

12-1-1960

## The Conquest of Canaan According to Joshua and Judges

Walter R. Roehrs

*Concordia Seminary, St. Louis*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Roehrs, Walter R. (1960) "The Conquest of Canaan According to Joshua and Judges," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 31, Article 85.

Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol31/iss1/85>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact [seitzw@csl.edu](mailto:seitzw@csl.edu).

# The Conquest of Canaan According to Joshua and Judges

By WALTER R. ROEHRS

**M**ANY Old Testament scholars find two opposing views regarding the Israelite conquest of Canaan in the books of Joshua and Judges. In the former the 12 tribes are represented as achieving full possession of the Promised Land through a few swift victories resulting in immediate and full occupation. In the Book of Judges, on the other hand, the process is described as gradual, beset by many reverses, and incomplete for a long time. The first, it is said, is an idealized picture; the latter is more true to the facts.

It is the purpose of this study to examine these two accounts and to set forth their purpose as supplementary rather than contradictory.

## THE COURSE OF EVENTS IN JOSHUA

The events of this period are briefly as follows: After crossing the Jordan (chs. 1—4) Israel established a beachhead in the central hill country of Palestine. The capture and destruction of two cities in this area is recorded, Jericho and Ai<sup>1</sup> (6:1—8:29). In each case the miraculous and direct intervention of God is stressed.

Other such victories over the Canaanites, though unrecorded, may have taken place. No opposition, e. g., is mentioned to contest Israel's first encampment, prior to the capture of Jericho, on the west side at Gilgal, slightly north and east of Jericho.

<sup>1</sup> Recent excavations have raised questions regarding Ai that have not been fully answered.

The people remained here unmolested to carry out the neglected rite of circumcision and to celebrate the Passover festival (ch. 5). The Canaanite kings' "hearts melted, and there was no spirit in them when they heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan" (5:1). Did this fear, engendered by the Lord, also open an uncontested road to Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, considerably north of Ai? For here the first altar was built, and "a copy of the Law of Moses" was inscribed (8:30-35; Deut. 27:1-8; 12:29-32). At Shechem, between these mountain peaks, and at Shiloh, between Ai and Shechem, Israel later was convened by Joshua without mention of previous opposition in this territory. May we not assume that other miraculous victories of Israel are not given space in this highly summarized account?

Explicit mention is made of one instance of submission of the Canaanites without resistance and out of fear of Israel: the people of Gibeon, a city a little south of Ai (ch. 9).

Other Canaanites displayed their fear of Israel by their reluctance to cope with the invaders individually. Their only hope of survival, they felt, was in a united defense and a joint counterattack. Two of these coalitions and their defeat are recorded in chs. 10 and 11. In both instances victory did not result from Israel's prowess, but because "the Lord threw them into a panic

before Israel" (10:10) and because "the Lord gave them into the hand of Israel" (11:8).

The first of these major attempts to dislodge Israel from its position in central Palestine involved five kings south of the occupied territory and was headed by the king immediately to the south, Jerusalem. Joshua defeated their combined forces, then carried the war into their territory as far south as Kadesh-Barnea. Many cities in this territory "the Lord gave into the hand of Israel" (10:32) as miraculously as Jericho, "because the Lord God of Israel fought for Israel" (10:42). Joshua smote the people seeking refuge in these cities and "left none remaining." No mention, however, is made of burning these cities. It should be noted also that after the campaign the army returned to its base of operations in Gilgal.

The second coalition of Canaanites threatened Israel from the north (11:1-15). Its focus was the king of Hazor, north of the sea of Galilee "by the waters of Merom" (v.7). Joshua did not wait for the attack but took the offensive. The report of this campaign again is very brief. We are not told, for example, how Joshua was able to pass through such hitherto unconquered territory, guarded as it was by formidable fortresses, e.g., Megiddo and Taanach (12:21), and to give battle to the enemy in the vicinity of Hazor. In this battle every advantage of the enemy, including the possession of chariots, vanished before Joshua because the Lord promised "to give all of them, slain, to Israel" (v.6). It is mentioned specifically, however, that "none of the cities that stood on the mounds did Israel burn, except Hazor only" (11:13).

There follows a tabulation of the victories of Israel over the Canaanites on the east side of Jordan under Moses (12:1-6) and on the west side under Joshua (11:16-23; 12:7-24).

#### BASIC FACTORS

A number of factors are basic for a proper understanding of the account recorded in chs. 1—12. In the first place, the summary character of this record must be kept in mind. There were more battles with the Canaanites than those described (even here very briefly) in the so-called southern (ch. 10) and northern campaigns (11:1-16). The list of 31 kings, "whom Joshua and the people of Israel defeated" (12:7-23), may not make for breathless interest on the part of the modern reader, but it bears out the fact that the defeat of the enemies required more time and effort than the reading of this summary. "Joshua made war a long time with all those kings" (11:18).

