

Thelle, Rannfrid. "The Biblical Conquest Account and Its Modern Hermeneutical Challenges." *Studia Theologica* 61 (2007): 61–81.

Rannfrid Thelle is described as an independent scholar that lectures around the United States on issues ranging from democratic socialism to feminist hermeneutics. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Oslo in Norway. Her dissertation is entitled, "Ask God: Divine Consultation in the Literature of the Hebrew Bible."

### **Thesis/Purpose**

The express purpose of Thelle's article is to "raise and explore some questions about present hermeneutical and, ultimately, ethical challenges we are faced with as custodians of the Old Testament textual traditions." She believes these questions should be addressed by "biblical scholars, theologians, and leaders in contemporary society," because these texts "are not just products of past cultures but are still accorded authority and in some cases, actively used to support discreet programs of action and to justify violence." The specific "Old Testament textual tradition" under consideration are Joshua 1-12, which are also referred to by Thelle as the "Biblical Conquest Account."

### **Outline of the Article**

Thelle wastes no time getting at the heart of the ethical challenges faced by "custodians of the Old Testament textual traditions." She writes, "Put bluntly: how do we deal with texts in which God commands genocide?" To give an example of such text, she briefly summarizes the account of the "Battle of Jericho" as "divinely commanded, total destruction of the city of Jericho and its population. It is a story of terror and destruction, and it repulses and troubles many readers that God can command such atrocity." She then asks the question, "Do we, however, understand the background and context of this destruction?" From this point, she explains that her article is essentially made up of "two main parts." In the first, she "will attempt to illuminate the biblical texts of conquest in their literary and cultural context of the Ancient Near East by attempting to understand the meaning of *herem* and becoming familiar with Ancient Near Eastern literary conventions for conquest literature." In the second section of her article, she plans to discuss "where such an exploration of the historical and literary background leaves us in terms of the hermeneutical and ethical challenges of the conquest account." She then states that the article will be concluded with a "brief probe into the question of an ethically responsible custodianship of the Old Testament."

Thelle begins the first section of her article with a discussion what the phrase "devote to YHWH for destruction," means in the conquest account. Thelle responsibly locates her study of the term *herem* within the context of the "Old Testament war accounts and the biblical laws of warfare." After a brief consideration of biblical passages like Leviticus 27, Numbers 21,

Deuteronomy 7, and 20 along with the Mesha inscription of the Moabite, Thelle concludes that *herem* refers to the sacred destruction of something for a deity.

With this understand established, Thelle moves on to consider the ANE literary context of the biblical conquest account. The portion of the article deals exclusively with holy war literary of the ANE. Following Lawson Younger's findings, Thelle list nine, "stereotypic patterns" found in such literature. They are as follows:

1. There is a command by the deity that certain cities and kings be conquered.
2. The deity takes active part in the acts of war.
3. The occurrence of supernatural phenomena.
4. Motifs of escape after a defeat, of crossing rivers or mountains in pursuit of enemy kings and of the enemy hiding in caves.
5. Assurance of divine help and protection.
6. The city will be burned.
7. All human beings/all living things will be killed.
8. The use of repetition and hyperbole.
9. The use of summary statements and final list of the conquered cities.

Thelle rightly concludes that the "biblical conquest account thus belongs to a standard repertoire for nations/empires in the Ancient Near East.

Having explored the details of the biblical conquest account on a historical-literary level, Thelle "reverts" back to questions she posed at the beginning of the article regarding where these findings leave the modern reader in hermeneutical and ethical terms. For Thelle, these questions are important because she views the biblical conquest account as a historiographical "account of events presented in the way that political elite wanted them to be preserved, and were in this sense propagandistic." In other words, her concerns are not simply with how an individual interprets and lives according to such passages, but with how nations justify nationalistic sentiments and militaristic actions on the basis of these types of "authoritative passages."

Thelle begins with addressing what she believes to be inadequate solutions to the hermeneutical challenges. She claims there are some that would seek to "lessen the discomfort" of such passages by emphasizing literary phenomenon and suggesting that such a historical reality never existed. Others, she contends, would highlight the fact that scripture seems to contradict such treatment of people. Thelle is not convinced that these approaches deal with what she perceives to be a problem. For her, the text is clear. She writes, "The conquest account is a text in which God commands Joshua and his army to annihilate the inhabitants of the Canaanite towns, because they are Canaanite." In her words, this creates a "colossal theological challenge." In light of this challenge, Thelle believes the biblical scholars who "share ancient Hebrew traditions as part of their heritage" have a "responsibility to face this challenge." That responsibility includes denouncing the "oppressive, violent ideologies" that "have been developed and inspired by the biblical text of conquest" while formulate an ethical response to such actions that may arise in the future.

