

*Reading Joshua/Judges in Kansas*

*Postcolonialism in Oz?*

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## *Introduction: Reading from Nowhere*

Everywhere is just as somewhere as anywhere else. That having been said, Kansas is about as nowhere as anywhere can be. It is flat, treeless and boring, and usually at the bottom of any list of potential vacation destinations. Kansas is also in the heart of the United States, far removed from the rest of the world. So one might expect a fairly typical “Western” reading of Joshua/Judges to emerge from Kansas, potentially as dull as the prairie landscape.

What separates this reading from most “Western” scholarship is that I plan to pay attention to my context. While American scholarship traditionally pretends to read the Bible from “nowhere” as if context does not matter, reading Joshua/Judges from the “nowhere” of Kansas turns out to be surprisingly interesting (at least I think so). So let's begin.

### *1. Kansas as context*

Kansas is the state in the geographic center of the US. It is also the state in the mythic center of the US. For all of its military and industrial and economic strength, Americans still have an additional mythic picture of themselves as part of an innocent people, working hard on the land, unsullied by the noise and violence of the city or the larger world.<sup>1</sup> When these images arise in the American imagination, it is the prairies and small towns of Kansas that form the background. It is the symbol for “down-home, stand-pat, plainspoken, unvarnished, bedrock American goodness” (Frank 2004: 28). It is connected to this American myth through stories such as *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and Superman (who grew up in Smallville, Kansas).

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of the mythic nature of Kansas and the rather different history of the real Kansas, see Frank (2004).

Despite, or rather because of its central location, Kansas is also marginal state. Most of the large cities in the US are near the coasts, or a major waterway. Decisions are made on the east coast, myths are created in Hollywood on the west coast, and Kansas is safely ignored because it lacks sufficient population or wealth to be important.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, Kansans occupy a space that is both central and marginal to American identity. We are part of “the West” in the broader sense of the term, yet we have no influence on “the West.” There is a sense in which Kansas could be thought of both as the heart of “the West” and as a (willing) colony, with our social systems being completely dominated by “Western” culture while having little influence on this culture.

In writing this paper, it quickly became apparent to me that it is impossible to speak of Kansas culture as monolithic. There are divisions by class, race, size of community, rural vs. urban, education, and place of origin. Further, to suggest that “Kansas culture” can be unproblematically tied to “Western culture”, to the culture of New Orleans or Seattle, never mind the culture of Vienna or Paris, is hopelessly naïve. I would even wonder if small town Kansas culture could not be more easily compared to small town culture in Kenya or China than to the cities of Europe.

In this sense, the term “Western” is problematic, which is why I will continue to put “the West” and “Western” in quotation marks. At some points it encompasses so many peoples and cultures that it becomes its own myth, rather than a description of real people or groups. In his study of anti-essentialism within postcolonialism, Sayyid notes that “the West” is as much a “brand name” as an actual description of something (2000: 265).

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<sup>2</sup> The exception is the Koch brothers, who use their enormous wealth to exert significant influence on the American political scene.

This is not to suggest that Kansas is somehow insulated from larger “Western” culture. It is rather to say that this connection is not as simple as it may seem, even for people living in the mythic heart of America. It is even more complicated by the view many Kansans would have of themselves. Their self-identity would include a basic individualism, with ties to family, various social groups, their town, state, and nation (with a few sports teams thrown in), but for many their identity would end at the distant borders of the nation. They would see little connection to the cultures of Canada or Europe, as these people are part of “them”, distinguishable from Asians and Africans only by skin color.

In addition, Kansas is significantly isolated from the rest of the world. I live nearly one thousand miles from the nearest international border. This allows me to safely ignore what is happening in the rest of the world, knowing that there is a large buffer zone between my home and the larger world.

Historically, Kansas, like the rest of America, is land taken without compensation from the “Indians.” While Kansas history is hardly unique, it is the part of that story that is regularly told in American pop culture. While I have never seen a Hollywood movie on the conflicts between white “settlers” and “Indians” in Georgia or New York, I have seen many classic “Westerns” that detail this fight on the American plains (told, of course, from the perspective of the winners). So Kansans are likely to be well aware of this part of their history. This tradition also maintains the connection between Kansans and the land, as agriculture continues to form a large part of Kansas economics.

Another significant part of Kansas history is the battle over slavery around the civil war. Kansas is sometimes known as “bleeding Kansas” because of the bloody battles that took place before the Civil War to decide whether Kansas would enter the Union as a free state or a slave

state. The stories of this conflict often center around a man named John Brown, celebrated in legend and song. This story also continues into the twentieth century, as Kansas became the focal point for the battle over segregated education in the “Brown vs Board of Education” case in Topeka, KS in the 1950's.

Kansas is also part of the Bible Belt in America. My hometown of under twenty thousand people has over forty churches, but no synagogues, mosques, temples, or other buildings dedicated to the use of another religious group (although many would argue that not all of these churches are truly “Christian”). While it might be argued that sports<sup>3</sup> and nationalism (Jewitt 2008) dominate the religious culture of Kansas,<sup>4</sup> Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings are still generally set aside for Christian worship and mid-week meetings, so that even sports teams do not play or practice during these times.

In my classroom at a secular university, a significant majority of my students believe the Bible to be the Word of God.<sup>5</sup> While some of them have not actually read the Bible, nor do they attend church, they often agree that they “should” do both of these. My status as both professor and Christian pastor is important to many of my students, even though they are often there to learn about the Bible from a less dogmatic perspective than they get in church.

So for most of my students, their identity is significantly defined both by Christianity and American nationalism. These two are often understood as part of a single whole, because “American is a Christian nation.” There are, nonetheless, points of tension between these two identities, since one can be both American and Muslim, but not Christian and Muslim. Abortion

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3 The debate is whether baseball (Evans and Herzog 2002) or football (Dean 2002: 148-171) are the most American of sports.

4 Anyone who has watched Americans place their hands over their hearts as they worshipfully listen to the Star Spangled Banner before a sporting event should recognize the religious nature of these institutions.

