

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Adult Bible Equipping Class
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“The narrative from Joshua to Kings is a unified and continuous telling of Israel’s story. But it was not a narrative that was content to rehearse the dry facts of the situation; instead, each of the “books” used its story to make theological points based on the narration of the events. Each “book” was convinced that it was the nation’s sin that had, in each case, brought the people and its succession of leaders into harm’s way.”

—Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 132.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

The Former Prophets

I. Introduction

- A. The Protestant tradition (following the LXX) classifies Joshua-Kings as “historical” books for the obvious reason that they deal primarily with Israel’s history. Also included in this category are other books such as Chronicles, Ruth, and Esther.
- B. The Jewish tradition views these books as the “Prophets.”
- C. This reflects the view of the Jews even at the time of Jesus, who saw the OT canon as divided into “the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms” (Luke 24:44).
- D. How can Joshua-Kings be considered prophetic books?
 - 1. They give a continuous history of Israel in the land through the eyes of the prophets.
 - 2. They prepare the reader for the messages to come in the “Latter Prophets” (Isaiah-Malachi).
 - 3. Thus, the Jewish tradition calls Joshua-Kings the “Former Prophets.”

II. Major Themes

A. God

- 1. God is the primary focus of the Former Prophets just as he was the focus of the Torah. However, the Former Prophets present a new context in which different attributes of God receive greater emphasis.

2. The Torah focused on aspects of Yahweh's character and attributes that were most relevant to Israel as they were entering into covenant with Yahweh. The Former Prophets now focus on those attributes that more clearly define God's relationship to Israel as they enter and possess the land.
3. In many instances, the Torah's depiction of God is carried on into the Former prophets and given greater clarity as it applies to this new era of Israel's history.
4. ***God the Warrior***
 - a. Israel's initial task is to take possession of the land of Canaan and dispossess its current inhabitants. Once in the land, Israel must maintain possession of the land amid the hostile Canaanites.
 - b. Thus, Yahweh is continually depicted as a Warrior God. He *fights* for Israel, just as was promised in the Torah.
 - c. He is "the captain of the host of Yahweh" (Josh 5:14), a phrase which views God as a general commanding an uncountable army.
 - d. He is the God who "fought for Israel" against her enemies (Josh 10:14).
 - e. He "thundered with a great thunder" against the Philistines who had amassed against Israel to attack (1 Sam 7:10).
 - f. He is described by David as "Yahweh of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (1 Sam 17:45); cf. 2 Sam 5:10).
 - g. He is the one who slayed 185,000 Assyrians who had laid siege against Hezekiah in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 19:35).
5. ***God the Righteous Judge***
 - a. God holds his people to the standard of the law and dispenses judgment on evil, even among his own people.
 - b. He judged Achan for his disobedience during the Jericho campaign (Josh 7).
 - c. He gave Israel into the hands of the Canaanites for their idolatry and infidelity to the covenant (cf. Judg 2).
 - d. He removed Saul from the throne for his disobedience (1 Sam 15).
 - e. He judged David for taking a rebellious census of Israel (2 Sam 24).
 - f. He judged Rehoboam by allowing the kingdom to divide (1 Kgs 13).
 - g. He sent both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel into exile for their covenant infidelity (2 Kgs 17, 25).
6. ***God the Lord who Blesses Obedience and Curses Disobedience***
 - a. This theme is foundational to the nature of God seen in the Torah. From the very beginning, God blesses (Gen 1) and curses (Gen 3).

- b. “It shall come about that just as all the good words which Yahweh your God spoke to you have come upon you, so that Yahweh will bring upon you all the threats, until He has destroyed you from off this good land” (Josh 23:15).
- c. “If you will fear Yahweh and serve him, and listen to his voice and not rebel against the command of Yahweh, then both you and also the king who reigns over you will follow Yahweh your God. If you will not listen to the voice of Yahweh, but rebel against the command of Yahweh, then the hand of Yahweh will be against you, as it was against your fathers” (1 Sam 12:14-15).
- d. “Keep the charge of Yahweh your God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, according to what is written in the Law of Moses, that you may succeed in all that you do and wherever you turn, so that Yahweh may carry out his promise which he spoke concerning me, saying, ‘If your sons are careful of their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, you shall not lack a man on the throne of Israel’” (1 Kgs 2:3-4).

