

Conquest or Settlement?

History and Theology in Joshua and Judges

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I. Introduction

There has been much debate over the relationship of the Old Testament books of Joshua and Judges, especially in terms of their reliability as historical documents. Unfortunately, the historical issues have tended to dominate most discussion of the books and have made it difficult in some cases to read the books in terms of discerning theological intent. On the other hand, many people simply are not aware of the historical issues within the books, either because of a lack of familiarity with the details of the books or because certain views of Scripture have prevented asking historical questions. This can lead not only to an unreasonable naiveté about the complexity of Israel's early history, but also to a distorted perception of what the traditions actually say about God and his relationship with his people.

We should not ignore the historical issues or pretend they are not as severe as they are. Honesty in biblical study compels us to ask the historical questions and use all the available methods at our disposal to address those questions. But then neither should we allow those historical issues to obscure what the traditions might be saying in terms of confession about God, as Scripture for the Church. Scripture is not a book of history that only recites the facts. Finally, it is a book of Faith that bears witness to us of God's work in human history, and what that meant in the lives of people, and through that what it means for us. So, here we will briefly survey some of the historical issues in these two books, look at a sampling of historical solutions as well as some of the literary perspectives, and then propose a theological reading of the books that does not place the historical issues as central. That theological reading will arise more from the literary dynamic of the two books as part of the larger biblical witness rather than on any final solution of the historical issues.

From the beginning, we should distinguish the kinds of questions that we will ask of the biblical text and not confuse them. If we ask historical questions, such as questions of when, or where, or how, then the methods that we use to investigate those questions will need to be tools that will produce answers to those historical questions. Likewise, if we ask theological questions, tools that help us seek answers of data will not likely help us find the theological message of the writings. It is not that these methods are not complimentary; it is that each of them serves a different purpose. The greatest danger is that we will ask one set of questions, for example questions of history, and then assume that because we have answered theologically what the text says about God that we have also answered the data questions about history.

Yet, historical questions produce historical answers while theological questions produce theological answers. We might ask, "when did this happen?" If by using methods of historical investigation we conclude that a certain time period was 1290-1050, this does not say anything about the theological confession about God to which the same passages may bear witness. We may debate the date, how we

arrived at it, evidence to support a different date, or even question whether they kept time in the same way that we do. But the answer to that question of date does not tell us anything about the Israelites' testimony to God (theology).

It is true that some of those historical answers may raise questions about some of the theological assumptions we often make about the text. But that is one of the roles of the historical questions, to bring to light inadequate or mistaken linking of theological and historical concerns.

On the other hand, it should be stated clearly that nothing that will be said here about the historical questions will ever challenge the fundamental assumption of the Old Testament, that God revealed himself in real human history in real times and places. The Bible cannot be divorced from that thorough historical grounding, which keeps in from becoming just another set of myths about cosmic gods who have no real connection to human history. The biblical confession is unequivocal and consistent that God acts in human history, and that the Scripture of the Old (and for Christians the New) Testament bear faithful witness to that revelation (see [Revelation and Inspiration of Scripture](#)).

That confession demands that we set the biblical witness against the background of human history. By that very nature of being historical it also compels us to ask historical questions. And yet, the message of Scripture is not that history. It is that distinction that will help us hear both the historical and theological dimensions of these books.

II. The Historical Issues in Joshua and Judges

Both books recount the story of Israel's settlement in the land of Canaan and their first couple of centuries in the land. The first half of Joshua describes the actual entry of the Israelites into the land and the early battles for control of key cities (1-12). The second half of the book details how the land was divided among the tribes of Israel (13-22), as well as a concluding covenant ceremony in which the people committed themselves to the worship of God (23-24).

The Book of Judges tells us of continued struggles in the land as local tribal chieftains or warlords (Heb: *shophet*, pl. *shophtim*, "judge") led isolated campaigns to free the Israelites from recurrent oppression at the hands of surrounding people. The book is organized in regular cycles that mark the rise of new leaders, a cycle given in outline form early in the book (2:10-23). The stories of Gideon and the consequences of his leadership (6-9), Samson and the ongoing struggle against the Philistines (13-16), as well as a general summary of Israel's intertribal fighting that nearly destroyed them (17-21) occupies over one half of the book (see [The Judges of Israel](#)).

Without careful reading, the two books appear as a sequential narrative of Israel's rise to power as a dominant force in Canaan. This has been the traditional view of the books, that they recounted an orderly chronological account of the conquest of Palestine by the Israelites. The very idea of a "conquest" of the land has become a traditional way of describing Israel's entry into the land.

Yet there are obvious hints that the two books may not be as straightforwardly sequential as they appear from a casual reading. For example, after telling of an almost unbroken chain of victories over the Canaanites, the Book of Joshua concludes by reporting the death and burial of Joshua (24:29-30). The Book of Judges begins by reinforcing this sequential narrative: "After the death of Joshua. . ." (1:1). There follows a long list of defeats and setbacks, including the threat of syncretism with the worship of Ba'al practiced by the inhabitants of the land, with the implication that this happened following Joshua's death. Yet the second chapter of Judges still has Joshua leading the people during these defeats and only later reports his death (2:8-10). On a historical level this suggests that these are at least partially overlapping accounts of the same time period, adapted to a schematized or patterned presentation of history to emphasize theological themes.

An even closer examination of the two books reveals a much more complex situation that raises both historical and theological questions, not only about the reliability of the accounts as straightforward history but also about the very nature of Israel's entry into Palestine. The debates surrounding this issue have been intense and at times acrimonious, ranging from those who deny any historical validity to the accounts to those who insist that every detail of the accounts is absolutely and totally accurate. There have been agendas applied to the issue from both directions, with some using a denial of the possibility of anything miraculous occurring as a basis to deny the historical accuracy, to other using an idea of the inerrancy of Scripture to assert absolute accuracy.

In between these two extremes are biblical scholars and historians who try to evaluate the actual biblical texts in order to understand what the texts themselves communicate. Using both the methods of historical investigation and the tools of biblical study, they have attempted to understand the biblical texts on their own terms apart from the dogmas and ideologies of either side. It is that endeavor that we will survey here.

A. The Perspective of the Book of Joshua

1. The Lightning Conquest of Joshua 1-12

On the surface, the book of Joshua seems to present the Israelite entry into Canaan as a single campaign of unified Israel under the command of Joshua. The invasion appears very "clean." The Israelites entered from the east, quickly subdued the closest Canaanite cities, and then moved into the central highlands around Shechem.

After celebrating the early victories at Jericho and Ai, and making alliances with some of the Canaanites (Gibeonites), they spread out through the land as a unified army, first to the South and then to the North. In lightning raids against the Canaanite strongholds that virtually wiped out the Canaanite inhabitants (11:20), Joshua and the army of "all Israel" took the entire land leaving little but mop-up operations and the task of dividing the conquered territory between the twelve tribes. The Israelites enjoyed peace and security as the last rested from war. (10:40-42; 11:14-20, 23; 12:7; cf. also 18:1, 10; 21:43-45; 23:1). At the conclusion of the conquest narratives, a thematic verse summarizes this section of the book (11:23):

So Joshua took the whole land, according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses; and Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war.

