

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Karin Peter 00:34

Welcome to He'Brew, the Project Zion series that reduces Old Testament bitterness. I think we started with cold brew He'Brew, reducing Old Testament bitterness. And we do that through explanation, exploration and through experiencing the Hebrew Scripture text. So, our guides through the Old Testament for Hebrew Scriptures are Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. And I'm your host, Karin Peter. In today's episode, we are beginning our discussion of the prophets, specifically today, Joshua, and the books of Joshua and Judges and the entry into Canaan or what I grew up understanding as The Promised Land. So, I read the entire book of Joshua aloud to my spouse on a road trip through Arkansas, which says a lot. And when I began prepping for this episode, I realized my entire memory of the book of Joshua was they killed all the inhabitants, they took all the booty, they went home. That's what stuck with me out of this. So, a rereading of it was important. So, I'm going to turn it over to Charmaine and Tony and see where they take us with the prophets Joshua, and Judges.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:51

Well, first of all, this is a segment of the prophets that we could spend a lot of time on for some of those reasons that you've already stated, Karin, the, what is the what are the main themes, especially in Joshua? And the whole idea of what is scripture? And how, what is it for? So anyhow, hopefully, we'll touch on things that are of interest to you and to anyone else who is listening in here. So..

Karin Peter 02:28

I think if we're honest, and anybody's listened to this series, so far, I'm always interested in euphemisms for sexual activity. So, if you can get to that, in the beginning, we're good there.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:39

Ooo we'll have to think about that one. Alright, so first of all, we always want to do this at the beginning, and that's the reminder of how we'll be approaching scripture. We're seeing scripture as stories from the past, of people trying to capture, explain, and pass on their experience with God. Which, of course, means that it's shaped by their culture and their time and their language. What kind of language do they have for the divine, for interaction with the divine? So, if something in this story touches you or connects with you, great. Use it to enrich your own journey with God. And if it doesn't, that's fine, too. But perhaps you can learn a bit about their situation and times, or articulate why their story is difficult for you, or what part in yourself may need to seek understanding and healing with God, by what gets stirred. So, but it's all good. We're glad that you're here to participate with us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 03:49

This is a good time to remind ourselves too, that the Bible is not a book. It's a library. And if you walk into a library, you're going to find dozens and dozens, hundreds of titles of different genres of literature from different time periods with different values represented by the authors. It's no different in the Bible. The problem is that we've bound it up in a nice, compact package, which makes us think wrongly that this is a volume. It's not. It's a collection of volumes. And so, we have to change our mindset coming in. We have to expect that this is going to be uneven, but there's going to be a lots of variation in terms of how God is understood and experienced, about how human life is valued or not. So, I think that's just helpful always for us to remember.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 04:38

And it's a good place for us to ask the question is how we see God in the Iron Age, different than in the industrial age or in the postmodern age? And what are the tools we have for seeing and understanding who God is today? I mean, I think it's a good question to keep taking back and forth with us. So, we've gone from the first part of the Hebrew Scriptures. So, we've gone from the Hebrews, later known as the Israelites, and we'll probably be using that term more than anything. So, they're going from being slaves in Egypt, with this kind of vague, foggy memory that they had some kind of a connection with a God and they cry out to that God. And then they spend 40 years of homelessness, learning that this God is with them and for them. And so that takes us up to the end of Deuteronomy. And now we're into the spot where they're about to enter The Promised Land. And so, we're Judges and Joshua, this first part of the prophets section of the Hebrew Scriptures. And now it's about being planted on a piece of ground. So, there's this new relationship happening now. There's the people, and there's God, and there's a place. And there's some complications along the way because there are other established people on that piece of land, and keeping focused on God may be harder than they thought. So, that's just a little bit of what they're coming into.

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:41

So, in terms in terms of the Hebrew Bible, this is where we are. So, the first sessions we did were on the Torah. Charmaine walked us through the content of the Torah.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:50

A little.

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:51

Basically

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:51

I forgot the whole creation part.

Tony Chvala-Smith 06:53

That was kind of a truncated kind of a trip through the Torah. The second division of the Hebrew Bible is the Nevi'im, the prophets. And so, the prophets then are divided into two subsections, the former prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and the latter prophets: Isaiah to Malachi. And those prophets are further subdivided into the big prophets, and then the book of the 12. That is the 12 in Christian circles, and sometimes called the minor prophets, you know, Hosea to Malachi, but we're in the Hebrew Bible, everything from Joshua to Malachi is in the Nevi'im. And so, this is the first of four sessions we'll do on the Nevi'im. And then once we've done that, we'll go on to the final part of the Hebrew Bible, the Ketuvim, which are the writings. Think of it as miscellaneous, and we'll go there, eventually. But today, we're going to spend some time in the first part of the Nevi'im, Joshua, Judges. And I have to say, Karin, I remember as an 18 year old, for the first time trying to read the book of Judges. And I was absolutely mortified. I was absolutely mortified. So, I understand the, I call them the moral reaction that we have to Joshua and Judges. It's not a bad sign. It's a good sign if we have a moral reaction to these books.

Karin Peter 08:20

Oh, that's helpful to know.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:22

We'll talk more about that a little bit later, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:25

So, there's this overview of what we're going to be talking about today is the coming into the land. And we usually have one of two images, you know. Either God made the way possible for these people to come in and take over, or we have the other image that's so disturbing of wait, they believe God told them to go in and wipe out everybody in the town, you know, even the animals, you know. And so...

