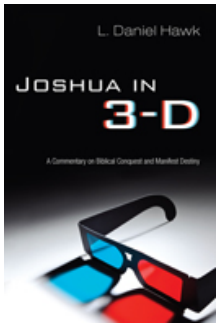
Joshua in 3-D: A Commentary on Biblical Conquest and Manifest Destiny, by L. Daniel Hawk



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This is a strangely encouraging yet problematic commentary on Joshua. Encouraging because it shows that someone as deeply and as openly committed to (a rather evangelical belief in) Christ can take up such a strongly left-wing political position; problematic because at a deeper level it elides the U.S. and ancient Israel yet again. After a few comments concerning the book's structure, let me say some more about each feature.

The "3-D" of the title refers not so much to those strange glasses one might receive at a theatre door in order to experience a film more intensely and "realistically" (although the word-play is obviously there), but the three dimensions of Hawk's analysis. Each chapter is structured in a three-fold fashion. The first is a close reading of the text. Not the laborious mono-method of Germanic scholarship (the text-killing process of translation, paraphrase and exegesis), but an insightful reading of Joshua as a community-based, multiply-overlaid, complex and tension-filled narrative of conquest. The second is a search for themes that connect Joshua by means of multiple threads throughout the biblical canon. It is a traditional "intertextual" reading, more in the heritage of Reformed exegesis, with its slogan that "the text interprets the text," than anything inspired by Julia Kristeva. But it yields some insightful readings, such as the one concerning the "bad girls" who keep Rahab company in Joshua 2 (32–34), or corporate punishment in Joshua 8

(93–96; although I was hoping for something on the punishment of corporations), or defining Israel (211–14).

The third dimension is an explicit effort to connect the story of Joshua with the history of the United States. One's immediate impression is that Joshua lends itself easily to such analysis, with all those troubling echoes—of persecution, wandering in the wilderness and then finding the Promised Land—that saturate the political myth of the U.S. But Hawk's agenda is more specific, tying in the story of conquest in Joshua to the less savoury aspects of the national myth of origins—where dispossession and massacre are routine almost to the point of banality. In other words, Hawk uses Joshua as a means to remind us of the myriad indigenous bodies buried in the foundations of the United States. Here we find "trajectories" such as: the doctrine of discovery; the face of the other; memorials, rituals, and nationalism; laying down the law; genocide; individuals and communities; indigenous peoples and broken treaties; God and war; Manifest Destiny; lands and homelands; retaliation and mediation; defining America and assimilating the Indian; race and miscegenation; the American dream. I have actually listed them all, not merely for the sake of some perverse desire for completeness, but because they became, in a macabre fashion, quite riveting. As I read I became ever keener to see what he would do next with this text, which had now turned upon itself (and the U.S.) as one of condemnation.

But what about my initial two points, concerning what is encouraging and problematic? First, Hawk takes what usually goes by the name of an evangelical position, or at least he opts for the most conservative scholarly position possible with these texts. So he sees Joshua as a resource for history, citing only maximalists like Iain Provan and William Dever. He wears his faith on his proverbial sleeve, asking:

> Christian reading of Joshua takes the gospel as its starting point for entering and experiencing the biblical text. Entering Joshua with Jesus prompts us to interpret what we read against the backdrop of God's saving work through Christ. How do we read Joshua, believing that God has been, is, and always will be working among humanity to bring salvation, reconciliation, justice, and peace? (xxix–xxx)

Normally that would be enough to make me thoroughly sceptical—as it did on this occasion. But then it became refreshing, not because I found myself

converted to an evangelical perspective, but because Hawk is being honest. Instead of pretending that he does "objective," "scientific" scholarship in his day job and then, on the side, slips away to pray fervently and occasionally preach at his local church, Hawk is not afraid to state openly how his faith influences his reading of Joshua. It became even more intriguing when Hawk's analysis revealed what can only be called a religiously left-wing perspective. All of which reinforced the sense that right-wing politics is not rusted onto Christian evangelicalism, indeed that it may well be a marriage of temporary convenience.

And yet the book is increasingly problematic at a deeper level. Let me put it this way: the structure of the commentary is thoroughly homiletical—although that is not necessarily a unique feature of this commentary: so many are written with the priest/minister/pastor in mind (often for sales reasons but also because the author is usually an erstwhile preacher). But it is more homilectical than most, moving in each chapter from detailed analysis of the text, through to connections with wider themes (often with a Christological link), to the direct application to life in the final section on U.S. history. A good sermon makes us not only see a text differently, but it also makes the familiar suddenly unfamiliar, the natural unnatural, the assumed problematic.

Hawk does all this very well—too well, in fact. What happens with the final application is that he reinforces the old narrative whereby the United States steps into the Bible and becomes Israel's closest ally, if not identical with Israel itself. Hawk does not do so in the usual triumphalist fashions, attempting to show how suffering and defeat led eventually to the founding of great God-blessed nations. No, as conquering forces Israel and thereby the U.S. become the subjects of sustained and withering criticism for the brutal dispossession of indigenous peoples. Yet it is through that very criticism, through the exposing of facile justifications for genocide, through the critical assessment of the text's own perspective on what it narrates, that the ties binding Israel and the U.S. become even stronger. At this deepest level, the book perpetuates the dominant, biblically-based and problematic political myths of both modern states.

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