Furthermore, where detail is added beyond the mere mention of names, it is to demonstrate that without the miraculous intervention of God, Israel could not have set foot on Palestine, much less turned back the counterattack of its inhabitants. What was impossible became easy when the Lord gave them the victory; what seemed easy, like the first attack on Ai, became impossible.

We must also be careful not to read into Joshua's achievements more than the account warrants and expressly states. Joshua, like Moses before him, directed the joint effort of all tribes. For this reason the writer draws attention to the participation of the two and one half tribes east of the Jordan in these campaigns and their dismissal at the end. This united action is

put into sharp contrast with the attempts by individual tribes in the succeeding era to take possession of their assigned territory.

What did Joshua achieve as leader of united Israel? He defeated some strong Canaanite forces and destroyed some important cities, but he did not *occupy* all of Palestine, not even the territory where he had achieved military victory. Defeat of the enemy in battle and the permanent settlement of Israel in conquered Canaan are therefore clearly distinguished. Joshua with all of Israel eliminated the most imminent threat to Israel's foothold in Palestine. He broke the power of the enemy. The Canaanites were no longer in a position to attack, and so "the land had rest from war" (11:23), to enable the next operation to be carried out: the allotment of the land and the occupation of the allotted land by the individual tribes of Israel. Joshua supervised only the allotment; he did not direct a unified endeavor to "possess the land."

The distinction between taking cities in battle and occupying or possessing the land is crucial if the Book of Joshua is to make sense. We find this difference carefully observed in the book. Ch. 12 makes it very clear that Joshua in his career was not destined to achieve on the west side of Jordan what God had enabled Israel under Moses to do on the east side. In this summary of the sequence of events by which God gave the land to Israel, the situation on the east side was as follows: the people of Israel defeated a number of kings and *took possession* of their land (vv. 1-6). On the west side Israel defeated a large number of kings, but significantly nothing is said of Joshua's taking

possession of the land (vv. 7-24). This verb is not connected directly with Joshua's activity in chs. 1—12. We are told that Joshua "took (תָּקַח) all that land" or "the whole land" (11:16). How he took it was previously described.<sup>2</sup> Beyond that, he did no more than give "it for an inheritance for Israel according to their tribal allotments" (11:23). Nothing is said of his leadership in effecting Israel's permanent settlements. His victory in all parts of the land gave security from attacks. The individual tribes, however, would still have to fight to take possession of the land. We are not told how long after the allotment the tribes responded to this challenge. In a number of instances enough time must have elapsed to make it necessary to take some cities a second time.

God's marching orders to Joshua had not included the occupation of the land as a part of his duties. The people were indeed "to pass over this Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land which the Lord, your God, gives you to possess" (1:11). But nothing is said of Joshua's leadership in attaining this ultimate goal.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In the taking of Ai, God commanded Israel: "Ye shall rise up from the ambush and take possession of the city, for the Lord, your God, will give it into your hand" (8:7). The LXX reads: "Ye shall draw nigh to the city."

<sup>3</sup> In 12:7 we are told that Joshua defeated many kings and "gave their land to the tribes of Israel as a possession (יְרֵשָׁה) according to their allotment." The word "possession" is a parallel term for "inheritance" in God's command to Joshua "Allot the land to Israel for an inheritance" (13:6). A similar command came to Joshua from Moses in Deut. 31:8: "Be strong and of a good courage, for thou must go with this people unto the land which the Lord, your God, hath sworn unto their fathers to give them, and thou shalt cause them to inherit it."

The dispossessing of the Canaanites and the taking possession of the land of Israel may appear to be placed into the period of Joshua in 21:43: "And the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which He swore to give unto their fathers; and they possessed it and dwelt therein" (RSV: "and having taken possession of it, they settled there"). This verse is found after the allotment of land had been completed and seems to summarize the achievements of Joshua. It should be pointed out, however, that Joshua's name does not appear here as the instrument through whom God gave the land as a "possession." It seems rather to point to the more remote objective, already mentioned in v. 11 of ch. 1: "Ye shall pass over this Jordan to go in to possess the land which the Lord, your God, giveth you to possess it." Since the body of the book nowhere indicates that Joshua helped Israel to reach this final goal, the introduction (1:11) and this summary of his achievements must be so understood.

I suggest therefore that the translation of 21:43 should read: "And the Lord gave unto Israel all the land which He swore to give unto their fathers *that they might possess it and dwell therein*" (cf. also 23:5; 18:3).<sup>4</sup> The first step in giving the land to Israel had been taken; the next, the full occupation of the land, was to follow, but Israel's lassitude and weak faith prevented it, as we shall see.

