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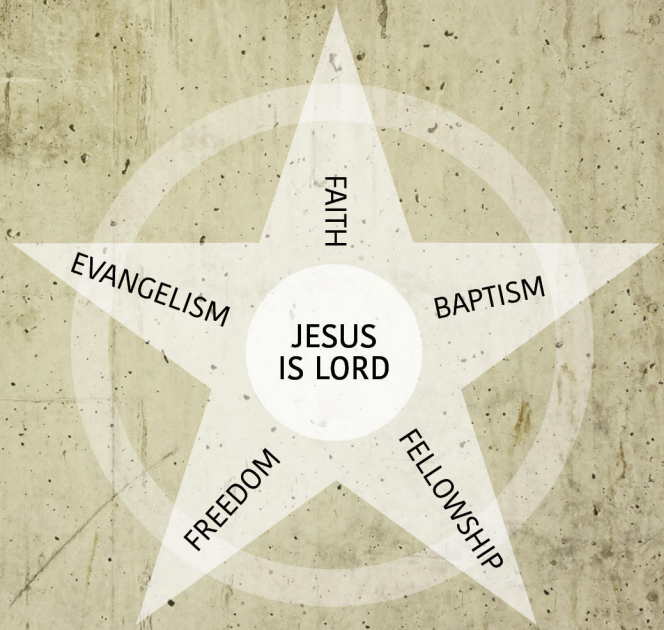
That the Next Generation Might Remember: The Conquest of Canaan in Israel's Collective Memory and in the Psalms

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Abstract

Several of the psalms contain significant allusions to the events of the exodus. Some of these offer detailed and prolonged retellings, with attention given to quite minor parts of the narrative as recorded in Exodus – Numbers. By contrast, these psalms appear to pay scant attention to the events of the conquest of Canaan. This question has not so far received significant attention in the scholarly literature. The present paper uses three psalms (78, 106 and 135) as a test to evaluate this hypothesis, and offers some tentative proposals to shape the ongoing investigation.

Keywords: Hebrew Bible, exodus, conquest of Canaan, collective memory, psalms

Introduction: exodus and conquest beyond Exodus – Judges

The story of the exodus from Egypt is told, retold, and alluded to around 120 times in the Hebrew Bible beyond the narrative in the book of Exodus itself.[1]

Much work has been done on the exodus traditions that are found throughout the Hebrew Bible. In particular, Linda Stargel's book *The Construction of Exodus Identity in the Texts of Ancient Israel* takes a social-scientific approach to consider how the retellings of the exodus

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[1] Linda Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity in the Texts of Ancient Israel*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2018), xviii.

contributed to the shaping of the national identity. Another significant contribution to the literature is the collection of papers in the book edited by Michael Fox, *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture.*[2]

Many of the direct references to the exodus are found in the Psalter, where a number of psalms (which I will henceforth refer to as *exodus psalms*[3]) make reference to events from the exodus story for hymnic or didactic purposes, 'that the next generation might know' (Ps 78:6). Four of the most extensive studies of these have been performed by Linda Stargel,[4] Susan Gillingham,[5] Alviero Niccacci[6] and Daniel Estes.[7] However the exodus events which they seek to identify are different. These are broadly set out in the table below.

Linda Stargel	Susan Gillingham	Alviero Niccacci	Daniel Estes
The adversity experienced by the Hebrews in Egypt.	The escape from Egypt.	The plagues.	The deliverance at the Red/Reed Sea.
The supernatural intervention of God.	The role of Moses in leading the people out of Egypt.	The parting of the sea.	The destruction of Pharaoh's army.
God bringing the people out of Egypt.	The crossing of the Red/Reed Sea.	The defeat of the Egyptians.	The rejoicing of Israel.

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[2] R. Michael Fox (ed.), *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014).

[3] This is not intended to suggest that the exodus is necessarily the main theme of the psalm.

[4] Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity.*

[5] Susan Gillingham, 'The Exodus Tradition and Israelite Psalmody.' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 52.1 (1999): 19-46.

[6] Alviero Niccacci, 'The Exodus Tradition in the Psalms, Isaiah and Ezekiel.' *Liber annuus* 61 (2011): 9-35.

[7] Daniel J. Estes, 'The Psalms, the Exodus, and Israel's Worship' in Fox (ed), *Reverberations of the Exodus in Scripture*, 35-50.

Daniel Estes applies his criteria separately, using each in turn to identify psalms where it finds resonance. The other three scholars look for clustering of psalms where their three selected motifs coexist, in order to identify the principal exodus psalms. Using their different criteria, Stargel, Gillingham and Niccacci have identified between seven and nine psalms which contain a significant element of exodus retelling. These are set out in the table below.

