Earl, Douglas S.

*Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture*

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Ernst Axel Knauf
University of Bern
Bern, Switzerland

Although a scholarly audience might be put off by this book’s title, those who read it nonetheless are in for a pleasant surprise. This Durham doctoral thesis of 2008 “represents a reflection on the pressing question of what it means to read the Old Testament faithfully as Christian scripture today in the context of the church but in the light of historical and ethical criticism” (x). The author approaches his subject in a dialogue with Christian exegesis (from the church fathers onwards) and Jewish interpretation and asks on his way all the important anthropological and hermeneutical questions. Thus, the book is a meaningful theological contribution for all communities with religious convictions based on ancient scriptures to which authority for the present is attributed.

Chapter 1, “Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture?” (2–13), formulates three primary questions: “First, a theological question: can, and if so how does, an Old Testament text continue to find significance in a Christian context? Secondly, a historical question: can a foundational “history-like” narrative that appears to lack historical veracity, even when broadly construed, be seen as trustworthy and true in any sense? Thirdly, an ethical question: can ethically problematic texts such as Joshua continue to find Christian significance?” (3). A recourse to the anthropological fact of “cultural memory” quickly
shows that the Old Testament, and hence Joshua, is an undeletable element of Christian cultural memory, and only the question remains of how to deal with it. The rediscovery of Origen’s hermeneutical principles proves helpful: if an authoritative text is meaningless (or even counterproductive) on one level of reading, then one must look for another level. This leads to reflection on “The Nature of Scripture and How We Learn to Speak of God” (12–13).

Thus chapter 2 is prepared, “Learning to Speak of God through Myth—Approaching Joshua as Myth” (14–48), starting with a nonpejorative “Introduction to Myth,” finding all the criteria for myth, as established by William Doty (16) operative in Joshua (17). At this point, the author might have mustered support from, for example, R. G. Kratz and his characterization of the Torah as “Israel’s myth,” which he did not. He broadens his point of departure by reviewing “Ideological, Sociological and Political Aspects of Myth” (20–22), “Psychological Approaches to Myth” (22–26), “Existential and Symbolic Approaches to Myth” (27–39) and “Structuralist Approaches to Myth” (39–46). The concept promises to bridge the “nasty gap” between the ancient text’s “there” and our “here” insofar as “approaching Joshua as myth’ appears to offer insights into what the book of Joshua sought to achieve as discourse as well as indicting how the book’s significance develops in new contexts to form Christian cultural memory” (47).

Chapter 3 turns back to “The Hermeneutics of Reading Joshua a Christian Scripture” (49–70). In the “Hermeneutics of Text” (50–57), Origen is supplemented by Paul Ricœur, whereas “The Significance of Testimony” (57–64) opens with Ricœur’s reception by Rowan Williams, stressing that the “testimony” of the mythic or poetic texts consists in the text being identical with what it is “telling” (and showing that rather than telling it). “Revelation” becomes an expression of what the text might generate in its readers. “Thus one may say that Joshua is revelatory today as Christian Scripture if it is generative of contemporary Christian life and experience by providing a faithful and fitting witness to God by developing the existential significance of foundational ‘inspiration events’ into the present” (61). The author is well aware that he is thinking in the footsteps of Rudolf Bultmann (27). The chapter concludes with “The Life of Symbols” (64–70), one of the most neglected fields of protestant theology.

Chapters 1–3 constitute “Section I: An Introduction to the Hermeneutics of Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture.” “Section II: Making Joshua Intelligible as Discourse: Starting to Read Well” comprises the following three chapters. In chapter 4, “Joshua as Part of Tradition(s)” (72–88), the author departs from the “DtrH” approach by identifying both “Deuteronomistic” (Josh 1–12 and 23) and “Priestly” (Josh 13–22) constituents in Joshua (74). Table 4.1 (80) lists “Instances of Distinctive Deuteronomistic Language in Joshua,” following Moshe Weinfeld, while pages 83–84 give instances of
“Priestly” language, and Table 4.2 (85) shows the “Provisional Summary of Deuteronomistic and Priestly Language in Joshua.” The significance of identifying these two main traditions in Joshua is “knowing that Josh 1–12 and 23 reflect Deuteronomistic concerns at a decisive stage of composition suggests that these texts may be read well with Deuteronomistic concerns in view. . . . Knowing that Josh 13–22 reflect Priestly concerns suggests that one might expect to read these texts well in terms of Priestly conceptions of the purity of the land for example. Moreover, one is invited to read Josh 18:1 and 19:49–51 in terms of the Priestly creation narrative, in which the settlement of the land is viewed as, in some sense, reflecting the completion of creation” (87). The author’s concern for “reading the Bible well” does, however, remind me of what Susan Sontag called “the ethos of reading,” and sometimes I wish the author, or any other reader of Hebrew Scriptures, more of the “eros of reading,” or just the joy of Scripture.

