

## DOES THE BIBLE SUFFICIENTLY DESCRIBE THE CONQUEST?

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In his book *The Sufficiency of Scripture*, Noel Weeks discusses a number of modern objections to the authority of the Bible. Some people have tried to limit the scope of biblical authority to the religious realm, while others have even questioned whether the Bible can serve as an authority in religion and ethics. According to Weeks, the fact that the Bible is not a textbook, providing exhaustive detail on any issue, lies at the heart of such objections to its authority. Weeks aims to refute the argument from incompleteness.<sup>1</sup>

One area where the Bible evidences incompleteness is its historiography. While every historian selects facts and unavoidably interprets them, the Bible's theological interpretation of ancient Israelite history especially violates the positivistic canons of modern historiography.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, modern scholarship has denigrated the historical value of biblical narratives. In his treatment of this subject, Weeks reduces the debate over the reliability of biblical historiography to a conflict of sources—discrepancies between the Bible and extra-biblical sources, discrepancies between one biblical book and another, and discrepancies within a given biblical book.<sup>3</sup> Although Weeks deals with several examples of each conflict, he understandably does not examine every example. Surprisingly, however, he never mentions the historical problems connected with the biblical account of the Conquest. Variations of all three of the above conflicts have appeared in previous analyses of the Conquest narratives. This essay will summarize each of the conflicts as it applies to the Conquest and suggest resolutions that uphold the sufficiency of Scripture.

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<sup>1</sup>Noel Weeks, *The Sufficiency of Scripture* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988) 3-7.

<sup>2</sup>Concerning historiographical selectivity, see Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 7. For a statement of the critical historian's presuppositions, see J. Maxwell Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 12-9.

<sup>3</sup>Weeks, *Sufficiency*, 47-64.

I. DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT  
OF THE CONQUEST AND ARCHAEOLOGY

According to the biblical or traditional account of the Conquest, Israel entered the promised land from without and proceeded to annihilate the resident peoples. Rather than being motivated by savage imperialism, the tribes served as YHWH's juridical agent against the Amorites, whose cup of iniquity had overflowed (Gen 15:16). YHWH had commanded Israel to practice the ban, i.e., a total devotion of the Amorite states to destruction (Deut 7:1-5). The OT places the Conquest at the end of the fifteenth century (Judg 11:26, 1 Kgs 6:1).<sup>4</sup> If Israel engaged in wholesale destruction, then it would seem reasonable to expect that Palestinian archaeologists would discover evidence of violent invasions at the end of the fifteenth century. To the contrary, they have not. Hence, the outside information provided by archaeology appears to conflict with the Bible's report of a hostile conquest.<sup>5</sup>

The apparent discrepancy between the biblical text and archaeological findings has led many scholars to reject the traditional view of the Conquest and to espouse other theories that commonly reduce it to a more or less indigenous conflict.<sup>6</sup> Summarizing and critiquing other factors that mitigate against the traditional view exceed the purpose of this essay.<sup>7</sup> For now the question is whether or not archaeological findings impugn the accuracy of the biblical account of the Conquest. If they do, then modern readers have good reason to doubt the sufficiency of Scripture for accurate knowledge of Israel's early history.

At this stage in time, archaeology has not unearthed much evidence for a military invasion of Palestine during the fifteenth century. There is evidence, however, of societal upheaval in the thirteenth century. According to J. Maxwell Miller, "Archaeological excavations have indeed revealed that a number of Palestinian cities were destroyed violently at the end of the Late Bronze Age (i.e., roughly during the thirteenth century)."<sup>8</sup> As properly noted by Miller, this data does not prove that Israel entered Palestine in the

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<sup>4</sup>For a discussion of the biblical statements, see Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 110; Leon T. Wood, "Date of the Exodus," *New Perspectives on the Old Testament* (ed. J. Barton Payne; Waco: Word, 1970) 66-9.

<sup>5</sup>See Michael David Coogan, "Archaeology and Biblical Studies: The Book of Joshua," *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (ed. William Henry Propp, Baruch Halpern, and David Noel Freedman; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 22-3.

<sup>6</sup>For a review of these theories, see John J. Bimson, "The Origins of Israel in Canaan: An Examination of Recent Theories," *Themelios* 15 (1989) 4-15; Bruce K. Waltke, "The Date of the Conquest," *WTJ* 52 (1990) 181-200.

<sup>7</sup>See John Bright, *A History of Israel* (3d ed; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 123-37.

<sup>8</sup>Miller, *Old Testament and the Historian*, 58-9. See also the discussion in Paul W. Lapp, "The Conquest of Palestine in the Light of Archaeology," *CTM* 38 (1967) 281-300.

thirteenth century, but it does seem to argue against a fifteenth century entry. Or does it?