Exodus psalms identified

Stargel	77	78			105	106	114	135	136
Gillingham	77	78	80	81	105	106	114	135	136
Niccacci		78	80	81	105	106	114		136

Undoubtedly the exodus event is a major element in the foundational story of Israel, and it is unsurprising to encounter it in the nation's psalmody. However, another momentous event in the narrative of the Hebrew Bible is the conquest of Canaan (henceforth simply 'the conquest'), which of course is the natural sequel to the exodus. This paper represents part of an ongoing project which is examining the ways in which the conquest is portrayed in the Bible beyond the books of Joshua and Judges.[8]

Here, as a test case, we will consider three of the exodus psalms: 78, 106 and 135. These three have been selected because they represent different types of psalm, and because they appear to handle the conquest in different ways.

This brings us to a note about terminology. Following Stargel's practice, I will refer to the exodus and conquest narratives contained

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[8] See also Helen Paynter, 'Matthew's Gadarene Swine and the Conquest of Jericho: An Intertextual Reading', *Pacific Journal of Baptist Research* 14.2 (2019), 13-24; Helen Paynter, 'Land, Seed and Promise: Jacob as Mise-en-Abyme to Israel' in Trevor Laurence and Helen Paynter (eds), *Violent Biblical Texts: New Approaches* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2022), 68-90; Helen Paynter, 'Erasing the Troubling Teens? What Happens to the Conquest of Canaan When the Non-Deuteronomistic Biblical Writers Tell the Story?' in Michael Spalione and Helen Paynter (eds), *Map or Compass? The Bible on Violence* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2022), 36-55.

within the Pentateuch and Joshua/Judges as the 'primary' narrative. Stargel takes pains to point out that the designation of this narrative as 'primary' does not imply chronological priority, but rather reflects its omniscient, eye-witness style, and its presentation as the dominant narration of Israel's journey from Egypt to the desert.

Likewise, this enquiry makes no presupposition about the relative date of the psalmist's and the Deuteronomist's time of writing. As we will see, some of the psalms appear to demonstrate close textual relationship with parts of the Pentateuchal and Deuteronomic writings, while others may be working on the basis of similar but slightly different sources, including oral traditions. Although some forms of intertextual study presuppose literary dependency of one text upon another, it is equally possible to consider two texts which emerge in conversation with one another during long periods of oral transmission,[9] and this synchronic approach is the one I am employing.

In methodological terms, then, this study will consider the three psalms identified as test cases, and will seek to find where they refer to the conquest, or to conquest-related events. Once the conquest *motifs* have been identified, the way in which the conquest is represented will be considered, in relation to the theme and structure of the whole psalm. The key question that this paper is seeking to understand is *how* the conquest is represented in the exodus psalms, although it will conclude with a brief discussion of *why* this might be so.

The conquest in Psalm 78

The form and dating of this psalm have received extensive treatment in the literature, but there is no consensus. The dating of the psalms is

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[9] This would be a reasonable conclusion to draw from David Carr's influential account of how the Hebrew Bible came to be in written form. See David Carr, *The Formation of the Hebrew Bible: A New Reconstruction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

'notoriously difficult',[10] and while this may well have a pre-exilic origin, it almost certainly underwent significant post-exilic editing.[11]

The psalm is second in length only to Psalm 119, and has been described as 'an extended and impressive instruction or sermon on matters of faith and loyalty to Israel's God'.[12] It is self-designated as a *maskil*, which has an uncertain meaning. A clue may be present in 2 Chronicles 30:22, where a group of Levites with liturgical responsibilities are described as *maskilim*. It may, therefore, be a psalm specifically composed for such a group. It clearly has a didactic purpose. Its stated intention is to 'tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord' (v.2), and it contains a frank account of Israel's moral failures, 'that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation' (v.8).[13]

There is also no clear consensus on the structure of the psalm, but broadly speaking it contains two recitals of Israel's failures and God's goodness, with the break occurring between verses 39 and 40. The recitals show extensive intertextual crossover with the Pentateuchal tradition of the exodus and wilderness wanderings, particularly Exodus 15 (the Song of the Sea) and the desert events of Numbers 11.

After an extended introduction (vv.1-8), the first stanza begins by making reference to an unidentified act of cowardice by Ephraim. Then there is a brief reference to the splitting of the Red/Reed Sea (v.13, cf. Ex 15:8) followed by a lengthy account of the wilderness wanderings. These are shown in the table, alongside their locations in the primary account.

Stanza 1

Event recorded in Psalm 78	**Equivalent in primary account**
Act of cowardice by Ephraim (vv.9-11)	*uncertain*

[10] Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*. Vol. 20. (Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, 1998), 284.
[11] Robert P. Carroll, 'Psalm LXXVIII: vestiges of a tribal polemic.' *Vetus Testamentum* 21.2 (1971): 133-50.
[12] Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, Volume XV (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 93.
[13] Biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2016).

