

8. Conquest of Canaan (1990)

166 There are three distinct blocks of tradition, which recount the conquest and settlement of Israel in Canaan: (1) Num 13–14 and 20–21; (2) Josh 1–12; and (3) Judg 1:1–2:5. In addition, the accounts in Gen 34; 49; Deut 2:26–37; 3:1–20, 33; and Judg 3–21 play a significant part in the scholarly discussion.

After the EXODUS from Egypt, the people of Israel arrived at Kadesh (Num 13–14). From there spies were sent into the land of the Canaanites. The conquest was postponed because of the negative report of these spies; and that entire generation of Israelites was judged and sentenced to die in the wilderness, except for CALEB and JOSHUA. To circumvent this decree, the people attempted a frontal attack from the south, resulting in a resounding defeat by the Amalekites and the Canaanites (Num 14:44–45). Some forty years later the Israelites passed around Edom and Moab in eastern Transjordan, seeking passage through Amorite territory. This resulted in conflict with SIHON and OG (Num 21), in which Israel defeated these two Amorite kings and took possession of their lands. At this time they established their camp in the plains of Moab across from Jericho (Num 22) and proceeded to give tribal allotments to Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh. After Moses' death, Joshua mobilized the Israelite tribes to conquer the central territory west of the Jordan. JERICHO was taken (Josh 2–6) from a base camp established at GILGAL. Soon afterwards they advanced westward into the central hill country, taking AI (Josh 7–8) and GIBEON (Josh 9–10). Next the Israelites turned their energies toward the south, which resulted in the conquests of Libnah, LACHISH, EGLON, HEBRON, and DEBIR. With southern Palestine under Israelite hegemony (Josh 10), Joshua then led an expedition against a coalition of five kings led by Jabin of HAZOR (Josh 11), resulting in the destruction of Hazor and the possession of northern Palestine. At this time Joshua divided the land among the remaining nine and one-half tribes (Josh 13–19; PLATE 10).

A rather different picture appears in Judg 1:1–2:5, where the Israelites are described as merely gaining a foothold in Canaan. The text lists scattered military operations by single tribes and presents what appears to be a peaceful settlement with the indigenous population of Canaan, including a list of twenty cities, which Israel is said to have conquered (cf. Deut 7:22 for a rationale for this). A number of tensions with the narrative in the book of Joshua are evident. In Josh 10, Hebron and Debir are said to have been conquered by Joshua, but in Judg 1:9–19 (and Josh 15:13–19) this is attributed to Caleb and OTHNIEL. Similarly, Num 32:39–41 attributes certain conquests in Transjordan to individual tribal groups like the Machirites, Jairites, and Nobahites, whereas Num 21:21–35 has the whole region (except for Edom, Moab, and Ammon) conquered as a result of a unified effort by all Israel. It should be noted that some scholars see a “pre-Exodus” conquest tradition in Gen 34. Thus it seems that the basic conquest story as related in Josh 1–12 is oversimplified.

The internal evidence for a more complex historical interpretation of events is compounded by conflicting archaeological data. A number of cities suffered violent destructions at the end of the Late Bronze Age (thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E.) including MEGIDDO, BETH-SHAN, HAZOR, Tell Abu Hawam, APHEK, BETHEL, GEZER, BETH-SHEMESH, Tell Beit Mirsim, Ashdod, etc. (PLATE 3). Following these destructions, numerous villages sprang up in the central hill country, the lower Galilee, the northern Negeb, and in central and southern Transjordan. Although at first sight this evidence seems to support the presentation of Josh 1–12, a close look reveals considerable tension with the biblical account. The archaeological evidence suggests that the cities of Hormah, Arad, HESHBON, Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, and Jarmuth were not

occupied in the thirteenth century B.C.E. Most of these sites suffered either destruction or abandonment in the Middle Bronze Age or earlier. The major destruction of Ai took place hundreds of years before Joshua came on the scene. On the other hand, there are cities like Megiddo, Beth-shan, Gezer, and Bethel which did suffer destruction during the thirteenth century B.C.E.; but the biblical record states that the Israelites could not drive out the inhabitants of these cities (Judg 1). The historian is thus forced to reckon with more than one invading force at this time, perhaps the SEA PEOPLES, who also entered Palestine about the time of Israel's conquest. To complicate matters further, the Bible lists only five places which are said to have been destroyed: Hormah, Jericho, Ai, Lachish, and Hazor. Of these, only Hazor and Lachish are supported by archaeological evidence. In short, archaeological evidence points to far wider destruction at the end of the Late Bronze Age than is attributed to Joshua and his troops. The combination of internal tensions within the biblical text and the poor fit with the archaeological evidence has produced three different theories for the conquest and settlement of Israel.

The first school of thought is that of the conquest or forced entry model, in which the biblical picture as depicted in Josh 1–12 is taken as essentially historical and accurate. Those representing this view include G. Ernest Wright, J. Bright, P. Lapp, Y. Yadin, and A. Malamat. It was W. F. Albright who first adduced the evidence of the extensive destruction throughout Palestine during the Late Bronze Age as confirmation of the biblical account. In addition to the archaeological evidence already cited, the Merneptah stele (ca. 1224–1211 B.C.E.) is taken as evidence for “Israel” being among the nations of Palestine at this time.

