

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #23: Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 12
The War Against the Canaanites, Part 1

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INTRODUCTION

Chapter 12 of Sefer Yehoshua effectively completes the story of the land's conquest. It begins by recalling the impressive Israelite victory over the Amorite kings Sichon and Og, the Transjordanian tyrants defeated by Moshe on the eve of the people's entry into the land. The chapter then goes on to tersely enumerate the thirty-one (!) potentates deposed by Yehoshua, as the people captured first the central hill country, then the southern plateau and its foothills, and finally the menacing kings of the north. By linking Yehoshua's victories to Moshe's earlier triumph, the narrative suggests that the former has admirably succeeded in his quest to fill the leadership void left by the demise of the Lawgiver:

These are the kings of the land that Yehoshua and the people of Israel struck down, on the western side of the River Jordan. (Their territories extended) from Ba'al Gad in the Lebanon valley until the cleft hills that ascend to Se'ir; Yehoshua gave it to the tribes of Israel as an inheritance in accordance with their divisions. (These lands included) the hills, the lowlands, the plain, the streambeds, the wilderness and the dry southern lands, the territories of the Chittite, Amorite, Canaanite, Perizite, Chivite, and Yevusite (12:8).

THE BIBLICAL SONG OF THE KINGS' DOWNFALL

While written in the form of a Biblical song, the list of the thirty-one kings follows a formal structure that nevertheless sets it apart from most other passages of Biblical song:

Rabbi Chanina bar Papa said: Rav Sheila of Kefar Timrata expounded that all of the passages of Biblical song are written as 'half bricks arranged upon whole bricks' and 'whole bricks arranged upon half bricks.' The exceptions to the rule are the list of the rogue Haman's ten sons (Esther 9:6-9) and the list of the kings of Canaan, for they are composed as half bricks arranged upon half bricks, and whole bricks upon whole bricks. What is the reason for the distinction? So that they should have no resurgence from their downfall (Talmud Bavli Megilla 16b).

That is to say that each line of the song, devoted to the mention of a single one of the kings, is divided into a longer stitch of text ('whole brick') that is then separated by a blank space from the shorter concluding stitch of text ('half brick'), like this:

The king of Yericho one;
The king of the A'i by Beit El one;
The king of Jerusalem one;
The king of Chevron one...
All of the kings thirty and one (12:9-24).

TEXTUAL INTIMATIONS

The reason advanced by the Talmud to explain this atypical feature is quite compelling. Up until the modern period and the advent of steel-reinforced concrete and curtain wall construction, a building's maximum height was strictly limited by the compressive strength of its material. Greater height could only be achieved by widening the base of the structure so that the load could be more widely distributed. Buildings that attempted to maintain a uniform 'footprint' over the course of their rise would become inherently less stable once the design limits of their material had been reached, and typically could not exceed six to eight stories. Thus, suggests the Talmud, the written form of these unusual songs is itself an integral part of their interpretation. The tall and slender columns of text preserving the names of wicked Haman's ten sons, comprising eleven lines or 'stories,' are therefore not only a record of their infamy but an unspoken prayer that, having been toppled and deposed, their acts of villainy not recur. The list of Canaan's conquered kings, of even greater 'height,' expresses the silent hope that Israel's triumph over their evil not be undone.

Seventeen of the thirty-one kings are stated explicitly in the texts of the battles that comprise chapters six through eleven of the Book, while fourteen kings are mentioned only in this list. Overall, the thirty-one towns and cities mentioned cover the length and breadth of the land, from the Negev in the south until the Chermon in the north, and from the coastal plain in the west until the Jordan River in the east. The fact, however, that fourteen of the conquered towns are mentioned here for the first time and were not recounted earlier in the chapters of conquest indicates that these earlier chapters, though providing a broad overview of the conflict, do not intend to provide a comprehensive description of every battle and skirmish. Rather, the essence of those narratives is to suggest that while the land as a whole had been secured and the main military alliances of the Canaanites had been smashed, the majority of the land still had to be settled and its people subdued.

THE MORAL DILEMMA

Before completing this first section of the Book, the story of the land's conquest, we must turn our attention towards its most troubling moral aspect, the seemingly indiscriminate slaughter of Canaan's indigenous inhabitants. It may be possible to make a case for the utter destruction of Yericho, the first town encountered by the Israelites that was razed to the ground never to be rebuilt. The denizens of Yericho, thanks to the untimely discovery of Yehoshua's spies in their midst, had ample time to sue for peace; their subsequent capture and decimation may have served as a powerful deterrent to the other Canaanite cities, thus averting even more bloodshed. Nevertheless, one cannot overlook the unsettling fact that nearly every encounter with the enemy Canaanite forces resulted not only in their unqualified defeat, but in the annihilation of their civilian populations as well. The recurring expression that runs as a refrain through the chapters of conquest is a variant of "he (Yehoshua) struck it by the edge of the sword, all of the souls that were in its midst, leaving not a remnant" (8:24-25; 10:28; 10:30; 10:32; 10:35; 10:37; 10:39; 11:11; 11:14).

At first glance, we may be tempted to dismiss the account of the Book as perhaps being wholly in consonance with ancient rules of warfare and therefore understandably brutal, but hopelessly out of touch with our more 'refined' conventions that ostensibly protect the lives of non-combatants. The timelessness that tradition ascribes to the books of Scripture, however, negates this superficial approach, an approach that elsewhere also charges Scripture with atavism and rejects its message as obsolete.