There is some archaeological evidence that seems to confirm Joshua's version of a rapid conquest of the land. For example, there are a number of Canaanite fortress cities that are listed in the Joshua account as destroyed or taken by Joshua and the unified Israelite army: Hazor (11:10, 14), Lachish (10:31-32), Debir (10:38-39), and Eglon (10:34-35). Excavations at some of these Canaanite cities show evidence of a massive destruction followed by new occupation levels, which would be consistent with a sudden invasion. Also, cities *not* listed as captured, or specifically listed as *not* taken show little if any evidence of destruction.

2. Echoes of Other Memories in the Book of Joshua

Yet even within the Joshua traditions there are accounts that seemingly conflict with the idea of a rapid and total conquest. On the one hand, there are sweeping statements about Israel's total victory over all the inhabitants of the land (10:40-42):

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the LORD God of Israel commanded. And Joshua defeated them from Kadesh-barnea to Gaza, and all the

country of Goshen, as far as Gibeon. Joshua took all these kings and their land at one time, because the LORD God of Israel fought for Israel.

“These kings and their land,” in the context of this chapter refers specifically to King Adoni-zedek of Jerusalem (10:1), King Hoham of Hebron, King Piram of Jarmuth, King Japhia of Lachish, and King Debir of Eglon (10:3). However, there are cities, such as Jerusalem, as well as others that are listed as taken or included within the boundaries of the tribes that raise other difficulties. In fact, the “clean” conquest that appears on the surface of the book of Joshua becomes increasingly difficult as the book is probed more deeply.

In spite of the overall impression, a closer reading of the details of the Joshua account reveals that the book actually tells us about only limited conquests of Canaanite territory, mainly in the territory of Benjamin (Jericho), Judah (Hebron, Debir), and Naphtali (Hazor). In fact, the first nine chapters of Joshua recount only the capture of two cities (Jericho and Ai), and the settlement of the territory of Gibeah by making an alliance with the Canaanites who lived there. Chapters 10-11 only briefly recount all the other conquests. Yet these are mostly the battles between Israel and the kings of Canaanite city-states who banded together to try to stop Israel’s entry into the land.

There are no reports about conquests in the central highlands of Ephraim (Shiloh, Bethel) and Manasseh (Shechem), even though this was the “staging ground” for the early tribal conquests (8:30-35, 18:1 ff; cf. 24:1-28). The Israelites simply moved into this territory, even though it is obvious from the presence of ancient Ba’al shrines at important cities and throughout the area that it had been inhabited for some time. Most of the battles recounted are on the fringes of the territory as they entered the land, or are against Canaanites who were making retaliatory raids against the Israelites as they settled into the central highlands surrounding Shechem (ch. 10-11).

While the northern conquests seem to go better, the battles in the South, along the coasts, and around the Megiddo Plain (Plain of Esdraelon and the Valley of Jezreel) do not seem nearly as successful as some of the lists and accounts in some places of Joshua indicate. For example, the list of conquered cities in chapter 12 includes some that Samuel and Kings report were not taken until the time of David and Solomon some 200-250 years later (Jerusalem, Gezer, Taanach, Megiddo, Dor). Other passages outside the city lists, both within Joshua and in other traditions, acknowledge that these cities were not taken in Joshua’s time but came under Israelite control much later. Even the Joshua tradition knows that the Israelites did not take Jerusalem in the time of Joshua: (15:63)

But the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the people could not drive out; so the Jebusites dwell with the people of Judah at Jerusalem to this day.

This is confirmed in 1 Samuel where the capture of Jebus from the Jebusites, the city that would become Jerusalem, is a key event in the account of David’s reign as King (5:6-7):

And the king and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites. . . David took the stronghold of Zion, that is, the city of David.

And yet, the defeat of the king of Jerusalem and the incorporation of Jerusalem into the tribal territory is mentioned in Joshua both in the battle reports (ch. 10) and in the list of cities captured by all Israel under the leadership of Joshua (12:10, 18:28). Likewise, Joshua reports that the king of Gezer was defeated by all Israel (10:33, 12:12), his city incorporated into the territory of the tribe of Ephraim (16:3), and then given to the Levites as one of the Levitical cities (21:21). Yet the Joshua traditions also remember that the city of Gezer was never controlled by the Israelites under Joshua (16:10):

They did not, however, drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer: so the Canaanites have lived within Ephraim to this day but have been made to do forced labor.

This is confirmed in the Book of Judges (1:28-29):

When Israel grew strong, they put the Canaanites to forced labor, but did not in fact drive them out. And Ephraim did not drive out the Canaanites who lived in Gezer; but the Canaanites lived among them in Gezer.

The introductory comment “when Israel grew strong” suggests that some time passed before Israel could gain any degree of control of Gezer. Here we might ask the logical question how it was that the Israelites could force the inhabitants of Gezer to do forced labor for them, effectually making them slaves, yet could not force them out of the city. A comment a few verses later in Judges may provide us some clue (2:2):

For your part, do not make a covenant with the inhabitants of this land; tear down their altars.’ But you have not obeyed my command. See what you have done!

This suggests that contrary to the assertions in Joshua about killing all the Canaanite inhabitants of the land (e.g., 6:21), the Israelites actually incorporated at least some Canaanites into Israelite society. This is one of the first solid clues that Israel’s entry into the land may have been much more complex than the Joshua account appears to present on the surface.

Later traditions confirm that Gezer was not under Israelite control until the time of Solomon when it was given to him by Pharaoh after he had captured the city from the Canaanites (1 Kings 9:16-71a):

Pharaoh king of Egypt had gone up and captured Gezer and burnt it with fire, and had slain the Canaanites who dwelt in the city, and had given it as dowry to his daughter, Solomon’s wife; so Solomon rebuilt Gezer. . .

There are also other tensions within the book of Joshua between the accounts as they first appear on the surface, and another memory that surfaces on closer inspection. For example, there is tension between the idea of total conquest by all Israel and the memory of limited local conquests by individual tribes or local military leaders (cf. 18:2-3). While the idea of “all Israel” is a prominent theme throughout Joshua, there are still echoes of individual tribes struggling to overcome local opposition. For example, the fall of the stronghold of Debir is credited in one place to “all Israel” under Joshua (10:38-39):

Then Joshua, with all Israel, turned back to Debir and assaulted it, and he took it with its king and all its towns; they struck them with the edge of the sword, and utterly destroyed every person in it; he left no one remaining; just as he had done to Hebron, and, as he had done to Libnah and its king, so he did to Debir and its king.

Yet, there is also the memory that Debir was taken by Caleb and his family who had emerged as tribal leaders of Judah, and specifically by his brother Othniel. Both are identified as “descendants of Kenaz,” or Kennizites (Josh 15:6, 15:7). While Caleb was always identified with the tribe of Judah, the Kennizites were remembered as Canaanites (cf. Gen 15:19, Num 32:12). We know that other Canaanite peoples had joined the Israelites, for example, the Kenites, the people of Moses’ wife (Jud 1:16). So it is entirely possible that Caleb’s family had Canaanite ancestry. In any case, the Joshua traditions remember that the city of Debir was taken by Caleb’s brother Othniel, who would later become one of Israel’s judges (15:15-17; cf. Jud 1:11-16; 3:9-10).