Karin Peter 09:01

It's pretty horrific when you start just reading page after page after page of this.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:06

Exactly. And that's sometimes the other image we have of Joshua. And so, I'm glad you read the whole thing. And there's, you got some other of the pieces as well. But that's still the big disturbing thing. And I think for many of us, it's disturbing, partly because we know Christians who think that that's still how God wants to work in the world. They have read it literally. They have determined who those Canaanites are today, and they think it's okay to wipe them out because God told these people to do it, so why wouldn't God tell us to do that? And we really need to name what's happening here as genocide. But we also need to look more closely at some of those stories and say, well, wait. Did they wipe out all the cities? And all the people? No, obviously not because there's other stories there where they're the minority. They're not in control at all. And they're getting, you know, attracted to the gods, the Canaanite gods? And how could that be if they had done this thing in each place and weren't being

influenced by the other cultures around them. So, we have to realize that some of these stories, may be how the author of Joshua wished it had been, rather than actually how it was. And Fant does a really good job of giving us three different understandings of how the Israelites may have actually come into the land and what the evidence helps us with there.

Karin Peter 11:02

So, the comment that, Tony, that you made about the different genres is really helpful in this particular episode because with Joshua and Judges, a lot of people think the Bible is chronological and could just go from book and then the next book takes it from there. But that's not what's happening with Joshua and Judges. And so, we do get two different pictures,

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:22

Right, there's two, these books have very different pictures of how the people of Israel emerged in the land of Canaan.

Karin Peter 11:30

Okay. Alright.

Tony Chvala-Smith 11:32

And we have some serious historical issues to deal with there, too. So, which we'll touch on here momentarily, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:40

Yeah, excellent. So, the other things that we have is they're coming into the land they're struggling with just dating Yahweh. You know, they want to date around, or in some cases, sleep around, because that's what you do under the inspiration of some of these other fertility gods. And then there's this whole other piece of, in Judges in particular, of being a minority, being oppressed, being ruled by the, you know, the city, the king of the city that you're living near, having to pay taxes, and crying out to God, and God raising up a leader that frees you from that. So, this is another side of the story when we get to the judges, of people forgetting about God, and then they're in this oppressed situation, and then they remember God, and then God later raises up a leader and brings order to the chaos. So, that's another, just as we're looking at the big picture here of some of the main themes. And so, Tony is going to go deeper on some of those themes and issues that are, that we think are worth noting in these two books. But of course, there's many, there's many things there to explore. And we could spend a great deal of time doing that. But...

Karin Peter 13:25

But it is a podcast, so...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:29

Fall asleep right away.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:30

It's not asleep cast, right. So, just some big picture items related to the book of Joshua and the book of Judges. First of all, these books came into the literary form, we're reading them now, of course, in translation, sometime in, like, 650 BCE, down to 550 BCE, in that period, straddling the end of the Judean monarchy, and into the Babylonian exile, which we've talked about in previous podcasts. So, the books as we're reading them are some 600 years removed from the events, I'll call them events that they're trying to talk about. And so, how did they have access to those? I mean, what do I know about my family history 600 years ago? Well, actually nothing. But in this culture, in this time, oral tradition, some written traditions, various ways people preserved memories. They've preserved memories in various literary forms. Myths, folklore, legends, poetry, lists, lists of cities lists of people. Everybody's favorite genre, genealogies. And so, both the books, Book of Joshua and especially Judges, are books made up of, like, pieces. Charmaine came up with the image of these books being kind of like memory quilts, were in a memory quilt, you have pieces of fabric from different parts of your life. But imagine that you'd lived 600 years, and you had pieces of fabric from some, faded a little bit too, pieces of fabric from 600 years of your life. And that's what's being sewn together in these books. And here's a result of it. It's fascinating, actually. The Book of Judges has one of the absolute oldest pieces of Hebrew text in the entire Old Testament. That's the song of Deborah in chapter five. The Hebrew is archaic. It's very ancient. And some scholars think it goes back to, you know, roughly the 1100 BCE. That's pretty darn close to the events. But in terms of the patchwork, the book of Judges has three different reasons why the Canaanites remained in the land. One reason was that the Israelites were disobedient. And they didn't do it. Yahweh told them to do and kill them all. Another reason was that Yahweh left them there on purpose to test the Israelites to see if they were faithful. And then a third reason is that Yahweh left them there to teach them how to fight because they didn't know how to fight. So, these are three incompatible reasons. And that's an example of the memory quilt with there's...

Karin Peter 16:26

I thought it was an example of a suburban dad. But that's, is what that really sounds like?

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:34

So, in other words, we've got these two books that are much removed from their original environments, their original environments they're trying to describe. They're drawing on oral traditions and some written traditions that have been passed on for centuries. And in some cases, the tradition is folklore-ish. So, definitely the Samson stories have all the feel of folklore and legends about heroic figure from the past. We can debate how heroic Samson was a little later if we need to. But so, what do we have here? That Joshua, the Book of Joshua is about the entry into Canaan. And the hero is Joshua. And that's really important to understand that the book of Joshua has been influenced by the theology that's in the book of Deuteronomy. And so, Joshua is portrayed as an ideal figure. He's portrayed like Moses. That's part of

the narrative is to show that as the Israelites moved into the Promised Land, which would have been promised all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, the person who's leading them has got the same authority and power as Moses, right? And so, already then, we know that the book has a certain ideological, theological bent. We're trying to show that our entry into the land was divinely approved. We did what you're supposed to do and we were led by a figure like Moses. Okay, and so, that's part of the theology of the book. It's a kind of an idealized view of Israel's past. So, the book of Judges depicts a much more messy picture. And actually, if you read Joshua close, it's messier than you'd think. The initial chapters in Joshua, there's this entry of Israelites as a mass army. And they do some quick conquests, but if you read the whole book very carefully, you discover, well, did they or didn't they? How much did they not do? Well, they didn't do some, they didn't take care of some places. And then when we throw archaeology into this, it gets really very messy, too.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:49

And Fant is helpful with...

