

A LOOK AT A BOOK: JOSHUA

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An Overview

The book of Joshua is named for its hero and principle character. His name was originally Hoshea (salvation), but Moses changed it to Joshua (Yahweh is salvation, Numbers 13:16). Joshua was a soldier. He was a brilliant soldier, one of the most extraordinary military commanders of all time. He was a rather straightforward man who was chiefly concerned with carrying out his divine commission. He became Israel's leader, and more importantly, God's leader! His entire career is a story of setting one foot down after another in quiet compliance with the commands of God.

If one places the date of the Exodus at 1446 B.C., then it can be surmised that Joshua was written between 1406 and 1380 (the year of Joshua's death). The events in the book cover a time span of at least a decade beginning around 1406, forty years after the exodus. What took perhaps decades to accomplish, the book of Joshua has telescoped into a simplified, selective, focused glimpse.

The book picks up the story of Israel from the death of Moses to the death of Joshua. Some scholars place the book of Joshua with the first five books, claiming that they must be viewed as a unit. Others link the book more closely with the historical books. In any case, Joshua is a historical bridge in which the continuity of God's dealing with His people is emphasized. It may not be such a casual thing that the very first word of the Hebrew text is usually translated "and." Joshua is often overlooked, as those who follow a prominent leader often are. Who remembers the president after Abraham Lincoln?

The study of Joshua calls upon the reader to pause, to reflect, and to consider profound questions including:

- Who are the people of God?
- Is lying justified?
- Are killing and death part of God's plan?
- Is there such a thing as holy war?
- Who owns the Promised Land today?
- Does God always keep His promises?
- How and when does God bring justice?

The book of Joshua tells the story of how Joshua led the Israelites to conquer and settle the land of promise, Canaan. The conquest section opens with Yahweh's affirmation of Joshua as Moses' successor after his death. Joshua has his officers prepare the people to enter the land while he himself reconfirms an earlier promise by the Transjordan tribes to help with the conquest.

Joshua dispatches spies to Jericho, where a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab shelters them and receives an oath of safety. On Yahweh's orders, the Ark of the Covenant leads Israel's dramatic,

ceremonial crossing of the Jordan, where Israel, once again, crosses on dry ground. Israel sets up a memorial at Gilgal and pledges to teach future generations of their journey.

At Gilgal, Israel's first campsite inside the land, Joshua circumcises all uncircumcised males and leads in celebrating Passover. These acts ritually sanctify Israel for conquest, and celebrate their long-awaited arrival in the Promised Land. Israel's daily wilderness staple, manna, stops, so the produce of Canaan now feeds them. Joshua has a mysterious meeting with the commander of Yahweh's heavenly army, and then leads a seven-day ceremonial conquest and fiery destruction of Jericho—sparing Rahab.

Joshua sends a small military force inland to capture Ai, but they are unexpectedly routed. The defeat upsets Joshua but also reveals the secret sins of a Judahite named Achan at Jericho. On Yahweh's orders, Joshua and the whole army again attack Ai, this time toppling it by clever ambush. Joshua burns the city and executes its king, piling stones over his body to mark his burial place. In chapters 8-10 we find Joshua capturing all of southern Canaan, destroying their enemies, while Yahweh answers Joshua's petition to have the sun stand still. Joshua 12 tallies up Israel's victories: thirty-one kings defeated on both sides of the Jordan.

The second section of the book opens with a survey of the areas of Canaan not yet in Israel's hands, and continues to detail the distribution of inheritances among the tribes. The land settlement also includes two special land provisions: the naming of cities of refuge throughout the land (chapter 20) and the assignments of towns and pastures within every tribe's inheritance for the Levites (chapter 21). The book concludes with a reminder that God has kept every promise, including His ancient promise of land and rest. After dismissing the Transjordan tribes, Joshua presents a passionate farewell speech. The book ends where it began—with death—specifically, with the burial notices of key Israelite leaders (Joshua, Joseph, and Eleazar).

Who Is Joshua?