Splitting of the Red/Reed Sea (v.13)	Ex 15:8
Splitting rocks in the desert (vv.15-16)	Ex 17:6; Num 20:8-11
Manna (vv.24-25)	Ex 16:4
Quails (vv.24-29)	Ex 16; Num 11:31
Fire in the camp (v.21)	Num 11:1
Plague (vv.30-31)	Num 11:33
Deaths in the desert (v.33)	Num 14: 29-35

The second stanza makes more detailed reference to the exodus event, with seven of the plagues listed, although not in the same order as the primary narrative. This is followed by brief reference to the Red/Reed Sea. The strongest candidate for a retelling of the conquest is found in next two verses (vv.54-55). The psalmist then continues with post-conquest events.

Stanza 2

Event recorded in Psalm 78	**Equivalent in primary account**
River of blood (v.44)	Ex 7:14-25
Flies (v.45)	Ex 8:20-32
Frogs (v.45)	Ex 8:1-15
Locusts (v.46)	Ex 10:1-20
Hail and lightning (vv.47-48)	Ex 9:13-35
Plague (v.50)	Ex 9:1-7
Death of the firstborn by the destroying angel (vv.49,51)	Ex 11:1-12:36
Red/Reed Sea (v.53)	Ex 14:19-31
Conquest? (vv.54-55)	various
Israel's rejection of the Shiloh cult (v.58)	various
Capture of the ark in battle (vv.60-62)	1 Sam 4

It will be readily seen that this lengthy recitation of Yahweh's mighty acts and Israel's rebellions and failures gives little attention to the act of acquiring and settling in the land of Canaan. Here are the two verses where this is covered.

> And he brought them to his holy land,
> to the mountain which his right hand had won.
> He drove out nations before them;
> he allotted them for a possession
> and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.
> vv.54-55

11

The first of these verses shows similarity to the Song of the Sea in Exodus 15, which the psalmist has already drawn upon.

Ps 78:54	Ex 15:17
And he brought them [*hiph* of בוא] to his holy land, to the mountain [הר] which his right hand [ימין] had won.	You will bring them in [*hiph* of בוא] and plant them on your own mountain [הר], the place, O Lord, which you have made for your abode, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands [יד] have established.

The following verse employs vocabulary which is commonly used of the conquest: the *piel* of גרש. This is a verb frequently employed to refer to the displacement of the peoples of Canaan. The subject of the verb is usually Yahweh's hornet (Ex. 23:28, Josh 24:12), or Yahweh himself or his angel (Ex 23:29; 33:2; 34:11; Josh 24:18). Within the conquest texts, Israel is only once the subject of the verb (Ex 23:30).

> He drove out [*piel* of גרש] nations before them;
> he allotted [*hiphil* of נפל] them for a possession [נַחֲלָה]
> and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents. (Ps 78:55)

Second, the verse states that Yahweh has allotted to Israel a 'possession', or 'inheritance' [נַחֲלָה]. The word נַחֲלָה is so central to the apportioning of conquered land to the tribes in Joshua 13-19 that it amounts to a *Leitmotif*, occurring 44 times (as the noun, e.g. Josh 13:6, or its cognate verb, e.g. Josh 13:32).

Within the long historical recitation of Psalm 78, then, the conquest is clearly marked. However, there are two striking features of the psalm's treatment of the conquest.

First, the brevity and paucity of detail is surprising. In comparison with the lengthy treatment of the exodus and wilderness wanderings, the conquest is described in just two verses, and in general terms. While Egypt, Shiloh and Zion and even the narratively insignificant Zoan are named (vv.12, 42, 60, 68), the places of the great battles of the

conquest are not. The murmurings of Israel are recounted in direct speech (vv.19-20), with a detailed account of many desert incidents and of the plagues. By contrast Joshua and his deeds are unremembered. There is one reference to the nations who were displaced by the conquest, but unlike the Egyptians, they are not identified. If the psalmist's purpose is to recount the mighty acts of Yahweh and the peoples' unfaithfulness, failure to recount the conquest events would seem like a missed opportunity.

Second, the emphasis of the psalmist is firmly upon the actions of Yahweh rather than upon human endeavour. The conquest is told in a brief sequence of four *wayyiqtol* verbs,[14] with Yahweh as the subject of each of them.

וישכן ... ויפילם ... ויגרש ... ויביאם

> He brought out… he drove out… he apportioned… he settled

We might consider this to be in keeping with the psalmist's emphasis upon God's mighty acts. However, by doing this, psalm is failing to reflect the difference between the two narratives that we encounter when we read the primary accounts of the exodus and the conquest. The primary account of the exodus strongly emphasises divine activity. Human action is framed in terms of obedience and faith. By contrast, the primary account of the conquest balances both divine action and human activity.

A naïve reader of this psalm could be excused for concluding that the conquest took place without human participation; that Yahweh simply handed the land over to the people of Israel, just as he had simply parted the Red/Reed Sea for them. Of course, the psalm would have been operative within the broader framework of an oral history and perhaps by then written accounts of the conquest, and in this sense such a naïve reader is not in the psalmist's mind. For now, we will simply note these things and move on to Psalm 106.