This restriction of the work of Joshua to a "softening up" operation of the enemy

<sup>4</sup> This translation involves no change in the consonantal text. It merely requires a pointing different from that of the Massorettes. For similar constructions see S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1942), p. 67.

in Canaan is made explicit in the account of the allotment of the land (chs. 13—21). Joshua is reminded by God of his advanced age and of the big task he will now leave unfinished. "There remains yet very much land to be *possessed*" (13:1). There follows a list of areas that "remain," that is, were unpossessed at this juncture, and the promise of God: "I Myself will give you possession by dispossessing (RSV, "drive out") them from before the people of Israel; only allot the land to Israel for an inheritance" (13:1-6).<sup>5</sup> As an act of faith, Joshua therefore was even under these circumstances to "allot the land to Israel for an inheritance" (11:23; 13:6,7).

#### THE ALLOTMENT OF THE LAND

The allotment itself was achieved in five stages. First of all, the territory that Moses had already assigned to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and half of the tribe of Manasseh on the eastern side of the Jordan was redefined and affirmed (13:8-32).

The division of the western side of the Jordan among the remaining 9½ tribes was "by lot" and took place at Gilgal and Shiloh (chs. 14—19). There follow two allotments that concerned an intertribal distribution: the appointment of cities of refuge (ch.20) and of the cities of the tribe of Levi (ch.21).

<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew root שׁר (Qal and Hiphil) is difficult to translate into English at times. In Hebrew the object may be the territory or the people. It implies a taking possession of a territory by dispossessing the previous inhabitants. "To drive out," therefore, reproduces only half of the operation involved. So also in 14:12; 15:63; 16:10; 17:18, where the KJV and the RSV translate merely "drove out." This root occurs 30 times in the Book of Joshua: in the Qal, 12 times; in the Hiphil, 15 times; as a noun, 3 times.

In connection with the assignment of the future homeland to the tribes, brief notes are added, telling us how some of the tribes later fared in taking possession of their promised territory by *dispossessing* (not merely driving out) the Canaanites. After Caleb, a representative of the tribe of Judah, for example, received his particular allotment, he realized the great task that awaited him: "It may be that the Lord will be with me and that I *shall dispossess* them [KJV and RSV: "drive them out"], as the Lord said" (14:12).

Since the Book of Joshua records the death of Joshua, these notes regarding the implementing of the division after his death by the individual tribes are not inconsistent with the whole pattern and the chronological framework of the book. Confusion arises if we assume that these tribal attempts at taking what Joshua had allotted them took place during his lifetime. In the introductory chapters of the Book of Judges, the record of achievement by the tribes is repeated (as we shall see). We are told explicitly: it was "after the death of Joshua" (Judg. 1:1) and "when Joshua had let the Children of Israel go" (Judg. 2:6).

The armed forces of the 2½ tribes from the eastern side of the Jordan had faithfully contributed their part to this first stage of the conquest of Canaan. "God has given rest to your brethren" (22:4). Since the occupation itself was not to be a joint endeavor, Joshua "blessed them and sent them away" (22:1-9).

#### JOSHUA'S FINAL ACTS

Joshua's mission was accomplished. He was now well advanced in years. He summoned "all Israel, their elders and heads,

their judges and officers," for a review of his activity and a preview of what remained to be done (ch.23). God had made it possible, he said, for him to allot the inheritance; He will also *dispossess* "those nations that remain" after his death if "they keep and do all that is written in the book of the Law of Moses" (vv.4-6). But "God will not continue to *dispossess* these nations" if they "turn back and join the remnant of these nations left there among" them (vv.11-13).

Therefore his final act, according to the account, was to induce Israel to commit and pledge itself to the covenant (24:1-28). Like Moses he reminded the tribes at Shechem of God's undeserved grace ever since the days of Abraham down to the time when they "took possession of" the land on the other side of the Jordan. The people acknowledged that it was the fear of the Lord which drove out (not dispossessed) before them "all the people" in all the way that they went (vv.16-18). The unfinished business of occupying their inheritance also on the western side of the Jordan would be completed only if they should remain faithful to the Lord and do as they promised: "We will serve the Lord."

The book closes with the report of Joshua's death and burial as well as that of Eleazar, the high priest.

#### JOSHUA AND THE COVENANT

The covenant is as central in the Book of Joshua as in few others. The covenant with the patriarchs and with Israel at Sinai is the great axiomatic presupposition and the one controlling factor of everything recorded. If the covenant existed as the revelation of God's plan for establish-

ing the relationship of peace with mankind, then the events of Joshua were its natural and logical implementation. Through Israel God was fulfilling the promises of the covenant, that is, He was putting into execution His plan of salvation for "all the nations of the earth."

This record of Israel's history also bears witness throughout to man's inability to produce this salvation-bringing history. The miraculous defeat of the Canaanites merely bears out the oft-repeated fact: "I [God] am giving you the land." In the covenant the Lord of history has pledged Himself to direct the course of history for His purpose. If this did not happen, it must be because God was not up to it or because there was no covenant promise to do so.

