Undoing Conquest

Ancient Israel, the Bible, and the Future of Christianity

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Introduction

The stories we tell shape our identities, who we are as a people, and what we come to expect in the world. Stories told together hold us together, shaping our collective or social imagination.¹ Our religious traditions contain many stories that shape us. Around the world, the stories of the Hebrew people have become foundational for the biblical faith traditions. Their stories are canonized in the Bible, which many people hold as sacred text, even the worl of God. So what do we do when we begin to realize that some biblical stories contribute to actual violence in the world? What do we do when our stories are harmful and no longer serve us? This book explores one such story, the conquest narrative found in the book of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible (Josh 1–11).

The conquest narrative is a story that justifies patterns and practices of colonialism, land-taking, and even genocide in religious imagination.² The story has enabled violent atrocities to be understood in the minds of primarily Christian perpetra-

¹Charles Taylor's description of the social imaginary is the space inhabited with myths, symbols, and stories, which create the norms of the social space. Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Public Planet Books (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23.

²Willie James Jennings names the European colonial and racist Christian imagination "diseased." See Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 6.

tors as not only justified but divinely sanctioned. The European genocide of Indigenous Peoples across the Americas and the apartheid state in South Africa are a few of the historical atrocities supported by the conquest narrative in colonial religious imagination. There are no land or peoples safe when any land can become the promised land and any people the Canaanites. These horrors do not remain in the past. They are part of our present, in large part because an imagination of conquest remains. But what do we do about a story so thoroughly embedded and entangled in the dominant faith, culture, and Western social imagination? How do we *undo conquest*? We cannot undo the past, but we must work toward undoing the legacies of conquest within our own communities.

Because stories affect identity, part of social justice work must be to reshape violent historical stories that contribute to harmful and even genocidal social imaginaries. Without doing so, these stories lie dormant as hidden inheritances that are carried forward into an unknown future, where they can once again be used to foster and perpetrate violence.³ The past is never in the past.

The good news is that the stories we tell can and do change. Religious traditions themselves are living communities, constantly on the dialogical move. Unlike static entities, they perennially negotiate the tensions between past and present, reshaping and reimaging stories in order to meet the current moment. The process can seem slow and even imperceptible, but change is occurring. New stories, new theologies, new practices, new images of the Divine develop as human cultures morph and change. Indeed, change is necessary as stasis leads to death. The task of undoing conquest, then, is consistent with processes inherent to religious traditions rather than a unique

³Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11.

problem. Even when stories are part of sacred texts, in this case the Bible, they are constantly up for new interpretation and new ways of understanding. New interpretations of old stories and even new histories are important for social change. When new meaning is made from the past, new beginnings occur.⁴

Feminist and other critical theorists contend that the key to the future is found in the past: how we perceive the past informs the way we shape our present, which, in turn, shapes the future.⁵ Disrupting the past and reimagining it can "disrupt the certainties of the present and so [open] the way to imagining a different future."⁶ History is a site of the political. In some cases, new information or discoveries are made that shed new light on our oldest stories and histories and press for a new interpretation. Sometimes, such a historical discovery can unsettle the very foundation of history.

Newly Discovered History of Ancient Israel

During the past century, archaeologists made such a finding when they unearthed a new history of the origins of the

⁴Rebecca S. Chopp, "Christian Moral Imagination: A Feminist Practical Theology and the Future of Theological Education," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1997): 106.

⁵Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1994); Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, 10th ann. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1994); Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (San Francisco: Harper-Collins, 1988); Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

⁶Elaine Graham, "A Remembrance of Things (Best) Forgotten: The 'Allegorical Past' and the Feminist Imagination," *Feminist Theology* 21, no. 1 (2012): 65. Here Graham quotes directly from feminist Joan Scott.

