

10-1-1985

## Joshua's total conquest of Canaan: a theological rationale

Ragnar C. Teigen

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Teigen, Ragnar C. (1985) "Joshua's total conquest of Canaan: a theological rationale," *Consensus*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol11/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# JOSHUA'S TOTAL CONQUEST OF CANAAN: A THEOLOGICAL RATIONALE

Ragnar C. Teigen

There is no question about the existence of two different versions involving Israel's settlement of Canaan found mainly in the books of Joshua and Judges. In Joshua 1-12 Israel under the dynamic leadership of Joshua conquered all Canaan demolishing its inhabitants within a short time. These same books describe with equal clarity a quite differing view of the conquest: Israelite acquisition of Palestine was not only gradual but represented a complex process over a longer period with a good deal of the Canaanite population left very much alive.

It is the intent of this essay to propose that Joshua 1-12 with its emphasis on the total conquest of Canaan, while it reflects historical elements, is a late claim to theological priority of land as a divine heritage over against the monarchical assumption of land by David's conquests and carried on by Israel's rulers.

Joshua 1-12 stands in the larger context of Joshua - 2 Kings and Deuteronomy, known today as the "Deuteronomistic History."<sup>1</sup> In that complex Moses and Mosaic interests from early Israel are carried forward. Joshua conquers Canaan but he does so "according to all that the Lord had spoken to Moses" (Joshua 11:23). In this sense Mosaic tradition undergirds the Joshua version of conquest and testifies to the land as a heritage from God.<sup>2</sup> The same interest dominates the book of Deuteronomy. The book's form is a series of sermons which Moses proclaims to Israel with an emphasis on settlement and how the people should develop their social life under the creative word of God.

Deuteronomistic reflection on Canaan as God's own land and as a priority over against monarchical control of state and society had its roots in deep convictions that Israel's rulers had largely failed to obey God's directives and had fallen prey to other religions or yielded to materialistic secularisms. Kingship had theological perspectives (e.g. the Davidic Covenant in Judah) but the Deuteronomistic writers thought that their word-

- 
1. Christopher R. North, *The Old Testament Interpretation of History* (London: The Epworth Press, 1946), pp. 85-106
  2. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 241-253.

theology was of more lasting importance to Israel.<sup>3</sup> It is in such a context that Joshua 1-12 is understood in this essay.

The Deuteronomic complex is not without history as such. Earlier events form the bases for later theological reflection. With this historical aspect in mind a sketch of settlement backgrounds is given below as a prior consideration.

## THE GRADUAL CONQUEST OF CANAAN IN SUMMARY

Judges chapter 1, among other materials, illustrates this second version. Vss. 4-21 describe pre-Joshuanic incursions of southern Palestine by an assortment of clans (Calebites, Othnielites, Kenites) with an important role taken by Judah and his blood brother Simeon (cf. Gen. 29:32-35). While an apparently sizeable territory with important bases such as Hebron and Debir (a territory of what later became the province of Judah) was assumed in this earlier period, the account states significantly that Judah “could not drive out the inhabitants of the plains....” The same refrain of incomplete control occurs in the historian’s note for the remainder of chapter 1. The Joseph tribes in central Palestine (vss. 22-29) and the tribes in the north (vss. 30-36) experienced like demographic fortunes. They “could not drive them (the Canaanites) out” (vss 28-33).

The newcomers and natives lived adjacent to one another either peaceably (Judges 1:32, “Asher dwelt among the Canaanites”) or under constraints from one side or the other. On the one hand, in some localities the Hebrew tribes managed to place their Canaanite neighbours under some form of servitude. The house of Joseph, Judges 1:27-28, the tribes of Zebulun, 1-30, and Naphtali, 1:33 “put the Canaanites to forced labour.” On the other hand, the Canaanites in control of vital areas, for example the Maritimes and Megiddo Valley, especially the latter, offered serious opposition to Hebrew tribal settlements. The general, Sisera, with his northern coalition aided by troops, arms and chariotry, virtually controlled central Palestine and is in fact described as holding Israel under cruel oppression for some two decades, Judges 4:3. Through the charismatic leadership of Deborah and her general, Barak, Judges 4-5, Israel, except for some dissident tribes, was enabled to defeat the coalition and open up the Megiddo Valley, permitting freer interchanges between north and south. The victory was a highlight in Israel’s settlement process.

