Joshua

We begin this lesson with the book of Joshua. The purpose of Joshua, which perhaps is dated sometime during the period of the judges, was to document the fulfillment of the land promise. The primary pastoral purpose for the covenant people of God was to document the fulfillment of the land promise and to remind the people that the land belongs to the Lord, not to them. It was a reminder that in order to retain title to the land they must live according to the covenant. So Joshua documents the land promise as being kept or fulfilled, that the land belongs to the Lord, and in order to remain in the land they must live according to the covenant. This is outlined very clearly for us in the first nine verses. The first nine verses of Joshua function as a table of contents for the entire book, reading,

After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: “Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go.”

There is a direct reference back to Genesis 17 there. Another function of Joshua is to ratify Joshua’s leadership. Joshua 1:8 is a good memory verse for Joshua. You can see how verses 2-5, “I will give you the land,” foreshadow chapters 1 through 12 in detailing the conquest of the land. There are three major campaigns: central, northern, and southern. “I will give you the land.” That foreshadows Joshua 1 through 12.

The nahala, or inheritance legislation, is given to us in Leviticus and Numbers, according to tribal distribution with special provisions for Caleb and Joshua because of the spy situation. Joshua 13 through 21 details the distribution of the land in accordance with that legislation, which is in accordance with the covenant and the Pentateuch. This passage talks about how to live in the land. You are not to forget anything written in the law. You are to obey it. When it talks about being prosperous and successful, it is not an American business seminar! This is specifically for what it means to retain title to the land. You will prosper in the land by keeping the covenant. We see Joshua end in chapter 24 with a renewal of the covenant. The book of Deuteronomy ends by talking about blessings and curses. There are blessings of many children, crops, and animals if you are loyal in your love to the Lord who delivered you from Egypt and who gives you this land. The success and the prosperity that is talked about in Joshua 1:8 has primarily to do with retaining the title to the land and living in the land.

Again, we see that the purpose is to record the fulfillment of God’s promise to give Israel the land of Canaan through conquest and its distribution to 12 tribes through continued covenant faithfulness. We have an introductory commission of Joshua that outlines the book. Then there are the three other parts: Joshua 1 through 12 in the conquest, chapters 13 through 21 about the inheritance distributed to the
tribes, and chapters 22 through 24, about Joshua leading Israel—this is exemplary covenant renewal. What we see in the first six chapters and quite strongly here is an affirmation of Joshua and his leadership.

Before we talk about that let us back up a couple of steps to talk about authorship and some historical questions about the book. Joshua 24:26 suggests that Joshua had written at least a portion of the book. “Joshua recorded these things on this day that Joshua made the covenant for the people at Shechem. He recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. He took a large stone and he set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the Lord.” Now this may well be limited to just the provisions that Deuteronomy talks about for copying the law, how each generation needs to copy the law. The leaders of Israel needed to recopy this treaty arrangement and covenant constitution for the people of God. But Joshua 24:29-31 records Joshua’s death, indicated by editorial additions. Then throughout the book we read the phrase, “Until this day,” indicating a distance between the recorded events and the writing of them: “This memorial is here until this day,” for example. There are also references to the Jebusites in Jerusalem and the Canaanites in Gezer. They correlate with the description of less developed city-states and natural boundary markers prior to the united monarchy. There are some updated names as well as events—for example, Caleb’s conquest of Hebron, which happens and is mentioned in Judges. The book of Joshua was edited and updated into the period of the judges, but it holds that this book was perhaps partially written by Joshua and happened during the time between Joshua and Samuel, during the period of the judges.

