

The Emergence of Israel in Canaan

In this session I will cover another debating point, which I describe as the emergence of Israel in Canaan. The debate is over how the conquest of the land actually took place. The biblical picture in the book of Joshua is that Israel entered Canaan by a military conquest. But the biblical picture has been challenged. There are four objections that are most typically raised against what appears to be the biblical picture of the events.

The first objection is historical and it has to do with the historical-critical method. That is the method that historians are called upon to employ as they carry out their history work. The historical objection revolves around an anti-theological bias, which is present in historical criticism as it is traditionally practiced. It comes out of the Enlightenment. A nineteenth century German scholar named D. F. Strauss, who made an impact in biblical scholarship with a book called *The Life of Christ*, commented on what can count as historical reportage. He said that an account is not historical when

the narration is irreconcilable with the known and universal laws which govern the course of events. According to these laws, agreeing with all just philosophical conceptions and all credible experience, the absolute cause [which is his name for God] never disturbs the chain of secondary causes by single arbitrary acts of interposition, but rather manifests itself in the production of the aggregate of finite causalities and of their reciprocal action. When, therefore, we meet an account of certain phenomena or events of which it is either expressly stated or implied that they were produced immediately by God Himself—divine apparitions, voices from heaven, and the like—or by human beings possessed of supernatural powers—miracles, prophecies—such an account is insofar to be considered as not historical.

So he approaches the biblical account, which does involve miracle, divine intervention, and God as an actor in the chain of events, and determines that it is not historical. Thus the biblical picture of a conquest is questioned from the outset. It is not questioned on the basis of evidence, but rather on the basis of an a priori assumption inherited from the Enlightenment. He says that God never intervenes, but how does he know that? It is an a priori assumption. But it lives on in historical-critical practice as one of the criteria of what it means for something to be historical. So there is a great deal of confusion in dealing with the Bible because God is involved. Much of the time He is acting behind the scenes, but sometimes He intervenes rather directly, not least in the resurrection. So there will be a problem with the account of the conquest if one assumes this anti-theological bias.

In the Enlightenment there was a common thought that people were freeing themselves from the tutelage of the church. The age of science was beginning to emerge. Many people were observing that things that were once thought to be mysterious or that were given metaphysical explanations could now be explained. The hope was that ultimately human scientific endeavor would explain everything. And many people today are still steeped in that view. But we need to ask whether it is the Enlightenment that should craft our worldview. Or does Scripture craft our worldview? What is it that shapes our understanding of reality?

Strauss also levels charges of guilt by association when he says, “It may be that a narrative standing alone would discover but slight indications, or perhaps might present no one distinct feature of the mythos, [which is, whatever is not historical] but it is connected with others, or proceeds from the author of other works, which exhibit unquestionable marks of mythical or legendary character [such marks as

God's involvement in the chain of events], and consequently suspicion is reflected back from the latter on the former." The charge of guilt by association is a win-win argument for him. He says that some texts in the Bible are not historical because they mention God, and other texts in the Bible, which might be acceptable on their own, are deemed not historical because they are connected with the texts that mention God. The result of his book was that he discredited the historicity of virtually the entire life of Christ.

After the historical objection, the next one is a logical objection. While reading Joshua and Judges, one may get the impression that there is a logical contradiction. Joshua presents a rapid blitzkrieg taking over the land. Judges presents a much more complicated picture in which God's people have actually lost some ground. Sometimes people say that the picture of conquest in Joshua cannot be historical because the picture in Judges contradicts it. If the Bible is internally inconsistent, then it cannot be trusted at all.

Another objection is a modern literary objection. It is part of a trend today to read the Bible as literature. It is a trend from which we can learn and from which we can benefit in many ways, but we must be very cautious. In past decades it was the historical-critical method that was dominant in biblical studies. The idea in that method was to get behind the surface of the text to discover what really went on behind the scenes. The goal was to find out what the real events were that provided the basis for the text. So the text was often disassembled in the attempt to discover a pristine core and find out what really happened. Some scholars have grown weary of that method and others have pointed out that it has not yielded much of theological value for the church. So in recent decades there has been more of a tendency to read the Bible as it stands, to read it as literature.

As that has happened, many have not taken time to question some of those historical-critical divisions that were proposed in the earlier period. Because they are focused upon reading the Bible as literature, they do not care about history. There is a growing anti-historical bias among some literary readers of Scripture. My argument is that to read Scripture well from a literary perspective is to recognize all of its truth claims, including historical truth claims. But the anti-historical bias supports the attitude that the text is a good story, and that is all it is. The Bible is not viewed as utilitarian literature, but pure literature. It is art for art's sake. But that is an assumption that works against the grain of the text.