These examples indicate that Israeli settlement of Canaan was as arduous as it was gradual. For that matter, virtually the whole book of Judges in its earlier materials is a record of sectional conflicts involving at times internal jealousies and strife such as that between Israel and Benjamin, Judges 19-21, and in other instances severe harassments of Israel from the outside. A noteworthy example involves the Midianites and their periodic destruction of Israelite crops and properties. This time the charismatic judge Gideon succeeded in expelling the troublesome foes, Judges 6-8.

Among other sites not conquered in this earlier period was the city of Jerusalem itself. Judah is said to have assaulted and fired the city earlier, Judges 1:8. While this

---

3. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 45ff.; on land as God’s gift, stemming from God’s creative word, pp. 47-53. (This volume is one in a series of monographs entitled, *Overtures to Biblical Theology*; all are valuable for new insights and recent research.)

attack was not improbable, it remained for David (2 Samuel 5) to possess Jerusalem and establish it as Israel's permanent centrum.<sup>4</sup>

Even in Joshua, dedicated not only to conquest of the land but its allotment among the tribes (chapters 13-22), there are accounts of gradual settlement. Joshua 13:2-6, 15:13-19 and 23:7-13 contain historical information alike or similar to that which is contained in Judges 1. To carry these perspectives further the polarities between Yahwism and the Baalisms which continued well beyond the period of the Judges would have seemed pointless had the Canaanites been destroyed in the wholistic fashion described in Joshua 1-12.

One may wonder why there is such preoccupation with totality when gradual settlement is a far more sober description of what occurred. Was there really any need for proposing a holy war carnage of this magnitude, especially since it does not for the most part accord with due processes of history? (Not that holocausts have been unrecorded in history elsewhere at various periods, many of them grounded in historical events. We need go no further than Jewish history itself for such grim realisms!) Yet one cannot imply that the account of a total conquest is a pure fabrication or some form of mental gymnastics. Archaeological data exist which point to violent attacks on major Canaanite sites in the latter thirteenth century, an era correspondent to Israelite settlement.<sup>5</sup> Important sites such as Debir and Lachish in the southern areas of Palestine and Hazor, a military centrum in the north, were destroyed in the conflagrations. Bethel in the central area of Palestine suffered a like fate in this time era. The relative locations of these cities point to widespread attacks somewhat correspondent to the distribution recorded in Joshua 1-12. It might be tempting to conclude in simplistic fashion that the findings from archaeology support the account in Joshua. Bright, however, advocates caution. While he regards Joshua 1-12 as "an authentic reflection of historical events" he also observes that the data do not "substantiate the Biblical narrative in detail; nor does it allow us to suppress evidence that the conquest was also an involved process."<sup>6</sup>

Data, of great importance to be sure, help us less in attempting to understand motivations behind the recorded conquests of Ai and Jericho. In both instances these cities were destroyed long before Joshua appeared on the scene. Ai can perhaps be "farmed out" to Bethel as though the latter's demise was mistakenly attributed to Ai since these sites are near one another. Jericho, however, would have "stood on its own" with no formidable site nearby permitting a similar confusion. Furthermore, Jericho for all purposes was supposed to have fallen in an elaborate liturgical enactment of holy war. A plausible explanation for these accounts may reside in

- 
4. Jacob Myers, *The Book of Judges, The Interpreters' Bible*, vol. 2 (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), p. 691. In the same volume, John Bright, *The Book of Joshua*, pp. 541ff.
  5. E.g. John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), pp. 118-120. George E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957), pp. 75-84.
  6. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 120, but see his discussion on the two versions of conquest, pp. 117-120, done in a sensitive and balanced fashion where archaeological discovery and history as events are considered.

editorial telescoping. Later editors saw Joshua's incursions as reality while in fact the destructions had occurred previously.<sup>7</sup>

Thus while historical data may partially inform the Joshua 1-12 account it appears evident that interests beyond such matters are also involved. One is still left with questions about motives or reasons which may exist behind the wholistic version of conquest.

