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INTRODUCTION

Endless War

The Gates of the Promised Land

On March 3, 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addressed the United States Congress on the subject of US negotiations over Iran's nuclear capacity. In short, Netanyahu came to oppose the impending agreement between the United States and Iran to slow Iran's nuclear capabilities and lift American sanctions. His emphatic speech reached for existential themes, causing several commentators to suggest the very personal nature of the existential crisis. Netanyahu's political career has been dedicated to decrying the nuclear capacities of Iran, and, at the time, the Democratic President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry stood on the verge of a new approach to Iran and its nuclear program.

The Republican Party took up Netanyahu's passionate opposition and allied with him against the American president. This unprecedented level of affiliation between a single American political party and the leader of a foreign country led Speaker of the House John Boehner to invite Netanyahu to Congress without consulting the White House, a clear violation of protocol. Defying President Obama had become both a sport and purpose among the Republican Party, so the Netanyahu invitation aimed to scuttle or, at least, disrupt one of Obama's central foreign policy initiatives.

Netanyahu was more than happy to oblige. His diplomatic identification with one political party had earned him the nickname "the Republican Senator from the State of Israel," and the shared patronage of donors like Sheldon Adelson brought the two even closer. More importantly perhaps were the ways Netanyahu aligned the stars in his favor. He scheduled the speech during the week of the Zionist lobby AIPAC's (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) annual meeting in Washington, DC, and just two weeks before that

year's Israeli election. At the time, Netanyahu trailed in the polls. He wagered correctly that his bravado in defying President Obama would impress Israelis at home exactly as his campaign "phone banks reminded voters that Netanyahu's opponents had the support of 'Hussein Obama.'"¹ As Netanyahu did his part to affirm the Republican *raison d'être*, so Speaker Boehner accommodated Netanyahu's political linking of the Holocaust and Iranian threats to Israel by inviting Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel to attend Netanyahu's congressional address.

Along with its significance in the Israeli electoral calendar, the March 3 date landed Netanyahu in the halls of American power on the eve of the Jewish holiday of Purim, which celebrates how the intrepid Queen Esther saved the Jewish people from certain annihilation at the hands of a Persian political advisor by risking everything to approach the tempestuous king for protection. Implying his role as a modern-day, male Esther, the prime minister did not hesitate to equate the story of ancient Persian threat with the contemporary Iranian scenario or to see the story as factual precedent for "the Jewish people's right to defend themselves against their enemies."² The speech's most pointed moment of biblical interpretation, however, did not concern Esther, but rather was a passing reference to the leader of conquest, Joshua.

Toward the end of the speech, Netanyahu had most of the audience on its feet applauding the right of the Jewish people—understood as Israel—to defend itself.³ With a dramatic glance above as if to God on Sinai but actually to the walls of the House Chamber, he said, "Overlooking all of us in this august chamber is the image of Moses. Moses led our people from slavery to the gates of the Promised Land. And before the people of Israel entered the land of Israel, Moses gave us a message that has steeled our resolve for thousands of years. I leave you with this message today." Breaking into Hebrew for the first and only time, Netanyahu quoted, "Be strong and resolute, be not in fear or in dread of them" (Deuteronomy 31:6).⁴

1. David Remnick, "Base Appeals," *New Yorker*, March 22, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/base-appeals>.

2. Benjamin Netanyahu, "The Complete Transcript of Netanyahu's Address to Congress," ed. Washington Post Staff, *Washington Post*, March 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/full-text-netanyahus-address-to-congress/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.fa375ffd612b.

3. Many prominent Democrats did not attend in protest of the affront to President Obama.

4. The exhortation to "be strong and bold" echoes the salute of the secular, socialist Hashomer Hatzair movement, as well as the 1977 charter of West Bank settlements; see Michael

In the immediate context of the speech, the “them” who should neither be feared nor dreaded are the Iranians, with the implication that the United States should not fear Iran’s nuclear capacity to the point of signing an agreement to curb that capacity. But the reference is slippery because fear of Iran constitutes the basis for Netanyahu’s argument why members of Congress should reject the agreement. Fear is the very emotion stoked by his evocation of “a dark, genocidal regime” and his conclusion that “Iran can’t be trusted.” Another level of meaning in the exhortation to “be strong and resolute” likely reverberated among the Republican audience. Were they not heeding Moses by being “strong and resolute” as they flouted President Obama’s authority and brought Netanyahu to Congress? As he affirmed Republican righteousness, Netanyahu endowed unwavering support of Israel with biblical import; his use of biblical citation pointed to a two-sided “them” who should neither be feared nor dreaded that included both Iran and the Democratic Party.

The citation carries yet a third meaning relating to Israel’s domestic policy. Here the biblical context matters quite a bit, as does the history of Israeli biblical interpretation in which the phrase “be strong and resolute” cues the Zionist program broadly and Israeli military action specifically. The strength and resolve at issue involves a lack of “fear or dread” of Arab opponents. The very point of this book is to show the trajectory of biblical interpretation that leads to Democrats, Iranians, and Palestinians alike figuring as a dreaded and fearful “them” to be opposed at all turns. Let us now observe the operation in brief.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses urges the People of Israel to “be strong and resolute” as he initiates Joshua as his successor. The occasion is momentous because the book dramatizes Moses’s struggle with his divinely ordained death outside of the Promised Land, which means that his appointment of Joshua marks a certain reconciliation with his fate. Furthermore, Moses will be spared the wars “to wipe out and dispossess” the peoples of Canaan, since this job falls to Joshua (Deut 31:3). Joshua has served as Moses’s loyal apprentice throughout the wilderness journey, showing his military prowess when necessary. Joshua figures as the ideal type of military man—fearless, strong, and resolute—and God promises to fight beside Joshua on Israel’s behalf. Still, Moses enjoins the quarrelsome people to act like an army and maintain fearlessness and resolve during the impending battles to conquer the Promised

Feige, *Settling in the Hearts: Jewish Fundamentalism in the Occupied Territories* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 48.

