

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of biblical theology today by continuing to examine evidence that corroborates the Bible. Last time we discussed evidence for the Israelite conquest of Canaan. Dr. Spencer, what would you like to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: The next phase of biblical history is the period covered by the book of Judges along with the first seven chapters of 1 Samuel. This period begins with the death of Joshua and extends up to the beginning of the monarchy under Saul. We are told in Joshua 24:29 that he died at the age of 110. And we also know that he was Moses' aid when the Israelites first came out of Egypt, so assuming he was a young man of, let's say, 18 or 20 at that time, he must have died a few years before 1350 BC. We also know that Saul started to rule around 1050 BC, so the period of the judges extends for about 300 years, from around 1350 to 1050 BC.

Marc Roby: And what extra-biblical evidence do we have for that period?

Dr. Spencer: Let me first say a little about the dates, and in doing so also provide a bit more evidence for the conquest, before I get into any of the evidence for the time of the Judges, because this is a period, just like the Exodus, about which there is a great deal of controversy. There are those, like Kenneth Kitchen, who hold to a late date for the Exodus, around 1250 BC,¹ which I think is very difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with the biblical accounts, and they point to the fact that much of the evidence for destruction and resettlement of towns in Canaan comes from the 13th and 12th centuries BC, rather than the 14th century. But, as Kitchen himself points out in his book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, which we've used quite a bit, the biblical account of the conquest does *not* say that the Israelites came in, *totally* destroyed and then *immediately* occupied most or even many of the towns in Canaan.²

In fact, we are told in Joshua 13:1 that "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.'"³ So, we know that around the middle of the 14th century the Israelites had not yet occupied much of the land of Canaan. We are only told that the Israelites totally destroyed and burned three cities: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. We discussed Jericho at some length last time, and the exact location of Ai is still in doubt, but we have not yet said anything about Hazor, which is north of the Sea of Galilee.

Marc Roby: Is there evidence for the conquest of Hazor?

Dr. Spencer: We have a tremendous amount of evidence that Hazor was a very large Canaanite settlement, including extra-biblical references to it, for example in the Amarna letters we

¹ Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, pg. 359

² *Ibid*, pp. 161-163

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discussed in Session 18, all of which is consistent with it being described in Joshua 11:10 as “the head of all” the Canaanite kingdoms in the north. In fact, the excavations at Hazor are still going on now and this most recent round of excavations was begun almost 30 years ago, in 1990.

Marc Roby: That’s a long time to be digging in one place.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it is, and yet they have still only excavated a small percentage of the site. And it has been under the direction of the same person for the entire time, Prof. Amnon Ben-Tor of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. In any event, these are some of the most extensive excavations in the region and they have yielded a lot of evidence as I said. There is also clear evidence of a massive destruction of the site by fire, which Prof. Ben-Tor dates to the time of Joshua, although – as you might guess – the date is controversial.

In any event, the main point I want to make is that independent of the exact date of the destruction by fire seen in the excavation at Hazor, there is a tremendous amount of evidence that corroborates the biblical narrative of both the conquest and the period of the Judges. In addition, as has been pointed out by many, the entire period of the Judges, which we are going to briefly examine now, is a time of many conflicts and changes in this region. So, the evidence of destruction and resettlement in this period of time is consistent with the biblical narrative and is not evidence that uniquely points to a late date for the Exodus.

Let me quote Randall Price from his book called *The Stones Cry Out*, which is another very useful book. He writes, “the signs of widespread destruction at certain sites should not be considered as archaeological evidence against the biblical chronology and for a late date for the Conquest. These destructions better fit the period of the Judges, during which ongoing warfare was commonplace.”⁴

Marc Roby: I think we are clear on the fact that archaeologists disagree about some of the dates. But what evidence do we have for the period of the Judges?

Dr. Spencer: We have a good deal of evidence, with much of it again being circumstantial. For example, we read in Judges 18 the sad story of the tribe of Dan, who, having not been successful in occupying the territory God assigned to them, sent out spies to look for somewhere else to go. And we are told in Judges 18:7 that the spies “came to Laish, where they saw that the people were living in safety, like the Sidonians, unsuspecting and secure. And since their land lacked nothing, they were prosperous. Also, they lived a long way from the Sidonians and had no relationship with anyone else.” The spies then returned to the rest of the tribe and said, “let’s attack them!” And they did so, taking the city and renaming it Dan.

As Kitchens details, we have significant archaeological evidence for Laish having a large Canaanite settlement, which was then destroyed around 1200 BC and resettled by Israelites.⁵

Marc Roby: That’s impressive evidence. What else do we have?