## TOTAL CONQUEST AND THE DEUTERONOMISTIC TRADITION

Explorations along these lines have received not a little impetus from considerations of the larger literary context in which Joshua 1-12 has come to be understood in more recent times. Here modern scholarship has been assisted by the research of Martin Noth.<sup>8</sup> It was Noth who proposed that a large Deuteronomistic History should be identified, comprising the books Deuteronomy-2 Kings. His view appears advantageous since it highlights the Mosaic tradition; its development and attitudes are reflected in this history in contrast to the ideals expressed in the Abrahamic covenant and its presumed spiritual descendant, the Davidic tradition.

Noth's formulations have not been without their difficulties. While the problems do not require detailed treatment here, the main feature(s) must be noted. These problems have their roots in the question of the relationship, if any, which should exist between the Deuteronomistic History and the Tetrateuch. Noth, in fact, clearly separated the two complexes. This view stands in contrast to the second which has been accepted generally since the advent of modern Historico-Biblical criticism, namely, that the pentateuchal traditions J and E persisted in Joshua-Judges and even into the books of Samuel and Kings as though the totality consisted of one major work which was later divided into books.

The differences occasioned by these views do not appear to diminish the merits apparently inherent in Noth's proposals. His research has served to place the Mosaic developments in a clearer perspective and at the same time has provided a clarification of the contrast existing between the Mosaic and the Abrahamic-Davidic covenants in the historical process. In addition, the contrast suggests the presence of an underlying tension between these two covenant styles, a tension which existed through most of Israel's monarchical era and left its permanent impressions on descendants.

When the Deuteronomistic History is thus identified, two important foci illustrative of the historic tension also appear in a clearer light. They involve the issues, first, of land acquisition integral to Israel's national identity and secondly, the attitudes toward the monarchy reflected in the Deuteronomistic History.

- 
7. Space allows for a profile only on Israel's gradual occupation in this essay. For detail on the Israelite settlement of Canaan from a historical perspective see Bright, *History* and Martin Noth, *The History of Israel*, English translation (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1958, second edition, 1960), pp. 141ff.
  8. Martin Noth, *Überlieferungs geschichtlich Studien I*, in Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament an Introduction*, tr. Peter R. Ackroyd (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1965), pp. 242-244.

## DEUTERONOMISTIC ATTITUDES TOWARD MONARCHY

Even a cursory examination of 1 and 2 Kings makes it abundantly clear that the Deuteronomic redactors of these books exhibit a highly disfavoured estimation of monarchy. Not one king in the north escapes the editors' censures. The notable accomplishments of such rulers as Jeroboam I, Omri and Ahab in respective areas of the national welfare, e.g. administration, public works and military strategy, are given secondary or scant attention in comparison to their presumed (religious) disloyalty to Yahwism. Jeroboam I, for example, has been forever "tarred with the editorial brush" in the capsule statement, "the one who caused Israel to sin." It appears to be almost a catalyst for the Deuteronomic composition throughout the book of Kings, since Jeroboam I was the northern kingdom's first monarch.

Of the twenty Judean kings covering a period from 922-587 B.C. only four (Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah) received a favourable verdict from the Deuteronomic editors. One might have presumed a greater solidarity in the covenant faith for the royal Davidic succession than for the north with its dynastic discontinuities, but, as it was, Judah fared only somewhat better. In the books of Kings, Mosaic Yahwism has been placed over Davidic Yahwism so that the Mosaic covenant has ultimately a priority over the Davidic Covenant for the Deuteronomists.

