

**Subverting Israel's Golden Age:
Reading the Deuteronomistic History after Christendom**
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There are many parts of the Old Testament that appear morally questionable. In this paper I shall focus on the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings, with their main storyline of Joshua's conquest of the land of Canaan, followed by a series of heroes – Barak, Gideon, Jephthah, Samson, Samuel (nb. Hebrews 11:32) – leading into the reigns of Saul, David, Solomon and the divided kingdom. Or should we re-characterize these books as valorizing genocide, terrorism, and brutal, self-serving monarchy? Of course, some characters appear less reprehensible than others; there are stories of honour and bravery as well as sexual transgression and murder. In all of these God is thoroughly involved, commanding destruction and death as well as saving his people. What do followers of Jesus do with these ethically challenging and theologically problematic parts of Scripture?

I have used the term “Deuteronomistic History” in the title as shorthand for the books in question. Strictly speaking, the “Deuteronomistic History” is a theoretical construct, first propounded by Martin Noth; the idea that the books of Deuteronomy to Kings were compiled (during the exilic period or soon after) from a number of pre-existing sources to form a unified work.² I am not committed to an historical critical theory of a single work, perhaps with several redactions, lying behind these four books.³ It seems to me that literary approaches developed in the last thirty years or so have a lot to offer in terms of treating them as works in their own right, rather than imposing some theoretical reconstruction of origins upon them.⁴ Having said this, questions of historical origins cannot be avoided if we are to recognize the literary conventions of the time, in order to read these books appropriately as the sophisticated compositions that they are. Furthermore, I will draw upon studies that move historical investigation into literary production by considering the political dimensions of propaganda and subversion.

As well as literary and historical dimensions of reading the Bible, there is the theological dimension, i.e., what they have to tell us about God and God's dealings with the world, and God's people in particular. That means reckoning with the faith communities for which these books were written, both Jewish and Christian. While it is advisable to stay with any Old Testament text in its own location in God's story before jumping too quickly into a Trinitarian theological framework, followers of Jesus must read the Old Testament in the definitive light of Jesus. So I must come to some conclusions as to the message of these books for God's people today when Christendom, if not entirely eradicated (in Britain, at least), is on its way out.

Why have I chosen to explore these books in particular? In addition to the moral and theological difficulties already mentioned, they seem to pose an additional challenge to Anabaptist-influenced Christians who want to take them seriously as Scripture. A number of Christian commentators have compared the situation of the church after Christendom to that of ancient Israel in exile (e.g. Walter Brueggemann, 1997; Stuart

¹ This paper, completed in January 2009, is an expansion of what I presented at the Anabaptist Theology Forum at Offa House on 30 October 2008.

² For a recent summary of work on the Deuteronomistic Theory, see Satterthwaite & McConville (2007), chapter 7.

³ I am taking 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings each as originally one book that was divided into two for convenience because of length.

⁴ This point is made by Craig Bartholemew (2005), 396-7. Cf. Meir Sternberg (1987).

Murray Williams, 2004). I think that this is a helpful hermeneutical move – but, if we take it, what do we do with those parts of scripture that deal with Israel's life *within* the Promised Land?

Some Christians read these books as a way to understand the contemporary church in relation to the modern state, with its leaders prophetically addressing governments – Steve Chalke is a British example of this approach (2006, 128), Daniel Berrigan is an American one (2008). I think that this is a mistake, since the New Testament letter writers read the stories of Israel as instruction for the church (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:1-22). Indeed, Richard Hays argues that “What Paul finds in Scripture, above all else, is a prefiguration of the church as the people of God” (1989, 86). Once one has accepted the Christendom critique, neither Britain nor the USA occupies the role of God's people today, and thus their leaders do not stand in analogy to the kings of ancient Israel. Rather, the trans-national church has been incorporated into God's people today (see Romans 11), and *its* leaders stand in analogy to ancient Israelite kings. If there are prophets in the church today their first calling is to address the church and its leaders!⁵

To set the scene, I shall sample some of the reading options that have been proposed for these books. My proposal for reading the Deuteronomistic History is set out in general, and some examples are worked out in 1-2 Kings and Joshua – time and space limitations mean that I must reluctantly pass over 1-2 Samuel and Judges. Some implications for my doctrine of Scripture are explored before I draw a few conclusions.