Land. “Be strong and resolute, neither fear nor dread them” becomes the mantra of the conquest that celebrates the annihilation of the peoples of Canaan.

In his speech, Netanyahu introduced the quotation with assurance that the message “has steeled our resolve for thousands of years,” by which he meant the Jewish people during thousands of years of oppression. In fact, the militaristic mantra of conquest was largely neglected by Jews and Jewish interpreters because Judaism developed in the Diaspora, where notions of conquest and homeland held little relevance and posed a danger to social stability in Christian and Muslim lands. Moses, of course, remained central as a figure of liberation and law giving, but Joshua held little appeal, particularly after Christian interpreters claimed him as a forerunner of Christ. Joshua assumed new importance in early Zionism as a self-sufficient leader who brought the People of Israel into an era of national independence and waged a prolonged war with the natives. As I will show, the book of Joshua became a foundational text in modern Israel in contrast to its marginal status in Diaspora Judaism. In the meantime, I would correct Prime Minister Netanyahu’s timeline and point out that the biblical directive, “be strong and resolute, neither fear nor dread them,” has steeled *Israeli* resolve in the context of ongoing war with Palestinians.

This point becomes clearer by reflecting on Netanyahu’s words before he raised his eyes to the image of Moses:

We are no longer scattered among the nations, powerless to defend ourselves. We restored our sovereignty in our ancient home. And the soldiers who defend our home have boundless courage. For the first time in 100 generations, we, the Jewish people, can defend ourselves.⁵

Not surprisingly, Netanyahu employs all of the central tropes of Zionism: discounting of the long history of Diaspora Judaism as a time of sheer Jewish powerlessness, total claim over occupied territories as part of an ancient homeland that can accommodate Jewish sovereignty alone, and justification of militarism and occupation as defense. He drives home the notion of defense by repeating it three times and having soldiers stand for the entire Jewish people. The defense that involves systematic aggression does not stand in contrast to ideas of a nonmilitarized state but rather to the Holocaust. According to this reasoning, the annihilation of Jewish Europe justifies military occupation, and the “them” whom Israelis cannot afford to fear or dread are Palestinians.

5. Netanyahu, “Complete Transcript.”

After his biblical turn, Netanyahu brought America back into the equation. “My friends, may Israel and America always stand together, strong and resolute. May we neither fear nor dread the challenges ahead. May we face the future with confidence, strength, and hope.”⁶ America’s continued standing with Israel certainly entails continued American funding for Israel’s extensive military at the same time that Netanyahu hammers the point that his Republican allies should remain resolute in opposing the Iran deal, a wish fulfilled when Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement negotiated under Obama. His invitation to a brilliant shared future suggests that as Israel continues its Occupation, America should reject the agreement with Iran and Republicans should remain steadfast in opposition to Palestinians, Iranians, and Democrats alike. The final note of “hope” works with the Joshua reference to ironically subvert Obama’s authority—“hope” having served as one of the main slogans of the 2008 Obama campaign during which Civil Rights leaders dubbed Barack Obama the harbinger of “the Joshua Generation” ushering Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s vision into a new era.⁷ As he assumed the rhetoric and reference, Netanyahu sought to unseat the hopes of this American Joshua.

The Jewish War

This book tells the story of how the biblical figure of Joshua entered modern political life. I tell it as a Bible scholar who studies the political interpretation and use of biblical images, as well as the political rhetoric of the Bible itself. So, in order to understand moments like Netanyahu’s address to Congress or the contrasting notion that Barack Obama’s election indicated the onset of the Joshua Generation, we will move through the book of Joshua itself, an

6. Netanyahu, “Complete Transcript.”

7. The Rev. Otis Moss Jr. dubbed Obama Joshua, explaining, “You’re part of the *Joshua generation*.” See William Safire, *New York Times Magazine*, November 30, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/30/magazine/30wwln-safire-t.html>; David Remnick, “The Joshua Generation: Obama and the Politics of Race,” *New Yorker*, November 17, 2008, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/11/17/the-joshua-generation>; and Jonathan Alter, “With a Little Help from Our Kids,” *Newsweek*, November 17, 2008, p. 28. Analysis of the book of Exodus in African-American traditions is also relevant; see Allen Dwight Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, “Let My People Go! Threads of Exodus in African American Narratives,” in *Voices from the Margin: Interpreting the Bible in the Third World*, 3rd ed., ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 309–333.

alternate reading of the biblical text, and the history of its Israeli interpretation. At each stage, I analyze the political currency of the idea of a Promised Land. As I provide a cultural genealogy of the term “occupation” in Hebrew, I analyze the rhetoric of war and its relationship to social reality.

Political and economic factors certainly set conflict in motion, but here I pursue the internal cultural logics that sustain a group of people in a state of endless war. Foremost, I find that nationalism, with its insistence on territorial integrity and unified citizenry, cannot exist without war stories constantly deployed to send citizens off to battle. By marking certain people as nationals and others as opponents, I argue, war rhetoric plays a dominant role in national formation. Importantly, within this formation, the army represents a cohesive entity not evident in civilian life. Because society—which is always heterogeneous in nature—does not support nationalist claims, the army becomes a key icon of the nation. An integral part of such national formation—and militaristic formation more generally—involves denial of the social realities that do not support national cohesion or ethno-linguistic unity. Just as military incursions seek to overpower opposition, so war rhetoric wages a battle against a social landscape that does not conform to its desires. And, because social reality remains out of step with nationalist conceptions, war stories become the primary place where the nation actually exists. Bearing the burden of sustaining the existence of the nation, war stories become publicly ritualized and reiterated with passion at moments and places where national bonds begin to dissipate. For many states, as well as disenfranchised groups, a founding war story operates to enforce the collective and to stir the kind of emotions that can lead residents to counterproductively turn against those sharing the same space.

