

1517 Media
Fortress Press

Chapter Title: Joshua

Book Title: A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible

Book Subtitle: Third Edition

Book Author(s): JOHN J. COLLINS

Published by: 1517 Media; Fortress Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1w6tb3r.20>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

1517 Media and Fortress Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*

CHAPTER 9

Joshua

Following the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy, the book of Joshua tells the story of the Israelite possession of Canaan. As we will see in this chapter, this account raises both historical and moral questions. We will discuss current thinking about the origins of Israel in Canaan, then consider aspects of the biblical account of the “conquest” of the land, the settlement of the tribes, and the covenant at Shechem.

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

The book of Joshua describes how the Israelite tribes took possession of the land of Canaan west of the Jordan. In the opening verses, the LORD tells Joshua that he is giving him the land “from the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates,” essentially the land promised to Abraham in Genesis 15. Later summary statements suggest that Joshua did indeed overrun the entire country (e.g., Josh 10:40).

Closer reading suggests a more limited conquest. Most of the action in chapters 2–10 takes place in a small area around Jericho, Shechem, and Jerusalem. The summary in 10:40–43 claims the comprehensive conquest of the southern part of the country. Chapter 11 describes a campaign against Hazor in the far north. The actual narratives of conquest appear quite spotty as compared with the sweeping claims in the summaries. Moreover, Judges 1 gives a long list of places from which the Canaanites were not driven out, including major sites such as Taanach and Megiddo. There are also troubling inconsistencies. Judges 1:8 says that “the people of Judah fought against Jerusalem and took it” but, according to 1:21, “the Benjaminites did not drive out the Jebusites who lived in Jerusalem.” Later, we will find that Jerusalem was captured only in the time of David. Hazor, allegedly captured by Joshua in Joshua 11, is still in Canaanite control in Judges 4 and 5. The biblical evidence for a sweeping conquest, then, is not as straightforward as it might initially appear.

Four models of the origin of Israel have been influential in scholarship in the twentieth century: the immigration model, favored especially by German scholars in the mid-twentieth century; the conquest model, defended especially in North America; the revolt hypothesis, which tries to explain the origin of Israel as social upheaval; and the model of gradual evolution, which suggests that the Israelites originated as Canaanites and only gradually attained a distinctive identity.

THE ORIGIN OF ISRAEL IN CANAAN

The Immigration Model

The immigration model is associated especially with the names of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth. Alt observed that the main cities were in the plains, whereas the central highlands were sparsely inhabited in the second millennium. He proposed that the Israelites first occupied the highlands, and only gradually extended their control to the plains. This view of the Israelite settlement could claim support from the account in Judges I, which admits that the Canaanites were not initially driven out from many of the lowland cities.



The circular platform of a Canaanite cultic place in Stone Age Megiddo, Israel.



Israel Settlement before the Monarchy

Some patriarchal stories from Genesis could also be understood as part of this process of settlement. Alt and Noth accepted the biblical account insofar as they assumed that the Israelites came from outside the land.

The Conquest Model

American scholarship in the early and mid-twentieth century was dominated by the rise of archaeology. The Near East is dotted with *tells*, flat-topped mounds that were the sites of ancient cities. These mounds grew because of the frequency with which cities were destroyed.

After the destruction, the ruins were leveled off and the city rebuilt on top of them. Typically, a “destruction layer” of debris was trapped under the new floors. If the cities of Canaan had been violently destroyed, there should be evidence that could be found by the archaeologists. The leader in this endeavor was William Foxwell Albright. The Albrightian account of the history of Israel was given classic expression in John Bright’s *History of Israel*. The attempt to corroborate the biblical account by archaeological research, however, backfired: the archaeological evidence does not match the biblical account of the conquest.

According to the biblical accounts, the first phase of the conquest took place in Transjordan. The account in Numbers 21 claims that there was a settled population in this region and specifically mentions the cities of Heshbon and Dibon. Both of these sites have been excavated and shown to have been unoccupied in the Late Bronze period.

Similar results were obtained at Jericho and Ai, the two showpieces of the conquest in Joshua. Neither was a walled city in the Late Bronze period. Of nearly twenty identifiable sites that were captured in the biblical account, only two, Hazor and Bethel, have yielded archaeological evidence of destruction at the appropriate period. Ironically, Hazor is said to be still in Canaanite hands in



The Merneptah Stele (or “Israel Stele”), ca. 1220 B.C.E.; now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Judges 4–5. In light of the available evidence, we must conclude that the account of the conquest in Joshua is largely if not entirely fictitious.