Hebrew people in Canaan (present-day Israel and Palestine), known as the Iron Age I Hebrew Highland Settlements.⁷ Archaeologists discovered and excavated hundreds of small villages, found scattered across the highland regions of ancient Canaan that date to the end of the Late Bronze Age and into the early Iron Age. Carefully excavated artifacts, like shards of pottery and layers of stones, now provide the foundation for a new history of the ancient Hebrew people in Canaan a history that counters the story of conquest. Archaeological evidence indicates that the social process that led to the origins of the Hebrew people was not a violent military overtaking as the Bible depicts in the book of Joshua. Rather, the Hebrew people emerged in Canaan in a nonmilitaristic social response to extreme social and climate conditions.

During this tumultuous period in Canaan, people faced severe drought, oppressive socioeconomic conditions, and the collapse of the Egyptian Empire. In response to these coalescing dynamics, groups of largely indigenous Canaanites carved out a new way of life in the geographically remote and rocky hillsides of the Canaan highlands. Though the settlements were in close proximity to Egyptian-controlled land, the rocky terrain kept them insulated from Egyptian military control. Horses and chariots could not navigate the difficult, rocky terrain. The lack of military intervention enabled the

⁷I choose to capitalize "Highland Settlements" throughout this book as a literary means to indicate the sacredness of their story even though it resides outside the pages of the Bible. Because the Highland Settlements represent the origins of the Hebrew people and are considered proto-Israelite, I am honoring them within this lineage by choosing to capitalize the references to this community even if this is not always the practice within archaeological and biblical studies research. I would like to thank Dr. Susan Schnur for this suggestion along with her feedback on an earlier draft.

Highland Settlements to expand for a nearly 150-year period.⁸ During this time, these new settlements appeared to idealize, if not practice, a type of heterarchical or even egalitarian social organization, likely in response to the harsh and unjust conditions they left under Egyptian imperial rule. The Hebrew and, later, Israelite identity developed through a process of ethnogenesis as Canaanite settlers began to shape a new culture through their innovative social, language, farming, and cultic practices.⁹

The biblical story of the Israelite conquest of Canaan covers over the Highland Settlement period of Israelite history. Unearthing this buried history once again is an archaeological miracle of sorts. Because Israelite history is a foundational historical narrative for Western cultures, new historical developments concerning Israelite origins, like the discovery of the Highland Settlements, can have a wide impact across different cultural and religious spheres.

Archaeological evidence from the Iron Age may not be readily understood as an inspirational source for contemporary Christian imagination. Inspiration from the Iron Age? Really? While this is an understandable reaction, because Christianity is shaped by the historical narratives contained in Hebrew Scriptures, new discoveries about the history of the Hebrew people can have an important bearing on Christian theology, even histories from the Iron Age.

⁸A few biblical scholars disagree with such an interpretation of the archaeological evidence. For one primary example of biblical scholars who argue for the likely historicity of the conquest narrative as is told in the biblical narrative, see Iain W. Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015).

⁹For discussion on the ethnogenesis of Israelite identity, see Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance*, Approaches to Anthropological Archaeology (London: Equinox, 2006).

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Many people are familiar with the biblical stories of Hebrew origins, like Abraham migrating to Canaan (Genesis 12–26); the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 1–15), and the Israelite conquest of the promised land (Joshua 1–11). However, few people outside of specialized academic fields like archaeology, biblical studies, and ancient Near Eastern studies know of the archaeological evidence surrounding Hebrew origins. Yet the Highland Settlements archaeological evidence is too important to remain only within specialized academic audiences because it provides fresh perspectives on the origins of the Hebrew tradition, with the potential to reshape social imagination.

Challenge to Biblical Authority

The discovery of the Highland Settlements can challenge how people understand the Bible, and the settlements' information can bring to the fore issues about biblical authority and the historical-critical contexts of certain biblical texts like the book of Joshua, and even Judges and Exodus. The biblical conquest story and the archaeological evidence of Israelite origins in Canaan do not only differ—they contradict one another. These differences inherently raise questions about the historical accuracy of the Bible that many people hold as sacred text: How do we understand the origins of Israel with this discrepancy in mind?