The final objection, which is probably the one that is debated the most, is an archaeological objection. The claim is that there is a lack of extensive destruction in Israel at the right time, in the right places, that would be expected if the text was historically accurate. People are looking for those destruction layers in the places they would be expected, but they are not finding them.

These objections, whether singly or in combination, have led people to conclude that there was not a conquest. It is merely a biblical fiction. And we must consider how we are to respond to these objections.

Our response to the historical objection is first to recognize and reject an atheistic, a priori assumption. It is an assumption that is employed today in the historical-critical method and sometimes even by believers. It is a strange compartmentalization of life to say that you believe one thing as a Christian but when you operate as an historian you will only utilize the accepted canons of the field. We need to challenge this kind of thinking. If someone believes in God, we need to ask what kind of God. Is He a God like the one described in the Bible who is a personal God? If someone believes in a personal God, we need to ask why one would assume God would not intervene into His own creation. We need to challenge people's foundations and force them to synthesize their worldviews. You cannot have one

worldview as a believer and another worldview as a practicing historian. It is a fundamental challenge that we need to bring against the historical-critical method.

We respond to the logical objection by raising our literary awareness of how to deal with the text. It is true that the picture painted by Joshua and the picture painted by Judges are different in some respects. The conquest is being looked at from different angles. In one instance, it is being looked at from the angle of what God did. Joshua focuses on God being true to His promises. Not a single promise of that which He had given to Israel failed. He gave them the land. He gave them the upper hand. They did conquer the land. They subjugated the land. Judges, on the other hand, looks at the human component or response. It looks at how the people did in occupying the land. It was subjugated by God's grace. But it still had to be occupied by the people. These are two different pictures that are being painted, but they are not contradictory. They are complimentary. If you look carefully at the picture painted by Joshua, there are some shades and lines present in it that are presented more boldly in the picture painted by Judges.

The logical objection falls flat when we consider the text of Joshua and Judges carefully. Here is an excerpt from my book, *The Art of Biblical History*.

This brings us to the next reason that many contemporary scholars have moved away from the conquest model as an explanation of Israel's emergence in Canaan. This is their sense that Joshua and Judges mutually undermine one another's historical credibility by painting conflicting pictures of the conquest—the former a hugely successful blitzkrieg and the latter a much more protracted complex affair. It is quite true of course that the two books present different pictures. But are they contradictory? While the question cannot be adequately addressed in the space available here, it may at least be observed that the sense of tension between the two books is greatly lessened when each is understood on its own terms and in the light of its own purposes. At the risk of oversimplification it could be said that the book of Joshua stresses God's faithfulness in giving His people the land, that is, by giving them the upper hand by not allowing any of their adversaries to withstand them, while Judges stresses the people's failure to act faithfully in occupying it. The introductory section of Judges, for example, describes how after the death of Joshua the people of Israel gradually lost their grip on the land until, instead of having the upper hand, they found themselves living among the Canaanites, intermarrying with them, and worshipping their gods. But even the book of Joshua, amidst its stress on Joshua's success in taking the land, acknowledges the war was a protracted affair and that there was much to be done even after the land was subdued and that the tribes of Israel sometimes failed to occupy fully their allotted territory. Thus Joshua can speak in the same breath of Israel having rest from all their enemies roundabout and yet needing still to contend with these nations that remain among them. In sum, it seems that the pictures presented by the books of Joshua and Judges, though different in their emphases, are ultimately compatible and complimentary.

There is no logical contradiction between Joshua and Judges, but you will read many books that say you cannot trust the Bible on historical matters and they will point to those books as examples. If we read carefully, however, we can show that they are acceptable forms of historiography.

In response to the literary objection, it is very important to determine the purpose of a piece. Why is a particular piece written? Is there any indication that the book of Joshua is written simply to be a nice story? Is it supposed to just help us think about life in a certain way, like J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the*

Rings? The way you discover the purpose of a literary work is similar to the way you discover the purpose for which a painting was painted and hung on a wall. Imagine that you are looking at an oil painting of a railroad depot. You must ask whether it is merely art for art's sake, if it is there just to please the eye. Or is it an historical piece? Is it referential, meant to commemorate an historic railroad depot the way it once looked?

