For Wednesday, April 26

Another series of short readings and short questions to answer in writing. This week’s reading will take us swiftly through the Israelites’ wanderings in the wilderness under Moses after their escape from Egypt; their crossing the Jordan to take possession of Canaan under Joshua; their downhill slide under a series of “judges”; and their request to God to give them a king like the other nations have. This begins another upward trajectory in their life as a nation under a series of kings, with the high point being their time under King David and King Solomon (about 1000 BCE). Then another downward slide begins, and the great prophets start preaching to Israel in about 750 BCE about the causes of their downward slide. This downward slide includes their being conquered, first by the Assyrian empire (around 721 BCE) and then the Babylonian Empire (about 587 BCE), and they end up exiled in Babylon, until they are liberated by a third empire, the Persian empire (about 539 BCE). Remember: Much of what we’re reading is being written or compiled after the downward slide and the Exile; it is looking back at what happened to draw lessons from it for the time in which it was being written and compiled.

1. Numbers 25.1-9: The Book of Numbers concerns events during the Israelites’ travels through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land of Canaan. In the course of these travels, they continually fall away from YHWH; the Golden Calf episode was by no means the end of that straying. What does this section imply is wrong with Israelites’ having sexual relations with Moabites?

2. Deuteronomy 4.1-8: (a) What does Moses say is special about Israel? (b) What is the big sin Moses warns against here (forgive the obviousness of this question)? (c) Although there is no evidence outside the Bible of Moses’s existence, scholars set the year for his leading the Israelites out of Egypt at approximately 1250 B.C.E. That’s when he would be saying the words attributed to him in Deuteronomy 4.1-40 and elsewhere. The Babylonian Exile was 700 years later, around 580 B.C.E. At Deuteronomy 4.25-31, Moses seems to predict the Babylonian Exile. How does the important footnote at the beginning of this section, 4.1-40, explain this?

3. Deuteronomy 28.1-68: (a) What is the ratio of rewards for obedience to punishment for disobedience? (Now will you behave? Now will you realize that seduction zones are more to be feared than subduction zones?) (b) According to the footnote introducing this section, what non-biblical writing does this collection of blessings and curses resemble? Finally (and most important for us), (c) which of the curses are most “apocalyptic” in nature; do any of them evoke passages you encountered (briefly) in Revelation?

4. Harris, Understanding the Bible. If you have the sixth edition: Look at the Table in Ch. 1, “Order of Books in the Tanak and in the Old Testament,” to see that with Joshua, we start a new section of the Tanak; look at the beginning of Ch. 5 on pg. 159, and, on pg. 160, at Harris’s concise definition of the deuteronomistic history. Note that this history does not include Deuteronomy (which comes just before). To answer in writing: Why is it called the deuteronomistic history? If you have the seventh edition: Look at the table in Ch. 1, p. 4,
“Order of Books in the Tanak and in the Old Testament,” to see that with Joshua, we start a new section of the Tanak; look at the beginning of Ch. 6 on pg. 146, and, on pg. 147, at Harris’s concise definition of the deuteronomistic history. Note that this history does not include Deuteronomy (which comes just before). To answer in writing: Why is it called the deuteronomistic history?

5. Joshua 2.1-24: Joshua is a bloody book about the Israelites’ conquest of the Promised Land under Joshua, who is presented as a second Moses-plus-military-prowess. This short section prepares for the next assigned section. It’s about the prostitute Rahab helping the Israelite spies. In this section, she tells the spies that the land has practically fallen to the Israelites already, since the inhabitants are in such fear of them. According to Rahab, why are they in such fear of the Israelites?

6. Joshua 5.13 to 7.26: Let’s plan on making this reading the subject of some extended discussion in seminar groups on Wednesday. This section is about the conquest of Jericho, with its famous walls that come a-tumbling down. The footnotes call this section “a paradigm for the entire enterprise of conquest” – that is, it establishes the typical pattern for everything else. The writers of Joshua are at pains to show that this conquest was not just a greedy land grab; they want to show that it was a holy war conducted by God’s rules. What details in this section seem to support this idea?

7. Joshua 10.1-43: (a) Pause over 10.8, where YHWH tells Joshua not to fear going up against the Amorite kings, “for I have handed them over to you.” This line is common in these books of the Bible involving the Israelites’ battles with enemies. Note how it suggests that YHWH, in his time frame, has already done something but it still needs to be carried out through the efforts of humans in their time frame. (b) As the battle against the Amorite kings continues, who kills the most Amorites? (c) The beautiful short poem at 10.12-13 is one of the oldest fragments in the Bible. What echoes of apocalyptic do you find in it?

8. Joshua 23.1-24.21: Ring a bell? (a) Point to a couple of specific themes or ideas that ring a bell. (b) When the Israelites do what they’re supposed to do – worship only the LORD – he does things for them. What is the main thing he does for them, according to this chapter?

9. Again, most of the questions above do not call for much discussion. What themes or questions emerge from today’s reading that you would like to bring up in a seminar?

For Friday, April 28

This continues the theme of the last assignment – the deuteronomistic theory of history. In Judges, the Israelites are without a main leader. They shouldn’t need one: they’ve been given the Law and should be able to govern themselves by it. But they keep not succeeding and falling away from the Law – which means (by now the story will be sounding familiar to you) falling away from the exclusive worship of Yahweh (the LORD) and whoring after other gods. This inevitably leads to their being attacked and battered by different groups of Canaanites, who are led an assortment of kings. (Canaan
was by no means securely in Israelite hands.) At such times, a “judge” – a temporary ruler with a big military role – would receive the spirit of YHWH and lead the Israelites against their enemies, usually winning with the help of YHWH. For a time, the Israelites are faithful to YHWH, only to fall into the worship of Baal or some other Canaanite deity. Then the cycle begins again. The last verse of the book reads as follows: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21.25). It will begin to look to the Israelites like they need a permanent king to keep them in line. This is what they will ask for in 1 Samuel, the last reading for this assignment.

