

# Episode 148 Including the Stranger

## David Firth

Hi, I'm David Firth, Tutor in Old Testament at Trinity College Bristol in the United Kingdom and Research Associates in Old Testament at the University of the Free State in South Africa.

## David Capes

Dr. David Firth, David, good to see you. Welcome to The Lanier Theological Library, first of all, and also welcome to The Stone Chapel Podcast.

## David Firth

David, it's great to be here. I've heard so much about this library. I'm just thrilled to be able to visit.

## David Capes

It's a delight to have you and your wife here. We're here for a conference this weekend, and you'll be a part of that. Now, for those who don't know, David Firth, who is David Firth?

## David Firth

I am an Australian, Old Testament scholar who is currently based in the United Kingdom. We've been there for nearly 20 years. My wife and I were missionaries with the Australian Baptist Missionary Society in Zimbabwe and South Africa in the 1990s. So we have a great heart for global mission. We're just delighted to be involved in the work of a very small church that we became a part of when we moved to Bristol. And when I'm not spending time, working with the Old Testament, my wife and I love finding a place that does a good cappuccino. And I haven't found one in Houston yet, David.

## David Capes

We have to find that for you!

## David Firth

Absolutely. That's a key test of any place for us.

## David Capes

It's a little bit of heaven when you have a good cappuccino. And I love scones and clotted cream myself. Well, it's great to have you here. We're going to be talking today about your book, *Including the Stranger; Foreigners in the Former Prophets*. And you're the author of many books, books you can find here at the Lanier Theological Library. But this is published by IVP press in the United States. And by Apollos in the UK.

I'm really grateful for the conversation that we're able to have in the next few minutes about it, because we want people to be aware of some of these ideas and aware of what you found here. Now, let's begin

by defining a few terms. Your subtitle says *Foreigners in the Former Prophets*. Now that's not necessarily common parlance here. The idea of former prophets, we know about Isaiah. We know about Daniel or Zachariah, but former prophets. What does that mean?

### **David First**

Okay, so the former prophets are the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings. In a lot of scholarly discourse, people will hear them called the Deuteronomistic history. But that's a model for reading these texts that I've rejected over my years of studying. And as a result, I prefer to go back to the way that they're labeled within the Hebrew Canon. The Hebrew Canon is divided into three main groups. The Torah, the Law, the Prophets. This is then divided into two subgroups, the Former Prophets, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and the Latter Prophets, which are the books that most of us in English think of as the Prophets. And then the third major section is the Writings, which is everything else. I wanted to use that label as a way of saying, I want to read each of these books as a discrete book. Because the Deuteronomistic History theory flattens them down so that they all become one large thing and there is a distinct voice in each of them. And I wanted to be able to bring that out clearly.

### **David Capes**

When we say First and Second Kings, that's actually one book in the Hebrew prophets, right?

### **David Firth**

That's correct. Yes, we basically have them divided up because the scroll got too long for anybody to handle.

### **David Capes**

Yes, the book got too heavy!

### **David Firth**

That's it! And the librarians were complaining about the problems of reshelving that, I suspect.

### **David Capes**

We're used to thinking of those books as books of history, like you said, Deuteronomistic History. But I remembered as a Protestant young man growing up in my church in Atlanta, we had Law and then History, and then Writings and then Major Prophets, and Minor prophets. We divided it up a little differently. And we ordered the books differently. But from the Hebrew point of view, they're really writing about people who are prophets, right?

### **David Firth**

Yes, not just writing about prophets, but the books themselves are considered as works of prophecy. You treat the book as a message from God. Now, that message from God includes the record of some of the earliest prophets that we have in the Old Testament. Obviously, Moses is before the Pentateuch, but Joshua is presented as a prophet a couple of times within the book of Joshua. And then we have various unnamed men of God, prophets, and seers. There's four different labels for different types of

prophets. They get mentioned within the Former Prophets. It's both a record of prophetic figures, but also a history which is itself a prophecy. It is a word to Israel from the Lord.

### **David Capes**

There's another term I want to talk about, and that is the word, foreigner, Stranger is used in the title. We're at a really interesting time of history, when there's a lot of migration. People are moving into the United States, but I know Britain has the same situation. And I guess Australia as well, where you're from. And there are places where people are migrating, and people are constantly migrating. Migration is, in a sense, the story of human history. My wife and I were in Atlanta the other day, which is where I grew up. And I realized, I've migrated to live in Texas, for economic purposes. I went to grad school here, and then I found employment here. And people do that all the time. And sometimes they're fleeing from persecution. There's a lot of different reasons that people move around. When you use the term here, including the stranger, who's the stranger?