The Book of Joshua furthermore makes crystal clear the "terms" of the covenant as far as Israel's partnership in it is concerned. Israel's national history depends on its response to the covenant, that is, on its faithfulness in playing the part of the covenant nation. Israel succeeds or fails in the measure that it is God's instrument of the covenant. Unless this is true, there is no meaning whatever to the history of the Old Testament, or of all times for that matter. It *is* programmatic. God blesses (also us) only in terms of His covenant blessing; all men (also we) are cut off from God and cursed when they defy God by breaking the covenant. The naïveté of this conception of history is as unsophisticated as faith in God's goodness and righteousness.

But this simple formula solves the great enigma of history. Covenant history alone is prophetic. It alone can see history as a movement toward a goal — the fulfillment

of the covenant promises and the execution of threats not only in Israel but to the end of time. Without the covenant, history, and not Russia alone, remains a riddle wrapped in a mystery. The Book of Joshua records the attainment of a significant milestone in this prophetic history. "Not one of all the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass" (21:45).

Therefore covenant history does not develop artificially or magically. Blessings do not fall mechanically and ready made into Israel's lap. Israel must labor to make them come true. For this reason the admonition was in place: "Be strong and of good courage" (1:6,9; cf. Deut. 3:28; 31:1 ff.). Above all, Israel had to have faith and the obedience of faith. The alternative in Israel's choice of its future is: "If *ye* will — *I* will." This either-or is reflected in the renewal of the covenant. Israel in the future could go only in one of two directions: to success on the road marked the covenant way or to destruction by rejection of the covenant.

The Book of Joshua therefore is merely another act in the drama of man's salvation. It calls attention to the previous acts of God in behalf of His covenant program: His dealings with the patriarchs and the more immediate fathers of Israel at the time of Moses. Other chapters of covenant history are to follow in the remaining historical books of the Old Testament, until God made and declared history ripe for the initiation of the new covenant. This was the goal of all Old Testament history. If the redemption of the world by the blood of the new covenant was God's ultimate purpose — and faith knows that it is — every chapter of the Old

Testament is but God's footprint in His undeviating, sovereign, and merciful march to Calvary.

#### ISRAEL'S SUCCESSES AND REVERSES

Covenant history in the Book of Joshua (as well as in the remaining books of the Old Testament) is not a succession of uninterrupted victories of Israel for the simple reason that it is covenant history. Success and failure are in direct proportion to covenant courage of faith and covenant obedience. God put His power over all the earth at Israel's disposal to carry out His program, but only as Israel tapped the resources of the Creator by entering into the covenant and remaining faithful to it could Israel overcome all odds. This axiom must also be invoked and applied if we are not to be confused by the terse statements of what Israel achieved and what it failed to accomplish in taking possession of the allotted territory.

"By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land . . . by faith the walls of Jericho fell down" (Heb. 11:29, 30). Wherever some of the circumstances of Israel's victories under Joshua are recorded, the vast superiority of the enemy and Israel's hopeless situation in face of it are mentioned. But walls crumbled, and armies were routed, when Israel armed itself with the faith of the God of the covenant. But conversely, in the absence of obedience of faith, when and because "Israel has sinned . . . [and] broken My covenant" Israel suffered defeat at Ai (ch. 7).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In this defeat no contradiction is therefore involved with the promise of God "No man shall be able to stand before you [Joshua] all the days of your life" (Ch. 1:5). All of God's promises are in the framework of the covenant.

In this particular instance Israel's natural resources and strength could have been sufficient to overwhelm the enemy (cf. v. 3). God therefore made this very clear: Without covenant faith and obedience there will be no covenant victory.

The strength or impotence of Israel therefore remained in strict proportion to the faithfulness of the tribes to the covenant also after the death of Joshua. They could expect it. They had pledged to abide by the covenant. Even after the miraculous victories of Joshua each tribe would not be able to occupy its allotted territory without further demonstration of divine aid. God took credit for all victories in advance. After enumerating some of the territories that remained to be possessed, He said, "I will Myself dispossess them ["drive out," KJV and RSV] from before the people of Israel" (ch. 13:1-7).