In terms of the destruction of the cities and archaeology that results from these sorts of burn layers is inconclusive in terms of supporting or debunking Joshua as historically accurate. Excavations at Lachish, Debir, and Hazor reveal destruction layers from this period. In Joshua only Jericho, Ai, and Hazor are listed as having been burned. Those are the only three cities listed as burned. Hazor has a destruction layer from the thirteenth century, around the 1200s. The events of the book of Joshua, if you take the earlier date of the Exodus, would be more in this period of the fifteenth to the fourteenth century. But remember from the first lesson about the geography of the area and the way that this area is a land bridge between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Egypt is to the south, Mesopotamia is to the northeast, and Europe is to the west. This area was an area of conquest. Palestine is an area of conquest, so the burning of cities happened many times over. This makes examining burn layers inconclusive. In terms of the references to the Jebusites and the way that cities are talked about and described, it would fit with the premonarchical events that happen in Joshua.

Let us return to the matter of Joshua’s leadership. We see right after the introduction that Joshua addresses these trans-Jordanian tribes, the Reubenites and the Gadites who wanted to settle their families on the east of the Jordan. Moses told them that they could do that, but they needed to help with the conquest. They assent to Joshua’s leadership, and he reminds them of Moses’ command in Joshua 13. We get a hint of something really important for how the history of Israel is told and evaluated. There is a reason why these are called the former prophets. In other words, Israel’s history is told through the lens of the covenant. It is not evaluated on the basis of military might, grand cities, economic power, or economic growth. The way in which the history is told is through referencing the covenantal relationship and the constitutional document primarily of Deuteronomy. Here we have a direct reminder from Numbers of the command of Moses to help with the conquest. Here we have this initial recognition of Joshua’s leadership.

Look forward a little bit past the story of Rahab and the spies to Joshua 3:5. Joshua tells the people to consecrate themselves for the crossing of the Jordan, saying, “Consecrate yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will do amazing things among you. Joshua said to the priest, ‘Take up the ark of the covenant and
pass ahead of the people.’ So they took it up and they went ahead of them. And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘Today I will begin to exalt you in the eyes of all Israel so that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses. Tell the priests who carry the ark, ‘When you reach the edge of the Jordan go and stand in the river.’’’” We see the Lord saying that He will exalt Joshua before the people. In Joshua 4 this is fulfilled at the crossing of the Jordan. Verse 14 says, “That day the Lord exulted Joshua in the sight of all Israel, and they revered him all the days of his life just as they had revered Moses.”

Then we get this appearance by the commander of the army of the Lord, apparently an angel, though some talk about this as a Christophony. Joshua 5:13 says, “Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a sword drawn in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, ‘Are you for us or for our enemies?’ ‘Neither,’ he replied, ‘but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come.’ Joshua fell face down to the ground in reverence and asked him, ‘What message does my Lord have for his servant?’ The commander of the Lord’s army replied, ‘Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.’” It is interesting that verse 15 is a direct echo of Exodus 3 and the burning bush encounter. The telling of the story of the crossing of the Jordan has a description very much like the crossing of the Red Sea. And the encounter with the commander of the Lord’s army has a description very much like Exodus 3. All of this ratifies through events the way they happened and the way they are described as the Lord’s support of Joshua.

In Joshua 6 there is a verse that underscores these things. Look at the end of chapter 6, which is after the fall of Jericho. Verse 27 reads, “The LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land.” Joshua’s fame, just like Moses’ fame and his military leadership of the people, begins to spread among the Lord’s people and to the enemies of the Lord’s people. The story of Jericho begins in Joshua 2 with the spies going into Jericho and the story of Rahab, but it ends in Joshua 6.

Set side by side are the initial stories of the conquest of the cities of Jericho and Ai, which are in the center of Palestine. This is a stroke of military genius, because it dominates two major cities and separates northern and southern cities. It also dominates the main thoroughfares between the north and the south. It is very astute from a military strategy perspective to begin this way, going across into Jericho rather than coming from the south. We have in these two patterns positive and negative patterns of holy war. There are three primary elements of holy war. One could argue that there are four if you separate the assurance of victory into two parts. But if you see it as one thing, the assurance of victory comes from the Lord. The order is the Lord’s order. It comes from the Lord, and the Lord gives assurance of victory through His authorized spokesperson and leader, Joshua. Also important is cultic purity. Not by accident, we see in Joshua 5, just prior to the conquest, the circumcision. Those who are uncircumcised must fulfill the requirements of the covenant. They must work together, and they must be in obedience for the Lord to give them victory. Finally, the unity of the assembly is necessary for holy war. They must be in this together. That is why we see what we see in Joshua 7 with the sin of Achan. Someone is out of accord. Not only is there cultic impurity violating the requirements of haram, but someone is also out of accord. There is a lack of unity, and there is no assurance of victory until Joshua 8 when they get it right.