In the case of the Conquest, archaeological data have not always been subjected to the Bible's own claims. V. Phillips Long noted that the Bible speaks of both violent and non-violent aspects of the Conquest.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, Israel was commanded by YHWH to capture the Amorite cities, destroy all life, and burn the religious icons (Num 33:51-53; Deut 7:1-5). Joshua 10-11 repeatedly reports the faithful observation of these instructions during the southern and northern campaigns. On the other hand, Israel did not have to raze all of the buildings and then build new ones from the rubble. While the book of Joshua records the burning of three cities (Jericho, Ai, and Hazor), it also reports that Joshua did not burn the cities surrounding Hazor (11:13). This, however, is not an admission of disobedience. In the context of warning the tribes not to forget YHWH's goodness, Moses had said that they would live in houses which they did not build, enjoy furnishings which they did not buy, drink water from cisterns which they did not dig, and eat the produce from vines and olive trees which they did not plant (Deut 6:10-12). Later in his farewell address, Joshua similarly reminded the tribes that YHWH had given them cities which they had not built and vineyards which they had not planted (Josh 24:13). Given the Bible's own statements, one should not be too surprised that archaeology has found little evidence for a violent conquest in the fifteenth century.

The problem with archaeological findings is that they are subject to different interpretations. A classic example is the earlier debate between John Garstang and Kathleen Kenyon concerning the destruction of Jericho. Both were competent archaeologists who examined the same evidence and came to incompatible conclusions about the date of Jericho's fall.<sup>10</sup> Archaeological artifacts are brute facts that can be used to bolster any number of historical reconstructions.<sup>11</sup> In the hands of historians, archaeological evidence must always be supplemented by inferential reasoning that goes

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<sup>9</sup>V. Phillips Long, *The Art of Biblical History* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 5; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 162-3. See also Eugene H. Merrill, "Palestinian Archaeology and the Date of the Conquest: Do Tells Tell Tales?" *GTJ* 3 (1982) 107-21.

<sup>10</sup>For a review of the debate, see Wood, "Date of the Exodus," 69-73. As further confirmation of the ambiguity of archaeological data, the debate about Jericho's destruction has been recently renewed by Bryant Wood ("Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Evidence," *BAR* 16/2 [1990] 44-59; "Dating Jericho's Destruction: Bienkowski Is Wrong on All Counts," *BAR* 16/5 [1990] 45-9, 68-9) and P. Bienkowski ("Jericho Was Destroyed in the Middle Bronze Age, Not the Late Bronze Age," *BAR* 16/5 [1990] 45-6, 68-9).

<sup>11</sup>J. Maxwell Miller, "Old Testament History and Archaeology," *BA* 50 (March 1987) 59; Iain W. Provan, "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *JBL* 114 (1995) 591.

beyond the facts.<sup>12</sup> But such theoretical extrapolations cannot be separated from the interpreter's presuppositions. According to Miller, "Most biblical scholars, regardless of their methodological purity on matters historical, operate with more or less fixed notions in mind regarding the general course of ancient Israel's history."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, they "consciously or unconsciously tend to rely on models" and so adjust the evidence to fit their reconstruction of the Conquest.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, archaeological discoveries are hardly conclusive. A tell is rarely excavated *in toto*, and inferences drawn from one excavation are subject to revision by later findings.<sup>15</sup> At best, archaeology can supply information about the milieu of biblical events, but it rarely is able to pass judgment on the factuality or date of the events.<sup>16</sup>

With respect to knowledge of ancient Israelite history, the Bible remains the best, and at times the only, source for facts.<sup>17</sup> Dismissing its record of the formative events of Israelite statehood significantly reduces the amount of information available to the modern historian about Israel and some of the neighboring states. Norman K. Gottwald goes so far as to say, "Without [the Bible] we should not even have guessed from all the other sources combined that so energetic and unique a people as Israel appeared in Canaan at the dawn of the Iron Age."<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, many scholars skeptically consider the biblical story of the Conquest so encrusted with theological interpretation that they set about to reconstruct Israel's early history on the strength of social science theories. Not only do they produce mutually incompatible hypotheses, but they also criticize one another for methodological weaknesses.<sup>19</sup> But on what basis, other than subjective factors, can they criticize one another? The one source which could act as a control has been disregarded.

Of course, the biblical writers selectively commented on the past and allowed theological motives to shape their narratives. Like any

<sup>12</sup>George W Ramsey, *The Quest for the Historical Israel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 13-5.

<sup>13</sup>J. Maxwell Miller, "In Defense of Writing a History of Israel," *JSOT* 39 (1987) 54.

<sup>14</sup>J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 77. See also Fredric Brandfon, "The Limits of Evidence: Archaeology and Objectivity," *Maarou* 4 (Spring 1987) 18, 30.

