

Dr. David Howard, Joshua-Ruth, Session 3, Introduction Part 3

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This is Dr. David Howard in his teaching on Joshua through Ruth. This is session 3, Introduction to Joshua, part 3, Literary Context.

In this segment, I want to talk about what I would call the literary context of the book of Joshua.

We've talked in another segment about the historical context, and geographical context, but the book of Joshua is not just referring to events and places and people that happened in real time and space and history, but it is also a literary composition. It is a book of words written by someone with a certain intent. The intent we've spoken of in a different segment is that God's gift of the promised land is the people of Israel and so on.

But let's think of the book of Joshua now in its literary context, namely in the place in the canon, the place in the Old Testament where it occurs. So traditionally we have the first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, as what we would call the Pentateuch. The division is right here and the logic behind this, these are sometimes called the books of Moses, and this would be because Moses was the primary author of these books.

Moses dies at the end of Deuteronomy, so it's a logical division of a major section of the Bible. After this, in the Protestant tradition, we usually talk about the historical books, Joshua down through 2 Kings or even all the way through Chronicles as Nehemiah Esther. I don't like that term completely because it might imply that other parts are not historical.

I would say the storyline in Joshua picks up on the storyline in Numbers, Exodus, and Genesis, and so those would be historical also in that sense, the narrative sections. But it's a term of convenience. It tells the story of when Israel entered the land, and if you go to Kings, 2 Kings, this is where Israel is taken away from the land.

So, these are the 400 years or so, or more than 400 years, maybe 800 or 900 years of Israel's life in the land. In the Jewish tradition, these are called the former prophets, Joshua, Judges, 1 Samuel, and 1 Kings. And they're not prophets in the same sense that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the others are, but in the sense that prophets are people who speak words from God, spokespersons for God, as Isaiah and others spoke in the streets of Jerusalem or in Samaria.

The authors of these books are speaking words from God in a different way. They're writing down the events and interpreting them through God's eyes. So, in that sense, these can be called prophets.

So, the book of Joshua then is the head of the historical books, the first book of life in the land. Now if you read far enough in Old Testament literature, you will come across theories of composition that may be a little different from this. One of the major theories that had cachet a couple of centuries ago into the 20th century was a theory that the storyline from Genesis didn't really end in Deuteronomy, but it ended in Joshua.

We should think of something called a Hexateuch. The Pentateuch got its name from the word penta meaning five. So, the first five books, we think of the pentagon as a five-sided thing. A hexagon is a six-sided geometric structure.

So, the Hexateuch would be the first six books of the Old Testament. Scholars came up with this theory end of the 19th century, and early 20th century, thinking that no, Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch, but somebody much later was writing about this, and threads that would go through all these books ended in Joshua. And there's a certain logic to this because there's so much in Joshua that looks backward as the fulfillment of the promises and the storyline finishes here.

The movement in the Pentateuch is always in a forward-looking direction. God gives promises to the land to Abraham, and then shortly within decades, his descendants are not in the land anymore. They're in Egypt.

And then the rest of the book of Exodus is moving out toward the promised land. The book of Numbers is moving through the wilderness toward the promised land. So, there's always this movement forward.

And at the end of every book in the Pentateuch, there's this kind of forward-looking lean. At the end of Genesis, they're in exile in Egypt, and they want to get back to the land. Exodus, the same thing.

They want to get back to the land and so on. So, all those books, the five books, are looking ahead. And it's in the book of Joshua that we have the fulfillment of that.

And there's a sense in the book of Joshua, it's kind of a sense of, ah, we're here. Finally, after all these centuries, the promises are fulfilled, we're in the land, and life is good. So, there's clearly a sense that the book of Joshua looks back in appreciation for all of this.

Life is now good. There's a settledness in the book of Joshua that you don't find in most other books. So it's true that this book looks backward.

But this theory ignores the traditional understanding of the Pentateuch as coming from the pen of Moses, or most of the Pentateuch coming from the pen of Moses. So, in 1943, there was a German scholar named Martin Noth, who proposed a different theory. And he proposed a theory called the Deuteronomistic History.

And Noth thought that, no, the point of closure should be here. And the book of Deuteronomy should be understood as the head of all of these books. It's clear the book of Deuteronomy looks ahead a lot to life in the land, Moses' instructions at the end of his life, looking ahead to how they should live, and so on.

And that you find themes in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings that are first articulated in the book of Deuteronomy. So, Noth argued that 2 Kings ends with the destruction of Jerusalem and the release of Jehoiachin from prison in the year 561, hundreds of years later. And so, Martin Noth argued that this entire corpus of all these big books was written during the exile after Jerusalem fell.

Maybe portions were written earlier, but this is all put together as a big composition called the Deuteronomistic History. And again, I would agree that much of what Noth has argued makes sense. Because yes, Deuteronomy does look ahead.

Many of the things about obedience and God's promises and so on that are mentioned in Deuteronomy are fulfilled in these books. And even some of the reasons why Samaria and Jerusalem fell in 2 Kings are echoing warnings from the book of Deuteronomy. So, there's clearly that thread and that unity of theme.

It's one thing to say there's a unity of theme. It's another thing to say there's a unity of authorship. And I would disagree with Noth's theory that this is all written in the exile.

Again, I would affirm the traditional perspective that the Pentateuch was Mosaic, essentially. But the whole purpose of this is to show the context of the book of Joshua as a hinged book. And in a sense, both Deuteronomy and Joshua are hinged books.

Because Deuteronomy consists of Moses' final speeches, looking back over his life with Israel and saying, here's how God has been faithful to us over the generations, from Abraham on and especially for us these last 40 years. Here's how God has been with us in Egypt and the wilderness and so on. And that's a backward look in the book of Deuteronomy.

But it looks ahead because Moses says, now I'm going to be off the scene. And you are going to cross into the promised land and here are the things you need to remember. And part of Deuteronomy is repeating the laws given 40 years earlier.

Even the name of the book, Deuteronomy, comes from the words Deutero and Nomos, meaning second law. The law had been given originally in Mount Sinai to the first generation. Those people died off in the wilderness and now Moses was speaking to the second generation.

So again, it's looking backward but also looking ahead. Joshua, the same thing. Looks backward saying, these are the fulfillment of the promises.

And yet, there is also a way in which Joshua looks ahead as the first book in which Israel was living until the end of 2 Kings when Israel is taken away from the land. So, the book of Joshua is one that looks backward and forwards in the sweep of these books here. And I think it's helpful to keep that perspective in mind.

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