

“To This Day” as a Blast from the Past: Revisiting a Rhetorical Idiom in Joshua, in Conversation with Walter Benjamin

Timothy C. McNinch, Emory University

Abstract

The rhetorical significance of the oft-studied phrase “to this day” (*‘ad hayyom hazzeh*) in Joshua is illuminated by considering it in conversation with Walter Benjamin’s 1940 essay, “On the Concept of History.” After a review of biblical scholarship regarding the idiom “to this day” and discussion of common understandings of time and history in biblical narrative, the paper considers four readings from Joshua, juxtaposed in epigraphic dialogue with excerpts from Walter Benjamin’s theses on history. Viewed through this lens, the idiom “to this day” in these passages brings hidden monuments of the past into co-temporal consciousness, challenges the hegemony of progressive narratives of inevitability, and asserts the now-time relevance of paradigmatic ancestors.

Key Words: etiology, history, historical materialism, progress, time

Introduction

“To this day” is a little phrase, as easily overlooked as an actor’s wink at the camera.¹ But like the actor’s wink, it signals the existence of a parallel world to which the author belongs, a world in which the author is not an omniscient narrator but a living, vulnerable participant. In the Hebrew Bible, the idiom “to this day” (*‘ad hayyom hazzeh*)² disrupts the paratactic march of history’s forward progress and momentarily transports readers into a different temporality, the author’s own *hayyom*, their “today.” This jump folds time back on itself, traveling directly from A to C without reference to B, like the tesseract in Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*. All of a sudden, what happened in the past is no longer quarantined there to legitimate the rise of institutions and traditions³ or to explain the origins of a social

¹ I would like to thank Ted Smith for introducing me to Benjamin’s thinking and for offering constructive feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

² *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* is the most common form; rarer variants are *‘ad hayyom* “until today” or *‘ad ‘etsem hayyom hazzeh* “until this very day.”

³ E.g., “The past was used in many different ways and by means of many distinct forms to exercise an authority over institutions, customs, rights, and behavior. An expansive portrayal of the past, however, could embody the explanation and the legitimation of all of these in one complex genre. The prestige of a dynasty, the primacy of a temple and its priesthood, the question of territorial rights

identity from a safe distance.⁴ “No!”—the biblical author interjects—“Those same Gibeonites are with us *now*; those stone markers stand as witnesses *today*.” An understanding of history as inherently linear and progressive does not adequately account for the shocking immediacy of *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* in a historical text. Such dissonance characterizes Gerhard von Rad’s reflection that “the Old Testament’s own historical understanding is as intense as our own: but it confronts our modern way of thinking about history with a different one.... We must consider whether we have not too naïvely combined the Old Testament’s way of thinking about history with our own” (1965, 2:417). Indeed, this postscript to von Rad’s magnum opus almost reads as a confession of the limitations of his own project, which is itself built upon a linear, developmental model of Israelite history and belief. Could reflection on the biblical use of *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* clarify our understanding of the meaning of the past in these stories?

Early form-critical analyses of the idiom *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* (such as those by Hermann Gunkel and Albrecht Alt) took it to be the sign *par excellence* of the etiological genre, that is, it served to explain a contemporary phenomenon by telling its origin story (see Childs 1963, 280). So, for example, mysterious rubble dotting the Judean landscape during the time of Joshua’s author could be explained by stories of an ancient Israelite conquest, tagged with the note that the ruins of defeated cities remain “to this day.”⁵ A story about the past (real or fictive) explains what is puzzling in the present, “when an existing fact was no longer intelligible or self-evident” (Golka 1977, 46). When read as an etiological formula, *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* has often been considered a redactional intrusion (Nelson 1997, 10; but cf. Roi 2013, 295). However, in many cases, the assignment of this backward-looking, etiological function to the idiom *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* does not stand up to closer scrutiny. Brevard Childs consolidated the challenges to this approach in his seminal study of the idiom’s usage in the Hebrew Bible, concluding that *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* is not usually deployed for the purpose of explaining something in the author’s own frame of reference. Rather, the rhetorical force is in the opposite direction: calling the reader’s attention to a persistent modern phenomenon lends testimonial legitimacy to an existing story about the past, as “a formula of personal testimony added to, and confirming, a received tradition” (Childs 1963, 292). So, to illustrate with the example from above, the reader ought to trust the veracity of the conquest

and boundaries, civil and religious laws—all could be integrated and supported by one ‘history,’ instead of using a variety of forms” (Van Seters 1983, 357).

⁴ E.g., “Dtr’s purpose, above all, is to communicate through this story of the people’s past a sense of their identity—and that is the *sine qua non* of history writing” (Van Seters 1983, 359; see also Creach 2003, 5, for this theme in Joshua specifically).

⁵ The etiological explanation persists in modern, mainstream commentaries. E.g., “Victories over vanished peoples provided a natural explanation for the ruined cities that dotted the landscape. The social stratification and ethnically mixed nature of the monarchic state ... could be readily explained in terms of older peoples dominated by new invaders. Contemporary tribal demography was traced back to an initial territorial allotment at [YHWH]’s command and under [YHWH]’s control” (Nelson 1997, 5).

story because the author attests that they have witnessed the ruined rubble dotting the landscape, which is visible “to this day.” The observable present corroborates the author’s interpretation of the hidden past. Recent scholarship on *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* has followed Childs’s lead, nuancing his argument but agreeing in principle that the phrase is generally used to give contemporary emphasis to an ideology that is already rooted in a particular understanding of past events (e.g., Geoghegan 2003; Van Dyk 1990; see also Childs 1974).