<sup>15</sup>Gösta W. Ahlström, "The Role of Archaeological and Literary Remains in Reconstructing Israel's History," in *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past* (ed. Diana Vikander Edelman; *JSOTSup* 127; Sheffield: *JSOT*, 1991) 117-8; Dillard and Longman, *Introduction*, 111; Long, *Art*, 145.

<sup>16</sup>Bright, *History*, 75; Long, *Art*, 148; Miller, "History and Archaeology," 59-60.

<sup>17</sup>John H. Hayes, "On Reconstructing Israelite History," *JSOT* 39 (1987) 7; Long, *Art*, 146.

<sup>18</sup>Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) 26.

<sup>19</sup>Edwin Yamauchi, "The Current State of Old Testament Historiography," *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 30-2. Cf. Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 12.

other work of historiography, the Bible does not tell the whole story and often admits that it does not (e.g., 1 Kgs 16:27; John 21:25). Unlike most other histories, the Bible reports the activity of God in time and space. Because critical historians operate on the principle of analogy—that all phenomena can be explained by mundane causes and effects—they are predisposed to disregard the trustworthiness of any narrative that attributes terrestrial effects to divine causation.<sup>20</sup> Such narratives allegedly distort “what really happened” in order to propagandize a religious interpretation of otherwise secular events.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not theological motives automatically negate the historical value of the biblical narratives will be discussed later. For now it is important to see that the discrepancy between the biblical account of the Conquest and the external evidence of archaeology can be overplayed. Archaeologists and critical historians operate with their own assumptions and limitations.

## II. DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN JOSHUA AND JUDGES

The second conflict involves the respective accounts of the Conquest in the books of Joshua and Judges. Critical scholarship has alleged that Joshua and Judges give contradictory reports. The contradictions in perspective supposedly indicate different sources, traditions, and compositional histories.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Joshua and Judges should not be read as a continuous narrative but as two divergent perspectives on the same period of early Israelite history.

The narrative in the books of Numbers and Joshua gives the impression that “the whole of the promised land was conquered systematically and in a relatively short period of time by a unified Israel under the leadership of Moses and Joshua.”<sup>23</sup> Joshua 1-11 presents a sweeping view of the Conquest on the western side of the Jordan River, and Joshua 12 comprehensively lists the kings which Moses and Joshua defeated on both sides of the Jordan. Joshua 13-19 describes the allotment of the tribal patrimonies. Moreover, the book contains numerous affirmations of universal annihilation and even asserts that YHWH completely fulfilled the patriarchal promises (21:43-45).

The book of Judges seems to present a different version of the Conquest. For example, Judg 1:10 reports that the tribe of Judah defeated the Amorites in Hebron, but Josh 10:36-37 says that Joshua and all Israel had totally destroyed Hebron, its villages, and the inhabitants. If Judges resumes the narrative after Joshua’s death

<sup>20</sup>Miller, *Old Testament and the Historian*, 18 See also Weeks, *Sufficiency*, 55-6.

<sup>21</sup>Ahlström, “Role,” 129, 134.

<sup>22</sup>Bright, *History*, 129-30; Weeks, *Sufficiency*, 56; M. Weinfeld, “The Period of the Conquest and of the Judges as Seen by the Earlier and the Later Sources,” *VT* 17 (1967) 93-113.

<sup>23</sup>J. Maxwell Miller, “The Israelite Occupation of Canaan,” *Israelite and Judean History* (ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller; OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977) 215.

(1:1a), then the tribe of Judah should have found Hebron decimated and depopulated. Furthermore, Judg 1:19-36 records the localized efforts of other tribes to obtain land and indicates that they experienced minimal success. In the later chapters of Judges, the picture of a fragmented people and a protracted conquest continues. The tribes were, at best, a loose federation, and they struggled unsuccessfully to maintain control of their patrimonies.<sup>24</sup> Thus, the sweeping victories in the book of Joshua seem not to be a reality in the book of Judges.<sup>25</sup>

The pervasive assumption of a rigid distinction between Joshua and Judges can be overplayed. First, Judg 1:1a does not necessarily qualify every statement in chap. 1. It serves more as a temporal indicator for the whole book.<sup>26</sup> In fact, Judg 2:6 refers to a convocation over which Joshua presided before his death. While the book as a whole describes events after Joshua's death, those events had a history that stretched back to Joshua's lifetime. As the opening verses of Joshua 1 alluded to Moses' career and indicated that Joshua picked up where Moses left off, so Judg 1:1a indicates the continuation of an ongoing story. Most of the events in Judges 1 have a corresponding description in Joshua 14-19, but the common material has a particular purpose in Judges 1.<sup>27</sup> Judges 1-2 describes the disastrous consequences of actions that took place shortly before and shortly after Joshua's death. In order to show the "big picture" that led to a series of judgments and restorations (Judg 2:10-19), the author produced a narrative that is characterized by some chronological fluidity. His point is that there were some noticeable lapses in the tribes' obedience *around* the time of Joshua's death. These lapses eventually led to the breakdown of tribal unity and morality that is chronicled in the later chapters of Judges.<sup>28</sup>

Second, Judges 1 manifests its own peculiarities, which fit with the book's pro-David agenda. The emphasis in Judges 1 on the priority and success of Judah cannot be missed, and the contrast of Judah's success with the failure of the other, northern, tribes is telling.<sup>29</sup> According to Dale Ralph Davis,

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 215-6; Ramsey, *Quest*, 66.