THE BROADER PICTURE

In order to provide a broader perspective on the matter, we must examine the other Biblical evidence at our disposal. Bear in mind that although there is much archeological evidence to support the account of warfare presented in Sefer Yehoshua, there are no contemporaneous non-Biblical textual sources that have been unearthed to substantiate its battle narratives. The burning of Chazor, for example, described in Chapter 11:10-13, has been well corroborated by the excavations at the site that are still ongoing, but no textual sources besides the Book itself attest to its chilling claim that "they smote all of the living souls that were there by the edge of the sword, destroying completely, so that none that breathed remained...(11:11).

In other words, if the only extant textual sources that describe the annihilation of the Canaanites are those scattered verses preserved in Sefer Yehoshua, and we are prepared to accept the vicious veracity of those verses (sometimes with less than completely sincere motives), then we must be equally prepared to trust the REST of the account concerning the war against the Canaanites that is preserved in the other books of the Tanakh preceding Sefer Yehoshua, namely the Chumash or Five Books of Moses. This is because one cannot read Sefer Yehoshua in splendid isolation and expect to comprehend it, while remaining oblivious to the larger framework that is provided by the Chumash. Like other books of the Hebrew Bible, Sefer Yehoshua is not only self-referential but cross-referential as well. Just as Yehoshua's personal struggles and achievements as leader can only be properly appreciated against the backdrop of Moshe's own example (as described earlier in the Hebrew Bible), so too the people's war against the Canaanites can only be truly understood when viewed through the larger prism of the Chumash.

Concerning the land of Canaan, there is no dearth of information in the Chumash concerning its topographical features and the way of life of its inhabitants, for since the eve of the Exodus, that land has been described to the people of Israel as their most exalted destination and as the fitting reward for their exertions of faith. Israel's associations with the land, however, go back even further, for the Patriarchs themselves were many times vouchsafed by God that their descendents would one day inherit its borders and peoples to become His own special nation. While we will also take note of some of these earlier "Patriarchal" references, we will begin by examining the background provided by the more "national" sources.

CONSIDERING THE SOURCES

The earliest source that addresses an existing national dimension (in contrast to the theoretical one associated with the Patriarchs) occurs in God's first words to Moshe, as the latter stands transfixed by the spectacle of the Burning Bush and is about to be designated as Israel's leader who will free them from Pharaoh's iron grip:

God said: I have surely seen the oppression of My people in Egypt, and I have heard their cries on account of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their anguish. I will descend to save them from the hands of the Egyptians and to bring them out of that land, to a good and expansive land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanite, Chittite, Amorite, Perizite, Chivite and Yevusite...(Shemot 3:7-8).

This hopeful passage, full of praise for the new land and promise for a better future, also indicates from the outset that Canaan is not a desolate and empty tract of land but is in fact inhabited by a whole series of tribes that currently enjoy its bounty. There is nothing else that the verses indicate to us about the

Canaanites, except perhaps that they are sectarian and splintered, tribal and tendentious, in contrast to the much more consolidated Egyptians.

A more telling reference occurs later in Exodus, in the aftermath of the revelation at Sinai when God proclaims His laws to the people encamped at its base. After setting out a detailed series of civil and ritual laws, the narrative turns to a description of the land in which those laws are to be lived:

Behold I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Be mindful of him and hearken to his voice not to be contentious, for he will not pardon your transgressions, for My name is in him. Rather, surely listen to his words and do all that I shall command, for then I will vanquish your enemies and defeat your foes. My angel shall go before you and bring you to the place of the Amorite, Chittite, Perizite, Canaanite, Chivite, and Yevusite, and I shall destroy them. DO NOT BOW DOWN TO THEIR GODS NOR SERVE THEM, AND DO NOT FOLLOW THEIR PRACTICES. Completely destroy (their idols) and break down their sacred pillars. Serve God your Lord, for He shall bless your bread and water, and I shall remove sickness from your midst...I shall drive them out slowly, until you multiply and inherit the land...do not make a pact with them nor with their gods. Do not let them dwell in your land lest they cause you to sin against Me, for you shall then serve their gods and they shall be a source of ensnarement for you (Shemot 23:20-33).

The tone of this section is much more circumspect. Apparently, there is much more than milk and honey that awaits the people of Israel in the promised land of Canaan. According to this passage, the inhabitants of the land, the very same tribes that are everywhere described as "Canaanites," represent a very real threat, but it is not their military prowess that the people of Israel must warily regard. Rather, it is their CULTURE, their polytheistic outlook and its ASSOCIATED PRACTICES, which are, however, not precisely spelled out in this text. Whatever rituals and forms of worship the Canaanites championed, they are here generically presented as a grave threat to the future well-being and success of the people of Israel. The great danger inherent in making a pact with the Canaanites was not that Israel would become militarily or economically dependent upon their goodwill, but rather that Israel would succumb to the WORSHIP OF THEIR GODS, and it is that menace that serves as the impetus for the associated harsh directives to destroy, break down and annihilate.

Next time, we will continue our investigation by considering other sources in the Chumash that, taken together, provide a more complete picture of the conflict against the Canaanites. Possessing this broader perspective will assist us greatly in coming to a more profound understanding of the war of conquest that must necessarily unfold in the pages of Sefer Yehoshua. In the meantime, readers are kindly requested to complete their readings of any passages in the first twelve chapters that they have not yet finished.