The poor fit of archaeological evidence with the biblical account in such instances as Jericho, Ai, and Bethel has caused some to abandon or revise the conquest model. D. Ussishkin has argued that Hazor and Lachish were destroyed nearly a century apart (end of thirteenth and twelfth centuries respectively). Thus, he concludes that the con-¹⁶⁷quest was a much more drawn out affair than that described in Josh 1–12. J. Bimson sets forth a more radical solution to this archaeological problem. He notes that, whereas there is no archaeological evidence for the destruction of such cities as Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, Hebron, Hormah, Arad, Debir, Lachish, and Hazor during the Late Bronze Age, there is evidence for this shortly before 1400 B.C.E. Thus, Bimson redates the conquest and Exodus to a period 200 years earlier than the normal dating (as based on the references to Pithom and Ramses in Exod 1:1). This further entails a lowering of the end of the Middle Bronze Age from 1550 B.C.E. to shortly before 1400 B.C.E. It should be noted that Bimson does not cite sufficient evidence for lowering the date of the Middle Bronze Age. Moreover, his solution creates as many chronological problems as it solves (i.e., the period of the Judges in Israel would now be 400 years in length).

A second model for interpreting the evidence was advanced by A. Alt and M. Noth, and more recently by M. Weippert, the so-called infiltration or peaceful settlement theory. Here the Genesis narratives are taken as the starting point, with Israel as nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes. Each year, in search of new pastures, they would enter the land, gradually becoming a sedentary people. At first their relationships with the urban population in Canaan were peaceful. It was only in the second stage, at the end of the Period of the Judges, that there would have been military conquests. The principle datum that Alt relied on was the fact that the Israelite tribes settled in the thinly populated mountainous regions, which would have best enabled this process of gradual assimilation to Canaanite culture. Recently Y. Aharoni has defended this theory arguing that the biblical traditions associated with the Negev battles are not to be associated with Moses and Joshua, but rather predate this period by almost three hundred years. V. Fritz presents a similar thesis, which he calls a “symbiosis model,” developed from an anthropological

perspective. Recent studies have shown that Alt was wrong in positing that nomads from the desert would invade the urban centers. Rather, the reverse is true. Studies have shown that pastoralists migrate from the urban center to the desert, not vice versa, and are sent out by the village in order to increase economic productivity during the nonproductive months of the agricultural year. Furthermore, archaeology has shown a dependence of Iron Age culture on that of the Late Bronze Age. Since the Iron Age settlements are not an offshoot of the Canaanite cities, Fritz explains this continuity as due to prolonged contact with Canaanite culture. Thus, there was no conquest as such, but rather a steady stream of independent migrations by separate tribal groups. The weakness of this theory is that it does not account for all of the archaeological data, and it too quickly dismisses the biblical stories as etiological in nature.

R. de Vaux offers an interesting synthesis of the different proposals of these two schools of thought in his proposal that there four different regions, each with a distinctive type of settlement. A peaceful settlement by various tribes characterizes the southern regions and the central hill country. On the other hand, in Transjordan and the northern region there was more of a military operation as such.

G. Mendenhall and N. Gottwald propose a third alternative called the internal revolt model, which proposes that Israel was the result of a social reorganization among the indigenous Canaanite population of the Late Bronze Age. This reorganization was the result of a social revolt within the Canaanite society. Mendenhall drew attention to the social conditions reflected in the AMARNA letters, where the *'apiru* class of people appear as uprooted individuals of varied origins. They stood outside the societal structures. These *'apiru* are identified by Mendenhall as forerunners of the Hebrews. In this view, the ideological and religious structures had broken down in the Late Bronze Age, resulting in the withdrawal of the peasant class from urban society. Thus the Israelite conquest is a misnomer, having nothing to do with the massive destructions of the mid-thirteenth century, but rather with certain transitions within the Iron Age itself (1200–1175 B.C.E.).

Gottwald defines the peasants' revolt along political and social lines rather than religious ones. He posits that there was conflict, not between pastoral and agricultural groups, but between urban and rural life. Israelite Yahwism is identified with rural life, which consciously rejected Canaanite centralization of power. The result of this conflict was a peasant revolt, which resulted in the formation of Israel. M. Chaney advocates that the catalyst to this peasant revolt was the infusion via the Exodus group into an already unsettled Canaanite population.

The major weakness of this theory is three-fold: (1) the identification of *'apiru* elements with Hebrews is tenuous at best; (2) the peasant revolt model seems to be a modern Marxist construct superimposed on biblical traditions; and (3) the biblical tradition insists that Israel's ancestors came from Mesopotamia and not Canaan. This view, however, does promise greater control of the biblical traditions through the use of sociological categories. The third edition of J. Bright's *A History of Israel*, which states that the conquest must "to some degree" be an inside job shows its growing popularity.

In summary, the biblical picture of the conquest, as presented in Josh 1–12, has come under considerable scrutiny. The biblical and extra-biblical evidence gives rise to three different models: conquest, infiltration, and internal revolt. Given the variety of statements within the Bible itself, and the conflicting archaeological results, it may not be too much to say that the truth probably lies somewhere in the synthesis of these three models. Such a synthesis must also be cognizant of the fact that memory of the conquest was transmitted within a worshipping community in ancient Israel. The Exodus-Conquest (i.e., Yahweh's "Holy War") was a

commemorated ritual event in the current life of the people, as well as a memory of actual experiences in the more distant past.

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