#### TRIBAL EFFORTS

As already indicated, in the allotment of the land there are accounts of how the tribes later fared in settling in their assigned inheritance. Some of them let God fight for them. So Caleb said: "It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall dispossess them as the Lord said" (14:12). Others lacked such a faith and failed. "But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the people of Judah could not dispossess" (15:63). The Ephraimites "did not dispossess the Canaanites that dwelt in Gezer" (16:10). "The sons of Manasseh could not take possession of those cities" (fortresses, such as: Beth-shean, Taanach, Megiddo (17:12)). The tribes in general seemed not disposed to take possession of their assigned inheritance. Already at the time of the final allotment Joshua spoke

these words of rebuke: "How long will you be slack to *take possession* of the land, which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you?" (18:3)

When a tribe lacked faith in accepting God's help or the courage of faith to attempt the impossible, or when it withheld the obedience of faith, the circumstances which prevented the people from reaching their objective by their own power were also created by God and are so mentioned. "Chariots of iron" were no match for the power of God in Joshua's obedience to the covenant (11:6,9; cf. Deut. 20:1), and they were not to interfere with the later occupation. "You shall *dispossess* the Canaanites, though they have chariots of iron and though they be strong" (17:18). But later the tribe of Judah "could not dispossess the inhabitants of the plains because they had chariots of iron (Judg. 1:20; cf. Judg. 4:15: "and the Lord discomfited Sisera and all his chariots and all his army before Barak at the edge of the sword"). Similarly if by faith the walls of Jericho fell, there was no fortress in the remaining unoccupied plain that could have withstood the trumpet blasts of Israel's faith.

All the while God was channeling this miraculous help through circumstances that outwardly might appear to follow a natural pattern of cause and effect. A wind or a landslide dammed up the Jordan, and an earthquake destroyed Jericho. A naturalistic philosophy of history would say these phenomena happened at an auspicious time for Israel, as history times so many other events seemingly to the advantage of a rising power. It got the breaks of history. Joshua by resolute and quick action then was able to defeat the surprised

inhabitants of Canaan. His army was composed of rugged men from the desert. The Canaanites had weakened each other by internal strife. Perhaps their more highly developed culture had rendered them effete and soft. But Joshua did not have an occupation army of sufficient strength. Furthermore, he had to be content with establishing a reasonably safe occupation of the central hill country. But the superior armament of the great cities of the great plain, both defensively (fortifications) and offensively (chariots of iron), was an insurmountable handicap for Joshua's inadequately armed men. This situation did not change after Joshua's death. Only gradually did Israel become strong enough to occupy the land. By that time other circumstances had also developed in Israel's favor.

All of this, however, should merely underscore the fact that covenant history is real history in the sense that it did not take place in heaven, in a vacuum of unreal circumstances, or in the imagination of an historian. It was to be a protracted campaign of conquests and occupations (cf. Deut. 8:17 ff.). Everything was quite natural. Only the eye of faith could see (and can do so) the futility of chariots of iron because "the mountain was full of horses and chariots of iron" (cf. 2 Kings 6:15-19). When Israel marched in the courage of faith and in obedience to the covenant, this unseen cavalry swept all opposition before them. When Israel did not, the chariots of iron of the Canaanites drove them back.

#### FROM JOSHUA TO JUDGES

The tone and outlook of the Book of Joshua is bright and optimistic. Israel was

well on the way to claim full possession of its inheritance. Faithful to God and obedient to His covenant representative, the twelve tribes had broken the power of the vastly superior forces of the Canaanites. What had been achieved by united action and the power of a common faith could be expected to be completed when now each tribe, in the unity of that faith and trusting in the promises of the covenant, made its way into its allotted territory. For each tribe it remained an act of obedience of faith. The obstacles facing each group were as formidable and insurmountable as the opposition in the days of Joshua. Walls as high as those of Jericho would have to give way; chariots of iron, like those of Jaben (Joshua 11:1-9), had to be overcome by an army lacking even "shield and spear" (Judg. 5:8). Encouraged and fortified by the experience of the miracles of faith in the past, Israel, however, could be expected to march on to complete victory.

But in the Book of Judges we see these bright prospects vanish and dark disappointment settle over Israel. No tribe succeeded in settling in its assigned and full territory. Instead of permanently occupying its inheritance, each tribe lost some territory. One tribe is entirely dispossessed (ch. 18:1-3). What had brought on this tragic reversal?

There were ominous forebodings of such a future already in the Book of Joshua. We have called attention to the brief notes attached to the description of the allotted tribal territory. In the case of several tribes the disappointing sentence "They did not dispossess the Canaanites" occurs in connection with the fixing of the assigned area. The Book of Judges is

an elaboration of these brief statements of fact in terms of cause and effect. When Israel "cannot" do what God can do and has promised to do for and through them, then the reason for the debacle must be sought in Israel's lack of faith in the covenant promises. Here we are given a picture of the progressive corrosion of covenant obedience. When Israel does not act aggressively in the assurance of faith, it does not merely stand still; the sin of omission inevitably leads to sins of commission. Israel slides downhill into committing every vice against God and man. "Where there is no prophecy [KJV, "vision"], the people cast off restraint" (Prov. 29:18). So it was "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes." Anarchy prevailed. Religious, social, political, moral principles disappeared. Civil war broke out. Dark ages indeed!