Some Overall Options

One common move is to cut Joshua to Kings, along with the rest of the Old Testament, out of the Bible altogether. Christians would not formally make this move, but in practice many do so simply by neglect. Right back in the second century the Roman church leader, Marcion, rejected the Scriptures of Israel believing that they portrayed a God other than that known in Jesus Christ. However, Irenaeus and other early Christian theologians vigorously opposed such a move. There is far too much reliance on the Scriptures of Israel in what we call the New Testament to dismiss them as referring to a different God. The Gospels portray a Jesus whose identity derives at least partly from these books since his genealogy includes Rahab and many kings, his teaching refers to David, Solomon and Naaman, albeit only occasionally, and his meetings include one with Elijah on the mount of Transfiguration.

In a politically aware proposal, Jack Nelson Palmeyer has sought to distinguish between two streams in both Old and New Testaments: a pro-imperialist stream linked to God's violence, and an anti-imperialist stream, linked to a non-violent God (2005, 111-7). In reading the Bible, he proposes that Christians must choose, from among a smorgasbord of options, the minority voice of non-violence (2005, 139-140). My difficulty with this approach is that it elevates the pro-imperialist/anti-imperialist criterion above Scripture and begs the question of from where this criterion derives.

The Quaker scholar, Daniel Smith Christopher, has argued for a similarly discriminating approach, though with stronger theological rationale, that

⁵ It is true that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others addressed “oracles against the nations,” and these might provide the required analogy for contemporary prophets addressing national leaders. However, such oracles seem to derive their power from their authors' primary address to God's people, and thus, while there may be a sense in which prophets should address “the nations” even today, this would remain a derivative sense. Of course, this is a matter of interpretation of the “Latter Prophets,” and here I must confine my attention to the “Former Prophets.”

the basis for the Christian opposition to violence and warfare actually has its roots in the Old Testament... the biblical case against warfare is rooted, not primarily in a biblical critique of violence (which invariably ends up contrasting the “peaceful Jesus” with the supposedly “vengeful Old Testament”), but rather in the biblical understanding of violating separations. In the Bible justice extends to the “other people” – even to the enemy – and thus holds out the possibility of their transformation by conversion (in mission) or becoming a coexisting human partner (in dialogue). To put it another way, biblical nonviolence is rooted in the “Old Testament” courage of a Hebrew minority willing to violate the borders of the majority. (2007, 24)

Like many scholars, Smith Christopher sees the Babylonian exile as a watershed in the story of Israel in the Old Testament; it resulted in

partisan struggles, infighting, and disagreements about what it meant to be the people of God after the Exile. For some... the language of revenge, violence, and regaining power became uppermost in their minds. These voices are definitely part of the biblical record. But there are other voices in the debate, too, and any serious discussion of the biblical history must insist that both kinds of voices be heard. (2007, 36)

Just as there were conflicts amongst the Jews as to how to respond to the experience of Babylonian exile, so six centuries later there were conflicts amongst the Jews as to their response to Roman occupation and oppression. Smith Christopher points out that some Jews advocated violent resistance, whilst others, such as Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai opposed the Jewish revolt in 66-70 CE and worked out a separate peace with the Romans so that he could move to the coastal town of Yavneh and establish a school of Jewish learning. Jesus and Paul, he says, belong in this radical Jewish tradition of border crossing (2007, 47-48), and *it is because they do so* that Christians must attend to that minority tradition within the Old Testament.

I find this approach more promising, so will summarize how Smith Christopher deals with the Deuteronomistic History. His first move is to contrast conventional battles fought by Israel’s kings with the “Yahweh war” tradition (as in Lind, 1980) in which Israel wins battles because of Yahweh’s miraculous involvement.

The writers want to suggest that in the times when we “trusted God” (before we chose a king to fight our battles by conventional means) God actually took care of us – God even fought our battles. Since the Israelite peoples were in exile, or under severe occupation back in Palestine, from the time of 587 BCE, the notion of mounting major armies like the time of the kings of Israel was hardly a realistic option. If there was ever a time when they needed God to intervene directly, miraculously, for a weakened people, surely it was the time after 587 BCE. (2007, 168).

Thus the Yahweh war tradition was deployed by post-exilic writers as part of the critique of adopting human kingship.

In a second move, Smith Christopher comments on “the ban” (*herem*), the genocidal approach to the occupants of Canaan mandated by Yahweh (e.g., Josh. 6:21);

As horrific as it is to imagine it, these genocidal reports of killing all living things **may actually have been added to these battle reports in the years after the Exile...** recent work suggests that we examine the use of these kinds of angry terms and violent language as *rhetoric* (2007, 169f, emphasis original).