The results of archaeology have not been entirely negative. Excavations and surveys in the last quarter of the twentieth century have brought to light hundreds of small sites that were established in the thirteenth to eleventh centuries B.C.E., primarily in the central highlands. The identification of these settlements as Israelite is suggested by the fact that this region is the stronghold of early Israel according to the biblical account, and it was clearly Israelite in later times. A commemorative stela of the Egyptian pharaoh Merneptah, erected about 1220 B.C.E., boasts of his victories in Canaan and that “Israel is laid waste, his seed is not” (*ANET*, 378). It is not clear here whether Israel is a people or a place but in either case an entity called Israel existed in Canaan in the late thirteenth century B.C.E.

The most remarkable thing about these settlements in light of the biblical account is that their material culture is essentially Canaanite. Archaeologists of an earlier generation thought they had found some distinctively Israelite features in the central highlands. The typical style of house there is usually referred to as “the four-roomed courtyard house” (consisting of a cluster of rooms around a courtyard). This has often been called “the Israelite-style house,” and it was indeed the typical kind of house in ancient Israel, but a growing number of such houses have now been found at sites that were obviously not Israelite. Similarly, the “collar-rimmed jar” is typical of these settlements but not unique to them. The pottery in the new villages is usually of poorer quality than what is found in Canaanite cities such as Gezer, but of the same general type. (One aspect of the material remains of the highland settlements that may be distinctive, however, is the absence of pig bones, which is of interest in view of the biblical dietary laws.)

Since these villages were not fortified, they lend support to the view that the settlement was a process of peaceful immigration. Unlike the older immigration hypothesis of Alt and Noth, however, the new evidence suggests that the settlers did not come from outside the land but were of Canaanite origin.

The Revolt Model

The hypothesis that Israel had its origins in a social revolution within Canaan was first proposed by George Mendenhall, in 1962. The basic idea was derived from the Amarna letters, which had been found in Egypt in 1888. These letters were written in Akkadian on clay tablets by people in Canaan, and addressed to the Pharaohs Amenophis III and Amenophis IV or Akhenaten in the fourteenth century B.C.E. The latter pharaoh had launched a religious revolution in Egypt by promoting the cult of the sun-god Aten to the exclusion of other deities (the Aten heresy). The letters from Canaan frequently complain about groups who were causing turmoil and challenging Egyptian authority. These troublemakers are often called Habiru/Hapiru or ‘Apiru. This is not an ethnic term but refers to people who were on the margins of society, as mercenaries, slaves, or outlaws. Especially interesting are the references to one Labayu, who allegedly “gave Shechem to the Habiru.” Shechem figures prominently in Deuteronomy and Joshua as an early Israelite center, but there is no account of its capture in the book of Joshua.



Canaanite Sites in the Late 13th/Early 12th Century B.C.E.

Say [t]o the king, my lord: Message of 'Abdi-Heba, your servant. I fall at the feet of my lord, the king, 7 times and 7 times. What have I done to the king, my lord? They denounce me: . . . (I am slandered) before the king, my lord, "'Abdi-Heba has rebelled against the king, his lord." Seeing that, as far as I am concerned, neither my father nor my mother put me in this place, but the strong arm of the king brought me into my father's house, why should I of all people commit a crime against the king, my lord? As truly as the king, my lord, lives, I say to the commissioner of the king, [my] lord, "Why do you love the 'Apiru but hate the mayors?" Accordingly, I am slandered before the king, my lord. May the king, my lord, know that (though) the king, my lord, stationed a garrison (here), Enhamu has taken *i[t al]*l away. . . . [Now], O king, my lord, [there is n]o garrison, [and so] may the king provide for his land. May the king [*pro*]vide for his land! All the [la]nds of the king, my lord, have deserted. Ili-Milku has caused the loss of all the land of the king, and so may the king, my lord, provide for his land. For my part, I say, "I would go in to the king, my lord, and visit the king, my lord," but the war against me is severe, and so I am not able to go in to the king, my lord. And may it seem good in the sight of the king, [and] may he send a garrison so I may go in and visit the king, my lord. *In truth*, the king, my lord, lives: whenever the commissioners have come out, I would say (to them), "Lost are the lands of the king," but they did not listen to me. Lost are all the mayors; there is not a mayor remaining to the king, my lord. May the king turn his attention to the archers of the king, my lord, come forth. The king has no lands. (That) 'Apiru has plundered all the lands of the king. If there are archers this year, the lands of the king, my lord, will remain. But if there are no archers, lost are the lands of the king, my lord. [T]o the scribe of the king, my lord: Message of 'Abdi-Heba, your [ser]vant. Present eloquent words to the king, my lord. Lost are all the lands of the king, my lord.

