

The Book of Joshua – Preparing Stage in the History of Salvation
 Doctoral Thesis
 (Abstract)

Book of Joshua, Hebrew Bible, biblical text, text history, translation, commentary, history and historicity, Biblical research and Archaeology, holy war, conquest, violence in the name of God, ban, Canaan, history of Israel, theology of the covenant, the holy name YHWH, God of Israel, biblical inspiration, message of the text, religious tradition.

The work at hand tries to address a long ignored issue of the Romanian biblical theology, namely the lack of a coherent commentary to the Book of Joshua in this language, despite the fact that the book plays an important part both in Judaism and, through its typological valences, in the Christian theology. The book of Joshua represents a complex text as to the possibilities of spiritual interpretation, though at the same time seemingly very problematic for the neophyte modern reader. Uncovering a God that calls its followers to war, that becomes furious faced with disobedience and that commands the punishment by stoning and the mass murder of all the inhabitants of a territory in order to give it to his preferred, a God who, even when obeyed, does not forget to threaten – the book of Joshua reveals itself to the modern reader as a scenario devised by an “extremist” organization rather than as an inspired piece of Scripture. And still, given the rich history of the reception of the book, we can assert with a certain degree of certainty that it bears in it a deeper theological meaning, a meaning cherished and guarded by the Church, a meaning that the Church knew to convey to his believers as a precious spiritual commodity. Although described as a fearsome warrior, the God of Joshua is in fact nothing more than a protector of *his* people in a world where war lurks at any corner and is a daily reality of existence. Thus, this godly protectorate cannot be better perceived by a nomadic people than through the warrior nature of the divinity. Moreover, the book insists upon the responsibility of the human being that has closed a pact with the divinity – the Covenant – and this reverberates upon the relationship between God and his people. God is faithful to his promise as long as the human being, respectively the people as a whole, stands by his commitment to God. In this manner, far from revealing a despotic God that relentlessly haunts and persecutes his subjects, the book of Joshua reveals a God entering a close partnership with the human being, whose wellbeing and fulfillment are personal desiderates of his. Regarded in this manner, the God of Joshua is neither the warrior, neither the killer of the Canaanites, but a God faithful to the promises made to his people and the one that leads his people to the accomplishment of its greatest good by offering them a vital space in the form of a fertile land that would ensure the survival of his people.

As well as conveying to us the figure of a faithful and protective God, the book also conveys another figure, that of Joshua, which incorporates in a typological manner all the qualities of an ideal ruler. Keeping his thought on the principles of the Torah while clenching the sword in his hand in order to be able to defend the people, Joshua is no more than the ruler devoted to the well of his nation. Having no family, no personal life, no personal ambitions, he is truly the warrant of the fulfillment of the Law as a prerequisite for the realization of his people.

Bearing the same name as the Savior (hebr. Yehoshua/Yeshua, gr. Jesus), Joshua was bound to be regarded by the tradition of the Church as the typological figure of Jesus. This reality led to a deepened and carefully formulated patristic exegesis to the book of Joshua, whereas the reader, i.e. the believer, is actively implicated in the narrative, as such becoming a participant to the events, a warrior freed from selfishness, greed and self satisfactory impulses trying to

conquest the kingdom of God, in which the idolatry of the old Canaan is replaced by the everlasting Law of the God of the New Israel.

This work tries to elucidate all of the above mentioned aspects, whereas its interest for the contemporaneity becomes ever so stringent as the modern world experiences a wave of religious extremism, a world in which violence supposedly commanded by God has become a disconcerting reality.

The work begins with an introductory study meant to approach aspects that precede the actual reading of the text, such as the history, the problematic and the theology of the book, offering the reader a condensed guide to reading the book as well as an introduction to the main part of this work, namely the *translation and commentary*.