Thus such accounts should be read as expressions of oppositional feelings rather than reports of events, just as Psa. 138:8-9 should not be read literally; “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” Similar things can be said about the narratives of Jewish violence towards enemies at the end of the Book of

Esther (8:11; 9:5), and the execution of Daniel's enemies with their families by being thrown into the lions' den (Dan. 6:24).

Franz Fanon writes of the "colonized people's dreams," dreams of rising up and destroying the colonizer communities – these are angry fantasies and invariably quite graphic. (2007, 171)

Smith Christopher has thus made some interesting suggestions along the lines of how to read these ancient books by being alert to their historical origins and context, and to the literary techniques of their times, especially rhetoric. In the New Testament the rhetoric of violence is sometimes employed (Mark 12:9; Eph. 6:10-17; Revelation), but to take such rhetoric literally would be a category mistake, and to take it as a mandate for physical violence would amount to a moral failure. In other words, these ancient texts should not be assessed according to an externally imposed grid such as the pro-imperialist/ anti-imperialist criterion, but read with sensitivity as to what they seek to achieve rhetorically.

The hermeneutical question that emerges for me from considering these ways of reading the Bible is this; is the approach one takes simply down to the reader, is it purely subjective? Or does the text point the reader in any particular direction? More than that, does the text point the church in any particular direction? Is there a way in which Scripture might guide the church, not with modernistic notions of authority, but by illuminating its calling, nurturing its questioning and encouraging its witness?

Here it is helpful to invoke the more theological approach of Canonical Criticism. The way we read texts cannot depend simply on the guidance of the texts themselves: we must pay attention to the communities that read the texts. And the communities of faith that shaped the Hebrew and Christian Bibles have given us clues about how to read Joshua to Kings. James Brenneeman observes;

It makes all the difference in the world whether one reads the Book of Joshua as the endpoint of an early historical credo (hexateuch) or as the first book in the second section of a three part canon. Since Joshua is one of the most violent books in the Bible, the first purely *historical* reading might argue for, and too often has, a sociopolitical climax of bloody proportion to any of Yahweh's promises. The second *canonical* reading would understand the Book of Joshua as having been deliberately excised from the historical credo and the first canon of Scripture, the Torah. As such the Book of Joshua, as it now stands within the canon, introduces a failed history, not a victorious climax to Yahweh's promises of land. The canonical reading is thus a significant sociopolitical statement on the part of the early canon makers in exile. (1997: 46)

As we shall see, canonical reading also means that we cannot read Joshua-Kings without alternative perspectives on the same characters and events that are presented in the prophetic books, though I cannot here venture into the psalms and wisdom literature as well.

A Proposal for Reading the Deuteronomistic History

I want to suggest that these books take what would have been the well-known story line of Israel's occupation of the promised land, indeed a rather rose-tinted portrayal of Israel's "golden age" – perhaps an important means of maintaining identity in exile – and then they ask difficult questions of it, or even subvert it. This subversion or questioning is achieved by a number of means that would have been fairly obvious to the original readers, but may only be apparent to contemporary readers who are reasonably alert to the ancient context and the literary conventions of the time. It is the study of such ancient contexts and literary conventions that helps us to better

understand the purpose of these books, as it does with so many other parts of the Bible.

This proposal is not entirely original; I first came across some ingredients of it in Rex Mason's, *Propaganda and Subversion in the Old Testament* (1997), though the language of propaganda is now becoming commonplace, e.g., in Thomas Romer's state-of-the-art historical approach to these books (2007). When I first read Mason's book about eleven years ago, I was somewhat skeptical about it, since I was concerned that once the door has been opened to a less than straightforward reading of the Bible, where might such "suspicious" reading end? How much is propaganda? To what depth does the subversion go? For example, some scholars have suggested that the book(s) of Samuel were written to defend David against the accusation that he was a Philistine, or even to disguise the fact that he was a Philistine (e.g., Halpern, 2001).

