



## Joshua and Judges

**H**istory is a very complicated thing. It's hard enough to try and make some sense out of past events that occurred even in our own lifetime, whether they be personal or things that happened around the nation or the world. We've all had the experience, I'm sure, of returning to some location of our childhood, and finding it to be very different from how it appears to us in our memory. Or perhaps in talking to another person with whom we shared an experience, we come to realize that this person has memories of that incident that are quite a bit at odds with our own. Such experiences are, to say the least, disconcerting; we ask ourselves, "Was it really as I remembered it to be?" and are not sure at all of our answer, or our memory. Can we really trust our recollection of events?

It is even more difficult when we try to make sense of stories and events that occurred hundreds or thousands of years ago, and in cultures and locations quite removed from our own. Then we must be extremely careful, for it is far too easy to take and apply our own values, our own beliefs, our own visions of reality to the distant past. This past truly is a distinct and foreign world, with elements we can hardly even comprehend. This is what makes reading biblical stories so difficult; they are of a place and time and culture far removed from our own. And few books are as distant and removed from us as the biblical books that are the subject for this issue, namely, Joshua and Judges.

Many of the authors of the articles contained here have comments on the difficulty of trying to understand the events narrated in Joshua and Judges. The narratives in these books are at times hair-raising and brutal, and other times reflective and sublime. There are rollicking good stories of heroines and heroes, but some of them seem rather disconnected from the God of Israel. And though we almost reflexively attempt to "translate" these stories into our own time, and draw moral lessons (good and bad) from them, we must stop and resist the temptation to jump too quickly and easily from the period of the Israelites into our own. Yet isn't this the very reason for the Bible in the first place? It's not an antiquarian collection—it is the word of God, and somehow it means something vital to us.

The authors who have contributed to this issue are scholars who have spent a great part of their respective careers exploring and reflecting on these texts, and their careful deliberations on them can help us, their readers, to know more about the world of Joshua and Judges. This is the first step toward biblical knowledge—solid research and deliberation. But sometimes this careful historical reflection can actually make our reading even more complex, as the thorny nature of the biblical text is drawn out before our eyes. Sometimes, it seems, the more we know about this world, the more we realize we don't know or understand.

Some would advise us to forget the past—that it is just a bunch of depressing stories that we have grown out of, we in our advanced human present. Well, apart from the immense hubris and folly of such a statement, it is also clear that even if the past were only a chronicle of human sin and limitation, we'd still need to know about it. The first thing a doctor or a therapist does with a new patient is to take a thorough and complete history! But more than this, there is still much in our past that is good and useful, and we'd be foolish to ignore it. As Hebrews states, "since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run the race that is set before us" (Heb 12:1).

Several theological truths, however, must leaven our enthusiasm for this task. The first is that one constant throughout history is human nature. Below all the cultural trappings in these ancient stories, there are basic human characteristics that are common across time. People live and work and cry and scheme and try to love their families and their God. For Christians, one of these basic elements is sin, sins both of omission and commission—the ways in which we human beings, out of good or evil intent, harm those around us. The stories of the past should be a caution to us: just because we are technologically and chronologically far beyond the world of Joshua and Judges, we are no more morally advanced than they were. We are perhaps more sophisticated, and our toys are more complex, but at root we are much the same as they were—for good and for evil.

A second constant here is God. If the Bible shows us nothing else, it shows us God's long-suffering patience with the human race, and how God keeps faith with us, even when we constantly fail to do the same. Sometimes because of, and sometimes in spite of, our efforts God is at work in the world and in our lives; this is the constant refrain of the biblical witness. If we learn nothing else from these two books, this would be a lesson well learned. And if there seem to be times when God seems absent, just remember that this is a long and continuing story, far beyond our human time frames.

The authors of these articles all, in one way or the other, want to engage the biblical world of Joshua and Judges with that of our contemporary world. This is appropriate. There will be times that we might disagree with the links they try to make, or their conclusions. This, too, is appropriate. We are all wrestling to understand the will of God for our lives, and this is part of that wrestling. But we all attempt, in our limited ways, to confess our own failings and to hear the call of God to be faithful; if we are not able to completely pull this off, we have plenty of company among that "great cloud of witnesses."

—M.G.