

Session 4

Joshua and Judges and the Problem of Violence in the Old Testament

Joshua 1-11, Judges 1-10

Basic Background Information on the book of Joshua

Some of the passages we will discuss are among the hardest in the bible to understand. We're going to dive right into these and do our best to figure them out. As we try to make sense of these passages there will be several parts to our discussion. First we'll go over these parts of these books that are easy to understand, then we'll look at the difficulties that exist, and then we'll look at some possible explanations.

Joshua was the successor to Moses as the leader of the people of Israel. He is mentioned playing an important role in key events in the Book of Exodus (Exodus 17:9-14 and Exodus 32:17). He was the leader of the Jewish people when they entered into the promised land of Canaan, which would become the Kingdom of Israel. Canaan was essentially the lands that make up modern day Israel and Lebanon

The Israelites faced opposition from those who were already inhabiting these lands. The Canaanites were worshippers of false gods who opposed the Jewish people and their worship of the one God. In this way they were very similar to the Egyptians. The Israelites had to protect themselves from the military threat these people posed. Much more importantly they had to ensure that they did not give up their own worship of God and begin to worship the same gods as the Canaanites. The religion of the Canaanites involved child sacrifice and the practice of sleeping with prostitutes as part of religious rituals, so they had to a system of beliefs and a way of living that was opposed to that of those who wanted to follow God. The Canaanites worshipped many gods and goddesses but three of the most prominent were El, El's son Baal, and El's wife Asherah. The most offensive of the Canaanites religious practices seem to have been largely connected with the worship of Baal.

Jeff Cavins Video

This video gives us an understanding of how evil the Canaanite way of life was, and how the fact that they were so wealthy and prosperous made them an even greater threat to the Jewish people. The relative comfort and luxury enjoyed by the Canaanites meant the Israelites would have to struggle against the temptation to accept the Canaanites' way of life.

It might seem impossible that the Israelites; who had been taught that sex was something sacred to be shared only between a man and a wife, and had been taught to worship the

one true God alone, would engage in the sexual sin and idolatry that was a part of Canaanite life. But they did. For hundreds of years this was a problem in Israelite life.

Centuries after the Israelites came into Canaan the prophet Hosea had to write this about the people of Israel:

They consult their piece of wood, and their wand makes pronouncements for them. For the spirit of harlotry (another word for prostitution) has led them astray; they commit harlotry, forsaking their God. On the mountaintops they offer sacrifice and on the hills they burn incense, beneath oak and poplar and terebinth, because of their pleasant shade. That is why your daughters play the harlot, and your daughters-in-law are adulteresses. Hosea 4:12-13

Similarly the prophet Micah spoke of the time when Israel would be punished for these actions:

All her idols shall be broken to pieces, all her wages shall be burned in the fire, and all her statues I will destroy. As the wages of a harlot they were gathered, and to the wages of a harlot shall they return. Micah 1:7

Israelite people were worshipping idols they had made and were engaging in prostitution. These are only two of the many biblical passages which talk about the horrible influence Canaanite religion had on the Jewish people.

Given the incredible differences between the practices of the Canaanites and what God asked of the Israelites, it's clear that it was essentially inevitable that when the Israelites came out of the desert they would face fierce opposition from the Canaanites. It's hard to see how these two people could have encountered each other in a way that would not have led to war. And given how important the preservation the nation of Israel was, and how wars were fought back then, these battles were inevitably going to be fierce, bloody, and costly.

Here we have the basics of the background knowledge we need to understand the encounter between the Canaanites and the Israelites.

Difficulties Involved in Trying to Understand the Book of Joshua

Joshua 6:20-21 says that when the Israelites conquered Jericho:

The horns blew, the people began to shout. When they heard the signal horn, they raised a tremendous shout. The wall collapsed, and the people stormed the city in a frontal attack and took it. They observed the ban by putting to the sword all living creatures in the city: men and women, young and old, as well as oxen, sheep and asses.

Joshua 8:24-26 that when the Israelites conquered the city of Ai (pronounce eye) that:

All the inhabitants of Ai who had pursued the Israelites into the desert were slain by the sword there in the open, down to the last man. Then all Israel returned and put to the sword those inside the city. There fell that day a total of twelve thousand men and women, the entire population of Ai. Joshua kept the javelin in his hand stretched out until he had fulfilled the doom on all the inhabitants of Ai.

Can we really say this was what God wanted?

