

Old Testament Land Promises and the Justification of Violence in the Crusades

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Abstract

This paper examines the contrasting interpretations of Old Testament land promises and the narrative of Joshua's conquests as understood by early Christian theologians versus medieval Crusaders. Through an exegesis of Joshua 1:3-6, this paper highlights how early Church Fathers Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen utilized typological hermeneutics to allegorize the conquest narratives, seeing Joshua as a prefigurement of Christ's spiritual victory over evil. In contrast, the Crusaders literalized these texts, using them to justify violence and territorial conquest. This paper exposes the dangers of scriptural misinterpretation and emphasizes the modern implications of such hermeneutics, especially in contexts of political conflict and religious justification of violence as seen in Israel/Palestine today. The findings underscore the importance of responsible scripture reading to promote peace and align with Christ's teachings in contemporary faith practice.

Introduction

Throughout history, Old Testament Scripture has been used for spiritual growth, teaching, and instruction in various faith traditions across the globe. It has also been abused and misused as justification for horrific violence, genocide, and unspeakable crimes in the name of religious zeal. Such is the case in the Middle Ages under the authority of the Latin Church in their violent pursuit of the Holy Land. This paper will investigate how leaders of the Crusades interpreted "land promises" and the battles of Joshua in the Old Testament compared with early Church Fathers of the Christian faith. I will do this through an exegesis of Joshua 1:3-6 to show how scriptures were used, in contradiction to the typological hermeneutic of the early church, to justify Christian violence and conquest in the name of faithfulness to God during the Crusades.

Interpretations of a Troubling Text

Early Church Fathers

Interpretation of sacred texts is a challenging task and easily mishandled to aid in personal agendas. This is why looking at the ancient roots of the Christian faith is important in gaining wisdom

when approaching texts like the Old Testament. The book of Joshua, for instance, has proven difficult to reconcile with the loving and self-sacrificing God we see enfleshed in Jesus of Nazareth. We read God commanding Israel to commit genocide and show no mercy to their enemies. We also read promises of a land “flowing with milk and honey”¹ and God’s assurance that he will stand with the Israelites as they take that land by force. Joshua 1:3-6 gives an example:

Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and this Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites to the Great Sea toward the going down of the sun shall be your territory. No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life. Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them.²

To understand the greater meaning here, let us investigate how early Church Fathers Justin Martyr (c.100 AD-165 AD), Tertullian (c.155 AD-220 AD), and Origen of Alexandria (c.185 AD-253 AD) would have read this text and those that exhibited Joshua’s violence to obtain that promised land. These prominent Christian figures are by no means alone in their interpretation, but their work highlights a greater consensus among the early church.

Typology, in a hermeneutical sense, is the recognition of how the people or themes in the Old Testament symbolize or anticipate the revelation of Christ in the New Testament. For every type, there is a corresponding antitype which is the greatest revelation or fulfillment of the type. The early church noticed, using this allegorical tool, that there are significant connections between Joshua and Jesus. In Numbers 13:16, Moses renamed Hoshea to Joshua, son of Nave. The names Joshua and Jesus come from the same root word in Hebrew (Yehoshua) and are the same name in Greek, *Iēsous*. To the patristics, Joshua is a type of Jesus, the ultimate fulfillment of what Joshua symbolizes. Justin Martyr makes this connection as follows:

as [Joshua], not Moses, led the people into the Holy Land, and as he distributed it by lot to those who entered along with him, so also Jesus Christ will turn again the dispersion of the people, and will distribute the good land to each one, though not in the same manner. For the

¹ See Exodus 3:8

² Joshua 1:3-6 (ESV).

former gave them a temporary inheritance...the latter, after the holy resurrection shall give us the eternal possession.³

Justin shows here that Joshua, leading the people into the Holy Land, is a type of when Christ will lead his followers into the eternal Promised Land. Tertullian, a prolific writer and defender of orthodoxy in the second century, also drew immense meaning from this connection:

We say that [the name of Jesus given to the son of Nave] was a type in advance of him who should come...As Jesus Christ had to lead a new people, that is to say, we who were born in the desert of this world, into the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey, that is into the possession of eternal life, and as this is achieved not through Moses, that is the works of the Law, but through Jesus, that is through the grace of the Gospel...so the man who was prepared to be the image of this mystery, was the first who bore in type the Lord's name.⁴

In this passage, Tertullian makes several type-antitype pairings, including Moses as a type for the works of the Law. As Moses was unable to bring people into the Holy Land, so the works of the Law cannot bring people into eternal life. Joshua's works, to these early writers, were not understood as literal conquests as much as they were interpreted as a prefigurement of Jesus coming to conquer evil to usher in the promise of eternal life.