People who take for granted that the Bible, while not factually inerrant, can be trusted to allude to actual historical events can find it upending to learn that the conquest narrative creates an alternative history of Hebrew origins in Canaan. Furthermore, the narrative was likely fabricated hundreds of years later to support specific geopolitical claims—fake news, so to speak. This information can be downright upsetting, and it could possibly be outright rejected by those who hold the Bible as historically accurate and factually inerrant. If the conquest is not true, what else might not be? I relate to this challenge since my earliest Christian communities taught me to read the Bible as inerrant and literal. For me it was a lengthy process to reconcile the idea that not all of what you read in the Bible may be literally true, yet the Bible can still be an authoritative sacred text.

The upside to the challenge is that the Highland Settlements' information presents a didactic opening to invite deeper study and analysis of the biblical texts. The book discusses what biblical scholarship reveals about the conquest narrative and why it was written. It also examines how different Christian approaches to violent biblical texts like the conquest narrative, may not be enough to deal with legacies of violence that such texts have supported. *Undoing Conquest* dives into biblical scholarship, questions of biblical authority, hermeneutic approaches, and deeper understandings of the Bible itself. For those who love and revere the Bible, these topics can deepen knowledge and appreciation of the good book, including violent texts like the conquest narrative. In short, for some people, this study can enhance biblical literacy.

I recognize that there are schools of religious scholarship and religious devotion that conceive of the Bible as sacred text in such a way that this project will appear offensive. While I respect such a position, it does not reflect my own approach. I hold a view of the Bible as sacred text that is not dependent upon it being historically accurate. I write within a tradition that upholds that there can be beauty and appreciation of the text found in these nuances. I offer an example of how new information can be intentionally integrated into Christian imagination and praxis.

Appropriating Conquest

At the outset of the project, I find it necessary to underscore that the problem with the conquest narrative in Joshua is not the biblical story itself but, rather, in how imperial Christians appropriated Israelite history. It is essential to make this distinction because Christians can easily discredit the Israelite conquest narrative as "bad" history. This easy dismissal from a Christian perspective can replicate an anti-Semitic, supersessionist theology that stereotypes the Hebrew Bible as containing a violent, vengeful image of God in contrast to viewing the New Testament texts as revealing a loving and just God.¹⁰ Because Undoing Conquest engages directly with the conquest narrative found in the Hebrew texts, I am wary of replicating this supersessionist tendency by simply critiquing the conquest narrative as the problem-such an interpretive strategy inherently places blame on the texts themselves. While violent texts in the Bible present hermeneutical challenges, easily dismissing them is not an apt answer. More interpretive nuance is needed.

A historical-critical interpretive approach examines the sociopolitical context from which the conquest narrative was written. This research provides greater clarity as to why the biblical history of Israel includes a violent story of conquest and not a story of a peaceful settlement process. Biblical studies research shows that the conquest story was first written around 600 BCE, in Judah, from people traumatized and

¹⁰Salvation history or *Heilsgeschichte* (the German name) is a theological perspective that divides the Hebrew Bible from the New Testament or interprets Jesus as a new revelation that supersedes the prior Israelite tradition.

terrorized by the Assyrian Empire for centuries. A traumainformed perspective shows that Judeans on the margins of empire sought to craft their history in a way that mirrored the empires surrounding them to empower themselves.¹¹ Taken in the context of Assyrian terror and trauma, the themes of the conquest story are understandable. Ironically, in the hands of Christian empires and imperial churches, the conquest story from 600 BCE became a tool in the arsenal of Christian colonialism and genocide.

Gottwald's The Tribes of Yahweh

In his classic book *The Tribes of Yahweh*, Norman Gottwald hypothesized that ancient Israel emerged from a "peasant counterculture resisting state control."¹² Gottwald saw the potential for the Highland Settlements to inspire justice because he made a connection between social justice movements seeking to make a better society and the Highland Settlements that were based on utopic societal ideals.¹³ What is important

¹¹David M. Carr, *Holy Resilience: The Bible's Traumatic Origins* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014).