Karin Peter 18:51

Very helpful. Yeah.

Tony Chvala-Smith 18:52

Absolutely. And then Judges, I say, Judges has a much more messy picture, I've already given an example. The author's editors preserve three completely different reasons why there are Canaanites left in the land. And all you have to do is read the narrative to understand that it was a much more messy process of how a people called Israel entered, or did they emerge? Or did they evolve? Were they, how closely related to the Canaanites were they? What, it's just a fascinating read. And there's some interesting theological stuff in it too. For example, in chapter one of Judges, it's describing the tribes, the tribes who did kind of what they were supposed to do, and it describes the tribe of Judah, and it says, "Yahweh was with Judah and helped them take the Highlands, but they couldn't take the lowlands because the people there had iron chariots". And it's like...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:53

God can help this much but...

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:54

I'm with you if they got bronze. If they got iron, God is like, I'm off the clock, right? But it's just fascinating. In some respects, the Book of Judges is a non-idealized picture. A messy picture of tribes that sometimes get along and sometimes don't. They sometimes get together. Sometimes they don't. The Book of Joshua ends with the tribes all gathering at Shechem to have this great, we promised to do it, whatever Yahweh says, The Book of Judges, it's like, now these are like, these are like 12 little independent duchies, trying to trying to figure out whether to run their own show, help each other. How much do they get along with the Canaanites? Should they let Canaanites (slip Be or Not)? And then you

throw in the Samson stories, and you by that time, you've got the Philistines, these sea peoples who settled on the coast around 1200 BCE. And Samson seems to actually kind of be attracted to Philistines, especially women Philistines. So, he's, you know, he's going over there a lot. So anyway, the book of Judges, I mean, if you want a thumbnail sketch of what's in Judges, it's the struggles of tribal Israel before the monarchy. And the book of Judges ends with a very peculiar line, where it says, "In those days, there was no, there was no king in Israel, and everyone did what was right in their own eyes." So, by the way, the Nevi'im is preserved to different traditions about the monarchy. The monarchy that arises, was a great idea. The monarchy that arises was a disobedient and faithless idea. The worst idea that we ever had. Both of those traditions are side by side. The book of Judges ends with this tribal confederation and complete chaos and wishing for a king. So, that's kind of a quick overview of the narratives of both. And there's lots of interesting and intriguing stories within and so one final thing is, there's three scholarly theories about how Israel entered Canaan. And Fant goes through these quite well. There's the traditional conquest model that basically says the text of Joshua's got it right. Problem with the conquest model, is that there's virtually no archaeological evidence to support it. And the textual evidence in other parts of Joshua and in the book of Judges, simply is contrary to it. Then, there is an immigration model, which is that groups of people who are ethnically related to the Canaanites were Semitic peoples, some of whom were connected to this group that was in Egypt, kind of slowly infiltrated in, and they assimilated in some places, and they kept their identity in other places, and it took, was a long process. And then there's a third model called a revolt model, in which a group of people connected to the exodus from Egypt, we'll call it the Joshua group, the Joshua group, enters Canaan. And already in Canaan, there are people that they are ethnically related to who are oppressed in the city states by these various Canaanite kings. And the coming of this Joshua group begins sparking revolts in the cities. And there's some archaeological evidence to suggest that. Here's the interesting thing about archaeology. The hard evidence from archaeology would say, it's until the time up until the time of the monarchy, it's impossible to distinguish Israelite artifacts from Canaanite artifacts. All we've got is Canaanite artifacts. And the other thing is that archaeology shows that some of the stories that are famous ones, like the taking of Jericho, that actually, archaeologically speaking, there was nobody living in Jericho end of the 13th century BCE. It was,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:02

A village maybe, but it didn't have a wall around it.

Tony Chvala-Smith 23:57

Right. There's no wall to see there. And it hadn't been for centuries at that point, so...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:02

But another interesting piece that keeps the debate alive is that in Hazor, which is further north, up in, up...

Tony Chvala-Smith 24:12

Up towards Galilee,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:13

Galilee, yeah. There it was, there was a walled city during this time period. And there's archaeological evidence that it was razed to the ground. So, this kind of warfare was not uncommon in that time period. But nothing about Jericho would indicate that the description that we have of Israel coming in to the Promised Land and laying waste to Jericho, could be historical, but we do know that that kind of wiping out of city did happen in that time, that it was a normal, expected actually, type of warfare in that time. It was their language and culture, you know. This is the language that they're thinking in when they think about conquest, when they think about taking over a city. This is what people do. This is what people with power and enough weapons and soldiers do to a place when they take it over, so.

Karin Peter 24:18

And if you're writing an idealized narrative, it makes a good story.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:19

Right! Right. Right. Yeah. And it's, it's absolute, right? It shows absolute power of one group over another or one people's God over another people's God.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:33

And something we haven't mentioned yet that's kind of important for this is that the context of these books coming together in the form that we're reading them is the Babylonian exile, when different people, different Judean exiles are trying to figure out theologically, how did this happen?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 25:48

Why did this happen? Why are we in exile? Why did everything that we stood for, our land? Why did we lose it all?

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:52

The temple was destroyed. We lost Jerusalem. The monarchy was destroyed. We lost everything. Why? And the book of Joshua gives one theological answer. We didn't do what we were supposed to do, right? According to Deuteronomy we were supposed to wipe out everybody in the land and be totally faithful to the covenant, worship no other gods. We didn't do that so we got what we deserved. That's one answer that these books are trying to come up with. So, that's the context of the context of the final editors and first readers will say.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:26

And we'll come back to what were some of the messages that the editors wanted the hearers to hear in their time. So, they're writing, they're drawing together all of these stories, oral and written, and trying to put them together in a way that will be meaningful to these people who are in exile with them. How do

they know who this God is that seemingly has deserted them? And so, what are some of the pieces in both Joshua and Judges that is trying to give them an answer about, where is God?