(Letter #286, *The Amarna Letters*, trans. Moran, 326–27)

The Amarna letters date from a time more than a century before the usual date for the exodus, so they cannot be taken as referring to upheavals caused by the emergence of Israel. But conditions in Canaan probably did not change very much over a century or so. Mendenhall suggested that the Israelites who had escaped from Egypt made common cause with disaffected Canaanites. Israel was not originally an ethnic group but the union of people fleeing oppression, who joined together in the worship of the liberator god YHWH. This revolt hypothesis was developed further by Norman Gottwald.

The revolt hypothesis is in fact compatible with the archaeological evidence, but it has little support in the biblical text. There is no suggestion that Joshua was engaged in the liberation of Canaan. The revolt model is widely viewed as anachronistic, a myth of ancient Israel that conforms to one set of modern ideals.

The Gradual Emergence Model

In fairness to the revolt model, no account of early Israel can reconcile the biblical account and the archaeological evidence. The consensus on the subject at the beginning of the twenty-first century favors the view that the Israelites were basically Canaanites who gradually developed a separate identity. Their emergence as a distinct entity is reflected in the settlement of the central highlands. The people who founded these settlements had apparently migrated from the lowlands. We do not know why. They may have been disaffected with an oppressive society in the Canaanite city-states, as the revolt model suggests. Alternatively, they may have fled because of the instability of life in the lowlands due to the invasion of the Sea Peoples who became the Philistines, and who emerge into history about the same time as the Israelites, or for other reasons. The main difference over against the revolt model is that this model does not assume that the Israelites were motivated by egalitarian ideals. It is true that early Israel, according to the Bible, did not have a king, but this may have been due to the relative lack of political organization rather than to ideological reasons.

THE ACCOUNT OF THE CONQUEST

Gilgal and Jericho

Some of the early stories in Joshua have a ritualistic character. Before the crossing of the Jordan, Joshua tells the Israelites to sanctify themselves, as they had before the revelation at Sinai. The waters part before the Israelites when the priests enter the river, and the people cross on dry ground. This directly recalls the crossing of the Red Sea, and may reflect a ritual reenactment of the exodus at Gilgal.

According to Joshua 5, Joshua had all the Israelites circumcised before proceeding to attack Jericho. Such an action is wildly implausible at the beginning of a military campaign (cf. Genesis 34, where the sons of Jacob sack Shechem while the Shechemites are still sore after circumcision). Here again the editor of the story seems to be more concerned with ritual propriety than with historical plausibility.

Before the attack on Jericho, Joshua has a vision of a figure who identifies himself as “commander of the army of the LORD” (5:14). The point is made that Israel does not rely only on its own human resources. Rather it is engaged in a “holy war,” aided by angelic hosts. (A similar view of “holy war” is found much later in the “Scroll of the War of the Sons of Light against the Sons of Darkness” from Qumran.)

The textbook example of the theological, or ritual, theory of warfare is the siege of Jericho in Joshua 6. The Israelites march around the city for six days. On the seventh they shout, and the walls fall down. The victory is given miraculously by the LORD. If, as the archaeologists have concluded, Jericho was not even occupied in the late thirteenth century, then the biblical writer was free to compose an ideal account of theologically correct conquest, unhindered by any historical traditions.

The Moral Problem of the Conquest

Historicity is not the only problem posed by Joshua. A more fundamental one is posed by the morality of the story. Joshua instructs the Israelites that “the city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction” (6:17), with the exception of the prostitute Rahab, who helped the Israelite spies. When the Israelites enter the city, “they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys” (6:21). This dedication and destruction is known as *herem* or the ban. The custom was known outside Israel. King Mesha of Moab, in the ninth century B.C.E., boasted that he took Nebo from Israel, “slaying all, seven thousand men, boys, women, girls and maid-servants, for I had devoted them to destruction for (the god) Ashtar-Chemosh” (The Moabite Stone, trans. W. F. Albright, *ANET*, 320). The story of the capture of Jericho is almost certainly fictitious, but this only makes the problem more acute. We are not dealing in Joshua with a factual report of the ways of ancient warfare. Rather, the slaughter of the Canaanites, here and elsewhere, is presented as a theologically correct ideal.

