

The Book of Joshua

Although some modern readers avoid the Book of Joshua, it is a critical part of Israel's story. Joshua narrates the violent conquest of the Promised Land in a manner that many people find either dull or offensive. However, the story of the conquest is closely linked to the Exodus as part of Israel's experience of God (Deuteronomy 26:5–10, Psalm 105). The book addresses several problems, intrinsic to the larger biblical narrative that make it an integral part of the Scriptures.

Transition, Continuity, and the Fulfillment of Promises

First, Joshua represents a generational transition. Such transitions are complicated by the competing claims of tradition and the needs of the present. The generation of the Exodus rebelled against the authority of Moses (Numbers, chapters 11, 12, 16, 17) and refused to enter the Promised Land. Consequently, they were doomed to die in the wilderness (Numbers, chapters 13 and 14). The new generation that Joshua leads into the land stands in contrast with their ancestors. They are obedient and therefore successful (Joshua 24:31). The generation after Moses proves more faithful to the Law than the generation that witnessed the wonders of the Exodus and wilderness wandering.

The generational transition corresponds to the problem of political succession. How will the community have continuity of its customs and institutions as its founding generation and its leader die? What will they do now that Moses is dead? The very beginning of the Book of Joshua indicates how Joshua is and is not a successor to Moses. God speaks to Joshua as he did to Moses, and God promises "I will be with you as I was with Moses" (Joshua 1:5; cf. Exodus 3:12), and God also affirms that the Law revealed through Moses is binding for Joshua (1:7–8). The narrative shows Joshua acting in accordance with the commandments of Moses (see Joshua 8:30–35; Deuteronomy, chapter 27), but it also represents him as parallel to Moses. The crossing of the Jordan River (Joshua, chapter 3), which resembles the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus, chapter 14), is only the most obvious of many similarities between the two leaders.

In addition to the problem of community continuity, the book also addresses the issue of God's fidelity to the Promise made to Abraham: that Abraham would have numerous descendants, that they would live in the land promised to Abraham, and have a special relationship with God (Genesis 12:1–3, 17:6–8). Moses leads the people out of Egypt and transmits to them the laws of God. By the Exodus and the gift of the Law, God forms a special bond with the Israelites (Exodus 6:7, 19:4–6), but Moses dies before the Promise is completely fulfilled. Joshua's mission is to lead Israel to the final fulfillment of the Promise—possession of the land.

The Gift of Land

Modern readers in urban societies tend to underestimate the importance of land. Throughout the biblical period, Israel was an agricultural nation. Almost all Israelites farmed land and were keenly aware of land as the basis for their survival. The Bible represents the land as a gift from God that may be taken away (Deuteronomy 8:19–20, 9:4–6). Similarly, the fertility of the land depended on God (Deuteronomy 11:10–17). The land is consistently represented as fertile and "flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8,17; 13:5; 33:3). Although famines did occur in the land (Genesis 12:10, 26:1), the biblical text focuses on the reliability of God rather than the unreliability of rainfall (Deuteronomy 11:10–17).



A Rational Critique of Joshua

Modern readers may have difficulties reading the Book of Joshua from a rational critique standpoint. The rational critique claims that some books in the Bible are irrational and so not worthy of serious attention. Modern science provides fuel for this critique. The story of the sun standing still in Joshua 10:12–14 became the basis for one of the most famous examples of the conflict between science and the Scriptures. In the early 1600s, Galileo Galilei advocated and defended the Copernican view of the solar system that placed the sun at the center of the system with Earth and the other planets in orbit around it. This heliocentric worldview appeared to conflict with the teaching of the Scriptures in Joshua 10:12–14 among other places (Psalms 19:1–7, 104:1–5; Isaiah 40:22). Galileo suffered for his defense of science but has since been vindicated. Most modern biblical interpreters understand the passage from Joshua (and the others) as language that is either figurative (we still speak of the sun rising and setting) or constrained by the limited scientific understanding of the human authors of the Scriptures. As asserted by the Vatican II Council, biblical authors did not address scientific topics but rather communicated “that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation” (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation [Dei Verbum]*, number 11).

