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# Joshua

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The Book

Conflicts in the Middle East often dominate the news cycles, many of which are related to, or centered upon the land of Israel and the nation's relationships with surrounding nations. While the story of the land and people of Israel is long and complex, contemporary conflicts are often intertwined, at least in much popular thinking, with appeals to the book of Joshua and its account of the initial conquest and settlement in the land of the Canaanites by a nomadic people, the Israelites, after their exodus from Egypt and their wanderings in the wilderness.

The book of Joshua is the sixth book of the Bible and, according to the traditional Jewish biblical divisions, the first book of the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). In the first five biblical books, the Pentateuch, Abraham's family gradually grows from just a few individuals to a nation without a homeland. Joshua tells the story of how the twelve Israelite tribes, after centuries as nomads,

immigrants, slaves, and refugees, finally reach the land that YHWH, their God, had promised Abraham.

Joshua can be divided into four sections. The first section focuses on the preparation of the nation Israel for upcoming battles (Joshua 1–5). The second narrates the conquest of the land and reports of the battles (Joshua 6–12). The third records the allotment of the tribes and reports of the boundaries (Joshua 13–21). The fourth recalls the speeches of the leaders, mainly of Joshua, but also of Phinehas and the leaders of the eastern tribes (Joshua 22–24).

Joshua includes both familiar stories of Joshua’s commission, Rahab the prostitute, the Israelites marching around the city of Jericho, and the battle where the sun stood still in the sky (Joshua 1, 2, 6, 10), as well as troubling stories of conquest and slaughter.

These narratives often provoke readers to ask a variety of difficult questions about the book. Are the stories of Joshua meant to be interpreted as history or fiction, or some combination of the two? How should Israel’s emergence in the land be viewed: as a dramatic conquest, or a gradual settlement? And what about those slaughters of Canaanite men, women, and children—should we understand them as a holy crusade, or an unholy genocide? While finding definitive answers may prove elusive, these are the questions we’ll discuss as we examine the book of Joshua.

## 1.2. Joshua: The Name

Whereas each of the books of the Pentateuch is called by a different name in the Hebrew Bible than it is in the English Bible (e.g., the book that is most popularly known as “Exodus” is *shemot*, “Names,” in the Hebrew Bible), both traditions refer to this book merely as “Joshua.” In Hebrew, the name Joshua consists of two parts: the first is basically a shortened version of “YHWH” and the second means “salvation.” So Joshua literally means “YHWH is salvation” or, more simply, “YHWH saves.”

### 1.3. Joshua: The Person

Not surprisingly, Joshua is about Joshua, but unlike the book of Samuel, which begins with the story of the prophet's birth by his previously barren mother Hannah, in Joshua the book, Joshua the character is already an adult. While the man he succeeded as leader of the nation, Moses, had a dramatic birth story included in the beginning of Exodus (2:1–10), Joshua's birth story wasn't sufficiently interesting to be recorded by the biblical authors.

However, biblical readers have already encountered the man Joshua in several settings in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. While Moses is known as the giver of the law, Joshua is as the conqueror of the land, and it is in this role as military leader that we first meet Joshua as he leads the Israelites in battle against the Amalekites immediately after they leave Egypt (Exod. 17:9–14). A few chapters later, the text states that Joshua is Moses' assistant (Exod. 24:13), and while Moses spoke to YHWH, his assistant Joshua didn't leave the tent of meeting (Exod. 33:11).

When two men are prophesying in the Israelite camp, Joshua wants Moses to shut them down, but instead is rebuked by Moses (Num. 11:26–29). In the context of Moses sending out the twelve spies to the land of Canaan, we learn that Joshua the son of Nun came from the tribe of Ephraim and that Moses changed his name from Hoshea to Joshua. Of the twelve spies, Joshua and Caleb are the only ones who are confident that they can take the land from the Canaanites (Num. 13:25–14:10). Because of their faithful perspective, they are also the only two adults to survive the forty years in the wilderness (Num. 14:30; 26:65; 32:12).



Figure 2.1: *Moses and the Messengers of Canaan*, by Giovanni Lanfranco (ca. 1621–24); The Getty Museum. Commons.wikimedia.org.