The savagery of the destruction here is bound up with its sacral character: the victims are dedicated to the LORD. The *herem* was essentially a religious act, like sacrifice. It not only condoned indiscriminate slaughter; it sanctified it. Compare the story of the zeal of Phinehas in Numbers 25, where the summary killing of an Israelite with a Moabite woman is rewarded with a covenant of peace and an eternal priesthood.

The brutality of warfare in antiquity was no greater than it is in modern times, and arguably less. We should not be surprised that the Israelites, like other peoples, gloried in the destruction of their adversaries. What is troubling in the biblical text is the claim that such action is justified by divine command and therefore praiseworthy. Such violence is generally disavowed by later Jewish and Christian tradition. But the examples of Joshua and Phinehas are still enshrined in Scripture and are therefore likely to lend legitimacy to such actions. This is a case where biblical authority can be dangerous and misleading.

Josiah's reform was, among other things, an assertion of national identity, and this entails differentiation from others, especially from those who are close but different. The ferocity of Deuteronomic rhetoric toward the Canaanites may be due in part to the fact that Israelites were Canaanites to begin with. It may also be due in part to the fact that Israelites traditionally had followed Canaanite cultic practices.

Underlying the whole Deuteronomic theology, and indeed most of the Hebrew Bible, is the claim that the Israelites had a right to invade Canaan because it was given to them by God. This claim is found already in the promise to Abraham in Genesis, and is repeated constantly. It would not be problematic if the land were empty, but it was not. The God of Israel, it would seem, did not care much for the Canaanites. The biblical story has often served as a paradigm for colonial conquest (North America, South Africa, modern Israel). We should be wary of any attempt to invoke the example of the conquest as legitimation for anything in the modern world.

The final redaction of the Deuteronomic History, including Joshua, was most probably done in the Babylonian exile. In that situation, the Judeans were not invincible conquerors but the hapless victims. It is one of the ironies of the biblical story that the

people of Israel and Judah suffered the kind of violent conquest that they supposedly had inflicted on the Canaanites.

The Story of Ai

The story of the attack on Ai is most probably also a fiction designed to give a clear illustration of the Deuteronomist's theology. When the initial attack fails, it is assumed that the reason is the displeasure of the LORD. Sure enough, the LORD informs Joshua that Israel has broken the covenant by disobeying a commandment. Achan had violated the ban by taking things for himself. After the perpetrator has been executed the Israelites are able to capture Ai and destroy it. Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the story is the sense of corporate responsibility. The Israelite army is defeated, and some thirty-six people are killed, because of the sin of one man. Moreover, not only is Achan executed, but also his sons and daughters and livestock, and even the goods that he had taken are stoned, burned, and buried under a heap of stones. There is a strong sense here that the family is a unit, but there is also a sense of defilement that has spread even to material objects.

The execution of Achan's family is all the more remarkable because Deut 24:16 says explicitly that "parents shall not be put to death for their children, nor shall children be put to death for their parents; only for their own crimes may persons be put to death." The story is presumably older than Deuteronomic law. According to Exod 20:5 the LORD punishes children for the iniquity of their parents even to the third and fourth generation, and this was the traditional idea in Israel, roughly down to the time of the Deuteronomic reform or the Babylonian exile. The doctrine of individual responsibility is an innovation in Deuteronomy 24. It is most strongly articulated in Ezekiel 18.

THE TRIBES

The second half of the book of Joshua is dominated by the allotment of territory to the tribes. Biblical tradition is unanimous that the twelve tribes of Israel were descended from twelve sons of Jacob, who was also called Israel. Such a simple genealogical model, whereby each tribe is descended from one individual, is clearly a fiction, but the tradition that early Israel consisted of associated tribes can hardly be denied. The tribes are listed in several places in the Pentateuch, with some variations (Genesis 29–30, Genesis 49, Numbers 26). It is evident that some historical changes are reflected in these lists. Linguistic evidence suggests that the list in Genesis 49 is older than that in Numbers 26. But attempts to reconstruct the history of the tribes are of necessity hypothetical. It has been suggested that the tribal lists in Numbers and Joshua reflect administrative districts under the monarchy, but here again clear confirming evidence is lacking. What is clear is that each tribe, with the exception of the priestly tribe of Levi, was identified with specific territory. Presumably the identity of the tribes and their territories evolved over time. The story of the allotment of territory in Joshua 13–19 projects into the early history of Israel the kind of centralized control that came only with the monarchy and was aggressively pursued by Josiah.