The commentary is so conceived, as to follow a well known methodology – translation of the text into Romanian, a short revue of the translated chapters and the commentary verse by verse. The translated text has as source the Hebrew text of the Bible (MT), as preserved in the *Codex Leningradensis* and published by the German Biblical Society as the well known *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. In order to stress the significance of the translation of the source text as well as to keep an overview of the translation, the Hebrew text will be quoted parallel to the Romanian translation. At the same time, we shall make use of the Greek Translation of the Bible, the Septuagint (LXX –Edition Ralph), which, alongside the Hebrew text, are the first and most important textual witnesses, thus offering us an unsurpassed bases for textual analysis. Where the two textual witnesses provide insufficient data for understanding the text, we shall also make use of other available textual witnesses, considering the order of their relevance – Targums, Vulgata, Peshitta, Midrashim. The differences between the Hebrew text and the LXX are noted in the section titled *Textual Analysis*. After a brief overview of every chapter, the commentary to the chapters will take every verse into consideration in a verse by verse analysis. The approach is here dictated by the historical critical method¹ and the stated purpose is to try to establish the original message of the text as a whole. Therefore we shall try to identify in this section the later editing of the text, be it in the form of subsequent developments additions and interpretative attempts that made their way into the text as such, offering a starting point for following hermeneutical works that shall appear in the context of the Romanian biblical theology. We must therefore stress that the orthodox biblical theology, through its inexhaustible richness provided by the patristic exegesis, represents the most suitable theological environment for embracing and popularizing the historical critical methodology which, lacking the perspective offered by the spiritualizing hermeneutics of the Church Fathers, cannot be regarded but as empty scholasticism, devoid of purpose and vitality.²

I. The book of Joshua –short presentation and problematic

The book of Joshua came to us in two different versions or traditions. One is the Hebrew (MT) and the other one is the Greek text (LXX). Both were in use in Judaic communities. The book of Joshua is the first book after the Pentateuch, in the LXX being considered the first of

¹ Cf. Constantin Oancea, „Exegeza istorico-critica si teologia biblica ortodoxa: o reevaluare,“ *Revista Teologică*, 3/2007, 187–202; Wolfgang Richter, *Exegese als Literaturwissenschaft. Entwurf einer alttestamentlichen Literaturtheorie und Methodologie*, Göttingen 1971; Georg Fohrer, *Exegese des Alten Testaments: Einführung in die Methodik*, Heidelberg 1973; John H. Hayes (ed.), *Old Testament Form Criticism*, San Antonio 1974; Odil Hannes Steck, *Exegese des Alten Testaments. Leitfaden der Methodik*14, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1999; Michaela Bauks et Christophe Nihan (éd.), *Manuel d'exégèse de l'Ancien Testament*, Genève 2008.

² Walter Wink, *Bibelauslegung als Interaktion: über die Grenzen historisch-kritischer Methode* (Übers.: Manfred Gronwald), Stuttgart 1976; Helmut Riedlinger (Hrsg.), *Die historisch-kritische Methode und die heutige Suche nach einem lebendigen Verständnis der Bibel*, München 1985.

the *historical books*, whereas in the MT being the first of the *ancient prophets*.³ It describes two fundamental events through their formative character in the history of Israel – one is the conquest of the land of Canaan by the Israelites freed out of Egypt and the other is the partitioning of the land between the Israelite tribes. According to the two major themes presented in the book, the text can be structured in two major sections. The first, comprising Jos 1- 12, we shall name *The Book of Wars* and the second, comprising Jos 13-22, 8, *The Book of Grantings*. These two major parts are followed by a few addendums: Jos 22,9-33 (*The illegitimate altar*), Jos 23 (*The farewell speech*) and Jos 24 (*The covenant of fidelity to YHWH at Sichem*).

