

Come To The Water—After Crossing The Jordan: Langley Mennonite Fellowship, October 23, 2022

Introduction

Thanks for the invitation to share this morning. It feels good to Esther and to me to be here.

I found this sermon not an easy assignment, one which raises so many issues—all of which I shall briefly touch on:

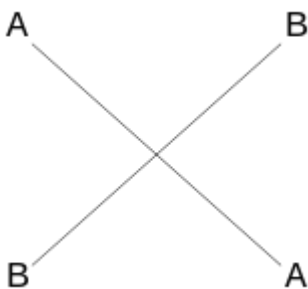
- Old Testament violence;
- How one interprets the Conquest stories in *The Book of Joshua*;
- The call to an *outward journey* of liberation in the face of Empire;
- The call to an *inward journey* of liberation in the face of personal dark powers;
- Palestinian domination by the Israelis.

In March 1997, I flew to Fairbanks to take part in a dialogue in front of a live audience, and a later video audience, at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, and via teleconference across the state, including in the Juneau Legislature. The invitation had come from two Presbyterian ministers to *dialogue* about capital punishment—at the time not in the law code, and still not—with [Dr. Richard Land](#), head of “The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission” of the Southern Baptist Convention: the second largest denomination in America, though dwarfed by The Roman Catholic Church.

Now *the* classic single Scripture used to “prove” God demands the death penalty is Genesis 9:6:

Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.

What could be more obvious?



When read left to right, top to bottom, the first topic (A) is reiterated as the last, and the middle concept (B) appears twice in succession.

Some may know however that in the Hebrew, this is a *chiastic* word structure. (*I don't know Hebrew, by the way.*) About 75% of the Hebrew Scriptures is in fact poetry. This verse is one such instance: *a chiastic poem*. And unless this is the singular exception, there is no law code in ancient Hebrew given as poetry.

When I pointed that out after Dr. Land's use of that text, plus rapid-fire about 15 additional exegetical problems with the section where that verse is located—that discredit its use to support state executions—he acknowledged he did not know how to respond. This happened another time similarly with a New Testament prof at Trinity Western University, who likewise conceded that, and went, to his credit, a step further: he said in that light, *he'd never again use Genesis 9 to support the death penalty*.

Interpretation: Old Testament Violence

Today's Scripture is weighted with centuries of contrary interpretation that must be addressed. *In short: we all interpret Scripture.*

The brief passage read this morning, Joshua 4:15 – 24, on the surface is quite straightforward. It describes a *momentous* event in the history of the ancient Hebrews: *entry at last into The Promised Land!* And it references *the ultimate momentous* event of that history: the Exodus from Egypt and crossing The Red Sea. This is that same miracle—*reprised*—40 years later, after the Hebrews' aimless wanderings in the desert.

For a second time, the children of Israel “came to the water,” and God parted the *water-obstacle* to let them cross over Jordan on dry ground.

They were on the cusp of the conquest of the Promised Land. I can affirm with Ian, in describing the scene:

This story is one of promise and freedom, of God's faithfulness, love and power and it is also the beginning of a story of conquest. It is also a story of reverence and ritual; a moment in Israel's history to be remembered.

The theme of crossing has a feel of passage through borders/boundaries/obstacles, refinement through travails... and eventual arrival, a happy ending thanks to human resolve and divine assistance.

That pretty much sums up the story in today's Scripture.

The Conquest of Palestine

But what is the larger picture in *The Book of Joshua*? What does it mean?

One writer [Hans Boersma](#) puts it this way:

[*The Book of Joshua*] is, more than any other, a book of violence. It is a book that offends, a book that not only ancient readers but also contemporary Christians find difficult to appropriate. How is a book such as *Joshua*—with its stories of conquest, its incitement to genocide, and its distributions of conquered areas—Christian Scripture? ([Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church](#))

In the brief publication, [Divine Presence Amid Violence: Contextualizing the Book of Joshua](#), one of the greatest living Christian Hebrew Scriptures scholars, [Walter Brueggemann](#), first acknowledges that Scripture in general is never just a “flat text.” He says that both in its being written, and in our reading it, *The Book of Joshua* calls forth an ongoing conversation that evokes, invites, and offers insight into our present moment. It's an invitation to a kind of never-ending *palaver*—a “wrestling with” the text—where, like a desert mirage, however, no definitive declaration of its final meaning is ever arrived at.



So how are we to *interpret* the passage today in the wider context of *The Book of Joshua*? There are two important considerations.

- *First*, the city-states within The Promised Land were Empire-like in their monopolies of socioeconomic and political power that were hierarchical and oppressive. They possessed “*horses and chariots*”—a repeated Hebrew Scriptures refrain—about states and empires wielding (in modern terminology) “weapons of mass destruction,” that must be eradicated. They were—as George Bush might say—*evil* Empires.
- *Second*, on the contrary to Empire . . .