As much as war stories bring the nation into being, they also end up preserving the very social realities that they set out to deny. This occurs in a few different ways. First of all, the representation of enduring opponents records the presence of neighbors in some way resistant to the national formation. Acknowledgment of these neighbors points to the fragile, incomplete nature of national projections. Secondly, the insistence that an army signifies the nation shows that civilian society cannot alone support the image of a unified collective. The stark oppositions of conflict play a vital role in bringing the national unit into relief. Finally, the fervent nature and ritual repetition of militaristic narration reveals the insecurity of the narrators facing social settings that do not match the political entity dramatized in their stories. War stories then not only rally troops and citizens with gripping accounts of heroism and

sacrifice, but they also impose a nationalist framework on a heterogeneous society. At the same time that battle tales mobilize against existing social structures, they unwittingly record the failures of nationalism. The failures become apparent not only in shrill tones and genocidal allusions, but also in admissions of persistent localized forms of governance.

I support these arguments about war and the nation-state with two interconnected instances of war rhetoric. The first comes from the biblical book of Joshua and the second from the significantly later 1958 book of Joshua study group held at the home of David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel.⁸ The two are not only linked as a biblical text and its political interpretation, but also as the primary consolidations of Jewish war rhetoric. Through the work of Ben-Gurion's study group, the terms of Joshua's conquest came to resonate with modern Israeli militarism. In modern Hebrew, the word for the Israeli Occupation (כיבוש/*kibbush*) derives from the biblical Joshua's systematic wars against Canaanite peoples.⁹ The word for settlement in the book of Joshua (נחלה/*nahalah*) similarly forms the root of the word for Jewish settlements in the West Bank (התנחלות/*hitnahalut*). Through use of the word, settlers (מתנחלים/*mitnahalim*) present their "fortified cities" as avatars of the sanctified parcels of land bestowed on biblical tribes (Joshua 19:35).¹⁰ The inseparable valences of conquest/Occupation (כיבוש/*kibbush*) and tribal allotments and militarized settlement (נחלה/*nahalah*), in combination with the selfsame word for a border (גבול/*gevul*), attest to how Joshua's vocabulary informed the lexicon of Jewish nationalism.

While we can, and usually do, think of Israel's wars as discrete events with separate intents—1948, the Suez Canal War, 1967, the War of Attrition, 1973, the Lebanon War, the First Intifada, the Second Intifada, and the wars on Gaza—we could also adapt Toby Jones's framework for thinking about the US-Iraq relationship as one continuous war.¹¹ The idea of war as a permanent state proves helpful not only as a means of rethinking history, but also as a way of examining the relationship of culture and discourse to war. If a state remains permanently at war, then its rhetoric and culture will forever be bound up with

8. David Ben-Gurion was Israel's longest-serving prime minister until July 2019, when Netanyahu surpassed him, albeit with an uncertain future and inconclusive elections to follow.

9. The use of the word in Joshua 18:1 suggests a completion of the conquest.

10. Feige, *Settling in the Hearts*, 48, 73–76.

11. Toby C. Jones, "America, Oil, and War in the Middle East," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (2012): 208–218.

militarization. This book examines the kind of speech, public rhetoric, and stories that support a situation of ongoing war and persuade a group and its opponents to participate in an unrelenting conflict. In 2020, as Israel's formal occupation of territory spills over its fiftieth year, I consider its founding stories and an alternative politics of place.

Joshua

Joshua, the biblical nationalist text par excellence, turns out to be divided between twelve chapters that narrate the gruesome conquest of Canaan and another twelve that reflect local, tribal traditions of coexistence. This bifurcated structure points to a dialectic that runs through the book and its representation of an ancient state. In addition, a hidden drama rests in the more static second half of the book, in which the very peoples earlier reported as liquidated reappear as long-standing neighbors. Joshua's war does remake the nation, but it does so by displacing (or trying to displace) social categories, not by exterminating indigenous peoples. Although hardly the first to offer a critique of the book of Joshua, I am the first to locate a corrective within the book itself. On my way to doing so, there are many compelling nationalist, Marxist, and postcolonial readings of Joshua that inform my own.

Marxist biblical critics have recognized in the book of Joshua an egalitarian tribal era of "primitive communism" that precedes the era of capital accumulation by landlords supporting the monarchy.¹² Thus a golden age comes to an abrupt end after kings establish a capital in Jerusalem.¹³ I share the Marxist appreciation for tribalism and its collective ownership of resources, but resist the idea that the tribes disappeared as their members dissolved into the ranks

12. See Roland Boer on how life was ordered through the extended-family household commune, village-commune, or *musha'* farming: *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014). See also Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 9–115.

13. "David Jobling, following Norman Gottwald, has argued that under the monarchy we find what may be termed a 'tributary' mode of production, a revised form of Marx's Asiatic mode of production. Prior to this, under the ideal of judgeship that appears in Judges and 1 Samuel, he prefers, following Marshall Sahlins, the notion of a 'household' or 'familial' mode of production, one that is somewhat more egalitarian in terms of sexual difference than what follows under the monarchy, to Gottwald's 'communitarian' mode of production." Roland Boer, *Marxist Criticism of the Bible* (London: T & T Clark International, 2003), 100.

of workers serving an owner class authorized by the monarchy.¹⁴ The book of Joshua actually reveals a blended system in which the household economies of a tribal order persist during the monarchy and outlast its destruction. In the double voice of Joshua, I see an ongoing relationship between institutions that involves tension and negotiation alike. But whether or not we see centralization as a negative consolidation of resources or a positive integration of disparate groups, it is vital to take the process of state formation in ancient Israel out of a historical plot of either progress or failure. By seizing upon one representation of the ancient state as its epitome, historical plotlines miss the coexistence of multiple political forms. I suggest that a spatial, rather than historical, reading best accounts for the multiple scales of governance in ancient Israel and their different political fates. So, in the name of eschewing a teleological plotline, I endeavor to loosen Canaan—the Promised Land—from the plot of exodus, where it marks the fulfillment of sovereignty following slavery and wandering. Taken outside of the plot of exodus, the space of the land appears as a dynamic site of contest and shared inhabitation.