There is something else really important in terms of holy war. In Hebrew haram is the notion of the devoted things to the Lord. The totally destroyed are the devoted things. Look at Joshua 6 and 7 where there is a word that comes up over and over again in the matter of holy war. There is a really important reason for it. Joshua 6:15 says,

On the seventh day they got up at daybreak and marched around the city seven times in the same manner except that on that day they circled the city seven times. The seventh time when the
priests sounded the trumpet blast Joshua commanded the people, “Shout, for the LORD has given you the city. The city and all that is in it are to be devoted to the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are with her in her house shall be spared because she hid the spies that we sent. But keep away from the devoted things so that you will not bring about your own destruction by taking any of them. Otherwise you will make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and bring trouble on it. All the silver and gold and the articles of bronze are sacred to the LORD and must go into his treasury.”

Basically that means that everything is to be utterly destroyed. In other words, “Do not take these things for yourself.” We see in Joshua 7:1, “But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things. Achan the son of Carmik the son of Zimri of the tribe of Judah took some of them, and the LORD’s anger burned against Israel.”

Let us talk about what is going on here. Armies and people attacked other people primarily to take their stuff. This doctrine and element of holy war says that it is not about taking these people’s stuff. Holy war and the conquest of Canaan was not like the way that other people conquer lands. The motivation was not economic. It was not about taking their stuff. It was about the fact that the Lord owns the land, and He wanted give it to them. The doctrine of haram is in keeping with the legislation of nahala, “our inheritance,” that the Lord gives the land. It was not the people’s own greed or economic motivation to conquer the land. In fact, most of the stuff, the herds and most of it, would be completely destroyed. Some of it, from time to time, the Lord will say is for His treasury as part of the tabernacle. This is a very important element of holy war that is outlined in a repeated fashion and illustrated by the contrast between Jericho and the success at Jericho and Achan’s sin and Ai being an initial disaster. Once this is rectified, the Lord gives them success.

In Joshua 8:30-35 we see a summary about this initial success in the center of Palestine. The covenant is renewed on Mount Ebal:

Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what was written in the Book of the Law of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings. There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua copied on stones the Law of Moses which he had written. All of Israel, aliens and citizens alike, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant facing those who carried it, the priests and the Levites, half of the people in the front of Mount Gerizim and half in the front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had formerly commanded...

There is an echo of Exodus 20:25 here. Here we see another example of the copying of the law. There is also a reference to Deuteronomy 27 through 31. Here we have a really important example, which we have referred to already, of how we evaluate Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. These books of the history of Israel, or the former prophets, are written a certain way. They are written, and the history of Israel is evaluated, in accordance with its constitution, which is in accordance with its covenant. Later we will talk about Samuel and Kings, and this will come back up. These kings were not evaluated on the basis of how much land they got, how successful they were in negotiating treaties, or how successful they were in building armies. These kings were evaluated on whether or not they walked in the ways of the Lord. The history of Israel is evaluated covenantally primarily through the lens of Deuteronomy as a constitution. We get that right here in this initial summary.
If you look forward to Joshua 10, we have a summary of the southern campaign. In Joshua 9 we have this rouse by the Gibeonites, this deception. You hear the echo over and over again, “Make a treaty with us; make a treaty with us.” We are supposed to get that it really means, “Do not make a treaty with the people. You go into the land.” We are supposed to hear that echo from the Pentateuch. They keep saying they do not live in the land. They say they are visitors from far away. The thing they did not do in Joshua 9:14 is inquire of the Lord. We get a summary of how the southern campaign is successful at the end of Joshua 10. Verse 40 says, “So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded. Joshua subdued them from Kadesh Barnea to Gaza and from the whole region of Goshen to Gibeon. All these kings and their lands Joshua conquered in one campaign, because the LORD, the God of Israel, fought for Israel.”