5 Recognizing that I teach New Testament courses, so my students are self-selecting.

is also a place where Christian self-identity supersedes the laws of the nation. Thus, many people in Kansas find themselves caught between two competing hegemonic systems, often without realizing it.<sup>6</sup>

More locally, Kansas is home to a large group of Mennonites (of which I am one). This group has upheld the tradition of Christian pacifism within an otherwise very militaristic society. The conflict between these types of Christianity has meant that pacifism has become a “Mennonite” idea rather than a “Christian” one.

My position within these various competing systems is different from most Kansans because I am a Canadian. I have lived in Kansas for over 15 years, so my perspective is increasingly both as insider and outsider. As someone from the Canadian prairies, I find the prairies and people of Kansas to be very familiar. Yet there are many things about basic American identity that are quite different from Canadian identity. As a white person, I live without the tension of foreigners with darker skin. No one ever asks me where I am from, and my accent is not so pronounced that I stand out. So my hybridity is largely invisible, which has its own complications and temptations. This also means that the descriptions below of what it means to read Joshua and Judges in Kansas will be both emic and etic, as I read both as insider and outsider.

## *2. Brief remarks on theory*

As a biblical scholar, I tend to start by asking a basic new-historical question: Why do these people write this text in this way at this time? I presume the context of Joshua/Judges to be the Persian period, where traditions were molded to form the texts we currently possess.

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<sup>6</sup> The importance of these dual identities will become apparent in our later discussion of hybridity.

In addition, as someone trained in ideological criticism, I want to re-formulate the question to ask, “Why do these people (namely me and my contemporaries) read this text in this way at this time?” This grounds my own work in the current religious/political/academic context, and forces me to be accountable for my own reading.

More recently, a third question has intruded on my reading. This one arises out of both postcolonial theory and my dual vocation as an activist Christian scholar and a Christian pastor. Here the question is, “How can I aid my readers to read this text in such a way that they will be better equipped to do the work that God is calling them to?” The pastoral thrust of this question is obvious, but the postcolonial thrust may be more difficult to discern.

While postcolonialism may be viewed as a critical theory or general approach to reading texts,<sup>7</sup> it also contains a political programme. It is important to remember that postcolonialism arose out of the work of Edward Said. His goal was not merely the description of the problems of “Orientalism”, but a transformation of “Western” culture to include Palestinians as real people capable of speaking for themselves.

It may seem a huge leap from the plains of Kansas to the problems in Palestine, but the connections are real and ongoing. A few days ago, I received an email from a friend from Wichita, Kansas, asking me to sign “Israel Pledge.”<sup>8</sup> While the stated purpose of the pledge is to “to send a message to our country, the media, and the people of Israel that millions of Christians love Israel and stand with her in her fight for survival,”<sup>9</sup> the organizers of this pledge (Christians United for Israel) are part of the Christian Zionist movement, which sees itself in direct opposition to the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

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7 There are many introductions to postcolonial theory currently available. The collection edited by Moore and Segovia (2005) is a good place to start.

8 <https://secure2.convio.net/cufi/site/SPageServer?pagename=TheIsraelPledge>

9 Taken directly from the email message.

So part of my purpose in reading Joshua/Judges in Kansas is to help my fellow Kansans understand that their work as the church includes the Palestinian people (and all other people equally). But Joshua/Judges is much more likely to be the problem than the solution.<sup>10</sup> These are the books of genocide and ethnic cleansing, the books of slaughter and rape and looting. So this is not the place to begin such a programme. But I cannot ignore these books either, because blindness to the parts of our cultural past that we would prefer to forget is part of the problem. We don't want to think about what we did to the Indians, or the blacks, or the Vietnamese. We want to believe that the nuclear weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki saved more lives than they ended (yes, I hear this regularly from my students). It is this forgetfulness that makes it easier to move forward to the next war.

In his recent book *Out of Babylon*, Walter Brueggemann recognizes the problem of reading the Bible in the midst of Empire. Writing as an American, he outlines a strategy for reading both within and against empire (similar to the postcolonial idea of hybridity) which includes “accommodation, resistance, and alternative.”(2010, p. 11)

His strategy has similarities to my own. In moving between the worlds of academia and regular readers, he attempts to lay the groundwork for what looks a lot like postimperialism (postcolonialism for those inside the empire). What I did notice, however, was that of the over five hundred biblical references listed in the Scripture Index, none of them came from Joshua or Judges. This suggests to me that neither Joshua nor Judges will be easily amenable to a postimperialist reading. On the other hand, if I can suggest strategies for a postimperialist reading of Joshua and Judges, they should be useful for nearly any part of the Bible.

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<sup>10</sup> Kim begins this process of reading Judges through the eyes of postcolonial criticism in his article in *Judges and Method* (Kim 2007). Unfortunately, after an excellent introduction to the problem, his interpretation resorts to a rather traditional historical reading of Judges.



Recognizing that Joshua and Judges may resist a strategy that aims at postimperialism, it is also important to note the parts of the American myth that resist this sort of reading. The two basic doctrines that form the basis for American comfort with neocolonialism are American Exceptionalism and Manifest Destiny.

Both of these doctrines have a long history and have been extensively studied. As we will soon see, both of them are also intimately connected to Joshua and Judges. American Exceptionalism teaches my students that America is special, and unlike any other nation past or future. America was founded on (Christian) ideals like equality and freedom, and is not subject to the faults that plague other nations. America is thus not an empire because empires are founded on different ideals, those of domination and control over others. So the American military goes abroad to free peoples from tyranny, but does not force its beliefs on anyone (because all good and right-thinking people already think like we do and want to be like us).

In addition, Manifest Destiny teaches my students that America has an obligation (given by God?) to spread freedom and democracy around the globe. (Capitalism also runs throughout this myth, but is usually assumed rather than voiced.) Many slogans accompany these declarations, such as “City on a Hill,” “Light to the Nations” and “Leader of the Free World.” All of this makes for a very messianic national self-image, with the apocalyptic Jesus cheering us on to victory.