B. The Monarchy

- 1. The monarchy was not a concept introduced in the Former Prophets. God promised Abraham that some of his descendants would be kings (Gen 18), and the Mosaic Covenant included provisions for instituting a monarchy at the proper time once Israel was established in the land (Deut 17).
- 2. Indeed, it had already been established that the royal line of Israel would flow from the tribe of Judah (Gen 49:10).
- 3. But in the Former Prophets, these future things become reality, and the royal line is further defined as it narrows from Judah specifically to the house of David.
- 4. Joshua serves as the model of kingship in Israel’s early years. The expectations given to him (Josh 1) reflect the expectations of Israel’s king (cf. Deut 17) and he leads Israel in battle the way Israel’s future kings will.
- 5. The people’s choice of king reflected their uncircumcised hearts—they chose a king like that of the other nations, exactly what Yahweh had forbidden them from doing.
- 6. Instead, Yahweh himself chose a king—David, and the entirety of the Former Prophets revolves around the preparation of Israel for a king (Joshua-Judges), the establishment of David as Israel’s king (Samuel), and the preservation of the Davidic dynasty despite Israel’s overall infidelity (Kings).

C. The Servants of Yahweh

- 1. The phrase “servant of Yahweh” is introduced in the Former Prophets as a designation for special individuals who performed specific tasks in Israel’s history.
- 2. By introducing such a phrase in the Former Prophets, they prepare the reader to better understand the role of the ultimate “Servant of Yahweh” found in Isaiah.
 - a. Moses (Josh 1:1, 2; 8:31, 33; 22:4, 5; 2 Kgs 18:12; 21:8)
 - b. Joshua (Josh 24:29; Judg 2:8)

- c. David (2 Sam 7:5, 8; 1 Kgs 3:6; 8:25; 11:13; 14:8; 2 Kgs 8:19; 19:34; 20:6)
- d. Elijah (2 Kgs 9:36; 10:10)
- e. Jonah (2 Kgs 14:25)

III. Purpose

- A. In general, the Former prophets show that Israel received Yahweh's blessing only so long as she remained faithful to the Mosaic Covenant.
- B. However, even this basic statement does not entirely exhaust the purpose of the Former Prophets. Instead, the overall theme of these three books seems to be that Israel ultimately failed to obey Yahweh both before the monarchy and under the monarchy as Yahweh faithfully provided leaders for her.
- C. Deuteronomy already predicted Israel's eventual failure. This must be remembered as we continue to read the prophetic books.
- D. Joshua, while presenting Israel at its most "obedient," still hints at Israel's disobedience. It begins with Achan's sin, but is presented more subtly as the author repeatedly emphasizes that Israel did not drive out all the inhabitants from the land.
- E. Any hope for Israel in Joshua is dashed in Judges, where Israel enters into a cyclical pattern of disobedience which leads to oppression. Yahweh, however, faithfully provides leaders who eventually liberate one segment of the nation, only to have another segment fall again.
- F. Samuel presents the monarchy as a possible solution to Israel's problem. But even here, hopes are dashed when even Israel's own leaders (Eli and David) fail to obey Yahweh fully.
- G. Whatever hope remained at the end of Samuel is dashed fully in Kings, when the nation ultimately divides and is exiled from the land.
- H. Thus, the Former Prophets paint a picture of a faithless Israel and a faithful God. While God provides leaders, Israel continually defies God, and even the leaders that God provide turn out to be less than ideal.

IV. The Literary Structure

- A. The Former Prophets are not a solid literary unit as is the Torah. Rather, it is a unit that is comprised of four distinct books that tie together into a running history of Israel as viewed through the eyes of the prophets.
- B. However, there are certain structural patterns that tie these books together into a more cohesive literary unit:
 - 1. *A Notation/Implication of Death*: Each book begins with a mention of the death of the previous figure (Moses [Josh 1:1-2], Joshua [Judg 1:1], Samson [1 Sam 1:1; cf. Judg 13:2; 16:30]; David [1 Kgs 1:1]) and/or a new figure coming upon the scene (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, etc.).

2. *Extended Narrative* (Josh 1:3-21:34; Judg 1:2-16:31; 1 Sam 1:2-2 Sam 20:26; 1 Kgs 1:2-2 Kgs 25:21).
3. *Epilogue*: Each book ends with an epilogue which paints the overall character of these men, giving the reader greater insight (Josh 22:1-24:33; Judg 17:1-21:25; 2 Sam 21:1-24:25; 2 Kgs 25:22-30). In each case, the epilogue ends with a note of failure.
 - a. Joshua ends with three burials (24:29-33).
 - b. Judges ends with everyone doing what was right in their own eyes (Judg 21:25).
 - c. Samuel ends with a plague (2 Sam 24:25).
 - d. Kings ends with Jerusalem destroyed, Israel in exile, but the house of David is still surviving (2 Kgs 25:22-30).
- C. The general tone of the Former Prophets is dark. Only in the center is there victory. Just when the darkness appears to be over during the rise of David, then he fails and the door is open for the fall of David and his house.
- D. The Former Prophets ends with the clear implication that Yahweh's promise to David has not been fully realized. It has not taken place in the past. It must take place in the future.