⁴ Randall Price, *The Stones Cry Out*, Harvest House Publishers, 1997, pg. 147

⁵ Kitchen, op. cit., pg. 211

Dr. Spencer: One of the more interesting bits of indirect evidence is provided by the Midianites, whom the Bible describes as one of the enemies of the Jewish people during this time. As it turns out, the Midianites were a people with a very short history. They seem to have existed for only 200 years or so, starting from about 1300 BC.⁶ So, the Bible mentioning them at this point is a very specific bit of evidence for the historicity of the account, and is again something it would have been virtually impossible for someone to get right if this account were written hundreds of years later as the minimalists would have us believe. A similar situation is true of another enemy of the Jewish people in this period, called the Amalekites.

There are a number of other specifics I could cite, but you get into arguments about dates and so forth for much of them, so I'll just finish by reminding our listeners that the Amarna letters we've discussed before illustrate the kind of constant conflict that was going on during this period. In addition, since there was no large or powerful Jewish state during the time of the judges, one would not expect to find a great deal of evidence. The Amarna letters and the Merneptah Stele, both of which were discussed last time, along with the evidence from Laish and the general archaeological evidence of a volatile time of destruction and re-settlement, is probably more than we should reasonably have expected to find.

Marc Roby: Very well. So what do we look at next?

Dr. Spencer: The next period in biblical history is the united monarchy. This started, as I noted a while ago, about 1050 BC when the Jewish people asked for a king and God complied.

Marc Roby: I think it would be a good idea to pause and point out the theological importance of this episode in Jewish history at this point.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. The book of Judges has a clear theme. Over and over again we see the people being punished for their disobedience to God's commands, followed by their crying out in repentance for relief and God, in his great mercy, providing deliverance. Overall then, it is a book about the unfaithful apostasy and idolatry of God's people and his faithful mercy and long-suffering. There is a phrase repeated four times in the book, "In those days Israel had no king", which is a terrible thing to have said about them since they *did*, in fact, have a king. And not just any king, they had the King of kings! And twice in the book, that phrase is combined with another sad statement that further explains it; in both Judges 17:6 and 21:25 we read, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit."

Marc Roby: That sounds a lot like our time.

Dr. Spencer: Yes it does. But, returning to the united kingdom, we have no good direct evidence for Saul, but we do have for his successor David, who is, of course, the most famous of all the Jewish kings.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 213-214

Marc Roby: It's particularly interesting that we have solid direct evidence for him since for many years the skeptics have been saying that King David was a figment of the Jewish imagination; a purely mythical ideal king.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it is interesting. I think that God has a great sense of humor and sometimes delights in giving people just enough rope to hang themselves. It is also a clear demonstration of how inconsistent and downright silly some of the critics of the Bible can be. If the Jewish people were going to construct a mythical perfect king, I don't find it credible to believe that they would come up with David, who while certainly a great king, was also severely flawed. I mean, who would create a mythical supposedly ideal king who is also guilty of adultery and murder?

Marc Roby: That's a good point. But what is the extra-biblical evidence for David, and just how recent is it?

Dr. Spencer: The best evidence comes from a 1993 find in our old friend, the city of Dan. Called the Tell Dan Stele, it was a black basalt monument erected in the late 9th century BC, about 150 years after David died. It is a victory stele put up by the Arameans to commemorate a victory over their enemies, the Israelites. One line of the stele says, with some reconstruction, "I killed Jehoram son of Ahab king of Israel and I killed Ahaziah son of Jehoram king of the House of David."⁷

The reconstruction of a couple of names is all but certain, but more importantly there is no reconstruction necessary for the part that says, "the house of David". So, first of all, we have absolutely irrefutable extra-biblical evidence for the existence of David. Secondly, the silly proposals that the real David was a petty tribal king and that the mythical David simply borrowed his name are put to rest because kings in the ancient world were no different than people today. They didn't make a big deal out of commemorating a victory over a nobody. And, in addition, if David was such a minor figure, Jehoram would not have been called "king of the House of David" nearly 150 years after David lived.

Marc Roby: That does seem unlikely. You said this is the "best evidence", so I assume there is more?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. Another piece of direct evidence, which, although less certain than the Tell Dan Stele, is also solid – no pun intended – is the Mesha Stele, which is also called the Moabite stone. Mesha was the king of Moab and this stele, which was also erected in the 9th century BC, links the house of David with an occupation in part of southern Moab.⁸ But our evidence doesn't stop there. There is a third, less certain but nonetheless probable reference to David in a list of place names conquered by Shoshenq I of Egypt. This list was engraved around 925 BC at the Great Temple of Karnak in Egypt and includes a place called "the heights of David."⁹

⁷ Price, op. cit., pg. 170

⁸ Kitchen, op. cit., pp 92-93

⁹ Ibid, pg. 93, see also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shoshenq_I

Marc Roby: That is truly amazing that after so many years we have solid evidence for this most famous of all Israelite kings. Do you want to say any more about the united monarchy?