The difficulty for Christians is that Jesus' life and teachings do not provide a very useful example for those wishing to be victorious conquerors. Here is where Joshua and the various judges come to the rescue (along with hundreds of their contemporary Hollywood counterparts). These are the manly heroes we want.

So reading Joshua and Judges in Kansas is very simple and straightforward. Much of the American frontier mythology was erected on this foundation. What is less clear is imagining a reading of Joshua or Judges that does not lead naturally to continuing military aggression and violence.

### 3.a. *First reading*

A casual reading through Joshua and Judges will provide any Kansan with a long list of themes and ideas with which they are very familiar. While many of these themes are significantly modified to fit Kansas history and culture, this modification happens so automatically that there is little conscious thought necessary to believe that Joshua and Judges provides a guide not only for who we are as Kansans but also where we have come from and how we should proceed toward the future.

Below is a partial list of parallels between the worldview of Joshua/Judges and that held by many Kansans. It is unlikely that any particular citizen of Kansas holds all of these beliefs, but that is also likely to be true of many members of the people of Israel. A more complete study would need to account for the modifications to these themes, but for now I will just note them.

#### *i) Joshua*

In Joshua, as in Kansas, the land is understood as promised land (1:3, 6). This particular land was given to the people as a gift (1:11; 2:9, 24) for our use by God (chs. 13-22).

So God has given us this land as a gift (although we in Kansas celebrate the heritage of the native people and prefer not to talk about why they are no longer here). This God is with us (1:5), and his primary characteristic is strength and power (4:24). God's strength is directly tied to military strength (note the "commander of the armies of the Lord" in 5:14).

The combination of land as gift and God's strength leads to the notion that this gift can be taken away (7:5, 9). This anxiety is linked to sin (7:12) and the people following God's law (8:34-35). In Kansas, this is often reflected in the fear-based message of AM Christian talk radio, where the sins of others (homosexuals, liberals, etc.) are given as the cause of America's real or potential downfall.

In general, however, this fear is a rather minor point, not a subject of much concern because God is on our side. In Joshua this is both stated (1:5) and shown (6:20; 10:11-13) and generally presumed as obvious. Still, there remains a clear sense that part of being a God-fearing people is that we are also a law-abiding people (1:8; 23:13-16, 24:20).

While God is in some significant sense our true leader, He (yes, always "He") acts through people. These people are our leaders who follow God fearlessly (1:7), and we must respect them and their leadership (4:14).

With God on our side, it is simply logical that other nations will live in fear of us (2:9, 11; 5:1). Their fear and our confidence is also rooted in our history of military conquest (chs 10-12, esp 11:20). We commemorate our past through the use of objects that remind us of who we are (altars, stones, the ark; flag, cross, historical markers).

## *ii) Judges*

Judges contains a number of statements that suggest that the stories of Joshua are some kind of fantasy (e.g. 1:27). For the most part, however, these can be ignored in favor of reading Judges as a continuation of Joshua. So Judges is both a continuation of the fantasy and reminder that it is all fantasy. Below I will simply highlight the parts of Judges that resonate best with the fantasy of Kansas.

Despite the simple truth that God loves us more than anyone else (remembering this from Deut. 7:6), not everything is as good as it could be (this is the general lesson from Judges 1:17-36). Part of the problem is the younger generation, who are not as good as we used to be (2:10). God has a larger purpose in this as well, putting temptations in our way to test us (2:3) and to teach us how to be strong in battle (3:2). The wars that arise from this are also part of God's plan to punish those who do wrong (9:56, 57). The clear distinction between us and them in the above description of the problems that face us also means that ethnic purity is important for religious faithfulness (3:6).<sup>11</sup>

Much of Judges reads like the ideal of the Kansas libertarians. Rather than a strong central government that steals our hard-earned money in the form of taxes, the leadership is very local. Rather than a central army that goes abroad to fight wars, citizen militias are drawn from local populations who are armed and ready to deal with local threats (4:6). God's people may be outnumbered, but God is with them (7:12-15). While this ideal is very pleasing to the libertarians, others are not so sure whether this is good or bad (17:6).

All of this relies on the local hero, who has special gifts necessary to carry out the task of leadership (13:2-5). This person may not always be the smartest person in the room (Samson and his father stand out here), and may arise out of a rather humble beginning (Jephthah, son of prostitute), but he<sup>12</sup> gains glory and honor through war (8:22). Songs of victory are sung in honor of these heroes (ch. 5). The hero may die in old age as an honored member of society (8:32), or may die heroically in battle (16:30). The correct response of the people is to follow the leader without question (6:14, 34, 35).

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11 The issue here for Kansans is not strictly ethnic or racial, but is more likely to be applied to illegal immigration.

12 There are exceptions (Deborah), but the ideal and the norm are still male.

While some verses point to occasional problems arising from the conflict between rich and poor (5:10-12), in general the system works to ensure peace and security for all (“and the land had rest...” 3:30; 5:31, 8:28). As in Joshua, the whole system is guaranteed by God, who rescues the people when they repent (10:15-16).

These are the obvious parallels between the worldview of Joshua/Judges and that of Kansas. A more complete study would be needed to tease out the many subtle transformations that take place as this ancient text is applied to a modern American state. In addition, there are many other themes that arise in a reading of Joshua and Judges that raise questions and concerns for the people of Kansas.

### 3.b. *Second reading*

Besides the many themes addressed directly by Joshua/Judges that relate directly to life in Kansas, there are other ideas and issues that are part of both Joshua/Judges and Kansas. Some of these lie quietly in the background, forming the assumptions and preconceptions that ground the discussion. Others arise out of the silences in the text. Still others arise as we reflect more thoughtfully on the implications of both Joshua/Judges and our own myths of identity.