### **David Firth**

The stranger is the person that you think, isn't the one that God's going to be interested in. So many of them are non-Israelite. And I wanted to use both the term stranger, which is a biblical term. There's a Hebrew word, *zar*, which talks about the person who isn't one of us, as well as a foreigner, which is the English term. But there's overlap between the two. At one level, a foreigner within the former prophets is somebody who's not an Israelite. On the other hand, the stranger might be the person who you think can't be the one that God is interested in. Or slightly more interestingly, the person you think ought to be blessed by God but isn't. And how do you deal with that, because one of the key figures that set up in the book of Joshua is a guy called Achan. And Achan, is presented to us as somebody who is an Israelite, who becomes a Canaanite. Whereas you start with Rahab. And, when you get Rahab, at the start of Joshua chapter 2, you've just read Deuteronomy, and you think, right, it's a Canaanite woman, prostitute. These are the ones that we're here to get rid of.

### **David Capes**

Right. She should be the first to go.

### **David Firth**

She should be the first to go. Yes. But she's the one who helps the Israelite spies, who must be the most incompetent spies in all human history. She gets them out. She's the one who tells them the Lord is giving this place over. And it's her report, which they take back to Joshua.

### **David Capes**

In a sense, she becomes one of them, though, doesn't she? And she becomes an Israelite. So as an outsider, as a stranger, a foreigner, she becomes an insider.

### **David Firth**

Yes. And so the book of Joshua is wrestling with this question, who are actually the people of God? Is it that you've got to have Israelite DNA? Obviously, they didn't use the word DNA, but is that what makes you part of the people of God? And immediately you get this contrast between Achan who has this long genealogy to be an Israelite of the Israelites. Which as a New Testament scholar you might at

least appreciate it! And yet, he's a Canaanite. Whereas Rahab, who looks to be the Canaanite of the Canaanites turns out to be more true to the Lord, than any other Israelite. So, we have that set up for us right from the outset. Joshua is saying, the people of God includes some very strange people, that you're looking from the outside and saying, that can't be God's people. Yes, they are. And oh, by the way, you might think you're there automatically. No, you're not. Do you live for the Lord? Do you do what he wants?

### **David Capes**

What do you think about Ruth?

### **David Firth**

Well, I deliberately didn't include Ruth and that was because Ruth sits in the Writings. So, in that third division of the Old Testament. But also in terms of books, which have studied Old Testament attitudes to foreigners. Ruth has been studied by quite a number of people, whereas the rest of the Former Prophets haven't. And in fact, one of the things that I've found talking with people, especially when I was talking with students at St. John's College in Nottingham might often be at their research seminar. And again, and again, there was this idea that was expressed that the former prophets especially were xenophobic. They were just there to destroy anyone who wasn't Israelite. And they'd say, Ruth's okay, but the rest of the former prophets aren't. And I was really reading these texts and going, no, they're not. They're doing something very, very different. So, I didn't want to look at Ruth. I think Ruth is one of the earliest receptions of what we find in the Former Prophets. I read Ruth in those terms.

### **David Capes**

You know, I've always looked at myself as an insider, as a Christian. But I realize now and reading these texts in a way, that I'm an outsider. In a sense, I'm not part of that history, of that culture, in that way. What does it mean for us as 21st century people coming to these books that are from a very different culture? They are very strange to our minds, in some ways, and yet deriving from them this ultimate sense of listening to God? And God speaking?

### **David Firth**

Yes, I think they are reminding us of some really, really important things about who God's people are. That they're not necessarily the insiders that we want them to be. They may be the ones who give all the appearance, but don't have the reality. And the thing that fascinated me when we were working in Africa were the people who were teaching us what God was doing? Very often, it wasn't the missionaries who'd done all the training. Very often we were learning from people in Africa, who people said to us, oh, they're simple folk. But then they were incredibly aware of what God was doing. And we needed the humility to learn from them, rather than to think well, we're the Western missionaries. We're here to give the answers. These books challenges us on that level. I deliberately didn't go into the issue of what this says about migration policy for any one government. Because every government has a whole host of different factors.

### **David Capes**

And a lot of different self-interests.

**David Firth**

Absolutely. And I'm also conscious that I arrived, as a migrant, you know, as one who started in Australia. Who lived in Zimbabwe and South Africa, and is now in the United Kingdom.