TRIBAL LISTS IN THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

Genesis 49	Numbers 26	Joshua
Leah's offspring:	Reuben	Judah
Reuben	Simeon	Manasseh
Simeon	Gad	Ephraim
Levi	Judah	Reuben
Judah	Isaachar	Gad
Zebulun	Zebulun	Benjamin
Isaachar	Manasseh	Simeon
	Ephraim	Zebulun
Bilhah and Zilpah's offspring:	Benjamin	Isaachar
	Dan	Asher
Dan	Asher	Naphtali
Gad	Naphtali	Dan
Asher		
Naphtali		
Rachel's offspring:		
Joseph		
Benjamin		

The Israelite tribes were evidently associated in some way. The Song of Deborah in Judges 5 commemorates a battle between Israelite tribes and Canaanite kings, "at Taanach, by the waters of Megiddo." Ephraim, Benjamin, Machir (= Manasseh), Zebulun, Issachar, and Naphtali all reported for duty. The Transjordanian tribes of Reuben and Gilead (= Gad) and the coastal tribes of Dan and Asher did not. Judah, Simeon, and Levi are not mentioned. The song singles out the otherwise unknown Meroz to be cursed, because its inhabitants did not come to the aid of the LORD. The song suggests that there was an alliance of tribes who worshiped YHWH. There was some obligation of mutual defense, but there are no sanctions against the tribes that did not show up, with the exception of Meroz (which may not have been a tribe at all). The alliance did not extend to all twelve tribes. The omission of Judah is significant. The bond between Judah and the northern tribes was weak, and this eventually led to the separation of the two kingdoms after the death of Solomon.

Judah is included in the Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33, but there Simeon is missing. It would seem that the number twelve was not as stable in the premonarchic period as is often supposed.



12 Tribes of Israel

THE COVENANT AT SHECHEM

Joshua concludes with a covenant ceremony at Shechem (chap. 24). The passage is now recognized as Deuteronomistic, because of its idiom. It is not an old source incorporated by the historian. It has many of the elements of the treaty form. The historical prologue is developed at great length. The people are called to witness against themselves (in place of the pagan gods of the Near Eastern treaties). The words of the covenant are recorded in a book, and a stone is set up to commemorate the covenant. The statutes of the covenant are not recited, but they are implied. Possession of the land is contingent on serving the LORD. The main elements of the covenant that are missing are the blessings and curses. In contrast, blessings and curses are amply represented in the covenant at Shechem in Deuteronomy 27–28. The prominence of Shechem in these Deuteronomic writings strongly suggests that there was a tradition of covenant renewal at that site. It does not necessarily follow that all twelve tribes were ever involved in such a ceremony. Moreover, we find in Judg 8:33 that Israelites at one point worshiped Baal-berith (Baal of the covenant), and we know that there was a temple of Baal-berith at Shechem. Indeed, Shechem appears to have been a Canaanite city through much of the period of the judges. The tradition of a covenant ceremony at Shechem may have been older than the cult of YHWH.

The need for fidelity to “all that is written in the law of Moses” is also emphasized in Joshua 23, the farewell speech of Joshua. Joshua concedes that the Canaanites have not been wiped out, and warns against intermarriage with them (23:12–13). The prohibition of intermarriage is found already in Deuteronomy 7 with reference to the seven peoples of the land. It did not necessarily apply to all peoples. Some distinctions between Gentiles were possible. Deuteronomy 23 distinguishes between the Ammonites and Moabites, who may not be admitted to the assembly of the LORD “even to the tenth generation,” and the Edomites and Egyptians, who may be admitted after the third. The thrust of Deuteronomy, however, is to maintain a distinct identity, and this could be threatened by intermarriage with any Gentiles. After the Babylonian exile, moreover, a significant part of the Jewish people would live outside the land of Israel, and the need for boundaries over against the Gentiles became more urgent. In this context, distinctions between Ammonites and Edomites lost its significance and all intermarriage was discouraged.

FOR FURTHER READING

Joshua

Robert G. Boling, "Joshua, Book of." In *ABD* 3:1002–1015.

Robert B. Coote, "Joshua." In *NIB* 2:555–716.

T. Dozeman, *Joshua 1–12* (Yale Anchor Bible; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997).

Early History of Israel

William G. Dever, *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 72–122, 329–39.

Norman Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979).

William L. Moran, ed. and trans., *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Particular Themes

John J. Collins, *Does the Bible Justify Violence?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004).

John J. Collins, *The Bible after Babel: Historical Criticism in a Postmodern Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 27–51.

Lori L. Rowlett, *Joshua and the Rhetoric of Violence: A "New Historicist" Analysis* (JSOTSup 226; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

Keith W. Whitlam, *The Invention of Ancient Israel and the Silencing of Palestinian History* (London: Routledge, 1996).