

Joshua

Joshua 1-6: The Historical Problem of Conquest

The books of Joshua and Judges are histories of the conquest of the land of Israel. Joshua's narrative is more organized and systematic than that of Judges, which is a compilation of collected stories. Joshua picks up where Deuteronomy left off: Joshua has taken over for Moses as leader, Moses has just died, and now it is time to enter the land.

The text addresses two central questions: (A) How did Israel come to possess the land of Canaan? (B) Where did the people who were there before them go?

There are several key themes repeatedly emphasized throughout both Joshua and Judges:

- Obedience to YHWH
- Following Torah
- Centralized worship
- No foreign gods
- Importance of ritual

Both Joshua and Judges have a unique editorial bent compared to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (also known as the *Pentateuch*). Although there is some narrative continuity between the Pentateuch and Joshua–Judges, scholars see these books as the start of a new distinct literary entity called the *Deuteronomistic History*, which continues through the books of Samuel and Kings. These books are all understood as a literary unit in part because the language and themes (above) used throughout these books are not present in the same way in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This suggests that they were crafted and/or edited by a different individual (or individuals) called the *Deuteronomistic Historian* who essentially took the theological perspective presented in the Book of Deuteronomy and then explained the history of Israel through that lens (i.e., following Torah, centralized worship, no foreign gods, etc.).

Dealing with Contradictions

While all of the stories in Joshua and Judges emphasize the Deuteronomistic view that obedience is good and disobedience is bad, undeniable contradictions in the text remain. Not all of the stories agree with one another, and it appears that the Deuteronomistic Historian is

not particularly interested in reconciling those inconsistencies. Instead, the Deuteronomistic Historian takes the collected stories of the people of Israel that developed over time and then weaves them together into a new kind of history that can be understood through the lens of obedience. Thus they are more interested in persuading their audiences as to what these events *mean* than they are in making the events fit into a smooth, consistent narrative.

In addition to contradictions within the stories in Joshua and Judges, we must also contend with the reality that contradictions exist between what the story says happened and what historical evidence suggests happened. Archaeology became the primary method scholars used in the 19th-20th centuries to substantiate the accounts of Israel's history found in the Bible. What scholars have found, however, is that much of what these stories describe does not align with archaeological evidence. The events in Joshua, for example, were assumed to have happened in the 13th century BCE, yet scientific dating indicates that the fall of Jericho (Joshua 6) must have happened hundreds of years earlier.

Tradition vs. History

Some argue that Joshua and Judges are products of "historical memories" from oral tradition recorded later. Archaeological evidence, however, suggests a more complex relationship between these texts and the historical events that preceded them. A better way to understand these stories might be as attempts to make sense of the things that the people of Israel were already seeing around them.

The city of Jericho, for example, had been a pile of ruins for centuries by the time the book of Joshua was written. The story of the battle of Jericho we now read in Joshua could be the result of generations of attempts to explain why Jericho is a giant pile of ruins. In other words, it is true that *something* probably happened to spark this story. The story itself, however, is likely a result of an ongoing process of meaning-making and identity-construction that unfolded over time in Israel

Sticking Points

There are several key tensions that lie at the heart of these texts. How does Israel make sense of its relationship to the people who lived on the land before them? If the historical consensus is now that the conquest likely did not happen, then why did Israel create this story? How do we deal with the conquest and genocide of an entire indigenous people described in this text? What role has this narrative played in justifying colonization, imperialism, and genocide throughout history, and how is that legacy of violence still impacting our world today? These questions and more will be the focus of the next few sessions of this Bible study.