<sup>25</sup>Critical scholarship, however, has argued that the book of Judges is a composite document and that Judges 1 itself is the product of several editorial hands. For a review, see K. Lawson Younger Jr., "Judges 1 in its Near Eastern Literary Context," *Faith, Tradition, and History*, 212-4.

<sup>26</sup>Dale Ralph Davis, *Such a Great Salvation: Expositions of the Book of Judges* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 19.

<sup>27</sup>J. P. U. Lilley, "A Literary Appreciation of the Book of Judges," *TynBul* 18 (1967) 97; Robert Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 147-8; Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSup 46; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987) 81-2.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. Robert G. Boling, *Judges* (AB 6A; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975) 66.

<sup>29</sup>Dale Ralph Davis, "A Proposed Life-Setting for the Book of Judges" (PhD. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1978) 92-5.

One can readily perceive how a budding Judean monarchy could use such pro-Judah material to argue the case for its hegemony through David, an argument made necessary by the previous leadership of Saul and Benjamin.<sup>30</sup>

The repeated refrain, "In those days Israel had no king" (Judg 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25), especially indicates the book's pro-monarchic stance. The tribes needed a king to maintain law, order, and covenantal fidelity; otherwise, Israelite society would sink lower and lower into moral debasement. Israel, however, did not need just any king (i.e., Saul from Benjamin), but a king like David who would obey YHWH's commandments. Therefore, whatever relationship Judges 1 has with the book of Joshua, it must first be read within its immediate literary context. Judges 1 is not correcting Joshua but reinterpreting some of Joshua's material for a new situation.

Third, in a number of passages which will be discussed below, the book of Joshua qualifies its triumphalism. Therefore, the conflict between Joshua and Judges is actually a variation of the third conflict, i.e., discrepancies within the book of Joshua. The solution to the second conflict cannot be separated from the solution to the third.

### III. DISCREPANCIES WITHIN JOSHUA

The book of Joshua narrates Israel's attempt to carry out the Deuteronomic regulations for holy war. Ideally, YHWH would fight for Israel and enable her to possess the whole land. Indeed, Josh 21:43-45 and 23:15 claim that God fulfilled all of his promises to Israel. Israel took possession of the whole land and enjoyed rest from enemy resistance. Other sections, however, betray the incompleteness of the Conquest before and after the time of Joshua's death. First, while Josh 10:1-11:15 initially gives the impression that Israel swept through Canaan with lightning speed, other passages indicate a slow conquest that continued after Joshua's death. Second, certain passages within Joshua indicate that Israel failed to execute holy war throughout the land. She neither killed all of the inhabitants nor subjugated the survivors enough to take control of their territory. Both of these exceptions will be examined below.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>31</sup>These exceptions, of course, have provided the impetus for critical reconstructions of both the Conquest itself and the compositional history of the books of Joshua and Judges. See, e.g., Miller, "Israelite Occupation," 215-7; Ramsey, *Quest*, 65-8; J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (3d ed.; OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 188-92; Weinfeld, "Period of the Conquest," 93-113; G. Ernest Wright, "The Literary and Historical Problem of Joshua 10 and Judges 1," *JNES* 5 (1946) 105-14.

### A. The Slowness of the Conquest

Despite the pace of the narrative in Joshua, some of the regulations for holy war had anticipated a slower conquest of the promised land. Because YHWH knew this ahead of time, he forewarned his people so that the apparent delay would not discourage them. While Deut 7:21-24 assured Israel that YHWH would destroy all of the Amorite states, it also mentioned the inadvisability of conquering the land all at once. Because Israel did not yet have enough people to fill the land, wild animals would multiply and potentially make the land hostile to human life. Such savage conditions would contradict the earlier Edenic descriptions of Canaan and inhibit Israel's microcosmic restoration of the cultural mandate in Gen 1:28. Israel could make a quick strike to gain the upper hand (Deut 9:3), but the actual settlement would require a longer period of time (Deut 7:22).<sup>32</sup>

Some of the apparent discrepancies in the book of Joshua should be read with this Deuteronomic perspective. On the one hand, Joshua 10-11 portrays an Israelite *Blitzkrieg* of Canaan, and Joshua 12 presents a rather comprehensive review of all the defeated kings and conquered territory. Rather than being surprised by Israel's unprecedented success or thinking that the writer of Joshua misrepresented "what really happened," the reader should marvel at YHWH's powerful support of his people. YHWH had fought for them and fulfilled his promise to give them possession of the land. He had stepped into history to render judgment on the Amorites and to bless Abraham's descendants.<sup>33</sup> The Israelite presence in Canaan was so firmly established that Joshua could dismiss Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh to their trans-Jordanian inheritance (Josh 22:1-9). Beyond doubt, YHWH had done the impossible, and Israel was in the land to stay.