And [Caleb] went up from there against the inhabitants of Debir; now the name of Debir formerly was Kiriath-sepher. And Caleb said, “Whoever smites Kiriath-sepher, and takes it, to him will I give Achsah my daughter as wife.” And Othniel the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb, took it. . .

There is even a tradition that recounts Joshua himself pleading with the individual tribes to take the territory that had been assigned to them. Accounts in the first half of the book described complete and

totally control of the land under Joshua and “all Israel,” with the land then divided between the tribes while the “land had rest from war.” Yet accounts later in the book seem to describe a situation quite different in which the allotments were made to each tribe who were then responsible themselves for taking the territory assigned to them (18:1-3):

Then the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them. There remained among the Israelites seven tribes whose inheritance had not yet been apportioned. So Joshua said to the Israelites, “How long will you be slack about going in and taking possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your ancestors, has given you?”

Here the tension is obvious even within a few verses, as the perspective of the land having already been subdued (v. 1) is immediately followed by the assumption that seven tribes had not yet taken their assigned territory (vv. 3-4). The early chapters of Judges support this perspective that individual tribes were still fighting to take their territory (Jud 1:3, 17).

There are still other indications within the book of Joshua of a memory that the conquest was not as all encompassing as some other passages in the book might indicate.

Josh 13:13 Yet the people of Israel did not drive out the Geshurites or the Maacathites; but Geshur and Maacath dwell in the midst of Israel to this day.

Josh 17:12 Yet the descendants of Manasseh could not take possession of those cities [Bethshean, Ibleam, Dor, En-dor, Taanach, Megiddo]; but the Canaanites persisted in dwelling in that land. . .

Even at Joshua’s impending death, the traditions acknowledge that there was a great deal of the land that had not yet come under Israelite control (13:2-6a):

This is the land that still remains: all the regions of the Philistines, and all those of the Geshurites (from the Shihor, which is east of Egypt, northward to the boundary of Ekron, it is reckoned as Canaanite; there are five rulers of the Philistines, those of Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron), and those of the Avvim, in the south, all the land of the Canaanites, and Mearah that belongs to the Sidonians, to Aphek, to the boundary of the Amorites, and the land of the Gebalites, and all Lebanon, toward the east, from Baal-gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo-hamath, all the inhabitants of the hill country from Lebanon to Misrephoth-maim, even all the Sidonians.

Beyond the repeated emphasis on “all Israel” in certain places in Joshua, there is little evidence that Israel was an “all” united army. In fact, internal evidence in Joshua, and as we shall see even more strongly in Judges, seems to show a group of very loosely allied yet fiercely independent tribes that were as quick to fight each other as they were outsiders rather than being a unified people. These factious tribes seemed to have fought localized battles and united only in limited ways for limited objectives.

There is also a memory within the Joshua traditions that in spite of the claims of total conquest in places, some of the tribes were actually displaced from their original allotments because they could not conquer the cities given to them. For example, the tribe of Dan was originally assigned territory in the southwestern foothills at the northern edge of the Philistine territory (19:40-46):

The seventh lot came out for the tribe of Dan, according to its families. And the territory of its inheritance included Zorah, Eshta-ol, Ir-shemesh, Sha-alabbin, Aijalon, Ithlah, Elon, Timnah, Ekron, Eltekeh, Gibbethon, Baalath, Jehud, Bene-berak, Gath-rimmon, and Me-jarkon and Rakkon with the territory over against Joppa.

Ekron, along with Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Gaza, was the northernmost of the five main cities that formed the Philistine Pentapolis, the heart of Philistine power (13:3). The Philistines were far stronger than the Israelites at the time. They had superior arms that included a formidable chariotry as well as iron weapons (cf. Judg 1:19). The Israelites would not learn how to work iron for nearly two centuries (cf. 1 Sam 13:19-21), and what weapons they had were made of relatively soft bronze. In spite of reports in Joshua of Philistine cities being taken, the Philistines were not subdued until the time of David, and even then remained in the land.

The Danites simply could not take the Philistine strongholds, and were likely harassed by the Philistines who were not too happy about newcomers trying to occupy their territory. Driven from their assigned land the tribe of Dan moved to the far north and settled there, which gave rise to the saying “from Dan to Beersheba” (Judg 20:1), meaning the whole country from north to south. The Joshua traditions refer matter-of-factly to this reassignment of territory (Josh 19:47-48; cf. Jud 18):

When the territory of the Danites was lost to them, the Danites went up and fought against Leshem, and after capturing it and putting it to the sword they took possession of it and settled in it, calling Leshem, Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor. This is the inheritance of the tribe of Dan, according to their families -- these cities with their villages.

In a similar manner, the western half of the tribe of Manasseh was assigned the territory that lay along the eastern Megiddo Plain to the Jordan Valley, the site of one of the strongest Philistine fortresses in the area at Beth-shean (or Beth-shan). They complained to Joshua about their allotment under the guise that they had not been given enough land, when it seems apparent that they simply could not take the Philistine garrisons in the area (17:12, 16):

Yet the Manassites could not take possession of those towns; but the Canaanites continued to live in that land. . . . The tribe of Joseph said, “The hill country is not enough for us; yet all the Canaanites who live in the plain have chariots of iron, both those in Beth-shean and its villages and those in the Valley of Jezreel.”

Joshua was not sympathetic to their plight and told them that they would have to defeat the Philistines in order to have their land (17:17-18). Yet, later traditions tell us that even in the time of Saul some 200 years later, Beth-Shean was still a Philistine fortress on whose walls the mutilated body of Saul and his sons were hung as Philistine war trophies (1 Sam 31:12).

There are even hints that some of the tribes were forced to merge with other tribes, or perhaps were decimated in this period by the Philistines. For example, there is some evidence that the tribe of Simeon was absorbed into the tribe of Judah (Josh 19:9; cf. Judg 1:17).

The inheritance of the tribe of Simeon formed part of the territory of Judah; because the portion of the tribe of Judah was too large for them, the tribe of Simeon obtained an inheritance within their inheritance.

Simeon’s territory recorded in Joshua lies at the western and southern edges of Judah, the territory closest to the Philistine strongholds along the southwestern coast. The tribe of Simeon, even though portrayed as part of Judah, plays little role in Israel’s history and is not mentioned again after the 6th century BC.

Likewise, the tribe of Gad shared its territory with the tribe of Reuben on the eastern side of the Jordan (Deut 3:12). Also, the tribes that were assigned territory occupied by other Canaanite strongholds along the Megiddo Plains (Issachar and Western Manasseh) and along the Phoenician Coast (Asher) virtually disappear from Israel’s history during the period of the Judges.

There are several other historical difficulties that arise from the book of Joshua, both from external evidence and from within the book itself. For example, even though there are destruction levels in some of

the Canaanite cities mentioned in Joshua, as noted above, there is no evidence to link Israel to the destruction levels, either in time frame or physical artifacts. That the cities were suddenly destroyed is obvious from the excavations. Warfare was common in the ancient world, and even from other biblical records, we know that there was constant warfare among the many city-states into which Canaan was divided. But there are problems in establishing a certain chronology of Israel's entry into the land, related to various views on the date of the Exodus (see [Date of the Exodus](#)). Various estimates range from 1440 to 1290 BC. Without a clear time frame, there is little way definitely to link Israel to the destruction of these cities.

