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# Dispossessing the Giants: A Sermon

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This is an example of a text that isn't in the Revised Common Lectionary.

It speaks of conquest. We live in a time when “conquest-ing” Greenland, Panama, and Gaza (for example) are in the news. This text has been wrestling with me, and if you assent, you can wrestle with it too.

## Deuteronomy 9:1-5

“Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said, ‘Who can stand up to the Anakim?’ Know, then, today that the LORD your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the Lord has promised you.

“When the LORD your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to occupy this land’; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the Lord is dispossessing them before you. It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

“These are the words.” In Hebrew that phrase is “Debarim,” and it starts the book of Deuteronomy and became its namesake.

### “These are the words”

- That tell of God's past actions to instill an understanding of identity for the people
- That Moses gave as final instructions for people about to cross the Jordan and enter into a land called “promised”
- That include the 10 words at Sinai
- That speak of covenant renewal

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The Deuteronomist is trying to say: The people will get to the “promised” land, not because of their own merit, rather because of God's love and faithfulness to them, given even while they're still sinful.

- That call for ongoing faithfulness from the people to God
- and reassure the people of God's unwavering faithfulness

In chapter 9, Moses addresses the people. He recounts their wobbles, including serious infractions to the covenant like the golden calf debacle. In our pericope in particular, the Deuteronomist is trying to say: The people will get to the “promised” land, not because of their own merit, rather because of God's love and faithfulness to them, given even while they're still sinful.

“These are the words” puts a pretty high emphasis on the words, which is rough since *these words* in our pericope are troubling.

I'm working on a writing project, and I got a good email from my editor on Friday, and my first thought wasn't about my article. Instead, it was: “What would she say to the Deuteronomists?”

So I wonder, will you journey with me in this thought project a little while?

The editor might say, “Consider your audience.” To which the surly Deuteronomists (I imagine them as surly for some reason)... they go indignant: “We *did* consider our audience, and this will land for them: We're writing about their time wandering in the wilderness. They're exhausted, and they're survivors. But their exodus from Egypt has cost more than anyone predicted. They need to feel safe. They need to know God is faithful to them even when they've gone and built this stupid golden calf, and even when all signs point to the wilderness still stretching long and unbearable ahead.”

The Deuteronomists continue: “So, we showed them they will have a home. We showed them God will fight for them. Our people will understand God's love and covenant faithfulness. They will feel reassured that this struggle has an end in sight.”

I imagine the editor, very patient, responding, “Yes, I can see how this story lands for your seventh century BCE hearers as assurance of God’s faithfulness. But people across the globe are going to read this in 2025, and they will not have the same shared historical memory, and they will not have the same worldview, and when they read that God will destroy and subdue nations, and hear texts instructing them to drive inhabitants out, and destroy them quickly—it will not make them all trust God, on the contrary, with words like these, many will question how such a God could be benevolent.

First, you Deuteronomists need to understand, they have Robert Warrior’s story in mind:

“As a member of the Osage Nation of American Indians,” Warrior notices that many liberation theologies have focused almost solely on “the Exodus story...as the fundamental model for liberation.” But Native Americans see a problem when Yahweh the deliverer plans to give the Israelites inhabited land, “using the same power used against the enslaving Egyptians to defeat the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan.”<sup>1</sup>

Second, you’ve got to understand they just gave an honorary doctorate to Mitri Raheb, who says: Netanyahu had to quote Hebrew scripture when defending attacking Palestine after October 7. He referred to 1 Sam 15:3 “Now go and attack Amalek and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant”<sup>2</sup>

For Zionists, “The book of Joshua is the blueprint par excellence of a settler colonial ideology and theology.” Raheb shows that settler colonialism consistently has these two things: geography and demography: desire for terrain (promised land), and displacement of the indigenous people already present on that terrain (in favor of a chosen people).

- “The Israelites who crossed the Jordan into Canaan are seen as having a divine entitlement to the land. They are portrayed as belonging to the land and as the legitimate heirs while the natives are described as wicked and decadent (Genesis 9:25), needing to be replaced, displaced, and exterminated (Deuteronomy 7:2)<sup>3</sup>
- “While the biblical texts themselves are very troublesome, the manner in which they have been received is even more so. These biblical passages have been repeatedly used as justification for land grabs and colonization in Palestine and beyond.<sup>4</sup>
- “Jesus wanted to tell his people that the empire would not

1. Robert Allen Warrior, “Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians: Deliverance, Conquest, and Liberation Theology Today” in *Christianity in Crisis*, 1989.

2. Mitri Raheb, “RCPI Spring 2024 Book Series: Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible” at Harvard Divinity School. Accessed 25 February 2025 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VaMYEsPT2kQ&t=1s>.

3. Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, the People, the Bible*. (New York: Orbis Books, 2023) 72.

4. Raheb, *Decolonizing*, 74.

**Stories of God’s faithfulness through images of conquest have been used throughout history to condone violent and fatal displacement while exonerating aggressors. Using the Bible to sanction ghastly political maneuvers is idolatrous and faith-shriving.**

last, that empires come and go. ...Jesus wanted to release the powerless from the power of the empire. The moment he spoke these words [Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth (Matt 5:5)], the empire lost its power over the people, and power was transferred where it rightly belonged, with the people.”<sup>5</sup>

And third, Raheb and Brueggemann are friends. Walter updated his 1977 book *The Land* in 2002, adding where his book was insufficient: “The recognition that the claim of “promised land” in the Old Testament is not an innocent theological claim, but is a vigorous ideological assertion on an important political scale. ... The shortcoming in my book reflects my inadequate understanding at that time, ... this ideology of land entitlement... has served the ongoing territorial ambitions of the state of Israel, ambitions that, as I write (April 2002), are enacted in unrestrained violence against the Palestinian population.”<sup>6</sup>

Stories of God’s faithfulness through images of conquest have been used throughout history to condone violent and fatal displacement while exonerating aggressors. Using the Bible to sanction ghastly political maneuvers is idolatrous and faith-shriving.