After showing Moses the promised land, YHWH told Moses to lay his hands on Joshua and commission him to lead the nation after he's gone, which he then did (Num. 27:12–23). Later, YHWH told Moses that the priest Eleazar and Joshua would be the men who would divide up the land into tribal allotments (Num. 34:17; Josh. 14:1; 19:51).

In Moses' speech at the beginning of Deuteronomy, Moses speaks of how YHWH wanted him to encourage and empower Joshua (Deut. 1:38; 3:21, 28). In two public settings toward the end of the book, Moses first tells Joshua to be strong and courageous, and then he repeats this charge and commission (Deut. 31:3–8, 14–23). Moses and Joshua perform a duet of sorts reciting the so-called Song of Moses (Deut. 32:44). With all these events preparing him for his new role, the people were willing to follow their new leader after Moses' death because Moses laid his hands on him and he was filled with the spirit of wisdom (Deut. 34:9).

These texts from the Pentateuch would therefore suggest that Joshua was about seventy at the beginning of Joshua, perhaps much

older. He dies at 110 (Josh. 24:29; Judg. 1:1; 2:8). Therefore, the span of the book is only about forty years, much shorter than the books of Judges and Kings, which cover multiple centuries, and even shorter than Samuel, which covers only about a hundred years.

#### 1.4. Joshua in the Canon

Scholars of previous generations often focused on connections between Joshua and the Pentateuch, and therefore some spoke of a Hexateuch (six books). The big event that the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy anticipate is the conquest of the land, so Joshua would be a logical conclusion to this extended narrative. Additionally, as we saw in the previous section, the character Joshua establishes a narrative bridge between the books of the Pentateuch and of Joshua.

However, two main problems have led many scholars recently to reject the theory of a Hexateuch. First, the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy (34:5) provides a compelling ending point for the series of books where he is the dominant character. Second, Joshua has many connections to the books it follows in the Former Prophets, particularly the book of Judges. Many scholars perceive language reminiscent of the book of Deuteronomy throughout the Former Prophets, and hence often refer to these books as the Deuteronomistic History (see introduction to this chapter and also 2.3, “Deuteronomistic Redaction”).

In the books that come after Judges in the Hebrew Bible, several other individuals named Joshua are mentioned, but Joshua the son of Nun only appears twice. During the period of the divided monarchy, when Hiel of Bethel rebuilds Jericho, Joshua’s curse against the builder’s sons is recalled (Josh. 6:26; 1 Kgs. 16:34), and Joshua the son of Nun is included in a brief genealogical note (1 Chron. 7:27).

In the rest of the Hebrew Bible, the conquest of the book of Joshua is greatly overshadowed by the deliverance in the book of Exodus. While the events surrounding the exodus, the plagues, the Passover, and the parting of the Sea are referenced literally hundreds of times in the

text (e.g., 1 Sam. 8:8; 2 Sam. 7:6; 1 Kgs. 3:1; Neh. 9:18; Ps. 80:8; Jer. 2:6; Ezek. 20:10), the events surrounding the conquest are only mentioned a few times again in the text. The prophet Samuel's final address to the people briefly recalls how YHWH settled the Israelites into the land (1 Sam. 12:8). A few of the historical psalms speak of how YHWH gave them the land (Pss. 78:55; 105:44) or how they didn't fully destroy the Canaanites (Ps. 106:34).

As we move to the New Testament, Israel's settlement in the promised land receives a bit more attention. Paul's speech in Pisidia mentions that seven Canaanite nations were destroyed as God gave them the land (Acts 13:19). According to the author of Hebrews, the walls of Jericho came down by faith (Heb. 11:30). The military hero Joshua is mentioned twice, once by Stephen in his speech to the council (Acts 7:45) and once in Hebrews' discussion of rest (Heb. 4:8). Perhaps a bit surprisingly, Rahab, the prostitute of Jericho (see Sidebar 2.4, "Rahab's Shocking Legacy" below) plays a more prominent role in the New Testament than Joshua as she is mentioned in three texts: in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt. 1:5), in the context of her faith (Heb. 11:30), and in the context of her works (James 2:25). However, we should also acknowledge that the name Jesus (Greek *Iēsous*) was apparently a common name in first-century Judea, being the name used in the Septuagint to translate Joshua (Hebrew *Yehošua'*).