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[14] *Wayyiqtol* verbs form the backbone of Hebrew narrative, with action generally described in terms of sequential action (he did this and he did that…) rather than using subordinate clauses.

The conquest in Psalm 106

Psalm 106 is another *maskil*, this time attributed to Asaph. It is a lengthy retelling of Israel's history, again emerging from a particular setting which is now obscure.[15] It focusses mainly upon the exodus–wilderness portion of Israel's story, employing the narrative to make a corporate confession and community lament. To do this, the psalmist narrates multiple instances of sin and rebellion, presenting a narration of Israel's early history in a series of cycles. Once again, the events are not presented in the same order as the primary narrative. The structure of the psalm can be summarised as follows:

> 1-3 Doxology
> 4-5 Plea for mercy
>
> **Cycle 1: Ex 14**
> 6-8 Confession: failure to remember Yahweh by the Red/Reed Sea
> 8-12 Salvation: parting of the Red/Reed Sea, inundation of the enemy
> **Cycle 2: Num 11**
> 13-14 Confession: the people complain of hunger in the desert
> 15 Punishment: wasting disease
> **Cycle 3: Num 16**
> 16 Confession: the rebellion of Korah
> 17-18 Punishment: earthquake and fire
> **Cycle 4: Ex 32 (and Deut 9:25)**
> 19-22 Confession: golden calf
> 23 Punishment: averted by prayer of Moses
> **Cycle 5: Num 14**
> 24-25 Confession: failure to enter the land
> 26-27 Punishment: a generation dies in the desert
> **Cycle 6: Num 25**

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[15] Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Tanner, 'Book Three of the Psalter: Psalms 73–89.' In E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (eds) *The Book of Psalms* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 624.

28   Confession: Baal worship at Peor
29   Punishment: plague
30-31 Salvation: plague arrested by Phinehas
Cycle 7: Num 20
32-33 Confession: grumbling at Meribah
Cycle 8: Deuteronomistic history
34-39 Confession: syncretism with Canaanite idolatry, including child sacrifice
40-42 Punishment: falling into the hands of the nations
43-46 Salvation: God remembers his covenant, deliverance and pity

47   Prayer for mercy
48   Doxology [which concludes book IV of the psalter]

Once again, a substantial amount of space is given to the Red/Reed Sea and wilderness accounts. The people's refusal to enter the land is made explicit (vv.24-25). But the conquest itself is hardly mentioned. In fact, it simply appears in negative relief, in verse 34:

> They did not exterminate [*hiphil* of שׁמד] the peoples,
> as the Lord had said to them.

The instruction which Israel is described as violating is found several times in Deuteronomy, particularly in chapters 7 and 20. The verb employed is frequently חרם rather than שׁמד but שׁמד is also used, as in this example from Deut 7.

> But the Lord your God will give them over to you and throw them into great confusion, until they are destroyed [*niphal* of שׁמד]. And he will give their kings into your hand, and you shall make their name perish from under heaven. No one shall be able to stand against you until you have destroyed [*hiphil* of שׁמד] them. (Deut 7:23-24)

15

The psalmist is bringing together key moments of rebellion in the history of Israel, including their refusal to enter the land, their failure to destroy the peoples of the land, and their consequent syncretic practices. Events which do not support this narrative are largely folded out, and the timeline is partially collapsed.

But not all events are folded out of the account. As we have seen, the exodus tradition receives some treatment. The conquest, however, does not. In narrative terms, the psalmist takes us from the refusal to enter the land (v.24), via the two desert stories of the idolatry of Peor (v.28) and the grumbling at Meribah (v.32), to the failure to drive out the nations (v.34). Once again imagining a naïve reader, they would not even know that the conquest had happened.

The conquest in Psalm 135

This is a hymn of praise, and has become part of the Great Hallel. It is widely considered to be late post-exilic, due in part to the density of its intertextual allusions, which implies the pre-existence of at least early forms of several texts from the Hebrew Bible.[16] It has been shown to occupy a neat chiastic structure.[17]

  Hallelujah (v. 1a)
        A summons to praise (vv. 1b–4)
              A celebration of God's sovereignty over all other gods (vv. 5–7)
                    A recounting of God's acts on behalf of Israel (vv. 8–14)
              The gods of the other nations compared with God (vv. 15–18)
        A summons to bless God (vv. 19–21a)
  Hallelujah (v. 21b)

The central portion of the psalm (vv.8-12) contains a retelling of key moments in Israel's history, which is where reference is made to the exodus and conquest traditions:

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[16] Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150 (Revised)*. Vol. 21. (Dallas: Word, 2002), 288.
[17] Nancy deClaissé-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth Tanner, 'Book Three of the Psalter: Psalms 73–89.' In E. J. Young, R. K. Harrison, and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (eds) *The Book of Psalms* The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 943.