These evil days came upon Israel soon after Joshua's death. He is mentioned four times in the introductory chapters (1:1; 2:2, 6, 21, 23). Two of the few successful tribal leaders mentioned were Caleb, Joshua's fellow spy under Moses, and Othniel, Caleb's younger brother (1:11-20).

God gave Israel a long time — the period of the Judges — to be a covenant nation without a national representative of its unity. Four times in the last chapter we read the phrase "there was no king in Israel in those days" (17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). Time after time God called Israel back to orderly covenant living. He chose men from various tribes to correct the disorders that had arisen and to give them an opportunity to make a fresh start. But neither severity nor kindness succeeded. After such attempts we read: "The Children of Israel again did evil in

the sight of the Lord." The Book of Judges is the episodic recital of Israel's failures to respond to God's promptings to live up to the challenge and responsibility of a theocratically governed people.

We marvel at God's patience. We tire of even reading the recurring pattern of gross infidelity, repentance under chastisement, relief from disaster after repentance, and then the inevitable relapse into the same evil. Can the plot of history be so monotonous, unimaginative, and unvarying? But no formula or recapitulation of history is true unless it is based on the cyclic perversity of the human heart and the realism of the constant justice and unending mercy of God. This formula of cause and effect operated in Israel, and it has been in effect to the present day.

"A covenant with the inhabitants of this land" (2:2). In this innocent phrase lurked Israel's downfall. Failing to act on God's promise of help in acquiring full possession of the land, they lapsed into direct disobedience of His commandments. The covenant with the Canaanites was a direct violation of their covenant with God "You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land." This stipulation was not a bit of caprice or narrow-minded racism on the part of God. Israel was to be His arm and instrument of justice upon peoples whose measure of wickedness was full and overflowing. Fraternization and intermarriage with idolaters led to idolatry. The chain reaction of "unfaith" continued. "They forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, they went after other Gods, from among the gods of the peoples round about them . . . the Baals and the Ashtaroth (2:12,13) . . . the gods of Syria, the gods of Sidon, the gods of Moab,

the gods of the Ammonites, the gods of the Philistines" (10:6). Baalism proved attractive to Israel, particularly at this point of her history. When the nomadic way of life was giving way to a sedentary agricultural economy, this religion of fertility rites seemed to offer the techniques to assure an abundance of crops, increase in flocks, and even human offspring in desired numbers. Doubt arose whether the Deliverer from Egypt had jurisdiction also in Canaan or whether the land belonged to a local Baal, whose special prerogative it was, the resident farmers asserted, to grant the necessary grain and cattle.

#### "THE LORD, THE JUDGE" (11:27) AND THE JUDGES OF ISRAEL

In spite of Israel's infidelity God kept His promise "I will never break My covenant with you" (2:1). He inflicted chastisements upon Israel in the attempt to re-establish covenant relations with His people. When Israel was brought to her senses by these afflictions, God "raised up judges who saved them out of the power of those who plundered them" (2:16).

It seems strange to call the men through whom deliverance from foreign oppression came, judges. This name, however, describes their activity as judicial in its broadest aspect. One of these judges (Jephtha) pointed out that he was merely the instrument to carry out the decision of the Lord to redress the grievance of Israel. "The Lord, the Judge, be judge this day between the Children of Israel and the Children of Ammon" (11:27, KJV). Every interference with Israel, when and to the extent that it attempted to live as the covenant people, was an infringement of its God-given rights. The judges of

Israel by their military campaigns put into effect what the Supreme Judge had established as the rightful prerogative of His covenant representatives.

The covenant also granted the Israelites rights as individuals within the nation. In some instances the task of the judges is specifically mentioned as including the application of justice to violators of the social and moral code of the covenant. Of Deborah we are told "she used to sit under the palm of Deborah and the people of Israel came up to her for judgment" (4:4,5). So they judged Israel by executing judgment on the evildoer and by freeing the innocent from injustice at home and abroad. Therefore they could also be called deliverers (3:9). Their office was not to be hereditary. One of them (Gideon) declined steadfastly the request "Rule over us, you and your sons and your grandsons also" (8:22). When the emergency had passed and order in foreign and domestic relations had been restored, the administration of justice, in this wider sense, could revert to the application of regular covenant procedures.

As in the case of other Old Testament heroes, the account of these judges, or saviors, of Israel does not hesitate to let us see their clay feet. Some of them are reported as lapsing into moral and religious aberrations as reprehensible as those they were to correct.

#### FROM TWILIGHT TO GROSS DARKNESS

The arrangement of the materials in the Book of Judges apparently has a design of progression. The movement begins with the setting of the sun of faith and ends in midnight blackness of moral and religious chaos.