A distinctive feature about Deuteronomy 17:14-20 is its inclusion as the only example in the book devoted to kingship. Monarchy as such is not outlawed in the passage. In retrospect it was an accomplished fact. Restrictions on kingship are, however, carefully expressed. This is how it ought to have been and always should be. Bad memories of the deteriorating influences from Solomonic rule are likely in the mind of the Deuteronomists. Royal opulence, international commercialisms and exotic harems are strictly forbidden. Religious interests are to be pursued. The king is to write a copy of the Torah in a book and read it "all the days of his life," which should result in fear of God, keeping the commandments and doing them. Only in this manner will his regime and lineage be blessed and just rule be fostered. In the eyes of the later Deuteronomic teachers and editors, the core of Mosaic tradition was more important for the life and history of Israel than any of the cosmopolitan glories associated with the Solomonic regime.

Among the complexities of materials represented in the Deuteronomistic History the Succession document, 2 Samuel 9-20, may appear as something of a problem for our line of thought since these chapters are virtually untouched by the Deuteronomists. The concluding verses, 20:23-26, presumably stand as a Deuteronomic revision. They are in the main a repetition of 2 Samuel 8:16-18 and therefore it has been suggested that the Deuteronomists omitted the Succession chapters which were subsequently reintroduced by still later editors. A reason for the supposed omission concerns an overly frank portrayal of David's moral failures. If there is any consistency in the Deuteronomic attitudes toward monarchy then such a basis might have argued for the retention of the Succession document. Deuteronomists ought to have found proof for their contentions that monarchy at its best was beset by complications, both moral and political, and let the record speak for itself. Another aspect to be considered is the emergence of court prophecy dramatically illustrated by the figure of Nathan who, among his other prophetic functions, served as monitor over David's moral deportment. Since the Deuteronomists and the prophets were in general accord about Yahwistic loyalty in faith and ethics as basic to the proper character of monarchy, it

seems possible to argue for inclusion of the Succession chapters in the transmission process. Sufficient correctives were present to make the document at least passable for the Deuteronomists.

## DEUTERONOMISTS AND LAND ACQUISITION

A second issue of equal importance for our purposes concerns the appropriation of Canaan by Israel and thereby the establishment of its national identity. Since Joshua is on record as conqueror of "all the land" previous to establishment of monarchy, and David assumed control of Canaan and surrounding kingdoms in a subsequent period, the question of priority appears to be involved in the tradition histories of Israel. In short, who should have proper credit, the Mosaic or monarchical process? The question is not one of historical events as such, but rather of the strength of respective theological traditions.

There are, apparently, some bases for suggesting that the Deuteronomists wished to create the impression among contemporaries in a post-monarchical era that the Mosaic tradition ought to give priority to the acquisition of land, whatever attainments David effected later. Their method for doing so was to subsume Joshua under Moses and the sacral history he represents (Exodus, Sinai), a history which became so formative for Israel's faith and ethics. Joshua is presented as a virtual second Moses in the redemptive history. Childs' analyses are beneficial here.<sup>9</sup> He observes that Joshua, in the first eleven chapters of his book, "is often consciously set in a typological relationship to Moses." He led Israel into Canaan over the Jordan river after its waters were miraculously divided as Moses had previously led Israel through the divided waters of the Red Sea. After his investiture under Moses he went on to conquer the land God had promised to Moses. He commanded the people to sanctify themselves before God preparatory to the crucial tasks as Moses had commanded the people to sanctify themselves before God at Sinai prior to reception of the decalogue. Especially significant is Joshua's dependence on the Torah once given to Moses by God himself. In his conquest of the land Joshua is to follow the words of the Torah delivered to Moses, the *Ur Mensch*, from the divine realm. All of this and more is intended by the Deuteronomists in their times to place Joshua solidly in the Mosaic tradition so that later Israel should unmistakably realize how the pioneering assumption of land had occurred.