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:06

So, in that respect, we've got books here that are dealing with a perennial question. Why did this evil befall us? So, that's one way to keep the possible relevance of the books. At least they're struggling with the issue, so.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:20

So, that's kind of a big overview. So, next will be the exploration. What are some of the questions that get raised in these texts, especially if we're trying to see whether or what their relevance for us might be?

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:35

We suspect you have questions, Karin, because these books are they are a hot moral mess.

Karin Peter 27:41

They are as we read through them, and we don't really realize that so, I do. A lot of questions came up especially in reading Joshua. Judges was a little easier, even though it's equally horrific. It was easier in the sense that it didn't feel as absolute as Joshua. So, in Joshua is extremely militaristic. God is militaristic in Joshua. The book is militaristic. And, as the Fant text points out, the religion becomes nationalistic in this time period. And we still see that today in Christianity. We hear it. We saw it on January 6, in what took place at the Capitol, this kind of nationalistic takeover of Christian religion, and

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:37

Justified violence.

Karin Peter 28:38

Justified violence, yes. It stays with us. And so, I'm wondering why that story of Joshua has stayed with us as a strain that still lived out rather than the more assimilative nature of the book of Judges. They're telling the same story.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:56

Yeah.

Karin Peter 28:56

But we have adopted the more graphic one as our identity even in Christianity.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:04

I think so. And I think one reason for that goes back to how I described the book of Joshua earlier. Joshua is depicted as an idealized figure. And it's much easier to make an idealized figure a hero. I

mean, for goodness sake, we, on the square in Independence, not far from here, where we live, there's a statue of Andrew Jackson. The historical Andrew Jackson is very, very problematic figure. But there he is in bronze, big and bold. And his actual deeds and the things he sponsored, like in his involvement in the Trail of Tears of Cherokee and other tribes from the southern United States, slavery and so on, we know the historical Andrew Jackson, we would probably not want a statue of him on any square actually. But we love idealized figures and so the figure of Joshua in the book of Joshua is strong, courageous, faithful. He's just like Moses. He knows what's supposed to happen. He's like this perfect image of an obedient leader, a religious leader. And so, he just, he makes good copy, right? So, that's, the book of Judges, though, the book of Judges, because it's so much more of a patchwork, preserves all these judges are morally ambiguous figures. You know, for example, Gideon. If you read the text carefully, Gideon had another name Jerubbaal. In other words, he had a name connecting him to the God Bael, the very God that was the nemesis, Yahweh's nemesis in Canaan. And so, was he a faithful follower of Yahweh? Was he devoted to Bael? Was he...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:06

Was he a follower of Bael and then saw the light and then goes and cuts down the poles? The, you know, where they worship?

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:14

Was he playing the field with both of them?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:16

He wasn't really super sure. I mean, that's the other part about Gideon right?

Karin Peter 31:21

Right!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:22

Well, yes, no, maybe, I don't know!

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:25

So, I think that it's much harder, it's much harder to read the book of Judges carefully and say, we want to be like these figures.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:34

This is just tossing out a possibility too because you're right. For some Christians, these are the pieces that they want to hang on to, the Joshua power kinds of things. But other Christians really do go more with the, you know, we're messed up people, and we're always making mistakes, and God is making a way. And so, I wonder if how grace is seeing effects, whether or not denomination or a group of people is more likely to read Joshua as the dominant way God works or instead of Judges are the same way.

And I would say the grace tendency would be more on the Judges kind of reading of it. But those who tend towards fundamentalism, and having, again, absolute answers and being, knowing absolutely that you have earned heaven. I think that's going to be more on the Joshua side of things.

Tony Chvala-Smith 32:47

I mean, you can read Judges as if Yahweh has a much lower moral bar there for service to Yahweh. That makes me actually kind of happy,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 32:56

Realistic!

Karin Peter 32:58

Well, and it brings up my next question, which is in Judges, I think, more than in Joshua, because you're aware you're, I'm hopefully you're aware, you're reading an idealized story about Joshua. But in Judges, as you read it, it really comes to the forefront that the Israelites were struggling with this really tenuous balance between the covenant they made to Yahweh, and the reality of living out that covenant in Canaan with all of their non-Israelite neighbors. And so, there is a lot of interaction with the Canaanite culture. And whether it's political, you know, you go along to get along. Or whether it's, they marry into for other tribal purposes. There's all of this happening. And so, there is that kind of, yes, where we believe in Yahweh, but we are totally comfortable with visiting these other Gods, right? There's a balance,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 33:58

Right and the element there that makes this extra hard for the Israelites coming in, is they've been wanderers, nomads for their lifetime. And now this is an agriculturally more agriculturally focused area of the world. And if they're going to be settling down on a chunk of land, and claiming it for theirs and maybe expanding it, they're going to have to figure out how to be farmers. And so, how do you be farmers when you've never been from farmers, you know? And so, the people in Palestine, they know how to be farmers, and they know how their Gods help them be farmers. And so, you know, it's kind of like you move into a neighborhood and you ask the farmer next to you, how do you make sure that your seeds germinate and you have a good harvest? And they say, "Well, first of all, you have to go visit the Bael priestess and that you know, have sex with her and that'll get the Gods going so that we'll have a good spring and there'll be fertility in the air." So, it's like, "okay, that's how we do it!"

Karin Peter 35:11

Says the male farmer. I just want to make kind of a connection for our listeners, and that is that when we talk about Christianity as we understand it now, Christianity has always borrowed from its culture. We're recording this on St. Patrick's Day, and that's a really good example of Christianity, of who we know as St. Patrick borrowing from the local culture in order to kind of persuade people to participate in

Christian religion. And so, we shouldn't be so surprised by this borrowing of culture of the people of Israel, because that is a common human way of understanding your world, right?