All this simply suggests that what appears on the surface of the book of Joshua is not the whole story. What appears to be a "clean" and simple entry into the land with the straightforward conquest and subjugation of the Canaanites by a unified people under the leadership of Joshua, may have been a much more protracted affair and had an exceedingly more complex history. It also suggests that even traditions within the book of Joshua, a "minority voice" in the book, were familiar with that more complicated history.

This raises questions that go deeper than the historical questions about the nature of the Israelite entry into the land. If the book itself preserves the memory of that other more difficult and more complicated version of Israel's occupation of Canaan, why does the present reading of the book so simplify the story? Was the book deliberately constructed to focus on one aspect of the story, while unhesitatingly providing the details of a different version of that history? If one aspect was emphasized, what was the purpose of doing so? And what was the purpose of providing details that would bring the historical aspects of that version into question?

Here, we have obviously raised questions that cannot be answered by investigating just the historical problems of the book. There are far more questions, first of literary composition, and then questions of intent and purpose, which in this context are finally theological questions. And here it is obvious that the very historical questions that arise from a closer reading of the book and need to be addressed by historical research, also reveal a whole set of theological questions that invite us to delve deeper into the traditions to understand them.

B. The View from the Book of Judges

As we move from Joshua into the book of Judges, the tone and mood of the writing changes considerably. While the main themes of Joshua are emphasized by the promise "I will be with you" (1:5; cf. 23:10) and the refrain "the land had rest from war," (11:23), Judges presents a much more somber perspective. From the beginning of the book, the people are fragmented and beleaguered by powerful Canaanites who are pressing them from all sides. The confidence that permeates the book of Joshua has disappeared, replaced by a sense of desperation in the face of enormous obstacles. The thematic comments of Judges are the opening question, "Who shall go up for us against the Canaanites?" (1:1), and the concluding commentary, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25).

Scattered tribes who were desperately trying to gain a stable foothold in the land have replaced the idea of "all Israel." While the Israelites were entrenched in the land, they were constantly pressed on every side by surrounding peoples. Even though the Book of Joshua had reported the death of Joshua in a period when the "land had rest from war," the Book of Judges clearly places Joshua still in leadership during this chaotic scramble for survival amid ongoing defeats and failures to take key cities (Jud 2:6). After the death of Joshua in the Book of Judges the leadership of Israel passed into the hands of local military leaders who arose to address specific crises. Most of these leaders were inept and terribly flawed. Even the well-known figures of Gideon and Samson are more like anti-heroes. Gideon was a cowardly Ba'al worshipper who led his entire family into Ba'al worship (8:27). Sampson, in spite of his Nazarite vows and God-given strength, was more concerned with Philistine women than he was with the welfare of Israel, a vice that cost him his life. The best leader in this entire period was a woman, Deborah, who proved to be a capable civil as well as a military leader (4:5).

In general, the book portrays an increasingly deteriorating situation. The people continually abandoned the worship of God and adopted the fertility religion of the Canaanites. The leaders were unable to bring any unity to the people and could not provide any spiritual leadership.

Besides the obvious differences in the perspective of the two books, there are also differences in historical details between the books. The perspective of failure and hardship that had been only an underlying strand of Joshua emerges in Judges as the main topic. This is evidenced in several specific examples that serve to highlight the differences.

We have already noted that one of the main themes of the Book of Joshua is the idea of “all Israel” fighting a unified campaign against the Canaanites (3:7, 17, 4:14, 7:23, 8:21, 24, 23:2). Yet the minority voice of Joshua also preserves the memory of individual campaigns by individual tribes, such as Judah’s campaign against Debir (15:13) and Western Manasseh and Ephraim struggling against the Philistines in the Megiddo Plain (17:16). In the Book of Judges, there is never a unified Israel. From the beginning of the book isolated tribes are fighting for their very survival against superior forces in isolated campaigns. In Judges, this idea of independent tribes fighting for their own territory is even connected with the leadership of Joshua:

2:6 When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land.

Judah and Simeon made an alliance to defeat Adoni-Bezek of the Perizzites (1:1-7). Judah campaigned against Canaanites in Hebron and the southern desert, sometimes with the aid of Simeon (1:8-21) and were more successful than most of the tribes in securing their territory. Western Manasseh and Ephraim continued, largely unsuccessfully, to fight the Philistines along the Megiddo Plain (1:22-29). Zebulon, Asher, and Naphtali all tried unsuccessfully to drive the Canaanites from their territory, but settled for moving in among them (1:30-33). The Amorites, a general term for Canaanites, forced the tribe of Dan to remain in the hill country (1:34-36).

Rather than sweeping claims of conquest, Judges interprets the failure of the people to take the land as a test from God, either to see if they would remain faithful to God (2:22-23), or to teach the young people who had not yet learned war how to fight (3:1-2). The book also sees the Israelites’ struggles to secure the land as a judgment for failing to remain faithful to God and allowing the worship of Baal to flourish (2:11-15, 20).

As the book unfolds in recounting the exploits of the *shophetim* it becomes more apparent that they are local leaders rather than “all Israel” leaders. Othneil led Judah in campaigns against Arameans from the northeast (3:7-11). Ehud led the Benjamites against the Moabites who were raiding across the Jordan from the east (3:12-30). Deborah led the Ephraimites against the Canaanite city-state of Hazor (4-5), while Gideon led a small band from Manasseh against a Midianite and Amalekite coalition (6-8). Jephthah raised an army from among Manasseh and Gilead to fight the Ammonites who were trying to expand their territory across the Jordan (11), and precipitated a brief civil war because he did not invite the Ephraimites to participate (12:1-6). Finally, Samson became the hero of the tribe of Dan because of his harassment of the Philistines (13-16).

To further emphasize the scattered nature of the tribes and the apparent total lack of unity, the Book of Judges concludes with accounts of a destructive civil war. The tribe of Benjamin was nearly annihilated because they chose to fight rather than recognize the authority of the other tribes over them.

All of this serves to highlight the fact that Judges agrees with the minority voice in Joshua that the Israelite settlement in the land was much more complicated than the smooth operation that the first chapters of Joshua portrays. This again raises serious historical questions about Israel’s entry into the land and the nature of the conquest. But it also raises questions about the nature of the material in Joshua and Judges, and how we should hear that material as Scripture.

C. Summary of the Issues

Joshua presents the entry into the land as a rapid conquest in which the Israelites eliminated all opposition and possessed all of the land as they obeyed God and followed his leadership. They were led by a single leader appointed by God and achieved success because God fought for them and was with them. The impression given is that Israel was a tightly unified people working together as one, unified in their worship of God and in their goal of settling the land and eliminating the Canaanites from the land.

Yet within Joshua there is a minority voice, another memory that acknowledges the entry into the land was anything but smooth, and that Israel was not a unified people. It consistently acknowledges that there was a great deal of land left unconquered, and that the process of entry into the land could be seen more in terms of settlement rather than conquest.