As various tribes, clans, and households formed alliances and federated under the umbrella term of “Israel,” they did not relinquish their autonomy. Tribes and their subgroupings moved in and out of the alliance, making “Israel” both a comprehensive and a fluid term. Amidst the fluctuations, different groups likely experienced localized moments of liberation, wandering, and struggle for territorial control. In this sense, we should consider the civil wars narrated in the Bible not as indicating the breakdown of national unity, but rather as struggles to force a particular group to affiliate or for that group to defect from the alliance.¹⁵

Postcolonial scholars correctly denounce Joshua’s radical premise that God commands Israel to annihilate the inhabitants of Canaan and destroy all of their property. To them, Joshua is a figure fulfilled in the many violent arrivals

14. James W. Flanagan argues, for example, “For our purposes we may assume that the end of the segmental state is symbolized in the Bible by the loss of the ark reported in 1 Samuel 4.” “Chiefs in Israel,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 6, no. 20 (1981): 152. My goal is to step outside the social evolutionary model and look at the simultaneity of institutions.

15. Civil wars may even, as Nasser Mufti contends, determine the bonds and bounds of the nation by establishing certain wars as family affairs and others as outside its conceivable scope. See *Civilizing War: Imperial Politics and the Poetics of National Rupture* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017).

of settlers to indigenous lands.¹⁶ In a most material way, the crusaders, the explorers, the Boers, and the American settlers framed their enterprises as quests for the Promised Land and understood the book of Joshua as explaining their times and justifying their wars.¹⁷ This book joins in the postcolonial critique of Joshua, as it offers a different mode of reading the Hebrew Bible's most violent book. Parallel to my argument for separating the space of Canaan from the plot of exodus, I propose a nonethnic interpretation of the difference between Canaanites and Israelites. Read against the grain of the exodus plot, these labels and their subcategories do not denote distinct ethnic groups as nationalist and postcolonial scholars have suggested. The many dexterous studies of the dichotomy between "Israel" and "Other" in the Bible ultimately convince me not that the terms are empty, but that they are political.¹⁸

Rather than descendants of twelve sons of Jacob, I understand the twelve tribes of Israel as groups that at some point pledged allegiance to a centralized state or protostate.¹⁹ As noted by the twentieth-century German Biblicalist Martin Noth, whose theories influence my own, twelve represents a kind of

16. See Naim S. Ateek, "A Palestinian Perspective: Biblical Perspectives on the Land," in Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin*, 227–234; Michael Prior, *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); R. S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 77–79, 88–91; Robert Allen Warrior, "A Native American Perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys and Indians," in Sugirtharajah, *Voices from the Margin*, 235–241.

17. On the pilgrims: Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: or, the ecclesiastical history of New-England, from its first planting in the year 1620. Unto the year of our Lord, 1698* (London, 1702), 55–56; L. Daniel Hawk, "Indigenous Helpers and Invader Homelands," in *Joshua and Judges*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 109–121. Jonathan Boyarin observes both "the ethnic-moral analogy, in which Israelites were to Egyptians and to Canaanites as Puritans were to Papists and to Indians" and "the geographical analogy, in which Egypt was to England as Canaan was to America." *Palestine and Jewish History: Criticism at the Borders of Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 56. On the Boers: Prior, *Bible and Colonialism*.

18. For example: Robert L. Cohn, *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part One: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges* (New York: The Seabury Press), 145.

19. Because tribes and clans circled in and out of the federation, maintaining the number twelve required some elaborate arithmetic. For example, the tribe of Joseph has two component groups—Ephraim and Manasseh—that are further bifurcated into the eastern and western halves of Manasseh. The tribe of Levi owns no land and therefore isn't counted as one of the twelve, and groups like the Clans of Yair become folded into other tribes. In other words, I don't think that there were ever twelve tribes or only twelve tribes, but rather that this symbolic

ideal number also used to indicate the ancient Greek city-states participating in the amphictyony at Delphi.²⁰ The groups that did not affiliate with state centralization, I propose, appear in biblical texts as interloping peoples of the land ineligible for marriage with Israelites. As with most political binaries, there are plenty of mediating cases.²¹ By analyzing Joshua outside of the exodus plot of liberation, transition, and establishment of a state, I conclude, along with archaeologists, that the nation of Israel did not emerge during the escape from Egypt and migration to a lost homeland, but instead was consolidated when regional groups supported a national army intended to resist imperial military threats.²²

The rise of local empires, particularly the Assyrian Empire, motivated the amalgamation of tribes and influenced the content of Joshua.²³ Small tribal groups had no chance of standing up to imperial forces and so, in a process likely resembling 1 Samuel 8:4, the tribes appealed for a king. Biblical texts portray the consolidation as less than ideal and perpetually plagued by divisions between north and south, east and west.²⁴ Furthermore, kingship is

rendering accounted for a process of state formation in which a range of local groups pledged varying degrees of alliance to a federation and central power.

20. Martin Noth, *Das System der zwölf Stämme Israels* (Stuttgart: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1930).

21. Such as the tribe of Benjamin, which may have submitted only after military defeat (Judges 19–21) or the Hivite peoples of the region of Gibeon, whose inclusion entailed a lower-class position.