#### *i) God working through conquest*

One of the questions that dogs the text in Joshua/Judges is the role of God in the conquest of the Canaanite peoples. Even if we willingly assert that God desires the conquest of certain peoples, and further if we agree that God is on “our” side, is that the extent of God's activities? In Joshua, the taking of Jericho might appear as a paradigm for God's actions on our behalf, but

it doesn't take a lot of thought to realize that Jericho is the exception. After that incident (Joshua 6), no more walls come a tumblin' down. There is the rather unclear incident in Joshua 10:12-14 when "the Lord fought for Israel", but otherwise God's support is difficult to discern. Israel continues to obey God's instructions, but does so without any obvious aid from God.

This makes "God on our side" a much simpler proposal. We can simply assume that God approves of our actions so long as we're winning, without expecting any signs to display God's approval. But this also makes God a rather petty nationalist deity, whose sovereign will is decided by the current state of Washington foreign policy.

### *ii) Warfare and its consequences*

The stories in Joshua/Judges mostly end so cleanly. King X is defeated and Israel wins and the land has rest. This fits well with the movies and the television programs we watch, where all conflicts can be solved in under an hour with no residual problems. But reality is usually not so cooperative. There are the wounded on both sides. There are the dead to bury on both sides (especially if we want to inhabit their cities).<sup>13</sup> There are economic consequences to war. Even if we are willing to think in terms of genocide (bomb them all into glass!), problems continue to arise. So Joshua/Judges is great for getting us into and through the periods of war, but is of less use in thinking about the long-term consequences of our actions.<sup>14</sup>

### *iii) Attitude towards government*

There are two problems here. The first arises from the conflict internal to Joshua/Judges regarding the people's duty to each other. Joshua 1:12:18 makes it clear that Israel is one people,

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<sup>13</sup> I have found no commentary which speaks about the problem of what to do with thousands of dead bodies after the genocides in Joshua. Apparently they disappear from the minds of scholars as quickly as they disappear from the text.

<sup>14</sup> Fortunately we no longer need to think about these things, having apparently entered a state of permanent war.

and must exhibit an “all for one and one for all” mentality. In Judges this is given some superficial support (Judges 5:15-18), but for the most part the battles appear local. This is, in part at least, due to the lack of a standing army (and a taxation system that makes a standing army possible). So in Kansas, do we support the numerous overseas missions of our standing army, or are we more connected to the more libertarian perspective we see in Judges (especially when these wars happen so very far away)? This relates directly to the suspicion I often hear regarding decisions made in Washington. Is warfare the only purpose of a central government?

The second problem arises within a strongly divisive democratic system. I notice among my students a definite tendency to support war more strongly when the current president represents their particular political party. So the Republicans are all gung-ho for war when it is instituted by George Bush, but much less so when Barack Obama begins (or continues or alters) a military mission. But Joshua/Judges does not allow for this type of party loyalty. On the other hand, Joshua/Judges also does not raise the possibility of a leader in Israel who does not follow God. So when God ceases to be a national deity and becomes the property of one political party (i.e. mine), does God's support for “our military” also wax and wane depending on the decisions of the American voter?

#### *iv) Us and them*

In addition to the basic divide between Democrats and Republicans, there are many other ways of dividing identity within Kansas. Inter-state rivalries (e.g. Kansas vs Oklahoma) are usually reserved for sports, but occasionally include more substantive issues such as water rights. Racial and ethnic tensions are part of our history and a current reality. Religious tensions are usually not an issue given the lack of other religious groups in many towns, but the status of

Muslims in a “Christian” nation in the midst of numerous wars against “Muslim” nations also might make us wonder what it means to be truly Kansan.

At first glance, Joshua/Judges has no such problem, for the line between Israel and everyone else appears quite simple. But cracks continue to appear in this facade. Who are these tribes across the Jordan (and where do they go)? What do we do with people like Rahab and her family? What do we do with Israelites who worship Baal (Judges 6:30)? What happens when the conflict becomes internal rather than external (Judges 19-21)? We can pretend that these conflicts don't exist when we stand proudly before the flag, but they tend to arise quickly when the last strains of the national anthem have died away.

*v) Identity: national vs religious; communal vs individual*

One of the difficulties in this whole discussion is the anachronism of thinking about Israel as a “nation” or a “religious group.” Neither of these fit well in a tribal society where blood relationships are primary. So these texts are of little value in helping resolve the questions of identity in Kansas. Yet Joshua/Judges is so significant in our cultural identity that its inability to even address our questions is problematic. After all, how do I construct my relationship to “them” if I do not first have both a stable “I” and a stable “us”?

Much of what I have noted as parallels between Kansas and Joshua/Judges presumes that America is, in some sense, the new Israel. This is the new promised land (or at least a second one) and we are the new chosen people. But does this identity include the native people who survive? Can it include Muslims and atheists? Can it include unpatriotic Americans, or is individual identity unimportant? And what do we do with allies in the larger world (a possibility not even raised in Joshua/Judges)? Or the billions throughout the world who (we presume) want



to be just like us? Are these people “us” or “them”? In these ways Joshua/Judges sets before us the issue of identity ( e.g. Joshua 24), but is less helpful when we want to ask more detailed questions.

*vi) Sexual politics*

Joshua/Judges presumes that all of the questions we have been discussing so far are men's questions. Women are naturally part of the story, but seldom as persons on the same level as males. Studies of women in Joshua/Judges abound, so it is not necessary to recount the issues here. In the context of Kansas, the most obvious current issue in sexual politics is the state government's attempts to shut down abortion clinics. While I have seen no direct reference to Joshua/Judges in the current debate, there is a clear religious element to it. In addition, there is the general presumption that men have the right to make decisions about the lives (and especially the sexual lives) of women without consulting them.<sup>15</sup>

*vii) Class issues*

As I mentioned earlier, Judges 5:10-12 provides a small hint of class differences in Israel, but that was the only one I could find. While the Law proclaims an egalitarian ideal for Israel, the writings of the prophets indicate that this was not a reality. It is difficult to know exactly how this played out in the Persian period. If all members of the Jewish community in Judah considered themselves to be upper class, clearly distinguishable from the people of the land, perhaps they were unwilling to talk about differences among themselves.