## 2. Literary Concerns

### 2.1. Diverse Literary Genres

Before looking at issues related to the authorship, composition, and redaction of Joshua, one needs to first observe that the book contains a wide variety of literary genres. It begins with a **call narrative** for Joshua (Joshua 1), setting him alongside other significant figures in Israel's history who likewise receive divine commissions (e.g., Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; see Sidebar 2.3, "Old Testament Call Narratives" below). It includes an engaging spy narrative involving a prostitute (Joshua 2) as well as more mundane

etiological notices explaining how places got their names (Josh. 5:9; 7:26). While the books of the Former Prophets don't include much poetry, and Joshua includes less than the other three, one still finds two brief poems in the book: a curse on anyone who should attempt to rebuild Jericho and a request for more hours of daylight in the midst of a battle (Josh. 6:26; 10:12–13). Interspersed throughout the book are ritual and ceremonial texts recounting how the people set up memorial stones, circumcised a new generation, practiced the Passover, constructed an altar, and renewed the covenant (Josh. 4:1–9; 5:1–12; 8:30–35; 24:1–28). The book concludes with a series of rhetorical speeches given by Joshua, which are often connected by scholars to Deuteronomistic editors (see 2.3 below). The two other major genres, conquest narratives and tribal allotment notices, warrant longer discussions since they dominate much of the book of Joshua (see 2.4, 2.5).

## 2.2. Composition of Joshua

Like many books of the Hebrew Bible, Joshua speaks of no author. Perhaps based on the textual report that Joshua wrote down “these words in the book of the law” (Josh. 24:26), the Babylonian Talmud attributes the book to Joshua himself; however, few scholars follow this traditional attribution. The diverse variety of genres discussed in the previous section would suggest either that Joshua was composed by a variety of individuals, or that whoever put the book together in its final form had access to numerous sources.

Up until the middle of the twentieth century, many scholars thought Pentateuchal sources carried into the book of Joshua, particular the priestly (P) source and the Yahwist (J) source. But most scholars have found persuasive Martin Noth's seminal work, *The Deuteronomistic History* (in German, 1943; in English, 1981), which argued that these sources didn't continue into Joshua (see more on Deuteronomistic redaction in Joshua below).

While scholars speculate that there may have been sources behind the conquest narratives and tribal allotment notices and that Joshua's

speeches show evidence of Deuteronomistic redaction (see below on these three sections), the only source the book directly mentions is the book of Jashar (Josh. 10:13). The author of Joshua speaks of the book of Jashar as if the readers should be familiar with it, which may have been true when the book was written, but it is no longer the case. The Hebrew word translated as “Jashar” (*yāšār*) could be translated as “upright,” which doesn’t really clarify matters much. The book of Jashar is mentioned in one other text, in the context of David’s lament over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan in battle (2 Sam. 1:18). The fact that the contexts of the references in Joshua and Samuel are both poems associated with battles would suggest that Jashar was an ancient source of epic poetry.<sup>1</sup>

One other possible textual indication regarding the book’s composition is the repetition of the phrase “to this day” (Heb. *ad hayyôm hazzeh*), which appears sixteen times in Joshua (more often than in any other biblical book; Josh. 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26 [2]; 8:28, 29; 9:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10; 22:3, 17; 23:8, 9).<sup>2</sup> The contexts of these expressions speak of various things that have somehow continued until “this day,” i.e., the day of the book’s composition. The relevant question then is, when is “this day”? Some of these phenomena have relatively short time frames. One notice reports that Rahab is still alive (Josh. 6:25), which would suggest a relatively short gap between the destruction of Jericho and the composition of the book. Four of the notices speak of stone piles being intact or city ruins still being present (Josh. 4:9; 7:26; 8:28, 29), which, depending upon factors such as weathering, erosion, and the size of the stones, could mean either a short or long duration. Other phenomena could involve a much longer time frame: place names not changing (Josh. 5:9; 7:6), or Canaanite residents remaining in certain locations (13:13; 15:63; 16:10). So, while these notices are tantalizing as we search for clues regarding the composition, we need to acknowledge that the book itself provides few definitive answers to our quest.