Judges presents the Israelites as a minority, precariously holding onto small enclaves of land within a much larger and stronger Canaanite majority. Following the minority voice of Joshua, it acknowledges that many of the territories or cities reported as subdued under Joshua by all Israel were not taken until much later or by actions of individuals or alliances of tribes. The impression is given that Israel was a very loosely confederated collection of individual tribes who sometimes came together for a common cause. They were plagued by disunity both socially and religiously, lacked any stable leadership, and often fought among themselves.

This raises the primary historical questions of the two books. Was Israel's entry into the land by conquest or by settlement? Did Israel enter the land suddenly as a strongly unified conquering people? Or did they migrate into the area over a period of time gradually spreading over the land as they were able to gain enough strength to challenge the Canaanite city-states? Or was it some combination of conquest and settlement, in which they fought some initial battles on the fringes of Canaanite territory to establish a foothold in the land, and then gradually infiltrated into Canaanite territory over a period of centuries? Or was there even a more complicated history in which they allied themselves with some Canaanite city-states and fought others, at the same time that they joined up with remnants of ancestral tribes who had remained in the central highlands around Shechem since the time of Abraham? Or was the whole entry into the land nothing more than a peaceful migration of people who were forced into fighting battles as the people of the land resisted being crowded by newcomers, and the conquest stories are only tribal legend?

And these questions then lead to literary questions about the relationship between the Books of Joshua and Judges. The traditional view has been that the books are sequential, with Joshua telling the story of the initial successful settlement in the land under the leadership of Joshua, while Judges tells of a later time after the death of Joshua when God was punishing the people for disobedience. Yet, is it possible, in light of the minority voice in Joshua, that the books are not as sequential as traditionally thought? Is it possible that the differences in the books may not even be as much historical as they are theological? That is, much like the different versions of the Gospels, do the two books simply present a different emphasis of essentially the same period in Israel's history? To this question we will return.

D. Historical Perspectives on the Entry into the Land

Of course, historians and biblical scholars have offered various theories to address these questions. For various reasons, as noted at the beginning of this study, the historical questions have tended to dominate study of this material. As a result, many of the theories are to answer the historical questions raised by the books, since this has tended to be the area of most concern even to those who want to use the Bible as Scripture. While there are many variations and refinements of the historical approach, most of them can be summarized under four major categories.

1. Literal Conquest

This view favors the majority voice of Joshua as being the historical core of the traditions. It also assumes the biblical books are primarily a historical record of Israel's entry into the land preserved within the community simply because they were historical records. A well-known proponent of this perspective is Yezekiel Kaufmann.

This perspective basically accepts the traditional way of viewing the books. It assumes that the accounts are basically historically reliable as they stand in the Bible with the character of Joshua as the focal point. He led the Israelites in a near total conquest of the land in a series of lightning strikes against the Canaanites, successful because God led them into the battles and fought for them. Judges portrays a much later time when the Israelites had abandoned the worship of God, and therefore were suffering under God's condemnation. All of the failures of the people can be traced to their disobedience. The entire account is of military battles being fought; there was no peaceful occupation of the land at any time.

What appear to be discrepancies in the accounts could be explained if we had more information. Lacking that, we simply have to accept the majority voice of Joshua as the most reliable and suspend judgment on anything that does not fit with the idea of a literal and absolute conquest of the land as portrayed in Joshua 1-11 unless or until we have more information.

2. Conquest Modified by Tradition

This perspective tries to balance Joshua and Judges as historical sources, but actually favors the evidence of archaeological data and historical reconstruction built from them as more reliable sources of historical evidence than the biblical texts. William F. Albright, G. E. Wright, and John Bright are well-known proponents of this perspective, although they would differ in details.

This view sees the traditions of a conquest of the land as a valid historical memory of Israel, but one that has been greatly modified by tradition and the retelling of the story within the community over the centuries. While the basic details of the biblical traditions need to be taken seriously as preserving that historical memory, they cannot be taken literally or at face value without some corroborating evidence that would lend support to them. Where archaeology cannot directly support the biblical traditions, they should not be taken as reliable history, although they may still preserve valid historical memory. We simply have no way to know in cases where there is no supporting evidence. Some scholars at this point would feel much more free to speculate about the actual history, while others would insist that we should follow the biblical text in the absence of contrary evidence.

So this view tends to lean heavily on archaeology to support the basic history, assuming that the biblical story line has been heavily schematized and simplified in the biblical accounts. This view would see Joshua as a leader in early Israel, but one that become a hero figure in later generations. As a result, the traditions expanded his role and attributed some of the actions of later figures, for example some of the conquests of David, to him to validate his position as God's leader of the people.

3. Peaceful Settlement

This view leans toward Judges, as well as the minority voice of Joshua, as a more reliable source of early Israel's history. The majority voice of Joshua is rejected as being too idealized and too heavily influenced by theological and tribal agenda to be of much value. The methods employed are far more historical, trying to reconstruct history from ancient documents, artifacts, and preserved traditions in order to build a historical stage on which to set the biblical material. As a result, there is heavy dependence on comparative religion, as well as logical interpretation and reconstruction of history, a technique common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth are the most well known advocates of this approach.

Israel's movement into the land is seen as a relatively peaceful migration of tribes who gradually settled among the city-states of Palestine. After an extended period of consolidation in the 11th and 10th centuries, the settlement climaxed in a period of expansion under the leadership of David in the 9th and early 8th centuries. The Israelites who first entered the land joined remnants of family units who had not joined the migration to Egypt with Jacob and had remained through the centuries in the central highlands around Shechem. They fought isolated battles as they expanded their territory and encroached into Canaanite controlled areas. But there were no "all Israel" wars, which was a romanticized nationalistic ideal projected back into this period from a much later time, reflected in the book of Joshua. Joshua himself was only a local Ephraimite leader who gradually became associated with the "all Israel" ideal. There was no "people" until the tribal confederation portrayed in Joshua 24. This covenant ceremony became the focal point for the rise of the unified people that would become the nation of Israel.

4. Peasant Revolt

This perspective rejects both Joshua and Judges as reliable historical accounts, and rather depends on modern social theory to address the historical issues. The methods employed are a specific type of social theory that sees progression and development in society as the result of class struggle between the "haves" and the "have nots." This view sees the biblical traditions as largely folklore that arose out of the social progression of a group trying to justify its own national identity. Proponents of this perspective are George Medenhall and Norman Gottwald.

In this view, the idea of "tribe" should be understood as a social unit, not a family unit. The relationships that appear as family relationships in the traditions are actually ways to describe social relationships and interactions. The conflict present in the accounts between Israelites and Canaanites should be understood as an internal class struggle between peasant villagers (Israelites) and wealthy city dwellers (Canaanites), a struggle between the "haves" and the "have nots." This struggle was precipitated in Canaan by the influx of a small core group of escaped slaves, the original Israelites, who rallied the people to rise up in rebellion against the oppression of the dominant class. The association of all the later Israelites with the early events of the exodus, Sinai, and entry into the land is a projection back into history of the story of the group that emerged as a dominant "tribe" in the area. They simply adopted the story of the small group of escaped slaves that first entered the land and made it a national heritage.