While it is certainly helpful to recognize that *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* functions as a testimonial formula in support of an ideology and is not simply an etiological marker, the opportunity remains to take that insight further by exploring *how* the idiom’s deployment rhetorically reconfigures the relationship between the past and the present. What does the interjection of “to this day” *do* to a story about the unfolding history of a society (or the fulfillment of God’s promises)? “To this day” is wielded in nearly every book of the Hebrew Bible that contains historical narrative, but it is unusually concentrated in the book of Joshua, in the stories of Israel’s conquest of Canaan. This concentration invites analysis of the connection between the social-theological context of Joshua’s author(s)⁶ and their frequent use of *‘ad hayyom hazzeh*.⁷ The following reflections engage these issues by bringing texts from Joshua into conversation with Walter Benjamin’s celebrated theses, “On the Concept of History” ([1940] 2006).⁸ Benjamin, the twentieth-century critical theorist, was known for his provocative approach to history. Several of his major projects (e.g., *The Arcades Project*; *Berlin Childhood Around 1900*) play creatively and reflectively with the ordinary objects of the past.⁹ Though he did not apply his own thinking about history directly to close readings of biblical texts, Benjamin’s work—and especially his influential final essay—can offer a useful theoretical model for considering the idiom “to this day” as it relates to historical narratives¹⁰ in Joshua and beyond. Benjamin’s insights about the nature of history suggest an interpretation of the idiom *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* that emphasizes its rhetorical ability to

⁶ The singular “author” will be used heuristically and synchronically in this essay, though I acknowledge that Joshua likely had a complex compositional process.

⁷ There are seventeen occurrences in Joshua (including one variant form), more than double the density of any other biblical book; cf. the next highest frequencies: fifteen in Kings, fourteen in Samuel, twelve in Chronicles, *though each of those books is more than twice the length of Joshua, by Hebrew word count*. Joshua’s emphasis on contemporary relevance may reflect a Deuteronomistic theological viewpoint: the word “today” appears in Deuteronomy seventy times (see Wolff 1974, 38).

⁸ English translations of the essay are sometimes titled “Theses on the Philosophy of History”; the German title is *Über den Begriff der Geschichte*.

⁹ For a helpful discussion of Benjamin’s philosophy of history, see Beiner (1984).

¹⁰ I am using the terms “history” and “historical narratives” in a literary sense, entirely apart from the question of whether the events narrated actually occurred as depicted—or at all. While the current scholarly consensus is that most of the events depicted in Joshua are not supported by modern archaeology, this reality only makes the literary questions more significant. This essay is not about what the actual past means, but about how an author uses “to this day” to make meaning in their own context. Therefore, the historical circumstances that bear most directly on this project are those of the authors and redactors of Joshua, likely working in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, long after the literary setting of the conquest prior to the Israelite monarchy. I will explore those authorial settings below, as best as we can discern them.

rescue vulnerable moments from traditions of the past in order to reassert their contemporary (i.e., “co-temporal”) relevance.

Problematizing the Linear, Progressive Model of History

Before bringing Benjamin into the conversation, it will be useful to review a common reading of historical temporality within modern biblical scholarship—a reading that interprets history as linear and progressive. James Muilenberg summarizes his sense of the “biblical view of time” by noting that Israel’s historical narratives “pointed to beginning and end, to initial moments in which God revealed himself in his unmotivated grace and to consummating moments in which he fulfilled his purpose and promise.... Israel’s conception is linear” (1961, 234). Jan Fokkelman incorporates Muilenberg’s chronological intuition into his literary analysis of plot in biblical narrative, defining plot as “the seamless succession of clauses along the linear axis of time, a succession that pretends to cover the chronology of the narrated events” (Fokkelman 1999, 77-78). For Meir Sternberg, this linear “chrono-logic” is the “backbone of the Bible’s narrative books” and is not peculiar to biblical thought, but is simply what makes narrative intelligible (1990, 82). Sternberg goes on to say, “the Bible’s adherence to the arrow of time follows from its complex of strategic goals: the historical, the ideological, the artistic proper, along with the rhetorical or communicative pattern designed to bring them home. However distinct their thrust, all these teleologies pull the same way, so joining forces to enjoin the grand chronology that we can disentangle them only in analysis” (1990, 89). In other words, the sequential movement of historical narrative in the Bible is tied to a teleological hermeneutic: we remember and retell the past because it is the seed of our present moment and will drive us toward our (and God’s) future.

The philosopher of hermeneutic phenomenology, Paul Ricoeur, has reflected on this inherent teleology within historical narratives. When a story becomes traditional, the end of the story becomes the goal through which the plot is remembered, effectively reversing the arrow of time: “By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backwards, as the recapitulation of the initial conditions of a course of action in its terminal consequences” ([1979] 1991, 110). Each story has its *terminus*, and the accumulation of stories in the sweep of history has its *telos* in the present. Ultimately, by telling stories as part of the unfolding plot of history, the present takes on a kind of necessity, whereby we tell ourselves that “things had to ‘turn out’ as they did” (Ricoeur 1984, 1:207; see also the synthesis in Dowling 2011, 76-84). This is the basic progressive rhetoric of historiography, and a common lens through which biblical histories are read.¹¹

¹¹ E.g., “[The Deuteronomist] chose ... to find meaning in Israel’s antiquities, in the conviction that the course of events vindicated his views” (Halpern 1996, 36); “The Joshua story is carefully structured by the writer to carry his message to his readers. A glance at the table of contents of this