Then in Joshua 12 we have a list of all the kings in the northern campaign who were conquered. At the end of Joshua 11 we see the success of the northern campaign and how Joshua’s obedience brings success. Joshua 11:15 says, “As the LORD commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and Joshua did it; he left nothing undone of all that the LORD commanded Moses.” Joshua took the whole region. He started in the south and then he went up to the north, “from Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir, to Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon. He captured all their kings and struck them down, putting them to death. Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time. Except for the Hivites living in Gibeon, not one city made a treaty of peace with the Israelites, who took them all in battle.” Then the land had rest from war. We see that Joshua and the armies under his command followed the doctrine of holy war. They followed the covenant in this general summary fashion. From the south to the north we have the land promise fulfilled. We have a list of conquered kings that details that. These summary passages basically summarize the three different campaigns for the conquest of the different regions of the land: central, southern, and northern. Again, Joshua 1 through 12 details the conquest of the land. The Lord has fulfilled His promise to give them the land. So here we have an idealized yet historical description of the conquest of the land.

What will happen with the book of Judges is that it is a very explicit qualification. The way Judges starts is with the ways that conquest did not happen. For example, the cities of the Philistines were not conquered, and Israel was not able to drive them out of this place. In Joshua the emphasis is on the fulfillment of the land promise. The emphasis of Judges is on unfaithfulness in the land. They have different pastoral purposes. Judges comes later because, as I will argue, Judges is an apologetic for the need for a king. In Joshua we have exemplary battles, exemplary language about Joshua’s obedience, and an emphasis on success and the taking of the land.

In Joshua 13 through 21 we have the distribution of the land in accordance with Numbers 26 and Leviticus. Though Joshua is idealistic in its description of the success, we do have this qualification at the beginning of Joshua 13: “When Joshua was old and well advanced in years, the LORD said to him, ‘You are very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over. This is the land that remains: all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites.’” Even though the emphasis is on success, there is this qualification. He begins to list some of these areas. We have the five cities of the Philistines—Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath, and Ekron—and the five Philistine rulers listed in Joshua 13:3. Notice that we begin in Joshua 13 to follow the distribution of the land. For example, verse 15 says, “This is what Moses had given to the tribe of Reuben.” Verse 24 says, “This is what Moses had given to the tribe of Gad.” Verse 29 says, “This is what Moses had given to the half-tribe of Manasseh.”
Notice in Joshua 14 and 15 a very important reminder with the example of Caleb and the spying of the land in Numbers. The promise of the Lord was to give this land to Caleb. In Joshua 14:13 Hebron is given to Caleb. The story starts in verse 6, but look at verse 10, "'Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I am just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.' Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to Caleb.” The emphasis in the story that is remembered from Numbers and here is on the fact that the Lord gave the land. The Lord owns the land, and He is the one who gives the land. The land belongs to the Lord.

The land distribution is in accordance with Numbers to each tribe. We also remember that the Levites did not have land, so they were given cities. Also we have, in accordance with the Pentateuch, these cities of refuge, three in the west and three in the east. Look at Joshua 20 where we see, in accordance with Numbers 35 and Leviticus, that when a person kills someone accidentally and unintentionally he can flee and find protection from the avenger of blood in a city of refuge. That does not mean that there might not be a trial. If the avenger comes to that city he cannot just kill the offender. There has to be a trial and witness in accordance with Deuteronomy, “...the truth established in the mouth of two or three witnesses.” Joshua 13 through 21 reminds us that the land is allocated in accordance with the covenant and the provisions of the law. The land is distributed to the tribes, and cities of refuge are established.