¹²Norman K. Gottwald, "Political Activism and Biblical Scholarship: An Interview," in *Tracking* The Tribes of Yahweh: *On the Trail of a Classic*, ed. Roland Boer (London: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 163; Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel*, *1250–1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979). Gottwald applied a Marxist sociological perspective to develop his interpretation. *Tribes* prompted much dialogue, analysis, and critique across biblical studies. Despite this critique, many details of Gottwald's initial hypothesis remain central to Highland Settlements interpretation today.

¹³Gottwald made this connection during the 1960s while working on the book in Berkeley, California, and witnessing social justice movements of the time. Gottwald, "Political Activism and Biblical Scholarship," 163.

here is that the Highland Settlements are not a "rootless utopia," but form a history that is firmly lodged in the memory of the three major biblical traditions.¹⁴ *The Tribes of Yahweh* encouraged "Christians and Jews to reclaim biblical tradition as a relevant resource for their own hopes and endeavors for positive social change."¹⁵

Tribes influenced a broad array of communities, from academic biblical studies to churches and synagogues. Political prisoners in South Africa passed *Tribes* around from cell to cell and considered it a holy book; Latin American nuns created flip charts of Highland Settlements material to inspire their base communities; a Korean biblical scholar who was imprisoned as a political dissident had a copy of *Tribes* that he began to understand in prison.¹⁶ The influence of *Tribes* confirms that the Highland Settlements can make "a practical, life-sustaining difference in religious and para-religious communities."¹⁷

Despite the influence of *The Tribes of Yahweh*, many people still do not know about the Highland Settlements. While much has been written across biblical and archaeological studies, the Highland Settlements story remains largely out of reach for people without access to specialized discourse. The Highland

¹⁴Gottwald, "Response to Contributors," in *Tracking* The Tribes of Yahweh, 182–84.

¹⁵Norman K. Gottwald, "Revisiting *The Tribes of Yahweh*," *Servicios Koinonia: Servicio Biblico Latinoamericano* 374; Gottwald, "Response to Contributors," 181.

¹⁶Gottwald, "Response to Contributors," 181; Gottwald, "Political Activism and Biblical Scholarship: An Interview," 166–67. Gottwald notes that the book has influenced political activists in the United States, Korea, the Philippines, South Africa, and Latin America. These are just the people from whom he received correspondence.

¹⁷Gottwald, "Response to Contributors," 181.

Settlements story has yet to be incorporated into the life of the church and other faith communities in any substantial way. Gottwald discussed the necessity for theological interpretation and asked how theologians can connect the early Israelite historical evidence with communities seeking "justice here and now."¹⁸ Theologians still need to grapple with the meaning of the Highland Settlements in connection to the construction of theology and religious practices. *Undoing Conquest* begins this work.

Theological Reflection

The lack of theological reflection seeking to integrate the Highland Settlements story into religious practice reflects a typical pattern of cultural integration of profound discoveries, according to Thomas Kuhn's studies of scientific paradigm shifts. Kuhn found that new discoveries can take around one hundred years to be incorporated.¹⁹ With this pattern in mind, it has been nearly a century since the first Highland Settlements discoveries were made. Now is the time to integrate the settlements discovery more fully into the life of biblical faith communities and into wider culture. Such a discovery is too important to remain unintegrated into religious life and praxis.

Undoing Conquest begins the work of theological reflection on the Highland Settlements research from a feminist theologi-

¹⁸Gottwald, "Response to Contributors," 184. As a biblical scholar, Gottwald did not do the needed theological interpretation. He does not mention theologians explicitly in his article, but it seems implied since this type of interpretive work is the task of practical theologians.