This is a question that can be asked about the identification of literary features such as hyperbole and irony as well the larger scale authorial intentions of propaganda or subversion. Perhaps the answer is that this is a matter of literary sensitivity, of readerly skills? And it must be admitted that over such matters there will be differences of opinion, i.e., there are no incontrovertible interpretations. However, readerly sensitivity is not primarily subjective; it is guided by knowledge of ancient culture and it takes seriously the literary composition of the book as a whole, and perhaps closely related books (such as others in the Deuteronomistic History). So I have come round to something like Mason's approach, and it is time to discuss some of the details of these books. My procedure will be to work backwards, since the subversion or questioning is most apparent in Kings. Having established a foothold with my perspective there, it may be possible to show how a similar approach works with the Book of Joshua.

1-2 Kings

Long ago Walter Brueggemann wrote in his preaching guide to 1 Kings that

This literature which purports to *summarize* the kings in fact *delegitimizes* the kings to show they have in fact forfeited their authority and are not really kings. Thus the book should be named with a question mark of incredulity – "Kings???" (1982, 3, emphasis original)

As an example, let's take King Solomon, one of the great figures of the entire story of Israel. On the biblical surface it seems he ruled a peaceful and prosperous empire with wisdom, and in particular constructed the great temple in Jerusalem, although things went badly in his final years.

However, a careful reading of the chapters recounting how Solomon acceded to the throne should make readers quizzical as they read on through the apparently successful years of Solomon's acquisitions and building projects. Firstly, David, the founder of the mini-empire that Solomon is to inherit, and the figure by which all subsequent kings will be measured in this book, is portrayed in old age – sexually impotent, lacking initiative in regard to the succession, and vulnerable to court intrigue. The only way in which he appears relatively coherent is in his instructions to his heir regarding the settling of old scores (1 Kgs. 2:1-9) – "enticement to murder lauded as wisdom" (Berrigan, 2008, 16). Secondly, Solomon follows David's instructions for the ruthless elimination of opposition (1 Kgs. 2:28-46).

Eric Seibert has written a persuasive study of 1 Kgs. 1-2 showing how a scribe or scribes may have written these chapters in the early years of Solomon's reign "ostensibly... as a piece of political propaganda" when questions were still being asked about the validity of his claim to the throne, but that it was "riddled with many

subversive elements” that would have been evident to a discerning reader (2006, 186). Seibert goes on to discuss a series of similarly propagandistic passages in 1 Kgs. 3-11 that would have been written at a later time when it was politic to present Solomon’s reign as successful and prosperous (at least to begin with), yet simultaneously contain seriously subversive elements. What Seibert does not consider is the possibility that the exilic or postexilic compiler found these propagandist/subversive passages conducive to a broader critique of a “golden age” view of Israel’s time in the land.⁶

Thus, even before we read of Solomon’s dream at Gibeon, we are informed of his marriage to an Egyptian princess (1 Kgs. 3:1) – on the surface a significant political achievement, but especially once we have read the later account of how foreign wives led Solomon to worship other gods (1 Kgs. 11:1-8), this move signals that Solomon is neglecting Torah as much as previous leaders. It should remind us of the law of the king in Deuteronomy 17:14-20, itself caustically illuminating all of Solomon’s apparent achievements.

I must limit myself to consideration of just one other passage by way of illustration, 1 Kgs. 4:20-28. This begins with a celebration of the well-being of the people during Solomon’s reign (20), the oldest promises having been fulfilled (Gen. 22:17; 32:12). The passage goes on to emphasize the abundance of food entering Solomon’s palace, the bounty of his extensive empire (21-24). Later parts of Solomon’s story make it clear that his empire and construction projects were built by the exploitation of labour (5:13-18, though note 9:22, itself in tension with 12:4). So it is interesting that verse 25 inserts a contrast to this picture of imperial prosperity;

During Solomon’s lifetime Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, all of them under their vines and fig trees. (NRSV)

Here ordinary people are said to have enjoyed the modest hope anticipated in Micah 4:4 (“but they shall all sit under their own vines, and under their own fig trees...”).⁷

Walter Brueggemann proposes that this text in Kings is ironic:

Its real intent is something other than first impression indicates. It wants us to recognize that v25 cannot be comfortable with vv 24, 26-28... The deep promise of ancient Israel has been confiscated as ideology for the state... hope has become ideology. (1982:19)

By his alertness to intertextuality Brueggeman helps us to see the irony in what might otherwise appear a straightforward assertion that “Israel never had it so good.”