III. Literary Perspectives on Joshua and Judges

These different perspectives on the historical issues of the books each attempt to construct a plausible historical scenario of the material in Joshua and Judges. As can be seen from this brief survey, there are arguments on all sides of the issue, some depending more on the biblical texts in various ways while others depend more on evidence external to the text, reconstruction, and speculation. But the diversity of the opinions, none of which provides adequate explanation to all aspects of the biblical text, suggests that in asking historical questions we may be asking questions that the text itself cannot answer, or perhaps was never intended to answer. This has led biblical scholars to turn to other methods for addressing the apparent historical discrepancies in the books.

These perspectives use a literary approach in examining the text, asking questions of how the tradition developed, how the books were composed, what the relationship might be between the books (and to other biblical traditions) in terms of story line, what is actually intended to be communicated, history and methods of composition, and possible sources. Of course, some of these methods are just as speculative as historical reconstruction. But many have found that examining the texts in terms of literary dynamic and intent has produced a better understanding of the texts than trying to answer the historical questions.

As we might expect, there are a variety of perspectives in a literary approach. However, all begin with a basic assumption: the biblical texts, however soundly they are rooted in history, are finally literary works and should be examined in terms of literary questions and methods. That simply means that the study of the

biblical material may use historical aspects of the text if possible, but that the primary focus is the text themselves and the story they communicate.

We should note that, in similar ways to historical investigation, some of the literary methods do not have a direct or theological intent. That is, the immediate goal of literary analysis is not to reach theological statements, but to understand the books as literature produced by a certain community in history. That may well yield theological results, since the community is a faith community and these are religious texts. But the immediate goal of these approaches is to learn more about the text as a literary work.

Here also we should distinguish different uses of the term “literary”, since it is used in three major ways. First, in its broad meaning, “literary” simply means a focus on the text, as opposed to the history of which the text tells or in which it was produced. In this sense, literary methods include any technique of investigation that is primarily concerned with a document or piece of writing as literature.

Second, a much more technical meaning of the term emerged in the 19th century in which literary analysis was directly connected to historical research. It referred to the study of various strands of tradition or sources, whether oral or written, that were used to compose a document. The study of these sources was a prolegomena, as Julius Wellhausen put it, to historical investigation, trying to establish reliable sources for the study of history. The first two perspectives surveyed below are generally of this type.

Third, today literary criticism is still a technical term but used much more broadly to refer to the study of the inner workings of a document, things like plot development, rhetorical dynamic, features such as irony and satire, word play, structure, the use of certain patterns or forms, all the features that go into making a piece of literature. The last two perspectives below work from this broader definition.

This “new literary criticism” is far less connected with historical issues, although most do not neglect it completely. However, in some of the more radical developments in literary criticism, such as structuralism, there is no need to place a piece of literature into a historical context. It is assumed that the “meaning” of literature by its very nature is self-contained within the piece of literature.

A. Source Analysis in Joshua and Judges

We cannot take time here to trace the development of source analysis, although a couple of observations are necessary. As mentioned above, source analysis arose as an adjunct to historical investigation in trying to establish the reliability of documents as historical resources. In its early phases, literary analysis was concerned with establishing the oldest strand that went into the composition of a literary work. Historians assumed that the earliest strand would be the most historically reliable. However, as the emphasis began to shift more to the text itself rather than to the history it could illuminate, the concern shifted to sources as clues to the compositional technique of the literature, and therefore as clues to the nature of the work itself.

Much of the early source work focused on the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament (see [JEDP: Sources in the Pentateuch](#)). The general conclusion was that the Pentateuch was a composite work that grew out of the life of the community of Faith over several centuries rather than beings composed at one time by Moses himself. Later study allowed a larger role for the older Mosaic traditions, but did not change the perspective that the book in its final form was the product of a long development with a variety of strands of tradition. Much like the different views of the four Gospels, the Pentateuch was formed from different strands of traditions that circulated in Israel representing different perspectives on Israel’s history (see [The Synoptic Problem](#)).

1. Pentateuch or Hexateuch?

As scholars applied the methods of source analysis and viewed the Pentateuch in terms of various strands of tradition or sources, the question arose about the extent of those sources. That is, could sources be seen in other places in the Old Testament beyond the Pentateuch?

This issue revolved around the relationship of the Book of Deuteronomy to the writings both before and after it. While Deuteronomy had been traditionally included as the last book of the Pentateuch, it is also obvious that it relates very closely to the book of Joshua that follows it since the story line of entry into the land from the Pentateuch continues in Joshua. And, as we have seen, Joshua has close connections with Judges, while Judges in turn sets the stage for the rise of the monarchy recounted in Samuel and Kings.

This relationship of the books of Joshua through Kings had long been recognized in Jewish tradition where they are known together as The Former Prophets (the Latter Prophets are the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve so-called Minor Prophets). The new question was how to understand the literary relationship of Deuteronomy as part of the Pentateuch to the material in the Former prophets, and especially in Joshua.

The first approach to this issue simply extended the results of study of the Pentateuch to the Former Prophets. Scholars had identified several specific strands of tradition in the Pentateuch and so they concluded that the connection of Deuteronomy with Joshua and the books that followed could be explained by tracing the same strands of tradition into the Former Prophets, at least through the early chapters of Joshua. In this view, even though Deuteronomy was recognized to be a separate strand of tradition from much of the rest of the Pentateuch (labeled the D tradition or source), it was seen as part of an unfolding story that continued through Joshua. Joshua was the fulfillment of the promises of possessing the land made throughout the Pentateuch and especially in Deuteronomy.

While Joshua shared the same perspective as the narratives in the Pentateuch, Judges was seen as a different kind of writing, taking the story in a different direction both in terms of literary structure and in terms of content and theological themes. As a result, the strands of tradition together were grouped as Gen-Exod-Lev-Num-Deut-Josh, with Jud-Sam-Kings forming a later set of traditions that told Israel's history in a different way (this follows the Hebrew canon in which Ruth and Chronicles are not seen as part of this history; see [Canons of the Hebrew Bible](#)). In effect, this lengthened the Pentateuch ("five books") to a Hexateuch ("six books"). The term Hexateuch was simply a way to refer to the idea that Joshua should be seen with the books of the Pentateuch and separate from Judges through Kings.

2. Pentateuch or Tetrteuch?

While the idea of a Hexateuch could explain the relationship of Deuteronomy with Joshua, problems with this proposal quickly emerged. The sources that could be seen rather easily in the Pentateuch, and upon which the while idea rested, could not be easily traced in Joshua if at all. Also, while the relationship of Deuteronomy and Joshua was clear, how that relationship should be seen in terms of the other four books of the Pentateuch remained uncertain since Joshua had little connection with those four books. Likewise, there was no adequate explanation, if all six books were to be seen as comprising a common set of traditions, why Deuteronomy should have influenced Joshua so heavily, but not have influenced the books preceding it more. Also, the idea of a Hexateuch separated Joshua from the rest of the Former Prophets, something unlikely considering the close connections between the minority voice in Joshua and Judges that we have already seen.

The whole issue of the literary relationship of the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets went a different direction with the work of Martin Noth. While his ideas are detailed and have been extended and revised by others, his basic proposal was that the book of Deuteronomy along with the Former Prophets should be seen as an independent work reaching its final form during the Israelite exile to Babylon.

