

Israel's Early History, II: Joshua

We were talking about the developmental theme of the Pentateuch. Now we want to talk about the thematic progression of the Pentateuch. I think David Klines has an interesting theory that seems to be born out by the evidence. It helps us to understand where the Pentateuch is moving and how those books lead up to the book of Joshua and even require it in a sense. David Klines says a good way of determining the theme of a book is to ask where it begins and where it ends, to look particularly at the beginning and end of a book. He focuses on the beginning and ending of the Pentateuch and on the beginnings and endings of the books within the Pentateuch, of course going on to look at the entirety of those books. He concludes with a theory as to what the theme of the Pentateuch is. He says, "There can be little doubt that the answer of the theme of the Pentateuch must be the promise to the patriarchs. That is the theme of the Pentateuch, with its various elements and its various formulations." What, then, is Klines' articulation of the theme of the Pentateuch? He puts it this way:

The theme of the Pentateuch is the partial fulfillment, which implies also the partial non-fulfillment of the promise to or the blessing of the patriarchs. The promise or blessing is both the divine initiative in a world where human initiatives always lead to disaster and a reaffirmation of the primal, divine intentions for man.

The main idea is that the theme focuses on the promise to the patriarchs and the fulfillment of that, but also on the partial non-fulfillment. What does he mean by that? The promise has three elements: the land, descendants, and blessing. He sees the divine-human relationship as the essence of the blessing: God is entering into relationship with His creatures and the land. What is entering is that he sees these three elements as being fulfilled in this order: posterity (descendants), divine-human relationship (blessing), and the land. The posterity element of the promise is dominant in Genesis 12-50. From the time Abraham receives the promise from God that these three things will happen, the issue for the rest of Genesis is will Sarah ever have children? Where is this great nation going to come from? Abraham is childless! That is what motivates much of the movement in Genesis. Then in Exodus and Leviticus the divine-human relationship comes into prominence. Then in Numbers and Deuteronomy the focus is more on the land element. Therefore Klines sees this tri-partite patriarchal promise as providing the structure for the flow of the Pentateuch.

Let us illustrate how this tri-partite promise provides structure for the Pentateuch. By the end of Genesis the promise of descendants has begun to take effect, but it is still largely unrealized. At the end of Genesis Abraham has not become a great nation. But we do have the blessing of Jacob's sons, from whom would come the tribes of that great nation. The promise of land has hardly begun to be realized at all by the end of Genesis. The promise of the blessing of God's presence has begun to take effect, but the shape it will adopt is as yet uncertain. God is dealing with Abraham, but it is not clear how their relationship will develop.

Then we come to Exodus. As Klines puts it, "The promise of God's relationship with the descendants of Abraham is most clearly brought to expression at two focal points [in Exodus]: the Exodus event and the Sinai revelation." When God brings His people out of bondage in Egypt and delivers them, that is an expression of His commitment to them and His relationship with them. Leviticus details the means by which the relationship that has now been established is to be maintained. Klines says, "The regulation of ritual worship is [Leviticus'] almost exclusive interest." That is probably why we find it difficult to understand. We do not have much common ground with that kind of ritual worship. Nevertheless, it is

still significant because its presuppositions are that men will want to offer gifts to God, they will sin against God, and they will want to know God's will for everyday life. Klines says Leviticus depicts a community exploring its relationship with God. I do not entirely agree with this. I do not think Leviticus is a community exploring its relationship with God so much as it is God communicating to that community how it should relate to Him. It is more of a divine communication to His human creatures than a human exploration of how they might relate to God. But the focus in Exodus and Leviticus is on the divine-human relationship.

Then we come to Numbers. Here the aspect of the promise dealt with is the promise of land. Now, during this time the Israelites are wandering in the wilderness and only come to the border of the Promised Land. When they approach the Promised Land they send up spies. Ten out of the twelve spies come back with reports that intimidate the people. Therefore they do not go up into the land as God had commanded. They come to the border of the Promised Land, but they do not actually enter it. However, numerous aspects in Numbers indicate that the focus is on the land. For example, Numbers is given the name Numbers because of the many censuses that are taken in this book. Predominant among these are the military censuses. These censuses are meant to record the warriors, the men who are able to fight. Why are they counting up their military personnel? Because they have a land to take! It is important for them to know who is able to go in and help take this land. Also, the way in which the camp is laid out in Numbers 2 clearly presupposes movement toward the land. The layout of the camp indicates that they are moving somewhere. Having prepared for movement toward the land, the actual movement begins in Numbers 10. The departure narrated here is not directionless, but as Moses says in 10:29 to Hobab, his father-in-law, it is a setting out for the place of which Yahweh said, "I will give it to you." The words of Moses to Hobab show an awareness of the promise of land given to the patriarchs. God had said, "Leave and go to the land which I will show you." Moses is echoing those words. He is saying, "This is where we have been moving." The patriarchal promise is still in force.