By “progressive,” I do not mean that history necessarily improves qualitatively over time, only that it *progresses* along a chain of dependent causality. According to this understanding of time, our present experience is not random. It is the fruition of all the causal forces of the past that have led to “this day.” We interpret each moment like a piece in a Rube Goldberg machine, leading ineluctably toward the goal in a “Grand Chronology” (to borrow Sternberg’s title, 1990). In her introductory editorial essay for *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, Danna Nolan Fewell explores this human drive to organize experience into narrative patterns. She summarizes, “To be human is to tell stories, and to see our individual stories as components of, as contributions to larger family, social, institutional, or national stories” (Fewell 2016, 5). Given this innate, pattern-seeking drive, it is no wonder that we so readily construct the past as a progressive narrative sequence that culminates in our own present experience. Nor is it surprising that we tend to read the Bible’s historiography in the same mode, as narratives that “inevitably hail their audiences, both ancient and modern, to position themselves as subjects in an ongoing story” (Fewell 2016, 7). Fewell’s analysis coheres with Robert Alter’s conclusion that the “Hebrew imagination” is captivated by its position in relation to the process of “the working out of [God’s] purposes in history.” In light of this historical framework, Alter describes biblical historiography (such as the conquest narrative in Joshua) as “fiction laying claim to a place in the chain of causation and the realm of moral consequentiality that belong to history” (Alter 2011, 36-37). Read in this way, each “event” remembered by a people’s traditions has its appropriate place in the chain of causation. Each event had its result, which led to something else, which eventually manifested in the present.

Though to many this framework of progressive history appears self-evident, it is not the universal approach to history and temporality. Danie van Zyl does not dispute that biblical narrative is typically linear and progressive (though perhaps not so thoroughly as in the modern Western imagination) but argues that African conceptions of time are quite different. For van Zyl’s African students, “Biblical stories ... are perceived as co-temporary with us, they merely belong to the realm of *Zamani*,” an “ocean of time into which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after or before” (2007, 149, 146). Van Zyl’s reflections are a reminder that there are diverse ways to understand the nature and relevance of the past. Sometimes alternatives to linearity and progressivism can be exegetically justified even within narratives that are dominantly linear and progressive. Such is the rhetorical “co-temporality” that the idiom *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* provokes when it disrupts the narrative flow, extracting events from their place in the chain of

commentary will show an orderly progression of events from preparation to climactic ending” (Hamlin 1983, xv); “Joshua as a whole is an etiology in the sense that it seeks to disclose how the people who called themselves Israel came to be who they were and where they were” (Nelson 1997, 11). A teleological reading of the conquest in Joshua was used (and for many, continues to be used) as justification for modern Zionist ideologies in Israel and Palestine (see Dor and De-Malach 2013; see also Hanssen 2018).

causality and reasserting them “this day.” To explore this phenomenon further, I consider below four readings from Joshua, juxtaposed in epigraphic dialogue with excerpts from Walter Benjamin’s theses “On the Concept of History.”

Hidden Monument: A Truth Beyond Sight

Joshua set up twelve stones in the middle of the Jordan, in the place where the feet of the priests bearing the ark of the covenant had stood; and they are there *to this day* [*‘ad hayyom hazzeh*] (Josh 4:9).¹²

Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history (Benjamin [1940] 2006, 390; Thesis III).¹³

The crossing of the Jordan River into the promised land is a significant liminal moment in Israel’s remembered history.¹⁴ Looking backward, it marks the conclusion of “the long march toward full maturity” that began with liberation from Egypt (Hamlin 1983, 30; see also Dozeman 1996, 413). Looking ahead, “it trips the first domino of an event-chain that will run beyond the book of Joshua into the monarchy period” (Hubbard 2001, 11). However, Israel marked the miraculous crossing of the Jordan with a highly unusual monument.¹⁵ While the waters remained heaped up and dry ground remained exposed, representatives from each of the twelve tribes removed large stones from the middle of the riverbed and deposited them at Gilgal as a memorial (Josh 4:3, 5, 8, 20). But verse nine describes a second set of stones, gathered from the same location in the heart of the Jordan, erected *in situ*, and left there. Presumably, when the waters of the Jordan resumed their normal course, this second monument would have been submerged and rendered invisible.¹⁶ While the Hebrew of verse nine is not particularly ambiguous, some translation committees have puzzled over how to interpret this hidden monument. The NRSV marks the whole statement as parenthetical, while the NIV merges the two sets of stones, calling the second set “the twelve stones that *had been* in the middle of the Jordan,” but were subsequently removed to Gilgal, though such a move stretches the Hebrew syntax uncomfortably.¹⁷ The most straightforward

¹² Unless otherwise noted, English translations of biblical texts in this essay are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

¹³ For clarity, references to the brief essay, “On the Concept of History” (Benjamin [1940] 2006) will be cited by thesis number (or letter), in addition to page number.

¹⁴ The Jordan River marks the boundary of the promised land, as well as the “boundary” separating the Torah and Former Prophets in the biblical canon (see Wright 2020, 51-61).

¹⁵ War memorials, victory stelae, etc. were common strategies for marking territory during a conquest or settlement. The Jordan memorials, however, do not commemorate any specific military victory—rather they memorialize a divine invitation to enter the land, accompanied by several other symbols and rituals (see Wright 2020, 131).

¹⁶ But cf. several commentators, who presume that the monument *must* have been visible, perhaps during low tides (Saydon 1950, 202; Nelson 1997, 69; Hubbard 2001, 7; Alter 2019, 2:18).

¹⁷ Wiesmann (1931, 92) makes the case for a single set of stones whose final resting place was in Gilgal, but his argument is criticized on grammatical grounds by Saydon (1950, 202). A similar

synchronic reading (and the *lectio difficilior*) is that the author intends to depict two monuments, one visible and one hidden. Surprisingly, but significantly, the *hidden* monument is the one flagged in Joshua 4:9 as being there “to this day.” The whole point of a memorial monument is to be seen, to provoke the children of future generations to ask, “What does this mean?” (4:6-7, 21-24). Therefore, a hidden monument is an oxymoron. Why is it depicted as such here, and why does it attract the idiom, “to this day” (the first of the many occurrences in Joshua)?

