

JOSHUA – PART ONE

A Promise Fulfilled

Chapters 1-6

[In addition to the pause questions offered here, you can ask: What spoke to you most in a particular chapter?]

Introduction

With the book of Joshua, we come to a new section of the Bible, sometimes called the “Historical Books” and sometimes known as “Deuteronomist History” (DH). A word about the terms *historical* and *Deuteronomist*.

History in the Bible. Designating a book of the Bible as *historical* does not mean it contains history as we understand it. We think of history as a set of verifiable events, as linear reality, one event following another. The six historical books that we are about to study tell the story from a *theological perspective*. This means that the primary focus of the authors of these books is not history but rather the interpretation of the events from God’s perspective. As we shall see, the aim of the writer was to show that things went well for Israel when they followed God’s law, as outlined by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.

Deuteronomistic History. Most scholars group Joshua, Judges, 1&2 Samuel, and 1&2 Kings, together and call them Deuteronomistic History (DH) because they believe that all six books came from the same school of writers who were deeply influenced by the book of Deuteronomy. It is believed that these writers lived around the time of Israel’s exile and wrote the books to explain why Israel had lost the land. It was not because of God’s unfaithfulness to his promises, but because of Israel’s unfaithfulness to their covenant with God, especially to their promise not to worship the false gods of the Canaanites. The common thread that moves through Israel’s Deuteronomistic History (Joshua to 2 Kings) is the belief that if Israel is faithful to God, she will prosper, but if she turns her back on God, she will be punished. This precept shared by the above six books of the Bible is sometimes referred to as the *Deuteronomic Principle*: faithfulness will be reward-ed; unfaithfulness will be punished. We are now ready to look at the first of the six books in this section of the Bible.

Purpose of the Book of Joshua

In the context of the Deuteronomistic History, the specific purpose of the Book of Joshua, with its emphasis on the conquest and division of the land, is to show the fidelity of God to the promises made in the past to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), Isaac (Gen 26:3), and Jacob (Gen 28:13), and to Moses and the Israelites (Ex 6:7-8). Hopefully, the Israelites now living in exile having lost their land, can begin to trust again in God’s willingness and power to restore them to the land if they would return to following God’s law. So we can say that the Book of Joshua was written to stir a spirit of obedience and commitment to God and the Torah. The Book assumes that Israel’s exile from the land was not due to any military disadvantage, but to their disobedience to the Torah.

What is the story? Still camped east of the Jordan River, the Israelites spy on Jericho, then prepare to march across the river. Joshua leads many successful campaigns of conquest in northern, southern, and central Canaan. Finally conquered, the land is allotted to the tribes. Joshua makes a farewell speech during which the covenant is renewed. Joshua dies and is buried.

Division of Chapters

Joshua can be divided into three main parts:

- PART ONE: Conquest of Canaan (chs 1-12)
- PART TWO: Division of the land amongst the tribes (chs 13-29)
- PART THREE: Joshua’s farewell address (chs 23-24)

A final introductory note. If you are not familiar with the Book of Joshua, brace yourself for what may be the most violent book of the Bible, making it all the more challenging because God is seen as the one ordering the Israelites to deal with their enemies in a most violent way.

PART ONE: CONQUEST OF THE LAND

COMMENTARY

CHAPTER 1: Promise of divine assistance

“No one can withstand you while you live. I will be with you as I was with Moses” (v. 5).

Verses 1-9. Moses has died. Joshua is now the new leader appointed by God. God promises to be with Joshua just as he was with Moses.

The land that the Israelites are about to possess is a gift from God.

The Deuteronomistic principle mentioned above is strongly emphasized. *“Above all, be firm and steadfast to observe the entire law which my servant Moses enjoined on you... Keep this book of the law on your lips. Recite it by day and by night” (vv 7-8).* Moses’ words are not just to be followed. They are to be the subject of meditation and discussion. The exiles living 600 years later are invited to see that the reason they lost the land is because they did not obey the Book of Moses.

Verses 10-18. Joshua tells his military officers to get ready to take possession of the land that God is about to give them, and he reminds the leaders of three tribes remaining in the Transjordan area that in the deal they cut with Moses, they promised that their men would help the other tribes take possession of the land (Num 32).

Pause: The sense that God is with us is very important in the spiritual life. Can you recall a recent time when you especially experienced God being with you?

CHAPTER 2: Rahab and the Israelite spies

“I know the Lord has given you the land.... We have heard how the Lord has dried up the waters of the Red Sea” (vv. 9-10).

Introducing this story in his commentary on Joshua, Jerome Creach writes: *“Joshua 2 is one of the richest and most intricately woven narratives in the Book. It employs irony, humor, and folkloric qualities to create an irresistible plot in which a prostitute outsmarts two groups of men in order to preserve herself and her family during the Israelite attack on Jericho. The narrative has suspense, sexual innuendo, and an underdog who triumphs – everything a modern audience expects in a great story!” (p.31).*

Just as Moses had sent spies to reconnoiter Canaan, now Joshua sends spies to reconnoiter Jericho. The chapter can be subdivided into four sections.