He it was who struck down [*hiphil* of נכה] the
firstborn of Egypt,
both human beings and animals;
he sent signs and wonders [cf. Deut 6:22; 11:3;
34:11; Neh 9:10]
into your midst, O Egypt,
against Pharaoh and all his servants.

He struck down [*hiphil* of נכה] many nations
and killed mighty kings—
Sihon, king of the Amorites,
and Og, king of Bashan,
and all the kingdoms of Canaan—
and gave their land as a heritage,
a heritage to his people Israel.

Unlike the other two psalms we have considered, here the conquest
portion is slightly longer than the exodus one. Both have an emphasis
on the Lord "striking down" (*hiphil* of נכה) the enemy; identified as
Egypt in verse 8, and 'many nations and mighty kings' in verses 10-11.

However, in the conquest part of this psalm the Canaanite kings – that
is, the kings whose territories were within the land of Canaan – are
unnamed, although the primary narrative identifies a number of them.
See, for example, Judges 1:4-12, and Joshua 10:3-15, which name King
Adoni-Zedek of Jerusalem, King Hoham of Hebron, King Piram of
Jarmuth, King Japhia of Lachish, and King Debir of Eglon.

The kings whom the psalm does identify are Og and Sihon, two
Amorite kings whom the Israelites encountered during their desert
wanderings, their territories lying east of the Jordan. Israel's defeat of
these kings is described in Numbers 21 and Deuteronomy 2-3, and
took place under Moses, so this is not a reference to the conquest
proper. The two kings are mentioned five times within the book of
Joshua, but only as back-story.

In the primary narrative, Og and Sihon are separated from the main
conquest in three ways: geographically, narratively and chronologically.
Geographically, the Jordan sits between the kings' territories and
Canaan proper. In narratological and chronological terms, between the

defeat of these two kings and the conquest are interposed four very significant events:

- Joshua's formal assumption of the leadership with the liturgical exhortations to courage and faith (Josh 1)
- The parting of the Jordan (Josh 3)
- The circumcision of the new generation (Josh 5:1-9)
- The divine 'handover' of the people from dependence on manna to enjoyment of the fruit of the land in conjunction with the first Passover in Canaan (Josh 5:10-12)

Why the prominence given to the defeat of these two kings, whose overthrow does not appear to be of especially strategic significance in comparison with the other threats faced by Israel between the Red/Reed Sea and the conclusion of the conquest of Canaan? As I have argued elsewhere,[18] there are two features in particular which distinguish these kings. First, unlike many of the other conquered peoples, they were the aggressors against Israel. In Numbers 21 and Deuteronomy 2, rather than permitting the people to move peaceably through his territory, Sihon aggressively attacks them, as he has Moab in the past. Og is also the aggressor in Numbers 21 and Deuteronomy 3.

The second feature that distinguishes these kings, particularly Og, is that they appear to have become the focus of an ancient mythology. In Deuteronomy Og is described as a man of gigantic proportions, requiring a fourteen-foot-long iron bedstead or sarcophagus (Deut 3:11). In the same verse he is coupled with the Rephaim, an ancient near-Eastern mythological trope employed in biblical narratives, as 'a general designation of the mythical inhabitants of southern Syria and Transjordania, before the settlement of the Ammonites and the

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[18] Paynter, 'Erasing the Troubling Teens?', 36-55.

Moabites'.[19] The category of 'Rephaim' also appears to overlap with the Anakim and Nephilim, other quasi-mythical people (cf. Num. 13:28-29, 33).

In support of this impression that Og is somehow paradigmatically monstrous is the later Jewish tradition. In the Tannaitic midrashim (c.10-220 CE) and the Amoraim (c.200-500 CE), he is viewed as a giant with mythical longevity.

If the postulated post-exilic setting for this psalm is correct, the psalmist is crafting his hymn in the context of the threat posed to the people of God by religious plurality in the post-exilic world. In order to promote worship of Yahweh alone, he has composed a recital of many of his 'signs and wonders' (v.9). At the heart of these is an approximately balanced account of the signs and wonders of the exodus, and the conquest of Canaan, but with the foregrounding of mythical rather than naturalistic elements. Once again, there is no reference to human action in any of the conquest events.

Marginalisation of the conquest: an under-appreciated phenomenon

This relative marginalisation of the conquest within the three psalms we have examined has not been the subject of much scholarly attention. In part, this is perhaps because any one particular psalm may have any number of reasons for omitting the conquest. Psalm 106, for instance, is preoccupied with the rebellions in the desert, so perhaps Israel's moral failures once they cross the Jordan are of less interest. Examined on its own, then, each psalm might offer a plausible reason for marginalizing the conquest. But when these three exodus psalms are considered together, a trend seems to be emerging. Further study is needed to evaluate the other exodus psalms to test the pattern further.