It is difficult to perceive the purpose of a hidden monument,¹⁸ even more the rhetorical function of its literary presence in the Jordan-crossing narrative, when we are so conditioned to read and understand history as an unfolding, progressive narrative.¹⁹ Monuments (for example, those lining the mall in Washington, DC) mark moments of transition, turning points that have paved the way for social development. They are celebrations of success and heroism that moved the needle forward, or they are remembrances of horror and tragedy, from which we have thankfully moved on. Monuments remind us that history has set the stage for our own present. In turn, our purpose is to improve the world for future generations.

In his theses “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin forcefully challenges this narrative of steady historical progress. Thesis IX famously depicts Benjamin’s colorful interpretation of Klee’s painting, *Angelus Novus*. Benjamin adopts the subjective viewpoint of the angel, whom he imagines as a witness to the unfolding of time. While many of Benjamin’s contemporaries see a hopeful and inevitable narrative of progressive enlightenment (Benjamin calls this ideology “historicism”), the angel sees from his Olympian perch “one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet” ([1940] 2006, 392). The horrified angel longs to repair the accumulating debris of history, but a stormy wind blows him like a kite into the future, away from his goal.²⁰ Benjamin comments, “What we call progress is *this* storm” ([1940] 2006, 392). In other words, historical progress is a myth, made ludicrous by his own experiences in twentieth-century Europe and by reflection on the wreckage of every human era. Benjamin’s bleak view of history²¹ is tempered only by an elusive eschatology. He hints at the notion that on Judgment Day, the wreckage of history will be brought to light and sorted, and only then will redeemed humanity be able to recognize the true narrative of history ([1940] 2006, 390; Thesis III). Until then, and without such a god’s-eye-view, the job of the

argument for one set of stones is refuted by Butler (2014, 7a:307). Many theorize the presence of multiple, conflated literary sources to explain the multiple sets of stones (e.g., Boling 1982, 6:181; Butler 2014, 7a:279).

¹⁸ Therefore, the idea is rejected by Boling, for “An invisible underwater stone platform could scarcely have attained much symbolic value” (1982, 6:174); Butler, who concedes that there were two monuments, confesses that it would make more sense if “invisible stones in the river [were] out of play” (2014, 7a:307).

¹⁹ Van Wijk-Bos interprets the two monuments as markers of literal progress: one at the boundary of crossing (mid-Jordan) and the other on the Western shore as a marker of successful entry into the land (2019, 80).

²⁰ See analysis of Benjamin’s “fascination with historical debris” in Maier-Katkin (2008, esp. 90-92).

²¹ For discussion of Benjamin’s version of nihilism as a “politics of weakness,” see McFarland (2012).

“historical materialist” (Benjamin’s protagonist, in contrast to the progressivist-minded “historicist”) is to arrest the false narrative of progress and let each moment of history stand still—not as a transition to something else, but as its own, crystalized monad ([1940] 2006, 396; Thesis XVII). That is to say, every moment contains meaning and significance—its own timelessness—independent of where it happens to be positioned in the flow of time. No moment is merely a stepping-stone toward history’s later fulfillment. As Benjamin puts it, every second contains the potential to be “the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter” ([1940] 2006, 397; Thesis B).²²

Benjamin’s focus on redeeming the individual moment apart from a progressive narrative invites a creative rereading of Josh 4:9. Benjamin insists that the historical materialist must work from the premise that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history” ([1940] 2006, 390; Thesis III). Indeed, in his literary work Benjamin was a devoted collector of the scattered remains and fragments of a nearly forgotten past. Like Klee’s angel, Benjamin longed to redeem those moments. “By locating former wreckage in the midst of their own culture, [Benjamin and his ‘angel’] raise awareness of lost and hidden moments of a vanished past” (Maier-Katkin 2008, 91). Is there not an echo of this redemptive principle in Josh 4:9? Without “to this day,” the reference to the construction of the hidden monument would have been only a fleeting aside homogenized into the conquest plot, one bead on the string of history, or one “domino in an event-chain” that leads to the monarchy (to return to Hubbard’s image). But by invoking the idiom “to this day,” the author pauses the paratactic march of the story and dislocates the building of the hidden monument from its place in the continuum of history, directing the reader’s attention to the author’s own location in time. This move serves to draw an immediate correspondence between a particular historical moment and the circumstances of the author’s own day, so that the past moment will not be simply assimilated into the larger history. “To this day” bypasses the progressive narrative to emphasize the significance of the individual moment, asserting its “now” quality for the author and their readers.

It strikes me as significant that of the two monuments in Joshua 4, the *hidden* monument is the one tagged with *‘ad hayyom hazzeh*. For the author, visible things may come and go, but the invisible monument—despite being covered by the waters of the Jordan—perdures to this day, even if it may be difficult for the casual observer to perceive it. While the question “What do these stones mean?” is often interpreted in a ritual or catechetical mode (see Butler 2014, 7a:290), the invisibility of this monument prompts a theological reflection. I concur with scholarship that dates the composition of this narrative to the late seventh century BCE (e.g., Geoghegan 2003), that is, to the days of King Josiah of Judah, who ruled in the shadow of the Assyrian Empire and the rising power of Babylon, caught between the pincers of

²² Benjamin’s eighteen original theses are followed by two additional theses (labeled A and B) in an early draft of the essay (cf. [1940] 2006, 400, note 28).