Dr. Spencer: There is a lot more indirect evidence that I'll let people look at on their own if they are interested, but I do want to mention that Kitchen does a good job of listing evidence from other ancient rulers that completely puts the lie to the idea that Solomon's riches and fame are somehow not believable.¹⁰ Solomon, as many of our listeners know, was David's son and was named by David as his successor. And many people have claimed that Solomon's riches, like his throne and vast amounts of gold and silver, are not believable. But, it turns out that there is a tremendous amount of evidence for other rulers of the same time frame having similar thrones, similarly huge amounts of gold and silver and so on. In addition, Solomon's relations with other kingdoms at the time, like the famous visit by the Queen of Sheba, all make historical sense. But, I'd like to move on now to the period of the divided kingdom.

Marc Roby: Alright. And for those listeners who don't know the history, after Solomon's son Rehoboam took over the kingdom was split in two. The southern kingdom, usually called Judah, was first ruled by Rehoboam and included the holy city of Jerusalem, while the northern kingdom, usually called Israel, was ruled at first by Jeroboam.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And this period of history, starting roughly in 930 BC, is one of great turmoil, as anyone who has read the biblical account in 1st & 2nd Kings and 2nd Chronicles knows. The Bible tells us that all of the kings of the northern kingdom were wicked and, as a result, that kingdom was totally destroyed and the Israelites carried off into captivity by the Assyrians. The capital city of Samaria fell in 722 BC.

Marc Roby: And the southern kingdom didn't fare much better.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. It did have some kings who were good, even very good, but because they also failed to remain faithful to God in spite of repeated warnings from the prophets and the example of the northern kingdom, they too were defeated, this time by the Babylonian empire, with most of the leading citizens of Jerusalem being carried into captivity in Babylon and the city itself being destroyed in 586 BC.

Marc Roby: And do we have evidence to corroborate the Bible's narrative of this period of history?

Dr. Spencer: Absolutely. In fact, we have an embarrassment of riches and it is safe to say that it would be completely futile to challenge the veracity of the biblical accounts in this period. I won't spend much time on it because it is really not controversial except for some minor details. The bottom line is that we have a lot of extra-biblical evidence that shows the biblical narrative to be factual. Let me give a couple of quick examples.

Marc Roby: Please do.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp 107-137

Dr. Spencer: Let's look at some evidence for the very beginning of the divided kingdom. In 1 Kings 14:25-26 and 2 Chronicles 12:2-9 we are told of Pharaoh Shishak's military campaign against Rehoboam. Shishak is also known as Shoshenq I.¹¹ No mention is made in the Bible of his also going into the northern kingdom of Israel, but Shoshenq I did leave a list of cities conquered in the Great Temple of Karnak¹² as I mentioned a couple of minutes ago, and that list allows people to trace the route of his military campaign into Canaan, which definitely included a foray into the north.¹³ Kitchen speculates, I think reasonably, that since Jeroboam had fled to Egypt before taking power in the north, he was a vassal of the pharaoh and had, perhaps, stopped making payments, which would certainly have brought the pharaoh up north to collect.¹⁴ In any event, we know from the city list that the pharaoh went there, and a portion of a victory stele was found in Megiddo, which clearly identifies Pharaoh Shoshenq I.¹⁵

Marc Roby: That's pretty solid evidence indeed. What else do you have to share?

Dr. Spencer: Well, moving along a bit in the list of kings, one of the most prominent kings of the northern kingdom of Israel was Omri. There was yet another stele found in 1868, which is called either the Mesha stele, or the Moabite stone. It was erected by Mesha, king of Moab, around 840 BC and it describes him gaining a victory over a son of "Omri king of Israel".¹⁶ Not only does it specifically name Omri king of Israel, it also gives a description of the battle which is consistent with the account given in 2 Kings Chapter 3. Anyone who is interested can read the inscription for himself on Wikipedia.

Marc Roby: I continue to be astounded by all of the extra-biblical evidence and how it continually proves the Bible to be an accurate source. But we are out of time for today and will have to continue this next time.

Dr. Spencer: That's fine, but I do want to remind our listeners to email their questions on this session, or any previous sessions, to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org.

¹¹ Ibid, pg. 33

¹² Ibid, pg 33

¹³ E.g., see *The Harper Concise Atlas of the Bible*, Harper Collins Publ., 1991, pg. 63

¹⁴ Kitchen, op. cit., pg. 34

¹⁵ Ibid, pg. 33, also Price, pg. 227

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesha_Stele#Parallel_to_2_Kings_3