The text and history of the book

As already noted, the book of Joshua came to us in two versions. Between the two are undeniable differences that cannot be ignored by the biblical scholars. The MT version of the book is about 5% longer than its LXX counterpart; whereas LXX contains textual fragments that are not present in the MT. Biblical scholars have tried to solve the dilemma by considering the MT as the “authentic” text, whereas the LXX was regarded as a simple paraphrase to the Hebrew text and consequentially of minor importance. The opposite hypothesis was also stated, whereas the LXX is the “original” text and the Hebrew one a revision of the “inspired” text retained only by the LXX. We must mention that, until the middle of the 20th Century, biblical research could only support its finding on “recent” manuscripts, no older than the 4th Century of the Common Era for the text of the LXX and no older than the 11th Century for the MT. The recent discoveries of the Dead Sea Manuscripts and of other manuscripts in the Judean desert brought into the field of biblical scholarly texts from the 3rd and 1st Century before our Era, including some fragments of the book of Joshua. Incorporating these fragments into the analysis of the book brought with it some interesting conclusions – some text groups show similarities with the MT, others with the LXX version – at the same a third group of texts differ from both textual witnesses. The Dead Sea Scrolls are the testimonial to the simultaneous use of more than one version of the book, thus indicating the multiple editorial revisions of the text in the centuries preceding the Christian era. As to the LXX, we can now safely state that it is the Greek translation of one of the most available and accepted versions of the book, that continued to be revised in its Greek form. The results of the textual analysis of the book indicate the fact that the text that won acceptance and that is to be regarded as the *classical* text of the book is actually the result of a longer process of successive text revisions, which first came to an end after the beginning of the Christian era.⁴ Once “canonized” and widely made available, this newly emerged official text (*textus receptus*) slowly eliminated from the use of the Jewish faith communities other variations of the book. The Christian communities nonetheless used the version presented by the LXX, reflecting one of the many textual traditions formerly used by the Jewish communities in the centuries preceding the Christian era. In conclusion, biblical theology saw itself constrained to renounce to a superseded terminology that had to do with trying to find the “initial text” of a biblical book. If ever was such a thing as an “original text” of Joshua, it has been long lost during the supposedly many successive revisions of the text and its message.

The idealized image of one text, being written by one inspired author and that made its way to us unchanged and unmodified does not hold water in light of the latest results in the biblical research. Both the writing, as well as the inspiration of a biblical text, must be regarded as a dynamic process, completed by a group of authors and revisers throughout the ages, and that

³ For further details see: Mihai V. Vladimirescu, *O istorie a Bibliei Ebraice*, Polirom 2006; as well as the chapter on the history of the Jewish and Christian biblical Canon in the *Manual for the Study of the Old Testament*.

⁴ The final revision of the TM text ends somewhat in the 8th Century AD, when the Massorets (Jewish scribes) add to the text the vocal signs (see: M. V. Vladimirescu, op. cit.).

first came to an end once a certain form of the text was “consecrated” through what has been named “canonization of the text”. According to both Jewish and Christian traditional views on the matter, with only few exceptions, Joshua was the author of the book bearing his name. Biblical research indicates that this is very unlikely. To its greater part the book reflects religious, historical and linguistic characteristics that belong to a much later age than that presupposed by the narrative. Still, the biblical research cannot point out either the one author or the authors of the book. The only certainty to this regard is that, as previously noted, the book is the result of strenuous and long process of editorial revision, at the beginning of which more textual sources were clustered together resulting a text that we can name *Proto-Joshua*.

The base of this text is considered to be the social-ethnic conflicts between the nomadic Israelite tribes and the settled Canaanite population of central Palestine, realities that the text depicts as wars of conquest waged at God’s commandment and under his supervision. It may not unlikely that the core of the narrative precedes the period of Israelite Kingship, although no evidence can be brought to this effect. What can be stated with a certain degree of certainty is that in the times of the monarchy, prior to the Babylonian exile and following it, the book went through major changes and at the end of this formative period in the history of Israel much resembled what we have today – a book in two main parts: *The Book of Wars*, having as central theme the more or less miraculous crossing of the Jordan and the war waging in order to conquest the land; and *The Book of Grantings*, having as central theme a list with the parting of the Land between the Israelite tribes. The resulting literary work was ascribed to Joshua, the heroic Figure of the book, and the following revision of the book tried only to harmonize the contents of the book and update its message. The result of this editorial effort was that different versions of the book were circulating beginning with the 3rd Century BC, as shown by the discoveries in the Judean desert, some of which showing similarities to the Greek translation of the LXX. The Hebrew text of Joshua (MT) belongs to another family of revised texts that passed into the general use by the Jewish communities and was finally consecrated through its canonization, accomplished by representatives of Rabbinical Judaism in the first centuries of the Christian era.