The bible clearly teaches that it is acceptable for followers of God to fight wars, use force, and defend themselves. The sins of the Canaanites were serious and had to be opposed. It seems unavoidable that Israel would go to war with the Canaanites and conquer these cities. But even once we accept all of that, how can we possibly justify the slaughter of entire populations? It seems simply incompatible with what we know about God. We can accept that Israel needed to fight wars in the Old Testament because they were the good guys, because God had called them to live a life that was worth defending. But how can their way of life have been something worth defending if they did this?

Possible Explanations

It is clear that whatever happened was something unique to the time

At the very least, even if we accept the worst case scenario, no one argues that anyone but Israel in the Old Testament had or has the right to do this. So this might have been a completely horrible event, but no one claims that God wants people to do this now or that it's acceptable now.

I think there is some good that comes out of understanding this, but it doesn't seem like enough to help us make sense of verses in the bible that are so shocking.

In the story of Rahab we see the extent of God's mercy even in the midst of these events

Rahab was a woman who lived in the city of Jericho. Rahab is called a prostitute in most English translations of the bible, but in Hebrew this word shares a common root with the title for someone who owned an inn, so we're not exactly sure what she was. She helped Israelite spies scout out the city. In return she and all her relatives and friends were protected. (Joshua 2:1-:22, 6:17, :22-:23) We see God's mercy in that even the extended family of Rahab were spared, even though they didn't directly help the Israelites. God's mercy is shown even more dramatically if she actually was a prostitute. This at least seems to connect with what we see in the rest of the bible, which is God saving and protecting those who show any openness to him.

It might not have quite happened this way

Here's why.

This is Sennacherib's prism:

http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/t/the_taylor_prism.aspx

Sennacherib was a ruler of the Assyrian Empire. On this prism he had this written about his siege of Jerusalem in 701 BC:

Hezekiah (the Jewish king at that time) himself I shut up in Jerusalem, his capital city, like a bird in a cage, building towers round the city to hem him in, and raising banks of earth against the gates, so as to prevent escape... Then upon Hezekiah there fell the fear of the power of my arms, and he sent out to me the chiefs and the elders of Jerusalem with 30 [talents of gold](#) and 800 talents of silver, and diverse treasures, a rich and immense booty... All these things were brought to me at Nineveh, the seat of my government.

In other words he is saying that I beat up the Jewish people bad enough, got what I wanted, and went home happy. The bible (2 Kings 18-19 and 2 Chronicles 23) says that Hezekiah's forces defeated Sennacherib's. Historically it's clear that Jerusalem was not conquered in 701 BC. In this case the bible's version of events seems more reliable, but the two versions of this story shows us that it was a common practice for leaders during this time to describe wars they fought in the way that best suited them.

What does this have to do with what happened at Jericho and Ai? The best archaeological evidence doesn't point towards these cities being completely destroyed. The stories we read in Joshua 6 and 8 look like they never actually happened exactly as they are told. It seems that later Israelites exaggerated their accounts of what the entry into Canaan was like. They did this in a way that we can find confusing and problematic, but the worst impressions we get from these books aren't the result of anything that God's people actually did or were told to do by God. The story of Rahab shows us that God's mercy was at work even as the Jewish people conquered Canaan, so we can trust that anything that would seem to indicate that God's mercy has disappeared doesn't reflect what actually happened.

Understanding different parts of the bible differently

This shows us how important it is to understand different parts of the bible in different ways. What we have in Joshua seems to be a historically accurate core that later authors added to by saying some problematic things. The core story is about God guiding his people into the Promised Land and helping them to defeat the forces of the pagans who lived in that land. Those who described these events added in their own, for lack of a better word, bragging about what this was like. In doing so they described morally unacceptable things, but thankfully the best historical and archaeological evidence tells us that this never actually happened. We need to be very careful in saying that any part of the bible contains this sort of exaggeration, but in this case the outside evidence is so strong that there doesn't appear to be any other explanation. There are still things that

God teaches us through the book of Joshua, but having a proper understanding of this book is not a simple thing to do.

A Quick Look at the Book of Judges

The title of this book refers to the leaders of Israel who rose up after the death of Joshua, and before the emergence of the Davidic kings. Judges 4 tells us the story of Deborah's period of service as the leader of Israel, as well as the lively story of a woman named Jael killing a foreign ruler by driving a tent peg through his head (Judges 4:17-:22). We also hear the story of Gideon (6:11-8:35) who was most well known for leading a smaller force of Israelite soldiers that defeated a much larger foreign force (7:9-:25). There is also the famous story of Samson (13:2-16:31).