Joshua is best known as the hero of the book that bears his name. He actually has a long, notable career prior to his succession of Moses. In Exodus 17 he leads Israel's defense against Amalekite raiders. Joshua's victory confirms early his leadership abilities later put on display in Canaan. Joshua next appears as Moses' aide during the period at Mount Sinai when Yahweh issues His instructions (Exodus 24). When he and Moses descend the mount, Joshua immediately interprets the shouting coming from the direction of Israel's camp as the sound of war. In reality, it was Israel worshipping the golden calf.

When Moses dispatches the twelve spies to reconnoiter Canaan, Joshua represents his tribe of Ephraim (Numbers 13). Among the returning spies only Joshua and Caleb favor moving ahead with the invasion of Canaan. Their fateful choice places them among the few from the exodus generation whom Yahweh permits to enter the land (Numbers 14).

God has Moses publically commission Joshua, his long-time aide as his successor. This step was necessary because God had already declared that Moses himself would not lead Israel into the Promised Land. In a dramatic scene played out before Eleazar the priest and all Israel, Moses

lays his hands on Joshua, symbolically effecting Joshua's appointment (Numbers 27). In Deuteronomy 31, Moses publically affirms Joshua as the one to lead Israel into the land and charges him to be strong and courageous. In retrospect, what sets Joshua apart are two essential spiritual qualifications for leadership:

1. He has God's spirit (Numbers 27:18)
2. He shows a consistent pattern of obedience (Numbers 32:12)

Yahweh War

The book of Joshua concerns "Yahweh War," a well-attested biblical theme about the military victories God wins over His enemies, victories in which Israel participates. Yahweh war drives the defeats of Jericho, Ai, Gibeon, and southern and northern campaigns. Such war is a sacred act and, hence, requires ritual purity in Israel's war camp and among its soldiers (Deuteronomy 23:9). In Joshua, "to devote to destruction" or "ban" is the way Israel consecrates objects to Yahweh for His exclusive possession and use. Only Yahweh Himself has the authority to impose destruction on a city or people, no Israelite leader can do so.

The primary application of this idea and practice is to the conquest of Canaan rather than a broad policy with wide applicability and a long record of use. In this case, it serves a specific, limited purpose, to protect the Israelites from idolatry by ridding the land of idol worshippers (Deuteronomy 20:18). This protection is necessary lest Israel's unfaithfulness hamper the advance of God's salvation plan. If there are those in Canaan who are willing to acknowledge God's greatness, they seem eligible for a waiver from His destruction. In short, the book of Joshua teaches that those who honor Yahweh's greatness and do not teach Israel idolatry may remain in the land, and Yahweh expects of everyone in the land rigorous obedience to His instruction. God, as part of His universal sovereignty, owns everything. As owner, He has the authority to decide who may enjoy the use of His property (Psalm 24:1-2).

In reckoning with the violence and desolation in Joshua, we find ourselves entering the dark, foggy realm of God's mysterious nature with little clear illumination. In the end, however, as disturbing as the idea of Yahweh war is to the reader, one does well to remember that God is on record stating His preference for life and blessing over death and destruction (e.g., Ezekiel 18:23, 33:11).

Theological Themes

Several thematic threads weave the patchwork of sources behind the book of Joshua into the striking literary tapestry in our Bibles. They include:

1. Yahweh the Promise Keeper
 - From beginning to end, the book of Joshua identifies Yahweh's commitment to fulfill His promises to Israel as the driving force behind its narratives. His primary promise is the gift of the land and Canaan, a promise that goes back to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Promised long ago, inheritance implies permanent possession and family roots in soil to be passed down over generations in perpetuity.