Tony Chvala-Smith 36:02

Right. Yes.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:03

And I would say that that's part of the whole idea of herem, H E R E M which is that the idea of the putting people to the band. Putting, you know, wiping out of town, this is the warfare language of the space that they're coming into, into in a violent era, in a violent world, and so they're understanding. And this is something that's still true today. We have this tendency to say, well, God must be okay with the way things are because that's how the way that's how things are. And so, God must be okay with that. You can see it in the US as far as slavery is concerned, with that, this is, it's been like this for a long time. So, God must be okay with it. And when we're looking at the ways in which warfare is being described in Joshua, they're going in and they're using the methods and, again, the cultural understanding of how you succeed, how you have victory. It looks like this. It looks like wiping out everybody and everything, and not being contaminated by, you know, their idols of different gods and all of those kinds of things. So, that's helpful for us today too because culturally, we have the tendency to say, well, yeah, well, maybe we live in a sexist or racist society, but it's the way it is, and God must be okay with it, because that's what it is. And so, I think we still have that question to always be, you know, do we do things because they're comfortable? Or because this is the way things have always been? Have we really said, what is it that we know about God that would help us see whether this is actually helpful to the creation, to communities, to living in love? You know, if we don't ask those questions, we're doing the same thing they're doing, which is assuming, and nationalism comes in very strongly here, then we're just assuming that the way things are is the way things are supposed to be, and God's good with that.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:32

The thing you mentioned is religion is part a human construct, and so, it can't not be connected to culture, right? And we, I think we mentioned this in one of our previous podcasts in this series, when we're talking about the 10 commandments and the law. Even the Decalogue and even the legal traditions in the Torah, are shaped by Hittite covenant treaties, and other kinds of legal stuff. In fact, some scholars think that those long list of rules about how you manage yourself in an agricultural society, that in Exodus are made to come from Mount Sinai, actually came from Canaanite culture, right? And that Canaanites helped Israelites figure out how to live in this. And so, I'm always suspicious when someone says they want to be counter-cultural, because it's like, are you saying that you are a-cultural and that you're completely outside of culture. It's like, I think maybe what you want is, you want to be counter-imperial, or, you know, counter-oppression. But you can't possibly be counter-cultural, as if you were somehow outside of culture.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 39:42

Because even the idea of being counter-cultural is because there's a new emerging culture inside of the old culture, and so, but you know, so that we're getting a sense of how we're completely influenced, not completely, but we're majorly influenced by the culture around us. And we're absorbing it, whether we know it or not. And for good or not good. But yeah, culture sometimes is the thing that helps us see more clearly so that we can question some things. We can maybe say, is this actually what God wants us to do? But on the other hand, so culture may get us to that point of saying, "Oh my gosh, I never saw that before. I never saw the ways in which I am oppressing somebody else." And, "Oh, my goodness, is that what Jesus was talking about? Oh, my gosh!" So sometimes culture gets us there. But sometimes, culture can also blind us, it can be either way.

Tony Chvala-Smith 40:54

A couple more things on this very difficult aspect of the book of Joshua that Charmaine mentioned called herem in Hebrew, putting to the ban, or it's sometimes translated, devoting to destruction. In other words, the idea here is, every living thing in a city, in this kind of warfare is exterminated. And it has ritual and religious overtones. It's a sacrifice to the God. And we know that other peoples in the neighborhood did this. The Moabites did it for sure. And the Moabites are roughly, ethnically related to the Israelites. And so, that's the cultural piece here. It's really problematic, because here in our scriptures, we have a depiction of God commanding people to do what we would call ethnic cleansing, or genocide. And so, we have to tread really carefully around these texts and make sure we understand them and not, not misuse them. This is a, don't try this at home, and don't try anywhere, kind of moment in the Hebrew Bible. Some other things to know are that it's very clear from the book of Judges, that the Israelites, if they did this, they didn't do it very often,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:06

Or very well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:07

Or very well, because there's Canaanites everywhere. And another thing is that a lot of scholars say that the book of Joshua, actually in describing this, is trying to do a wish list. This is what we should have done, right? If we had only gotten rid of the all of the Canaanite inhabitants, we would never have become disobedient to Yahweh, which is a highly problematic idea on its own. But the archeological fact that they didn't do this much, if at all, doesn't absolve us of the problem. Here it is in our sacred texts. And a number of Hebrew Bible scholars, like Michael Coogan, have pointed out, actually, the European settlers who came to the colonies, they came with this, they were being freed from European oppression. They were crossing the water, Coogan says, and they came with the idea that they would exterminate the inhabitants. And they got it from the book of Joshua and the book of Deuteronomy. And so, we have to find, we can't remove it from the scriptures. We have to figure out what sense to make of it. And culturally speaking, you can say, well, welcome to the late Bronze Age. The thing is, we're not all that morally advanced either. We can do this with people piloting drones from 10,000 miles away,

dropping bombs on people. So, we can do the same thing. So, we're not all that much morally superior. But we have to, this is a place where we have to keep telling ourselves, Christianity is found in the Bible, but not everything in the Bible is Christian. And we have to keep, as a Christian, we have to keep going back to the central figure of Jesus as the lens by which we know what, kind of, basically, what to do and what not to do. And Jewish tradition has a way of doing that too. So, anyway, it's canon, but we have to walk very slowly and carefully and not, and totally commit ourselves to living by the best insights that Jesus has given us. And definitely, we're not, we must not commit genocide. It's immoral, so.

