

Israel, Gaza, and the Book of Joshua

A sermon on the book of Joshua by Nathan Nettleton, 12 November 2023

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Message

Many parts of the Bible can be and often are weaponised as tools of oppression, but when we read it critically, with and through the teachings and example of Jesus, it calls us to liberation and life.

Sermon

If you are trying to get your head around the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stories and whose stories are told, heard, and believed, are of crucial importance. Frequently there is a contest over the stories, as though it were a zero-sum game in which there are only two stories, and everyone must choose one and reject the other. It's a poisonous attitude.

In the land that gave us the Bible which we gathered to listen to tonight, one current story goes like this:

The Jewish people have been one of the most persecuted people in history. Their ancestral stories and their dreams for the future have been bound up with the land of Israel for more than 3000 years. Over and over through history, they have been dragged out or driven out of the land, and forced to live under hostile conquerors who have sought to eliminate their stories, their religion, their cultural identity, their dreams. In the second world war, a major "Christian" European power sought to wipe them off the face of the earth, and more than six million were slaughtered. Those who survived were traumatised beyond belief, and the scars of that trauma have been passed down through the generations. Many many Jews, even several generations removed from those events, can tell you how unanticipated hostility can trigger paralyzing trauma deep in their bodies.

With the UN's blessing, modern Israel was created after that war to give this traumatised people a homeland, safe from those who wanted to destroy them. But five weeks ago, a huge band of Hamas terrorists broke through Israel's borders and brutally slaughtered more than 1,300 people – mostly civilians – and abducted 240 more. Since then, Hamas and their allies have fired thousands of missiles into Israeli towns and cities. Trauma, trauma, and more trauma.

That's one story. It is unquestionably true. But there is another story in the same land, equally true, and it goes like this:

The Palestinian people's deep roots in this land go back at least to the 7th century and perhaps even back to the ancient Canaanite people before the time of Moses and Joshua. Many Palestinian communities initially supported the creation of modern Israel and welcomed the Jews with open arms, but it quickly turned sour for them. In 1948, in what Israel calls the War of Independence and the Palestinians call "the Disaster", about 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled by Israeli forces. Most of them remain stateless, including those who still live in the Palestinian territories – Gaza and the West Bank – under a brutal Israeli-imposed system that objectively fulfils the definition of apartheid. Their homes are bulldozed, their movements restricted, and their children arrested and imprisoned for throwing rocks. The Palestinians too are deeply scarred by generational trauma.

Most Palestinians have long opposed Hamas, but immediately after the Hamas attacks five weeks ago, the Israeli military began bombing Gaza. They blocked critical supplies – food, medicines, water, electricity and fuel – from going in, and blocked almost anyone from going out. At least 11,000 people have been killed in the bombing of Gaza, and another 2,700 are missing and probably trapped or dead under the rubble. Even Israel's figures on how many Hamas terrorists have been killed reveal that 99.5% of those who have been killed have been Palestinian civilians, almost 70% of them women and children. That alone objectively constitutes a war crime, a massive breach of international law, but the world has turned a blind eye. Until the French President spoke out yesterday, not one major Western power had even called for a ceasefire. Trauma, trauma, and more trauma.

Don't let anyone tell you that you have to choose between these stories. They are both absolutely true. They both deserve to be told. They are both about people who love the land and deserve to live in peace. And the conflict cannot be understood or properly responded to as long as either of those stories is not being heard.

There is another story that needs to be heard too if we are to fully understand what is going on, and we heard a little extract from it tonight in our first Bible reading. The book of Joshua does not feature very highly in our cycle of Sunday Bible readings; just three times in three years, but two of them were last Sunday and this. Mostly I'm glad about that, because there is much in the book of Joshua that makes my skin crawl, but in light of what is taking place in Israel and the Palestinian territories right now, I don't think we can afford to be ignorant of this story and its impact on what is going on. The ideological conclusions that both Christians and Jews draw from the book of Joshua are literally a matter of life or death for Palestinian women and children, right now.

They are a matter of life or death for Indigenous people here in Australia too.

If you think that sounds a bit far fetched, just listen to this. The three bits that do make it into our cycle of readings are some of its more benign passages, but listen to this line from last week's extract:

Joshua said, "... you shall know that among you is the living God who without fail will drive out from before you the Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites." (Joshua 3:10)

Now imagine how that would sound to us if it said:

"the living God will without fail drive out from the land before you the Wurundjeri, Boonwurrung, Yorta Yorta, Gadigal, Wiradjuri, Walpiri, and Wakka Wakka peoples."

That last one is Uncle Den's mob.