The way in which the book of Joshua ends is that Joshua, just like Moses had done at the end of Deuteronomy, says farewell. In accordance with Moses and the pattern that he followed, Joshua renews the covenant. Joshua 24 in many ways follows this covenant treaty format that we saw in Deuteronomy. It is a preamble with an historical prologue, the stipulations referred to, copies, witnesses, blessings, and curses. Verse 2 says, “Joshua said to all the people, ‘This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, “Long ago your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the river and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt.'” Then he talks and gives the historical remembrance of deliverance from Egypt. In the very covenant renewal ceremony that ends Joshua, the big point is put on the exclamation. The promise God made to Abraham to give him this land has been kept. What you as the covenant people now need to do in response to His call to Abraham and the deliverance from Egypt and the conquest of the land is to live in obedience to the covenant that you renew today.

A good memory verse for Joshua is Joshua 1:8, but the final commitment is “Throw away the foreign gods and yield your hearts to the Lord.” This echoes Deuteronomy. The essence of covenant keeping is not keeping laws, but it is complete loyalty to the Lord, who has done this for us.

Let us talk about the book of Judges. The age of the judges covers approximately 350 years. Look with me at Judges 2 where Joshua dismisses the Israelites. They go on to take possession of the land in verse 6, “The people served the Lord throughout the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived him.” But verse 10 and following read,
After that whole generation had been gathered to their fathers, another generation grew up who knew neither the LORD nor what he had done for Israel. They forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers who had brought them out of Egypt, and they followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They provoked the LORD to anger because they forsook him, and they served Baal and the Ashtaroth. In his anger against Israel the LORD handed them over to raiders who plundered them. He sold them to their enemies all around, and they were no longer able to resist. Whenever Israel went out to fight, the hand of the LORD was against them to defeat them, just as he had sworn to them. They were in great distress. Then the LORD raised up judges who saved them out of the hands of these raiders, yet they would not listen to their judges but prostituted themselves to other gods and worshiped them. Unlike their fathers they quickly turned from the way in which their fathers had walked, the way of obedience to the LORD’s commands. And whenever the LORD raised up a judge for them he was with the judge and saved them out of the hands of their enemies as long as the judge lived, for the LORD had compassion on them as they groaned under those who oppressed and afflicted them. But when the judge died, the people returned to ways even more corrupt than those of their fathers following other gods, serving and worshiping them. They refused to give up their evil practices and stubborn ways.

Parents and pastors, this is a word of sobering warning to us here about the importance of generational discipleship. Judges 2:10-19 basically summarizes the whole book of Judges. What we have in Judges is a downward spiral of worse and worse apostasy until this final, terrible anti-crescendo at the end of the book where even the Levites make idols and help other people worship them. This chapter and these verses are a summary of the whole book. If you have to preach about Judges in one sermon, preach on this passage right here.

The period between the generation after Joshua and Samuel, who is the last judge whose birth starts the book of Samuel, is about 350 years. However, these are dechronologized accounts, not necessarily arranged in sequence but by theme of deepening crisis. A lot of these stories are regionally based, and therefore they overlap. Some of them happen at the same time. Adding up these various years and the time of rest that is given to the people, we have approximately 300 to 350 years.

Let us talk about what a judge is. The word for judge can also be translated “leader.” It is primarily a military function, and only in the case of Deborah do we have a clearly judicial role outlined. In Judges 4:5 Deborah functions as an adjudicator. “She held court under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephriam.” When we see this notion of a judge, primarily it refers to a military leader, a delivered, a savior from their enemies. One other thing to mention here is that Abimelech, who is Gideon’s son, is in parenthesis because he fancied himself not as a judge but as a king. That was a problem, because God would raise up a particular kind of king. We will talk more about Abimelech in just a moment. But the primary function of the judge was as a military leader.

