

IDEAL VERSUS REAL HISTORY IN THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

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In the Book of Joshua there appear a few cases of apparently contradictory statements. One example is the statement to the effect that the Conquest was completed in the lifetime of Joshua (11:16ff.) while it is elsewhere indicated that though Joshua was old there remained much land to be conquered (13:1ff.). Such instances have been explained as varying strands of documents from which the book was composed (cf. N. H. Snaith, "The Historical Books," *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 84ff.). S. R. Driver, for example, explained this as "generalizing summaries of D²," (*Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, Scribner's, 1910, p. 115). Among more conservative writers a better but oft times inadequate answer is given. C. F. Keil, for example, plays down the general statement to make it fit the evidently real situation (*Joshua, Judges, Ruth*, Eerdmans, 1950, pp. 125-26). It is the writer's suggestion, however, that there is a certain amount of "idealization" in the Book of Joshua which at times appears to contradict the actual history but for which there is an adequate answer.

But first a clarification must be made because of a former use of the terms "ideal" and "real" in connection with studies in the Book of Joshua. Critical scholars use the terms to represent what they feel are two basic stories of the Conquest. The earlier and *real* account is recorded in Joshua 15-19 and Judges 1, while a later *ideal* account is given in Joshua 10 and 11. The actual history of the Conquest was gradual and thus conflicts with the "ideal" story which presents a united effort under Joshua, accomplished in a relatively short time (cf. Harry Orlinsky, *Ancient Israel*, Cornell, 1954, pp. 49ff.). The writer's use of the term "ideal" is in no way related to this interpretation.

I. EXAMPLES OF IDEAL HISTORY

1. *The boundaries of the "promised land."* In the Pentateuch and in the Book of Joshua the boundaries of the land promised to the Patriarchs are clearly defined: from the River of Egypt on the south to the area of Hamath (R. Euphrates) on the north, and the Sea on the west to the Jordan on the east (Joshua 1:3, 4; 13:1-6, Genesis 15:18; Numbers 34:2-12, etc.). That this description is somewhat ideal is indicated by the fact that the Transjordan area was occupied by certain tribes of Israel though the region was not included in the "promised land." Moses' rebuke at their rebellion in making this request makes this fact clear (Numbers 32:6-15). Another indication that these boundaries were ideal is the fact that though the area of Lebanon and Syria was included in the boundary there is no attempt to conquer this by Joshua.

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2. *The Extent of the Conquest.* The Book of Joshua clearly shows that Israel conquered the land in Canaan in two major campaigns (Joshua 10, 11). At the end of these campaigns a summary is given ("So Joshua took all that land, the hill-country..." 11:16-20) which indicates that his work was done, the Conquest was completed. That this also is somewhat ideal is seen in that chapter 13:1-6 says "there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed..." and describes the various areas remaining with a list of unconquered cities (cf. Judges 1:27ff.). A similar example is given near the end of the book (Joshua 21:43-35—Israel possessed all the land, all their enemies were delivered, and all that Jehovah promised came to pass). Yet the Book of Judges makes it plain that this was not the case. Again the command to dispossess all the enemies in the land and to occupy their territory (Genesis 15:18; Exodus 23:23-31, Numbers 34:2, Deuteronomy 1:7, 8, etc.) has a similar implication. Ideally Israel was to dispossess all their enemies, but in actual fact many were left behind, and these became a snare to them. In fact it is indicated that this was part of the will of God—in order to discipline them (Joshua 23:12, 13, Judges 3:1, 2).

3. *The Settlement of Canaan.* In the procedure for the allotment of the districts to the various tribes (Joshua 13:7; 14:1, 2, 15-17) it appears that all of the tribes were given their portion at the same time. This is seen especially in the original commands to this effect given by Moses (Numbers 26:52-56; 34:1ff.) where the distribution is to be done by lot (Hebrew *goral*—a chance lot), though the stipulation is made that the size of the tribe is to be considered (Numbers 26:52-54). Even the list of men assigned to do this is given (Numbers 34:13ff.) further indicating that it was planned to be done at one time.

In the actual history, however, certain changes from this plan are noted. In the first place, the Transjordan tribes requested an area outside the promised land and thus this was received without a "lot." Next, in Joshua 18 a special assembly was called after the tribes of Judah and Joseph had received their inheritance to arrange for the disposition of the inheritance for the "seven remaining tribes" who had not yet received theirs. This disposition was done by lot (vv. 8-10). Thus it appears that ideally there was a committee of 12 men set up to choose the lots for the 12 tribes, but due to unforeseen circumstances the program was not followed completely though in general the results were about the same.

4. *The Levitical cities.* The inheritance of the tribe of Levi receives special consideration. (Joshua 21). Because of their unique religious position they were not to receive land for inheritance but each of the 12 tribes was to give them a portion of their inheritance (v. 12). The Levitical families are given 48 cities in the following arrangement:

Priests	13 cities—9	Judah-Simeon	Kohath	10 cities—4	Ephraim
			4	Benjamin	4
Gershom	13 cities—2	Manasseh	east	2	Manasseh west

4 Issachar	Merari 12 cities—4 Zebulun
4 Asher	4 Reuben
3 Naphtali	4 Gad

The average of 4 cities per tribe is somewhat ideal. In addition, the measurements of the "suburbs" (Numbers 35:4, 5) and the impression gained from the account that the Levites were apparently the sole occupants of the cities also indicate this.