The book of Joshua and the biblical archeology

When discussing the book of Joshua, one cannot ignore the relationship between the information provided by the text itself and the results of the biblical archeology trying to follow up or build upon this textual information. The impulse for archeological research in Palestine at the beginning of the 19th century was animated by the strong wish of the biblical scholarly to prove, with the help of this newly emerged scientific tool, that the biblical text conveyed trustworthy historical fact.⁵ Although this was the initial purpose of biblical archeology, the results of it can be summarized as follows: the archeological sites identified as cities quoted in the first part Joshua do indeed present traces of destruction, such as Jericho, Ai, Bet-El and Lachish. Nonetheless, these cities underwent destruction previous to the time of Joshua. Therefore, their destruction cannot convincingly be ascribed to the Israelites.⁶ At

⁵ I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, Jerusalem 1988.

⁶ O. Bar-Yosef, “The Walls of Jericho. An Alternative Interpretation,” *CA* 27 (1986), 347–351; P. Bienkowski, “Jericho was Destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, Not the Late Bronze Age,” *BAR* 16,5 (1990), 45–46,69; J. Briand, “La conquête de Ai,” *BTS* 151 (1973), 16–17; “Bethel et Bet-Awen,” *Salm.* 28 (1981), 65–70; “Archéologie palestinienne et AT,” *RICP* 2 (1982), 3–10; M.D. Coogan, “Archaeology and Biblical Studies. The Book of Joshua,” in: Propp, W.H., Halpern, B., Freedman, D.N. (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters*, Winona Lake 1990, 19–32; H.J. Franken, “Tell es Sultan and Old Testament Jericho,” *OTS* 14 (1964), 189–200; V. Fritz, “The Israelite ‘Conquest’ in the Light of Recent Excavations at Khirbet el-Meshash,” *BASOR* 241 (1981), 161–173; J. Heller, “Die Mauern von Jericho,” *CV* 12 (1969), 203–216; R.S. Hess, “Early Israel in

the same time, it is impossible to say how and under what circumstances these cities were destroyed. The results of biblical scholarly do point to major transformation in the Canaanite society at the brink between the Late Bronze and the Iron Age (the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BC), period that coincides with the importance growth of the Israelite element, attested in Canaan two centuries prior to this moment by the Merneptah Stele, which is describing a military campaign undertaken by the Pharaoh in the area.⁷

If the archeological research contradicts the events described in Joshua, then a new and apparently insurmountable problem arises, requiring the full attention of the researchers. The question is how and under what circumstances did the Israelites come to be present in Canaan. Roland de Vaux named this problem „le problème le plus difficile de toute l’histoire d’Israël.”⁸ When and how the populational development of Israel took place is a problematic for future research. Certain is the fact that this people did not conquer at a given time and under the leadership of one man the whole territory and in doing this decimating the whole of the Canaanite population. This reality is also stated in some other parts of the Bible, the most illuminating paragraph to this effect being found in *Judges*,⁹ where a long and tedious process of conquest, or better said overpowering, is being described, a process that gives witness for the century-long cohabitation of the Israelite and Canaanite tribes. It is not impossible to see the core of the book of Joshua as a summing up of local traditions that evolved around conflictual events that took place between different ethnic groups inhabiting Palestine and that finally led, after centuries of struggle, to the affirmation of a new nation, of Israel.¹⁰

The Historicity of the Book

Christian and Jewish religious communities alike always cling to the historical character of the book. As far as these religious communities are concerned, the book is not a symbolical description, a parable or storytelling, but real “historical” fact describing the formation of a nation that would eventually bring forth the Savior, thus a stage in the history of redemption. Nonetheless, as we previously showed, archeological research contradicts such a presupposition and leads us to doubt the historicity of the events at hand. The argumentation of our doubts has to do with the ever better defined and refined history of Canaan and Egypt, contoured with the help of sources that are independent from Scripture, including texts and archeological findings. Where Scripture is concerned, taking its layers of consecutive revisions into account, as well as the testimony from other biblical books, would lead us to a somewhat similar conclusion. Despite this overwhelming evidence there are still some biblical scholars that partially or totally reject the interpretation of the archeological findings, trying to support the historicity thesis. The reason for this rejection seems justified –defending at any cost the historicity of the book would equal defending its divine inspiration. This is why the historicity of a biblical book plays in the Orthodox Church such an important role. This raises the following issue into discussion: the concept of history as we nowadays understand it. Can we apply our understanding of history to history writing in antiquity? And

