomic corpus. In the exegesis of the book itself we find two of the best known and most discussed (but not the most important) episodes of Israelite history—the collapse of the walls of Jericho in chapter 6 and the stopping of the sun in 10:12-14—as well as a passable collection of historical puzzles (*was* it Hai whose capture is related in 7:2-8:29?) to which no certain solution can as yet be given. The object of this note is to suggest that we should make no attempt at the detailed exegesis of Joshua, or of any other book, secular or religious, until we have decided on general grounds the character of the book with which we are dealing. How platitudinous that remark now seems! Yet it is only in comparatively recent years that a principle of interpretation which was taken for granted in dealing with secular works has been seriously and fruitfully applied to Holy Writ. Now it is commonplace to stress the importance of discovering and taking account of the literary genre, the type of writing, of each book and

¹ *Introduction à la Vie et aux Vertus Chrétiennes*, Paris 1657, pp. 313-14

its parts : we are aware that to mistake the genre is to misunderstand or, at best, to understand only partially the very purpose and message of the author, to miss the point of what he is trying to say, to misinterpret the methods he uses to make that point.

So vital is this matter of the literary genre of the books of the Bible that we may perhaps press it home with an example that lies close to hand—that of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, first published in 1945 and still selling. It is subtitled 'A Fairy Story' and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a child should read this book, so simply and vividly written, with such lively characterisation, and see in it only a rather pathetic tale about some farmyard animals who speak and think like humans, who gain their freedom from the tyranny of Mr Jones, who enjoy a brief period of happy liberty, only to be reduced little by little to an even more hopeless slavery under the dictator pig Napoleon—altogether a sad and affecting little story. But to see only this in *Animal Farm* is to misunderstand its genre and, as a result, utterly to miss the author's point and purpose. It is not, of course, a mistake which an adult is likely to make ; an adult, recalling the date of its publication and the course of European history about that time, will at once recognise the work as an allegory ; he may be able to identify not only Napoleon but also Snowball the deviationist, Squealer the go-between and the groups represented by Boxer the farm-horse and the dogs and the hens and the sheep ; he will certainly admire the skill of the author who has used an innocent fantasy of animals that talk and think, a homely setting and a deceptively easy and humorous style to describe a grim tragedy of human disappointment, and who has by the contrast between the fable and the reality achieved his purpose with almost intolerable effectiveness. But all depends on our recognising that we are reading an allegory, on our recognising the genre of the writing.

We have, of course, for a long time been aware of similar non-historical genres in the Bible : we know, because St Luke pretty well tells us, that the story of the Prodigal Son is a parable and so we take the point of the story without allowing ourselves to become involved in dissertations on Jewish laws of inheritance, the locality of the 'far country,' the date of the great famine, Jewish methods of fattening calves, etc. Or, outside the Bible, we soon recognise the character of Goodier's *Public Life of Our Lord* and so do not look in that great work for information which is rather to be found in writings of a different genre, those, perhaps, of a Lagrange, a Benoit, a Boismard. So that, all in all, to be aware of the sort of literature we have in the Book of Joshua and to take account of that awareness may well save us the trouble of asking the wrong questions in our study of the book

(thereby getting unsatisfactory answers) and may well help us to a true appreciation of its methods and message and value.

It is by no means novel to say of the Book of Joshua that it is a 'religious historical epic'; it may be of use to illustrate this description and to justify its application to this book. In Western literature there are several works which we have dignified by the name of 'epic.' For most of us the term is synonymous with the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, yet Joshua can hardly be classed with these to which the adjective 'historical' can scarcely be applied, for there is no doubt, even on purely secular grounds, that there is much history narrated in Joshua but only the veriest grain in the classical epics. A more enlightening parallel might be drawn between Joshua and the less well-known *Pharsalia* of Lucan or the *Punic War* of Silius Italicus in which a solid substratum of fact is presented in a manner deliberately very different from that of the textbooks and for a different purpose. An even closer and, I think, an even more enlightening comparison might be drawn between the Book of Joshua and Shakespeare's *Henry V* in which dramatic form only thinly veils the epic quality. Years ago Prof. George Saintsbury used of this play a phrase which admirably clarifies the character of the biblical book: in this play, he said, Shakespeare is 'projecting an idea (in this case the patriotic idea of England) in such a fashion that the whole of the play, humours and all, imposes it on the spectator.' That is so; the play is an epic of England—for the native a rousing and stirring experience; for the foreigner, no doubt, another galling example of the nation's traditional superiority complex—and its purpose is so to present the history of the past, so to use the history of the past as to inspire emulation of the heroes of the past. There is, admittedly, in *Henry V* a great deal of 'real history'—the conspiracy of Scrope and others, the claim to the French throne, the invasion of France with the siege of Harfleur and the unexpected victory of Agincourt, the marriage of Henry and the French Princess—but the student of the life and times of Henry V has better sources at his disposal than Shakespeare's play and knows that Shakespeare has dressed up and arranged his history so as to serve another purpose than merely chronicling facts. He has given us a highly flattering (?) portrait of the noble, chivalrous, able yet very human king, a worthy leader of his people so loyal yet independent, so clear-sighted yet courageous; he has introduced the low life of the taverns not only to provide comic relief but also to contrast with and so emphasise the nobility of the king's entourage and the dutiful steadiness of the yeoman. The whole is planned to rouse contemporaries to 'attest that those whom you called fathers did beget you.'