¹⁹Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

cal standpoint, with a focus on interpreting the meaning of the settlements for Christian practice today. This book argues that the Highland Settlements material can be interpreted as a liberating counterhistory that can challenge the imagination of conquest and prompt new Christian imagination and praxis for churches today. Counterhistories typically read against the grain of dominant histories and challenge dominant forms of knowledge and power.²⁰ Since the Highland Settlements story has been largely lost due to the biblical story of conquest, it can be considered a counterhistory. As a counterhistory to conquest, the Highland Settlements research can challenge the problematic ways the Joshua conquest story has shaped what Willie James Jennings calls a diseased Christian social imagination.²¹ Simply put, the Highland Settlements can be understood as a counterhistory from the ancient past that can help prompt liberative imagination today.²²

²⁰WordSense.eu, s.v. "counterhistory." Elaine Graham explains that counterhistories can inspire new social imagination because "It is necessary to 'read against the grain' of history in order to redeem it; whether it be through the telling and retelling of how we got where we are, or painstaking scholarship [to] excavate the stories of our foremothers, or the writing of fantastical science fiction as both inspiration and warning. All such genres are 'sketches toward a counterhistory' (Jantzen, 1994: 188) in which agency, power and knowledge are radically re-envizaged." Graham, "A Remembrance of Things (Best) Forgotten," 12. Additionally, Emilie M. Townes writes about "countermemories," which is similar to the concept of counterhistory. Townes discusses the power of countermemory in the context of the United States: "Countermemory has the potential to challenge the false generalizations and gross stereotypes often found in what passes for 'history' in the United States." Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 47.

²¹Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6.

²²Emilie M. Townes discusses the power of countermemories to challenge dominant generalizing and stereotyping histories. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 45–48.

Undoing Conquest

The title *Undoing Conquest* nods toward the gender studies concept exemplified in Judith Butler's text *Undoing Gender*: gender is a social construction and, as such, can be undone.²³ Socially constructed things still have real-world consequences. Understanding the socially constructed nature of a thing can open avenues to choose to do a thing otherwise. The Highland Settlements archaeological evidence provides a contrasting history to conquest and, by doing so, reveals the constructive nature of the conquest narrative in the book of Joshua. Upholding the Highland Settlements as a counterhistory to conquest can bring about liberative and justice-oriented real-world consequences.

Churches often examine their current praxis, seeking transformation in moments of change and decline. Such processes of change typically involve examining the past to reconstitute the present. *Undoing Conquest* challenges churches to seek to undo conquest within Christian imagination and praxis by examining the past. To undo conquest, churches that bear the legacies of colonial violence will need to take responsibility for the conquests in the history of Christianity. Such churches will need to seek reconciliation and reparations for those still living in the traumatic wake of these conquests. They must actively seek to decolonize the church's theology and praxis. One decolonial practice is to loosen or unfasten the image of conquest as the predominant story of Hebrew origins from the Christian imagination.²⁴

²³Judith P. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Judith P. Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²⁴Here, I draw on the definition of undoing as the act of unfastening or loosening. Merriam-Webster.com, s.v. "undoing."

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Not all churches fall into these categories. Predominantly Indigenous Peoples' churches, Black churches, and immigrant churches, for example, do not have the same decolonizing and reparative tasks ahead of them. Their task may be toward the continued healing of historic and contemporary traumas inflicted by the conquests of colonial powers and churches. For such people and churches, the Highland Settlements offer a liberative story of Hebrew origins that aligns with stories of the oppressed and not of the empire.

Undoing Conquest introduces the Highland Settlements story and suggests ways to integrate the story into the practice of churches that considers churches both with colonial legacies and those on the margins of colonial power. To undo conquest, all churches share the task of intentionally reshaping Christian imagination in ways that can counter the imagination of conquest now and in the future. These are some of the ways that this book seeks to undo conquest.

These tasks are not easy. So, in the latter part of the book, I suggest a new liturgical season that can provide a yearly space for churches to dedicate to this work—what I call the "Season of Origins." The work of undoing conquest cannot be accomplished quickly. It will require an annual return to build new practices and theologies cumulatively. Given the profundity of the Highland Settlements discovery and the horrific ways that Christians have leveraged the conquest history as their own, a practice as encompassing as a new liturgical season is appropriate to deal with histories of conquest within Christianity.

