
Pro Rege

Volume 46 | Number 3

Article 6

March 2018

The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest (Book Review)

Justin Bailey

Dordt College, Justin.Bailey@dordt.edu

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Recommended Citation

Bailey, Justin (2018) "The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46: No. 3, 38 - 40.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol46/iss3/6

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A quarterly faculty publication of
Dordt College, Sioux Center, Iowa

BOOK REVIEWS

The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest. John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton. Downer's Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2017. 288pp. ISBN: 978-0830851843. Reviewed by Justin Bailey, Assistant Professor of Theology, Dordt College.

John Walton's first two "Lost World" books aimed to illuminate the opening chapters of the Bible. Convinced that the rich imaginative universe of the biblical writers is often occluded in contemporary debates about human origins, Walton sought to supply the "ancient cognitive environment" that gets lost in translation. Both books were popular and provocative, challenging modern assumptions about the Genesis account as well as the larger project of Old Testament interpretation. Walton's burden is to remind modern readers that the strangeness of Scripture demands our respect. His careful work with Ancient Near Eastern sources often reveals the vast distance between the biblical text and our modern outlook, even as it seeks to build bridges for our understanding.

For this third book in what has become an unintended "Lost World" series, J. Harvey Walton (son of John Walton) takes aim at the Israelite conquest of Canaan, as described in the biblical book of Joshua, with the elder Walton in a consulting and editorial role. The authors' basic argument is that modern interpreters have misunderstood and misapplied these texts in Joshua. This is the case for cultured despisers of religion, who condemn the conquest as genocide, as well as for Christian apologists, who legitimize the conquest as divine judgment. The interpretive failure, the authors opine, is multi-dimensional. Lacking a proper picture of what the Bible is (an ancient document), we adjudicate the text by modern conceptions of progress and goodness. Ignoring the literary intent of Canaanite depiction, we judge the Canaanites as "doomed for their sin." Lacking historical appreciation of ancient conquest narratives, we miss the literary and theological significance of Joshua's genre. Lacking a nuanced conceptualization of the key word *kherem* (Joshua 2:10, 6:17-18), we mistranslate it as "utterly

destroy" instead of "remove from use."

The authors argue that what is actually happening in the Canaanite conquest narratives recapitulates the creation account in Genesis: the establishment of cosmos from chaos, the institution of order in a non-ordered realm, and the clearing of a space in which God can dwell with his people. In other words, the Waltons do not attempt to construct an apology for the conquest so much as situate it within its ancient context. The authors argue that portrayals of the Canaanites fit an ancient trope, borne out by other sources, that of the "invincible barbarians" who must be expelled. This is a literary device used to demonstrate that the land is not procured by the might of the Israelites alone, but by divine assistance. The need to justify the conquest of the Israelites, they point out, is not felt by the ancient author: "The Canaanites are being destroyed by Yahweh because that is always the destiny of invincible barbarians" (147). Thus readings of the conquest as commensurate to Canaanite evil miss the point just as much as readings that paint the conquest as genocide. Both are poor interpretations of what is actually going on in the book of Joshua.

Although Israel's compliance with the *kherem* command did involve military violence, the authors argue that the concept is neither implicitly nor comprehensively destructive. Understood in context, it has to do with the clarifying of covenantal identity: its purpose was to "forfeit the right to administer the territory and instead turn the site over to the deity for the deity's own use" (240). Thus the modern application of this has "nothing to do with killing people," for in the new covenant, "the element of land is recapitulated by the believers themselves" (239-240). In the final chapter, the authors seek to draw a parallel between the *kherem* command and

the mortification passages in the New Testament (Romans 6:3-4, Galatians 5:24, Colossians 3:8-9). To practice *kherem* in a new covenant context means to de-center our prior identities and to re-center on the covenant community in Christ. Rather than taking over territory or pronouncing judgment on those outside our covenantal community, Christians *kherem* themselves, “not as a punishment but to make space for God to carry out his purposes through their lives” (252).

I take the positive contributions of this volume to be twofold. First, the authors provide a plausible alternative for *kherem* that is worthy of consideration. Here, *kherem* signifies the removal of Canaanite identities from use in the land so that the land and the people in the land may be co-identified with Yahweh. In the authors’ assessment, this process includes not just military conquest but also conversion (e.g. Rahab is an example of *kherem*, not an exception to it).

Second, the authors illuminate the conquest narratives by placing them alongside other ancient conquest accounts. To call descriptions of the conquest “hyperbolic” is not exactly accurate, since these narratives belong to a specific ancient genre that seeks a particular perlocutionary effect. The recognition of these contexts give coherence to the conquest accounts so that we are able to appreciate the literary and theological significance of what is being narrated in Joshua, rather than starting with questions that are foreign to the text.

Nevertheless, many readers may feel that the authors’ systematic dismantling of the traditional interpretation of the conquest is strained. The Waltons argue that depictions of Canaanite evil are intended to critique Israel rather than condemn the Canaanites, and they claim that the conquest narratives are concerned with driving out the forces of chaos and establishing cosmological order rather than with judging sin. Yet, in both cases, it is difficult to see why it cannot be all of the above. That the authors are accurate in what they affirm does not necessarily rule out what they deny.