The only way to determine the answers to these questions is from the context. The context is all important. If you were able to look around the painting and you discovered that this painting of a railroad depot is the only painting in the room, and it is in a new railroad depot, and it has a bronze plaque under it, you would begin to think it is there for historical reference. It may be a nice piece of art, but the context leads you to understand its purpose. It is meant to recall what the old depot was like before they built the new one. But if you viewed the painting in an art gallery, and there was a painting of a barn next to it and a painting of a landscape across the room, you would be unsure. In that context, it may be a painting of a real depot, but that is not the point.

In the same way as with the painting, context is the key to discovering the purpose of biblical accounts. The book of Joshua begins after the death of Moses. That links us in to a prior history. Then after the book of Joshua is the book of Judges, which in turn leads us to the books of Samuel. They are all in the thread of Israelite history. So however well told the story is, it is still historiographical in intent.

So the context helps us see the purpose of a smaller unit. One of the principles of discourse analysis is that every smaller unit of a discourse is influenced by every higher level of communication. You can see this in everyday life. If you pass by a group of people and hear only a few words of their conversation, you may grossly misinterpret what they are talking about. If you want to understand, you need to find out what they are talking about. In other words, you need to discover the context. Even though you heard those few words perfectly clearly, you did not know their purpose or meaning until you got a sense of their context.

One example from Scripture is the story of Elisha and the floating axe head. That seems like a fabulous tale. One might wonder why God would bother to make such a strange thing happen. But when you look at the broader context, you find out that it was not a trivial event. And you will begin to be encouraged by the historiographical intent of the context to think of the account as an historical record of a miracle that was performed. In order to doubt the text's historical nature, you would have to show in the text how the influence of the context should be discounted, which sometimes does occur. In the Gospel accounts of the life of Christ, sometimes there are moments when they record that Jesus told a parable. When that happens, they usually say something like, "Jesus told them a parable." That indicates we are changing from historiographical discourse to the telling of a parable. But there is a signal in the text of that change. If there is no signal in the text, then the larger order of discourse helps us understand and decide the purpose of the smaller unit. It shifts the burden of proof to those who want to say that just because something is a miracle it is not history.

In response to the archaeological objection, we need to become good readers. I encourage you to become good readers in two respects. First, be good readers of the biblical text. In other words, make sure that what you think the text is claiming, and therefore what you expect to find in the archaeological record, is actually what it is claiming. Second, be good readers of the archaeological artifacts, because they do have to be interpreted. Those artifacts do not come out of the ground with labels affixed so you can put them right on the museum shelf. Someone has to analyze, interpret, and explain those artifacts. Let me read you another short section from my book. "Does the Bible, properly understood, depict a violent conquest involving great destruction of persons and property? The answer is yes and no. Yes,

because both Joshua and Judges indicate that Israel entered Canaan from outside and that this involved much loss of life to the indigenous population, but no, because property damage is said to have been more minimal. Specifically the book of Joshua testifies that the populations of numerous cities were placed under the ban and totally destroyed, but of only three sites is it explicitly said that property also was utterly destroyed, only in Jericho, Ai, and Hazor.” The latter instance is particularly instructive because it reveals that Israel did not burn any of the cities that it destroyed except Hazor. Clearly then to take a city, put it to the sword, and utterly destroy it, implies the decimation, or at least the dispossession of its population, but it may say nothing of property damage. The picture presented in Joshua is that the destruction of property was the exception rather than the rule.

The point of all that is that archaeologists, even conservatives and evangelicals, have been searching to find destruction layers for all these different cities. But if you read carefully you know that we have no right to be looking for that. The annihilation of a population does not leave anything in the archaeological record. You may find bones, but you will not find a destruction layer or evidence of burning. But that is what so many have been looking for. We need to read the text more carefully so that when we go to Israel to find archaeology that correlates with the Bible, we are looking for the right things.

We also need to be careful that we are reading the archaeological evidence very carefully. In an article by Bryant Wood, he takes the prime example of the claim that there is a contradiction between archaeology and the Bible, which is the destruction of Jericho, and he reinvestigates the interpretation of the evidence we have from that site. Much of the support for the idea of contradiction came from the work of Kathleen Kenyon, who published some popular books that led some to the conclusion that Jericho was not even a city that was extant in the time when the conquest took place. Wood investigated the actual archaeological excavation results, which did not appear until after Kenyon had died. He is an expert in archeological pottery and he reassesses the results. The conclusion is that if even 50% of his findings are borne out by further research, then no one would be able to use Jericho as an example of contradiction again. Archaeology is not objective evidence. It is objects that must be interpreted. Just as we must interpret the Bible, we must interpret the results of archaeology.