

Conquest of the Land

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I. Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

1. The Promise of the Land to the Patriarchs.

The theme of the possession of the land is rooted in the patriarchal narratives in God's election of Abram in Gen 12:1: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to *the land that I will show you*." When Abram reaches Canaan, YHWH assures him that he will give this land to him and his offspring (Gen 12:7; 13:15–17). The gift of the land is also part of God's covenant with Abraham: he will give him all of Canaan "for a perpetual holding" (Gen 17:8).

That land, however, is inhabited by Canaanites and other peoples (Gen 12:6; 13:7; 15:19–21). With no allusion to a conquest or expulsion of these peoples in the patriarchal narratives, contrary to the Moses- and Joshua-traditions, Abraham purchases a field from Ephron the Hittite in Machpelah (Gen 23:8–18), where his wife Sarah (v. 19), he himself (Gen 25:9–10), and their son Isaac (Gen 35:29) will be buried. Even when Jacob has settled with his sons in Egypt, he asks to be buried in Machpelah's cave (Gen 49:29–50:13). Some ambiguity arises in the patriarchal narratives about the possession of the land: in some texts, the land is already given to Abraham, whereas for the priestly writer, the land is one where the patriarchs sojourn as immigrants (Gen 17:8).

2. The Conquest of the Land under Moses. According to the story of Moses' call (Exod 3), YHWH establishes Moses to bring the Hebrews from Egypt up to "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites" (Exod 3:8). Here the theme of the land is related to the idea of conquest and expulsion: YHWH promises he will drive out the inhabitants of Canaan (Exod 23:23–28). The conquest theme connects with the Deuteronomistic idea of strict separation from the autochthonous nations: the Israelites should not associate with these peoples or worship their gods (vv. 24, 32–33).

According to the book of Numbers (Num 13–14), the conquest first fails because of the unwillingness of the exodus generation to wage war. As a result, none of them is allowed by YHWH to enter the promised land: they will stay in the wilderness until their death (Num 14:22–23), with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, who were faithful to the divine command (v. 30). The last part of Numbers relates the conquest of Transjordanian territories, which according to the Deuteronomistic conception do not belong to the promised land, whose eastern border is the River Jordan.

3. The Conquest of the Land under Joshua. In Deuteronomy, Moses' assistant, Joshua, is destined to secure the conquest of the land (Deut 1:38; 31:23; 34:9). After Moses' death, YHWH instructs him to take over the promised land (Josh 1:2) and reminds him of its borders: "from the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea (i.e., the Mediterranean Sea)" (v. 4). This extension of the traditional borders "from Dan to Beer-sheba" results from a later insertion into the original speech of YHWH (1:1–2, 5–6). The book of Joshua focuses on Israel's settlement in the land, which comes in two stages: (1) the conquest of the land (Josh 2–12) and (2) the allotment of the land (Josh 13–22).

The first stage begins with the conquest of Jericho, which covers half of the section (Josh 2–6). The battle itself follows long preparations, such as the miraculous crossing of the Jordan River and several religious ceremonies, including the circumcision of the people and the celebration of the Passover. These elements emphasize YHWH's central role in the conquest of the land, as shown by the visit of the commander of YHWH's army (Josh 5:13–15). Failure to realize this specific character leads overconfident Israelites to their defeat against Ai (Josh 7:4–5): the war is not theirs, nor is the victory or the booty, which is devoted to YHWH (Josh 6:17–19).

After these initial battles, the conquest of the land is hastened by two coalitions of local rulers: a southern (Josh 10) and a northern coalition (Josh 11). The Israelites do not attack these cities: they (or their allies the Gibeonites) are assaulted by coalesced kings, whom they are able to defeat. As a result, no further peace agreement is made (Josh 11:19–20), and the promised land is globally secured.

The second stage in Israel's settlement is the land's allotment to Israelite tribes (Josh 13–22): the Transjordanian tribes (Josh 13), the tribes of Judah and Joseph (Josh 14–16), and the seven remaining tribes (Josh 18–19). Each tribe is responsible for its own territory; in this way, the land will eventually be possessed (Josh 13:1–6; 18:3).

Most of the stories in Josh 1–12 were composed in the Neo-Assyrian period, as evident in the parallels between these stories and Neo-Assyrian conquest accounts (Younger). The book of Joshua is not a historical source for the origins of "Israel" in its land.