these empires to the east and the western dominance of Egypt. In such an environment, Judah's security in the land was, by all appearances, headed toward disintegration. The flow of history, like the unstoppable flow of the Jordan, seemed to be progressing inevitably toward Judah's destruction, loss of sovereignty, or expulsion from the land. Perhaps this is why the author of Joshua makes the invisible monument co-temporal with their own moment, to communicate that beneath surface appearances, they believed Judah's God was able to secure them in the promised land. The author of Joshua reaches back to a moment when God's power held back the flow of inevitability and granted Israel access to the land. That brief window of time when the riverbed and its standing-stone monument were exposed is frozen, "crystalized as a monad" in Benjamin's language, dislodged from its place in the narrative and reasserted in the author's day by the phrase *'ad hayyom hazzeh*. For the author of Joshua, the God who brought Israel into the land against all obstacles and opposition, with miraculous acts, was able to keep them rooted—if the king and people would turn with absolute loyalty to the God of their ancestors. They needed parts of that old, old story in Joshua to slip out of time and meet them in the present; to bring again into the light what had been submerged and "regarded as lost to history." They needed a hidden monument.

Persistent Outsiders: An Asterisk on Inevitable History

But the people of Judah could not drive out the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem; so the Jebusites live with the people of Judah in Jerusalem *to this day* [*'ad hayyom hazzeh*] (Joshua 15:63).

Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it "the way it really was." It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger (Benjamin [1940] 2006, 391; Thesis VI).

The extended narrative of Israel's unstoppable wave of conquest in Canaan concludes with the summary: "So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war" (Josh 11:23). This three-fold claim's totality is emphasized by the repetition of the Hebrew word, *kol* (the "whole" land, according to "all" that the LORD had spoken). In Deuteronomy, the instruction that "the LORD had spoken to Moses" was that outside of Canaan, Israel was permitted to despoil enemies after battle, or to make treaties of peace. Inside Canaan, however, the instructions were different.

But as for the towns of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything [*kol*] that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them [*haḥarem taḥarimem*]*—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the LORD your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you*

to do all [kol] the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD your God (Deut 20:16-18).

Like the story in Joshua that portrays its fulfillment, this Deuteronomic anticipation of the conquest takes up a disturbing ideology, instructing Israel to wipe the land clean of foreign (that is, indigenous) remnants, in order to pre-empt temptation toward apostasy or syncretism.²³ The doubling-up of the verb *heherim* (“annihilate”) emphasizes the totality of the destruction, for even the conventional spoils of war were “off-limits” (*herem*), devoted for destruction.²⁴ The first half of the book of Joshua paints the campaign as a swift and complete success culminating in the summary of Josh 11:23.²⁵

But it is not the only version of the story retained in the text. Almost immediately after the summary of victory, the second half of the book picks up (years later?) with an elderly Joshua, who is reminded by God that “You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land still remains to be possessed” (Josh 13:1). Likewise, while we were told in 11:23 that the whole land had been taken according to God’s command, on a few occasions “minority reports” have slipped in with notices that certain groups successfully defended their towns against the Israelite invasion. The persistence of these peoples in the land beyond the era of conquest is signaled in the narrative with the idiom, *‘ad hayyom hazzeh*: Hivites in Gibeon (9:27),²⁶ Geshurites and Maacathites in the Transjordan (13:13), Jebusites in Jerusalem (15:63), and Canaanites in Gezer (Josh. 16:10). Not only did these peoples survive the conquest, and persist in the land “to this day,” but three of them are among the very populations specified by name in Deuteronomy 20 for annihilation: the Canaanites, Hivites, and Jebusites! What are we to make of this odd historiography with competing narratives, and what might this have to do with *‘ad hayyom hazzeh*?

Walter Benjamin did not mince words regarding narratives of historical inevitability. “The historical materialist,” he wrote of those who shared his perspective, “leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called ‘Once upon a time’ in historicism’s bordello” ([1940] 2006, 396; Thesis XVI). It did not matter to him

²³ For a sustained critique of the problematic “Rhetorics of Violence” in Joshua, see Sharp (2019, 44–53); for a different, but not mutually exclusive, perspective that emphasizes the political violence of “urbicide” in Joshua (rather than genocide, particularly), see Wright (2015, esp. 153).

²⁴ Verb doubling in this way (infinitive absolute followed by an imperfect form) is a common way to show emphasis in Biblical Hebrew. Thus, this verb is commonly translated “You shall *utterly* destroy them” (NASB), or “*Completely* destroy them” (NIV), etc. The common emphasis on *herem* in Deut and Josh is a factor that suggests they belong together, perhaps sharing a redactor or redactional school (Wenham 1971, 148; Hoffman 1999, 200).

²⁵ But cf. Butler (2014, 7a:121), who identifies hints of incomplete conquest throughout the first half of Joshua.

²⁶ The Gibeonites did not exactly “defend” their town; they secured a treaty via trickery, and merely survived as providers of manual labor for the Israelites. This self-debasement out of terror fits with the narrative of swift conquest in this section of the book, but the fact that the Gibeonites survived at all adds a note of ambiguity.

whether the storytellers were Nazis or Social Democrats; Benjamin perceived that all narratives of progress ultimately serve the purposes of the ruling classes and facilitate “the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” ([1940] 2006, 392; Thesis VII). The problem with such narratives is that they present the dominant historical ideology as inevitable by stringing relevant past moments together “like the beads of a rosary” ([1940] 2006, 397; Thesis A), all the while suppressing counternarratives. Considering the impotence of the German Social Democrat Party in the face of Nazism, Benjamin bemoaned, “Nothing has so corrupted the German working class as the notion that it was moving with the current” ([1940] 2006, 393; Thesis XI).