Karin Peter 44:29

So, remembering that this is how the people, centuries later, tried to explain their situation, is what we want to keep foremost in our mind with this.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:40

I think that's helpful, yeah, yeah. And then to say further, this is not something subsequent readers of the Bible should want to do.

Karin Peter 44:52

Right.

Tony Chvala-Smith 44:53

It's, in terms of the best understandings of God we have, this is not one of them.

Karin Peter 45:00

Well, I think even in the restoration tradition, we can look back and go, okay, that's not something we want to carry forward. So, we can see that in our own kind of denominational history. Yes. So, I do have another question, but we need to talk about Samson first. So, I'm going to turn it back to you guys to carry on with your explanation.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:23

So, well, you want to talk about Samson right now?

Karin Peter 45:26

Well, yeah, because it kind of ties into my question about Bible stories. So, if you, let's talk about it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:32

Go for it. Yeah.

Karin Peter 45:33

So, the story of Samson, out of Judges, I think it's the 14th, 15th and 16th chapters of Judges so, for fun reading, listeners, you want to turn to that? It's awful. So, I remember reading the Bible stories when I was a kid. You learn about Samson and Delilah. That's one of the stories included. But when you actually sit down to read those three chapters, a whole different picture appears. And so, Samson is portrayed as a hero. And you said earlier, was he really heroic? And if you really read that, it's like, no, he seems to be a person that has some anger management issues, some sexual behavior issues,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:21

It's an impulse control problem.

Karin Peter 46:23

Real impulse control. And for a person who was consecrated to God at birth, his behavior is contrary to what we would understand to be a person consecrated to God. So why is this in there? Why do we have this three chapter story of Samson?

Tony Chvala-Smith 46:50

Well, so this is, again, this is folklore. And it's very likely these kinds of stories that are in the book of Judges were remembered locally. These were local heroes. And so, Samson's claim to fame is that, in the end, he pulled down a temple on pagan Philistines,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:15

And himself.

Tony Chvala-Smith 47:16

And himself. So, in some respects, he's no better or worse than King David. If you want to take a grace view here, God seems to keep working with Samson, in spite of all of Samson's worst traits, and he's got a lot of them. It's a really long resume of really bad traits. And yet this call to be a Nazarite, this being devoted to God, God stays faithful to it, to that call, and Samson, in spite of Samson's mess ups. Now, if I'm reading the story in the Babylonian exile, and one of the stories I've been hearing is that the reason we're in exile is because we messed up and this is punishment, the story of Samson isn't a counter-story. It's like, well, we may have, but God's still with us. Because if God was still with Samson, God could still be with us. In other words, the story, sometimes you have to ask the question, how did the story function for the hearers? So, I can I can imagine the story of Samson functioning for hearers in exile as, maybe God is still with us because...

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 48:33

Look what God was able to do even with Samson!

Tony Chvala-Smith 48:38

We're not possibly screwed up as Samson. So, in other words, the story might have functioned as a grace story for them as a way of saying, whatever we did, God's still faithful to us as a covenant people, and we can at least count on that, however things go from here. So, I don't know, Charmaine?

Karin Peter 48:56

We see that in a lot of stories in the Hebrew Scriptures, though. What we take as the message of why it's in there is not at all what the original hearers of this story were taking from it because we don't have their experiences.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:16

Right, right. We're not reading it through the lens that their desperation was reading it through. Right.

Karin Peter 49:25

So, I look at it through my lens and I want to take a grace perspective on it, I might see the struggle of someone trying to navigate their own humanity with their call or connection with God, so that you can find that. I'll extend grace in this setting even though reading it in the middle of the Me Too movement, and the kind of cancel culture in which we're living in right now makes any reading of some of these stories just suspect from our current cultural perspective. So, putting that aside is the hardest thing to do when reading the Old Testament.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:10

Now, in some ways, this is a continuation of the theme with Abraham, and Sarai, or Abram and Sarai, where Abraham isn't really nearly as faithful as later. New Testament writers want to say, oh, well, Abraham, what is our example of what it means to be faithful? Well, so why did he say his wife was his sister, to save his own skin twice? You know, I mean, it's like, really? So, this is a theme that I love about the Old Testament is that looking honestly at human tendencies and not wincing.

Karin Peter 50:54

There's a lot of humanity there to look at.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:55

There certainly is!

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:57

Yeah, some of these stories give us an opportunity to practice, kind of retroactively, let whoever's without sin cast the first stone, right?

Karin Peter 51:11

Keep that in mind the entire reading.

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:16

All these books and you're constantly reaching into your pouch for stones here, and it's like eh, eh, stop.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:21

So, we may find that when we are disturbed by some of these stories, and we've, maybe talked about this before is that, we may have a latent literalism that we're saying, well, the story should be shiny and fresh and pure that are in the Bible. And you know, that's a kind of literalism, so that's what we're saying, well, the Bible should say all of these wonderful things about what it looks like and feels like to follow God and but then that's a kind of literalism that we're carrying around, rather than saying, okay, these reveal, you know, the underside of human experience. And maybe it's not about the human experience here. Maybe it's trying to point to something about the nature of God rather than about what it means to follow God and to do it right. So...

Karin Peter 52:16

So, we have an issue then, when we try to teach Bible stories, because we do try to teach the sanitized and gentle and the sun is shining and God is love version of all of these stories to our children. And we end up propagating that kind of lens with scripture. The Noah story we teach about the ark and the animals and the rainbow, and we don't teach what happened after which our readers should definitely check out, I mean, our listeners, should definitely check out. Or we teach about Samson but we don't really. We teach little bits of pieces of Bible story that aren't helping us take this broader perspective of scripture. So, what do we say to parents who are trying to teach scripture to children in a way to help them understand, but not inadvertently, teach them to be literalist?