The entire work, Deuteronomy along with Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, incorporated many older traditions and perhaps even earlier versions of Deuteronomy itself. In its final exilic development it interpreted Israel's history from that later perspective (c. 580-550 BC). Deuteronomy was the introduction to this entire historical work that was called the Deuteronomistic History. This accounted for the close connection of Deuteronomy with Joshua and the books that followed. As a result, the strands of traditions together were grouped as Gen-Exod-Lev-Num, while the Deuteronomistic History included Deut-Josh-Jud-Sam-Kings as a unified literary work. This in effect reduced the Pentateuch to a Tetrach (‘‘four books’’).

Historically, the implications of this perspective is much more far-reaching than the Hexateuch proposal. While the Hexateuch was not used to argue a literal historical record for the material of either Joshua or Judges, it did allow a more traditional approach to the historical issues. Generally, the traditions of both the Hexateuch and the remaining Former Prophets were thought to be very old traditions. With Joshua connected with Deuteronomy, the sequential unfolding of settlement in the land, with later apostasy in the period of the Judges, was more likely.

However, with the Tetrach approach, the entire account of settlement in the land was seen as a very late development in Israel's history, at least in the form it appears in the books now. While various scholars took the historical questions more seriously than others in working with this approach, to many this suggested that these later traditions were not as reliable as historical records since they were actually written 500-700 years after the events in a radically different historical context. Later studies were more ready to allow greater validity to oral tradition in the ancient world, as well as allowing very old strands of tradition to be incorporated into the final work. Still, the effect of this approach was to push the historical issues into the background in favor of seeing the Deuteronomistic History as more of a social or theological interpretation of history rather than simply the recording of historical data.

B. Holistic literary approaches to Joshua and Judges

Noth's proposal has been widely accepted since it allows us to explain many of the features of the biblical text for which historical or source approaches could not. Some have not accepted his perspective for fear of what it might do to certain theories about the nature and authority of Scripture. Yet, in many ways it provides a perspective from which to take the biblical traditions seriously apart from the magnitude of historical problems that emerge in Joshua and Judges. Still, many have challenged his proposal on other grounds than just certain view of Scripture.

1. canonical perspectives

From slightly different perspectives both Brevard Childs and James Sanders raised questions that went beyond dealing with traditions and sources from which the books were composed. The new questions they raised sought to understand how the books related to each other in terms of functioning together as part of the canon of Scripture for a community or communities of Faith.

The fact remains that in spite of all the previous proposals, the actual canon of Scripture has been a Pentateuch followed by the account of Israel's settlement in the land. Both Jewish and Christian communities, even with the slightly different order of the Christian canon in the Former Prophets, have always understood the books in some kind of unfolding order, from Pentateuch to Historical Books/Formal Prophets. This concern with canon takes that order seriously, yet without returning to a position that allows the historical questions to override the biblical text itself. It was not the biblical text that forced the various divisions, but the assumptions in asking historical questions and using historical methods that led to trying to sort the material out along historical lines. This does not suggest that the historical methods did not produce helpful results, only that finally they do not deal adequately with the biblical text as Scripture for the Church.

The perspective of a canonical whole asserts that how the community of Faith arranged the biblical material, whether by redactors or authors, whether from oral tradition or documents, whether ancient or

newer traditions, is the governing factor in how we should see the material. The primary question is not, “what were the sources from which this document was composed?” or even “what strands of tradition can we identify in this work.” The primary question, at least for those who are part of a community of Faith, is simply, “how shall we understand this material as it has been passed on to us.” This perspective emphasizes the communication of the material as it stands in its present form rather than imposing other categories on the text that force us to read it in different ways.

This has significant implications for how we see the relationship between Joshua and Judges, as well as the relationship of those books to the larger canon. From this view, Deuteronomy, with its summary of the exodus, focus on the giving of torah at Sinai, as well as the covenant curses and blessing with which the book concludes, is clearly the conclusion of the Pentateuch. The central section of the book includes a reiteration of many of the Mosaic instructions, and so must be seen in relation to the torah traditions of Exodus through Numbers. Yet, it awaits the crossing of the Jordan and entry into the land to fulfill what the exodus and the promises to Abraham had begun, and so ends in expectation of the future.

Joshua assumes this emphasis on the instructions from God to his people about how to live in their world (the *tora*; while we often think of “law,” the Hebrew term *tora* actually means “instructions;” see [Tora as Holiness](#)). In fact, faithfulness to those instructions becomes the primary focus as the people enter the land, both from the ending of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua. Likewise Judges uses faithfulness to God’s instructions as the criteria for evaluating the spiritual status of the people throughout the book. Failure to follow those instructions is one reason given in Judges for the hardship that the people endured at the hands of the Canaanites.

Rather than dependence on just the Book of Deuteronomy for this emphasis on faithfulness, Joshua and the books following depend on the entire preceding tradition from creation to the exodus contained in the Pentateuch. Specifically, the twin themes of God’s grace (exodus) and faithful response (Sinai) that have unfolded throughout most of the Pentateuch in the exodus and Sinai narratives, provide the groundwork upon which the entry to the land is built. The Former Prophets track the outworking of the implications of the exodus and the giving of the *tora* at Sinai through Israel’s subsequent history.

So, there is an integral relationship between Joshua and the Pentateuch. It is not on the level of sources or traditions, but in terms of what was important to the community who shaped these traditions, how Israel lived out in the land the implications of the covenant they had made with God at Sinai following the Exodus. This suggests that the unity of the material is a thematic or theological unity, and not a unity (or disunity) of sources. It also suggests that the sequence and organization of the material is not chronological and not dependent on sources, but is theological and dependent on the testimony of the community to their own history.

This also suggests that the material of the Former Prophets, while closely connected thematically with the Pentateuch, is a significantly different kind of material. There is a clear break between the formative era of the exodus and the wilderness wandering and the later entry into the land. While Joshua succeeded Moses as leader, the roles of the two men were radically different. It was left to Joshua to put into practice in the land the principles that God had revealed to Moses in the desert. The movement into the land in the first chapters of Joshua was far more than a geographical move; it was a significant shift in the way Israel related to God. The “land” becomes its own theological symbol as the traditions unfold, the place where faithfulness to God will be tested, the place where life must actually be lived as God’s people.

2. the convergence of history, literature, and theology

The canonical approach to reading Joshua and Judges as part of a larger literary work in conjunction with the Pentateuch has been modified in various ways as further suggestions have been made. Yet, it has remained the primary way to understand the material beyond a purely historical reading.

Noth's proposal of a Deuteronomistic History reaching its final form in the time following the exile of Israel to Babylon, with the Book of Deuteronomy as its anchor, has remained widely accepted although modified. Rather than seeing the book in terms of sources or compositional strategies, now the emphasis is on the Deuteronomistic History as the post-exilic communities' theological interpretation of their entire history from the perspective of exile. Most would acknowledge an earlier form of Deuteronomy that is much older than the present book, but reworked and edited in light of the events of the exile. Likewise, the traditions in Joshua and Judges are understood as very old traditions, but occur in their present form as the result of being cast into a new interpretive framework in light of the exile.