So with the Book of Joshua—it projects an idea, the religious and

patriotic idea of the Chosen People, in such a fashion that the whole book imposes it on the reader ; it portrays God's Chosen People at that period of their history when under their leader Joshua, the God-appointed successor of the incomparable Moses, they took possession of their God-promised land with the providential and promised help of God Himself ; it is written to arouse in Jewish breasts a stirring of patriotic feeling and as, for the Jew, patriotic feeling could not be divorced from religious feeling, it aims at promoting that fidelity and thankfulness to God which the events of the Conquest ought to inspire. The book is profoundly historical in that it expounds the true meaning and context of those events : what to contemporary Canaanites would have appeared merely as another series of raids by land-hungry nomads is shown to have been in fact the providential movement of the people of God. It is profoundly religious in that it instils a lesson of faithfulness to the Covenant, manifests the fidelity and provident protection of God and shows clearly that only sin can mar the relationship between God and His people. Yet it is very far from being a mere chronicle of events : the story is told and the doctrine imparted in the grand manner, in epic style, with that arrangement and telescoping of details, with that heightening of contrasts and underlining of effects, with all the panoply of God-in-action as the Jewish mind would have instinctively considered appropriate to so great a theme. The use of such a style immeasurably reinforces both the importance of the events and the impact of the moral and is entirely legitimate—even though it may result in a lessening of historical objectivity in detail.

We may perhaps again exemplify : a preacher wishing to impress upon his congregation the idea of the Providence of God might quote the chapter of the Vatican Council (*DB.1784*) ; he would be quoting a most accurate statement of the doctrine ; he would be quoting an infallible authority. But he would rightly feel that such a bare statement of the fact was not sufficient for his purpose ; the doctrine there expressed must be explained, developed, illustrated, made intelligible and real and attractive to whatever congregation he is addressing. He must appreciate the mentality of his hearers and adapt his thoughts and his words to their minds or he must already share that mentality so that he instinctively, unconsciously expresses his message in a form which will have meaning and force for those who listen—and a form which will be effective at one time and for one congregation may well prove quite inept and wide of the mark in other circumstances. So, the author of the Book of Joshua explains and develops the facts and the lessons of the Conquest in a way which would impress men of his own time and of his own mentality ; we might nowadays choose a different manner in order to impress men of our time, but that would

be due to the simple fact that literary fashions have changed and our mentality is different from that of the Jews of the Old Testament. Moreover, our author was himself very much a man of his own age ; he shared the social, cultural and religious background of those for whom he wrote so that it was by instinct and unconsciously that he put his story in a form which would be effective. We ought not to imagine the author of the Book of Joshua making a clear distinction between the facts of history themselves and the way in which he would use and relate those facts to produce the desired effect. Doubtless Shakespeare made such a distinction in writing *Henry V*, but the author of Joshua (so we should imagine him) was so absorbed with his doctrinal thoughts, so concentrated on the vital providential import of what he had to say, so alive to the inner meaning and, one might say, eternal value of his tale that he passed no real judgement on the facts he presented and used ; he took what was to hand among the riches of the traditional material about the age of Joshua, material with which he had been familiar from his childhood, and brought it to life and gave it significance for his contemporaries—and for us. Chroniclers may be disappointed in the result ; theologians and religious historians will applaud the success of his venture.

But it is not enough to decide and state *ex cathedra* that such is the literary genre of this book. It is not enough to allot Joshua to a given category of composition simply, for example, to avoid theological or historical difficulties ; one must not look for an easy way out of exegetical troubles by an *a priori* casting of a book in a pre-determined literary role. We need proof or at least indications that Joshua is in fact a 'religious historical epic.' The indications are to be found, I think, in the book itself and in other parts of the Old Testament.