“Israel” [is] an [anti-kingship], peasant movement hostile to every concentration, surplus, and monopoly [of wealth and power]. Conversely it follows then that every such city-state . . . would regard Israel as a threat, for Israel practiced a social alternative that had to be destroyed. The Israelites are the dominated and downtrodden.

The central call in *The Book of Joshua* from God (*Yahweh*), therefore, is to break free of all forms of Empire-like domination and oppression. So God calls them to *destroy all such imperial weapons*: namely hamstring (cripple) the horses (Israel had none, nor wanted any); and burn the chariots. In other words: God’s authorization for the Conquest was *to carry out a liberation movement in the face of Empire*. The “violence” in Joshua was to be directed against all the oppressive trappings of such hegemony. It was to be a beat-the-swords-into-ploughshares enterprise against the oppressors—with justice and peace privileged.

The Bible in this regard is an all-encompassing *counter-narrative to Empire*—in all its sociopolitical and economic, domineering and brutal manifestations. *Think Putin’s imperial Russia today . . .*

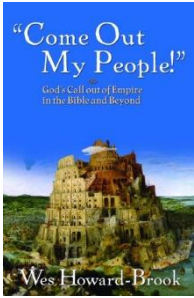
Scripture is at the same time no less a long *counter-narrative to the Kingdom of Darkness* that ever impinges to destroy our personal peace and freedom: our *shalom*. More on this later.

Except to say that crossing the Jordan is a longstanding motif for arriving *home* at last. Listen to this beautiful imagery by 16th-century [St. John of the Cross](#):

*And I saw the river over which every soul must pass to reach the kingdom of heaven, and the name of that river was **suffering**: and I saw a boat which carries souls across the river, and the name of that boat was **love**.*

Biblical spirituality ever entails an *outward*, and an *inward* journey of liberation.

The Journey Outward: Confronting Empire



An outstanding (massive) book on the *journey outward* in response to “Empire” is: [“Come Out, My People!” God’s Call out of Empire in the Bible and Beyond.](#)

The author [Wes Howard-Brook](#)

. . . surveys the Old Testament and apocryphal literature and . . . argues that the material is [best] seen as a *tension between two ways of life and faith in the world—a religion of creation and a religion of empire*. **Religion of creation** is “grounded in the experience of and ongoing relationship with the Creator God . . . for the blessing and abundance of all people and all creation.” By contrast, **religion of empire** is “a human invention used to justify and legitimate attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for some at the expense of others.”

Does that sound familiar? In today’s terms, one might think indigenous spiritualities honouring the Creator—over against an array of capitalist systems that one writer ([Arundhati Roy](#)) dubs “*Empire’s Religion*,” that takes no prisoners; that creates a world of scarcity—not abundance—and of haves and have-nots; and that extracts with abandon resources from The Good Creation.

The above author convincingly demonstrates that Jesus and the apostles firmly sit in the tradition of the religion of creation, further developing it in powerful new ways. (p. 7; from S. Watson, on Amazon website; emphasis added)¹

A very potent expression of this in the 1970s was by the Peruvian scholar and activist, [Gustavo Gutiérrez](#), who became renowned as founder of *liberation theology*. For him, a central tenet in his reading Scripture, is that:

“*God has a preferential option for the poor.*”

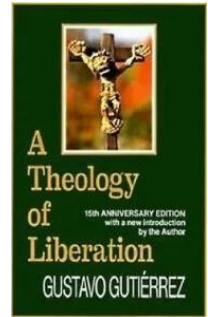
¹ An outstanding earlier publication, [Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism](#), [Robert Jewett](#) and [John Shelton Lawrence](#), Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. We read in my [review](#) of it:

The authors state that there is deep biblical rootedness in two contradictory strands of American culture, evident from the beginning. “The first tradition is what we call *zealous nationalism*. It seeks to redeem the world by destroying enemies (p. 8).” They point out: “The phenomenon of zeal itself provides a fascinating access to the inner workings of our national psyche: the term itself, as we shall see, is the biblical and cultural counterpart of the Islamic term *jihad* (p. 8).” Then, “Alongside zealous nationalism runs the tradition of *prophetic realism*. It avoids taking the stances of complete innocence and selflessness. It seeks to redeem the world for coexistence by impartial justice that claims no favoured status for individual nations (p. 8)

The former is “*a religion of Empire*,” the other “*a religion of Creation*,” to use terms matching the above book’s thesis. Reading them in tandem is highly enlightening.