This would provide a parallel to life in Kansas. In Kansas, most people consider themselves middle class. Since middle class status is maintained by hard work, those who are

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<sup>15</sup> Mieke Bal's *Death and Dissymmetry* (1988) remains the definitive study.

poor must not be working hard enough. The truly rich remain an abstraction, since few of us know any of them personally.

*viii) Connection between nationalism and militarism*

Recognizing that “nationalism” remains anachronistic, this is still the most obvious way people in Kansas would think about group identity in ancient Israel. The word “nation” appears in modern introductions to the Bible, so even scholars are guilty of this error.

In Joshua/Judges, group survival is often at stake. The people are threatened from outside (and inside). In each case where this occurs, the response is warfare. Making treaties is not even allowed (Deuteronomy 7), and no other form of conflict resolution is mentioned. It is us or them, so they must die. Occasionally the alternative is enslavement for the defeated, but this is a second-best option.

This response to the “other” is especially interesting in a Persian text. It is unlikely that the Jewish community in Yehud had the authority to go around killing all their neighbors. Disputes were dealt with in a variety of ways (see Ezra 4-6, Nehemiah 4, 6), none of which included genocide or enslavement, yet the text only wants to talk about slaughter. There may have been numerous ways the attitudes prevalent in Joshua/Judges could have worked themselves out in the Persian period (extreme isolation, people ignore policy, extreme arrogance, et c), but none of them look like a particularly good option.

In Kansas, we are home to one of the largest air force bases in the world. In addition, there are dozens of smaller military bases (including a number of installations of the Navy in a land-locked state that does not have a single natural lake). There are, on the other hand, no places that directly train people for nonviolent intervention, and we are too far from any country

to worry about needing to get along with foreigners. So for many in Kansas, it is natural to believe that America is strong and free because of its military strength, and our identity is tied up with our ability and willingness to crush our opponents through the sacrifice of our soldiers.<sup>16</sup> For Christians in Kansas, Joshua/Judges provides an alternative to the “unrealistic” (and rather wimpy) teachings of Jesus (“Blessed are the meek,” Matt. 5:5).

While the attitudes found in Joshua/Judges towards “others” continues to echo in Kansas, there are significant ways that they clash with other parts of American self-perception. Americans want to believe that they are saving the world, with their military only doing good,<sup>17</sup> rescuing foreigners from evil dictators, and giving aid to the poor and weak. This self-identity means that we can’t count bodies of dead foreigners after battles, and are wary of death of innocents. We are told that drone aircraft have killed no innocent civilians.<sup>18</sup> Or else we need to de-humanize the “other” because it is not enough that they are foreigners. So the narrative of the actions of the American empire get complicated, based on what can be said or not, what can be shown or not, and how this fits with the things that everyone generally is expected to know. It is also interesting to note that it was the president who grew up in Kansas, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who first warned of the dangers of the “military industrial complex” for America’s future.<sup>19</sup>

### *3.c. Actual Reading*

#### *i. More theory*

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<sup>16</sup> For a more detailed study on the contrast and connections between biblical and American concepts of sacrifice see Bergen 2005: 69-81.

<sup>17</sup> The current Navy slogan is “America's Navy: A Global Force for Good.”

<sup>18</sup> There are many articles on this subject on the internet. See e.g.

<http://www.publicserviceeurope.com/article/635/pakistan-drone-attacks-have-caused-civilian-deaths>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.h-net.org/~hst306/documents/indust.html>

The above section details some ways that Joshua/Judges might interact with the worldviews of people in Kansas. Yet there are in this study a number of assumptions that need to be identified before we can proceed to a solution. This is because the way scholars use the Bible is quite different from the way it is used by regular people. So we cannot assume that our understanding of what the Bible says is reflected in the minds and hearts of average church-going (or not) people. If I am going to be honest about what it means to read Joshua/Judges in Kansas, I need to at least articulate these differences.

The sections above think about the interaction of Joshua/Judges with the worldviews of Kansans. Yet I cannot assume that even faithful church-going people really encounter the books of Joshua or Judges beyond the children's story book stage (if at all). So even if they have any knowledge of Samson or Daniel or Joshua, it is unlikely to come from a detailed study of the Bible. They are more likely to have seen a video than actually read the text. For my students, the most likely association with the Jericho story is purple slushies.<sup>20</sup> The chance that an average church-goer has been influenced directly by modern scholarship is miniscule.

On the other side of the question, I also cannot assume that the questions raised by the sections above are talked about in churches. Do churches talk about class issues or the unintended consequences of warfare? And if they do, is the Bible seen as a significant resource?

Besides these questions concerning whether the Bible is used in the churches in Kansas, there is an additional question regarding how it is used. For most of my students, the Bible is a unified text with a single message (about spiritual salvation). This is an important faith statement for many of them. For them, the bogey-man is “contradictions”, of which the Bible cannot have any. If it does have any, the whole edifice falls down. The church and its hierarchy guarantee the truth of this singular message, and the fate of our souls rests on our belief (faith) in

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<sup>20</sup> See *Josh and the Big Wall* (2009, DVD).

it. So much of the evidence I find when I study Joshua/Judges becomes inadmissible because it violates the truth of the Bible.

A further problem is that the Bible is only one of the foundational documents for the people of Kansas. The others are the documents and icons of Americanism. Since both the Bible and the Pledge of Allegiance are True, they must say the same thing. So Joshua/Judges is used to justify ongoing Christian participation in war. God commanded people to go to war in the past (here Joshua/Judges are major exemplars), and God does not change. Further, God put our leaders in place (Romans 13), so we must support our leaders in war (even if we have no intention of supporting our leaders in anything else they do). This conclusion is not the result of careful study. It is the result of the fusion of two parts of the Truth (since there can be only one Truth). It is also more of a “gut thing” than a “head thing”, especially because following is more important than the critical examination of ideas. This also means that the question is not what the text actually says when studied carefully, but how it is fused with the basic foundational ideas of Empire.