If the Bible said that, we'd feel sick to our guts. But the truth is that the first version I read out is no less sick, and the second is exactly what the Biblical version was interpreted to mean by settler-colonisers in this land, around the world, and in Israel.

The extract we heard tonight, no doubt included for the much loved line "choose this day whom you will serve, ... but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord", includes a reference in the very same sentence to "the Amorites in whose land you are living" (Joshua 24:15), so it doesn't even try to pretend that the traditional ownership is the other way around.

And just 3 verses later as the people respond to that call to choose, they say “we also will serve the Lord, because the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land.” (Joshua 24:18)

If you don't know much of the Bible other than the parts we read in worship, you may not be familiar with the book of Joshua as a whole, so let me give you the very brief summary. The book forms the bridge between the ancient stories that lead up to the exodus of the Israelite people from slavery in Egypt under the leadership of Moses, and the later stories of the establishment of a kingdom of Israel under the first kings, Saul, David and Solomon. The book begins with the Israelite people on the border of Canaan and Moses having just died. Joshua, son of Nun, is Moses' chosen successor. He parts the Jordan River as Moses had parted the Red Sea, and leads the people across into the land of Canaan. The bulk of the book is then taken up with telling how, beginning with the city of Jericho, they invaded and conquered the land and divided it up among the twelve tribes of Israel.

What most disturbs us when we read this book is that the violent conquest it describes ticks all the boxes of settler colonialism and genocide, and portrays God as commanding it. If you took a full and frank account of the atrocities committed against Aboriginal peoples by British colonisers here in Australia, and portrayed God as unquestionably on the side of the perpetrators, you would have something that sounded and felt like the book of Joshua.

We are explicitly told that the Israelites “killed everyone in Jericho, men and women, young and old, and also killed the cattle, sheep, and donkeys,” (Joshua 6:21) and then went on to do similarly in other parts of the country. Even those who believe that war is often justified and who can therefore accept the death of active combatants know that a line has been crossed when non-combatant women, children and livestock are killed simply for being there. That's not war; that's war crimes, that's genocide.

Inspiring phrases like “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” sound noble when heard in isolation, but in their context, they are part of a pledge to a genocidal colonialist project.

Now one of the strange things about this is that, unlike our history of hiding and minimising the accounts of our genocidal colonialism in Australia, the book of Joshua probably greatly exaggerates the exact aspects of the story that most disturb us. There is no archaeological evidence and no written evidence outside of the Bible that an invasion and conquest on this scale ever occurred. Even within the book of Joshua, there are traces of evidence of a much more gradual and peaceful settlement and assimilation, and there are much more historically plausible explanations of the emergence of the Israelites as a distinct people with their own religion.

But that doesn't matter now, because the book of Joshua is not read as history, it is read as scripture. That is to say that its stories tell us who we are and how we are related to God and to God's purposes in the world. And that's why, when the book of Joshua is allowed to be the centrepiece of scripture, it becomes so dangerous and poisonous to the world.

In the form we have it now, the book of Joshua was probably compiled to inspire and encourage the Israelite people as they returned to Canaan from their exile in Babylon. Its message to a traumatised and fearful people was “Don't be afraid. God has delivered this land

over to you before and will surely give it back to you. God is with you and no one can stand against you. The land is yours.”

Put Joshua alongside books like Ezra and Nehemiah that describe the return to Canaan after the Babylonian exile, and you find a huge agenda of employing the tools of ethnic cleansing to assert and protect the ethnic purity of Israel. But even in the pre-Christian Hebrew Bible, this was not a voice that went unchallenged. For example, while those three books railed against intermarriage and commanded Israelite men to divorce their non-Israelite wives and send them and their children off destitute – a classic ethnic cleansing strategy – other books of the Hebrew Bible (eg. the book of Ruth) defiantly hold up non-Israelite wives as great heroes and focus more attention on the biblical commands to show love and generous hospitality to strangers in the land, especially the poor and vulnerable.

So even within the Hebrew Bible, the Joshua agenda has serious critics, but for those of us who follow Jesus, the rejection of Joshua’s agenda is unmistakable. Jesus was clearly not a fan. Given that the name Jesus is the Greek translation of Joshua, you’d think that Jesus might be drawn to the book that bore his name, but no. It is one of the few books in the Hebrew Bible that Jesus never quotes or appeals to. It seems that Jesus wanted nothing to do with the Joshua agenda.

Unfortunately, the same can not be said for many who have claimed allegiance to Jesus over the centuries since. The book of Joshua has been claimed throughout the history of European imperialism to provide a religious ideological justification for settler-colonialism – that is, the deliberate process of one society moving in to supplant another, occupying its land and usually regarding the original inhabitants as dispensable. Settler-colonialism, backed up by the book of Joshua, was an openly held policy of the European colonial powers including those who planted the British flag in Australia.