Audience

Undoing Conquest invites deeper engagement with topics of Israelite history, the Bible, and new imagination for liberative church praxis. It encourages people to learn about violent Christian histories, to interrupt problematic patterns, and to reconcile and heal from the past. The book is a practical theological text that does interdisciplinary work engaging the Bible, biblical scholarship, and archaeological research. Such interdisciplinary work has been largely missing in practical theology.²⁵ I hope that scholars in practical theology and biblical studies will be among its readers. Undoing Conquest can be used in a theological school classroom, particularly in courses focused on biblical study, practical theology, or the theological imagination, to name a few. I have also written the book with churches and religious leaders in mind, especially those who are leading and imagining new ways of building community as a response to ecological, decolonial, and social pressures. I encourage churches and other faith communities to form reading groups to read and discuss it together. Likewise, anyone interested in how history shapes the present will find this book useful, especially as the United States is embroiled in controversies of what history gets to be told in public education. I hope that Undoing Conquest will prompt theological reflection and new praxis across a variety of contexts.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 considers the importance of the Highland Settlements for theology as it may not be readily obvious how Iron Age I archaeological evidence is relevant today. The chapter

²⁵Margaret Whipp, Paul H. Ballard, Christopher Rowland, and Zoë Bennett offer a few examples of practical theology texts that discuss using the Bible in practical theology. Margaret Whipp, "Lucky Lections: On Using the Bible in Practical Theology," *Practical Theology* 5, no. 3 (December 1, 2012): 341–44; Paul H. Ballard, "The Bible in Theological Reflection: Indications from the History of Scripture," *Practical Theology* 4, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 35–47; Christopher Rowland and Zoë Bennett, "Action Is the Life of All: The Bible and Practical Theology," *Contact* no. 150 (January 1, 2006): 8–17.

discusses common ways in which Christian traditioning processes incorporate new information into theology and praxis. Chapter 2 turns directly to the archaeological research of the Hebrew Highland Settlements, providing an in-depth discussion of the artifacts and how they are interpreted. The chapter provides a consolidation of the various research across archaeology, Ancient Near Eastern studies, and biblical studies. The various ways that Highland Settlements material contradicts or aligns with certain biblical texts are considered.

Chapter 3 examines the historical and political context of the conquest story in the book of Joshua by answering these questions: If the Israelite conquest did not take place, then why was this story told? Who wrote the conquest story and why? Many biblical scholars take up these questions and provide historical and social political interpretations of these texts. This research helps to demystify the violence in the conquest narrative and enable readers of the Bible to make interpretive decisions about how they read the story. Chapter 3 also discusses ways that the conquest story is interwoven in the fabric of the US social imagination, surveying how the story has shaped imagination in a variety of violent realities across Western colonial cultures both past and present.

Chapter 4 provides a feminist theological analysis of the Highland Settlements and interprets them as a liberating counterhistory that supports a counternarrative to an Israelite conquest of Canaan. The chapter explores ways that the Highland Settlements material can be read alongside the exodus story and provides fresh insights into this foundational biblical narrative. The chapter invites insights from feminist theology and understandings of history, cultural memory studies, and graphic design to interpret the significance of the Highland Settlements for reshaping religious imagination and church transformation.

Conclusion

Many people and institutions are beginning to confront their racist and colonial histories. Old wounds are rising to the surface with a force no longer ignorable. The church must confront its complicity in these wounds if it is ever to live into its own best ideals. The same is true for the United States. The Highland Settlements represent one salve for a long and entangled historical wound. The settlements story challenges the biblical conquest narrative that undergirds imperialistic, racist, and genocidal Christian imaginaries. The retelling of Hebrew origins made possible through the Highland Settlements discoveries prompts a reckoning of the past and invokes new Christian imagination in the present. It is not often that new information reveals the origins of the biblical faith traditions differently. It is time to integrate the Highland Settlements story into the Christian story.