**David Capes**

And this is because of a sense of calling. Like Abraham was called out Ur of Chaldees to the land of Canaan, you are called from Australia, to Africa, and then to England.

**David Firth**

Yes. And we have gone because God has taken us to a place he didn't tell us when we set out. We thought we were going as far as Indonesia, maybe. And it ended up as Africa and we thought that's okay. But somehow we've ended up in England. Which if you know anything about the history of Australia and England, every time that cricket comes around, and I'll need to explain to you The Ashes. Apologies to all the Americans who don't know what that is. This is the biggest sporting event in the world from an Australian perspective.

**David Capes**

And for a lot of British people as well! Well, this is a terrific book. You don't talk about policies or governments. But as you think about the disposition of the individual believer today, who finds themselves being brought into the people of God through faith in Christ. Do they speak to us in a particular way about our disposition toward the foreigner and the stranger?

**David Firth**

I think they do. The challenge to us, I think as Christians is to be countercultural. In terms of the gospel, the gospel is going to drive that counterculture. We can't just be countercultural, because it's countercultural, right?

But if we understand that part of that counterculture, is to say that God sees beyond what we see. God sees people who have the ability to contribute much to the kingdom, amongst peoples that we might not think, necessarily have that ability. I think still today, there's a disposition that's required of us to see that God is at work, not only to those people, but through those people also to us. And that we need to have that disposition, I think is one of the central themes of the former prophets.

**David Capes**

A Catholic priest friend of mine works among a number of people who come from through Mexico to United States and are illegal immigrants. And he's very heartened honestly, by their presence, because many of them are Catholic. And many of them are simple folk, but they have a profound faith too, as well. He says these folks are making us more Christian as they come into our country, and I haven't thought about it in those terms until I began reading your book and thinking about what it means for them to come to us and make us more Christian. We thought we were the Christian nation.

**David Firth**

Yes, we fall into the trap of assuming that we are the ones who have it. We can give it to them, or they can choose not to take it. Right? But God is doing so much more. And we need to be open to what God is doing, while still being faithful to his commission to us in world missions.

**David Capes**

Yes. As you think about these particular books, was there one book that resonated more with you? Samuel, Kings, which ones?

**David Firth**

All of it! But the one that surprised me was in the Book of Kings. In the Book of Kings, we move from what has happened to foreigners who are coming into Israel or who Israel is joining. To foreigners beyond the borders of Israel, so that Naaman is the only person said to be forgiven in the Book of Kings. So, Solomon's prayer, prays that when the foreigner hears about the Lord and prays that they would be forgiven? Well, the only person who is said to be forgiven is Naaman, or Elijah, who we've traditionally translated as the Tishbite. He's of the settlers of Gilead. The kind of paradigm prophet post-Moses for the Old Testament is Elijah. And he is from a family of immigrants. They believe in the Lord otherwise they wouldn't have said, the Lord is my God. *Elijah*. But that was the thing that really surprised me. I got my head around Rahab and Achan and the Gibeonites, and Joshua and the people like Uriah the Hittite. Who you know, Uriah, the Hittite. falling down drunk is more upright than David stone cold, sober. So, I keep being surprised. But the ones that caught me by surprise, were the ones in Kings, probably because that was the text of all the former prophets that I'd done the least work on before writing the book.

**David Capes**

Well it's a fabulous book. We've been talking to Dr. David Firth, about his book, *Including the Stranger; Foreigners in the Former Prophets* published by InterVarsity Press here in the United States, and also by Apollos in the United Kingdom. It's part of a series called New Studies in Biblical Theology. And I really do commend it because I think it gets us thinking in some wonderful ways. And I appreciate so much the humility that I hear coming through you, but also coming through the book that we need to be listening, rather than doing all the speaking, thinking that we have all the answers. Dr. David Firth, thank you for being with us today on The Stone Chapel.

**David Firth**

Thank you, David. It's a pleasure to be here.

**A Nugget of Wisdom from David Firth**

Picking up on the theme of the book. One of the people I learned the most from whilst we were in Africa was one of my undergraduate students. He said to me, "David, when you come to our black African church, you don't preach correctly." And I said, "what? I'm the ordained minister. I've got the Master's degree. What do you mean?" He said, "You don't know how we hear the story. You tell it wrong." And when I listened to him, I suddenly discovered that God started moving through sermons when I was

preaching amongst black African churches in ways that had never happened before. I had to listen to the person who I didn't think mattered so much, who had so much for me to learn.