As the work of two authors, *The Lost World of the Israelite Conquest* is both like and unlike the earlier two “Lost World” volumes by John Walton. It is built on the same interpretive

assumptions and follows the same basic method. Structurally, it organizes its argument around twenty-one propositions, each of which stands as the title of short chapters that cumulatively make the case. This can be a benefit to most readers: the sometimes dense material is mitigated by the efficiency of each chapter’s aim. The argument, thus constructed, is relatively easy to follow.

At the same time, this third volume is also unlike the earlier volumes: largely penned by the younger Walton, the prose is less practiced, and this less-practiced prose sometimes pulls the book towards overly ambitious pronouncements. That, together with the elder Walton’s interpretive minimalism, results in a reading of the conquest that is simultaneously spare in its interpretations of particular texts and provocative in its larger interpretive project.

Indeed, what makes the volume most potentially problematic is not the revisionary approach to the Israelite conquest but the methodological denials that are made along the way. The authors take aim at many targets tangential to their task, such as Christopher Wright’s missiology (Israel is not “expected to bring the nations into the covenant” [75]), Walt Kaiser’s principlizing hermeneutics (principles are extracted from their context so as to become “essentially arbitrary” [95]), and any number of attempts to derive ethics from Scripture (God’s purpose in giving us Scripture “does not include teaching us to be moral” [98]).

With chapters as short and pithy as they are, these dismissals cannot help but resemble straw men. The authors seem to indicate that most attempts to move from the Bible to theology are misguided, even as they advance their own proposal in the book’s final chapter, an attempt that in practice is difficult to distinguish from any number of hermeneutical approaches on offer (including Kaiser’s!).

Indeed, the desire to distance their approach from moralism leads to some strange conclusions, such as this: “We must not conflate the Bible’s status and function as Scripture with its status and function as literature. Providing us with moral knowledge is not its purpose as *Scripture*; consequently, any moral knowledge we can derive

from it does not carry the *authority* of Scripture, but rather only the authority of human wisdom” (100). I am simply not sure how to understand statements like this. That divinely-inspired moral direction can and should be derived from Scripture is the testimony of the Great Tradition and, more notably, of Scripture itself (2 Timothy 3:16). In the authors’ effort to ensure that we mind the gap between the ancient context and our own, I worry that they are in danger of leaving us with Lessing’s “ugly ditch” between history and faith.

Perhaps the difficulties I found with the volume may be no more than those of a theologian wanting to bring canonical theology to bear on biblical specialists who are zealous for close readings of particular texts. But hard disjunctions seem methodologically commonplace throughout this volume. We are given a picture of striking discontinuity between the testaments, between holiness and morality, and between creation and covenant. On the last pair, the authors write, “When the Israelites are unfaithful to the Torah, they are not breaking God’s universal moral law; they are breaking the covenant” (103). Why not both? Does not the

covenant reveal something about the character of the Creator and the grooves of creation? Related to this is the authors’ repeated insistence that the Canaanites cannot be depicted as guilty since they are not in covenantal relationship with Yahweh. Does not Yahweh’s sovereignty extend to the nations? Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is right by the Canaanites, just as surely as by the inhabitants of Sodom (Genesis 18:25)? This may not be an immediate concern of the world of the text, but isn’t it a concern we must address as we live in front of the text? And surely the larger canonical context has something to say on God’s relationship with the nations, the accountability and guilt of all humanity, and the general contours of God’s design for flourishing. These canonical dimensions do not replace the meaning of ancient texts in their context, but they do fill them in sometimes surprising ways.

In the end, this volume advances the conversation on the conquest narratives in some important ways. As a part of the Waltons’ larger project in restoring lost worlds of meaning, it is a gift to interpreters. The question is whether the methodological underpinnings of their approach can sustain the weight placed upon them.

The Disruption of Evangelicalism: The Age of Torrey, Mott, McPherson and Hammond. Treloar, Geoffrey R. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2017. 335 pp. ISBN: 978-0830825844. Reviewed by Keith Sewell, Emeritus Professor of History, Dordt College.

Covering the period between 1900 and 1940, *The Disruption of Evangelicalism* is the fourth book in InterVarsity Press’ series titled “A History of Evangelicalism: People, Movements, and Ideas in the English-Speaking World.” Once the series ends with the eventual publication of the fifth volume, some will see the series as completing the development in evangelical history-writing that began with George Marsden’s *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (1970). This book’s author, Geoffrey Treloar, is director of learning and teaching at the Australian College of Theology, Sydney. He is an authority on the historiography of the New Testament scholar Joseph Barber Lightfoot (1828-89).

In this fourth volume, Treloar’s subject is English-speaking evangelicalism in the period

following the high points of the nineteenth century and the post-1945 era of the Billy Graham Crusades. This period was marked by what Treloar labels as “disruption.” It was a time when the previously unresolved problems within evangelicalism were not only not resolved but became more fully apparent. These include evangelicalism’s inadequate ecclesiology, its tendency towards cultural superficiality, and its intellectual deficiencies, all of which were already manifested in the nineteenth century and, in the early decades of the twentieth century, came home to roost.

While not offering “potted biographies” as such, Treloar finds exemplars of these divergent tendencies in the lives and work of Reuben A. Torrey (1856-1928), John R. Mott (1865-1955),