On the other hand, the book of Joshua does not fail to balance the *Blitzkrieg* with three additional angles on the Conquest. First, chaps. 7 and 9 report that the army did not always adhere to the regulations for holy war. Achan's disobedience led to the catastrophe at Ai and YHWH's threat to abandon his people. The Gibeonite ruse blemished Israel's total extermination of the resident population. When the tribes exhibited covenantal disloyalty, the whole nation became objects of divine wrath. Second, Josh 11:13 reports the human factor of warfare. The reader learns that Joshua and the army engaged in grueling warfare that spanned "many

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<sup>32</sup>Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 182; Gordon J. Wenham, "The Deuteronomic Theology of the Book of Joshua," *JBL* 90 (1971) 142. See also the discussion in Wright, "Literary and Historical Problem," 113-4.

<sup>33</sup>G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 133-4.



days." Although the number of casualties is not mentioned, the reader can properly imagine the fatigue and homesickness that took its toll on the troops, especially the trans-Jordanian soldiers.<sup>34</sup> Third, without a hint of condemnation, Josh 13:1-7 identifies the territory which Israel had not yet taken. In keeping with Deut 9:22, Israel did not possess the whole land all at once. The decisive battles had been fought, but each tribe still had to search out the surviving enclaves and eliminate them.<sup>35</sup> Such "mopping up" did not require the whole army.

These additional angles highlight the spiritual nature of the Conquest. Even though YHWH judged the iniquity of the Amorites, the progressive character of the judgment on the Amorites indicated that it was a firstfruits of the final judgment on all evil.<sup>36</sup> Except for a universal calamity like the flood, evil could not be vanquished in one moment. But God did not want to eradicate evil at the expense of all creation. He had sworn to suspend the full effects of final judgment in order to defeat evil through redemption of his chosen people (Gen 8:22). Through Israel God judged hardened sinners, but he also used Israel to bless Rahab and many others. Moreover, he was preparing his people for their inheritance and their role as a blessing to the nations (Gen 12:3). The privilege of living in the promised land entailed the responsibility of personal and communal holiness as well as indefatigable perseverance in the war against evil. Although Canaan was described as a land of rest, it was not a land of idleness or isolation. Israel had been strategically placed at the crossroads of civilization so that the redemptive grace available in her covenants would make its claim on all of creation.<sup>37</sup>

### *B. The Failure to Complete the Conquest*

More troublesome, however, are the passages in Joshua and Judges that indicate that Israel never finished mopping up after the initial strikes. In these cases Deut 7:22 clearly cannot apply, and there appears to be an insoluble discrepancy between YHWH's promise to the patriarchs and actual history. For example, the author of Joshua reports that at the time of writing Judah had not yet driven out the Jebusites (15:63); Ephraim could not dislodge the Canaanites at Gezer (16:10); and Dan had to move away from its assigned patrimony (19:47). Moreover, the book of Joshua ends on a

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<sup>34</sup>Cf. Josh 1:14-15 with 22:3-4.

<sup>35</sup>K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 244-6. Younger compared the Conquest account in Joshua 1-12 with the obviously hyperbolic conquest accounts of the ancient Near East and helpfully distinguished between "occupation" and "subjugation."

<sup>36</sup>Marten H. Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 113.

<sup>37</sup>Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 34, 40-1, 109-10.

pessimistic note, which foreshadows further trouble for the tribes. In Josh 24:19, Joshua warned the tribes that they could not obey the commands of YHWH because they still had not relinquished the worship of foreign deities. The implication of his remark was that YHWH would not honor their efforts to displace the remaining Amorites. Despite the tribes' insistence that they would serve YHWH, earlier evidence to the contrary made their confession tenuous at best.<sup>38</sup>

Joshua's premonition received vindication in the book of Judges, which records both further failures to mop up the land (1:19, 1:21, 1:27-36) and repeated Amorite conquests of the tribes. Because the tribes abandoned the faith of their fathers, YHWH did not fight for them but against them (Judg 2:10-15). In fact, the remaining Amorites became divinely appointed tests of Israel's covenantal loyalty (Judg 2:20-23).<sup>39</sup> Judges also ends on a dismal note. Israel's eroding commitment to the covenant made her so internally corrupt that she was in jeopardy of losing all holdings in Canaan.