A similar analysis might be made of the later “good” king, Hezekiah. But I must move on to the two major figures whose stories dominate the central section of 1-2 Kings, Elijah and Elisha. The main focus of their activity is to challenge Israel’s often royally instigated apostasy (challenge to the moral implications of apostasy only really appears once, over Naboth’s vineyard, 1 Kgs. 21), though a good number of other stories emphasise God’s care for ordinary people, including foreigners. At a literary level, this book seems to be insisting that, in contrast with the pretensions of most of the kings, true power belongs to God’s Word in the mouth of God’s prophets. Perhaps in the exilic or post-exilic situation this emphasis might bring hope that Yahweh had not finished with his people. At any rate, a careful exilic or post-exilic reader of 1-2 Kings must have concluded that to romanticise the “golden age” of kings in Israel was a mistake! Conventional kings could not solve the problems of God’s people; indeed they had made them worse. What was needed was a different kind of king altogether.

⁶ The Books of Chronicles, in contrast, present the time of David and Solomon in a much more positive light than found in 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. It is usually thought that they were written well into the Persian period.

⁷ See the promise in Lev. 26:4-5.

Theologically, the way in which Yahweh is portrayed in 1-2 Kings emphasises God's words and deeds of judgment on Israel's apostasy, its unfaithfulness to God in the form of worship of alternative gods. Especially under Ahab this took a syncretistic form, a blending of subscription to Baal along with Yahweh. As Terence Fretheim says,

The issue is the First Commandment (Deut. 5:7-10; 6:5). The problem at its heart is thus a matter of faith and unfaith, and not (dis)obedience of an external code. (1999, 11)

Although "the people's apostasy carries within itself the very seeds of disaster," Fretheim points out that some prophetic words of judgment are not literally fulfilled (1 Kgs. 21:27-29; 2 Kgs. 20:1-6), and thus

... the future is understood to remain open until fulfilment actually occurs. Israel's future is not absolutely determined by the prophet's word. In other words, prophetic words of judgment do not function mechanistically, as if the word were some autonomous power beyond the reach of God's continuing attention. (1999, 12)

In the end, divine judgement is not an end in itself, nor a divine attribute; rather, it is a refining process in the service of God's ultimate purpose of salvation.

I suggest that followers of Jesus read 1-2 Kings in a messianic rather than a literalistic way – and "messianic" includes implications for God's people. Jesus shows us the true nature of kingship, challenging common political assumptions and practices of power. So we need to bear in mind both the fore-shadowings of Jesus in this book and the way he has transposed kingship into a new key. If propaganda presented Solomon's reign as a time of peace and prosperity, such should be a genuine ultimate goal for leaders, foreshadowing the second coming of God's kingdom in Jesus. Yet such propaganda was coupled with subversion that reveals ruthless power-accumulation, oppression of labour, military spending and wisdom competitions (the latter being equivalent of contemporary celebrity culture in the church?).

Jesus also shows us the true nature of the prophetic calling; although his ministry among ordinary people has strong echoes of Elijah and Elisha (see Wolfgang Roth, 1988), his consistent rejection of violence only finds occasional fore-shadowings in their careers (e.g. 2 Kgs. 6:8-23). Contemporary prophets may find inspiration among the faithfulness of Ahijah, Micaiah, Elijah and Elisha; they may encourage God's people in spiritual warfare, but they must not imagine themselves called to put rival prophets to death!

The fact that Jesus reframes both kingship and prophecy suggests that Jesus also reframes the theology found in 1-2 Kings. Even within the Old Testament, the divine approval of Jehu's actions found in 2 Kgs. 10:30 is reversed in Hosea 1:4-5.

This inner-biblical critique means that no unequivocal approval of Jehu's violence in the service of Yahweh is possible (Fretheim, 1999, 173).

Since Jesus, no prophets are given the task to commission killers, in contrast with Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:15-17). This means that 1-2 Kings can nurture our spiritual lives because it shows us something of God, though we must handle it carefully since it does not show us the whole picture (cf. Heb. 1:1-3).

Joshua

Of the Deuteronomistic History, the first book is probably the most difficult. Joshua has been neglected by many Christians because it seems too close for comfort to

contemporary stories of ethnic cleansing and religious fanaticism.⁸ Yet a more attentive reading places several question marks against initial impressions.