1. See Alter, 51.

2. See also Hess, 110.

### 2.3. Deuteronomistic Redaction

Many critical scholars detect elements of Deuteronomistic influence in the book of Joshua, establishing linkages between the Former Prophets (also known as the Deuteronomistic History) and the book of Deuteronomy. While many scholars agree in principle that redaction by Deuteronomistic editors took place, many questions remain: how much redaction? when was it done? by whom? For an extended discussion of Deuteronomistic redaction in the Former Prophets more generally, see chapter 1. Here, we'll focus on the book of Joshua.

The book of Joshua includes a variety of terminology that echoes language from the book of Deuteronomy. We'll include a few examples here. In both books, Israel is commanded to "love YHWH" exclusively (Deut. 5:10; 6:5; Josh. 22:5; 23:11) and to "not serve other gods" (Deut. 5:7; 6:14; Josh. 23:7; 24:14). Israel is called to "walk in YHWH's ways" (Deut. 8:6; 10:12; Josh. 22:5), and YHWH promises that they will receive rest from their enemies (Deut. 3:20; 25:19; Josh. 1:13; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). The Deuteronomistic concern for obedience is also seen as the Israelites are called to turn neither to the right nor to the left away from the law of Moses (Deut. 5:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14; Josh. 1:7; 23:6).

Deuteronomistic themes can be found connecting these two books, particularly ones focused on conquest and settlement. Both Deuteronomy and Joshua speak repeatedly of destroying the Canaanite peoples (Deut. 7:1-2; 20:16-18; Josh. 9:24; 11:12) and of distributing the land among the tribes (Deut. 31:7; Josh. 14:2, 5). Noth argued that the Deuteronomist (he only spoke of one person) focused the Deuteronomistic terminology and themes into speeches.

Many scholars perceive a concentration of Deuteronomistic ideology in the final speeches of Joshua at the end of the book in chapters 23 and 24. Similarly, there is general agreement that redaction is minimal or absent from the sections narrating the conquest narratives or the sections describing the tribal allotments. Presumably, this information came from earlier source material, which will be discussed in the following two sections.

THE HISTORICAL WRITINGS



Figure 2.2: Canaanite sites between the fifteenth and twelfth centuries BCE (before the settlement of Israel).

## 2.4. Conquest Narratives

The key event of the book of Joshua is the conquest of the promised land by the Israelites. However, apart from two brief notices (Othniel captured Kiriath-sepher: Josh. 15:17; the tribe of Dan captured the city of Lesham: Josh. 19:47), Joshua's battles are concentrated in just six of the twenty-four chapters of the book (Joshua 6–11). The conquest narrative section of the book is concluded with a summary of the kings and nations conquered first by Moses, then by Joshua (Joshua 12).

With the possible exception of the summary, the conquest narratives are distinct from the rest of the book, particularly the rather tedious tribal allotments that follow them. We'll discuss some of the ethical problems related to these battles later (see 4.8), but if you like warfare, you'll love the conquest narratives of Joshua. There's not a lot of dialogue, but there's a lot of action, strategy, intrigue, and bloodshed.

Along the way, Joshua used a wide variety of military tactics to achieve victory. He sent spies to Jericho and Ai for reconnaissance, which worked well in the first instance, but not in the second. The Israelites practiced seven days of ritualistic marching around the city of Jericho before (in the words of the song) the "walls came a-tumbling down." After their first attack didn't work out so well against Ai, Joshua used a clever plan involving deception and an ambush (which is surprisingly similar to the strategy utilized by the Israelites against the Benjaminites in Judges 20). Joshua was the victim of a clever deception by the Gibeonites, who tricked him into making a covenant with them.