#### I. Chapter 1:1—3:6

In this introduction we are led to expect an unpleasant chapter in the history of the covenant nation. Evil days are to follow Joshua's death for two reasons that grow out of one another:

*A. Chapter 1:1—2:5.*—The tribes of Israel lacked the faith to complete the conquest of Canaan. But without faith in the promises of the covenant Israel has no claim to it, and God "will not drive them out before you, but they shall become adversaries to you, and their gods shall be a snare to you" (2:3). Israel wept at such a prospect but did not bestir itself to resolute acts of faith.

*B. Chapter 2:6—3:6.*—Instead, Israel's default of faith made it a victim of the circumstances it had created. The remaining Canaanites tempted Israel into overt acts of disobedience against God. Because "they forsook the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashteroths . . . the hand of the Lord was against them for evil when they marched out. . . . He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them" (2:13-15). A preview is then given of the period to follow in outline form. Periodic deliverance from these oppressions did not rouse Israel to a heroism of faith, but it resulted only in relapses into the same unholy living.

#### II. Chapter 3:7—16:31

In this main body of the book some specific examples are given to document the thematic introduction and characterization of this period of Israel's history. Light and shadow alternate almost as regularly as day and night. The darkness of sin and its depressing consequences are

repeatedly lifted through the activity of the 12 (or 13 or 14) judges, but it always returns.

### III. *Chapter 17:1—21:25*

In painting this era of Israel's Dark Ages the artist has reserved his darkest hues for the last chapters. The two episodes recorded here do not occur in any sequence of dates and could have happened at any time during this entire period. But by placing them at the end of the book the author creates a climactic effect. We can see how far Israel went into the night of sin. At the same time this arrangement of the materials lets our trust in God's mercy mount in direct proportion to the progression of evil. A penitent Israel always found a God who says, "I will never break My covenant with you" (2:1).

#### SETTING THE STAGE

The introductory chapters (1:1—3:6) set the stage for this dismal picture in Israel's history. To establish the connection with the previous period the state of affairs at Joshua's death is once more referred to. By his victorious campaigns he had led Israel to success in the first phase of the occupation of Canaan. But the Lord fulfilled only part of His promise through Joshua: "The Lord left those nations without dispossessing them [KJV and RSV: "driving them out"] and did not give them into the hands of Joshua" (2:23). Before Joshua had "dismissed the people" (2:6) from the convocation at Shechem (cf. Joshua 24), he had, at God's direction, assigned the final task of dispossessing the inhabitants for Israel's full possession to the individual tribes. When they act in faith as the covenant people, God's power is at their disposal as before.

Joshua's last words: "If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good" (Joshua 24:20), had a foreboding ring. Furthermore, in the account of the allotment is noted, in the case of some tribes, the disappointing fact that they were unable to dispossess the people in their particular territory.

As a necessary introduction to the coming period, the Book of Judges in its opening chapters repeats most of these very terse statements of failure on the part of the individual tribes. It adds, however, that such inactivity aroused the displeasure of the Lord (2:1-5). It shows furthermore to what wickedness this dallying with God's promise led: gross idolatry and wickedness of every kind that the Lord's repeated chastisement and gracious help did not cure.

Six tribes are mentioned in completely negative reports (1:27-33). In the case of three, Zebulun, Asher, Naphtali (1:30-33), there is no advance notice regarding their failure in the Book of Joshua. Two others, Manasseh and Ephraim (1:27-29), have almost the same brief account in Joshua (17:11-13; 16:10). The Danites were pressed back into the hill country (1:34; Joshua 19:47). New in the Book of Judges is the account of the capture of Bethel by the house of Joseph, probably a joint effort of Manasseh and Ephraim (1:22-26). Nothing is said, however, of a permanent possession of Bethel and its territory.

As in Joshua, so in the Book of Judges there is a somewhat fuller description of what the tribe of Judah did in taking possession of its territory. The account, how-

ever, is still a very brief sketch, and some details are not easily assigned to their proper place in this outline.

One of the complicating factors is the extent of the co-operation of Judah with two other tribes. According to 1:1-7, Simeon fought at Judah's side in a victory over Adonibezek at Bezek. The same tribe is mentioned as Judah's ally in defeating the "Canaanites who inhabited Zephath" (1:17). But in the preceding, as well as in the succeeding verses, Simeon is not mentioned as involved in Judah's successes and failures.

The tribe of Benjamin is also included in immediate connection with Judah (1:21), as if it, like Simeon, collaborated with Judah. Here we have only the brief note that "the people of Benjamin did not dispossess the Jebusites who dwell in Jerusalem." In Joshua 15:63 we were told that "the children of Judah could not dispossess them." Since the lot of these tribes had contiguous borders, it is not surprising that both tribes tried to take permanent possession of this important city. The brevity of the account does not preclude a number of individual attempts by Judah and by Benjamin. It also allows for united onslaughts against Jerusalem, led by Judah at one time and by Benjamin at a later time.