The purpose and outline of Judges is to establish the need for a godly king who would consolidate Israel’s power to complete the conquest of the land and to lead her into covenant faithfulness. The book closes with a refrain, “In those days everyone did what was right in his own eyes, and Israel had no king.” It is repeated four times. We are supposed to get the message that Israel needs a king who will lead them into covenant faithfulness because the judges are not effective enough and, sadly, the Levites are not qualified either. In Judges we see a section that emphasizes the point that the land has not yet been fully conquered. Then we have a deepening cycle of good and bad (bad, bad, bad) judges in Judges 2 through 16. Then we see complete cultic and social anarchy in Judges 17 through 21. There is complete disintegration of covenant identity. A good short way to summarize this is an apologetic for a
good king. The first part of the book has this recurring phrase, “unable to drive out the people, unable to dislodge the people, did not drive out the people”; we see it over and over again, and we see it in different tribal areas. While the emphasis of Joshua is on the faithfulness of Joshua and his elders in that generation and on the success that God gave them, the emphasis of Judges for the generation after Joshua is on unfaithfulness. They did not conquer the land like they were supposed to, and not only that but they worshiped the Baals and the Ashtaroth. Then God raised up the people against them.

What is interesting is that over and over again, especially with the story of Abimelech, we see an argument against the tribe of Benjamin. Let us talk about why that happens. It is because Saul is a Benjamite, and we do not want a king like Saul. We want a king like David. We also have Caleb’s conquest of Hebron, which is where David rules from first. Perhaps the lead-up in terms of the time in which Judges was written and published is the time in which David struggled against Saul. This is an apologetic for kingship, but for a certain kind of king. It is interesting that it might be set in that context of events that we do not read about until 2 Samuel. The time that Judges was published fits that situation—the argument against the tribe of Benjamin, and the argument for a particular kind of king.

The first thing in which they are disobedient in Judges 1 and 2 is that they do not complete the conquest. We have already read from here, but the cycle is apostasy followed by enemies who are raised up and defeat. Then you have outcry and deliverance. God gives a judge. This cycle then starts over, because when the judge dies, sometimes before then, and sometimes even the judge himself leads the people into apostasy again. We have enemies and defeat again, and we have outcry and deliverance again. This cycle is a literary cycle—a way of telling the story. It follows again and again and again. This cycle is there as a lens through which to tell the story of the judges, because it is covenantally framed. The history is told this way. Israel is in defeat because they are unfaithful, not because they do not have enough people or an army. They are in defeat and subrogation because they are unfaithful. That is a way of telling the story. You could tell it a different way and write history a much different way if you wanted. It could be on the basis of military resources, economic resources, or political relationships and alliances, but that is not the way that the former prophets tell the history. They tell the history covenantally. We see the cycle as we look at each of the stories, especially each of the six major judges. They follow exactly this outline of apostasy, punishment, outcry, and deliverance. The cycle is then repeated again.

Of these judges only Othniel, Deborah and, to a certain degree, Gideon, were exemplary. You certainly would not call Samson exemplary. Really only Othniel and Deborah were good judges. To some degree Gideon was good, but in the end Gideon took all the stuff from the Midianites for himself. Then he himself was subverted at the end of his life. His son was an absolute terror who killed his 70 brothers. In the way the story is told we see that the cycle gets worse and worse. It goes from bad to worse to worst.

Before we talk about the end of the story, I want to say just a little bit about Abimelech. I got an argument from Richard Pratt about situating the story of the judges historically in the struggle between Saul and David. Notice the way in which Abimelech is characterized. Turn to Judges 9, where we get a terrible description about how Abimelech kills his 70 brothers. Saul ends up terrifying his family, and he is in treachery with his family. “Come be our king, come be our king,” we see in the refrain in Judges 9:10, 12, and 14. Verse 22 says, “After Abimelech governed Israel three years, God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem who acted treacherously against Abimelech. God did this in order that the crime against Jerubbaal’s seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech.” That sounds just like Saul. Notice later in Judges 9 the way in
which Abimelech dies. Verse 54 says, “Hurriedly he called to his armor bearer, ‘Draw your sword and kill me so that they cannot say, “A woman killed him.”’ So his servant ran him through and he died. When the Israelites saw Abimelech was dead they went home.” That also sounds like Saul’s death. The way in which the story is told may have a strong political purpose as well. “We do not want the Benjamite king. We do not want Saul’s heritage. We want David. David is the right kind of king.” We see an apologetic for kingship, but it is an apologetic for a particular kind of king, one who will follow the covenant after God’s heart.