In light of the power of historiography to pull societies into conformity under the ruling classes, Benjamin saw the task of the historical materialist to be the disruption of those narratives, to “brush history against the grain” ([1940] 2006, 392; Thesis VII). Sometimes this anti-conformist vigilantism found religious language in Benjamin’s theses. He believed that each generation was endowed with a kind of “weak messianic power” ([1940] 2006, 390; Thesis II), an urgent and sacred responsibility to former generations of the oppressed, not to let the past be reduced to a controlling historical narrative of the victors.

Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious ([1940] 2006, 391; Thesis VI, *emphasis original*).

The faithful historical materialist, for Benjamin, is the one who recognizes the danger of being conformed to an inevitable history, and who therefore acts boldly to reassert the vulnerable and nonconforming memories of the past when they flash up. What would be only a flash in the pan to the historicist, is the “spark of hope” fanned by the historical materialist for the sake of the past.

When I read the ambivalent stories of conquest in Joshua with Benjamin’s twentieth-century concerns lingering in my mind, the stories of persistent outsiders feel like a brushing against the grain of history. In these counternarratives, *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* functions like an asterisk placed on the narrative of total conquest in the first half of Joshua. Even without “to this day,” the mention of a few surviving Canaanite communities creates narrative tension and sounds a note of ambiguity and contradiction within the larger unfolding plot of a generally successful conquest, distribution, and occupation of the land. The presence of these brief counternarratives creates “a world of ambiguity which readers can only decode slowly, one in which all readings are challenged by other elements of the text, requiring continuing re-reading” (Firth 2017, 430). But the author’s footnote that

these people remain “to this day” intensifies that tension and disrupts the temporal flow of the narrative in order to seize these memories as they flash up and assert their cruciality for the author’s own present moment. This rhetorical move reveals the author’s anxiety that they, too, live in a “moment of danger,” and need these particular memories to speak directly into their own situation.

For the author of Joshua, whose sense of security was ideologically bound up with exclusive loyalty to God (Josh 24:14-15, *passim*), the presence of “others” in Judah was a cause for anxiety. They perceived these Canaanite others, who held different religious loyalties, to be a seductive source of temptation to Judahites and a threat to Judah’s divinely permitted tenancy in the land. We could imagine that this author felt that their contemporaries took God’s protective presence for granted, that Judahites might be lulled into complacency by the old legends of their God-aided wave of conquest, which made their possession of the land seem inevitable and irreversible. Perhaps the author felt that in order to prevent fellow Judahites from following outsiders in doing “all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods” (Deut 20:18), they urgently needed to brush the history of conquest against the grain. The author wields *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* to call attention to the counternarrative in the conquest story, that kink in the progressivist string of beads. “To this day” confronts the readers of Joshua with the reality that full possession of the land had *never* been their reality, and was still not, despite the dominant narrative of conquest (see Van Wijk-Bos 2019, 43). The land was not inevitably theirs; Canaanite tempters remained among them—and apostasy could yet lead to disaster.²⁷

The *Jetztzeit* in Ancient Loyalty and Disloyalty

But Rahab the prostitute, with her family and all who belonged to her, Joshua spared. Her family has lived in Israel *ever since* [*‘ad hayyom hazzeh*]. For she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho (Joshua 6:25).

Joshua said [to Achan], “Why did you bring trouble on us? The Lord is bringing trouble on you today.” And all Israel stoned him to death; they burned them with fire, cast stones on them, and raised over him a great heap of stones that remains *to this day* [*‘ad hayyom hazzeh*]. Then the Lord turned from his burning anger. Therefore that place *to this day* [*‘ad hayyom hazzeh*] is called the Valley of Achor (Joshua 7:25-26).

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time ... blasted out of the continuum of history (Benjamin [1940] 2006, 395; Thesis XIV).

²⁷ A footnote on the ethical implications of this literary reading: I disagree strongly, as I hope most would today, with the genocidal reflex toward anxiety about the presence of “outsiders” in a community. While the Deuteronomists’ anxiety was real, and their sense of political instability well-founded, their projection of those anxieties onto Canaanite minority communities was unequivocally wrong. Just such a misprojection of anxiety in twentieth-century Germany led to the Shoah. Benjamin himself, as a Jewish intellectual, was a casualty of that German anxiety—he died in 1940 during an attempt to flee the Nazis. Such atrocities continue in various forms and manifestations *to this day*, therefore my “asterisked reading” requires this asterisk of its own.

The narratives in Joshua that draw the most occurrences of the phrase *'ad hayyom hazzeh* are stories of loyalty and disloyalty to God.²⁸ Rahab the prostitute is the unexpectedly paradigmatic example of loyalty.²⁹ When Israelite spies enter Jericho to scope out the city, they stay the night at her home collecting intelligence. The story pivots when Rahab hides the spies rather than turning them over to pursuing authorities (Josh 2:4). She deceives the spies' pursuers and coordinates their safe escape from the city. Before they leave, Rahab binds them in an oath to protect her and her family during the invasion. She informs the spies that everyone is terrified of the Israelites and their God, and confesses, "The LORD your God is indeed God in heaven above and on earth below. Now then, since I have dealt kindly [*hesed*] with you, swear to me by the LORD that you in turn will deal kindly [*hesed*] with my family" (Josh 2:11-12). Rahab's words are reminiscent of a key Deuteronomic passage that describes the pact of loyalty embedded in Israel's covenant with God:

Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty [*hesed*] with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, and who repays in their own person those who reject him.... If you heed these ordinances, by diligently observing them, the Lord your God will maintain with you the covenant loyalty [*hesed*] that he swore to your ancestors. (Deut 7:9-12).