The phenomenon largely escapes comment by the scholars who have focused upon the exodus psalms. This is probably because, by drawing their inclusion criteria tightly around the exodus events, they have methodologically excluded the discussion of the conquest. For

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[19] H. Rouillard, 'Rephaim', in K. van der Toorn, *et al* eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 697.

example, in identifying her three core elements of the exodus account, Stargel makes reference to the conquest as a minor, or secondary, plot feature.[20] However, because she excludes it from her core diagnostic criteria, she places the discussion of the conquest beyond the purview of her study and therefore offers little consideration of its absence.[21]

Alviero Niccacci notes that the prophetic literature operates with a three-phase approach to the exodus: leaving Egypt; wandering in the desert; and entering the land.[22] He also notes that in the psalms this same pattern does not tend to be present, and there is less focus upon entering the land and the events of the conquest. The explanation Niccacci advances for this is that the hymnic or didactic purpose of the psalms lends itself to certain elements of the exodus account more than others. However, it is not clear to me that this explanation is sufficient. The dramatic events of the conquest, particularly the battle of Jericho, would lend themselves very aptly to the hymnic purpose, and an emphasis upon the decisive capture of the land or Israel's moral failure (through Achan, for example, Josh 7) would serve the didactic purpose very well.

'Forgetting' in a memory psalm

In this paper we have examined, as a test case, three exodus psalms, with the explicit question of how they each represent the conquest tradition. In each case, the human activity of the conquest is omitted altogether, and the conquest itself is relatively marginalised. In Psalm 78, there is only a very brief mention of conquest events, with the focus being on the land as gift from Yahweh. In Psalm 106, the conquest is folded out of the account entirely. In Psalm 135, there is a focus on the direct action of Yahweh in taking the land, with the foregrounding of mythic rather than naturalistic[23] elements.

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[20] Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity*, xix.
[21] Stargel does briefly note that the non-primary narrative retellings of the story tend to omit the conquest. Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity*, 99.
[22] Alviero Niccacci, 'The Exodus Tradition in the Psalms, Isaiah and Ezekiel.' *Liber annuus* 61 (2011): 9-35 (9-10).
[23] I use this word to denote a naturalistic type of content, rather than – necessarily – comment on its historical 'accuracy' (which, in any case, is an

We might consider the relative marginalisation of the conquest to be surprising, because in canonical terms, the conquest of Canaan could be considered inextricably linked with the exodus account, for both narrative and theological reasons.

In narrative terms, the conquest is the climax to the exodus account because of its centrality within the divine promise to the patriarchs.

> I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess… Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions… And they shall come back here in the fourth generation. (Gen 15:7,13-14,16)

Genesis 15 is the first time in the Pentateuch that the exodus from Egypt and the possession of the land of Canaan are coupled together. As the narrative moves from Genesis to Exodus, the coupling of the two events occurs again in Yahweh's opening words to Moses in their encounter at the burning bush.

> I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. (Ex 3:8)

This promise continues to have potent force throughout the exodus events and the desert wanderings, and when the conquest is fulfilled, the events and land allocation records of the book of Joshua are

anachronistic question). In other words, this is a genre question rather than one that need exercise scriptural apologists.

framed by reference to that promise made by Yahweh to the patriarchs and Moses.

> Arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this
> people, into the land that I am giving to them, to
> the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of
> your foot will tread upon I have given to you,
> just as I promised to Moses. (Josh 1:2-3)

> Thus the Lord gave to Israel all the land that he
> swore to give to their fathers. And they took
> possession of it, and they settled there… Not
> one word of all the good promises that the Lord
> had made to the house of Israel had failed; all
> came to pass. (Josh 21:43,45)

If the conquest is positioned as the fulfilment of divine promise, it is also the climax of Israel's 'coming of age'. William Propp considers the exodus event to function in Israel's memory as its rite of passage, but unlike rites of passage in traditional societies (where a young man, for instance, will leave the settlement a boy, and return to it a man), this has a linear direction of movement: Egypt – Sinai – desert – land.[24]

In narrative terms, then, coming to possess the land of Canaan was the natural conclusion of the exodus events. What would be the point in being redeemed from slavery in the land of Egypt, if the people were to wander in the desert for the rest of their lives? (Indeed, this question underlies the people's complaints for water in Exodus 14:11 and 17:3.)

This fulfilment of promises has not just narratological import, but also deep theological significance. As Yahweh's character was consistently predicated on his faithfulness to the covenant, so the conquest of Canaan was one important proof of that faithfulness. It even lies at the heart of the covenant record in Exodus.

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[24] William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 2. Anchor Yale Bible. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 35.

> When my angel goes in front of you, and brings
> you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites,
> the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites,
> and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to
> their gods, or worship them, or follow their
> practices, but you shall utterly demolish them
> and break their pillars in pieces. (Ex 23:23-24)

The downplaying of human activity in these three psalms' accounts of the conquest is also surprising, given the emphasis placed upon Joshua's conquering action in the primary narrative.[25] I referred earlier to a notional 'naïve reader' of the psalm, who would not be able to deduce from it that there was any difference between the conquest event and the exodus event, in terms of the mode of divine or human action. While, as we noted, such a naïve reader is unlikely to have been in the psalmist's mind, nonetheless, in the light of the significant pedagogical effect of the psalms, this is striking.