## *ii. Testing*

One way to test how Joshua/Judges might actually be encountered by people in Kansas is to look at lay Bible study guides. While it is impossible to know how many of these guides are actually studied in Kansas, this is still the most likely way that an average Kansan would encounter these texts, with the possible exception of a read-through-the-Bible program (which often ends somewhere in the bowels of Leviticus).

For the purposes of this study, I have chosen to focus on two specific passages, Joshua 9 (the Gibeonite deception) and Judges 3:1-6 (the list of nations who remained in the land after the

conquest). Joshua 9 was chosen because it raises the possibility of another approach to ethnic relationships, namely covenant and cooperation. Judges 3:1-6 is a summary of the failure of the program of ethnic cleansing, and presents a number of explanations for the failure. Together, these passages potentially represent a challenge to a superficial reading of Joshua/Judges, or at least may be texts that provide the opportunity to reflect further on questions raised by the larger story.

As my guides through these texts, I found five Bible study guides that would be readily available to someone wanting to study Joshua or Judges as a lay Christian. Each is from a different series and publisher, and all were published in the U.S.

Donald Baker's study in the LifeGuide Bible Study series is largely a series of open-ended questions on the various pieces of Joshua. The section on Joshua 9 is titled "Deceived" (1988: 24-26). After a brief introduction, he begins with a few questions on the details of the story itself, then moves on to questions about being deceived personally (24), and the problem of "not inquiring of the Lord" (25). He sees the problem in Joshua 9 as parallel to "making peace with a sinful world" (26).

NavPress publishes a LifeChange series of study guides written cooperatively by the editors and study developers at the press. In the section titled "Gibeon's Deception" (1988: 97-105), there are questions interspersed with explanations of specific terms and sidebars "For thought and discussion."

The group "warm-up" section begins as follows: "Ask everyone to think of an example of how the victory of God's people is currently threatened by direct enemy assault" (102-03). The sidebar gives passages about spiritual warfare, but there is also an open question about whether Christians should also exterminate "nations in lands they have conquered" (103). From there it

moves to “personal applications” (103). In the larger study of warfare for Christians, it assumes a “we” who can fight against “them,” those “who uphold the order of the world, the flesh, and the devil” (105). The only gospel passages cited in this section is John 10:10.

Earlier there was a hint that the Gibeonites might have preferred Israelite control over that of the “oppressive Canaanite kings” (98). It implies that the leaders of Israel (called a “republican committee”) were elected by the men of Israel (99). Overall, the issue that is central to the discussion is “unwise alliances with a nonChristian (sic) world” (102).

Kay Arthur's study *Choosing Victory, Overcoming Defeat* is part of the New Inductive Study Series, all of which she authors. Arthur understands Bible study as “warfare with the devil” (1995: 6), while working from the principle that “Scripture will never contradict Scripture” (10). This is a study of Joshua, Judges and Ruth, and focuses on choosing victory, which is “always ours for the obedience of faith” (11).

Her study of Joshua 9 is part of week two, which deals roughly with Joshua 7-12, although it focuses on chapter 7. It deals directly with the problem of things “under the ban,” and believes that this is a phrase that still applies to Christians today (29). Her conclusion is that “A holy God is to be obeyed; sin must be judged,” and that God must be consulted in all things (31).

In moving to Judges 3:1-6, Arthur continues her study by looking at Judges 2:1 – 3:4 as a unit (53-57). The reader is asked to read the passage and “apply what you learn here to your life” (55). The problem being addressed is “tolerance of an incomplete obedience to the Word of God” (56), which is linked to freedom and ruling over vs. being ruled by enemies (57).

Woodrow Kroll's study *Judges* is subtitled *Ordinary People, Extraordinary God*, and is part of the Back to the Bible Study Guides series. He studies Judges 1:1 - 3:6 as a unit (2006: 7-

14), with the “key verse” being 2:3 (10). He understands Israel's wars as a result the people abandoning God, which he parallels with a man finding his wife unfaithful (12). He also connects the worship of Canaanite gods to “all sorts of sexual immorality and violent acts”<sup>21</sup> (12), which link to the personal lives of Christians today (13). So the question we are left with is “What is God asking you to drive out of your life?” (14).

Sandra Glahn's *Java with Judges* (2006) is part of her Coffee Cup Bible Studies series, which appears to be aimed directly at a female audience. She deals with Judges 1-3 in one lesson. Her general introduction to Judges provides three explanations for the annihilation of the Canaanite people: a) the land was a gift from God, b) God had “put up with” the Canaanites for four hundred years but “they had blindly refused His grace,” and c) the Canaanites were “horrible”, and she ascribes the sins mentioned in Leviticus 18:21-25 to the Canaanite people (xiv). Later she connects the worship of Baal and Astarte to “animal sacrifice, male and female prostitution, and even human sacrifice” (12).

Glahn summarizes the cycle of the judges as “sin, suffering, supplication , salvation” and asks the reader to link them to “a time in your life” (12). Nothing is said directly about 3:1-6, although the general theme is “extreme obedience” (21). In dealing with the problem of war, she states, “Today we are not called to literally kill in the name of righteousness,” citing four passages from Matthew as well as Romans 12:14 (18).

In comparing these five studies, it is easy to see two important issues that face someone in Kansas who wished to read Joshua/Judges as somehow relating to modern realities. The first is how a text which deals with inter-ethnic disputes can be translated into a world of multicultural nations. The second is how these same stories of inter-ethnic war can be related to individual lives.

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21 Though without the rock-and-roll.



As to the first question, only Glahn and the NavPress study deal with the issue directly, while Arthur only hints at the problem when she talks about being ruled by enemies (1995: 57).<sup>22</sup> Glahn and NavPress appear to be at opposite ends of the spectrum regarding the modern state. Glahn is clear that killing is no longer an option, with spiritual warfare being the battle we are called to fight (2006: 18). In contrast, the writers at NavPress regularly use the language of holy nation, and assume that Christians have armies with which they can conquer (1988: 103 -105). Interestingly, both books were published in the same city (Colorado Springs, Colorado), which is in the state next to Kansas and is a hotbed of nationalistic evangelicalism.