Origen of Alexandria, one of the most influential early church theologians who espouses this view was known for his allegorical biblical exegesis. In his book *On the First Principles*, Origen speaks directly to Jerusalem and prophecies regarding Judea and the holy land.

If then there are in this world certain souls who are called Israel, and a city in heaven which is named Jerusalem, it follows that those cities which are said to belong to the Israelite nation have for their mother city the heavenly Jerusalem, and that we are to understand in this way all references to Judea as a whole. For we believe that the prophets were speaking about

³ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1, (Figs, 2016), chapter 113, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Dialogue_with_Trypho/181B4I3mUMwC?hl=en&gbpv=1&bsq=chapter%20113.

⁴ Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns & Oates, 1960), 238, accessed May 9, 2024, <https://archive.org/details/JeanDanielouFromShadowsToRealityStudiesInTheBiblicalTypologyOfTheFathers/page/n124/mode/1up>.

this heavenly country by means of mystical narratives...to refer in the thought of Paul himself to that country which he calls the heavenly Jerusalem.⁵

Origen sees prophecies regarding the Holy Land and Jerusalem as “mystical narratives,” referring to a “heavenly city” that is allegorical. He does not suppose it is the physical, earthly Jerusalem that Israelites have sole ownership and claim to. Origen also embraces the traditional typological hermeneutic, most notably in response to the book of Joshua. For Origen, the entire book of Joshua is speaking of the mysteries of Christ:

...this book is not concerned so much with the deeds of Jesus the Son of Nave [Joshua], but it portrays for us the mysteries...of my Lord Jesus. It was he who received authority after Moses, it was he who led the army in triumph over Amalek, who has been prefigured by the outstretched arms on the mountain, and who has triumphed over the principalities and powers, nailing them to the Cross in his person. Thus Moses is dead, for the Law has been destroyed.⁶

It is notable to mention that the triumph of Amalek, to these early fathers, is seen as a type of the triumph of Christ over all evil.⁷ Origen is beautifully describing the book of Joshua as a prefigurement of Christ coming to dismantle the powers of evil, sin, and death; something which only Jesus could do—not the works of the Law as Moses represented.

Reading Joshua 1:3-6 again through this lens, a couple of points jump out. If this were a literal promise from God to the Israelites, we would expect sweeping victory for the Israelites “all the days of [their] life.” But that is historically not true, as Israel/Judah would later be conquered by both Assyria and Babylon, sending the Israelites into exile once again. Furthermore, verse 4, which promises the Israelites a great expanse of land has yet to be fulfilled to the present day. If our literal interpretation lacks historical and archeological evidence, then perhaps we should follow in the footsteps of our church fathers.

According to Justin, Tertullian, and Origen, we must look into the text for its allegorical and typological meaning. Perhaps the promise that God will give every place the Israelites put their feet is symbolic of the overwhelming victory of Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection over sin and death. Perhaps the promise of land “From the wilderness and this Lebanon...to the Great Sea toward the going down of

⁵ Origen, *On First Principles*, 428.

⁶ Jean Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality*, 240.

⁷ *Ibid*, 234.

the sun” is a metaphor for the great expanse, farther than the eye can see, of the Kingdom of God that is the eternal inheritance of those who put their faith in the resurrection. When God claims that “No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life,” is it possible that He is describing the absolution of Christ’s victory over death and that no human power will ever be greater than that love? And is it possible that the promise, “Just as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you,” is a prefigurement of how the law and prophets are not abolished, but fulfilled in Christ? Finally, with these patterns wringing in our ears, perhaps we can hear God’s answer to Christ’s prayers in the garden of Gethsemane the night before he defeated death: “Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them.”⁸

These Old Testament writings, particularly the book of Joshua, were understood by Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, and others to have spiritual meaning as a symbol of Christ to come. Unfortunately, as Christendom became powerfully intertwined with the Empire in its later history, we will now look at how these texts influenced Christians to justify the conquering of land through violence and domination during the Crusades.