Rahab's confession and courageous loyalty is all-the-more exceptional because she is the most unlikely heroine: a non-Israelite, a woman, and a prostitute. As discussed above, non-Israelites were a source of anxiety for the Deuteronomists (and non-Israelite women, especially so).³⁰ Rahab's identification as a prostitute further puts her unexpected loyalty into sharp relief. Prostitution was a common metaphor for Israel's disloyal worship of other gods (e.g., Deut 31:16). Here, a woman whose livelihood supported "unfaithfulness" has become the model of faithfulness to God. By confessing the supremacy of Israel's God and, by showing loyalty to God in her aiding and abetting of the Israelite spies, Rahab transcends all of the anxiety-producing elements stacked against her. Nevertheless, this potential for transcendence does not extend to Canaanites generally. As Phyllis Bird clarifies, Rahab becomes the exception that proves the rule; she does not define the type, but only the antitype (1989, 131; contra Firth 2017, 419, 426; see also Van Wijk-Bos 2019, 96).

²⁸ For more examples of *'ad hayyom hazzeh* connected to rewards for loyalty, see Josh 5:9; 14:14; 22:3; 23:6-9. For more examples of the idiom tied to the consequences of disloyalty and opposition to God, see Josh 8:28-29; 10:27; 22:17.

²⁹ Rahab's full story is recounted in Josh 2:1-24.

³⁰ Cf. Deuteronomistic comments about Solomon's foreign wives and the portrayal of Ahab's foreign wife, Jezebel.

Josh 6:25 notes that Rahab's family has lived in Israel "to this day." Though some commenters (e.g., Alter 2019, 2:25; Hayes 2002, 21) read this as an etiological note, explaining the origin of the "Rechabite" clan (cf. Jer 35:6, *passim*), this association is unlikely. In the first place, the etymology is weak: the name Rahab (*rahav*, with the letter *het*) does not share its Hebrew root with the Rechabites (*rekhavim*, with a *kaf*). In addition, in Jeremiah, the Rechabites are linked with a different eponymous ancestor, the Benjaminite assassin, Rechab (2 Sam 4:1-12; 2 Kgs 10:15). Perhaps most significantly, Joshua 6:25 does not imply that Rahab's descendants became assimilated as Israelites. Rather, they were tolerated, yet perpetually distinct, "others" (see Wright 2020, 129-30, 146). Rahab's marginality, and that of her descendants, is actually essential to the rhetorical impact of her story in Joshua (Bird 1989, 130; but cf. McKinlay 1999, 54). Precisely *because* she is a confirmed outsider, her loyalty Israel's God puts Israelites to shame. The notice that her family remains in the midst of Israel "to this day," as tolerated outsiders, reasserts that same honor/shame leverage "now," among the author's contemporaries.³¹

By contrast, Achan is the paradigm of disloyalty, even though compared to Rahab, he has every advantage: a man, an Israelite, and a representative of the tribe of Judah.³² Lori Rowlett observes that Achan's "insider" status is emphasized by the double citation of his parentage and affiliation within the space of a few lines (1992, 20). During the sack of Jericho, Achan took forbidden spoils (a fancy mantle and some gold and silver) and hid them under his tent. As a consequence, God immediately removed divine protection over the Israelite armies, and their next military excursion (at Ai, which should have been a breeze) was a complete disaster. In the aftermath, by a process of divination, Achan was identified as the source of the trouble. The remedy: after his confession of wrongdoing, Achan was stoned to death and incinerated, along with his sons and daughters, all of his property, and the forbidden items he had spared from Jericho. Atop the remains of the pyre, the Israelites piled a mound of stones, which (the author notes) are there "to this day." The narrator also mentions that the site of that mound is called *'emeq 'akhor* ("Valley of Trouble," a play on the alliteration of Achan and Achor) "to this day." Achan's story follows immediately after the *'ad hayyom hazzeh* notice about Rahab's persistence in Israel, heightening the literary contrast between them.³³ Rahab's success story and Achan's tragic story are illustrative of the epidemic nature of both loyalty and disloyalty. Rahab's loyalty activated covenant protection for her family and their descendants "to this day," while Achan's relatively minor infringement jeopardized the whole conquest and the promises to his ancestors (see Hubbard

³¹ Contra Butler's assessment that Rahab's story "appears to be much too old to be of interest to people in the time of Josiah or later" (2014, 7a:380).

³² Achan's story is told in Joshua 6:26-7:26.

³³ For further discussion of the juxtaposition of Rahab and Achan, as an intentional literary contrast between the two characters, see van Wijk-Bos (2019, 106-107; see also Billings 2013, 25-52; Rösel 2011, 119; Rowlett 1992, 19).

2001, 14). Even the remedy, quarantined as it was, was corporate in nature, including the execution of Achan's own children in order to cut off his legacy forever.

