

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Shiur #26: Sefer Yehoshua – Sefer Yehoshua Chapter 13

The Process of Settling the Land of Canaan

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INTRODUCTION

Yehoshua was old, advanced in years, and God said to him: 'You have become old, advanced in years, but much of the land remains unsettled. This is the land that remains: all of the Philistine regions and that of the Geshuri. From the Shichor by the Egyptian border until the border of Ekron northwards, is the territory of the Canaanites. The five Philistine city-states of Azza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gat, Ekron, as well as the Avim. From the south, all of Canaan until the cave of the Tzidonites at Apeh, until the border of the Amorites. The land of the Givli and all of Lebanon eastwards from Ba'al Gad at the foot of Mount Chermom until the approach of Chammat. All of the inhabitants of the hills, from the Lebanon until Misrefot Mayim, and all of the Tzidonim. I will drive them out before the people of Israel. Only assign it to Israel according to lot, as I have commanded you. Now then, divide this land by inheritance among the nine tribes, and the half tribe of Menashe. With the other [half of Menashe], the tribes of Reuven and Gad took their possession that Moshe had given them on the eastern side of the Yarden, as Moshe the servant of God gave them...' (13:1-8).

Thus begins the second half of Sefer Yehoshua. It describes Yehoshua as now advanced in age, and much of the land of Canaan as not yet conquered. The regions demarcated by the verses above, "from the Shichor...until the border of Ekron," are all to be found along the length of the Mediterranean coastline, while Tzidon, Apeh and the rest are nestled in the hills and valleys of Lebanon. In other words, the areas of Israelite conquest and settlement were concentrated in the Canaanite hill country, the less arable and sparsely populated ridge that runs the length of the land from the arid Negev in the south until the fertile

valley of Yizrael towards the sea of Kinneret northwards. The coastal plane and the fertile valleys southwest of the Kinneret, however, populated and cultivated by the Canaanites, could not be conquered militarily.

CONQUEST AND POSSESSION

While a superficial reading of the first half of the book may leave the impression that Israel under the leadership of Yehoshua succeeded in conquering the entire Canaanite population in short order, a more careful study indicates that this was not the case. Though the Israelites under Yehoshua achieved impressive victories over the primary Canaanite military alliances and even took many of their towns in battle, the effects of their campaign were tenuous. Only by following up their victories with settlement of the land, a long and drawn-out process that was scarcely unfolding when the smoke of the battles had long since cleared, could the people hope to possess it.

This, in fact, was the core of God's message to the aging leader, as the cycle of wars was coming to an end but Israel's hold on the land was far from firm: "You have become old, advanced in years, but much of the land remains unsettled. This is the land that remains...I will drive them out before the people of Israel. Only assign it to Israel according to lot, as I have commanded you." In other words, God indicated to Yehoshua and to the people what every victorious general must eventually acknowledge and what had become apparent to the Israelite forces by virtue of their own experience: conquest of territory does not equal its possession. While the former is a function of more advanced weaponry or superior strategy, the latter depends upon establishing a permanent presence of one's population. The former is quick and decisive, while the latter is protracted and plagued by setbacks. While Yehoshua was singularly successful at the first task, God informs him that the second aspect, settlement of the land, would not be completed during his lifetime. God therefore bids Yehoshua, while he yet lives, to formally assign the territory of Canaan to the tribes by lot, to be actually distributed much later when the people of Israel finally achieve hegemony.

FALLACIOUS READINGS

Modern archeologists and Biblical critics have questioned the veracity of the Book's seeming description of a lightning victory over the Canaanites and, in its aftermath, an immediate settlement of

the land, claiming instead that the tribes' entry and colonization was more akin to a gradual infiltration. It should be pointed out, though, that the material evidence for the swift military conquest of many of the sites mentioned in the account is beyond dispute. The excavations at Chazor, for instance, the chief city in the alliance of the Northern Kings (11:1-13) located to the west of the Sea of Kinneret's northern shores, have corroborated the Book's claims that it was captured and then burned by fire:

Yehoshua returned at that time and captured Chazor, killing its king by the sword, for Chazor had been the chief of all of these city-states. They killed by the sword all of the people that were in it leaving not a breathing soul, and he burned Chazor with fire...all of the towns that were on their mounds were not burned by Israel. Only Chazor alone did Yehoshua burn (11:6-13).

At the same time, the supposed suggestion of Sefer Yehoshua that Israel's possession of the land was sudden, swift and decisive, an implication derided by the above-mentioned scholars as an intolerable myth, is a shallow and self-serving reading of the text that overlooks its own indications to the contrary. It is easy to misread statements such as: "Yehoshua captured all of the land, just as God had spoken to Moshe, and Yehoshua gave it to Israel as their possession according to their tribal divisions. The land thus became quiet from warfare" (11:23). But only by clearly distinguishing between WARFARE and POSSESSION can the matter be correctly understood. The time interval of the battles may have been relatively brief, their noisy effects fairly short-lived, but the course of settling the land was long and drawn-out.