The Crusaders

The Crusades mark some of the darkest periods of Christian history. Marching with sword in hand in the name of God, millions of crusaders took up the cause, sold to them as a righteous pilgrimage, to defend Christendom and obtain sanctification. The motivations for the First Crusade in 1095 were numerous, including political/economic gain, the extension of papal influence, and unification of the Western and Eastern Church, but among them was the belief that it was God’s cause to take back and secure the Holy Land from the Seljuk Turks, who professed Islam. Pope Urban II, a chief instigator of the First Crusade, preached a masterful sermon in November 1095 to rouse the passions and commitment of Christians to join the crusade. While there was no direct threat from Muslims on western Christendom (Muslims had ruled over Jerusalem for centuries at this point), Urban II dehumanized the Muslims as enemies of God, describing them as “subhuman savages, bent upon the barbaric abuse of Christendom”⁹ to incite an urgency to defend his Christian brothers in the Byzantine

⁸ Joshua 1:3-6 (ESV).

⁹ Thomas Asbridge, *The Crusades: The Authoritative History of the War for the Holy Land* (New York: Ecco, 2010), 36.

Empire. Though his description of the oppression that Christians withstood under Turkish rule was almost completely false, this demonizing of Muslims acted as a major catalyst for the crusades.¹⁰

The crusader's understanding of scripture provided them ample justification for their violent attack on Muslims and anyone they deemed pagan. Taking on the identity of "God's Chosen People," they looked up to the warriors of the Old Testament, believing that they, too, had the God of Israel by their side:

In the Old Testament, the Chosen People of the Israelites fought battles commanded and protected by their God...Warrior heroes adorn the scriptural landscape: Joshua, Gideon, David...the martial history of the biblical Chosen People of the Old Testament fed directly the world-view of the crusaders, providing rich quarries alike for preachers and chroniclers.¹¹

Texts that relate directly to Jerusalem especially provided the crusaders with reason to take up the "cause of Christ" to defend Jerusalem from the hands of "defilers," as alluded to in Psalm 79: "O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble."¹² The crusaders and church leaders read these Old Testament stories and poems literally as opposed to the approach of the church fathers discussed above. Instead of looking for the spiritual meaning of the text in light of the resurrected Christ, they assumed themselves to be the protagonists in these narratives, applying the literal interpretation directly to their present circumstances. In a study of crusader art in the Latin Kingdom, it became clear that the crusaders believed that their Old Testament heroes were types for themselves in their quest for the Holy Land:

As both the textual and visual sources reveal, alongside the figures of Christ and the Apostles, those of the Maccabees, Joshua, and King David were also central for the crusaders, functioning as models designating the crusaders as the "New Israelites" who had conquered the Holy Land and the Holy City.¹³

¹⁰ Asbridge, *The Crusades*, 37.

¹¹ Christopher Tyerman, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*. (Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 30-31.

¹² Psalm 79:1 (NIV).

¹³ Gil Fishhof, *Shaping Identities in a Holy Land: Crusader Art in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem: Patrons and Viewers*. (New York: Routledge, 2024), 5.

Their artwork showed how they viewed themselves as part of a “miraculous work of God,” and exploited Biblical models to enunciate their legitimacy in claiming the Holy Land.¹⁴

Louis IX, leader of the Seventh and Eighth Crusades, also drew strongly from the story of Joshua:

Joshua...was seen as a type for the crusader in ways that informed Louis IX's crusading ideology and his kingship. The parallel between Joshua's divinely sanctioned wars and Louis' own crusading ambitions structured a teleology that incorporated Louis into salvation history.¹⁵

Despite the disaster of the Seventh Crusade,¹⁶ Louis was encouraged through the failures of Joshua and soldiered on in his journey to recapture the Holy Land in the eighth and final crusade.

Instead of Joshua being a type for Christ in an allegorical battle against evil, the crusaders believed Joshua was a type for *themselves* in their literal battle against the “enemies” of God. This misuse of the text has great implications for Christians today. Not only is it important to learn from our history, but we must investigate how misinterpretation of scripture has led to our own moral and spiritual failures.