You should read and think about all the questions below, but you only have to write on # 5 and #8.

1. Harris, Understanding the Bible: Note the map on p.171 of the sixth edition, p. 157 of the seventh edition (or Map 3 at the back of the Oxford Bible – “Israel in Canaan”). It shows Canaan as settled by the twelve tribes of Israel, named after Jacob’s twelve sons – Dan, Asher, Manasseh, Ephraim, Judah, and so forth. (Joseph’s tribe gets subdivided into Ephraim and Manasseh, Joseph’s two sons.) Remember, Canaan is also full of other people, too – Amorites, Moabites, and so forth. Jerusalem at this point does not belong to the Israelites; it is a Jebusite city. Two important areas to notice are Ephraim and Judah. When Israel comes apart in a couple of weeks, it will be between these two tribes (Ephraim becomes another name for Israel, so you end up with Israel and Judah. Their separate histories become important in understanding parts of the great prophets). So which of the two – Ephraim or Judah – is to the north of the other?


3. Judges 1.1-36. Skim over Judges ch. 1 quickly and don’t worry about following all the names. Note what the introductory footnote says: the chapter “describes the general success of Judah and the increasing failure of the other Israelite tribes in dispossessing the Canaanites from the individual tribal allotments.”

4. Judges, 2.1 to 3.31: Again, skim over this pretty quickly; the next reading is the one you should concentrate on. The footnote to 2.6-3.6 tells you that this section is about “apostasy and its consequences.” Another very important term: apostasy. (a) What does it mean? (b) Name a couple of the gods the Israelites lust after. (c) Enjoy the Biblical writers’ talent for sticking in memorable little details to help the stories live in our memories. What do you remember about Ehud in 3.12 ff.? What do you remember about King Eglon? Can you believe the Israelites serving a king like Eglon for eighteen years! It’s a measure of how far they fall when they fall into apostasy, now that you know what it means!
5. *Judges 4.1 to 5.31:* The main exhibit for today is the story of Deborah; it contains one of the oldest parts of the Bible, the song of Deborah in ch.5. In considering the battle described here, historians generally agree on this bare outline of historical events: Around 1125 B.C.E., some combination of Israelite tribes (but not all of them) rebelled against a Canaanite overlord named Jabin, who sent an army of chariots under the command of Sisera to subdue them. Battle was joined at the river Koshon, where a rainstorm turned the battlefield to mud and Sisera’s chariots bogged down helplessly. In the retreat, much of Sisera’s army was killed, and Sisera himself was assassinated by a woman with whom he took refuge. **Questions:** (a) What does the poetic account in Judges 5 add to that sparse statement of events? (b) What religious meaning does the poet find in the battle? (c) What emotional effects appropriate to the occasion does the poem convey? (d) Where do you see parallelism contributing to emotional effect? **Point out particular lines and details from the poem to support your answer.** (If you missed what Michael said on Wednesday about parallelism in Hebrew poetry, see Harris, sixth edition, pp. 214-215, Box 6.2, or seventh edition, pp. 237-238, for an efficient overview of the topic.). (e) **Most important question:** What theme is sounded by the scene imagined at the end of the poem? Be sure to understand and envision that scene.

6. **Optional:** Judges, 11.1 to 12.7. The story of Jephtha and his daughter in this section is sad and beautiful. Its purpose seems to be, in part, to illustrate a common theme in all these chapters – that YHWH has to work out his divine plan through very imperfect leaders. What is Jephtha’s mistake in this story? Why does he make it? (In this culture, a vow, once made, cannot be retracted.) Speaking of imperfect leaders, we don’t have time for Samson, the most imperfect of them all, and so colorful! If you want to read about him, he’s in Judges 13.1-16.31.

7. **Judges 21.25:** Just to call your attention again to that important last verse summing up the whole book of Judges. Is it inevitable that, in the absence of asking, everybody will just do whatever is right in their own eyes? Is there an alternative?

8. **1 Samuel 8.1-22.** A key reading for us (and for understanding the whole Bible). Israel’s troubles have continued, and they follow the formula you should not be quite familiar with: They stray from the monotheistic worship of the LORD and consequently they start being defeated and conquered by other tribes, especially the Philistines. The system (or non-system!) of appointed “judges” continues. Samuel, a priest, has been a good judge. His sons are not good judges. Finally fed up, the Israelites make their demand: “appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations” (1 Sam. 8.5). “Like other nations”? Were they supposed to be like other nations? **In writing:** Summarize the LORD’s response in your own words.
So they get their kings. The first is King Saul, followed by King David and King Solomon, and then others. The first ones are pretty successful; David – the David of the Goliath story, the founder of the line that leads to Jesus – is in many ways glorious: he unifies the north and the south into one nation, he triumphs militarily, he conquers Jerusalem for Israel and makes it the capital. But he has great flaws, too, like all the others. We are skipping his story (all of 2 Samuel, and the first two chapters of 1 Kings) although it is my favorite section of the Bible; it’s just not relevant enough to our concerns.

After King Solomon, the kings get really bad. King Ahab is one of the worst; he marries Jezebel. Israel starts coming apart, physically and morally. Worship of other gods keeps cropping up again. That’s when the big empires move in. And that’s when the great prophets start preaching at Israel about why things are going to hell in a handbasket. Their prophecies eventually take on apocalyptic tones. We will take them up next week.