Before suggesting a "program of action," Thelle briefly shares examples of how these conquest accounts were used in the past to "legitimate nationalist ideological projects." The examples range from how the book of Deuteronomy played an "important role in forming the American concept of constitution as a document regulating society" to how Palestinian Christians "had no problem with reading Joshua and the conquest account" up until the point of their expulsion in 1948. After the survey of examples, Thelle concludes that it "should perhaps not comes as a surprise that the examples of misappropriation of the biblical conquest account in

modern times that we have seen examples of above all come from immigrant-settler states like America, South Africa, and Israel. These are countries that are all highly ideological and are founded on the construction of a common experience and a very high level of awareness of identity.”

Thelle records Lohfink’s suggestion that the problem lies in the failure of some to read the conquest accounts typologically. For him, it’s a hermeneutical issue. They have failed to rightly understand and apply the text. Thelle seems unsatisfied with this suggestion, saying “It is easy to criticize the readings of others.” She wants actions, not debate on hermeneutical method. So what is her solution to issues she has raised? She writes, “It seems that the problem (and solution) does not lie in methods of interpretation as much as with the position of the interpreter. There needs to be a focus on the ethics of interpretation and biblical use.” She continues, saying

The reading illustrated above have more to do with ideas the interpreters have about their own lives and situations than what the biblical texts can tell us about ancient Israelite thought. In fact, if there is anything that critical historical and literary study can show us, it is how little we really know about ancient Israelite through and life. And we should definitely not accord authoritative status to behavior that we find morally unacceptable. At a basic level, what we are scholars have been able to discover about *herem* should lead us to condemn it as unacceptable. We can perhaps understand various ideologies of war and tolerate a fair spectrum of views. But the indiscriminate killing of human beings, even if it could be explained within a system, cannot be accepted on moral grounds.

Thelle concludes by stating here belief “that the biblical narratives are at risk of being and have been employed to inspire and lend a rationale to modern secular nationalist ideologies.” Accordingly, she believes “there needs to be more focus on the underlying assumptions of modern nationalist ideology and the construction of national identities, as well as group identities.”

### Critique

By way of affirmation, Thelle demonstrates competency in the use of the historical-critical method of textual studies. She obviously has knowledge of the Hebrew language. Her endnotes demonstrate that she reads broadly and is familiar with respected scholars in the field of Old Testament studies. Furthermore, she writes clearly. Portions of the article were particularly informative, especially the details on holy war literature in the Ancient Near East.

In terms of criticism, though, while Thelle’s article accomplishes its goal of raising questions, it fails miserably to provide compelling answers. In fact, when a reasonable answer is raised that could have been developed further and explored regarding a typological reading of the biblical conquest account, Thelle dismisses it as “easily” deconstructable and unworthy of consideration because it does not lead to immediate action. Unfortunately, in her zeal to propose her answer, which most likely was determined before she ever studied these passages, Thelle makes a devastating mistake. Instead of engaging the “authoritative text,” she dismisses it upon what she claims are “moral grounds.” Of course, the question that arises is: what moral grounds? Upon what grounds are concepts like *herem* to be condemned? Thelle argues for a focus on “the ethics of interpretation and biblical use” without suggesting the source of such an ethic. What is to govern the “use” of the bible? What makes a particular use morally objectionable? Is it the interpreter? If so, that was the problem in the examples that she listed. Is the source of the ethic

to be found in the bible itself? Well, that's the same document that clearly and authoritatively affirms concepts like *herem*. In the end, Thelle is not concerned with real answers from the text, but instead with exposing what she believes to be the evil nationalistic distortions of text. And while she may very well be right about nationalistic misrepresentations and applications of the biblical conquest account, her solution to rectifying those problems simply will not work. Formulating "ethics of interpretation and biblical use" without recognizing a transcendent authority on the matter ultimately leads to hermeneutical anarchy, which one cannot help but wonder if Thelle genuinely desires given her socialistic affinities.

Much more could be said by way of critique in terms of Thelle's concept of authority, particular in regards to God, and her view of "user certitude."