Since the development of archeology, modern scholars have found a new basis for the rational critique of Joshua that cannot be resolved so readily. Archeological excavations of the cities mentioned in Joshua give conflicting evidence about the historicity of the book. Archeological evidence indicates that some cities said to have been defeated by Joshua, such as Bethel and Hazor, were violently destroyed around the time of Joshua. However, there are many sites such as Jericho and Ai that were not only not destroyed at this time but seem not even to have been inhabited. Scholars will continue to argue about the evidence, but most now accept that Joshua is not a straightforward narration of past events but a carefully edited series of conquest narratives that present an idealized image of Israel’s emergence in the land.

A Moral Critique of Joshua

The moral critique of the Book of Joshua poses a more serious problem. The moral critique claims that this book must not be used as a moral guide because it promotes immoral behavior. The problem most relevant to Joshua is warfare and genocide. Joshua leads the Israelites to military victory, conquest, and settlement of the land. In accordance with God’s command, the Israelites massacre entire Canaanite cities, including men, women, children, elderly, and sometimes livestock because, it was thought, they belonged to God so that they could not be kept as the spoils of war (Joshua 6:17–18, 10:39–40). Indeed, Achan and his family suffer a severe penalty for attempting to keep some spoils for themselves (Joshua 7:16–26). This understanding of war, as divinely mandated massacre, conflicts with modern moral sensibilities and Christian ethics. Christians have responded to this problem in various ways. Some attempt to spiritualize the violence and understand it as the victory of those committed to God against a hostile world or against sin. Others prefer to contextualize the violence. They point out that the ideology of warfare in Joshua resembles wider thinking and practice in the ancient Near East and therefore claim that this biblical perspective is no more normative for us than the notion that the sun orbits the earth. In ancient times, the just-war theory evolved in part from Christian attempts to come to terms with the violence in Joshua.



Possibly, none of the above solutions is adequate to the problem. Part of the problem may lie within us. We have become uncomfortable with the notion of a warrior God, so prevalent in Joshua. Instead, we prefer to think of God in terms of love and nonviolence. However, might there be times when we want God to be a warrior?

Parallels Between the Old and the New Testaments

Two characters in the Book of Joshua have significance beyond the boundaries of the book. First, Joshua himself appears frequently before the book that bears his name. Joshua is primarily a military commander, although he also administers the allotment of conquered land. His role is not surprising given his previous appearances in the Pentateuch. Joshua first appears in Exodus 17:8–13 as the warrior who leads the Israelites in battle. He thereafter appears consistently as Moses' assistant (Exodus 33:11). He is protective of Moses' authority (Numbers 11:28–29) and rewarded for his fidelity to God by being permitted to see the Promised Land (Numbers, chapter 14). God's choice of Joshua for this mission is further foreshadowed by Moses' commissioning of Joshua in Numbers 27:18–23. By the time Joshua dies, the Israelites are a numerous people in possession of their Promised Land who have the opportunity to enjoy the blessings of God.

According to Numbers 13:16, Moses gave Joshua his name, which means "Yahweh saves." Since Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, Christian tradition has seen a parallel between Joshua and Jesus. Both are conquerors—one of Canaan, the other of sin and death.

The second character whose reach extends outside the book is Rahab. Rahab is a Canaanite prostitute whose fear of God motivates her to help Joshua's spies escape from Jericho. In return, she asks that she and her family be spared from the slaughter of the city. Rahab signals the Israelites by tying a scarlet cord to her window (recalling the blood of the Passover lamb in Exodus 12:21–23). She and her family are the only people of Jericho spared from the massacre. In the Old Testament, Rahab is mentioned only in Joshua, chapters 2 and 6. In the New Testament, Rahab is mentioned as an ancestress of Jesus (Matthew 1:5) and as a woman who was saved by faith (Hebrews 11:31) and saved by works (James 2:25).

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