The use of tradition in the psalms: three proposals

Texts are a product of the concerns of the writer, which in turn are shaped by the collective concerns of his culture. 'History does not come neat or plain in these writings; the Hebrew Bible consists in large part of interpretations and reflections on history—more a midrash on the times than the times themselves.'[26]

The concerns of a culture are shaped by its *collective memory*. Collective memory is a term used by Maurice Halbwachs for a particular set of memories held by a group.[27] These are memories that have passed well beyond intergenerational transmission, into the collective consciousness, and so extend hundreds or even thousands of years

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[25] As one example among many, see Joshua 11:10–11. 'And Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms. And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction; there was none left that breathed. And he burned Hazor with fire.'

[26] Ronald S Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: culture, memory, and history in the Hebrew* Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 6.

[27] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (trans. Lewis A. Coser; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1941, 1952]).

beyond the life of eye-witnesses. Such a collective memory is orientated to the needs of the present generation; it does not prioritise historical 'accuracy' over the current needs of the group. Halbwachs's work was developed further by Jan Assmann, who used the term *cultural memory* to refer to 'that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image'.[28]

Collective memory and cultural memory are overlapping categories; here we will use Halbwach's term 'cultural memory', or 'tradition', while noting Assmann's emphasis on the way that such memories help to shape a culture's self-understanding.

So why is the conquest marginalised in the psalms? I suggest that explanations fall into three possible categories, although these may not be mutually exclusive in any given instance.

The unconscious reproduction of a deficient collective memory

In the light of the above, we can view the psalms as a faithful reflection upon the present and historical preoccupations of the author's own time, which are shaped by the collective memory of his culture. The psalmist does not construct his historical retellings out of thin air, but draws deeply upon existing tradition to do so.

But which tradition is the psalmist using, and how good is it? At times, as we have seen, there appears to be formal intertextual dependency upon the primary history; at other times the psalmists appear to draw upon other traditions, or collective memories, which are similar but not identical to those in the primary history. One possibility, then, is that in the cases we examined, the psalmists were drawing upon a different tradition from that of the Deuteronomist, and that the one they are employing is 'deficient', in that it does not recall the stories of Joshua.

Collective memories do not retell history in an even fashion. Certain events hold a much greater prominence in a nation or society's collective memory than others. This phenomenon of the variable

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[28] Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, 'Collective Memory and Cultural Identity', *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 132.

expression of historical events in the collective mind is termed 'mnemonic density'. The variability of mnemonic density reflects the way that a collective memory, and hence identity, has been constructed within a culture. The stories which are told and retold are stories of triumph or trauma; stories that in some way have captured the popular imagination and have shaped the culture.

So it is possible that the collective memory which is present in our psalmists' milieux is one that overlooks Joshua, foregrounds the exodus over the conquest, and views both events as pre-eminently acts of divine sovereignty. If this is the case, we might speculate as to the reason. We will return to this question shortly.

Such conjecture of divergent traditions can find support in the psalmists' representation of the exodus itself. As we briefly noted above, they refer to fewer than ten plagues, and do not represent them in the same order as the primary narrative. This is still true even if the Exodus account is split into its putative J, E and P sources. [29] However, although there may be some validity to such a reconstruction of the psalmists' world, this falls short as an entire explanation.

As Marvin Tate writes,

> It is sometimes argued that Ps 78 represents the oldest version of the tradition and Ps 105 and Exod 7–12 are variants. Of course, if source analysis of Exod 7–12 is accepted, the J, E, and P accounts would be as old or older on this basis. However, this kind of argumentation inspires little confidence. It is much more probable that the plague traditions were relatively fluid and malleable enough to be fashioned in different ways for different contexts. [30]

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[29] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 292.
[30] Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 292.

Unless we posit two communities which are isolated from one another, one producing the psalms and one producing the Deuteronomistic history, we still need to account for the psalmist drawing upon a different tradition than the one which informs the narrative writers – and explain why that might be.

Positive promotion of the exodus narrative

This idea of traditions being consciously manipulated for a rhetorical purpose directs us towards a second possible explanation. As the memory theorists Zerubavel and Zerubavel write,

> Socially "marked" historical periods occupy much more mnemonic "space" than one would expect... This variable density of historical intervals constitutes a significant semiotic code.'[31]

Therefore, perhaps the psalmists are intentionally promoting the exodus narrative.

Each of these three historical psalms constitutes, to use Claus Westermann's term, the 're-presentation' of history.[32] The collective memory is not simply replicated, but also presented. The psalmists' purpose is not simply the telling of history for its own sake, but for a rhetorical purpose. Depending on the genre, this might be as a credo, to extol Yahweh and declare his mighty deeds, to evoke lament and repentance, and so on. These psalms therefore have both a doxological and pedagogic, or 'traditioning' function.