Indications for Contemporary Life

The repercussions of these harmful hermeneutics are widely prevalent today. The militancy of the Old Testament, particularly around land promises, has been taken as permission by Christians, reading themselves as the forever protagonist of the story, to do unbelievable harm to others in the name of faithfulness to God and a perceived “right” to all God promises in these texts. This misuse has found its way into our personal ethics and political allegiances and is being applied presently on the global stage as of the writing of this paper.

When modern readers employ the story of Joshua as Louis IX did, making Joshua a type for themselves in whatever modern context they inhabit, they assume the right to the same literal promises that Joshua was assured and make the fatal error of believing that God is always on their side. Reading Joshua 1:3-6, many modern readers hear that God will never forsake them as long as they are strong and courageous...there’s no need to worry because God has it covered, He keeps His promises to His people,

¹⁴ Gil Fishhof, *Shaping Identities in a Holy Land*, 5.

¹⁵ M.C Gaposchkin, “Louis IX, crusade and the promise of Joshua in the Holy Land,” *Journal of Medieval History* 34, no. 3 (Sept. 2008): 245. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jmedhist.2007.10.007>.

¹⁶ González, *The Story of Christianity*, 351.

and no one will ever be able to stand against them. This ideology leads to the convenient ability to name any “enemy” and believe that God will stand on their side in battle against that enemy, be it their political opponents, religious “others,” cultural or ethnic minorities, or those with ideological differences. Instead of meditating on hermeneutical methods of typology and allegory, they literalize the text and apply it universally, assuming it speaks to all “God’s people” at all times rather than being written at a certain time for a specific purpose to reflect a certain spiritual narrative. This mishandling has harmful effects on individual spirituality and has proven detrimental on a global stage.

The world is seeing the fruit of this literalization of the land promise in Israel-Palestine presently. Zionists believe that taking control of the land promised to the Jews in the Old Testament is a fulfillment of prophecy, and they have a right to reclaim that ancestral homeland.¹⁷ To them, Palestinians have no legitimate claim to the West Bank or Gaza Strip. This has led to tensions for years in the area, most recently exacerbated by the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel on October 7th, 2023. Israel is now indiscriminately bombing the whole of the Gaza Strip, taking no consideration for civilian life or destruction of Palestinian infrastructure, and blocking humanitarian aid from entering the country.¹⁸ Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel, drew from Deuteronomy in an interview shortly after the initial attack by Hamas, stating, “You must remember what Amalek has done to you, says our Holy Bible,”¹⁹ likening Hamas to Joshua’s enemy in the Old Testament. That same passage states, “...in the land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.”²⁰ Netanyahu is employing the same hermeneutic of Louis IX and other crusaders, assuming himself and the Israeli state to be the antitypes of Joshua and effectively permitting himself to eliminate the existence of Palestinian life under God’s commands. This is one of many dangers when scripture and land promises are taken out of context and forced onto a modern landscape.

Conclusion

¹⁷ Peter J. Miano, “Mainstream Christian Zionism,” In *Prophetic Voices on Middle East Peace: A Jewish, Christian, and Humanist Primer on Colonialism, Zionism, and Nationalism in the Middle East*, ed. Peter J. Miano, Thomas E. Phillips, and Jason Mitchell, 1:163–86. Claremont Press, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvbcd292.12>.

¹⁸ Reuters, “Gaza Aid Could Grind to a Halt Within Days, UN Agencies Warn,” Reuters, May 10, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gaza-aid-could-grind-halt-within-days-un-agencies-warn-2024-05-10>.

¹⁹ NPR, “Netanyahu’s References to Violent Biblical Passages Raise Alarm Among Critics,” NPR, November 7, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics>.

²⁰ Deut. 25:17-19 (ESV).

Christians, and all readers of scripture, must take their interpretation and application of the text very seriously, particularly when it comes to the conquest texts in Joshua and land promises in the Old Testament. As shown, mishandling these scriptures to fit our political and cultural needs has proven detrimental to human life and Jesus' call to peace. Literalizing texts about Jerusalem and specific groups of people, instead of reading them with the early church fathers as "mystical narratives" about a heavenly place, can mistake these ancient, typological, and spiritual texts for prophetic utterances about current events. Instead of taking up the biblical call to create peace, this makes the reader guilty of the very violence that Jesus came to defeat in his victory over evil.

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