

CHAPTER 6

Conquest and Settlement

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

Scripture records that once the ancient Israelites escaped from Egyptian bondage, they wandered in the desert for forty years. Eventually, Joshua led the Hebrews to the Promised Land. There they engaged in battle with the Canaanites. Repeatedly Joshua encouraged his soldiers, telling them that God was on their side. In this conquest, the Hebrews slaughtered the inhabitants of the land, believing that it was God's will that they be victorious. Through the centuries, Jews have celebrated this triumph, and throughout the liturgy the notion of the Promised Land occupies a central role.

However, serious questions need to be raised about the Biblical narrative. Does it make sense to believe that God chose the Jews and destined that they would vanquish the indigenous Canaanite population? Arguably, the massacre of the Canaanites was an act of cruelty and barbarism. If God is truly a loving father of all people, could He have sanctioned such an assault? This issue is of pressing contemporary concern given the political dilemmas facing the State of Israel. Today a significant number of Orthodox Jews – both inside Israel and in the diaspora – are convinced of the legitimacy of the Jewish homeland on religious grounds. In their view, the divine promise made to Abraham is still valid. Hence, they argue, Jews have a right to the Holy Land as they did in ancient times. What do you make of such claims? If the Jewish onslaught against the Canaanites was defensible in Biblical times, what responsibility do Israelis have toward the Palestinians?

THINGS TO DO

- Go to Google.com. Click on images. Type in 'Joshua Bible', 'Bible conquest', etc. You will find a wealth of information about this period in Jewish history.
- Stay in Google. Click on Web. Type in 'Bible judges'. Again, there is a wide range of websites related to the Hebrew settlement, such as www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/asbook06.html.
- In Google, click on images. Type in 'Canaan', 'Canaan archaeology', 'Canaanite religion'. You will find illustrations and maps connected with Canaanite civilization.
- Stay in Google. Click on Web. Type in 'Israel', 'Palestinians', 'Palestinian conflict'. You will find numerous websites related to contemporary events in Israel, such as www.masada2000.org/historical.html. This will help you to understand the contemporary relevance of the Biblical narrative.

TIPS FOR TEACHERS

- Stage a debate about the conquest. Divide the class into two groups: one should defend Joshua's onslaught against the Canaanites; the other should argue against the conquest on religious and moral grounds.
- Ask the students to imagine that they are Moses. They should write a letter to Joshua, giving him advice about leading the Jewish people in the light of Moses' experience in Egypt and in the desert.
- Read the account of Samson and Delilah in the Book of Judges to your class. Discuss the perspective of the Biblical writer. Ask if your students agree with some modern feminists that he was prejudiced against women. Is such an attitude typical of the Bible as a whole?
- Ask an Orthodox rabbi to speak to your class about the modern implications of the Biblical account of the conquest. You should explore whether he believes there are parallels between the Biblical account and the current conflict in Israel.
- Ask your class to write an essay evaluating the Jewish claim to the Promised Land.