Canaan. A survey of Recent Evidence and Interpretation,” *PEQ* 126 (1993), 125–142; A.S. Kaufman, “The Date of Jericho’s Destruction – Archaeologically and Biblically,” *BAR* 16,5 (1990), 73; J.A. Soggin, “The Conquest of Jericho through Battle. Note on a Lost Biblical Tradition,” *ErIs* 16 (1982), 215–217; Y. Yadin, “Is the Biblical Account of the Israelite Conquest of Canaan Historically Reliable?,” *BAR* 8 (1982), 16–23; “The Conquest of Canaan in the Book of Joshua. Military and Archaeological Aspects,” *Dor* 13 (1984–1985), 141–150 (hebr.).

⁷ D. Merling, *The Book of Joshua: Its Theme and Role in Archaeological Discussions*, Berrien Springs, Michigan 1996, 8–11; Ahlström, G.W./Edelmann, D., “Merneptah’s Israel,” *JNES* 44 (1985), 59–61.

⁸ R. de Vaux, *Histoire ancienne d’Israël. Dès origines à l’installation en Canaan*, Paris 1971, 443.

⁹ Strange, J., “The Transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the Eastern Mediterranean and the Emergence of the Israelite State,” *SJOT* 1 (1987), 1–19.

¹⁰ H. Engel, “Grundlinien neuerer Hypothesen über die Entstehung und Gestalt der vorstaatlichen israelitischen Stammesgesellschaft,” *BiKi* 38 (1983), 50–53.

is such a history the necessary prerequisite to considering a book inspired or should we look for other criteria? Numerous events related in the Scripture can neither be denied, nor confirm. E.g. we cannot know whether Adam and Eve were historical figures. Nonetheless, no one would question the inspired character of the *Book of Creation* or the therein reported events.

Given the clear and powerful message of the text it is absolutely secondary whether the events actually took place and are to be regarded as historical events. Same could be said about other biblical narratives, such as the ones about *Job* or *Jonah*, without mentioning the biblical parables, undoubtedly inspired. The books of the Bible were written in the context of certain time, cultural and mind frames. The problem arises when dealing with the so called historical books of the Bible, which are expected to be historical in a modern sense. Historical-critical research provided a lot of information as to these cultural milieus, including some relevant information about the concepts of “history” and “historiography” amidst these cultures.¹¹ Undoubtedly the book of Joshua was written as *historical record* of an essentially formative time in the history of Israel. But projecting the modern concept of history upon the cultural mentalities that brought forth these literary creations that became the Bible seems an illegitimate action. The results of modern historiography present a different image where the correspondence between historical fact and historical record of it is concerned. The perception of a historical event is what is being registered and not its factual evolution. In light of this research we can affirm that the stressing point is not on the juxtaposition of fact and record, but the interpretation that “history writing” attaches to an event, making this historiography not objective and biased, not record per se, but mythifying perception of an event.¹² The scientific community has access to a wide array of ancient texts of “historiography”, whereby the historicity of therein specified events can hardly be upheld. These texts are nonetheless historical texts, but of another sort. We could name just some of the traits that characterize this kind of history writing: hyperbolism and ideological servitude. The ancient historiography did not objectively and independently record events in writing –that has been, since the Age of Enlightenment, a desiderate of modern historiography.¹³ As such we must consider the historicity of Joshua in view of the ancient concept of history and historiography and interpret it accordingly.