4. The Conquest of the Land after Joshua. The opening of the book of Judges gives a different picture of the conquest, insisting contrary to Josh 21:43–45 that the land was not totally conquered (Judg 1). According to Judg 2:20–23, YHWH had deliberately left nations to test Israel's obedience—a test they failed. They will thus be troubled by these

peoples during the entire period of the Judges. The expectation of a king (Judg 21:25) is later met. According to the history of the Judean and Israelite kings, under Solomon Israel lived quiet in his land from Dan to Beer-sheba (1 Kgs 5:5), but after his death the behavior of most kings and the people led to the loss of the land: Israel is conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BCE (2 Kgs 17), while Judah and Jerusalem are conquered by the Babylonians in 597 and 587/586 BCE (2 Kgs 24–25).

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II. Judaism

Jewish literature of the Second Temple period shares the earlier biblical assumption that the forefathers' conquest of the land of Canaan fulfilled God's promise to Abraham to give it to his descendants as a possession. Despite Israel's defeat, occupation, and subjugation by other nations, the promise was understood to be eternal as was the unique relationship between the land and the people of Israel.

Reviewing Israel's sacred history before proclaiming a new covenant for the postexilic community in Jerusalem, Nehemiah highlights the act of conquest. The Levites tell of God's promise to Abram of the land (Neh 9:8), his command to Moses' generation to possess the land (9:15), and the taking of the land by "the sons" before whom God "subdued the Canaanite inhabitants of the land" and "delivered them into their power" (9:24). Though Nehemiah's generation has been restored to the land, they remain "slaves on it" (9:36), subject to Persian overlords who "rule over our bodies and our beasts as they please" (9:37). In their pledge to uphold Torah and temple (10:29–40), the people express the need to detoxify the land from sin, a frequent theme in Second Temple literature (e.g., *Jub.* 6:12–13; 15:28; 1 Esd 8:83–90). Two centuries later, the authors of the Qumran scrolls depict a group so repelled by this toxicity that they withdraw from sinful Jerusalem to await a new, messianic conquest. Understanding themselves as the revivification of ancient Israel in the wilderness, they apply biblical instructions for the conquest

(Num 10:9; Deut 20:2–4) to their own expected apocalyptic battle (1QM).

In the Hellenistic Diaspora, Jewish writers offer an apologia to mitigate the seeming harshness of the conquest. The Wisdom of Solomon, for instance, affirms the biblical contention that the conquest was punishment for the sins of the Canaanites, yet depicts God as a merciful judge who gave these sinners a chance to repent and did not destroy them all at once (12:3–11). After carefully reworking the biblical account of the division of the earth among Noah's sons, *Jubilees* has Ham's son Canaan seize Shem's land instead of settling on his own land and thus earn the curse of his own father (*Jub.* 10:27–34). The conquest then becomes the rightful return of the land to Shem's heir, Israel. Philo's reading is more extreme: the Canaanites came to respect the unwarlike Israelites and voluntarily surrendered to them (*Hypoth.* 356).

In the wake of the defeats at the hands of Romans, whom they regarded as illegitimate occupiers, the rabbis sought to retain the Jewish claim on the land of Israel by discouraging emigration, emphasizing the unbreakable link between people and land and insisting upon the ongoing right that the conquest established. Dwelling in the land, they said, outweighs all of the commandments of the Torah; only there can all of the commandments be observed and full holiness be enjoyed. One midrash asserts that the biblical purchases of the Cave of Machpelah, Joseph's tomb, and the threshing floor on which the temple was built stake the claim to the land both before the conquest and since (Buber: 50). Despite the destruction of the temple, the site remains an *axis mundi* linking heaven and earth, God and Israel. Another midrash, famously quoted by Rashi in his commentary to Gen 1:1, defends against the nations' accusation that Israel robbed the Canaanites of their land by citing Ps 111:6 ("He has told his people the power of his works, giving them the property of nations"). Because God created the heavens and the earth and apportioned lands as he wishes, he may once have given the land to the Canaanites, but subsequently he gave it to Israel. Still another midrash denies that the land was ever rightfully the Canaanites', citing Gen 12:6 ("the Canaanites were then in the land") to charge the Canaanites with illegal border crossing and thus, with *Jubilees*, justifying their destruction. Unlike other peoples' appropriations of lands, the conquest was not a conquest at all but only a taking of the land that God had already designated for Israel (Cohen).

Medieval thinkers, writing during and after the Crusades, when Christian and Muslim armies battled over the land of Israel, pressed anew the Jewish claim in two ways. For one, they undercut the reliance of Israel on military might alone by softening the nature of the biblical conquest. Building on a