THE PRECEDING CONTEXT

Here again, an appreciation of the broader context is helpful. The narratives of the Torah already make clear that the PROCESS of conquest and settlement would be slow, methodical, and incremental. Many years earlier, as the people gathered at Sinai's foothills to hear God's word, He proclaimed to them not only His Ten Principles, but their future destiny as well:

...I will send My angel before you and bring you to the land of the Amorite, Chittite, Perizite, Canaanite, Chivite and Yevusite, and I will cut them down. Do not bow down to their gods nor serve them, and do not follow their practices. Rather, destroy them and break down their idolatrous pillars. Serve God your Lord for He will then bless your bread and water, and I will

remove sickness from your midst. Your land shall not contain one who miscarries or is barren, and I will fill the length of your days. I will send My dread before you and discomfit all of the nations whom you shall encounter, and I shall cause all of your enemies to turn their backs towards you [in flight]. I shall send the hornet before you and it shall drive out the Chivite, Canaanite and Chittite from before you. I WILL NOT, HOWEVER, DRIVE THEM OUT FROM BEFORE YOU IN ONE YEAR, LEST THE LAND BECOME DESOLATE AND THE WILD ANIMALS MULTIPLY. RATHER, I WILL DRIVE THEM OUT VERY SLOWLY, UNTIL YOU INCREASE AND INHERIT THE LAND. I WILL SET YOUR BORDERS FROM YAM SUF UNTIL THE SEA OF THE PHILISTINES AND FROM THE WILDERNESS UNTIL THE RIVER [EUPHRATES], I WILL GIVE THE INHABITANTS OF THE LAND INTO YOUR HANDS, AND DRIVE THEM OUT FROM BEFORE YOU. Do not conclude a pact with them or with their gods. Let them not dwell in your land lest they cause you to transgress against Me, for if you serve their gods then you will become ensnared. (Shemot 23:23-33).

Here, God indicates to the people that settling Canaan will take some time, that lightening, sweeping victories will produce desolation and therefore be counter-productive to the settlement endeavor. If so, the first half of Sefer Yehoshua, the epic battles against the Kings of the South and the Kings of the north, the lengthy list of thirty-one defeated potentates, is in actuality a description of only the BEGINNING of the process of conquest and settlement. During the course of this preliminary phase, the organized resistance of the primary Canaanite city-states was crushed as their major military alliances were decimated in battle, but that was hardly the end of the matter. Though kings fell and cities were captured, the land could not be immediately settled. Practically speaking, most of it still remained in Canaanite hands, as the Israelite forces and population were in the main still encamped at their temporary lodgings at Gilgal (9:6; 10:7; 10:15; 10:43). Many more years would pass before the people would succeed in SETTLING the territory and making it their own. Many regions, such as the ones outlined above at the opening of chapter 13, would remain outside of their collective control long after Yehoshua had passed on. It would be hundreds of years, in fact, until the dawn of the monarchy and the ascent of David to the throne, that the entire land of Canaan would truly be the uncontested inheritance of the Jewish people.

PARALLELS

Significantly, the opening verses of the chapter draw an important parallel between the military campaign of Yehoshua and that of his mentor Moshe: "Now then, divide this land by inheritance among the nine tribes, and the half tribe of Menashe. With the other [half of Menashe], the tribes of Reuven and Gad took their possession that Moshe had given them on the eastern side of the Yarden, as Moshe the servant of God gave them..." Moshe had overcome the Amorite kings Sichon and Og who ruled over the fertile Transjordanian territories, and on the eve of his own death had devastated them. He had assigned their lands to the tribes of Reuven and Gad who, on account of their great flocks, had looked desirously upon those lands and were therefore reluctant to cross the Yarden into Canaan with their brethren.

As Moshe had done earlier, Yehoshua does now; and as we have seen throughout our studies, the thrust of the narrative is to emphasize the bond between Moshe and Yehoshua, between the lawgiver and his successor, between the generation of the wilderness and that of the entry into the land. Recall that Yehoshua's career as leader of the people had commenced with his command to the warriors among the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half Menashe to accompany their brethren into Canaan and to assist them in their battles (see 1:12-18). The mention in our context – concerning Yehoshua's distribution of Canaanite territory – of those very tribes that had earlier received from Moshe their own allotment of Amorite lands, has the effect of casting the leader in the likeness of his mentor. More importantly for our purposes, the events associated with the settlement of the land are thus understood to constitute a continuum. The plodding process that commenced with the conquest of Transjordan and proceeded with the fall of the Canaanite military alliances, still awaits completion as Yehoshua grows old.

Next time, we will begin to study the tribal territories that are described in these intervening chapters. Readers are requested to study Chapter 14, and to review the account of the Spies preserved in Bemidbar 13:1-14:10, with particular emphasis on the exploits of Calev son of Yefuneh.