However, the text emphasizes that these strategies ultimately aren't what made the difference in their eventual success. Even when Joshua and his forces appear to be massively outnumbered, they receive divine assistance in the form of walls falling down, widespread panic among enemy forces, hail thrown down from heaven, and the sun standing still in the sky. The one exception to this pattern illustrates how vital YHWH was to their success; in their first attack against Ai,

YHWH allowed them to lose because one member of their community (Achan) had taken items devoted to destruction from Jericho.

While these conquest chapters of Joshua lack obvious Deuteronomistic terminology and ideas, they are full of the language of battle. The military language in the book is concentrated in these chapters in Joshua as a brief sample of three terms illustrates. The verb “fight” (*lāḥam*) appears nineteen times in Joshua, thirteen times in these six chapters (Josh. 9:2, 5, 12; 10:5, 14, 25, 29, 31, 34, 36, 38, 42; 11:5) and only six times in the other eighteen chapters of the book (Josh. 19:47; 23:3, 10; 24:8, 9, 11). The verb “strike down” (*nākāh*) appears thirty-eight times in Joshua, thirty-one times in chapters 6–12 (e.g., Josh. 7:3, 5 [2]; 8:21, 22), seven in the rest of the book (Josh. 13:12, 21; 15:16; 19:47; 20:3, 5, 9). The noun “sword” (*ḥereb*) appears twenty times in Joshua, fourteen times in chapters 6–11 (Josh. 6:21; 8:24 [2]; 10:11, 28, 30, 32, 35, 37, 39; 11:10, 11, 12, 14), and six times elsewhere (Josh. 5:2, 3, 13; 13:22; 19:47; 24:12).

The conquest narratives can be divided into three sections. The first campaign in the center of the country is against Jericho where everything goes as planned, and the walls come down as scheduled, and against Ai, where it takes two attempts to finally defeat the city (Joshua 6–8). The second campaign is centered in the south as the city of Gibeon first deceives Joshua into making a covenant, and then a coalition of five southern cities (Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, Eglon) attack Gibeon. This draws Joshua and his forces into battle where they defeat this southern coalition in overtime thanks to divine intervention in the form of hail and extra sunlight (Joshua 9–10). The third campaign takes place in the north as another coalition of both cities (Hazor, Madon, Shimron, Achshaph) and peoples (Canaanites, Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Hivites) join forces, but are still defeated by the Israelites with the help of YHWH (Joshua 11).

## 2.5. Tribal Allotments

After the battles are over, the process of dividing up the land remains. In contrast to the dramatic activity of the conquest narratives (Joshua

6–12), most readers of Joshua will find the reports of tribal allotments rather boring (Joshua 13–21).

Just as military terminology characterizes the conquest narratives, distinctive terminology characterizes the tribal allotment section. The noun “inheritance” (*naḥālāh*) appears fifty times in Joshua, only five times outside of the tribal allotments section (Josh. 11:23; 23:4; 24:28, 30, 32), and forty-five times within the section (e.g., Josh. 13:6, 7, 8, 14 [2], 23, 28, 33 [2]). The noun “territory” (*qēbûl*) appears eighty-four times in Joshua, six times outside the tribal allotment section (Josh. 1:4; 12:2, 4, 5; 22:25; 24:30), and seventy-eight times within it (e.g., Josh. 13:3, 4, 10, 11, 16, 23 [2]). The boundaries were determined by lot and the noun “lot” (*gôrāl*) appears twenty-six times in Joshua, all within this section, often at the beginning of a new territorial description (e.g., Josh. 14:2; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1, 14, 17; 18:6, 8; 19:1).

The allotment section begins by acknowledging that despite Joshua’s successful military campaigns there was a lot of the land left unconquered by Israel and still controlled by the Philistines, the Canaanites, the Amorites, and the Sidonians (see 2.6 below). After this initial acknowledgment, the rest of this section alternates between notices of various types related to the allotment of the land. The text includes two summary reports of the lands conquered first on the east side and then on the west side of the Jordan (Josh. 13:8–14; 14:1–5). There are two types of boundary descriptions: long detailed ones, most notably for the tribes of Judah and Benjamin (Josh. 15:1–63; 18:11–28), and short terse ones; see for example the descriptions for Issachar and Dan (Josh. 19:17–23, 40–48). Often following the descriptions of the tribal boundaries are lists of specific cities that belong to the tribe (e.g., Josh. 15:20–63; 18:21–28; 19:1–9).