22. Along with Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman, I see the groups that eventually constitute Israel as largely indigenous while involved in migrations common to settlement in the era. In addition, I lean on the theories of Mendenhall and Gottwald that Israel consolidated during an anti-imperial revolt, although I imagine the revolution as primarily discursive. The succession of empires faced by Israel, I propose, produced an acute anxiety regarding survival that motivated processes of centralization in the north and south and, it seems, alliance between them. Whether an army resulting from these alliances actually fought imperial or local opponents or is simply imagined as doing so, I recognize the trope of a unified army as evidence of consolidation and nationalization.

23. Thomas B. Dozeman notes “the influence of the Neo-Assyrian royal conquest accounts in the composition of Josh 9–12” and suggests that “the polemical perspective of the author against kings and city-states would represent a critique of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, using the royal conquest accounts as a story of revolt against the empire.” *Joshua 1–12: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 27.

24. The book of Judges, for example, tells of a war between eastern and western tribes (12) and a vicious campaign of multiple tribes against Benjamin (19–21).

rarely portrayed as suitable or desirable to the tribes and their confederated structure, appearing as something forced upon them by external geopolitical realities. Only out of necessity did these regions seem to have sustained periods of alliance. Rather than from the people, the real push for centralization seems to have come from the monarchy based in Jerusalem, which simultaneously enlisted scribes in the project of writing national history.

This history, known to (and disputed by) biblical scholars as the Deuteronomistic History, contains the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Along lines first proposed by Martin Noth, I see the project of creating this history as reflecting the very process of nationalization.²⁵ Reading strongly along narrative lines, one could even say that the Deuteronomistic History produces the People of Israel. As the Jerusalem monarchy absorbed and enlisted tribes from different geographic regions in a process of state centralization, its scribes adapted local tribal traditions into a national story.²⁶ The consolidation of this collective history played a key role in the process of political consolidation. Thus I identify, like Noth, pre-Deuteronomistic tribal traditions that Deuteronomistic scribes compile and incorporate into their plot of conquest. Departing from Noth, however, I perceive agency behind these sources—a demand for legitimacy on the part of smaller sociopolitical groups prior to acceding to centralization. Analyzing the relationship between the literature of Joshua and social institutions results in a picture of ongoing, tenuous political negotiation. The tenuousness of such negotiation, ironically enough, produces brutal, absolutist rhetoric of holy war.

The centrality of the army contributes to the formulation of the nation as male and renders masculinity a stipulation for its soldier-citizens. Exceeding the national depictions of other biblical sources, the book of Joshua repeatedly emphasizes that fighting men comprise “all of Israel.” However, this national portrait dissipates when the war story ends. The second half of Joshua depicts a tribal system characterized by subdivisions of clan and household. Female

25. Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, trans. Jane Doull and rev. by John Barton, Michael D. Rutter, D. R. Ap-Thomas, and David J. A. Clines (Sheffield: JSOT, 1981).

26. My analysis is indebted to early twentieth-century biblical scholarship that saw war as key to the confederation of Israelite tribes and suspected that unity only existed during times of war. However, where scholars such as Albrecht Alt, Martin Noth, and Rudolph Smend believed that unity resulted from actual war, I see it as a product of war stories. Albrecht Alt, *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel* (Munich: Beck, 1953), 2:187; Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1953), 61; Rudolph Smend, *Yahweh War & Tribal Confederation: Reflections upon Israel's Earliest History*, trans. Max Gray Rogers (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970).

figures appear as vital members of the household, often in charge of its sustenance and survival. I am not suggesting that women in ancient Israel were relegated to the household, nor am I proposing that women's lives transpired in a private, domestic space. Rather, I build on Carol Meyers's work about the household as the dominant site of economic production in order to argue that it was also a political institution.²⁷ It appears that households leveraged their economic potential in order to gain protection from the larger entities of tribe and state. As the primary site of production, the economic leverage of the household translated into political terms. Deuteronomistic sources in general, as well as the book of Joshua in particular, show women in public, political roles related to the household. In this way, the book of Joshua attests to a political sphere separate from the nation and the army. As it eclipses tribal autonomy, Joshua's war story downplays the constitutive role of the household and the necessary involvement of its female leaders. But just as allegedly decimated peoples reappear in Joshua, so its female characters ensure the survival of their households in full view. Exactly as Joshua strives to tell the most nationalist story possible, nonnational institutions like the household become apparent.

The question of authorship—for the most part *the* question in mainstream biblical scholarship—often hijacks scholarly arguments to the point where literary texts are transformed into mathematic equations regarding the combination of sources and academic panelists duel in the name of their imagined author. This trend carries a share of irony insofar as the authors in question are inferred from the texts themselves. Still, every interpretation requires a context, and suppositions or fictions about ancient authors may be as valid a context as any other. Bemusement and all, I participate in the project by recognizing distinct terms and grammars employed by different biblical sources, identifying certain passages in Joshua as nationalist and others as tribal, and relying on the interpretive horizon set by Noth's theory of a Deuteronomistic History. The need to infer authorial intention is intensified by the questions of who might

27. Through the prisms of anthropology and archaeology, Carol Meyers shows that Israelite women worked to harvest and convert grains into edible form. "The role of women in performing this vital subsistence task (and many others—such as producing other foodstuffs, household textiles, and various utilitarian objects and installations) would have been highly valued. It was also the source of considerable household power in a society that lacked a market economy, except perhaps in several urban centers in the late monarchic period." "Foregrounding Ordinary Israelite Women," *AJS Perspectives: The Magazine of the Association for Jewish Studies*, Fall 2014, <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-peoples-issue/foregrounding-ordinary-israelite-women/>.

have formulated a particular line of political rhetoric to further what ends. At the same time, I find the obsession with authorship unduly constraining, particularly in light of the hypothetical nature of our assumed authors. And so, as I propose that scribes supporting centralization and monarchy folded longstanding local and regional traditions into their story of a conquest sometime during the eighth to seventh centuries BCE, I perceive dynamics at work in the book of Joshua that could relate to other periods. Taking seriously Noth's theory of an exilic revision of the Deuteronomistic History, for example, I can see how the story of "all Israel" marching in line behind Joshua could promote social cohesion during the crisis of dislocation and loss of sovereignty. I can also accept Thomas Dozeman's assessment of the late, blended Deuteronomistic and Priestly language throughout the book of Joshua.²⁸ Although they differ on the nature of central authority, both of these biblical sources, in my estimation, promote centralization as a political strategy. Later editors could well have continued a process of combining traditions begun at an earlier point in time.

