

# THE ISRAELITE CONQUEST OF THE ANCIENT MIDDLE EAST

By  
Arif Hasan

(August 22, 2006)

According to the Old Testament, God promised the Israelites the land between the Nile and the Euphrates. This land according to the Bible was inhabited by the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt and occupied much of this land. The Bible gives details of how it was occupied and how its cities were destroyed and plundered and their citizens massacred by the Israelites. There are remarkable similarities between what happened then and what is happening today in the Holy Land. So, it is interesting to note what the Bible has to say about the Israelite occupation of the Holy Land in about 1200 BC. There are hundreds of verses describing the destruction of the cities and the massacre of the inhabitants of the Holy Land, but I can only give a few for editorial reasons. The Bible from which these quotations are taken is the New International Version of the Philippines Bible Society, Manila 1984, and the chapter and verse number precede the quotes.

In the **Chapter on Exodus** Moses speaks in the verse below.

**3.8** *So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey – the home of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.*

The Israelites sent spies into Palestine to ascertain conditions. The **Chapter on Numbers** gives their feedback and follow-up in the following verses.

**13.27** *They gave Moses this account: “We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. **28** But the people who live there are powerful, and the cities are fortified and very large.”*

**21.2** *Then Israel made this vow to the LORD: “If you will deliver these people into our hands, we will totally destroy their cities”. **3** The LORD listened to Israel’s plea and gave the Canaanites over to them. They completely destroyed them and their towns.*

But the Israelites also encountered resistance from Sihon, King of the Amorites, and from Og, King of Bashan. The Bible tells us how their towns were destroyed by the Israelites and all men, women and children were killed “leaving them no survivors”. The expansion continued as described in the following verses in the Chapter on Numbers

**31.10** *They burned all the towns where the Midianites had settled, as well as all their camps. **11** They took all the plunder and spoils. Including the people and animals, **12** and brought the captives, spoils and plunder to Moses at their camp on the plains of Moab, by the Jordan across from Jericho.*

**31.14** *Moses was angry with the officers of the army. **15** “Have you allowed all the women to live?” he asked them. **16** “They were the ones who followed Balaam’s advice and were the means*

of turning the Israelites away from the LORD. **17** Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, **18** but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man.”

**33.50** On the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho the LORD said to Moses, **51** ”Speak to the Israelites and say to them: “When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, **52** drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. **53** Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. **54** Distribute the land by lot, according to your clans.

The **Chapter on Deuteronomy** has detailed descriptions regarding the occupation of Palestine and contains promises of victory that the LORD made to the Israelites encouraging them to continue with their expansion. Some relevant verses are given below.

**1.6** The LORD our God said to us at Horeb, “You have stayed long enough at this mountain. **7** Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples in the Arbah, in the mountains, in the western foothills, in the Negev and along the seacoast, to the land of the Canaanites and to Lebanon, as far as the great river, the Euphrates. **8** See, I have given you this land. Go in and take possession of the land that the LORD swore he would give to your fathers – to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and to their descendants after them.”

**9.1** Hear, O Israel. You are now about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and stronger than you, with large cities that have walls up to the sky. **2** The people are strong and tall – Anakites! You know about them and have heard it said: “Who can stand up against the Anakites?” **3** But be assured today that the LORD your God is the one who goes across ahead of you like a devouring fire. He will destroy them; he will subdue them before you. And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the LORD has promised you.

**20.10** When you march up to attack a city, make its people an offer of peace. **11** If they accept and open their gates, all the people in it shall be subject to forced labor and shall work for you. **12** If they refuse to make peace and they engage you in battle, lay siege to that city. **13** When the LORD your God delivers it into your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. **14** As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves.

**20.16** However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes.

The **Chapter on Joshua** describes the final occupation of the Holy Land and the destruction of its cities in the following verses.

**1.1** After the death of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses’ aide: **2** Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them – to the Israelites. **3** I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. **4** Your territory will extend from the desert and from Lebanon to the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country – and to the Great Sea on the west. **5** No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you or forsake you.

The conquest of Jericho is described in Joshua.

**6.24** Then they burned the whole city and everything in it, but they put the silver and gold and the articles of bronze and iron into the treasury of the LORD’s house.

After Jericho the famous city of Ai was destroyed by the Israelites.

**8.24** *When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. 25 Twelve thousand men and women fell that day – all the people of Ai. 26 For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. 27 But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the LORD had instructed Joshua. 28 So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day.*

The destruction of Makkedah, Lebnah, Habron, Eglon and the Debir followed and are given in the **Chapter on Joshua**. The fate of these cities was identical to that of Jericho and Ai. For all these cities it is stated that Joshua “left no survivors” and “everyone in it they totally destroyed”. After this there was a rest from war as described in the verses from the Chapter on Joshua.

**10.40** *So Joshua subdued the whole region, including the hill country, the Negev, the western foothills and the mountain slopes, together with all their kings. He left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded.*

**11.14** *The Israelites carried off for themselves all the plunder and livestock of these cities, but all the people they put to the sword until sparing anyone that breathed.*

**11.16** *So Joshua took this entire land: the hill country, all the Negev, the whole region of Goshen, the western foothills, the Arabah and the mountains of Israel with their foothills, 17 from Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir, to Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon below Mount Hermon.*

However, the occupation was not complete just as it is not complete today. The following verses from Joshua illustrate this.

**13.1** *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.*

**13.2** *”This is the land that remains; all the regions of the Philistines and Geshurites; 3 from the Shihor River on the east of Egypt to the territory of Ekron on the north, all of it counted as Canaanite (the territory of the five Philistine rulers in Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, Gath and Ekron – that of the Avvites); 4 from the south, all the land of the Canaanites, from Arah of the Sdonians as far as Aphek, the region of the Amorites, 5 the area of the Gebalites; and all Lebanon to the east, from Baal Gad below Mount Hermon to Lebo, Hamath.*

**13.6** *”As for all the inhabitants of the mountain regions from Lebanon to Miserphoth Maim, that is, all the Sidonians, I myself will drive them out before the Israelites. Be sure to allocate this land to Israel for an inheritance, as I have instructed you, and divide it as an inheritance among the nine tribes and half of the tribe of Manasseh.”*

The above quotations make disturbing reading because the history and religious beliefs of a people can be used politically for promoting divisions and violence. It is well known that orthodox thinking is deeply rooted in the minds of the rulers and people of Israel and it is because of this that the concept of “greater Israel” (from the Nile to the Euphrates as promised by the LORD) is enshrined in the Israeli Constitution. One wonders to what extent even the liberal Israelis believe

in the invincibility of Israel and its use of force to occupy Palestine and parts of its neighbouring countries on the basis of their religion, just as many Muslim liberals have a secret admiration for militant Islam? Is peace possible if occupying and subjugating other nations is a part of your faith? In the Old Testament "peace" only came to the Holy Land when the Babylonians from what is today Iraq came and destroyed the power of the Israelites (one wonders if this factor figured in the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq). But that "peace" created what came to be known in the West as "the Jewish problem" which the West has used to pursue its imperialist ambitions.

The Old Testament is not unique in promoting ethnic and religious superiority, violence and subjugation of "others". In the scriptures and traditions of many religious and ethnic entities there are similar concepts of superiority and preaching of subjugation of indigenous people and ethnic groups. The use of religion and tradition for promoting injustice and violence can only be curtailed if religious texts and traditions can be related by societies as a whole to the context of the times in which they were produced. A very tall order in this day and age of megalomania and paranoia and hence irrationality, hypocrisy and lies.