How can these reversals of the Conquest be explained in terms of the original promise to the patriarchs? Was YHWH not able to keep his word? According to Moshe Weinfeld,

The implementation of the *herem* of the Canaanites in the Deuteronomistic sources (Josh 10:28-43; 11:11-23) is wishful thinking, an attempt to adjust reality to the ideal norm, which was never implemented (cf. Judg 1:21-34; 1 Kgs 9:20-21).<sup>40</sup>

This line of thinking implies that YHWH promised too much and that the Conquest turned out to be a rather reduced version of the anticipated result. If Weinfeld's assessment is correct, then the discrepancy between "what really happened" and "what reportedly happened" separates faith from history and essentially condemns the former as irrelevant, if not wholly vacuous.<sup>41</sup>

### C. A Suggested Solution

Rather than accusing the writer of Joshua of inaccurately revising history according to wishful thinking, one could assume instead that he was aware of the tension and deliberately juxtaposed ostensibly contradictory material.<sup>42</sup> Applying an eschatological

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<sup>38</sup>See the discussion of Joshua's rejection of the people's confession in L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 135-40.

<sup>39</sup>Weinfeld, "Period of the Conquest," 99-100.

<sup>40</sup>Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 365.

<sup>41</sup>See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50* (WBC 2; Dallas: Word, 1994) xxxvi-xxxviii; id., "History and the Old Testament," *History, Criticism & Faith: Four Exploratory Studies* (ed. Colin Brown; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1976) 13-75; Woudstra, *Book of Joshua*, 18-26.

<sup>42</sup>Moshe Greenberg made this same point in defense of a synchronic reading of Hebrew literature. See his "The Vision of Jerusalem in Ezekiel 8-11: A Holistic

perspective to the tension, he gave the Conquest an "already/not yet" quality. Hans Eberhard von Waldow said as much:

Even though, in her historical retrospection, Israel pointed out that everything that was promised was fulfilled, the "not yet" of the reality left open the possibility of further acts of Yahweh in the future.<sup>43</sup>

Just as the successful defeats of the Amorites were preliminary manifestations of the final judgment, so the setbacks pointed ahead to the consummation of redemption. God started to judge his enemies and to save his people, but the early stages only typified the full judgment and salvation to come.<sup>44</sup> The tension highlights the struggle of God's people to live by faith in evil surroundings.<sup>45</sup> As God proleptically requites the sins of his enemies, he also uses their wickedness to sharpen the commitment of his people to the pursuit of holiness.

Following this line of thinking, John Bright observed that the Conquest narratives pointed beyond that one moment in ancient history to an eschatological battle between Jesus Christ and the satanic powers of evil. Although Christ defeated those powers on the Cross, the battle still rages until the last day of history. According to Bright,

This war is not fought with conventional weapons against visible foes. The foes are spiritual—though terribly real, and often enough real men—and the battle and weapons are spiritual. But it is a war, a no-quarter fight to the death.<sup>46</sup>

Bright even went so far as to say that the book of Joshua should be read in the light of Christ's redemptive work. When so read, Joshua informs the church of its militant role in an evil world and of God's amazing utilization of feeble creatures in a spiritual battle. Joshua reminds the church that God does not tolerate sin and does not want his people to mistake compromise for peace.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, Bright missed the connection between holy war and the final judgment and viewed the ban as "sub-Christian."

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Interpretation," *The Divine Helmsman: Studies on God's Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (ed. James L. Crenshaw and Samuel Sandmel; New York: KTAV, 1980) 145. See also Wright, "Literary and Historical Problem," 107.

<sup>43</sup>Hans Eberhard von Waldow, "Israel and Her Land: Some Theological Considerations," *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Memory of Jacob M. Myers* (ed. Howard N. Bream, Ralph D. Heim, and Carey A. Moore; Gettysburg Theological Studies 4; Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974) 502.

<sup>44</sup>Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 144; Woudstra, *Book of Joshua*, 113.

<sup>45</sup>Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 20, 145.

<sup>46</sup>John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975) 247. See also pp. 241-6.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 248-51.

Bright both affirmed and denied redemptive history and progressive revelation. He cannot have it both ways. The God and Father of Jesus Christ is the same God who judged the Amorites in the OT and threatens eternal punishment in the NT (e.g., 2 Thess 1:6-10).<sup>48</sup> Bright struggled with the apparent contrast between the bloody wars of the Conquest and the cleaner, ideological warfare of the gospel. That God judges humans is acceptable as long as there is no carnage, i.e., no tangible, repulsive evidence of judgment.