My argument hinges on the premise that the book of Joshua relates to the consolidation of an ancient nation-state or, at least, the strong desire to consolidate; the dynamics of consolidation are of more interest than fixing a particular period in which this must have occurred. Although I place this in a relatively early time period, there is plenty of evidence in later biblical texts of smaller-scale, regional social groups that required unification or consolidation in order to survive the onslaughts of empire. The model I propose about the absorptive function of state formation would be relevant in both pre- and postexilic eras.²⁹ Therefore, I hope that even those readers who take issue with my dating might recognize the applicability of the reading I advance.

Joshua in Judaism

The book of Joshua has been transformed through interpretation almost as much as it has been tragically implemented in real time. Jewish thinkers of the Second Temple Period lionized Joshua as a hero worthy of Hellenistic

28. Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*.

29. For example, the model could work even in Dozeman's exilic or postexilic timeframe for Joshua: "The all-Israel focus indicates that the author of Joshua is not sectarian but is writing a myth of origin that is intended to include both the northern Israelites in Samaria and the southern Israelites in Judea during the Persian period." Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12*, 29.

acclaim.³⁰ Yet in the wake of Jewish military defeat at the hands of the Romans, rabbinic interpreters largely neglected Joshua and turned their interest to Moses as a man of the book.³¹ In both their cycle of public scriptural recitation and their more exclusive academic dialogues, the Rabbis skipped over most of Joshua.³² Early Christian interpreters read Joshua as a prefiguration of Jesus whose crossing of the Jordan River and conquering of the land predicts the redemption of baptism and the defeat of sin. However, this figuration never stopped Christian warriors or colonists from justifying their conquests as holy wars sanctified by verses from Joshua.³³

The archetype of biblical warrior did not play much of a role in diasporic Jewish consciousness. Many people might see this as a good thing or even wish that its pages had been excised from the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), but the book was always present and sometimes associated in Jewish and Christian traditions with apocalyptic aspirations. When some Jews began to desire collective sovereignty and territory, the book of Joshua became a newly relevant

30. For the nuances and differences among Second Temple and Hellenistic conceptions, see Zev Farber. Farber points out, for example, how Ben-Sira celebrates Joshua as the best of warriors, a sentiment echoed in 1 Maccabees. Philo, in a later and diasporic setting, sees Joshua as a “pupil and imitator of Moses, as well as a philosopher.” *Images of Joshua in the Bible and Their Reception* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2016), 154.

31. Farber details the different rabbinic iterations of Joshua. In some part influenced by the early Christian favoring of Joshua as a prefiguration of Jesus, who surpasses the old era of Mosaic law, the Rabbis not only celebrate the unsurpassed Moses, but also attribute some of Joshua’s miracles to Moses. The rabbinic Joshua is an ideal disciple of Moses, who never ceases to study Torah (an interpretation of Joshua 1:8) and transmits laws (b. Baba Qama 80b–81a); *Images of Joshua*, 464.

32. However, in rabbinic war taxonomy, Joshua’s conquest of Canaan figures as a “commanded war,” in which all must fight, in contrast to “discretionary war,” from which individuals can easily defer. Mishnah Sotah 8; Reuven Firestone, *Holy War in Judaism: The Fall and Rise of a Controversial Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 74, 89. By limiting commanded war to Joshua’s conquest alone, Firestone argues that the Rabbis “essentially eliminated the dangerous wild card of holy war because Commanded War was associated with a historical occasion that had long passed” (74); BT Sotah 44b and PT Sotah 8:1.

33. See L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua in 3-D: A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), xxv–xxvi. As Jonathan Boyarin points out, this trajectory is more complex than simple influence, “The crucial innovation in Christian legal thought that paved the way for the rationalization of Renaissance-era conquests occurred during the Crusades, in a mid-thirteenth-century commentary written by Pope Innocent IV. True, the fact that the Crusades, as a model for European colonization, focused on the land once promised and now holy reminds us that the culture of colonialism has biblical grounds as well.” *Palestine and Jewish History*, 44.

text. Insofar as it describes the People of Israel emerging from a long exile to settle a dimly remembered homeland, the book of Joshua suddenly seemed to speak directly to modern Jewish nationalists. As Israeli historian Anita Shapira has argued, Zionist pioneers (הלוצים/*Halutzim*, the name for the infantry in Joshua 4:13) turned to the Bible as artifact, mythos, and mediator of their strange homeland.³⁴ Developed under British imperial rule, which related to Palestine and its people (present or aspiring) through the prism of the Bible, the Zionist movement found it expedient to weave biblical allusion through requests for territory and autonomy submitted to the Colonial and Foreign Offices.³⁵ At the same time, Zionist writing painted British Mandate Palestine as the twentieth-century manifestation of the biblical Promised Land.³⁶ Performing the role of Hebrews returning to their ancient homeland for Christian audiences left an imprint on the national culture and psyche. But the role was not merely self-serving or cynical; it was one that had always been on hand, at least in imaginative terms, for Jews who saw themselves and were accused of being the hereditary descendants of Abraham meant to return to the land of his sojourning. Within the nationalist framework, the *Tanakh* seemed to possess the power to teach Jews how to dwell in the land of the Bible and restore them to the farmers, soldiers, and sovereigns that they had been in the ancestral past.³⁷ Further influenced by the militarism of European nationalist thought, Zionist exegetes pulled the image of the Jewish warrior from the pages of Joshua and animated it during modern Israeli wars.³⁸ In this way, the fighting of actual wars became entwined with biblical interpretation.