Interspersed among these various reports are other notices or brief narratives that don’t fit into the pattern but are often connected to other stories either in the Pentateuch or the book of Judges. Joshua’s fellow optimistic spy, Caleb, the only other Israelite to survive the wilderness wanderings (Num. 14:30), receives a special allotment, and the text records his eventual occupation of that land within that of his

tribe, Judah (Josh. 14:6–15; 15:13–19). The romantic and heroic story of how Othniel won the hand of Caleb’s daughter Achsah by conquering the city of Kiriath-sepher in response to his future father-in-law’s challenge is recorded first in Joshua and then retold at the beginning of Judges (Josh. 15:16–19; Judg. 1:12–15). The daughters of Zelophehad were promised by Moses that, because their father had no sons, they would receive land as an inheritance, so a short notice records the fulfillment of this promise to this group of soon-to-be land-owning women (Num. 27:1–11; 36:1–12; Josh. 17:3–4). While one might expect numerous tribal squabbles as lands are being divided up (based on my many experiences of desert portions being divided up among my family members), the allotments proceed smoothly until the two tribes from Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) protest about their small portion (essentially, “we’ve got the smallest piece!”). They are finally appeased by Joshua’s wise response, which displayed confidence in them for their greatness and their ability to clear and possess their lands (Josh. 17:14–18). A brief notice in Joshua that the tribe of Dan’s campaign to take their tribal allotment was unsuccessful (Josh. 19:47) is reiterated at the beginning of the book of Judges and then is the catalyst for a much longer narrative toward the end of Judges (Judg. 1:34; 18:1–31).

## 2.6. Partial or Complete Conquest?

As we’ve examined both the conquest narratives and the tribal allotment records, we find what appear to be two contradictory perspectives on the completeness of the promised land conquest. Scholars love to discuss these types of tensions, so we probably should discuss them also, and this discussion will also provide a good transition into the historical section which follows.

A strong argument can be made that the text of Joshua is claiming that the conquest was *complete* and the land was fully conquered. At the beginning of the book, YHWH declares that he will give the Israelites “all the land” (Josh. 1:4) and toward the end the text records that YHWH gave them “all the land” (Josh. 21:43). Both the spies and the Gibeonites declare that YHWH was going to give Israel “all the land”

(Josh. 2:24; 9:24). And the text then reports that Joshua actually conquered “all the land” (Josh. 10:40; 11:16, 23).

A strong argument, however, can also be made from the text that the conquest was *partial* or incomplete. First, the tribal allotment section begins by unabashedly declaring that major portions of the land were left unconquered (Josh. 13:1–7). Second, scattered throughout the tribal allotments section are verses that clearly state that the Canaanite residents of the land were not driven out by the Israelites (Josh. 13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12; 19:47). Third, the book of Judges begins by listing various groups of Canaanites that the Israelites had been unable to drive out from their land (Judg. 1:19, 21, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 33).

*How does one reconcile these tensions?* We will discuss the relevant historical issues related to this question in the next section, but here we’ll look at the question from a literary perspective.

Some scholars argue that the literary genre of the conquest is *fiction*,<sup>3</sup> which in addition to solving the problem of the contradictory accounts, solves any ethical problems associated with a genocide (see 4.8 below). According to this perspective, there’s therefore no need to reconcile these contradictory accounts because they are both simply stories with little historical basis. While supporters of this perspective find this solution attractive, as the problem disappears, many scholars argue that it doesn’t take the text seriously. (For more on the topic of the historicity of Joshua, see 3.2, 3.3 below.)

Other scholars think that the contradictory perspectives on the conquest are evidence of *multiple authors* or editors. One author (the “glass is half-full” one) was concerned with showing how the Israelites were faithful to the commission to drive out the Canaanites. Another author (the “glass is half-empty” one) focused on how they disobeyed, which explains all of their problems with enemy nations and idolatry in the book of Judges. A problem with this perspective is that it makes the final editor seem rather incompetent and unaware of what appear to us to be glaring inconsistencies.