Chapter 5, “The Genres of Joshua—Codes of Production and use of Literary Conventions” (89–93), discusses the similarities and dissimilarities between Joshua and ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts and comes to the conclusion that this genre covers only parts of Joshua. I do not think that any other genre applies to the books from Judges to the Twelve in their final shape and form than that of a “biblical prophetic book.” Chapter 6, “Understanding the Significance of בָּרָה” (94–112), addresses the central ethical problem of Joshua for modern readers.1 There is a slightly apologetic undercurrent in this chapter (especially on 112), but I fully agree with the conclusion “that whilst in one sense Joshua does portray the fulfillment of Deuteronomy 7, and of the promise of the land to the patriarchs, its literary use of בָּרָה is in fact far more subtle and searching, being used symbolically to pose probing questions concerning Israel’s identity and self-understanding, qualifying some of the assumptions of Deuteronomy—in particular, how the boundaries of the community are to be defined” (111). I have no doubts, though, that the scribes of Joshua, contrary to many modern readers, were well aware of the fact that Deut 7 is from a speech of Moses, while Deut 20 is YHWH-speech.

“Section III: Reading Joshua” comprises the next three chapters. It delivers the entrée after two sets of delicious hors d’oeuvres. One might ask whether chapter 7, “The Text of Joshua” (114–19), would not be better placed in the preceding section, but the author stresses the fact that the (Christian) reader has a real choice between the Greek and the Hebrew texts, which are different (but more or less coeval, in my view), and justifies his own choice. In addition, I would like to point out that we have an excellent commentary on the Septuagint of Joshua (A. G. Auld, Joshua: Jesus Son of Naue in Codex Vaticanus

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1. As does T. R. Elssner, Josua und seine Kriege in jüdischer und christlicher Rezeptionsgeschichte (Theologie und Frieden 37; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2008).
Chapter 8, “Reading Joshua” (120–96) is a significant first step to meet this need. This “close reading” substitutes well for the commentary one hopes the author will write some day. There is an abundance of pertinent intertextual discoveries. Then chapter 9, “Drawing It All Together: Reading Joshua as Christian Scripture Today” (197–240), brilliantly concludes the book. With “Challenging and Constructing Identity” (197–203), the author grasps well the nature of the biblical myth, which is, as opposed to many others, not just foundational but at the same time critical of those who build on that foundation. “Appropriating Joshua—the Development and Use of Its Symbols and Mythemes” (203–11), “Appropriating Joshua—Its Development and Use as an Act of Discourse as Myth” (212–32), and “The Context and Use of Joshua” (233–36) more explicitly address a Christian audience, but not without interest for others: “So even in a context with raised historical consciousness it is still possible to develop the idea of ‘salvation history’ with Exodus and Joshua reflecting key symbolic expressions of this history. These symbolic expressions form a grammar of discourse that the community agrees to and uses to talk about salvation history, even if the basis for the idea looks rather different now from what it might have done previously. One might approach the idea of ‘salvation history’ with a second naïveté” (211). “[T]he reading developed is also an attempt to explore the plenitude of the text in dialogue with the tradition and the context of the interpreter … Joshua itself is already part of a dialogue with tradition, or indeed traditions … as we have seen, a kind of dialogue that continues throughout Joshua’s interpretation and use” (237). Previous theories of “reading the Bible” were overly concerned about how to get the content (message, testimony, truth) of the Bible into our minds. Here is a theory that suggests how we should get our minds into the stream that continues to flow from the Scriptures, the Scriptures flowing with it. This is an endeavor with which I heartily agree.

The book is a prime example of fides quaerens intellectum and of academic, trans-denominational theology.