The end of this story is divided into two major sections, or you could say three major sections if you separate Judges 17 and 18. We have these rather horrifying stories—not for the faint of heart. The purpose of these stories is to show the disintegration of covenantal identity. Even a Levite would take silver and metals and make idols. The Levites were not supposed to be private priests, but Micah has a private priest. Even worse than that, a whole tribe has their own priest. The Danites go to kill the people of Laish where Micah is, and they take the idol for themselves. They do it thinking that they are under the protection and the blessing of the Lord because they have their own priest and Levite. People should be shocked and horrified when they read this story! The Levite was supposed to embody the covenant by not making idols but calling everyone together to worship the Lord, to instruct in the law. These were the responsibilities of Levites, given in Leviticus 10. They were to instruct in the law and pronounce what was clean and unclean. This story is supposed to be absolutely shocking and horrifying. We see the disintegration between the Danites and their willingness to kill others who occupy Laish. Then we see the behavior of the Benjamites in this story of a concubine who is unfaithful to this Levite. The concubine is from Bethlehem, which is interesting. The Benjamites declare war by raping her repeatedly, dismembering her, and dividing her up and sending pieces and parts of her to the various tribes.

What we see in the first instance with the idolatry is cultic anarchy. What we see in the disintegration of relationships between all the tribes, the way they treat each other, and the way a Levite even assists in the way they treat each other, is complete social disintegration and anarchy. There is a theme through all of this repeated over and over again, stitching together these stories of Levitical corruption and complete social disintegration: “Everyone did what was right in his own eyes, and in those days Israel had no king.” That is the way the book of Judges ends. There is a strong apologetic for a king who will be stronger than the judges and as faithful as or more faithful than a Levite to instruct Israel in the covenant and to lead the people back into the ways of the Lord. Through the story of these terrible cycles and at the last refrain we have Israel really in trouble and in need of a good king who will reestablish a particular social identity. That social identity should be shaped by the covenant, the constitution, and complete loyalty to Yahweh, who gave them the land.

Ruth is also somewhat of a political story in some ways supporting David. How do you explain the fact that you have a Moabitess in your family? That needs a little explanation in Israel, especially if you are running for king! Of course they did not really run for king; they did not have campaigns, but the story of Ruth really undergirds and politically supports David. That is its purpose. One of the purposes of Ruth is to support, again, Davidic leadership and kingship. It shows how it is that Ruth came to be a part of Israel and to exemplify Boaz as perhaps one of the exemplary characters in the entire Old Testament. He not only lives out the basic requirements of the law, what we might call the floor of the law, but he also goes way beyond the gleaning laws. He goes beyond the kinsman redeemer laws, and he goes the extra mile as the kinsman redeemer. He exemplifies what it means to live in covenant relationship with God. It is about the heart apprehending the covenant, not just keeping the jots and tittles of the law. It is about going beyond that, reaching for the ceiling, and reaching for the covenant order and the created
order. This happens in terms of mercy and in terms of economic provision for widows in your family.

Boaz is the exemplary character who exemplifies Torah faithfulness. This story of Ruth explains how it is that David has a Moabitess in his family. It comes on the heels of Judges, where Judges 21:25 is a good memory verse for the book because it summarizes the story of Judges.