The tension between the Mosaic version of conquest and monarchical administration of Palestine after David's victories in empire building is heightened in the realization of the Deuteronomists as northern in orientation and thus less sympathetic to the Davidic south. Even if one were to suppose the Joshuanic conquest as an Elohite (Ephraimite) version accepted and edited by the Deuteronomists, the tensions would not disappear. Scholarship today has pointed out the northern provenance of both the Elohite and Deuteronomist sources. The cultural, not to mention political, disparities existed between a pluralistic north and a more homogeneous south has long been recognized by scholars and is evident in the respective histories of the northern and southern kingdoms.<sup>10</sup> David alone was capable of holding together the empire he had

9. Brevard Childs, *Introduction*, pp. 241-253.

10. E.g. John Bright, *History*, pp. 175-177, 209ff. T.H. Robinson, *A History of Israel*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), pp. 270ff.

built. Solomon fortified cities in Israel, to be sure, and maintained his father David's holdings for most of his reign, but if anything his organization of Israel into tax districts in support of his burgeoning bureaucracy only deepened the schisms between north and south which had always existed. When Solomon passed away so did David's empire. It seems scarcely conceivable that such political histories would not also have a bearing on theological attitudes toward the conquest of land. Whose conquest had lasting effects?

## CONCLUSION

We have noted the attention given the tradition of Moses, especially Joshua 1-12 and Deuteronomy which stand in the Deuteronomic History. In refashioning the tradition the later Deuteronomic theologians have given the occupation and settlement of Canaan based on divine promises to Moses a priority and status of more importance to Israel than the monarchical form. Joshua 1-12 is an initial testimony to these convictions. The Moses tradition, in Deuteronomy for example, stresses the creative word of God as essential to national growth and of more lasting worth than the power and control of the state. The latter had failed to live out the directions God had provided the forebearers.

## THOUGHTS FOR OUR TIME

Two important themes emerge in Joshua - 2 Kings. The one deals with the sacredness of the land and the other with land and its relationship to the state. I will mention the latter first. When Israel went through a transformation from a theocracy, God's covenant rule over the twelve tribes, to monarchy, the nation governed by a human king, many essential areas of the nation's life changed. Complexities such as levied armies, state taxation, enforced labour (e.g. 1 Samuel 8:1-18), deprived Israel of a freedom which had been acted out in the Exodus and declaimed in the covenant renewals of the Judges' period.

The passage noted in 1 Samuel sounds modern in its prophetic insights. Samuel prophesies a military establishment and forced labour causing Israel to "cry out." Concerns in our time, more complicated, if anything, address taxation, land use and abuse, mortgages and ruinous interest aggravated by unpredictable climate. Many of these burdens have been dramatically illustrated in Canada. Others appear everywhere in our nation. Solomon's tax districts, 1 Kings 4, Ahab's expropriation of Naboth's vineyard, 1 Kings 21, are messages for us in land management and how land can be benevolently regarded by government officialdom and not only by those who care directly for land and its properties.

The second point, sacredness of land, while a Christian teaching, is deeply embedded in the Old Testament itself, e.g., Genesis chapter 12ff, reiterated in Deuteronomy 6:10ff, 11:8ff. The land is sacred because it is a basic promise of God to his people. Thus God is the ultimate owner of land by virtue of his original creation works, e.g. Psalm 24:1-2, and we are his caretakers.

On this basis land is more central to the Biblical witness and to our present welfare than we might at first realize. In the three-year cycle of lections twenty-six lessons are from the books, Joshua - 2 Kings. Thirteen of these lessons are from Deuteronomy and in all of them the cruciality of land is implied or stated. Just about everything Israel can hope to be or become is predisposed by its possession of the land. This would strongly



suggest a vital relationship between Deuteronomy and Joshua 1-12 (13-24). Again the underlying strength of such concern is based on God's word spelled out in his promises. A perusal of Deuteronomy reveals the sacred land as a primary theme throughout. It is as though the book is "wrapped around" by this theology.

When we speak of land with its themes of room, liberation, and identity and of God as owner of our possessions, it is a confession we cannot make lightly in consideration of the first point above. Whatever difficulties people have with land we must not forget its importance. The words of Brueggemann are a timely caution: "Land is so central a motif to the Biblical witness that it is surprising that it has heretofore received such scant treatment."<sup>11</sup>

---

11. Walter Brueggemann, *The Land*, p. xii.