In an earlier paragraph, there was an allusion to Gen 8:21, which contains God's promise of a temporary suspension of the full effects of final judgment. This suspension under the Noahic covenant has been called common grace. Because of common grace, God has offered redemptive grace to those whom he has chosen to believe in him. Nevertheless, God remains free to enter history at any moment to suspend common grace and to judge sinners. Although these intrusive judgments (e.g., the Flood and the Conquest) served common grace by checking rampant evil and thereby preserving the hope for redemptive grace, they also foreshadowed the final judgment. Because those who perished in the Flood and in the wars of the Conquest died in unbelief, their eternal fate was sealed. During these events God irrupted into history and executed an eschatological sentence, which was a preliminary manifestation of the final judgment. He distinguished between the members of his kingdom and those of the kingdom of darkness.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, God exercised his sovereign prerogative to withhold grace (either common or redemptive) in order to use temporal judgments as harbingers of the eternal fate of hardened rebels.<sup>50</sup>

Therefore, the tension within Joshua, which potentially throws doubt upon the reliability of that book's account of the Conquest, should be understood from a theological point of view. Although the writer reported the events of the Conquest and made what could appear to be excessive claims on behalf of God (Josh 21:43-45), he or the final editor was aware of the incongruities. For reasons known only to God, redemptive history is not tidy. There are setbacks, reversals, disappointments, struggles, and tension. How history unfolds does not argue against the fact that it does unfold. Rather than smooth out the discrepancies and engage in the revisionism of which he has been accused, the author of Joshua set allegedly conflicting material side-by-side and so taught a theological and even pastoral lesson to his readers in every generation.

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<sup>48</sup>Cf John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953) 194-7.

<sup>49</sup>See Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (South Hamilton, MA: n.p., 1989) 153; id., "The Intrusion and the Decalogue," *WTJ* 16 (1953) 15-6.

<sup>50</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1980) 114.

## IV. HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THEOLOGY

Such a view of the Conquest is obviously tendentious and raises the earlier question about the historical reliability of accounts of divine activity. No biblical scholar would deny that the OT presents a theological interpretation of history. The biblical writers believed that God intervened in terrestrial affairs, and they consciously interpreted seemingly isolated events in terms of a unified, sweeping plan. Many scholars, however, would distinguish between confessional history (what reportedly happened) and critical history (what really happened).<sup>51</sup> For example, Michael David Coogan made the following assessment of Joshua's historicity: "In my understanding, the book of Joshua is historico-theological fiction. The primary purpose of its authors was to present a theological construct."<sup>52</sup> In other words, whatever historical facts lay behind Joshua's narratives, the author of Joshua so overlaid them with theological interpretation that the final product (i.e., the book of Joshua) cannot possibly be considered factually reliable. The events never happened that way.

Similarly, Norman K. Gottwald's magisterial treatment of early Israelite history and historiography assumes that the biblical texts are "quasi-historical" sources of knowledge that "are shaped in one way or another by cultic and ideological considerations."<sup>53</sup> What this means is that the biblical history of Israel is a royal apology. A number of pre-monarchic sources and traditions (i.e., "sub-histories") were collected and synthesized to produce a single, official explanation for the origin of a unified Israel under the monarchy.<sup>54</sup> The sources, however, assume neither political nor theological unity.

As mentioned earlier, one of the hallmarks of critical historiography is the out-of-hand rejection of divine intervention. But such an approach is essentially flawed. The modern historian may or may not be able to verify the historicity of the biblical events themselves (e.g., Israel's daily gathering of manna), but he cannot pass judgment on the biblical historian's interpretation of the events (i.e., YHWH provided the manna).<sup>55</sup> Because of human limitations, no work of historiography can be exhaustive; therefore, historians have to select which data they will interpret and which they will omit. The selected data then becomes "an incomplete account,

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<sup>51</sup>Gerhard von Rad was perhaps the major advocate of this dual view of early Israelite history. See his *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962-65) 1.107-8.

<sup>52</sup>Coogan, "Archaeology and Biblical Studies," 27.

<sup>53</sup>Gottwald, *Tribes of Yahweh*, 27.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 41, 87.

<sup>55</sup>Wenham, "History and the Old Testament," 29-30.

written toward a specific end, of selected developments."<sup>56</sup> While the "specific end" or thesis could turn out to be a perversion or falsifying revision of what really happened,

normally we would say that if the author does not *mean* to be accurate in representing the past ("as it really was"), if the author does not try to get the events right and to arrange them in the right proportion, the result cannot be history.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, the representational accuracy is tempered by the historian's selection of the data and imposition of causal explanations.<sup>58</sup> Thus, any piece of historiography, whether biblical or positivistic, is unavoidably subjective and ideologically motivated to some extent.

