

## THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN AT THE TIME OF JOSHUA

In Bible history there were three periods in particular when God's miraculous power was at work, at the times of Moses and Joshua, of Elijah and Elisha, and of Jesus and His apostles. The conquest of Canaan by the Israelites under Joshua was a remarkable series of events. The Israelites, who had been wandering in the desert for forty years, displaced a culture that had been established for a long time. The Canaanites had walled cities. Some of them were giants. Archaeologists have found thousands of artefacts that show the material culture of the Canaanites. The entry of the Israelites into Canaan, though not fully completed at Joshua's death (Jos 13:2-5), fulfilled God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob some four hundred years before (Gn 17:8; 26:4; 28:13; Ex 3:15-17). The cities of Megiddo, Beth Shan, and Gezer were not captured during the time of Joshua.

Some liberal scholars have suggested 1280 BC or later for the beginning of the conquest, and some have denied the biblical account altogether, suggesting a gradual penetration of nomad people, not from Egypt, but from the east, instead. However, the biblical records suggest 1400 BC. Solomon began the building of the temple in the fourth year of his reign, 480 years after the exodus (1 Kings 6:1). That was about 960 BC. When Jephthah, the eighth judge, argued with the king of Ammon about the land east of the Jordan, he indicated that the Israelites had been holding that territory for three hundred years (Jdg 11:26-28). Paul said that there were about 450 years from the exodus to Samuel's time (Ac 13:20).

Some people object to the apparent cruelty of the Israelites at God's command. Not only Canaanite soldiers were destroyed, but sometimes women, children, and animals. Certain cities, like Jericho and Ai were placed under the ban and totally destroyed. However, God said repeatedly that the reason for His judgment on these people was their false worship, immorality, sexual perversion, child sacrifices, idolatry, and violence (Dt 7:1-5). God wanted the land cleansed of such disgusting practices. It was a particular and limited mission. The book of Joshua should be understood as God's reclaiming part of the world for Himself and for His chosen people in His plan to provide salvation through His Son.

The possession of the land of Canaan by the Israelites was not absolute or permanent, in spite of such words as "for ever." It was conditional, depending on loyalty to the Lord and ethical living. The later banishment of ten tribes to Assyria, and the Babylonian captivity showed that possession of the land was conditional. The curses on the Canaanites would come on the Israelites also if they were not faithful. The same applies to modern Israelis.

The conquest of Canaan was not a complete genocide (Dt 20:10-18; 21:10-14). The prostitute Rahab and her family were spared after Rahab had sheltered the two spies. Rahab later married Salmon, became the mother of Boaz, and was included in the list of Jesus' ancestors (Mt 1:5). When Saul became king, he severely punished the Amalekites (1 Sm 15), but spared their king Agag. Haman, the enemy of Mordecai in the book of Esther, was an Amalekite, a descendant of king Agag, and that was probably the reason for Mordecai's refusal to bow to him.

The Gibeonites belonged to the tribe of the Hivites. They made a treaty with Joshua under false pretences. When their trick was discovered, the treaty was respected, but the Israelites made them woodcutters and water-carriers for the whole community. The family of Saul later lived at Gibeon. When Saul became king, he broke the treaty and massacred many Gibeonites. However, justice was restored when David became king. The Gibeonites were allowed to choose seven of Saul's sons for execution (Jos 9-10; 2 Sm 21).

The conquest began already under Moses, when two kingdoms east of the Jordan were allotted to two and a half Israelite tribes (Nm 32). The men from those tribes had promised Moses that they would assist their fellow-Israelites until the land west of the Jordan was in their possession. It was really the Lord who won the victories and gave Israel the land. He had promised to guide and support Joshua as He had supported Moses (Dt 31:23). Joshua was a brilliant strategist in the conquest of Canaan, under God's direction.

When the Israelites moved into Canaan, the great neighbouring countries were relatively weak. The Hittites had faded from the scene. Neither Babylon nor Egypt had a military presence there, and the Assyrians did not become powerful for several centuries.

First the well-fortified city of Jericho was taken. After an initial setback, the small city of Ai was taken by a clever stratagem. These victories gave the Israelites a foothold in Canaan, and access to the hill country; and they showed the power of the God of Israel. These victories demoralized the rest of the Canaanites, and the Israelites had driven a wedge into the middle of Canaan. Next the hill country around Bethel and Gibeon were captured. After that, the cities in the foothills to the west were captured. Two major campaigns followed, the first in the south. In a remarkable battle, daylight was prolonged for the Israelites to complete a rout of Canaanites (Jos 10:9-12). In the next battle, five Amorite kings were defeated. Jerusalem, however, remained under the control of the Jebusites until Joab captured the city at the time of King David. Joshua's name for Jerusalem was simply, "the Jebusite city." He still called Hebron "Kiriath Arba." The next campaign was against a formidable alliance under the king of Hazor in the north. Even that powerful alliance was no match for the Israelites (Jos 11). Finally, the Israelites had taken all the land from Mount Hermon in the north to the Negev in the south. In six years, the Israelites had taken the chief cities of Canaan and defeated 31 kings. The Philistines came into the south-west from islands in the Mediterranean, and their chief cities, Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod, Gath, and Ashkelon were not suppressed until the time of David (Jos 13:2). Some men among David's warriors came from these cities. People from Gath, for example, were called "Gittites."

It was not God's intention that the whole land should be emptied of its inhabitants very quickly, for then the land would have become overgrown, and wild animals would have increased (Dt 7:22). However, the Canaanites who remained became a regular source of temptation to the Israelites. At the time of the judge Deborah, there was still a strong coalition of

Canaanites in the north, until a great victory at the Kishon River. A sudden storm bogged the Canaanites' iron chariots, and a woman killed their general, Sisera, with a tent-peg.

Joshua himself summed up the conquest in this way: "So the LORD gave to Israel all the land that He had sworn to give to their forefathers. They took possession of it and lived in it. The LORD gave them rest on every side exactly as He had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of all their enemies had withstood them. The LORD had handed all their enemies over to them. Not one Word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the family of Israel had failed. All had come true" (Jos 21:43-45).

The conquest was followed by the allocation of land to the Israelite tribes. The last part of the book of Joshua reports his death, and this section has been attributed to Eleazar, a son of Aaron; but the last verse, which recorded Eleazar's death, must have been written by a later writer. There are twelve instances of the phrase "until this day", which may also suggest a later writer.

Early in his life, Joshua's name had been "Hoshea", which meant "salvation." He had led the Israelites in their first victory, over the Amalekites, before they reached Sinai. He had accompanied Moses on Mount Sinai when God gave them the Ten Commandments (Ex 24:13-14). He had represented his tribe of Ephraim when the twelve spies were sent into Canaan, and only he and Caleb had brought back a good report. After another forty years in the wilderness, Joshua was no longer a young man. The Hebrew name for "Joshua" means "the Lord saves", and a later form of it, "Jeshua", became "Yesous" in Greek for both Joshua and Jeshua. Even the Greek New Testament uses "Yesous" for Joshua as well as for Jesus. The appearance of the Captain of the army of the Lord to Joshua in Jos 5:13-15 should be understood as a face to face meeting of the first Joshua with the second, greater "Joshua", the divine Son.