

The Origin of Biblical Israel: Between History and Today

Biblical scholars and historians have been debating how the people of Israel got its start for decades if not centuries. Is the Biblical narrative of the Exodus and the conquest of the Land factual? Or is there another story underlying the Biblical account?

Four basic theories have emerged. Before describing them, I'll share a few facts that are necessary to understand the context of Israel's emergence.

- During most of the second millennium B.C., Palestine was under the control of Egypt, the major imperial power of the time.
- Egyptian imperial control over Palestine broke down around 1200 B.C, which appears to be the likely time for the emergence of Israel as a people.
- Around that time, between about 1250 and 1150 B.C., archeology shows that there was widespread social and political collapse in the Near East, with empires falling and major (and minor) cities being destroyed or abandoned. The reasons for this are mostly unclear.

"Conquest"

- The narrative in Joshua depicts a kind of Blitzkrieg in which the Israelites, after escaping from Egypt, sweep through and conquer the whole land of Palestine.
- For centuries, scholars assumed this account to be historically factual and confined themselves to trying to figure out under which Pharaoh the Exodus had happened and other similar questions.
- Continued research, including archeological discoveries, raised significant problems with the "conquest" model of Israel's origin:
 - The archeological record does not indicate any radical change in population in Palestine at the time of the supposed Exodus; there is considerable cultural continuity between earlier ("Canaanite") Palestine and later ("Israelite") Palestine.
 - While several cities in Palestine were destroyed around this period, they were not destroyed all at once, as one would expect if the Israelites had conquered the land at one fell swoop; and several cities that are important in the conquest

narrative, such as Jericho, were not inhabited at all in this period.

- The biblical text itself does not unequivocally support the conquest hypothesis.
 - While Joshua puts forth summary statements about a rapid conquest of the whole land, all the battles actually described take place within a restricted region of the Palestinian hill country.
 - The book of Judges paints a very different picture of the Israelites' place in Palestine. Rather than being masters of the whole land, they live among and are in constant conflict with various other peoples.
- Because of these problems, most though not all scholars have abandoned the “conquest” model of Israel's origin.

“Nomadic infiltration”

- In the 20s of the last century, German scholars put forth the theory that the Israelites were pastoral nomads who had gradually intruded into the land of Palestine and then, as their numbers grew, come into conflict with the existing city states there, ultimately conquering them over a period of time and gradually establishing their own rule.
- This gets rid of the difficulty about the various times at which Palestinian cities were destroyed, but it poses other problems:
 - Known nomadic peoples do not behave in the way presupposed by this theory. Cities and nomads are generally in mutually dependent and therefore friendly relations, each marketing things that the other needs.
 - This theory raises the same difficulty as the conquest model, namely the considerable cultural continuity between “Canaanite” Palestine and “Israelite” Palestine.

Because of the problems with both these models, many scholars have put forth theories of Israel's origin that see the people of Israel as arising from a political and social transformation of a portion of the native “Canaanite” population rather than the intrusion of people from outside Palestine. There are basically two varieties of this idea:

“Peasant revolt”

- The first of these to be put forward, in the 1960s and 1970s, asserts that Israel arose from Canaanite peasants who revolted

against the declining city states and established a new egalitarian society with the god Yahweh as its patron deity.

- The book that put forward this theory in greatest detail, *The Tribes of Yahweh* by Norman Gottwald, had a huge and continuing impact on biblical studies, and unlike the “conquest” and “nomadic infiltration” models this theory does not conflict with archeological data, but in its details it does go well beyond anything that can be confirmed by archeological or textual evidence.
- Some scholars have objected that the peasant revolt model is based on romantic and politically motivated assumptions.

“Highland transformation”

- Because of the perceived problems with the peasant revolt hypothesis, some scholars have put forth the theory that Israel arose as peasants in the Palestinian highlands were forced to depend on their own resources and organize their society anew when the economic and political systems they had been a part of fell apart as the Egyptian empire and the Palestinian city states declined and collapsed.
- This model too more or less fits the archeological and textual evidence.