Without either exaggerating or belittling the well-known contrast between Joshua and Judges, it seems clear from the latter that Joshua does not give us the whole story of the Conquest and the Settlement, that Joshua is not a plain, unadulterated, factual chronicle of the campaigns of invasion in chronological order. In Judges we see the painful, gradual advance of Israel and the struggle to hold its gains in the face of many setbacks ; in Joshua we are shown a *blitzkrieg*, a speeding-up of the process of conquest and a triumphal progress of Israel from one end of the land to the other with but one setback before Hai and only the barest hint (13:1 and contrast 16:10 with 10:33) that much of the land remained to be possessed. Indeed, any of the traditional 'lists of contents' will show at a glance the schematic character of Joshua : the Promise (chap. 1), the Crossing and the Reconsecration (chap. 2-5), the Bridgehead established (chap. 6), Sin and Disaster followed by Expiation and Triumph (7-8:29),

Renewal of the Covenant (8:30-5) before Conquest and Annihilation of enemies in the south (chap. 10) and Conquest and Annihilation in the north (11:1-15), a Summary (11:16-12:24), the Distribution of the Land (chap. 13-21), Dying Speeches and Epilogues (chap. 22-4). The plan is neat and tidy and comprehensive; the gaps are glaring. How and when did the Israelites penetrate the Shechem area? How and why did the Israelites wage a campaign in the far north? When was Bethel taken? How was it possible for all the people to gather at Shiloh and at Shechem when, as Judges tells us, so many unconquered foes were still in the field? Moreover the formalities of battles are stereotyped—always a general overwhelming victory is won, often by stratagem and by God's direct intervention, and extermination of enemies follows. The book itself manifests simplification.

The religious element is formal and dominant. The leader Joshua is portrayed as another Moses (1:2, 5, 17, etc.); the entry into Canaan is intended to evoke memories of the Exodus from Egypt; the crossing of the Jordan is a piece of religious ceremonial, Ark and Priests leading the way and holding back the waters; scarcely is foot set in the Promised Land than the great rites of Jewish worship and dedication are performed, passover and circumcision (in the midst of a hostile country!); the taking of Jericho is accomplished by ritual processions after a vision of the commander of the army of the Lord. Nothing can stop the triumphant advance save sin; the sin is committed, catastrophe ensues, and only expiation brings renewal of success. So, the morality of the account is highlighted. In similar fashion the divine protection and providence is shown in action; for the Jew, all nature was at the beck and call of God; certainly God had set laws for inanimate creation, but whereas we think first and almost instinctively of the 'laws of nature,' the pattern to which nature generally conforms, the Jew thought first of the God who was master of them all; if then the supreme ruler of the universe aided His people in conquering their Promised Land, He must be shown manifestly to have intervened on their side in a way worthy of His power, worthy of the occasion. Abstractions were not to the mind of the Jews; they thought and wrote of God-in-action. So, the theology of the book is made clear. And the whole is rounded off by speeches (sermons would be a better term) making explicit what the narrative implies.

If, then, the Book of Joshua is a religious historical epic, we must confess ignorance about a number of topics which most of us would dearly like to have settled—how precisely was Jericho captured? Was Achan and his family really stoned with stones and burned with fire? Did the Gibeonites survive exactly as described in chapter 9? What really is implied by the stopping of the sun? Perhaps we shall never

be able to answer these questions; certainly we cannot do so at present; we are left mouthing our 'perhaps' and 'it might be' and 'possibly.' It is unfortunate, to our minds, that the author of Joshua has not been more explicit, more of a chronicler and less of an historian-cum-theologian. But the writer had more important matters to make clear and it is those matters which form the enduring message and value of his book.

P. GIFFIN

Wondersh

THE UNKNOWN PROPHET OF THE EXILE—I

It is rather annoying though possibly providential that the greatest difficulties both of text and of interpretation in the Old Testament occur in passages of the greatest importance for our faith. Take chapters 40-55 of Isaiah. There is hardly a single conclusion to which scholars have arrived in relation to these chapters which has not been and still is in dispute: the date of the writer, his identity, where his ministry took place, whether these sixteen chapters form a unity or whether they are really made up of 41 (Mowinckel), 49 (Gressmann), 50 (Volz), 70 (Köhler) or more separate pericopes—not to speak of the *crux crucium* of the identity of the Servant of the Lord. At the same time they are patently of vital significance for us in our attempt to grapple with and understand the dynamic line of development of revealed religion. Even on the superficial though useful level of statistics, we can gauge their importance if we note that the *Bible de Jérusalem* gives about 120 cross-references to the New Testament for these few chapters: far more, comparatively, than for any other part of the Old Testament. The reasons are not far to seek. They provide, in the first place, the means by which Jesus and, after him, the early Church, expressed his identity—the Servant of the Lord with a mission for vicarious suffering and redemptive death; secondly, a figure by means of which the mission of the Church itself in relation to the world could be communicated as a prophetic reduplication of the mission of Jesus himself; thirdly, and not least in importance, a universal theological frame of reference within which the divine action and, supremely, the divine Act in Jesus could be understood and expressed. Thus the oracles of this great anonymous figure of the Exile whom we somewhat inelegantly call Deutero-Isaiah, handed down by his disciples, form the watershed of the Old Testament;