- Despite sweeping statements about the complete conquest of the land (10:40-42; 11:16-23), there are several others that explicitly refute that state of affairs (13:1, 13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12; 18:3), and the limited nature of the conquest is evident at the beginning of the Book of Judges. It looks as though there are similarities here with the propagandistic statements about Solomon's prosperity that are simultaneously subverted in 1 Kings.
- Yahweh's authorization of Joshua to lead the invasion of Canaan forms the introduction to the Book, and one feature of this authorization is its emphasis on observance of the book of the law (1:8). This emphasis is picked up in the concluding chapter, following Joshua's challenge to the people before he dies; "Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God..." (24:26). This sort of observation contributes to the Deuteronomistic theory. It should prompt readers to consider in which ways the book of the law is, or is not, followed within the body of the Book – in other words, under the surface story of conquest lies a more searching motif of obedience to God's law, which, in turn, raises questions of interpretation of God's law.

So we need to probe in two ways beneath the surface story for the deeper issues with which the Book of Joshua is concerned. Firstly, Lawson Stone has done fascinating work on the clues in Joshua that point to an important proposal:

the present literary shape of Joshua integrates the conquest traditions with their religious reinterpretation by successive generations.... Several passages in Joshua explain, mitigate, and reinterpret the portrayal of Israel's slaughter of the Canaanites... (1991, 26)

Comparison between reports of the reactions and responses of the Canaanites to God's action on Israel's behalf in Josh. 2:9-11; 5:1; 9:1-6; 10:1-5; and 11:1-5, suggests a significant structural feature of the Book. Israel's presence in Canaan is set out programmatically by 2:10 and 5:1 as a divine act (and is established by the victories at Jericho and Ai in Josh. 6-8), requiring a response of either affirmation or resistance. The subsequent Israelite military campaign (Josh. 9-11) is presented as a defense against aggressive Canaanite response to Yahweh's action. Parallels with the Exodus contest with Pharaoh are close to the surface ("it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts," 11:20). Stone argues that these six passages

shift the level of the material perceptibly and significantly, so that they become object lessons in responsiveness to Yahweh's action and warnings against resistance. (1991, 34)

Further additions to the Joshua traditions by the Deuteronomist (Josh. 1:1-9; 8:30-35; 23:6) turned "the literary structure of act → response in which the *Canaanites* were annihilated for their obduracy into a summons for *Israel* faithfully to obey God's written Torah" (1991, 35). Stone concludes that

certain ethical dimensions of holy war did concern the early tradents of Joshua, to the extent that the holy war traditions in their earliest form represented an unusable past. Clear moves were made to guide the reader to a nonmilitaristic, nonterritorial actualization of the text in which the conquest first illustrated the necessity of an affirmative response to Yahweh's action, then became a paradigm of obedience to the written Torah. Long before the NT or early Christian and Jewish allegorists touched the text, its bearers had already transformed the historical tradition of the conquest into a gigantic metaphor for the religious life (1991:36).

⁸ For an important rebuttal of the notion that the Book of Joshua justifies modern Israeli ejection of Arabs from the land, see Norbert Lohfink, "Conquest or Return: Reading Joshua Today" in 2003, 27-43.

My proposal is that this transformation took place during or following the exile, in an effort to internalize the lessons of that dreadful experience. Joshua, in the form we know it, was produced not to inspire Jews to fight their enemies in general, nor to return from Persia to “re-conquer the Land.” Much more profoundly, it was written to challenge Jews about their own faithfulness to Torah in a world that presented various puzzles and temptations to forsake Yahweh.

Secondly, a more literary approach recognizes that Joshua is a book about boundaries: its opening signals the end of Moses’ era and it gives a great deal of attention to the crossing of the River Jordan into a new land. The second main section of the book (Josh. 13-21) consists of allocation of land to various tribes. A conflict about the boundary status of the Jordan threatens the unity of Israel as the story draws to a close (22:1-34). Corresponding to these geographical boundaries are instructions that place limits on behaviour and separate Israel from other nations (1:7; 23:12-16), and in several places it is shown that Israel remains faithful to the divine commands (8:35; 11:15; 22:1-6). Daniel Hawk observes that this preoccupation with boundaries reveals “a fundamental concern with issues of identity” (2000: xii). He continues,

Yet something extraordinary happens in Joshua. Reports of failures to acquire cities and lands challenge the triumphal descriptions of conquests. The incorporation of native peoples into the larger Israelite community counters reports of mass slaughter. Tribes and clans spill over geographical boundaries. And stories of transgression and internal conflict counter the assertions of Israel’s uniform obedience to God. Boundaries of territory, race, and practice are indeed strongly drawn at the surface but are constantly subverted. By the time the Book reaches its conclusion, other peoples still inhabit vast tracts of the promised land, some with concessions that allow them to remain permanently. There have been lapses in and modifications to the Mosaic torah. And encounters with pious Canaanites and rebellious Israelites have collapsed the notion that Israel is somehow different than or superior to the surrounding nations. (2000, xiii)

The Book of Joshua might appear on the surface to locate Israel’s national identity in its territorial claims, its kinship bonds and its correct religious observances. However, the final chapter insists that Israel’s identity lies in Yahweh’s exclusive choosing of Israel and Israel’s exclusive choosing of Yahweh.