Then we come to Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy, like Numbers, focuses on the land. The people of Israel are on the plains of Moab. The promise of descendants is now coming into almost full fulfillment. They are a nation, though a landless nation. They are a great people on the plains of Moab, and they are still expanding. The promise of presence and relationship is touched on in different ways in Deuteronomy, including the possibility of forfeiting the blessing of that relationship and experiencing the courses of that relationship. I am not sure that what is threatened is the entire forfeiture of the relationship, but rather it is a question: how is the loving God going to administer His love to His people? Obedient people will tend to find that His love is administered in blessing. Disobedient people will find that His love is administered in punishment or discipline—the Old Testament uses the word "curse." In Deuteronomy we have Moses preparing the people to enter the land.

The Pentateuch breaks off with the patriarchal promise partially fulfilled, but also partially unfulfilled. It cries out for a continuation. It calls for the book of Joshua. This has led some scholars to divide the Bible in different ways. Some have spoken of a Hexateuch. They say that because Deuteronomy ends with the people still outside the Promised Land it is rather anticlimactic and you need to include Joshua. Therefore instead of talking about five books, the Pentateuch, they talk about six books, the Pentateuch and Joshua as the climactic chapter. The problem is Joshua bears a close relationship to the books that follow after it. It is hard to break it off after the end of Joshua; you would need to go into Judges, Samuel, and so on. Others have suggested a Tetrteuch, a collection of four books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. They suggest that a new chapter in the story is begun in Deuteronomy because it is much like Joshua. I prefer the division that we have, with the Pentateuch and then the historical books beginning with Joshua. The books of Moses end with the death of Moses. And the book of Joshua, who was Moses' aid, picks up the story. The historical books do relate to the language, imagery,

and theology of Deuteronomy, as one would expect. Nevertheless, a distinct beginning is made in Joshua. In terms of the patriarchal promise and its fulfillment, the story is not told until the end of Kings. Therefore there is no reason to truncate that early history anymore, which indicates that Genesis to Kings tells the early history of Israel.

We will now be looking at grace and law in the primary history. We talked a little about grace and how it is introduced even in the primeval prologue of Genesis chapters 1-9. We talked about how this sets the stage for the call of Abraham after the fall of Babel. It causes us to look for that expression of God's grace, and we find it in His calling out of Abraham and the beginning of His redemptive through the descendants of Abraham. But what about law? Law is also present in these early books of the Bible. They provide a background to what happens in Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. David Friedman suggests that the primary history is structured so as to accent the justice of God's judgment on the people of Israel for their covenant breaking. Friedman is taking the Decalogue, the commandments God gave, and he shows how each of these commandments was broken. He begins in Exodus after God's law is given and shows in the books that follow how these commandments were broken, one by one. By the time you get to the exile of the Southern Kingdom, when the Southern Kingdom falls all the commandments are broken. Therefore it is high time that God visit the judgment, which had been threatened on His people, and send them into exile. You might ask if it could have really been a period of centuries before all of the Ten Commandments were broken. Certainly not. In every century, probably in every day, all ten were broken somewhere and somehow. But what Friedman points out, and what I think is an interesting observation, is that there are certain episodes recorded in each book that highlight the breaking of a specific commandment. These episodes are ones that have caused commentators to wonder about their purpose—why is this recorded right here? Why is this story about the man gathering sticks on the Sabbath recorded right here? It seems worth considering that the narrators in their wisdom chose these to highlight these episodes out of the many they could have recorded in order to show how Israel was breaking all of the law. By the time you come to the end of Kings, the breaking of all Ten Commandments has been recorded in these episodes showing that it is high time that God judge His people, which he then does. I present this theory to you to get you thinking about these things, not because I agree with it completely. It is a theory that has not been fully assessed. But it shows a mastermind overseeing the composition of this primary history. Some would wonder about that idea, but if we believe the Bible to be inspired then we can understand how God in His providence could have worked it out so that this kind of structure is apparent, even if it was not intended by any given editor along the way.