While some scholars maintain that the imposition of causal relationships renders historiography (especially biblical historiography) tendentious and therefore fictional, such cynicism is both confusing and unwarranted.<sup>59</sup> First, the confusion centers on the attribution of fictionality to historiography. If fictionality means that a work of historiography has no reference to the "real past," then the generic distinction between historiography and novels has been thoroughly blurred. If fictionality means that a work of historiography both respects the objectivity or actuality of past events and also interprets them in view of a larger paradigm, then a work of historiography can properly be described as fictional, artistic, creative, or interpretive. In fact, all historiography is necessarily fictional in this latter sense.<sup>60</sup> No one knows everything, and no one can exhaustively analyze the past. In the words (so far as they go) of Philip R. Davies, "Whenever we try to understand the past, we engage in story-telling. No story . . . is ever an innocent representation of the outside world."<sup>61</sup>

Second, the charge of fictionality is unwarranted because it insinuates that past events bear no logical relationship to one another. In other words, history is not going anywhere. Such historical cynicism may be philosophically arguable, but it is an interpretation nonetheless. The events of history do not necessarily lead to that conclusion. In fact, one mark of an effective historian is that he or she stands at a distance from the events which he or she chronicles and observes patterns which the major and minor players could not have fully appreciated even as they made the events

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<sup>56</sup>Halpern, *First Historians*, 7. See also Mark W. Chavalas, "Recent Trends in the Study of Israelite Historiography," *JETS* 38 (1995) 162.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid. Cf. A. D. H. Mayes, *Judges* (OTG; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985) 9.

<sup>58</sup>Peter R. Ackroyd, "Historians and Prophets," *SEA* 33 (1968) 20-1.

<sup>59</sup>Provan, "Ideologies," 586-7. See also the literature cited by Long, *Art*, 69-70.

<sup>60</sup>See the discussion in Long, *Art*, 60-3, 71.

<sup>61</sup>Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel"* (JSOTSup 148; Sheffield: JSOT, 1992) 13. See also Ernst Axel Knauf, "From History to Interpretation," *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past* (ed. Diana Vikander Edelman; JSOTSup 127; Sheffield: JSOT, 1991) 26-7.

happen.<sup>62</sup> Thus, the nihilist must be honest about his or her own presuppositions. The so-called facts of history are not brute. They are always understood within the confines of the historian's world view.<sup>63</sup>

Therefore, the historian's world view inescapably influences his or her selection of the facts and shapes his or her interpretation of those facts. When historians offer competing analyses of ancient Israelite history, the accuracy or inaccuracy of their conclusions cannot be divorced from their respective presuppositions. One historian can interpret OT events from a purely political slant, and another can perceive the hand of YHWH behind the political strategy.<sup>64</sup> Obviously, the biblical writers had a high view of divine providence and believed that YHWH always worked mediately or immediately in a given event.<sup>65</sup> The question about the rightness or wrongness of their theocentric world view shifts the debate from historiographical methodology to apologetics. Ultimately, then, the issue of the sufficiency of the Bible's Conquest narrative has to do with one's epistemology or theory of knowledge.

Delving into a philosophical defense of the Christian postulation of divine revelation exceeds the purpose of this paper.<sup>66</sup> The point to be made is that the three types of conflicts that Noel Weeks enumerated do not arise in a presuppositional vacuum. Quite undeniably, the biblical writers wrote passionately about the events of Israelite history, and they call upon readers in every age to understand those events from their point of view. Those who would accuse the biblical writers of historiographical errors must admit that they also operate with a set of presuppositions that influence their selection of admissible facts and color their interpretation of the facts.<sup>67</sup> At bottom, the pursuit of objective historiography (i.e., finding out what really happened) turns out to be a complicated enterprise.

For evangelical Christians, belief in the existence of God affects our evaluation of the biblical narratives. If God really exists independently of human concoction; if God has access to his universe; if God can speak meaningfully in human language; and if he can inspire humans to write down his thoughts, then his interpretation of historical events is certainly as valid as (and

<sup>62</sup>Halpern, *First Historians*, 235.

<sup>63</sup>Long, *Art*, 120-1; Vern S. Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 6; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 125-30.

<sup>64</sup>Chavalas, "Recent Trends," 165.

<sup>65</sup>The biblical historians shared a theistic starting-point with Assyrian kings whose annals copiously credit their gods for political and military success. Nevertheless, critical scholarship assigns historical value to these royal annals and relies on them for its understanding of biblical and Near Eastern history. See A. R. Millard, "Story, History, and Theology," *Faith, Tradition, and History*, 53-4.

<sup>66</sup>See Cornelius Van Til, *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1969) 25-71.

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Weeks, *Sufficiency*, 64.

obviously more valid than) any other work of historiography. Admittedly, God, who possesses exhaustive knowledge of the past, has not provided an exhaustive account of either world or redemptive history. Nevertheless, what he has said is sufficient to accomplish his historiographic purpose. The biblical account of the Conquest sufficiently narrates God's fulfillment of the patriarchal promises and Israel's struggle to obey his commandments. That struggle points to God's continuing conquest of evil through Joshua's NT namesake—Jesus, who saves his people from their sins.