

An Introduction to Joshua

Who?

As we said when we looked at the book of Deuteronomy, Joshua is one of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures attributed to the Deuteronomist, or the Deuteronomistic historian. The story told by the book picks up where Deuteronomy left off, with Moses having died and passed on leadership of the people of Israel to Joshua. The main body of the text then deals with the conquest and settlement of Canaan.

Now, the conquest of Canaan has been foreshadowed and trailed already, going back as far as the account of Noah in Genesis. If we remember back to that strange story when Noah exited the ark and planted a vineyard, the first seeds of Canaan's role as the 'bad guy' in this epic were revealed. Noah got drunk and one of his sons was cursed for observing him in his nakedness under the vines. That son became the father of the nation of Canaan and in the book of Joshua, the curse is going to play itself out.

You may also recall that, in Deuteronomy, the Israelites were told to be pretty ruthless to the inhabitants of the land they were about to conquer. They were told to wipe out all places of worship and all the people too. This appears to be a specific injunction against Canaanites, so, when we read Joshua, we can expect some bloodshed and nastiness.

When?

The Deuteronomist was not writing in the time of Joshua or of the tribal society he describes. The archaeological record shows that the type of invasion described by this book is unlikely to have taken place. There is evidence of tribal warfare, but not of an invading force coming in from the outside and conquering everyone.

As well as archaeology telling us a slightly different story to Joshua, the book itself, along with the book of Judges, contradicts its picture of wholesale triumph. We are told that the Canaanites are destroyed and yet, in various later stories, they appear again. This suggests that the author of the book was writing in and from a different historical context than the one he describes.

As the Deuteronomistic history unfolds, it gets closer to the story told by the archaeological record. The likely date of its final composition is towards the end of the monarchical period and probably during the exile in Babylon in the 6th

century BC. Of course, this is the date of its final composition and the history is a text which uses a variety of sources, drawn from different time periods in Israel's story. The reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah are significant periods from which the sources are drawn. That places some of the material earlier than the 6th century, during the reign of Hezekiah two hundred years earlier.

Why?

The Deuteronomist is looking to make three key points. First, as we have already discussed, he wants to provide reasons for the exile. The blessings and curses at the end of Deuteronomy give us reasons for the plight of the Israelites in Babylon.

Secondly, the Deuteronomist wants to promote the idea of a united Israel. Joshua, from the tribe of Ephraim, represents a people who are together, because significantly, the Ephraimites were one of the tribes that broke away from the Davidic monarchs. Here, we find him fighting for a united state, so the writer is making a political point that addresses the concerns of his own time rather than those of the period described.

The third point being made by the Deuteronomist concerns the Davidic line. David is being set up as the ideal king, whose family are going to rule over the united state described in Joshua. David may not be introduced until later, but the Deuteronomistic history is pointing towards him and towards those of his successors – Hezekiah and Josiah particularly – who want to reunite the tribes in a single nation.