As can be seen in major examples like Australia and America, the settler-colonisers usually portrayed the indigenous inhabitants as wasting, misusing or afflicting the land, and therefore needing to be subdued and vanquished, so that the invaders could impose order and properly employ the land. As had been the intention with the book of Joshua in its origins, the national identity of these new colonies was constructed around stories of “brave” conquest.

Returning to modern Israel, and its re-occupation of the lands of the Palestinian peoples, we see this ideological use of the Joshua agenda on steroids, because of course, now we are not just extrapolating it to other peoples and lands, we are seeing those who claim descent from the original “chosen people” of the story reclaiming the specific land which the book of Joshua says was promised to their forebears by God and was to be taken by eliminating the indigenous inhabitants. The expanding Jewish settlements in the Palestinian West Bank, clearly illegal under international law, are an obvious continuation of this policy of settler colonialism, with Palestinian communities being literally bulldozed aside.

There are Jewish Zionist extremists today who openly say that the reason there is no peace in Israel today is because they failed to obey God by completely eliminating the indigenous inhabitants in the days of Joshua, and because they failed to finish the job again in 1948, and that the only solution is to finish the job now. And while the majority of the Israeli leadership would not employ such extreme rhetoric, that Joshua mythology clearly underpins the genocidal apartheid policies with which Israel oppresses the Palestinian people.

I'm not making a subjective negative judgement in using those words. The policies easily fulfil the UN definitions of those words, and even a former chief of Mossad, the Israeli Secret Service, has described the current practice as apartheid (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/sep/06/israel-imposing-apartheid-on-palestinians-says-former-mossad-chief>). Some South African visitors have said it is worse than what occurred in their country.

Another story must be acknowledged too, and that is that there are many Jews in the world today who oppose Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands and this war, and are horrified by what is being done in their name. Many Jews have always opposed the creation of the modern state of Israel, believing that their faith taught that they were to remain in diaspora and not return to the lands of Canaan until the Messiah came. So anti-Zionism, far from being automatically anti-semitic as the right-wing Israeli leadership deceptively asserts, is in fact a relatively common position in the Jewish community.

There are many Christians today, especially American evangelicals, who maintain a largely unquestioning support of not only Israel's right to exist, but its right to violently oppress the ordinary Palestinian people and repress their hopes for freedom and independence. They weaponise two biblical ideas to justify this unwavering support. One is the Joshua agenda, which most Christians would no longer support in other colonial projects, but are still willing to support in the context of its original geographic location. The other is a weird reading of the end times prophecies in Revelation which they understand to mean that the return of the Jews to Israel is something that must happen before Jesus will return.

As a result, the Christian Church has been absolutely complicit in allowing Israel to maintain its self-destructive policies of repressing the Palestinians. I say self-destructive because, no matter how understandable Israel's urge to seek vengeance for the horrific atrocities committed against them may be, even if they succeed in completely destroying Hamas, their illegal and indiscriminate methods will have sown seeds of rage and despair in the next generation of Palestinian youth that will inevitably grow into something even worse than Hamas. Israel, which was created to provide a safe homeland for persecuted Jews has now become the most unsafe place on earth to be a Jew.

So what we are seeing as we read the book of Joshua and this current conflict side-by-side is an urgent reminder of the life and death perils of building policies on one strand of biblical thought without allowing other, sometimes even more developed, strands of biblical thought to engage in critical dialogue with it. As much as I don't like the book of Joshua, it is important that we continue to hear it, because without an understanding of history, we are doomed to repeat its mistakes.

So when we hear Joshua say, "Therefore, choose this day who you will serve..." we may now be being called to choose between serving Joshua's agenda and serving Jesus's agenda.

The Bible speaks elsewhere of the God's people being called to be a light to the nations, and tonight we heard Jesus's parable of ten bridesmaids, five of whom were able to continue to shine their light, and five of whom weren't (Matthew 25:1-13). Perhaps like the wise five whose lights continued to shine, we are being called to recognise the foolishness of expecting the only the oil once given is enough, and instead to know that our faith and our understanding

of the Bible and its relevance to the world need to be continually replenished if the light is going to continue to shine.

Therefore choose this day who you will serve, the war mongers and oppressors like Hamas and the Israeli Defence Force who both think that the slaughter of civilians can be religiously and politically justified, or Jesus who says what you do to the least of these Palestinian children, you do to me. Therefore, choose life.