All the authors agree that the books of Joshua and Judges have lessons that should be applied to the lives of individual Christians. In this, they are firmly part of the modern American paradigm of what “religion” is. In Arnal's study of the definition of “religion”, he notes that, in the context of the capitalist notions of the state, “ religion, as such, is the space in which and by which any substantive collective goals (salvation, righteousness, etc.) are individualized and made into a question of personal commitment or morality” (2000: 32).

By conforming to this sense of the place of religion, these studies show themselves to be grounded in an understanding of faith that is very different from that of either Testament. While claiming to lead people to battle with “the world,” they actually uphold the place of religion prescribed to them by modern capitalism. By subscribing to this system, they are unlikely to lead our Kansas readers to any particular ideas that challenge their worldview.

#### 4. *Counter-reading*

Most of what has been said thus far has been descriptive, but hopefully you have also seen how the books of Joshua and Judges have been used in ways that are largely destructive.

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<sup>22</sup> Although she does speak about “Christendom” (1995: 62).

As an activist biblical scholar, I also wish to find ways to read Joshua/Judges in ways that lead to life rather than death. I believe that the current American self-identity is destructive both to the enemies of America and to America itself. Insofar as Joshua/Judges has played and continues to play a role in this self-identity, perhaps there are some tools that would allow Joshua/Judges to be part of the emergence of a new identity that offers more hope for the world. Scholars have offered a number of alternatives that are worth considering in my context in Kansas.

*i. History*

Michael Prior has written a book that explores the relationship between the Bible and colonialism (1997). In it, he notes the important place that Joshua/Judges play in the construction of colonialist views and in defense of all sorts of atrocities.<sup>23</sup> He explains the problem well when he says that, when judged by modern standards, “the Hebrew Bible reflects some ethnocentric, racist and xenophobic sentiments that appear to receive the highest potential legitimacy in the form of divine approval” (1997: 34).

On the other hand, when the Bible is used to legitimate colonialism, he believes this to be a result of “naive interpretation”, and “every effort must be made to rescue it” from being used in this way (1997: 263). His rescue comes in the form of standard historical-critical scholarship. He devotes an entire chapter to the explanation for how both the patriarchal narratives and the book of Joshua are not historical documents by modern standards (ch. 6: 216-52). In making this case, he seems to believe that this removes these texts from use for colonialism, although he is not clear why this is so.

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<sup>23</sup> It is understandable that Prior, as a British scholar, says little or nothing directly about American colonialism. What is more striking is his lack of references to British colonialism. He also says nothing about neocolonialism.

In the context of Kansas, I do not have much hope for this particular method. Decades of biblical scholarship along this line have had little or no discernible impact on the worldview of Kansans. Reading these texts as “ideologically motivated assertions about the past” (1997: 248) does not really change what these assertions are, nor what they appear to say about the attitude of God towards anyone who is not one of the chosen people (whether Israelites or Kansans).<sup>24</sup>

## *ii. Reading for Liberation*

Prior is not the only one who wants to rescue the Bible. Roland Boer has numerous books on this subject, most obviously his *Rescuing the Bible* (2007). Boer’s strategy, however, is not connected to a “correct” interpretation of the Bible, but a commitment to liberation that precedes any use of the Bible.

An important part of the question here is the nature of the biblical text itself. Boer calls the Bible “an unruly and fractious collection of texts” (2007: 50) which are inherently multivalent. Thus, any political position that one wishes to take can be undermined by passages from the Bible. Boer’s response to this is to call readers of the Bible to take sides, to decide “that any political and economic programme that brutalizes people and nature is undesirable and should be condemned and overthrown” (2007: 79). This decision recognized that it is quite possible to use the Bible for oppressive purposes. Boer lists numerous examples of this, both from his native Australia and from the US. His contention is not that these are false readings of the Bible, but that they should be opposed simply because of their oppressive nature.

Boer’s programme of liberative readings of the Bible is especially significant for reading Joshua/Judges in Kansas, since these are two texts that are regularly used to justify the

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<sup>24</sup> Rannfrid Thelle, in her study of the hermeneutical challenges of the conquest accounts, comes to a similar conclusion. After a lengthy study of the cultural and literary context of Joshua 1-12, she concludes that this type of reading does not solve the problem of the “misappropriation” of Joshua in modern times (2007: 72, 76).

oppression of others. While it is rare to hear someone defend genocide as acceptable because the Bible says so, there is often a general supposition that the Bible belongs to the right side of the political spectrum. So long as this idea remains unchallenged, Christians will be forced to choose between supporting right wing political ideas and abandoning their faith. Boer's commitment to both liberation and the Bible offers an important alternative to this oversimplified (and incorrect) view.

### *iii. Postcolonial reading*

Postcolonial reading strategies arose in response to neocolonialism. Its history and commitments are well summarized in numerous books and articles. As a strategy for reading, it is usually situated among neocolonialism's victims rather than its perpetrators, so it might appear a bit out of place in Kansas. In my defense, I have argued earlier that in Kansas we are both the beneficiaries of (neo)colonialism and its victims. Whether or not you accept this argument, I also believe that the transformation of Kansas and all America from being a major perpetrator of neocolonialism is in its own best interests. So any help we can receive from the voices of the "other" in our own liberation should be welcomed.

One of the most challenging parts of postcolonial reading for most Kansans is the insistence that indigenous voices (used critically) be given renewed standing, as opposed to the texts of the colonizer (such as the Bible).<sup>25</sup> At first glance, this might appear to be nonsensical in the context of Bible-belt Kansas. The local traditions of Native American groups are no longer available for our use, and are not "our traditions" in any case.

On the other hand, if we could include Americanism in the category of local traditions, there are some aspects of the excesses of Joshua/Judges that could be challenged by the myths

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g. Dube 2002: 116.

and ideals of American society. This would be similar to what Martin Luther King Jr. did, using the American dream against racism, calling this nation to its best myths, to actually do what is claimed.