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:22

Yup, yup.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:23

So, there's a few things and one would be, you know, what if we read these stories, to say, you know, this story tells us some things about the struggles that human beings have, and that sometimes people aren't very nice. And sometimes they make, they're willfully making decisions that will hurt themselves and other people and go against what they believe God wants them to do. But look, and I'm using here, mostly Judges but also Abraham's story, and eventually, next time, David's story. But to be honest about the characters that are there, and to say, you know, we sometimes do those things too. You know, within us there might be that impulse, lack of impulse control that Samson is illustrating, but we could still do some things for God. We don't have to be, you know, pure as the driven snow in order to be loved by God, to be called by God, to respond to God, and keep coming back to God and back to God and back to God. I mean, how would that, that's pretty good news for kids, I think.

Karin Peter 54:57

That's good, hopeful news for kids. Going through all of the things that kids go through.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:01

But then, one of the things parents have to realize is that sometimes they want to use the Bible stories to control their children's behavior. Just the same as with the Santa story, you know, using it to control their children's behavior, when in actuality it may be denying the reality of human experience, and then putting shame on kids because they aren't this idealized David or Abraham, or the excised very short story of Samson, when there's way more happening there.

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:41

So, I mean, the only thing I can add on to what Charmain's observed, which I think is really helpful with this is that moral formation in children is a long, slow process. And one of the things we have to be careful of is, give up the default setting view, you know it's a default setting view in American religious culture, that somehow the Bible is a magic book. And if you just read it, you'll be a better person. No. You, if you don't use the Bible carefully, you can become an absolutely horrible person, right? So, in other words, you can't, just the mere fact of reading Bible stories does not have magic power that makes people into decent people. It takes a community. It takes learning how to navigate your way through stories. It takes a cost and moral experience through parents and peers. It takes a lot of reflection and care. And you can't just, you know, read a couple of sanitized children's Bible stories to kids at night and expect that somehow, they're going to become angels, right? It's like, no, it doesn't. That's not how it works. So, there's a view of the Bible behind that, that I think is dangerous to us.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:51

And the other part is reading scripture in community. So, you know, no community is perfect or easy, or without struggles and challenges. And so, you know, reading some of these passages and saying, you know, recognizing that, you know, there may be this tendency in some people in our congregation to be at war with each other, and to use all means available to them to wipe out the other, you know, I mean,

Tony Chvala-Smith 57:21

That's good.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 57:23

And to be able to say, okay, so how do we invite God into this? You know, that's what happens in Judges. They turn away from God, and then they get oppressed by the neighboring King, and then they call out to God, and God helps them get re-centered. So, how, so, there's all kinds of ways that reading this in community, letting the wealth of the long tradition of Christianity, you know, these aren't plucked out, you know, these aren't just plucked out as unconnected to anything else. They're really connected. They're really connected to the hard decision to choose again and again and again to follow Jesus or to

listen to God or to be open to the Spirit. And so, and that would be another element. Let the community help us interpret these passages.

Tony Chvala-Smith 58:29

And then, kind of, one other thing is that it's really good to take the view from 30,000 feet, and remember, if we can, that the people of Israel were pretty much for most of their history, a threatened highly vulnerable minority group in the Near East, occupying a strategic piece of land that all the big empire kids on the block wanted. That, so, some of the stories in Judges, for as violent, as cruel as are, they're also liberation stories. They're also about pushing back against oppressors. And so, there's a liberative element in some of the stories here, that's a little harder for, you know, we want to be careful not to justify anything we want as liberation. But I mean, there's still a sense in these stories that there was a quest for justice, and there may be better ways to quest for justice in our time, but that was an underlying, there's an underlying element there of unjust treatment.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:25

And that God is with and for the oppressed.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:28

Right.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:28

That's, that's another piece.

Tony Chvala-Smith 59:31

Yeah. So, some other just some different things to put in the pot.

Karin Peter 59:35

I think that does come out in a reading of Judges. You do get the idea that these were smaller communities trying to figure out again, how they got in the situation they got into and then they use the means they understood in their time of culture to overcome that. And so, it does have some kind of redemptive cycle in Judges, that comes a little clearer to that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 59:59

So, for the Bible study part of this, just the last little bit, we've taken three of these themes, and simply, rather than unfolding one story and going deeper into one story, we've taken three themes and just presented a question that could be a question for discussion. It might even be a kind of question, you know, like, at a prayer, you know, prayer service kind of time, where you do some inner reflection, and maybe sharing. So, we've got three. So, Tony's gonna do the first.

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:00:36

So, even for the ideological tone of the book of Joshua, there's some important stories there and in Judges. So, the importance in Joshua and Judges of stories like Rahab and Jael that push back against the idea that the only good Canaanite is a dead Canaanite. That's a major theme in Deuteronomy and Joshua. It's actually amazing that the editors of these books preserve these stories. The Rahab story is, like, directly counter to much of the whole thrust of the book of Joshua. Here is a Canaanite prostitute who's like, "Hey, I want to follow Yahweh too." And, "You help me, I'll help you". And they make a covenant. And so, that's quite amazing. This Deuteronomistic idea that if we don't like, you know, completely separated ourselves from those others, we'd be okay. But wait, among our own heroes are many who would have been seen as other. Rahab, Jael, again, again and again, in the Nevi'im, that strong minor key keeps coming back to sound that no, we have to be careful how we do that. So, a question that comes out of this is, when has someone, commonly thought of as other, and you can take that to mean outside of God's people, but you can go a lot of ways with that, been the one who drew me closer to God, right? Sometimes it's not the ones on the inside who do, it's the ones quote, unquote, on the outside, that the other, that awaken a yearning for God in us. So, that's a place you could go with the Rahab story.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:02:25