34. Anita Shapira, “Ben-Gurion and the Bible: The Forging of an Historical Narrative,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 33, no. 4 (1997): 647.

35. Rachel Havrelock, *River Jordan: The Mythology of a Dividing Line* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 218–241.

36. The urtext in this case is Abraham Mapu’s 1853 novel, *Ahavat Tsiyon* [Love of Zion] (repr., New York: Asap, 1918), which expressed nineteenth-century enthusiasm for the Holy Land with a particular Jewish spin. See also Shai Ginsburg, *Rhetoric and Nation: The Formation of Hebrew National Culture, 1880–1990* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014).

37. Referencing Israel Bartal, Boaz Neumann notes, “By ‘ascending’ to and settling in the Land of Israel, the *halutzim* [Zionist pioneers, named after the infantry in Joshua] sought to negate the exile, its way of life, and its existential presence. In this regard, the pioneer act was revolutionary. It brought about a fundamental transformation.” *Land and Desire in Early Zionism* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 18.

38. On the making of masculinity and the soldier in modern Israel, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

Joshua in Israel

Of the Jewish national interpretations of the book of Joshua, none had more impact than the Joshua study group sponsored by Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion in 1958. Not only was the prime minister's Joshua study group well publicized, but it was also an endeavor of elite group interpretation emulating the model of the rabbinic academy while seeking to subvert the centrality of the religiously oriented Yeshiva.³⁹ Ben-Gurion invited politicians, justices, generals, archaeologists, and biblical scholars into his home twice a month for biblical study. Several of the participants positioned themselves as both public figures and experts on the Bible, so there was little distinction between political and academic interpretation. Although the members of the group insisted on the scholarly precision of their arguments—a central tenet of the project was that Zionism enabled a correct historical reading of the Bible—their commentaries reveal the degree to which present political frameworks inflect biblical interpretation. Through the study group, Ben-Gurion hoped to promote Israeli national unity and to foster a collective identity based on biblical images.⁴⁰ He chose Joshua, the book concerning the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land, to inaugurate the prime minister's study group.⁴¹ Ben-Gurion, who developed the army as an institution to absorb and naturalize immigrant Jews, became the foremost modern interpreter of Joshua.

Ben-Gurion saw the biblical war story as constituting an ideal basis for a unifying narrative of national identity. Not only could modern Israelis relate to the processes of conquest and settlement, but through the prism of Joshua they could also understand them as reenactments of the biblical past. This

39. In her book about novelist S. Y. Agnon's position within a culture of Ben-Gurion inspired "Bible-Mania" (a term coined by Anita Shapira), Ilana Pardes notes Agnon's ironic view of Zionist exegetes: "While they aspire to break with the culture of the yeshiva and ignore the exegetical traditions of their predecessors, in their obsessive immersion in the Bible, in their insistence on devoting their lives to this ancient text and to its study *ad olam*, they turn out to be—if antithetically and heretically—part of the chain." *Agnon's Moonstruck Lovers: The Song of Songs in Israeli Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 123.

40. An initial condition of participation in the study group was a biannual public presentation on the Bible to the public by each of the members, but Ben-Gurion later dropped this stipulation. Haim M. Y. Gevaryahu, "Recollections from the Bible Study Circle at D. Ben-Gurion's Home," in *Ben-Gurion and the Bible: The People and Its Land*, ed. Mordechai Cogan (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1989), 71 (Hebrew).

41. The group followed the Joshua discussions by studying the books of Judges and Kings.

would enable the strengthening of Israeli resolve to undertake battles and development and the dissolution of diasporic and nonnational affiliations. Ben-Gurion also hoped that the analogy with Joshua would promote international support for Zionism as the revival movement of the People of Israel and recognition that the revival could only transpire on the soil of the ancient homeland.⁴² For Ben-Gurion, Joshua stood as the veritable symbol of “actualized Zionism.”⁴³

Ben-Gurion succeeded in forging a national myth, and his study group’s interpretation impacted Israeli culture. It certainly raised the profile of a long-disregarded book in Jewish tradition and animated its lexicon. Thereafter, it became hard to think of Joshua differently. Through interpretation, ancient tropes of war merged with modern national militarism. However, the narrative that Ben-Gurion and his study partners created reflects their struggle to make a nation out of a nascent society comprised of immigrant Jews from different countries and a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. As they sought to include and refashion these Jews as Israelis, Ben-Gurion and his associates looked to distance Israelis from their neighboring Arabs.

In this sense, Ben-Gurion’s commentary mirrors the book of Joshua itself. Both represent compensatory strategies intended to assert unity and cohesion in a shifting and varied social setting. Joshua’s conquest and Israel’s founding narrative generate a war story attesting to national unity in order to obscure the presence of nonnationals and overcome the patchwork nature of a society comprised of different ethnic, religious, ideological, and linguistic groups.⁴⁴ The war narrative produces the collective by acknowledging its soldiers as representatives of a social and political unity and marking its enemies as those beyond the political and geographic limits that define the nation. Yet the nonnationals, however excluded from the political unit, do not disappear from the national space. Their persistence motivates ritualized retellings of their military defeat, as if the story of people’s disappearance could actually render them invisible. The intensity of the story arises from the desire to dispel present

42. Adam Ackerman, “The Biblical Nationalist Thinking of David Ben-Gurion,” *Kivunim* 2 (1979): 101 (Hebrew). See also Shalom Goldman, *Zeal for Zion: Christians, Jews & the Idea of the Promised Land* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 293.

43. Shimon Peres, “Joshua Son of Nun—the Symbol of Actualized Zionism in the Eyes of David Ben-Gurion,” *Yediot Ahronot, Saturday Supplement*, April 4, 1980.