What I find most interesting is how the author accesses Rahab's and Achan's paradigmatic potential by deploying the phrase *'ad hayyom hazzeh*, stopping the clock and blasting these individual events out of the continuum of time in order to assert their "now-time" relevance for the author's own context. *Jetztzeit* (a term given new technical meaning by Benjamin, [1940] 2006, 395; Thesis XIV) is the quality of immediacy that past events can have when they are removed from their place in the progressive historical narrative. This is the same quality that is endowed by the phrase "to this day." It folds time back on itself so that an event can move out of its past context directly into "now."³⁴ The stories of Rahab and Achan (and the others like them in Joshua) could have been absorbed into the larger narrative of conquest. As part of the progress of the plot, they describe moments when threats to the conquest arose but were successfully mitigated (by loyalty from an unexpected source in Rahab or by violently cutting away the disloyalty of Achan). These moments add interest and tension to the plot; then, the story of Israel's establishment in the land moves on. But when we read the phrase *'ad hayyom hazzeh*, the narrative flow halts, blasting these moments out of the continuum, inviting readers to consider their *Jetztzeit*, their "now-time," their meaning for a new and immediate context. In the late seventh century, drawing these stories to the attention of readers with the phrase *'ad hayyom hazzeh* would have underscored the Deuteronomists' sense of urgency for absolute loyalty to the God of Israel. Such loyalty, they believed, would be rewarded in the form of renewed security in the land (Hubbard 2001, 22), but disloyalty (especially the collection of foreign objects for worship) would be met with swift, divine discipline: the loss of one's own life and legacy—or, if the problem is not addressed quickly enough, the potential loss of the whole nation's tenancy in the land under God's protection. "Insiders" can quickly become "outsiders" (Rowlett 1992, 23). This threat is embedded in much of the Deuteronomistic literature. But "to this day" intensifies the ideology by tagging moments that have a particularly potent "now" quality. The author of Joshua did not want these lessons to be left in the past, fodder for the celebration of ancient victories only. They sensed a need to experience these moments' palpability, now. *'Ad hayyom hazzeh* adds that disruptive jolt of urgency to the old, paradigmatic stories, a confrontational encounter with their *Jetztzeit*.

Postscript: *Stillstand*

³⁴ Von Rad leads in a similar direction with his discussion of typology. "The ways in which [typological figures] act are not to be regarded as having occurred only once: what makes them important is precisely their more general validity. They therefore possess a coefficient of present-day relevance which the documentary presentation of history lacks" (1965, 2:420). Such typologies may be implicit in a narrative, but "to this day" represents a more assertive rhetoric.

“Sun, stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, in the valley of Aijalon.”
And the sun stood still, and the moon stopped,
until the nation took vengeance on their enemies (Josh 10:12b-13a).

Who would believe it! It is said that, incensed at the hour [l’heure],
Latter-day Joshuas, at the foot of every clocktower [tour],
were firing on clock faces to make the day stand still [arrêter le jour] (Benjamin [1940] 2006, 395;
Thesis XV).³⁵

There is no *‘ad hayyom hazzeh* in Joshua 10 until the very end of the pericope, where it is noted that the stones that sealed the tomb of the five enemy kings remain at the mouth of the cave “to this very day” (10:27).³⁶ Nonetheless, I cannot conclude this essay without a brief comment on the earlier part of the chapter, when the sun stood still—the only passage in Joshua to which Benjamin explicitly alludes in “On the Concept of History.” Though Josh 10:12-13 does not utilize our focal idiom, this moment in Joshua ties together several of the themes in this essay. In the epigraph above, I have juxtaposed the Hebrew poetry (here the narrative abandons prose, considering it inadequate to describe the miracle) with another snippet of poetry, the Parisian vandalism cited by Benjamin. The latter poem interprets the fascinating symbolic act of Parisian revolutionaries on the eve of the July Revolution (1830), a coordinated attack on the clocktowers, in order that they would eternally (or at least until repaired) mark the moment when their world changed. The French poem likens the revolutionaries to “nouveaux Josués,” arresting the day. Benjamin attributes to these Joshuas an awareness that they were “about to make the continuum of history explode.” They stopped the clocks to make their moment of glory perpetually present to future generations. The same motivation applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the biblical Joshua, who directed the sun and moon to stand still so that the day’s victory would not be only partial, eclipsed by the passage of time. Time was stopped in order to open the possibility of a decisive moment, a moment brimming with *Jetztzeit*.

These two time-stopping images, juxtaposed, capture well the heart of Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history: Paradoxically, it is the arresting of history, the bringing of time to a standstill (*Stillstand*, an important word for Benjamin in Thesis XVI, see Hutton 2010, 86), that creates hope for history’s redemption. By stopping the flow of progressive time to blast an individual “work” out of the continuum and assert its *Jetztzeit*, “the lifework is both preserved and sublated in the work, the era in the lifework, and the entire course of history in the era” ([1940] 2006, 396; Thesis XVII). Benjamin did not conceptualize history as the sum of a series of progressive moments; rather, he envisioned each monadic moment containing the whole significance of history. History becomes filled with new

³⁵ Benjamin is here quoting an unknown French source: Qui le croirait! on dit, qu’irrités contre l’heure / De nouveaux Josués, au pied de chaque tour, / Tiraient sur les cadrans pour arrêter le jour.

³⁶ *‘ad ‘etsem hayyom hazzeh*, a variation on the idiomatic form, giving it emphasis.

potential each time a vulnerable moment is seized and reasserted.³⁷ Rather than presuming that time marches ineluctably toward a single, future Messianic fulfillment, the historical materialist's arrest of time splinters the Messianic era into every moment, making each second a potential gateway through which the Messiah may enter ([1940] 2006, 397; Theses A, B).

This essay has made heuristic use of Benjamin's perspective in order to explore a similar time-bending, sequence-splintering function in the rhetorical use of the Hebrew idiom *'ad hayyom hazzeh*. "To this day" brings hidden monuments of the past into co-temporal consciousness, challenges the hegemony of progressive narratives of inevitability, and asserts the now-time relevance of paradigmatic ancestors. If we are willing to submit our own inherited hermeneutic of history to critique, we may find that these texts reverberate into our time as well. After all, each time the text is read, a new *hayyom*—a new "today"—is invoked. In this way, *'ad hayyom hazzeh* challenges all readers to wrestle anew with the salient potential of the past brought to bear, with disruptive immediacy, upon the present moment.

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³⁷ On the independence of each moment: "Historical time is infinite in every direction and unfulfilled at every moment. This means we cannot conceive of a single empirical event that bears a necessary relation to the time of its occurrence" (Benjamin [1916] 2004, 55).

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