Let us say a little bit more about Ruth, though we have said a lot already. The story of Ruth really follows the narrative of resolution very clearly. What we see in a narrative of resolution is a clear problem. The five-point outline follows the five-stage narrative of resolution. The problem is Naomi’s bitterness and her near emptiness. This is because of these deaths and how death robs life, joy, and even economic sustenance from people. Naomi goes to Moab to be filled because of famine, but she returns to Bethlehem without her husband or sons. The problem is death and a lack of support for this widow and her daughter-in-law. The rising action is that a kinsman redeemer is pointed out in Ruth 2. The turning point of the story in Ruth 3 is where Boaz promises Ruth a kinsman redeemer. The falling action is in Ruth 4 where Boaz becomes Ruth’s kinsman redeemer. Naomi is blessed and full at the end of the story in Ruth 4. It follows very clearly the arc of the ways stories work. They start with a conflict or a problem. That problem is resolved and then moves toward resolution.

The purpose of Ruth is to illustrate covenant faithfulness in David’s ancestors, both Ruth and Boaz, as one demonstration of the legitimacy of his kingship. In telling the story we engage some very important legal protections for the poor. The story is told through the lens of the covenant and the law. Deuteronomy 15:4 contains the requirement, “There shall be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance he will richly bless you if you fully obey the LORD and are careful to follow his commands. For the LORD your God will bless you as he promises, and you will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. You will rule over many nations and none will rule over you.” Covenant faithfulness in the land produces crops, enough to feed the poor and the widows who are exposed to poverty. The covenant community is to provide for the poor. We have some specifics on how that is to happen through the gleaning laws in Leviticus 19. Boaz instructs those who work his fields not only just to leave what they missed but to also leave more. Again, Boaz is exemplary. He goes beyond the requirements of the law. Leviticus 19:9 and 10 read, “When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of the harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and for the sojourner. I am the LORD your God.” We see in Ruth 2 and 3 an emphasis on gleaning as a way to provide for Naomi and Ruth.

In terms of the kinsman redeemer, we have the Levirate marriage laws. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 shows this way of providing for those in your family, “If brothers are living together and one of them dies without a son, his widow must not marry outside the family. Her husband’s brother shall take her and marry her and fulfill the duty of a brother-in-law to her. The first son she bears shall carry on the name of the dead brother so that his name will not be blotted out from Israel.” This is not just in terms of how you support life in an agrarian society. The land supports life, and it is distributed according to the family. So you take care of those whose husbands die by keeping them in the family so they also have economic support from the land. Again, these two major aspects of covenant identity of multiplying and subduing the Earth come out in the way that the covenant provides for the poor and for the widow.

In Leviticus 25 we have further instructions when different family members might not be able to support economically or take a widow in and support her. This is the notion of the kinsman redeemer addressed in verses 39, 47, and 48. The theme throughout is the notion of redemption and what is redeemable. Leviticus 25:47 says, “If an alien or a temporary resident among you becomes rich and one of your
countrymen becomes poor and sells himself to the alien living among you or to a member of the alien’s clan, he retains the right of redemption after he has sold himself. One of his relatives may redeem him: An uncle or a cousin or any blood relative in his clan may redeem him. Or if he prospers, he may redeem himself. He and his buyer are to count the time from the year he sold himself up to the Year of Jubilee. The price for his release is to be based on the rate paid to a hired man for that number of years.”

In other words, he can pay to get himself out of indentured servitude or debt. Tied in with the Sabbath and jubilee laws we have this notion of redemption through other family members. Say you died and your brother cannot afford to take your wife. Another family member then has rights to redeem the widow. That is what happened to Boaz. Someone else before him had rights to redeem Ruth. They went into the city gate, which is where contracts were signed, property was exchanged, and deeds were done. That person did not want to exercise his right to Ruth, so Boaz followed through and exercised the right of the kinsman redeemer. We see that these two elements, the Levirate marriage and the kinsman redeemer laws, are combined in the way that they are exercised in the story of Ruth.

Jesus is the perfect son of David, whose kingdom was legitimated by Ruth. Her story is picked up in Matthew 1 and other references in the New Testament. Jesus extends His grace to outsiders like Ruth who trust Him as Lord. Like Boaz, Jesus demonstrates unreserved commitment to His bride, the Church, to redeem her.