Yet other scholars believe that these accounts can be *harmonized*.

3. See Dever, 39–41.

They acknowledge that there are tensions, but they are by no means irreconcilable ones. They assume that the conquest was not complete and typically make three points. First, the conquest was supposed to be complete, but because of Israel's lack of faithfulness or courage they were unable to achieve total appropriation of the land. Second, the language of the conquest texts could be intentionally hyperbolic, which is typical of ancient Near Eastern conquest narratives.<sup>4</sup> Third, if one examines the contexts of the notices that seem to speak of a complete conquest, one sees they are focused on specific regions of the land, which explains why the comment needs to be repeated. When the text speaks of "all the land" in these contexts it essentially means "all the region." If the whole land were in view, repetition wouldn't be necessary. The nature of the conquest will be revisited at several points in the next section discussing the history of the book of Joshua.

### 3. Historical Issues

A variety of historical issues regarding the book of Joshua warrant discussion: the date of the conquest, possible models of how the conquest should be understood, the archaeology of the conquest specifically focusing on the key cities, and finally the ancient Near Eastern background related to these various issues.

#### 3.1. The Date of the Conquest

We'll begin by looking at the date of the conquest. From the perspective of biblical history, the book of Joshua is framed between the deaths of two national leaders: Moses at the beginning and Joshua at the end (Josh. 1:1; 24:29). While the text records that Joshua was one hundred and ten years old when he died, we should remember that according to the biblical record he could have easily been seventy or older when the book began. He would have presumably been at least thirty when he led the nation in battle against the Amalekites

4. See Younger, 203–6.

(Exod. 17:8–14), and then he reportedly survived the forty years in the wilderness.

Based on these figures (which may have been rounded), we can conclude that the time range of the book was perhaps between twenty and forty years, encompassing the later years of the life of Joshua. Thus, the book of Joshua would have the shortest time frame of any of the books of the Former Prophets.

Where in Israel's history should one situate the twenty- to forty-year window of time in which the conquest occurred? Among scholars who assume some sort of conquest (or settlement) took place as described in Joshua, there are two primary views, an early date (late-fifteenth century BCE) and a late date (late-thirteenth century BCE).

The early date is based on a literal interpretation of 1 Kgs. 6:1, which states that Solomon's temple was completed 480 years after the conquest. Solomon's completion of the temple is often dated to about 960 BCE, which would put the exodus at about 1440 BCE and, after forty years in the wilderness, the conquest at about 1400 BCE. The main problem with this date is that the land of Canaan was under Egyptian control during the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, but the books of Joshua and Judges make no reference to this situation, despite speaking of numerous battles with Canaanite people.

Scholars who hold to the later conquest date interpret 1 Kgs. 6:1 more figuratively and base their date on, among other things, the reference to the construction of the storage city Ramesses (Exod. 1:11), presumably named after the Pharaoh Ramesses II (1279–1213 BCE). This would fit well into the mid-thirteenth century for the exodus, and then a late mid-thirteenth century date for the conquest (about 1200 BCE). Egypt was less of a factor in Canaan during this period, which would explain why they weren't engaged militarily in the books of Joshua and Judges.

### 3.2. Models for the Emergence of Israel

The textual tension between a partial and complete conquest has led to a wide varieties of models for how to understand the historical nature

of the emergence of Israel. While much has been written on this topic, I will include only two representative scholars (see also bibliography) for each of these perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

**Conquest** (Albright and Bright). This traditional perspective takes the biblical record seriously and more literally than any of the other models. It basically interprets the archaeological evidence as supporting the historicity of the conquest in three stages (central, southern, and northern) as described in the book of Joshua. Critics of this view make two points. First, of the many locations that the book of Joshua describes as being conquered by Israel, only two archaeological sites show evidence of destruction in the thirteenth century. Second, the literal interpretation of the biblical is simplistic and doesn't take the diversity of style and genre seriously.



Figure 2.3: The Merneptah stele, at the Cairo Museum. Photo: Webscribe, Commons.wikimedia.org.

5. For summaries of the various views see Younger 178–91; Dever 71–74.