The Problematic of Violence

Closely connected to the historicity of Joshua is the legitimacy of violent action in God’s name. This is the reality reported by the biblical narrative of war against the Canaanites and of their mass murder, both carried out at divine command. The violence in the name of God has long been a stumbling block both for Jewish and Christian commentators alike. Most Christian commentators put aside the issue by “spiritualizing” the whole matter, considering the belligerent narrative in need of typological or allegorical interpretation. As such, Joshua is the one called to purge the Israelites of their sins, symbolically represented by the Canaanites. This line of interpretation can be well harmonized with the ensemble of revelation. In this context we may ask ourselves the following question: What of the literal meaning of the text that was neither side ever denied or reprimanded?

The narrative as such was never contested, neither by the church fathers, neither by rabbinical thought. The Sages of the Talmudic period searched in some way to justify God’s and

¹¹ I. Finkelstein, N.A. Silberman, *Keine Posaunen vor Jericho: die archäologische Wahrheit über die Bibel*, München 2003, 217–222.

¹² Volker Ladenthin, „Betrachtungen zur antiken Geschichtsschreibung,” *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 36 (1985), 737–760, 739–741;

¹³ Cf.: Christian Simon, *Historiographie. Eine Einführung*, Stuttgart 1996;

Joshua's actions against the Canaanites by stressing their moral degradation and idolatry. Consequently God sealed their fate not on arbitrary grounds or because he wanted to give the country to his elect, but because of the idolatry of the Canaanites. Without going deeper into these dialectics, we will just stress here the fact that none of the "traditional" justifications for God's incitement to violence holds water to this regard. Can God be the author of such "crimes" directed at his own creation? The modern reader, as opposed to the ancient recipient of the text, has a holistic-universalist view of the religious and of creation. The God of the Israelites is perceived as the God Creator of all being, and as such must care for all of his creation, including the Canaanites, although excluded from the special covenant God closed only with his people. Other biblical texts make affirmations that would not disagree with such a point of view on the matter; the book of Judges and those of the Kings do not know the reason for the annihilation of the Canaanites. Moreover, they testify to a secular cohabitation between Israelites and Canaanites, troubled by conflicts that will eventually die out in the royal period due to the complete assimilation of the Canaanite population. Despite this evidence we still have to explain or at least try to explain the reason of decimating the Canaanites at God's command. A proper understanding of this matter is more acute than ever, in an age when the Book of Joshua is being used in certain political contexts and by certain groups of "religious" people as a behavioral model, offering them a "transhistorical", not to say divine justification for abuse and crimes against other religious or ethnical communities. E.g. the British puritans claiming the right over the "promised land" – i.e. America – decimated the natives according to the model provided to them by a literal reading of Joshua,¹⁴ as well as the Zionist that occupied Palestine and within the Jewish state still try to (re)conquest the Land by robbing the Neo-Canaanites – i.e. the Palestinians – of their land. Their belligerent ideology, propagated by religious leaders, is based on the biblical text in question.

Faced with this reality one can raise the question whether orthodox biblical exegesis should actually, in accordance with the modern understanding of history, consider the narrative as factual. As to the literal level of Joshua, the events described in the book must be reevaluated in the sense that they should be regarded as part of a formative and programmatic discourse belonging to biblical monotheism and to the history of Israel, understood as antechamber to the history of salvation; the opposite of this would be a strict reduction of the text to a historicity that cannot be proved or understood in the context of salvation and revelation. Historically seen, this book emerged in a violent context, in which the Israelite kingdoms were attacked by the eastern empires. Faced with the religious war-waging ideology of these enemies the Israelites create their own, having as starting point the Joshua narrative that was meant to underline, for this context only, the fidelity of God to his promises, the divine protection of the people, thus offering a sense of security based on religious conviction and a reason for remaining true to the Law. In a belligerent context, the realities of war are projected in the divine sphere, making God a warrior of the people and for his people, as a far and distant "history" can attest to. As a conclusion we can state that the Book of Joshua, presenting the miracles of a violent "holy war" in a context in which destruction and endangerment are daily realities, represents the warranty of divine protection and thus survival, because God has promised this. The Book of Joshua does not relay historical, but rather a theological truth: God offers his believers protection and accomplishment with the condition that the believers remain faithful to Him and to the covenant made with Him.

¹⁴ A. Johnson, "The Bible and War in America. An Historical Survey," *JETS* 28.2 (1985), 169–181.

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