But what is true of individual psalms is more strikingly the case with the entire psalter, whose liturgical repetitions shape the theology and memory of the people by what Walter Brueggemann calls a 'pedagogy of saturation', which is 'constitutive of reality.'[33] In other words, the

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[31] Eviatar Zerubavel and Yael Zerubavel. *Time maps: Collective memory and the social shape of the past.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 27.
[32] Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* Trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 214-49.
[33] Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 722.

psalter is both shaped by, and shapes, the imagination of the people of God.

In this reality-constituting function, the exodus events, and in particular the Red/Reed Sea narrative, assume paradigmatic significance, both within and beyond the psalms. Aarre Laurer argues that both in the imagination of the community and in its cultic reenactments which the psalms help to shape, the *motif* of the sea swallowing Pharoah forms a paradigm for the hope of eschatological renewal.[34] Certainly this would be borne out by biblical-theological study of the two testaments, especially that which focuses upon the themes of creation and new-creation, since these draw heavily from the exodus and Red/Reed Sea traditions.[35] Perhaps this helps to explain the prioritizing of the exodus tradition over the conquest one.

Demotion of the conquest

But might it be that the psalter is not so much prioritizing the one as downplaying the other? Might there be an intentional marginalisation of the conquest, or at least, of certain elements of it? Evidence for this might be found in the ways that even when the conquest was represented in one of our test psalms, it was portrayed as the result of direct divine rather than human action, as defensive rather than aggressive warfare, or as victory over an enemy that was more mythic than naturalistic. None of these choices would seem to be directly linked to a prioritisation of the exodus tradition, but rather the converse.

The telling of history, indeed, the act of remembering, is not a morally neutral act. It establishes an ethical relationship with past events.[36] We referred above to the work of Zerubavel and Zerubavel on mnemonic density. They point out that the variability of mnemonic density in a

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[34] Aarre Lauha, 'Das Schilfmeermotiv im Alten Testament.' In International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, *Congress Volume Bonn, 26-31 August 1962* (Leiden: Brill, 1963), 32-46.

[35] See, for example, the use of the Red/Reed sea motif in Isaiah 11:10-16; 43:14-21; 51:9-11.

[36] D. Bell, 'Introduction: Violence and memory'. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 38.2, (2009): 345-360 (356).

text is a communicative act. It may be that we are here glimpsing an ancient theological or ideological current which preferred to view the land as gift rather than battle prize, and elects, then, to tell history that way.

Is this implausible? History is written by the victors, as the familiar saying goes. Writings, especially ideological ones, tend to amplify their territorial claims and promote their version of history, especially battle conquests. Does the down-playing of human battle conquest but the promoted narrative of divine gift strengthen or weaken the claim upon the land? Does the absence of Canaanites from the psalmic narratives silence the victims, or might it possibly represent an unease of memory in the tradition of the victors?[37]

We might expect a people who have been dispossessed from their own land in the exile (or who face that threat) to trumpet their claims to it. But they do not; at least, not by means of the retelling of battle triumphs. Is it possible that a people who have experienced the trauma of exile might be demonstrating some reluctance to commemorate the trauma of others?

Towards a conclusion

The exodus *motif* is common throughout the Hebrew Bible, not least in the psalter. However, in our test study of three exodus psalms, the conquest of Canaan appears to have been marginalised in several different ways. This is particularly true of the naturalistic elements of the conquest: the slaughter of actual Canaanites by actual Israelites. These findings are broadly consistent with the results of similar studies in other parts of the Hebrew Bible.[38]

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[37] Such a theory has been proposed by Robert Hubbard, whose work on Old Testament allusions to Joshua also identifies this relative eclipse of the warrior leader from the narrative. Hubbard poses the question, 'Does the OT itself, whose prophets foresee a final international harmony under Yahweh, betray any wrestling with the problem [of the conquest]?' Robert Hubbard, 'Only a Distant Memory: Old Testament Allusion to Joshua's Days', *ExAud* 16 (2000): 131.
[38] Helen Paynter, 'Erasing the Troubling Teens?', 36-55.

Identifying this trend (at least in this limited way) and explaining it, are two very different matters, however. In this preliminary exploration, three broad possibilities have been set out. One possibility is that the psalmist was acting on the basis of the traditions he knew; traditions that themselves marginalised human activity in the conquest. A second is that the psalmist was deliberately choosing to prioritise the exodus story for his rhetorical and theological purposes. A third explanation postulates the deliberate down-playing of the conquest events, especially their historical, human side. If any element of this third explanation has credibility, then it raises further questions about the psalmist's intentions, and the theological purpose that he was pursuing. If the first explanation is preferred, then similar questions are pushed back onto the collective memory of Israel. Why had the blood and gore of the conquest receded from at least one strand of its tradition?

It is hoped that future scholarship will shed further light on this unexpected and under-investigated issue.

Notes on Contributor

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