All right. So then, second place, is reminding ourselves of who we are with God or in God. And this is the covenant renewal that's at, almost at the end of Joshua. And then we'll see it again later in Samuel, or I Kings? No, anyhow. It's next time. Whenever that is. But this is just a little piece of it with a little bit of my commentary in it. So, then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem. And Shechem, is the place where, when God said, you know, go ahead and leave Haran, and I'm going to take you somewhere, and they stop around Shechem, and God says to Abram, "This is the land you see in front of you is the land that I'm promising to you." And so, Abraham built an altar there. And so here in Joshua, all the tribes are brought back to Shechem, and they have an opportunity to covenant again, with God. And so, it was they're summoned, the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel and then present themselves before God. And Joshua said, to all the people, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, long ago are your ancestors." And then there's a whole recalling of the story. They're reminded of their story and takes them through the many chapters of their story as people up to now and then so, "Now therefore, revere the Lord and serve God in sincerity and faithfulness. Put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord." And so that brought to mind for us the question, what are places or experiences you need to revisit regularly to remind you who you are in God? There's so many times in our lives and in the ups and downs and in the last year, and the struggles that have been part of it, more for some than others, when we're in those times that are hard. What experiences or places do we need to revisit to remind us of who we are in God? That's another question that can come out of listening to their story and seeing how they tried to stay connected with God. And then the last one is, you know, again, going back to those editors of the prophets, this whole set of, sets of writings that we're going to be looking at. What did they want their people to know, as they were in exile, as they were saying, "Oh my gosh, where is God? We've lost everything and we're in danger of

losing our identity. We've lost our land. We've lost our families. We've lost our sense of as a nation. Has God rejected us?" And their answer, the editors that pulled together these writings that we know as the prophets, part of their answer is, God will not and has not abandoned us. Look at our story, especially Judges. And I just put in here a little bit of this recurring rhythm in Judges. "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, forgetting the Lord their God and worshipping the Baals and the Asherahs." And so then, then they were given over into King Cushan-rishthaim. Yeah, so him. And the Israelites served him for eight years. But then they cried out to the Lord and the Lord raised up a deliverer. And Othniel, son of Kenaz, he became their judge, and led by God, frees them from being oppressed. And then a couple, just a few verses later, the Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the Lord. And the Lord strengthened King Eglon of Moab and put them into, you know, they are oppressed by him and then raises, then they cry out, and Ehud is brought, as a deliverer, a left-handed man. I had to leave that in there because I'm left-handed. And it is important to the storyline but. And then after Ehud had freed them from the king of Moab, and then they had rest for 80 years. And then again, next chapter, the Israelites again, did what was evil in the sight of the Lord after Ehud died. And so, the Lord sold them into the hands of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor. The commander of his army was Sisera. And then we go into the story of, so this is a time when Deborah is the judge, and also the military leader. And she's also singing. This is her son. This is the place where Tony was talking about her song showing up, and God's faithfulness to them. So, the question here, I think, is one that many of us can relate to. When has God heard my cries, and sent someone to help me find a way forward with God? And that's that on that rhythm throughout Judges, that God keeps hearing us and keeps finding a way for us to move forward with God. Even when we will fully, like Samson, you know, decide that whatever, whatever he's wanting, is what he should have. So...

Karin Peter 1:08:31

Even in our own impulse control moments or anger management moments or all of the other humanities that we exhibit on a daily basis.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:08:41

Exactly. Interesting places to go.

Karin Peter 1:08:47

So, those are helpful to take us from the horror of the beginning of reading through Joshua, and then trying to hear not only what the original hearers of these would have taken from the text, but also how we can look at them and find value for them in our own discipleship, which, as you so lovingly said, is a long journey in formation, not as easy as reading some Bible stories. So, any last thoughts or comments before we close out this episode of He'Brew?

Tony Chvala-Smith 1:09:17

I have one. It's easy to be rather harsh and judgmental towards these texts, but all I have to do is look at contemporary American life and I might be willing to say, the Bronze Age is way closer than you think.

Karin Peter 1:09:36

Yeah. That's true. Charmaine, any last comment from you?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:09:47

Keep looking to the loving God that many of these texts are pointing to. Some of them are pointing to an angry and destructive God. But keep noting that that's not the only image of God that's there. And this Old Testament version of grace is pretty strong. So, keep looking for it. I think you'll be surprised how often you might find it.

Karin Peter 1:10:18

When I'm guilty, I tend to look at God as not understanding and angry as well. So, there's always that!

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:10:26

Acknowledge that and keep looking too to see what else is there.

Karin Peter 1:10:31

See what's there. So, next time we meet for He'Brew, we're going to look at the story of David and the establishment of the monarchy in Israel. And even David and Bathsheba. And so, we'll tentatively call that our episode on Entitlement, Privilege and Accountability, in the story of David. And we hope you'll join us for that, for Episode Six of He'Brew. So just for you, Tony, part of our closing words today are from the 1970s rock musician, Edgar Winter. So, think back into your memory of the Edgar Winter band, long white hair. Okay, and here's from Edgar winter, "The mountain is high, the valley is low, and you're confused on which way to go. So, I've come here to give you a hand and lead you into the Promised Land. So, come on, and take a free ride."

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 1:11:40

Ah,

Karin Peter 1:11:42

So, everyone 50 or over, that was also for you. And on a more serious note from a professor of alternative medicine, I think San Francisco University, I could be wrong on the universities, so don't take that for gospel, but her name is Rachel Naomi Reman. And she says, "Few of us will reach our Promised Land in a day, but perhaps the most important part of the story is that God does not delegate this task. Whenever anyone moves toward freedom, God is there." So, on that note, until next time, I'm Karin Peter, with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. This has been He'Brew, part of the Project Zion Podcast. Thanks for listening.

Josh Mangelson 1:12:38

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