Verses 2-7. When the spies reach Jericho, they enter the house of a harlot named Rahab (v.1). We may wonder why the spies would enter such a house. Some commentators suggest that it was a good place to gather information without having to answer questions. Anyway, the local king becomes aware that spies are in the city and tries to locate them. The king’s men come to Rahab’s home. Rahab, having hidden the spies on the roof, gives the king’s men false information and sends them on a wild goose chase.

Verses 8-14 show the two spies concealed under a pile of flax on Rahab’s roof. There the smart harlot cuts a deal with them, thus buying safety for herself and her household when the city is destroyed.

Verses 15-21. Rahab lowers the spies from the city wall and gives them instructions for their escape. Rahab is the savviest person in this story. She thwarts the king’s efforts to capture the spies, and she maneuvers the spies into an oath that will protect her and her family when the Israelites invade Jericho. And most important, she is the one most keenly aware of God’s sovereignty and makes a powerful profession of faith in verses 9-11. She recognizes:

- that the land of Canaan belongs to God and that he has given it to the Israelites.
- that it is God’s might and power that enable the Israelites to take possession of the land.

Pause: What speaks to you most in the Rahab story?

CHAPTER 3: Crossing the River Jordan

“...the waters flowing from the upstream halted, backing up in a solid mass for a very great distance...” (v.16).

The crossing of the Jordan is remembered as one of the key events in Israel’s history. Just as the Red Sea miracle changed Israel’s status from slave to free, the journey through the Jordan transformed Israel from a wandering band to a people with their own land.

The crossing event is presented as an elaborate liturgical event led by the priests carrying the Ark of

the Covenant. In verse 5, Joshua says to the people: *“Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow the Lord will perform wonders among you.”* In verse 9, Joshua makes sure that the people recognize the hand of God in the mighty event that is about to happen.

Verses 12-17 describe the miracles that God worked for the people in causing the waters to dry up. Just as Moses held out his arms to part the waters of the Red Sea, in this event, the Ark of the Covenant parts the waters of the Jordan and leads the Israelites into the Promised Land. An important message here for the Israelite exiles is that their all-powerful God who brought their ancestors into the land several centuries earlier could lead them back into the land.

CHAPTER 4: The memorial stones

“When your children ask you what these stones mean to you, you shall answer them, ‘The waters of the Jordan ceased to flow before the ark of the covenant of the Lord when it crossed the Jordan’” (v.7).

The twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel were intended to be a physical and perpetual reminder of the drying up of the waters as the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord crossed the Jordan (v.7). Also, in the spirit of the Book of Deuteronomy, when their children ask what the stones mean, they will use the question to tell the story of God’s saving presence amongst the Israelites.

Finally, chapter 4 tells us that the Jordan was used by God to exalt Joshua in the eyes of the people. *“Henceforth during his whole life, they respected him as they had respected Moses”* (v.4). Jerome Creach writes: *“Joshua was an example of torah obedience; he shows dependence on God by constantly meditating on the law and being perfectly obedient to the commands that came through Moses”* (ibid, p.54).

CHAPTER 5-6: Rites at Gilgal – The Fall of Jericho

“When all the kings of the Amorites...and the kings of the Canaanites by the sea heard that the Lord had dried up the waters of the Jordan before the Israelites until they crossed over, they were disheartened and lost courage at their approach” (v.1).

This verse shows that the Israelites did not need to be scared of the Canaanites because God was in charge.

Verses 2-9 recount the circumcision of the new generation, those born in the wilderness. Circumcision was a sign of cutting off an old way of life and beginning a new life with God. For the Israelites, it was an external sign of their belonging to God, a significant mark of devotion to God especially after the exile. Also, one had to be circumcised in order to participate in the celebration of the Passover.

Verses 10-12. This is the first celebration of the Passover in the Promised Land. It was very special because it celebrated not only the Israelites deliverance from the slavery of Egypt, but also the end of the wilderness era and the manna food associated with that period in Israel’s history.

5:13-6:27 - The Walls of Jericho come tumbling down. *“By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days”* (Heb 11:30).

These verses illustrate the opening claim of this Book that Canaan was *God’s gift* to Israel (1:3) and that military power would not win the land. The capture of Jericho begins with the apparition of a divine being that recalls Ex 3, the call of Moses. Joshua is to be seen as the new Moses (5:13-15).

Verse 6:2 states: *“And to Joshua, the Lord said, ‘I have delivered Jericho and its king into your power.’”* In and through this word of the Lord, Joshua is told that he does not have to worry about this battle; God will be taking care of it.

In their book *Walking with God*, Tim Gray and Jeff Gavins write: *“The battle for Jericho is to be fought more by liturgical action than military might. The weapon of God’s people is worship, in the face of which her enemies cannot stand. God fights for his people; they have only to trust and keep faith in him.”* (p.120).