- Besides land, a second promise whose fulfillment the book of Joshua features is Yahweh's promised gift of rest, a state of calm, quiet, peace, security, and safety that follows the end of war—the time when enemies, now vanquished, no longer threaten.
 - Finally, the author emphatically states the outcome of the promise theme: at the end of the day, not one single promise remains undone.
2. Yahweh the Warrior
 - Yahweh's overwhelming power and His personal presence undergird the theme of Yahweh as warrior. Before battles Yahweh typically calms Joshua or Israel and/or promises victory.
 - A simple, gilded, wooden box—the ark of Yahweh—overwhelms the waters of Jordan (even at flood stage), stops their flow, and amazingly lets Israel cross on dry ground.
 - A simple seven-day ritual siege—six days of silent circling broken by trumpet blasts and a lusty war cry on the seventh—topples the walls of ancient Jericho.
 3. Joshua the Successor
 - No doubt Moses served as a role model, mentor, and spiritual leader to Joshua. The continuity between Moses and Joshua is an obvious concern of the book of Joshua. At stake is Israel's confidence in Joshua's leadership, a confidence that hinges on Yahweh's presence with him.
 - The book of Joshua also portrays Joshua as far more than a Mosaic clone. Joshua is the one who conquers all of Canaan, and only Joshua receives an inheritance in the land as a gift of the Israelites.
 4. The People of God
 - The people of Israel form the all-important supporting cast in the drama of this book. They are the recipients and executors of the orders that Joshua gives from Israel's campsite in the plains of Moab to the book's final assembly at Shechem.
 - They strike a deal with Rahab, carry the stones that end up in Joshua's monument at Gilgal, follow the leadership of Joshua, and distribute the land among the tribes. A good leader, Joshua, is blessed by good followers.
 - They agree to absolute holiness to maintain their unique identity as God's special people.
 5. Israel and the Peoples
 - Despite the deadly shadow of ethnic cleansing that haunts the book, Joshua also reflects a surprisingly inclusive stance toward non-Israelites (Rahab, the Gibeonites).
 - The book promotes obedience to the instruction of Moses as the basis for anyone, Israelite or non-Israelite, to remain in the land. Rahab typifies the ultimate outsider—a Canaanite, female, prostitute—while Achan typifies the ultimate insider—as Israelite, a male, and from the prestigious tribe of Judah. Rahab survives and lives in Israel, while Achan dies and is remembered with shame. The difference is that Achan has violated the covenant while Rahab embraces it and submits to Yahweh and His will.

Passages to Consider

1. A new leader – 1:2 (Deuteronomy 34:9)
2. The Joshua code – 1:8 (Psalm 1:1-3)
3. Be strong and courageous – 1:9

4. Rahab shelters the spies – 2:24
5. Crossing of the Jordan – 3:14-17
6. Memorial stones – 4:1-7
7. An ancient rite before conquest – 5:1-3
8. A new diet plan – 5:10-12
9. The walls of Jericho fall – 6:1-27
10. One person's sin effects the entire group – 7:10-26
11. Give me this mountain – 14:6-15
12. Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve – 24:14-15

Outline of the Book of Joshua

1. Report: The Conquest of the Land (1:1-12:24)
 - a. Preparations for Entrance (1:1-2:4)
 - b. Ceremony: Jordan Crossing (3:1-5:12)
 - i. The crossing itself (3:1-5:1)
 - ii. Ceremonies at Gilgal (5:2-12)
 - c. Two Battle Reports (5:13-8:35)
 - i. Conquest of Jericho (5:13-6:27)
 - ii. Conquest of Ai (7:1-8:29)
 - iii. Epilogue: Ceremony at Shechem (8:30-35)
 - d. Conquest of Canaan Proper (9:1-12:24)
 - i. Rescue of Gibeon (9:1-10:27)
 - ii. Conquest of Southern Cities and Kings (10:28-43)
 - iii. Conquest of Northern Cities and Kings (11:1-15)
 - iv. Summary of the Conquest (1:16-12:24)
2. Report: The Settlement of the Land (13:1-24:33)
 - a. The Distribution of Inheritances (13:1-19:51)
 - i. Description: Unconquered Areas (13:1-7)
 - ii. The Distribution Proper (13:8-19:51)
 - iii. Two Special Land Provisions (20:1-21:45)
 - b. Three Concluding Reports (20:1-24:33)
 - i. The Alter Controversy (22:1-34)
 - ii. Joshua's Last Acts (23:1-24:31)
 - iii. Two Burial Reports (24:32-33)