Whatever the amount of collaboration between these three tribes may have been, Judah is mentioned alone in 1:8-16 and again in 1:18-20. As in Joshua (15:15-19), the prominent part played by Caleb and his younger brother Othniel of the tribe of Judah in the taking of the city of Debir is mentioned (1:11-15). In the defeat of the inhabitants of Hebron the whole tribe of Judah is first mentioned (1:10);

later (v. 20) we are told of Caleb's dispossessing these Canaanites as in Joshua 15:14, 15.

But in spite of these victories Judah's success in taking its promised lot was only partial. He "took possession [only] of the hill country, but he could not dispossess the inhabitants of the plain, because they had chariots of iron" (1:19).

No doubt this inability to follow through after a victory or the capture of a city to permanent occupation also explains the fact that "the men of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it" (1:10), but that neither Judah (Joshua 15:63) nor Benjamin (Judg. 1:21), nor both together, could *dispossess* the earlier inhabitants. Very likely cities had to be retaken before they and their environments became Israel's inheritance in fact. Jerusalem remained in Canaanite hands till David's time.<sup>7</sup>

The same "taking" but not "dispossessing" may be noted in the case of the cities of the plains: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ekron (1:18, 19).

Having told us in the first chapter how it came about that Israel's conquest was incomplete, the writer proceeds in ch. 2 to describe what followed as a consequence. Israel was on the verge of being Canaanized and of losing its mission as God's instrument of salvation to the nations. Therefore their occupation of Canaan no longer served His purpose: "I will not henceforth dispossess [KJV

<sup>7</sup> Some commentators believe that 1:8 is a parenthetic note referring to David's conquest. It would indicate that the Book of Joshua was not written till there was a king in Israel in the person of David or that a scribe added this explanatory bit to the text.

and RSV, "drive out"] before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died" (2:21).

#### ONE PURPOSE AND MANY REASONS

God had one purpose in creating Israel and giving them Canaan as an inheritance. In His covenant with the patriarchs and with Israel at Mount Sinai, He had made it clear that Israel was to be a means to an end: to bring the blessing of salvation to all nations. God had His own inscrutable reason for the election of Israel as the chosen nation, but He tells us some of the reasons why He directed the course of Israel's history at the time of the conquest of Canaan, as He did, to achieve His purpose.

He would first of all give Israel physical possession of the land in a way most advantageous to the conquerors. "The Lord, your God, will clear away these nations [the Canaanites] little by little . . . lest the wild beasts grow too numerous" (Deut. 7:22; cf. Ex. 23:29-30). This pattern of gradual conquest also committed Israel to learn to be true spiritual heirs of the land. In the extended operations during a protracted period, they could conquer only by faith and in obedience to the covenant. Only as "a kingdom of priests" were they to displace the kings of Canaan.

Israel had ample opportunity to learn this lesson during the campaign under Joshua, but it failed. It went counter to God's purpose. It lacked the faith necessary to be His covenant nation. They did not carry on after Joshua's death to dispossess the Canaanites. Thus they created for themselves a situation that led to their undoing. "Their gods shall be a snare unto you" (2:3).

God did not deviate from His announced program for Israel. As long as the Canaanites remained, they served "for the testing of Israel, whether Israel would obey the commandments of the Lord which He commanded their fathers by Moses" (3:4). This situation obtained for a long time, as we can see from the Book of Judges. Even a new generation which "had no experience of any war in Canaan" was not permitted to possess the land without learning to wage war as God's people, that is, to conquer by faith in Him and for His ends (3:1-3).

#### CONCLUSION

The account of the conquest of Canaan by Israel and the settlement of the twelve tribes in the Promised Land, as given in the Books of Joshua and Judges, forms a consistent pattern of events in proper sequence and progression if the following factors are kept in mind:

1. In both books the conquest of Canaan is depicted as incomplete.
2. Joshua's role is restricted to military campaigns. Canaanite forces are defeated in battle, and some cities are taken and destroyed.
3. After the backbone of Canaanite resistance is broken, Joshua allots the land to the individual tribes. This is an act of faith in God's promise to give them the land. Much territory is not occupied by Israel at the time.
4. The final occupation of the allotted territories is assigned to each tribe individually. This task can be accomplished only to the extent that Israel continues to trust in God's miraculous intervention.

**THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN**

5. These two phases of the occupation are indicated by the discriminating use of the verb שָׁרַף. It is not applied to Joshua's activity but is reserved in both books to describe the subsequent efforts of the individual tribes.

6. The tribes lacked the courage and obedience of faith to take permanent possession of their inheritance.

7. This failure on the part of the tribes, already mentioned in brief notes in connection with the allotment, is repeated and elaborated in the Book of Judges.

8. The Book of Judges gives the reason for this state of affairs and shows that it extended over a long period of time after the death of Joshua.

St. Louis, Mo.