

Getting Started with Joshua

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Introduction to Joshua

The book of Joshua is named after its main character--Joshua the son of Nun. Joshua served as Moses' young aide who accompanied Moses as he entered God's presence in the tent of meeting (Exod 33:11). He was originally named "Hoshea" ("salvation") but Moses renamed him "Joshua" ("Yahweh saves," Num 13:16). The Greek translation for "Joshua" is "Jesus." Joshua's first act was as a military leader defeating the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-13). He then accompanied Moses up Mount Sinai when Moses received the law (Exod 24:13) and was chosen to represent his tribe of Ephraim as one of the twelve spies who were sent out from Kadesh Barnea to reconnoiter the Promised Land (Numb 13-14). He and Caleb were the two who stood strong against the majority report that rejected going up and taking the land. He was Moses' handpicked successor (Num 27:12-22) and many believe he may have recorded the events of Moses' death in Deuteronomy 34.

In the text of Joshua there is an implicit comparison made between Moses and Joshua by parallel events. They both parted waters (Red Sea, Jordan River; Josh 4:23). Both circumcised their "people" prior to beginning major acts of redemption (Exod 4:24-25; Josh 5:13-15). Both met an angel and were told to take off their sandals because they were standing on holy ground (Exod 3:5; Josh 5:15). Both won battles holding a staff/javelin in their uplifted hands (Exod 17:9-11; Josh 8:18). Both oversaw covenant renewal ceremonies (Deut 29; Josh 8:30-35; 24:1-27). The military victories of the two are juxtaposed in the list in Joshua 12.

This comparison of the two leaders is made explicit several times when God says, "As I was with Moses, so I will be with you" (Josh 1:5, 17; 3:7; 4:14). Repeatedly, Joshua is characterized as carrying out the commands that Moses had given (8:30, 35; 11:20; 21:2; 22:2). Joshua begins as Moses' aid (1:1) and ends up with the Mosaic title "servant of the Lord" (24:19, Howard).

One must be acutely aware that it was the Lord himself who fought for Israel (10:42); gave them the gift of the land as their tribal inheritance (14:2; 18:3), and ultimately gave them rest (23:1). Indeed, it is God who parts the Jordan River, topples the walls of Jericho, develops the strategy for taking Ai, rains down hail killing the southern kings, and guides the allotment of the tribal territories.

Contents of the Book

The book of Joshua naturally divides into two sections: the conquest of the promised land (chs. 2-12) and the distribution of tribal territorial allotments (chs. 13-21).

These two sections are introduced by a prologue with the Lord commissioning Joshua (ch. 1), and close with a covenant renewal postlude and the death of Joshua (chs. 22-24).

The book opens with a series of speeches utilizing Deuteronomy type terminology as the Lord instructs Joshua after the death of Moses to “be strong and courageous” and to “not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night...Then you will be prosperous and successful” (1:8). Joshua orders the Transjordan tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh to send their fighting men across the Jordan to help him take the land just as Moses had commanded them.

Chapters 2 through 12 describe the conquest of the land. Chapters 2-5 feature preparations with the two spies being hidden by Rahab in Jericho (ch. 2) and her great confession that the Lord had given the land to Israel. She and her family receive a reprieve hanging a red cord from her window. Rahab will later appear in the line of David and ultimately in the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Mat 1).

The Israelites cross the Jordan River during the spring flood, led by the ark of God. The river is dried up as the waters are heaped up upstream. After the Jordan crossing there are a series of rituals--twelve stones are piled up as a memorial at Gilgal where Israel celebrates its third Passover, the males are circumcised, and the manna stops because they can now eat the rich produce of the land (chs. 4-5). Gilgal will become a special ritual site for Israel. Chapter 6 narrates the daily, silent circling of Jericho led by the ark of God until the seventh day when the city is circled seven times concluding with the trumpets blasting, the people shouting, and the walls tumbling down. Joshua places a curse on the city so that it cannot be rebuilt. Jericho is the Lord's as the first fruits.

The Israelites next turn their sights on Ai (ch. 7). It is while attacking this small town that they experience their first defeat due to the sin of Achan. He had stolen some of the Lord's banned plunder from Jericho and hid it under his tent. Achan's sin is exposed and the devoted goods, Achan, and his family are destroyed by fire in the valley of Achor which is a play on the Hebrew word for “trouble” (7:26; cf. Gilgal, 5:9). God strategically orchestrates an ambush, Joshua executes it with javelin raised, and the town of Ai is burned (ch. 8).

Israel then travels north to Mount Ebal for a covenant renewal ceremony, where an altar of uncut stones is built and the law of Moses is publically read then written upon plastered stones (8:30-35).

Without consulting the Lord, the Israelites, deceived by the Gibeonite's old worn out clothes and moldy bread, make an alliance with them (ch. 9). The Gibeonite cities are located in the very heart-land of Canaan. The kings of the south, headed by Adoni-Zedek of Jerusalem, rally to strike the Gibeonites. Joshua and his troops march all night from Gilgal to defend Gibeon. He prays for the sun to “stand still” and there was never a

day like it “when the Lord listened to a man” (10:14). God fights for Israel as the hailstones kill more than the Israelite swords.

