

Deconstructing Manifest Destiny

Rev. Gusti Linnea Newquist

Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

October 11, 2026

Based on Deuteronomy 34:1-5, and the LORD showed [Moses] the whole land ...

Our Timeline tells us the particular land with which we live and worship and this land's particular people have gathered for millennia, responding to the yearning for oneness within us all.

While the Moses of our Lesson was pondering Jericho from atop Mount Nebo, our Timeline tells us hunter-gatherer locals in the Archaic Period were pondering the Potomac from their summer camp at the top of South Mountain. Over time, hunting and agriculture, trade and warfare, travel and migration led to a trail network known as The Great Warrior Path along what is now Interstate 81. By the same time Jesus was making his way from Capernaum to Jerusalem, our Timeline tells us indigenous traders in the Americas were traveling from as far away as the Great Lakes, the Rocky Mountains, and even Mexico, right here to the Shenandoah Valley to trade with local communities. By the early 1600s, our Timeline tells us, the Iroquois — known in their native tongue as Haudenosaunee — had come to dominate the Valley, often at the expense of established farming villages.

Seen in the light of this part of our Timeline, the biblical story of Moses — pondering the edge of a promise — becomes one indigenous story among many, rather than THE Story To End All Other Stories. By the time we come to our Lesson, Moses has led his tribe through escaping brutality, cultivating an emerging identity, transforming through trial and tribulation, struggling with neighboring tribes, and holding on to some kind of hope that their nomadic way of life will give way to settled agriculture in a Land of Promise and Plenty. In our Lesson the tribe of Moses emerges at the edge of a fertile valley — their version of the Shenandoah Valley — where maybe, just maybe, new life might emerge. And it does!

Yes, there are other tribes already in the land, in the same way the Keyser Culture existed here in the panhandle when the Haudenosaunee arrived. But the literal biblical interpretation of 600,000 warriors with another two million family members making their way across the Sinai Peninsula for forty years and then completely conquering the entire landscape from Dan to the Negeb — which today would stretch between Lebanon and Egypt — does not hold up to historical scrutiny. There simply is no archaeological record for a mass movement of that magnitude.

Our Lesson was never intended to etch into stone for all time a divine mandate to displace any others who might inhabit the same land. Instead of relating historical fact, our Lesson is intended to inspire an oppressed people with visions of the grandeur of a God who wants to liberate them. Inspired by this Lesson, none other than the

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the last night of his life, having faced dogs and bullets and burning crosses and jail, says that he, like Moses, has been to the mountaintop. *And I've looked over*, King says to the crowd preparing to march the next day. *And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you*, King says, *but I want you to know ... that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!*

King's Mountaintop Speech was my first introduction to interpreting this Lesson as an inspiration for liberation. Later, I learned how this Lesson has instead been used to justify the colonization of Africa and the conquest of the Americas, and today to justify the displacement of Palestinians. Today, I know that reading this Lesson in the context of today's genocide in Gaza borders on biblical malpractice.

When we place the millennia of harmfully interpreting this Lesson alongside our personal SPC Timeline, we see parallels that should shake us to the core. Our Timeline tells us the early 1700s brought religious refugees from Scotland and Ireland, many of them motivated by a vision, based on our Lesson, of America as a Promised Land. I have recently discovered my own matrilineal line includes ancestors in this category.

Our Timeline tells us this hopeful movement rooted in liberation then led to conflict with and eventual displacement of local indigenous populations. When the 1722 Treaty of Albany established the Blue Ridge Mountains as the dividing line between Virginia and Haudenosaunee lands, White settlers still pushed across the Blue Ridge right here into the Shenandoah Valley, encouraged by the colonial government of Virginia.

By 1743 Scots Irish Presbyterians had chartered our own worshiping community in the village that would become Shepherdstown. Our very existence appears to be a direct violation of the Treaty of Albany. In 1744, the Haudenosaunee, with few remaining options, sold their rights to the Shenandoah Valley through the Treaty of Lancaster. By 1768, they had sold all land claims between the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers. A movement originating in liberation, based on our Lesson, became coopted for conquest, also based on our Lesson. We have inherited that movement, in all of its hope and all of its harm.

So what are we to do about the harm?

The first thing, in my opinion, is to simply tell the truth. If I have my facts wrong, I hope someone will correct me. If not, we must continue to build them into our official written history.

The second thing is to insist on a conquest-free interpretation of the Bible.

Those of you attending my course on reading the Bible as a *Liberating Word* will remember our commitment to The Lens of Love, based on the two greatest commandments promoted by Jesus. If our reading of Scripture leads us to do anything other than love God and love neighbor, we have read it wrong and need to read it again. The fourth century scholar St. Augustine says the same.

We also bring a commitment to interpreting a particular passage of Scripture through the lens of other passages that pertain to the topic. In this case, the psalmist reminds us that, at the end of the day, *the earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof*. God is the ultimate owner of the land. Any biblical claim to a God-given right to land is invalid unless it includes the conviction that others have the same God-given right to land. The Presbyterian biblical scholar Gene March puts it this way: our Lesson simply asserts God's fundamental intention that all people have a place, not that one people have a place to the exclusion of all others.

Finally, we bring a lens from within the Jewish tradition, promoted by one of my own teachers — Jon Levenson — regarding how the Lesson is located within the larger biblical witness. The Torah, the “Law,” the five books of Moses is the most sacred text in all of Judaism. And it culminates here in our Lesson, with Moses on the mountain, pondering a land he will never enter.

The most sacred text in all of Judaism, does *not* continue into the Book of Joshua, into the conquest, into the wars and the burning cities and the driving out of the people already living there. Those stories come later, in a less sacred part of the Jewish Bible. The Torah itself — the holiest text Jewish tradition has — concludes right here at the edge of the promise, in view right in front of us as a promise for a persecuted minority, ready to be fulfilled when we finally and forever learn how to truly love God and neighbor.

Jesus, himself, would have studied our Lesson this way. Jesus, himself, certainly followed our Lesson this way. That is not an accident. That is the lens through which we must interpret the entire biblical story.

Like Moses on Mt. Nebo, you and I have come to the edge of a promise we did not create and cannot fully see. We cannot undo our harmful history. But we can tell the truth about it and write it into our own story. We can correct the biblical interpretation that justified it the harm and its aftermath. And we can commit, right here, right now, to the long, unfinished work of repair this promise still requires.

As Choctaw elder and Episcopal Bishop Steve Charleston insists, *we are going on a spiritual migration. This world needs renewal. We need to take an evolutionary journey to discover change. We need to create a new community and a new future. Spirit will guide us. We will journey together. We will care for one another until the shift occurs: a higher level of maturity for the human family, a balanced and just society, a healing of all that has harmed us. We are setting out to keep an ancient promise. We invite you to join us.*