Joshua establishes a sense of identity which demonstrates (negatively) that Israel cannot be defined, in a fundamental sense, by land, religious observance, or racial affinity, but (positively) that its identity, at the core, must be understood in light of chosenness and choosing. (Hawk, 2000, xxxi)

This prompts readers to reflect on Israel’s various choices throughout the book: obediently, often in response to Joshua’s lead (4:8; 11:15); but also disobediently – the spies who deal with Rahab violate Moses’ instructions (Deut. 7:2), and Achan’s theft that provokes Yahweh’s criticism of the nation.

The most well known collapse in these boundaries is the story of Rahab and the spies, but I had not realized the significance of this until I read Frank Anthony Spina’s stimulating book, *The Faith of the Outsider*, in which he illuminates the contrast between the faith of the Canaanite prostitute and the blatant disobedience of the quintessential Israelite, Achan – the drawing of lots emphasizes that he is of the tribe of Judah, no less – and who is put to death as a Canaanite (by stoning, burning, and covering with a pile of stones).

I would argue that the Book of Joshua is a highly charged theological narrative in which the first seven chapters serve as an interpretive key to the whole book. In these chapters, the motif of insiders and outsiders forces us to completely rethink what it means to be Israel and to remain Israel... The import of this text

is that the community of faith must be constantly aware that outsiders are only a confession away from being included, while insiders are only a violation away (when it is a violation of Achan's magnitude) from being excluded. This story is not one that merely reports brutal and gory war stories from the past, nor is it an affirmation of an ethnic understanding of religion. It is a story in which the interplay of insiders and outsiders requires a reevaluation of the very nature of what it means to be God's people. Rahab should give all "outsiders" hope; Achan should make all "insiders" cautious and attentive to keeping the faith. (2005, 70f)

Now many scholars think that the Rahab story is a late addition to the original account of land entry since it seems to interrupt the logical connection between 1:11 and 3:2 (e.g. Creach, 2003, 31). Could it have been inserted at a late stage, such as the exile, in order to highlight the outsider/insider identity issue close to the beginning of Joshua, even as Israel enters the promised land?

What difference does Jesus make to our reading of the Book of Joshua? The figure of Joshua points to Jesus much more obviously than do any of the later kings, since the name itself in Hebrew means "Yahweh saves," the equivalent of the Greek name, Jesus. Throughout his life, and especially in his farewell speech, Joshua models faithfulness to Yahweh, but his primary task is as Israel's war leader. Once it is accepted that Jesus transforms Israel's traditions of physical conflict with enemies into spiritual conflict by means of enemy love, many aspects of the Book transform into lessons in spiritual warfare.

Perhaps Spina's observations about the interplay between Rahab and Achan can even illuminate the Gospels. The extraordinary story of the healing of the demonized daughter of a Syrophenician woman (Mark 7:26, interestingly labeled a "Canaanite" in Matt 15:22) highlights the boundary crossing ministry of Jesus. In contrast, Judas Iscariot, a member of Jesus' twelve disciples, betrays him for thirty pieces of silver and comes to a sad end (Matt 27:3-10).

Some Implications for my Doctrine of Scripture

I have sought to show how readers of the Deuteronomistic History must penetrate the surface story by means of the details of its presentation in the Biblical books as they stand canonically, in the light of the questions asked of it by the editors and compilers who adapted the earlier materials, oral and written, available to them. In other words, certain parts of the biblical text are critiqued by other parts in their vicinity – one cannot read as if all parts equally "tell the truth."