A northern league is led by Jabin king of Hazor, who rallies a huge army including chariots to the waters of Merom. Joshua roundly defeats them and there is “left nothing undone of all that the Lord commanded Moses” (11:15).

This first section (chs. 1-12) concludes with a victory list (ch. 12). The victories of Moses in Transjordan (Og and Sihon) are juxtaposed with a list of Joshua’s victories over the kings of Jericho, Ai, Jerusalem, Gezer and others.

The second section (chs. 13-21) narrates the allotment of the land to the various tribes. Chapter 13 opens with the acknowledgment that there still remains a significant amount of land to be taken. Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh got their territory after Moses’ defeat of Og of Bashan and Sihon of Hesbon in Transjordan, but they were unable to drive out the Geshurites (13:13). It is twice observed that the tribe of Levi received no inheritance because the Lord was their inheritance (13:14, 33).

The tribal boundary descriptions and a tribal town listing begin in chapter 14 with the description of the allotments west of the Jordan in Canaan proper. Hebron is given to Caleb (ch. 14). There is a lengthy description of Judah’s inheritance with towns listed and boundaries carefully observed (ch. 15). The inheritances of Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, are also described in great detail in chapters 16 and 17. The remaining seven tribes receive their inheritance by casting lots from the hands of Joshua and Eleazar, Aaron’s son and high priest (19:51). Benjamin is placed between Judah and Ephraim in the center of Canaan. Simeon finds its home in southern Judah. Zebulun and Issachar are found occupying the west and east sides of the valley of Jezreel (ch. 19). Asher and Naphtali are on the west and east side of Galilee. Dan’s inheritance is out by the Philistines, west of Benjamin. Dan, however, decides it is too dangerous there and the tribe moves north to the lush foot of Mount Hermon, consolidating down to a single town “Dan” in the extreme north. The six cities of refuge are identified (ch. 20) and the 48 Levitical cities are listed in chapter 21.

Chapter 22 narrates the eastern tribes returning home to their inheritance in Transjordan. They decide to build an altar near the Jordan River to symbolize their bonds with the tribes west of the Jordan. The western tribes rally to Shiloh to confront the Transjordan tribes, accusing them of turning away from the Lord and threatening them with war. The Transjordan tribes explain their situation and civil war is narrowly averted.

Joshua’s farewell address advises that they beware of intermarriage, serving other gods, and violating the covenant. He acknowledges that all of God’s good promises had been fulfilled. He then, in chapter 24, assembles all Israel to Shechem and rehearses the

history of Israel, with a particular challenge to reject other gods. He sets a clear choice and a sacred commitment before them: “choose yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River.... But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (24:15). The covenant is renewed at Shechem and recorded in the Book of the Law of God, and a stone is set up as a witness (24:25). Joshua is buried in Timnath Serah in Ephraim, and Eleazar, the son of Aaron, dies and passes the high priesthood on to his son, Phineas.

Difficult issues in Joshua

Critical Theories

Critics have looked at Joshua in two ways over the years. First some have tried to extend the source critical JEDP model into Joshua, suggesting a Hexateuch that includes Joshua rather than a Pentateuch (Gen.-Deut.) that does not. The JE sources were traced into Joshua 1-11 and the tribal town lists in Joshua 12-21 are seen as a result of the Priestly writer (P). This theory has now been abandoned by most.

Another approach was developed by M. Noth linking Joshua with the following historical books (Judges-2 Kings). Noth suggested that all these works were fashioned by a Deuteronomistic writer(s). This Deuteronomistic History (DH) was written according to the themes and idioms initially expressed in Deuteronomy in the time of Josiah (ca. 612 BC). While there are common themes and idioms that do unify the historical books (Joshua – 2 Kings) with Deuteronomy, it may be that later writers purposefully synched their way of looking at history to Deuteronomy because, as Israelites, they shared a common covenantal worldview that obedience brought blessing and disobedience brought the curse. Shared ideas do not necessarily demand shared authorship.

There is also a massive challenge to the “conquest” model described in Joshua, moving to a more infiltration or even a Marxist style internal peasant-revolt approach to the “taking” of Canaan by the early Israelites. The archaeological data for Joshua is mixed. A word of caution is perhaps well advised before jumping to major conclusions based on incomplete and highly speculative archaeological evidence from this period. Hess has a insightful discussion of the historicity of Joshua (Hess, 26-31).

Critics have taken the statement “until this day” (4:9; 5:9; 7:26; 8:28-29; 14:14; 16:10 et al) to imply a lengthy separation between the historical event and when it was written down. Joshua 6:25 demonstrates that such a separation need not be the case as “Rahab is still alive until this day.” Thus this section was written within her lifetime.