Doing this in response to Joshua/Judges would be rather simple in some ways. Part of the American myth is that we are strongly opposed to genocide, ethnocentrism and other evil things that “they” do. In addition, the ideal of America as a melting pot of cultures is strongly counter to themes in Joshua/Judges.<sup>26</sup> In these and other ways, the “local traditions” of Kansas can be used to counter the genocidal and xenophobic view of Joshua/Judges.

In some ways this may seem an odd idea, using the American myth as a counterpoint to the themes of Joshua/Judges, since the American myth is the heart of the problem. How can the same myth be the problem and its solution? Again, however, using Martin Luther King as our example, it is possible to see that the problem is only partially the myth itself. Mostly the problem is the gap between the myth and the actual facts on the ground. Just as racism was part of the American reality but not part of the myth, so too neocolonialism and empire building are not part of the American dream.

#### *iv. Reading counter-voices within the text*

This is perhaps the trickiest tactic to employ. In one sense, it seems rather straightforward. Yes, the text clearly says that God commanded the wars that Joshua then carried out. On the other hand, there are a number of places within the text that suggest another picture of the events. As I noted earlier, the simple narrative of conquest breaks down quite quickly when we get to Judges. At points the failure seems to be with the people while at other times the failure seems to be God's. Both are captured in the angel's speech at Bokim (2:1-5),

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<sup>26</sup> For an explanation and defense of Americanism as a religion, see Gelernter (2007).

where God first blames the people for the failure (“yet you have disobeyed me,” v.2), then seems to take responsibility himself (I will not drive them out...” v. 3). Even the sacrifice of the people (v. 5) makes no difference, suggesting that the mechanism for affecting the actions of God does not actually work. Finally, the list of peoples who are left in the land (Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, 3:5) are identical to the list in Deut 20:17, implying that the whole conquest slaughter did not happen.

These are just a few of the many places in Joshua/Judges where the conquest model is undermined by the text itself. Of course, again we encounter the problem of “contradictions” in the Bible, and how to speak of them. So this, like any of these suggested solutions, needs to be employed selectively. There is little point in telling people things they are unwilling to hear. On the other hand, if we can show that the Bible gives us two visions of the way to respond to the “other,” we can choose which to implement.

#### *v. Using the New Testament as a Counter-Voice*

For the most part, Kansans have an ambivalent relationship to the Old Testament, much preferring the New. The exceptions are not surprising, since they involve ideas that are important to Kansans but are not part of the New Testament message. The two most obvious ones are capital punishment and war.

In my New Testament course, I introduce my students to the various places where the New Testament proclaims a message of love of enemies and nonviolent peacemaking (Matt 5:38-48; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27-33; John 18:36; Acts 5:29; Romans 12:14-21; 1 Peter 3:9-12). Even among the students who attend church regularly, most have never been shown these passages. They are often confused by the disjunction between these apparently straightforward

teachings of Jesus and the message they have heard in church regarding Christian participation in war.

Other students have seen these passages, and have been armed against their potential effects through the use of systematic theology (usually in the form of a two-kingdoms theory) or a resort to Joshua/Judges (with some help from Romans 13). I find it best not to argue with these students, but to simply point them back to the New Testament texts and suggest that they argue with Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

#### *vi. Denying a Connection between Ancient Israel and America*

Underlying much of this study has been the larger question of the relationship between ancient Israel and modern America. Joshua/Judges is key to this identification. Joshua/Judges allows us to talk about land and conquest, but the movement towards kingship that follows is not formally part of the American myth.<sup>28</sup>

I found the most forthright denial of this connection in Younger's *NIV Application Commentary, Judges/Ruth*. In the "Contemporary Significance" section of his commentary on Judges 2:1-5, he asserts that it is simply wrong to apply the message of Joshua 2 on a national level: "No contemporary nation equates with the Israel of the Old Testament" (2002, 80). Here, however, he comes across the problem discussed earlier. While he claims that the church corresponds to biblical Israel, he also suggests that any application be done on an individual level, and then on a "more limited corporate level" (80). So a text written within a tribal/ethnic context is brought into an individual/national context and the translation is not a simple one. But

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27 A similar argument is made by Hubbard in his *NIV Application Commentary on Joshua*: "Joshua 9-10 in no way justifies the use of violence to achieve Christian goals" (2009, 310), citing the nonviolent ethic of Jesus, although he does not address national goals. Hubbard, however, is the only commentary on Joshua I consulted that even addressed the question.

28 Although Disney's mythmaking often assumes an ideal of kingship.

an acknowledgment of the problem goes a long way in undermining a simple equation between Israel and America.

## 5. *Conclusion*

In Kansas, as in much of America, the cross and the flag are proudly used as parallel symbols for a single mythic system.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to imagine this parallel being made without the influence of Joshua/Judges. The New Testament does not easily lend itself to nationalism, although this has not stopped numerous groups from using it for this purpose. It is almost inevitable that people wishing to argue for a Christian nation or Christian empire would resort to these ancient stories of conquest and war. In this way, Kansas is little different from many other places in the world.

On the other hand, the unique history and geography of Kansas lead to specific types of uses of Joshua/Judges. This means that any attempt to read for liberation or peacemaking must take these conditions into account. Anyone attempting to bring change must be aware of local context and tradition.

The interconnectedness of our world also means that the way we read Joshua/Judges in Kansas has potential effects throughout the world. Joshua/Judges forms part of the justification for continued American participation in the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and the many other low-level conflicts where Kansans are sent as part of the US military, often with the enthusiastic blessing of their local church. In a more subtle way, the mythic connection between militarism, nationalism and capitalism makes Joshua/Judges part of the foundation for the spread of the gospel of capitalism throughout the world.

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<sup>29</sup> For a defense of this system, see Noonan, 2004. Boer (2009: 2273) argues that capitalism is the unacknowledged third party in this system.



The mythmaking enterprise continues. Myths intertwine and are transformed into new myths. Somehow we got from the lone Kansas cowboy to the need to spread democracy to Iraq. Somehow Joshua/Judges continues to be part of this transformation. Perhaps we as scholars have an obligation to address this reality before more people die.

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