The question is by no means settled, and today there are scholars supporting versions of all these theories as well as various combinations of them. Those who still support the conquest model, and thus a reading of the biblical narrative as historical fact, are now very much in the minority. Does that mean that the biblical text is all hokum, with nothing to say to us today? I leave that question for my wife.

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Joshua 1:1-9

"Joshua: A History of Hope"
Part 2: Rebecca Ireland

I've long been tempted to tell this joke but worried that I'd get in trouble for it. Should I go for it? Do you know who are the five constipated men in the Bible? 1) Cain wasn't Abel. 2) Moses took two tablets. 3) Joshua blew the walls down. 4) King Solomon sat for forty years. And 5) Balaam. I'll let you figure that one out.

Sorry about that bit of adolescent humor. It's the only joke I know about old Joshua. But in reality, the story about Joshua isn't very funny. As the people of God enter into the land of Canaan, we get to read about divinely ordained

genocide. So I can't say that I was too upset when I first learned that the historical record—or what we can know of it—doesn't support the idea of a genocidal conquest. Thank goodness! Makes you wonder: if it never really happened, did God really command it? I'd like to think not.

But that doesn't mean that the story does not contain any truth or that the text has nothing to say to us today. What we are dealing with here are stories that started out as oral traditions, and they weren't written down for a very long time. So we could think of the books of Joshua and of Judges as a mash up of lots of different memories. Joshua gives us a more rose-colored version. Judges gives us a messier one. And to have conflicting memories is not so surprising really. It just might be that when telling about the early years of their history, some people naturally remembered the victories, while others dwelled on the defeats.

We know people like that, don't we? We know people who only remember the suffering because they rehearse it every day. And others we know deny they ever suffered at all and only remember their successes. Well, in this case, the Bible remembers both, and regardless of whether we focus on just the gore or only on the glory, the Bible wants us to be able to see the grace.

The reason these stories are important, even if they are not historically verifiable, is that they show us how the people looked for grace: for God at work in their world. Every time they told the story about how they overcame formidable odds to establish themselves in the land of Canaan—whether they were part of an invasion or a revolution or just a gradual process of cultural domination—they were reminded of how God was with them every step of the way. And if God was in their past, that made it oh so much more believable that God was also in their present. Even if they couldn't see God just yet or know what God was doing on any given day, they could have faith that one day they would be able to look back on this time and this place and realize that God had been here all along.

I personally like the messier story in the Book of Judges more than the one in the Book of Joshua, because life is messy, and we need constant assurance that God is in the mess and not just in the success. Ask a member of the clergy how they got into the ministry. Many of them will tell you that they heard the call after the death of their spouse or at the end of their marriage or when they became disillusioned with their career or when they had gone through a major crisis in faith. Our lives are not one long straight string of victories as in the Book of Joshua. We take many detours and suffer many defeats along the way, as in the Book of Judges. But the Bible tells us that God hears our cry and delivers us each and every time, even if we don't recognize it at the time.

So, the message in the formation of Israel is this: don't let the enemy write your story. In concrete terms, that means don't lose hope in the midst of a messy divorce. Don't give up your faith because of financial stress or chronic illness. Don't abandon God or think that God has abandoned you because your life is busy or your family is crazy. Don't be tempted to go after other gods because you don't see how this One has done anything for you lately. Instead, do what the ancient Hebrews did. Like Joshua, keep telling your story, over and over, until you can find God in it. Because, by locating God in your past, you will be convinced that God is also living in your present.

When Joshua got old and was about to die, he told the story one more time and then said to the people:

"Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."

Then the people answered, "Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed...Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God."

[Joshua 24:15-18]

Joshua tells us that if you can keep the memory, you can keep the commitment. If you know the history, you know there is hope. Thanks be to God.