For someone, like me, brought up in an evangelical environment that regards the Bible as divinely inspired and authoritative, this means further enlargement of my understanding of the Bible as a humanly authored collection of documents, though I do not think that this detracts from its divine efficacy. After all, it should be obvious that parts of the Bible, taken on their own, present distortions of the truth; e.g., the words of the serpent in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:4f), the half-truths of Abraham about Sarah (Gen. 12:13; 20:2), the report of Joseph's death by his brothers to Jacob (Gen. 37:31-35), and so on. These examples are fairly obvious from the context, but we can go further; if the case for propaganda and subversion has been made, characters are represented as invoking the divine name or divine approval for actions that are at least questionable (e.g., Solomon's verdict on Joab, 1 Kgs. 2:32-33). Thus readers cannot simply take at face value statements of divine approbation or disapprobation in the mouths of biblical characters, any more than they should believe their professed piety (for an obvious example of the latter, see King Herod's devious speech to the wise men in Matt. 2:8).

Yet, this proposal does require a larger step; in 1-2 Kings it entails regarding some narratorial reports of divine speech as belonging to propaganda: in Joshua it entails regarding some reports of divine action as morally questioned by the wider context. Here we must engage in a theological wrestling with (I hesitate to say critique of) the voice of the narrator, and not simply with his characters. There is a theological contradiction between the two versions of David's census of Israel – was this instigated by Yahweh (2 Sam. 24:1) or by Satan (1 Chron. 21:1)? The usual explanation of this contradiction is in terms of historical development from the pre-exilic theology that attributed evil to God, to the post-exilic theology that attributed evil to a satanic figure. The Roman Catholic Old Testament scholar, Norbert Lohfink, argues the doctrine of "biblical inerrancy" in terms of the Bible as a whole – as the developing, organic word of God, operative in history – each part must be interpreted in light of the whole, and the "fact of Christ is like the key signature at the beginning of the score which determines everything that follows" (1992, 38).

Conclusions

So much more needs to be said; these books have fascinated me for many years, but I feel that I have only scratched the surface of what they might mean for God's people. I think the case for propaganda and subversion in the Deuteronomistic History is well founded. My proposal that these books question a false sense of Israel's identity derived from Israel's "golden age" requires further working out in order to be fully convincing. But for now I must wrap up with a few reflections.

I believe that most Christians have a "Children's Bible" understanding of the Old Testament (if they have any knowledge of it at all!) – Samson is a prototype of Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Solomon is the grand king who builds the wonderful temple. In other words, the most obvious story line obliterates the questions and ironies that a more historical, literary, and politically aware approach illuminates. That may do for children, perhaps, but not for adults. I suggest that there is a need for educating local teachers (including children's teachers) to work more carefully with the biblical text.

What might be the message of the Deuteronomistic Books for the church today, living in the 'exile' that follows Christendom? If it is the case that these prophetic books subvert romanticized stories of Israel's history, they encourage contemporary followers of Jesus to subvert the romanticized stories of the Christian church; romanticized Christendom, but also romanticized Anabaptism. I am not going to go into detailed contemporary applications, but let me sum up the direction in which these books may point.

Joshua raises questions about identity: for the Jews during or following exile, it was common to think that ethnic descent and ancestral land was fundamental, but this book subverts such assumptions and insists instead on obedience to God, whose will is known through Torah. What mistaken assumptions about Christian identity require subversion today?

Judges wrestles with the need for some sort of established organization and leadership among God's people, and suggests that the people's gradual departure from God's Torah is reflected in the increasingly flawed leadership available, whilst 1 & 2 Samuel focuses in on the temptation to adopt conventional forms of leadership, and the temptations of absolute power in particular. I have had to pass over these wonderfully rich books, but will give one hint here from Joel Rosenberg;

The makers of biblical literature... were deeply preoccupied with the nature of Israel's political community, and were interested in the premises of political existence, addressing themselves to readers who thought about such things as

leadership, authority, social cohesiveness, political order, rebellion, crime, justice, institutional evolution, and the relation of rich and poor. (1986, x)
Add to this John Howard Yoder's insistence on the political nature of the church (1992), and the connections to church life should begin to emerge.

1 & 2 Kings shows the eventual result of giving way to the temptations of conventional leadership. It suggests that God finds ways to resist the arrogance of absolute power in the mouth of the prophets, whilst inviting questions about the behaviour of some of those same prophets! It warns about the dangers of adopting conventional assumptions about leadership, about temples (read church buildings!), of capitulating to the powerful forces threatening God's people from rival kingdoms (ideologies)...

And finally, each of these books, in its own way, points towards Jesus: his awareness of identity, his practice of leadership, his prophetic challenge to established corrupt rule, and his salvation of God's people.

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