Tensions in Joshua

Hawk (IVP Dict. OT) has highlighted a series of tensions in Joshua. These tensions are important for gaining insight into the book itself as a canonical whole. On the one hand, the book of Joshua proclaims Joshua took Canaan and destroyed all its

kings (Josh 10:40-43; 11:16-20; ch. 12). Yet, on the other hand, chapter 13 has the Lord pointing out, “there are still very large areas of land to be taken over” and then proceeds to list them (13:2-5). As the text continues, other failures are acknowledged (15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13). On the one hand, Joshua declares all the directions of Moses were followed (1:16-18; 4:8; 11:15; 24:16-18). Yet, on the other hand, reports of problems (ch. 7) and warnings against the enticement to the worship of foreign gods continue (24:19-20). On the one hand, there are descriptions of Israel’s unity as “all Israel” gathers (1:12-18; 3:14-17; 4:10-13; 8:30-35). Yet, on the other hand, there are strong hints of inter-tribal tensions (17:16; 22:10ff.). On the one hand, Caleb received Hebron (14:13-15). Yet, on the other hand, Hebron was given to the Levites who received it as a Levitical city with Caleb inheriting only the surrounding fields (21:11f.).

Such tensions even flow over into the book of Judges. Joshua records the destruction of the King of Jerusalem (Jebus) and similarly Judges 1:8 records the men of Judah capturing Jerusalem. Yet it is not until the time of David that the city actually becomes an Israelite city (2 Sam 5:6ff.) and even Judges 1:21 acquiesces that Israel could not dislodge the Jebusites at Jerusalem. Likewise the king of Gezer is killed (12:12). Yet Judges 1:29 makes it clear they could not drive the Canaanites out of Gezer. Solomon, hundreds of years later, receives Gezer as a wedding gift from Pharaoh (1 Kgs 9:16).

It should be clear that towns could be taken repeatedly and kings were killed, yet the native population could re-inhabit towns. These diverse reports of multiple taking of various cities should be no surprise to any modern reader when they reflect on how many times Fallujah Iraq was taken and retaken with and without sustained control.

War

The execution of war and the annihilation of the Canaanites is perhaps the most difficult ethical problem in the Old Testament. The prescriptions for war are laid out in Deuteronomy 7 and 20 but are actually implemented in Joshua 6-11. Many find the summary statement at the end Joshua 10 troubling: “He [Joshua] left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the Lord, the God of Israel, had commanded” (10:40; cf. 11:20). Similarly, after taking Jericho it is recorded: “They devoted the city to the Lord (*herem*) and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys” (6:21). While this question cannot be solved here, the following provides a context for the larger discussion.

First, Genesis 15:16 warns that the sin of the Amorites had not yet reached its full measure and that after four generations Abraham’s descendants would come back and execute judgment on the sin of the Amorites and take their land. In one sense the taking of Canaan can be seen as a divine judgment on that culture (cf. Sodom). Amos 1-2 shows that God judges all nations for their egregious, sinful, behavior.

Second, it should be clear this is not ethnic cleansing or genocide. Israel welcomed others when they left Egypt as a “mixed multitude” (Exod 12:38). Moses himself married a Cushite woman (Num 12:1). Moses took advice from Jethro the Midianite (Exod 18), and Rahab of Jericho is found in the royal Davidic line. Clearly there is no xenophobia here. Indeed, the Abrahamic covenant describes their destiny as being a blessing to all nations (Gen 12:3). In the legal sections Israel was commanded to show compassion to the aliens in their midst (Lev 19:34; Deut 26:11-13).

Third, the violence of war in the taking of Canaan is rather unique and only engaged by divine command through a sanctioned prophet. Israel did go to war at other times for defensive purposes having been attacked or oppressed but the initiating of *herem* is only really found here in Joshua 6-10 and then only really at Jericho, Ai and Hazor. So this is the exception, not the norm.

Fourth, one must read this record of war in the context of ancient Near Eastern rhetorical patterns. Hyperbole, exaggeration, and bravado were the common literary form used to describe war in the ancient Near East. It is clear that many of the statements of complete and total destruction are in fact hyperbole, over statements, and not meant to be taken literally. For example, when Joshua claims all the Canaanites and Anakites were destroyed (10:40-42; 11:14-15, 17, 22). Yet we find out later Caleb must deal with the Anakites (15:14). Similarly we find out that many Canaanites were indeed left in the land indicating that there were many survivors (13:1-5, 13; 18:3; and Judg 1:19, 21, 35). So the situation is complex. Archaeology has also confirmed that there was no mass annihilation of the indigenous population at this time.

There is, however, a serious warning here that idolatry and assimilation of pagan religious practices would not be tolerated. These destructions should be understood as harbingers of the final judgment or coming Day of the Lord and be seen as a call to repentance and commitment to righteousness.

Questions

1. How do the idioms and themes of Deuteronomy show up in Joshua?
2. How does Joshua contrast with the early chapters of Judges?
3. In what ways does Joshua show himself to be a good leader?
4. What do we learn about God as we watch him engaging in the book of Joshua?
5. What do we learn from the various confessions made in the book (Rahab, Gibeonites, Transjordan tribes [ch. 22], Joshua [ch. 23-24])?
6. How do you understand the wars presented in Joshua? How do you reconcile Joshua with Jesus’ statements in the Sermon on the Mount to love our enemies?
7. How does the theme of command/fulfillment crop up in Joshua?
8. At what points do you see tensions in the book of Joshua? Can you resolve these?