44. This is, admittedly, a circular process, since the myth also marks the people it seeks to obscure as nonnationals.

enemies. Yet the narrative of unity works better during war than it does during peace, when disparate factions among the nationals prevail. Working double-duty to impose itself on a social reality that doesn't match, national myth in such cases becomes all the more fervent.

The argument and its instantiating examples unfold in four chapters. The first chapter, "The Conquest of Land and Language," appraises the conquest as described in the first half of the book of Joshua and shows how the war story forges the collective of Israel. The book of Joshua tries to balance a unifying national narrative that enlists disparate groups in a project of centralization and the recognition of the relative independence and legitimacy of the constitutive groups. At the same time that the conquest appears to be successful as a mobilizing story, it also points to underlying disunity. I propose that a competition between a movement of centralized nationalism and a decentralized social order best explains the two distinct sections of Joshua. As the nation takes form through the image of the army, groups opposed to centralization acquire the label of "foreign," and tribal institutions run by women become suspect. The chapter follows the conquest and analyzes the dynamics of its representation, ultimately assessing how the account of total war models the confederation of distinct local groups.

The second chapter, "'So Very Much Left to Conquer' and the Persistence of the Local," speculates on the nature of the ancient Israelite confederation through a close reading of the geographic traditions and boundary lists in the second half of Joshua. I argue that this record of "the land that remains" attests to the decentralized, ethnically and politically varied social landscape that the conquest narrative seeks to obscure. It shows that the tribes of Israel live alongside a host of others, Jerusalem is divided "until today" (Josh 15:63), no national army repels local opponents, and a tribal system of negotiations and marriages maintain a social balance. The social balance rests on the household as maintained by women. As well as marking the persistence of decentralized political institutions, the second half of Joshua attests to the incorporation of local traditions as a component of the very project of state-building. In analyzing the relationship of spatial language to social forms, I discover local systems that cut across the territorial integrity of the represented nation.

The third chapter, "The Joshua Study Group at the Home of David Ben-Gurion," invites the reader into Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's home, where in 1958 some of the leading minds in Israel together pondered the book of Joshua. As it analyzes the interpretations and discussions of the group, the chapter highlights the degree to which the participants reflected on the 1948

war through passages in Joshua. In many ways, they made explicit a connection already evident in the name of Operation Bin-Nun, the 1948 battle at Latrun to open the road to a besieged Jerusalem, after the biblical Joshua Bin-Nun. Ben-Gurion, who declared that no one had better interpreted Joshua than the Israeli Defense Forces in 1948, saw the enactment of biblical archetypes as the most fitting form of biblical commentary.⁴⁵ He invited colleagues over in order to sketch the outlines of such archetypes. Similar to the book of Joshua, the official Israeli interpretation sought to unify the disparate Jewish immigrant communities through a war story. And, like the writers and editors of Joshua, the Israeli interpreters wanted their audience to put aside competing affiliations to align with a national culture. However, as in Joshua, the military myth of nation becomes an unwitting record of nationalism's failure. Despite defeat and dispossession, Palestinians remained present within the new borders and just beyond them. Israeli settlement had to confront this exactly as it established facts on the ground to deny it.

Conquest rhetoric echoed in Israeli politics, institutions, and statistics attempting to erase the presence of Palestinian people jointly inhabiting the land. Chapter 4, "The Tribes of Joshua Land," shows the post-1958 legacy of Joshua and its elaboration in Ben-Gurion's study group in Israel. The sociologist Baruch Kimmerling described Israeli society as characterized by a strong central government and unified national culture until 1967, at which time differing responses to holding occupied territories fractured the culture into distinct, and often oppositional, camps.⁴⁶ Following his thesis, the fourth chapter considers Moshe Dayan's appropriation of Joshua to describe the occupation of the West Bank as the fulfillment of the Bible and political Zionism alike and how educators, settlers, leftists, and neoconservatives responded to the formulation. After Dayan, Joshua became increasingly important to religious settlers citing the biblical grant of the land as their charter. Like the early Zionists, these fundamentalist settlers proclaim the Bible as their mandate, yet unlike their secular predecessors, they favor righteous zeal over attainment of practical goals. For them, Joshua offers precedent for militarized settlement and continued displacement of Palestinians. A Joshua doctrine governs the expansion of the settlement project, which often relies on the Israeli army to enforce its claims.

45. For the IDF as interpreters of Joshua, see Shapira, "Ben-Gurion and the Bible," 651.

46. Baruch Kimmerling, *The Invention and Decline of Israeliness: State, Society, and the Military* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

I conclude the book with an appeal to “End This War” and its shrinking cadre of oligarchic beneficiaries. I follow the impacts of both by visiting the southern coastline, where constant siege causes Gaza’s wastewater to stream into the sea where it is then sucked up by desalination pipes to become Israeli drinking water. This drinking water flows through pipes designed by Ben-Gurion as he pored over the book of Joshua, yet it subverts his vision of nationalized water by falling under privatized ownership. Alongside a restrictive, violent Occupation that suppresses Palestinian sovereignty, Israelis experience eroding jurisdiction as they lose public assets and benefits to private equity. It thus seems the perfect moment to explore other sociopolitical configurations and to move past the era of conquest to that of adaptive cohabitation. I conclude by taking the decentralized politics of the second half of Joshua as seriously as Ben-Gurion’s cohort took the first half and thinking about localized and confederated forms of governance as a template for a politics of place that offers a range of inhabitants jurisdiction over their resources and labor. Faced with accelerated global trends of extraction and privatization, as well as the mounting violence necessary to enforce the boundaries of the nation-state, the Middle East may be the ideal place for an emergent local, bioregional politics. If the bloodiest book of the Bible offers such an alternative, then perhaps a modern site of conquest can likewise manifest it.

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