In regard to the covenant promise, can we untether God the deliverer from God the conqueror? Can we look to God for deliverance without seeking a next goal that displaces other people or God’s creation? This is the practice I’d like to try in the rest of this sermon.

I imagine the Deuteronomist responding: “I’ve written what I’ve written. They are going to have to imagine what I went through and read up on the worldview of the people I’m writing to. I do not know this place you are calling globe; I do not have tablets where I can do research and hear stories of their worldview. They *maybe* can see me, but I am at a loss for how I am to anticipate them. So, no. I won’t be writing a second edition. The audience I’ve got in mind for my book lived hundreds of years before this Jesus, of whom you speak, was incarnate.

But if *you’ve* met the Messiah—*you* have a story to tell.”

5. Raheb, *Decolonizing*, 93.

6. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press: 2002.

As the Deuteronomists searched for stories that told their people of God's faithfulness, we search, and tell, and write, and inscribe on our bodies and in our memories such stories.

So, I'm wondering about you. Do you know someone wandering in a wilderness? You know someone, don't you, who is exhausted, and they're a survivor. But their struggle is costing more than anyone predicted. They need to feel safe. They need to know God is faithful to them even when we've got an idolatry to a golden age happening, and even when all signs point to the wilderness still stretching long and unbearable ahead.

When the squall around me threatens to swallow hope before 9am, I need you to tell me an old, old story, and when I ask the same question as yesterday only to be met by four news apps that I keep opening but never do they deliver on hope, when fear of the world surrounds me and I wonder what could become of this beautiful globe with nationalisms on the rise across the earth's varied, fragile, and resilient terrain, when my kids wonder if Iowa is a place they can live and love. When I wonder, I really wonder, how long, O God, can Ukrainians make it. How long can Palestinians survive without water and infrastructure? How long can your wild indigo bloom, your side oats gramma ripens next year's seed, your bees pollinate prairie clover while humans strip away policies and practices meant to protect this world. I need you to tell me the story in a way I can hear it.

When my own spirit, as a squall within, swirls with anxiety and fear and defiance while some people are encouraging "find your voice" while others give high marks only when you speak in theirs. I need God's story.

And there you have it: "God, I cannot live without you" Your toes are up to the Jordan, but your back is against a wall. "God, I cannot cross the Jordan without you" "I understand that promise and hope are over there—across the river—more in your future than in my past, but I'm also scared of the giants I will need to face. And they are bigger than me, more weaponized than us, they threaten to take down those I love, and I have not seen anyone prevailing against them lately. God, I cannot taste milk and honey without you."

And a new Deuteronomist stands up in the chapel. And you say, "Go ahead, you will walk through these waters and they will renew your baptism" and Roland and Donna and Al and everyone there when you were baptized will remind you "You belong to Christ." Another new Deuteronomist on Zoom stands and says, "the giants might be bigger than you, but you will never be alone." And another of you says, "Don't you go thinking God goes before you on account of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart. God goes before you because "the forces that defy God, the powers of this world that rebel against God, the ways of sin that draw you from God" will not have last words. God is omega. God speaks shalom. God dispossesses wickedness that harms the vulnerable "in order to fulfill the promise that the Lord made on oath to your ancestors." And yet another new Deuteronomist says, "know then, today, that the Lord your God is the one who crosses over before you" And in terrain new to you, God scoops

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**J**esus is going to show up in the midst of anguish. Jesus met Taylor and will meet you and every one of the people you serve in the midst of their squall or the world's storm. Jesus lived this storm on the cross, and beyond his and every grave, Jesus sees you, shows up for you, dispossesses evil of all its teeth.

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up your fear, "Oh. This hurts. I will not let it overwhelm you." God sees you point out the big things that threaten to destroy those you love and fills you with enough peace and enough hope and enough love... No. Fills you with so much peace, hope and love that conciliation tastes like milk, the next step like honey.

What if this whole place is full of new Deuteronomists—full of you good people with God stirring stories inside you and anointing you with courage to tell those stories of God's faithfulness known in Jesus—stories that land with people you serve?

So, you show Gazans they will have a home. And you show trans kids adults who care that surgeries aren't cancelled. Or maybe for you it's showing a grandparent new belonging, in the midst of burying beloved long-term friends, or showing a middle schooler a protagonist who's like them, or showing a Dad, who's dealing with poverty, medical care that will be there for his family.

For a leader serving in a parish, it was this story: A dad died of cancer. When the pastor visited his spouse and elementary school kids, they opened to Mark 4:35 and started reading about a storm at the sea and Jesus' words, "Peace, be still." Before finishing, third grader Taylor tore out of the living room and ran upstairs. Worry filled Stacie's eyes, she waffled wanting to go after her kid, not wanting to abandon the pastor. She was getting up, uttering an unneeded apology, "It's been so hard for..." when footsteps were running back down the stairs. Taylor ran into the room, shoved a Bible toward the pastor, "Show me where that is, I'm going to need it."

Jesus is going to show up in the midst of anguish. Jesus met Taylor and will meet you and every one of the people you serve in the midst of their squall or the world's storm. Jesus lived this storm on the cross, and beyond his and every grave, Jesus sees you, shows up for you, dispossesses evil of all its teeth, utters God's words: "I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you."