As we move into the book of Joshua let me recommend some commentaries to you, understanding that not all of you will have access to these resources. In my view the most helpful commentary is one by Marten Woudstra in the New International Commentaries of the New Testament (NICOT) series. It is a fairly high-level commentary without being completely baffling to non-specialists. It is a good commentary that sheds good light on Joshua, and I recommend it to you. I like to try to find commentaries that come at the text from different vantage points. Many times we read books that are all written by people who are very much alike. They are all Westerners or they are all Christians, for example. I think when you are dealing with the Old Testament sometimes it is interesting to know what the rabbis said about the text. If you are reading all Christian authors you will find that they are repeating each other because they are all reading each other's works. It is good to draw in a different perspective. Drawing in the perspective of a commentator from the Third World, for example, is often very helpful because they see things in texts that we do not see because their life issues are different than ours. Similarly, the perspective of someone from the Far East can be very useful. Another commentary I would recommend is that of C. J. Goslinga. He is a Dutchman whose commentary has been translated

into English. This commentary is quite good. These are not all evangelical commentaries, and so as always you should read these critically, as you should whatever other resources you might use.

Let us begin talking about Joshua. I would like to begin by reiterating and elaborating on a comment we have made about reading methods. How do you go about reading a biblical book? What should be your impulses as you begin to read Joshua? As I said before, and as Woudstra says in his commentary, the task of the theologian exegete is a humble yet a significant one. It begins with listening, and it continues and ends with listening. In reading the Bible, listening is crucial. It could be compared to the way a counselor listens to their client. They seek to understand what their client is saying by listening and by asking probing questions and listening to the response. The very significant difference between this scenario and biblical study is that the counselor is asking questions and listening in order to try to help their client. In contrast, in studying the Bible we are listening carefully and asking probing questions in order to gain help for ourselves, in order to gain understanding of what God has said to us.

To illustrate this practice of listening and asking probing questions, let us see what questions we could ask of Joshua 1:1-2 after listening to the text. Joshua 1:1-2 says, “After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: ‘Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites.’” After listening to even this very brief text there are many questions we could ask. Who is Moses? What is the significance of his death? What is the meaning of “servant of the LORD”? Is this perhaps an honorific title being given to Moses? Why is Joshua chosen to lead the people? How are they to cross the Jordan River? Who was Joshua? Why did God choose to speak to him at this time?

In the original text the command to Joshua is simply, “cross over into the land...” rather than “get ready to cross...” That makes me wonder whether Joshua was right to take the time to send out spies into the land before going into the land. The people had already spied out the land in Numbers, the spies did not accomplish much, and the sending out of the spies delayed the people’s entry into the land. The next time they send spies is to spy out the little village of Ai in chapter 7 and it was a problem because of Achan’s sin. The spies do bring them into trouble; they cannot rely on the spies’ report. Of course providentially the sending of the spies resulted in the encounter with Rahab and the subsequent incorporating of her and her family into the people of God. God does work all things together for good, even the mistakes we make. I am not saying that I believe for certain that Joshua made a mistake, but I think it is an interesting question. It is nowhere recorded that God specifically ordered him to send spies.

There are other questions that arise from listening to these verses. Why is Joshua called Moses’ aide? What does that mean? Again, why does God tell Joshua that Moses is dead? Is He giving Joshua information he did not already have? Or is He implying that the reason for the command coming at this time is the death of Moses? The name for God used here is the name Yahweh, which is God’s personal, covenant name as opposed to the more generic name of Elohim, which simply means God.

This text shows us that we must have some knowledge of what comes before. We will come back to this in our next session. But more generally, how would you go about answering questions like this? We see that by listening to even a very short passage there are many questions we could ask. How do we go about looking for answers? What are the basic tools we could use as Bible students? A concordance is a good way to look for answers to some of these questions. We could, for example, look up the phrase “servant of the LORD” and find where that occurs elsewhere in the Bible and see if it is significant. A Bible dictionary or encyclopedia is also a good tool. There you can find answers to some of these questions. For example, you could look up Joshua in a Bible dictionary and find a summary of who he was, why he was chosen, and what his relationship to Moses was. You can find all these things in the

Bible, but it is sometimes helpful to access a summary of that information more quickly in one of these tools.