The whole thrust of the account of the fall of Jericho is to show that God is the one who gave Israel the victory. Having the walls collapse as Israel conducts what looks like a prayer service is a dramatic way of stating what happens when people place their trust in God. The focus in Joshua is not an historical account as we understand history, but a theological declaration of God’s role in the events of Israel’s life.

Pause: What is the greatest act of God that you have witnessed?

Throwing light on the ban of destruction

“They observed the ban by putting to the sword all living creatures in the city: men and women, young and old, as well as oxen, sheep and asses” (6:21).

In this chapter of Joshua, we read about one of the most reprehensible practices in ancient Israel, namely God’s command to destroy every man, woman and child after Canaanite city had been conquered.

In carrying out the practice of what is called the “ban of destruction,” the Israelites were obeying what Moses told them to do when the Lord gave them victory over the cities in the land of Canaan. *“In the cities of those nations which the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage, you shall not leave a single soul alive...lest they teach you to make any such abominable offerings as they make to their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord, your God” (Dt 20:16-18).*

The people of Israel believed that God was a warrior, the commander-in-chief of their army. It was their God who won their battles; therefore, God must receive the spoils. As they understand it, they dedicate the spoils by destroying everything—men, women, children and even animals. In this way, the people will be protected from the contamination of foreign gods (Ex 34:12-15).

What can be said about this practice that is so reprehensible to our modern sensibilities? How could the God who forbade killing in his Ten Commandments, order such destruction of human life when he gave them victory over the people of Canaan? Several points to note:

- While the mass slaughter of whole populations do greatly offend us, we too in our own era have experienced the mass execution of Jews, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the conquest of North America by white European settlers who believed it was their *divine right* to drive the Indians out of their land and mistreat them in gross ways. While the mention of these modern atrocities is not intended to justify the ancient practice of the ban, they may help to sober our outrage.
- Wholesale destruction of cities after a victory in war was common practice in those times just as burning heretics at the stake was a common practice in the Middle Ages. It was part and parcel of the practice of holy warfare in ancient times. Rather than take

captured soldiers as prisoners and material objects as booty, *everything* was destroyed and burned and given as a sacrificial offering of thanksgiving to the god or gods who led them to victory. It was easy for Israel with *their very primitive image of God* to believe that this is what their God expected of them. The refusal of all claims on the items and individuals captured was a way of proclaiming that the victory belonged totally to God. Our ancestors were influenced by the customs of their day, and are not to be judged by the customs or principles of our time. We may be embarrassed by the ban, but it was part of the initial stage in Israel’s formation and growth as the people of God.

We must keep in mind that the Israelites did not have the benefit of the revelation that came with Jesus – the One who revealed to us the totally non-violent nature of God, the One who said that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword (Mt 26:52).

- The practice of the ban was seen as a way to make sure that the pagan practices of the Canaanites did not contaminate Israel’s loyalty to God. *“It is necessary to realize that the ancients saw evil as an infectious reality; it had to be rooted out and destroyed in its totality”* (Roland Faley, TOR). The Israelites living in the thirteenth century B.C. did not have the benefit of the fullness of revelation that came with Jesus. As noted above, Moses had told the people not to leave a single soul alive lest they teach pagan ways. In 1Kings 11:1-13, the Deuteronomistic historian will tell us that the downfall of Solomon’s kingdom was due to his allowing the pagan practices of his foreign wives to enter into Israel. In the Gospel, Jesus says: *“If your right eye should cause you to sin, tear it out and throw it away”* (Mt 5:29). Jesus is not telling us to self-mutilate but rather to do whatever it takes to avoid sin and the occasion of sin. When the authors of Joshua were compiling this book, they saw clearly how the exiles could easily lose their faith in God by mixing with and intermarrying with their neighbors.

Commenting on the ban in his book *These Stones Will Shout*, Mark Link, S.J., writes: *“At this point in her history, Israel had no idea of an afterlife. This revelation would come much later. Therefore, Israel assumed that God executed judgment upon wicked people (enemies) in this life. Thus, to chastise an enemy was to act as the instrument of God’s justice – a noble occupation.”*

- Most scholars believe that it was unlikely that the ban of destruction was ever carried out as ruthlessly and completely as described in Joshua.

Finally, we may wonder how the ancient practice of Holy War can be distinguished from the jihad of some present-day Muslims. Scripture scholar Roland de Vaux, O.P., states that Israel's "holy wars" differed from the jihad of Islam in as much as it was the duty of every Moslem to spread the faith by force of arms, whereas Israel was not trying to spread the faith just to preserve it.

Pause: What are your thoughts and feelings as you read about the ancient practice of the ban? What enables people today to do terrible acts of violence to others?

Verse 6:22-25 – Exceptions to the ban. Leviticus 27:29 states that there are to be no exceptions to the ban. "*No human beings who were devoted to destructions can be ransomed: they shall be put to death.*" An exception to this no exception rule was the sparing of Rahab and her household who hid the two spies when they went to reconnoiter Jericho. They also saved some precious material items that would be used to embellish the Lord's sanctuary.