In the actual history the fact that the Levites were not the sole occupants of the cities shows the utopian nature of the description. Both priests and Calebites occupied Hebron (compare Joshua 14:13ff. and 15:13ff. with 20:7 and 21:9-11), and Othniel shared Debir with priests (Joshua 15:15-19; 21:15). The main evidence of idealization is the fact that many of these Levitical cities did not come into Israelite control until many years later. Gezer, Ajalon, Taanach, Rehob, Nahalol and others were unconquered (see Joshua 13:7ff. and Judges 1:27ff.). Though our evidence is very scanty it appears that some of these cities were never occupied by priests or Levites.

5. *The "twelve" tribe phenomenon.* The tribal system in ancient Israel was based upon the 12 sons of Jacob (Genesis 49:28). For some reason this 12 tribe system was assiduously maintained. In the Sinai experience the tribe of Levi was separated from their brethren and given special status. Thus in the numbering of the tribes (Numbers 1 and 26) the Levites are reckoned separately and the tribe of Joseph is divided into Manasseh and Ephraim to maintain the ideal 12. Then again in the Transjordan episode when Manasseh was divided and thereby making 13 tribes the expedient of "half" was resorted to to retain the normal 12. Notice in the Levitical cities legislation each of the "half" tribes gave but 2 cities. The purpose of the strict retention of the "twelve" tribes is not clear, but it is evident that there was an *ideal* to be maintained.

II. THE EXPLANATION OF IDEAL HISTORY

Yehezkel Kaufmann explains some of these idealizations as an ancient priestly aspiration that was never realized (*The Biblical Account of the Conquest of Palestine*, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1953, pp. 40ff.). A more accurate characterization of this idealization is given by Marten Woudstra. This is simply evidence of what he calls the "programmatic character of Joshua," (*The Ark of the Covenant from Conquest to Kingship*, Presbyterian & Reform, 1965, p. 108). Notice the types of idealization in the Book of Joshua.

1. *Simplification.* The writer of the Book of Joshua appears to use idealization for the purpose of presenting a simple, brief account, which may serve as an introduction (Joshua 1:3, 4), a summary (11:16ff.), or simply a generalization (Numbers 34:4, 5). In this last passage the measurements for the "suburbs" of the Levitical cities appear to be a

square of 2000 cubits on a side which would be very difficult to follow in rugged terrain, and which was the same for all of them. The measurements are evidently intended to indicate the general size rather than the shape of the suburbs.

2. *The program not completed.* It is evident that the story of the Conquest and Settlement of Israel in the Book of Joshua is but the initial stage of the program of God for Israel. Thus, the general statements (Joshua 11:16ff. and 21:43-45) that the Conquest was completed appear to indicate that as far as Joshua was concerned his part was completed (i.e., he was on schedule), though much remained to be done (this apparently was not part of his assignment). It was not until the time of David that the entire area of the "promised land" was captured by Israel, but even then it was not occupied by Israel nor did they drive out the inhabitants. Thus it is suggested that the complete fulfillment of this plan will not come until the return of Israel to Palestine in the "latter days." In this connection notice the boundaries described in Ezek. 47:3-23, and the tribes enumerated in chapter 48.

3. *The program not followed.* As has been noted above, it appears that circumstances arose that hindered the implementation of the original program. The Transjordan experience, for example, shows that though the capture of this area by Moses was necessary as a prelude to the capture of Canaan, it led to its selection by the 2½ tribes and thus to a change in the plan. In addition, the selection of the tribal areas by chance lot at one grand ceremony seems to have gone awry, for the transjordanian tribes apparently preceded the lot, while at least two such ceremonies were necessary to complete the job. The program of the Levitical cities is another case in point, for though the program was not intended to be fully implemented at the time (they would not have needed all these cities then), some of these cities were never occupied by priests or Levites, and other cities not on the list are known to have been occupied by priests or Levites (Nob, Rama, etc.).

4. *The Principle involved.* Is there a moral problem involved in ideal history that conflicts with real history? Are we limiting God's knowledge or His ability to cope with circumstances of life? Not necessarily so. Woudstra suggests that we have here a "type of dogmatic history writing. Yet this history writing does not do violence to the actual facts, but looks at these facts from the ideal point of view of a complete obedience to Jahweh. This history writing is therefore truly 'prophetical' ..." (*loc. cit.*). This would answer problems relative to the incompleteness of the plan: i.e., in the eyes of Joshua the man of faith, it was considered accomplished. However, the aspects of the plan not followed would hardly apply. To the writer, this appears to represent the principles seen throughout Scripture, namely, the sovereign will of God as opposed to the finite ability of man. The Book of Joshua presents the divine program of Conquest and Settlement but at the same time the actual history

of how this divine plan was imperfectly performed by finite human instruments. In the same way we see the divine program for the Church described in the New Testament, but the story of its implementation in subsequent years of Church History (and even some in the Book of Acts) is poorly accomplished by man. Nevertheless, as with Joshua of old we have the promise of the final accomplishment of God's program (Joshua 1:6 and Matthew 16:18).