His ground-breaking work, [*A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*](#), published in 1971,

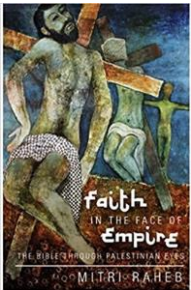
. . . [charted] a whole new course for the church, not just for Latin America, but everywhere. . . Gutiérrez examined our concept of God and the scriptures within the Latin American reality of extreme poverty and systemic injustice. That led to a renewed realization of Christ’s presence among the poor and oppressed, especially in their struggle to end poverty and oppression.



[Mahatma Gandhi](#) captured the pathos of the poor in this biblical context, when he wrote:

Poverty is the greatest form of violence.

Palestinian Domination by Israel



On this theme of socio-political liberation from oppressive Empires, there is a challenging publication by a Palestinian theologian [Mitri Raheb](#), that appeared in 2014: [*Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible through Palestinian Eyes*](#).

In short, his take on the biblical story is *one that sees God enter into human history precisely to point towards liberation from the oppressive political realities of the modern-day Israeli state*; and generically for humanity in no matter what era and location. He makes a clear case that the modern-day Palestinians are wrongfully subjugated under today’s Israeli state. Israel is the present “evil”—*there is biblically no other kind*—Empire in Palestine.

NOTE: I also initially included these—but no time to use them in the sermon:

[*The River Jordan in Early African American Spirituals*](#)

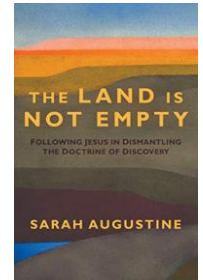
The American theologian [James Cone](#) suggests that there are two basic meanings of the Jordan River as a symbol in African American spirituals. First, the Jordan represented death—a death that was typically seen as liberation from the harsh realities of slave life. Thus, “crossing Jordan” was a theme of going home to restore a community lost in oppression and slavery.

Second, the Jordan could also represent the border between slavery and freedom—and so the “other side of the Jordan” could just as often suggest the Northern states, even Canada, and thus freedom:

*I’ll meet you in the morning
when you reach the promised land
on the other side of the Jordan
for I’m bound for the promised land.*

(see: [Daniel L. Smith-Christopher](#)
Professor, Loyola Marymount University)

Last year, American Mennonite indigenous leader **Sarah Augustine** published a book, titled: [The Land Is Not Empty: Following Jesus in Dismantling the Doctrine of Discovery](#). Many here may know of this. She writes:



An important premise of the [Doctrine of Discovery](#) goes like this: God made a covenant with Israel, God’s chosen people. With the coming of Jesus, God’s chosen became the church, the body of Christ. The church thus becomes the new chosen people who have a covenant with God, and who are justified and empowered to go into the promised land—that is, lands around the globe that were uninhabited by a Christian prince [and baptized Christians] . . . [T]his is the basis of the [two 15th-century] so-called papal *bulls*[—proclamations—]that formed the foundation of the [Doctrine of Discovery](#), *the worldview of domination [of indigenous peoples]*.

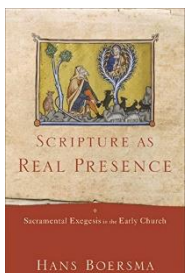
The conquest stories of Joshua in part tragically informed that profoundly destructive worldview in relation to the indigenous around the world. Her book:

. . . unpacks the harm of the Doctrine of Discovery—a set of laws rooted in the fifteenth century that gave Christian governments the moral and legal right to seize lands they “discovered” despite those lands already being populated by indigenous peoples. Legitimized by the church and justified by a misreading of Scripture, the Doctrine of Discovery says a land can be considered “empty” [Latin: *terra nullius*] and therefore free for the taking if inhabited by “heathens, pagans, and infidels.”

Thankfully today, the Church and Western society are going through painstaking withdrawal from that destructive Empire-induced social addiction.

Sacramental Interpretation

Now, yet another way of interpreting Scripture, not mentioned by Walter Brueggemann and most fellow Old Testament exegetes, who approach Scripture with historical-critical tools, is undergoing currently a renewal, at least in the West: a *sacramental interpretation*. It seeks to discern approaches to Scripture through mining aspects of the exegesis—interpretation—practised by the ancient Fathers and Mothers of the Church—okay—mainly Fathers. It emphasizes expressly the spiritual.



As mentioned above, a local scholar, [Hans Boersma](#), has been a leading light in publications on pursuing understanding of such sacramental approaches to Scripture. In 2018 he published: [Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church](#). He looks in particular at one of the most prolific Early Church writers: [Origen](#), who lived in the second and third centuries. In his *Homily 11*, he discusses *The Book of Joshua*. Origen approached the Old Testament through three lenses: the *historical*; the *moral*; and the *spiritual*. The accent though was on the spiritual in the context of Church.

Boersma focuses on Origen’s approach to *The Book of Joshua*,

. . . because [as said above] it is, more than any other, a book of violence. (Emphasis added)

Origen, Boersma tells us,

. . . defends Old Testament Scripture against the . . . accusation of cruelty by insisting on an allegorical interpretation of the text of Joshua.