It is really this interpretative framework that is emphasized in talking about a Deuteronomistic History or the Deuteronomist who composed it. The interpretative framework is both historical and theological. Historically, the traditions are read in light of the outworking of Israel's history into the post-exilic era, a time when Israel had been driven from the land and enslaved by foreign powers. Theologically, the Torah and covenant traditions become the criteria for reading Israel's subsequent history in the exile. These come together since Israel's history in the exilic came to a disappointing end, a failure that the community attributed to Israel's unfaithfulness in keeping the commitment to God that the people took to themselves at Sinai. The interpretative framework then is a theological perspective of Israel's history read in terms of faithfulness to God.

IV. History as Theology

In light of all this, we can return to some of the historical questions raised at the beginning. There are still no answers to those specific historical problems. But perhaps it is more obvious now that some of those historical problems are important to us because we have not heard the biblical text as the faith community of Israel intended it to be heard. That is, we have asked historical questions when the books are not history. This does not suggest that they are fictional; that reaction is as much a part of our own biases in favor of our modern categories as were the assumptions that allowed the historical problems to dominate the books in the first place. But it does say that there is a theological dimension to the books that simply does not concern itself with historical harmony, and will not yield to historical questions. In fact, the very dissenting voices in Joshua and Judges that raise the historical questions may provide us the best clue to how we can hear the books theologically.

While there are historical elements within both accounts of Joshua and Judges, the primary purpose of neither account is purely or even primarily historical, so asking historical questions is not really helpful in understanding the books. The primary purpose of the books as they are preserved by the Community of Faith as Scripture is confessional and theological. They review and tell Israel's history from the time of entry into the land until the rise of the monarchy in terms of obedience and faithfulness to God. They tell of Israel's blessings when the people were faithful and of awful consequences when they were not. They bear witness to the work of God in the world, both His self-revelation in history and the community's response to that revelation, both positively and negatively. So rather than asking "what really happened?" a historical question, we should ask "what is the community telling us about God?" a confessional and theological question.

Rather than seeing the two books in opposition to each other, or trying to ignore or rationalize the obvious discrepancies in the books, a better means of access to the theological message is to ask how the books relate to each other theologically, and in the larger context of Scripture. For this, it might be helpful to work with a graphic. This admittedly schematizes the accounts, but does so to highlight the larger literary structure of both Pentateuch and Former Prophets to illustrate the confessional themes that govern both blocks of material.

Historical and Theological perspective from which Israel viewed its history

| Recalls Obedience ← | | | → Anticipates Failure | |
|---------------------------------------|--|--|------------------------------------|---|
| Revelation of God: Giving of Torah | Call to Respond: Call to Live Torah | Results of Obedience: Following Torah | Results of Sin: Forsaking Torah | Consequences of False Trust in Torah |
| Genesis-Numbers | Deut | Joshua | Judges | Samuel-Kings |
| ↑ land created | preparing to enter land | entry into the land | trouble possessing the land | land lost ↓ |
| ↑ promise of land → | | | hope of land → | |

First, note the perspective from which Israel viewed its history. If Noth is at all correct that the entire Deuteronomic History presents Israel looking back on its history from after the exile, then the perspective of the entire work is from a time after the last event in 2 Kings, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Israel and its king to Babylon. That event becomes the interpretive lens through which all of the material is to be read, much as the Gospel accounts in the New Testament are to be read through the lens of the final events recorded there, the resurrection of Jesus.

Since that event is the loss of the land and, at least for the time being, the ending of God's people, the history is told in terms of that ending and that failure. The dominating question, then, in looking at Israel's history was, "how did this happen?" How could a people who had such a heritage of promise and experience of the grace of God come to such a dismal failure? This becomes the interpretive framework in which the rest of the history is cast.

The central books in this holistic reading are Deuteronomy, which summarizes the requirements of God for his people and calls them to faithfulness, and the two books of Joshua and Judges, which provide the pivot of the interpretive framework.

In this perspective, the book of Joshua is a theological reflection on the results of obedience; when God's people are faithful and live Torah, He is with them and brings His promises to fulfillment (Deut 30:20). As it stands within the canon, it recalls God's faithfulness and the possibilities that exist in an obedient people enabled by God's grace. The end of Joshua (24:14-15) reflects a sermon call to respond to His gracious self-revelation in faithfulness.

This means that the purpose of the book is not to duplicate "what happened" as Israel entered the land in a dispassionate way. Its purpose is to highlight the points at which the people were faithful to God and the blessings that faithfulness brought to the people. The Joshua traditions remember that not everything went smoothly as Israel entered the land, which the minority voice in the book is not at all embarrassed to tell. But the purpose is to relate the successes the people had to the call to faithfulness in Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch. The fact was, with all the reverses and failures Israel faced, and as difficult as it was to settle in the land, they did settle in the land. That very fact was enough to celebrate the blessings of God and the fulfillment of the promises to the fathers.

As far as the historical details, we should admit that there are some discrepancies in how the story is told in Joshua and how it is told in Judges and later traditions. But that should never be allowed to become the sole criteria of the reliability of the traditions or the truth about God to which it bears witness. It is only with assumptions forced by modern categories of thinking, such as absolute inerrancy or historical positivism, which makes such criteria the judge of Scripture in either direction (see [The Modern Inerrancy Debate](#)).

This also means that the book of Judges serves a companion role to Joshua, a theological reflection on disobedience and the consequences that unfold from sin. When God's people failed to live Torah, He would no longer fight for them and would allow the consequences of their sin to work out. Canonically, it serves as an anticipation of Israel's failure, a foreshadowing of the end of Israel in the exile. All of Israel's history from the entry into the land to the Exile is anticipated in the failures portrayed in Judges. The end of Judges

(21:25) anticipates how those consequences of sin would continue to work out in Israel's history. This is not a prophetic prediction of that failure, but a theological reflection on history from those who had already experienced it and were looking back at the traditions.

But there is an even more significant theological overtone in shaping the traditions in this way. While the Deuteronomic History serves as a theological critique of Israel's history, it also confesses something about how God works in the world. If the past has worked out in terms of consequences for sin and blessing for obedience, there is some hint that this understanding may well set the stage for the future as well. With Deuteronomy as the summary of God's requirements and a call to faithfulness, it might serve in the present as the people were in exile as much as in the past. In other words, while the book of Deuteronomy is set in Israel's past as the people were about to enter the land, it was reinterpreted to apply to the context of the exile. In that context, the call to obedience is no longer a recounting of history, but a very much contemporary call to respond to God's grace in the present.

This suggests that Joshua and Judges may be far more than just the theological recounting of history. They may be paradigms for response to God in any time. That is, Joshua extols the positive results and hope for a future that faithfulness to God and response to his grace entails. On the other hand Judges graphically illustrates the consequences of unfaithfulness to God and the rejection of God's instructions for "what is right" in our own eyes. This is not timeless truth; but is clearly a truth about God that transcends the historical context in which it is presented.

And so, the final impact and significance of Joshua may well be that call to faithfulness that is willing to launch into an unknown future on the promise that "I will be with you," because that is the only way to live in the land as God's people. And the final impact and significance of Judges may well be the warning of the consequences of failing to be God's people, of the dangers of allowing the adulteration of worship and commitment to God, and the endings that come because God's people refuse to follow torah in favor of their own way.

The historical issues in the book cannot be dismissed. But with this message, they seem less important.