He so believes in the sacramental/spiritual sense of Old Testament Scripture, that he uses the names Joshua/Jesus interchangeably. For in fact, the name “*Jesus*” is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name “*Joshua*.”

For him, a sacramental reading of *Joshua*, or any other Hebrew Scripture text, shows that so-called “*salvation history*” itself is in a sense “inspired,” under the providential ordering of God, and therefore shot through with Christ’s Real Presence. Interpretation of Scripture for Origen is given to discerning that Presence.

There is no time to develop this approach further. But it is quite sophisticated though simple (Boersma is a great scholar), and has its own compelling rationale. Hence, the questions about violence in Scripture for Origen and others take a back seat to the great salvation *mysteries* in Scripture.

The Journeys Outward and Inward: “A Culture of Life”

I shall turn now to what makes for: “*a culture of life*,” as Mitri Raheb calls for. It consists of a *Journey Outward*; and a *Journey Inward*.

I begin with a story that illustrates these two prongs.

The World Council of Churches held its sixth international Assembly in Vancouver, July 24th to August 10th, 1983. The overall theme was: “*Jesus Christ—the life of the world!*”

I attended the same-evening presentations back to back on that theme by two African Church leaders: [Allan Boesak](#) of (then *apartheid*) and profoundly oppressive South Africa; and Ugandan Anglican Bishop [Misaeri Kauma](#), whose country for eight years (1971 to 1979) had been ruled by [Idid Amin](#), one of the most corrupt and brutal dictators in modern world history. I have vivid recollections of their talks; and also draw on the proceedings publication: [Gathered For Life](#).

Boesak’s rousing address elicited from us a standing ovation. He

. . . referred to the theme’s affirmation [“*Jesus Christ—the life of the world!*”] as the Church’s “quiet, subversive piety” which refuses to believe that the power of oppression, death and destruction has the last word. This faith in the living One, this refusal to bow down to the false gods of death, is the

strength of the Church. . . ([Gathered For Life](#): World Council of Churches Assembly (6th, 1983, Vancouver, B.C.)

He declared that *the Gospel is **nothing** if not the ultimate [Magna Carta Libertatum](#) (Medieval Latin for “Great Charter of Freedoms”) for human liberation in the face of violent Empire-like oppression of every kind, for followers of Jesus Christ—the life of the world!*

The Anglican Bishop from Uganda was less rousing, but no less pointed. He first affirmed the truth and power of his predecessor’s speech. He continued with a story of recently having visited a pastor in (then) West Germany. Post-War West Germany had by then become an economic powerhouse.

The Bishop explained that the pastor he was visiting, at one point took him to a local bridge, and said that recently, five persons had jumped from it to their deaths. This, despite West Germany’s affluence and many “cradle-to-grave” welfare programs. He then said that even during the height of Amin’s brutal rule, he knew of no bridge in Uganda he could have taken a visitor to, from which any Ugandan had jumped to his or her death.

He paused, then spoke words to the effect:

*The Gospel is **nothing** if not about liberation from spiritual oppression for every person through faith in Jesus Christ—the life of the world!*

So there is the classic juxtaposition of the impact of the Christian Gospel:

- a Gospel at odds with all oppression derivative from the power of generic or specific “Empire”; embracing peace and justice—a *journey outward*;
- a Gospel of freedom from spiritual bondage to inner enslaving dark powers—a *journey inward*.

The Gospel is ever *both-and*: on the one hand utter rejection of and freedom from the evil brutality of domineering, rapacious Empire ways; on the other, freedom from the personal demons that plague humanity. *Liberation* in both instances is the operative word.

Conclusion

Saint Paul in Romans 8 poses two questions:

[35](#)Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? . . .

His response is:

[37](#)No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. [38](#)For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor principalities, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, [39](#)neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Jesus, Paul claims, is the Ultimate *nonviolent* Conqueror who declares us to be “more than conquerors,” who delivers us spiritually to the Promised Land here and now, and no less in the age to come; but also calls us to challenge and confront the sociopolitical domination of “Empire” in all its brutal and oppressive ways.

Former landlord, seminary prof, and friend, [Clark Pinnock](#), sent an email to friends, after an advancing dementia, writing this was his last email; then added these poignant words:

See you over Jordan.

An addendum to what is claimed to be St. Paul’s farewell note in II Timothy 4:7 that reads:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.;

would in this light appropriately be:

See you over Jordan.

May we all be able to at least somewhat identify with the ancient Israelites, contemporary liberation activists, evangelists, the great Apostle, and my friend, in channeling our lives towards “crossing Jordan”; where the *Ultimate Freedom of the Promised Land lies*.

*And may we be assured: the boat which carries us across the river is named **Love**.*

Amen