

JOSHUA
JANUARY BIBLE STUDY 2025
Introduction

I. The Grand Narrative & Joshua's Place in It

We make sense of our lives through narrative. Without a working knowledge of God's story, the grand narrative of creation and redemption, we will lose all sense of who God is, who we are, what our problem is, and what is the solution. In the case of Joshua, the book begins in the middle of the story.

Act I: The story of the world always begins in Gen 1-2

Act II: Rebellion (Gen 3-11)

Act III: God's Plan of Redemption Begins (Gen 12-Malachi)

- Call of Abraham and the promise of descendants, blessing, and land (Gen 12-50)
- Slaves in Egypt, the Exodus, and Covenant @ Sinai (Exodus-Leviticus)
- Wandering in the wilderness, the death of Moses, and prepared to enter the land (Numbers-Deuteronomy)
- **The Promise of land fulfilled (Joshua)**

Joshua opens with preparation for crossing the River Jordan, so the book itself forms a threshold, marking the passage from a people without land, struggling to become a nation, to a nation occupying their own land. The stage is now set for the great drama that will show how Israel will fare as God's covenant people, a great nation with a great name (Gordon McConville, *Joshua*, 1). Thus, Joshua is one of the most important "bridge" texts in Scripture. It looks back to the Pentateuch and ties together many of the themes and promises made there. But Joshua also anticipates the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham of life in the land and the ensuing story that continues through Kings ending in the destruction of Jerusalem and exile in Babylon.

II. Authorship & Date

Although the text itself is anonymous, Jewish tradition has claimed Joshua himself as the author. While there is evidence Joshua contributed certain parts ("And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God," 24:26), the following must be kept in mind: (1) it is self-evident that the final form of the book was completed after Joshua's death since Joshua's death and events following his death are narrated (24:29-31).

(2) Furthermore, the book includes the phrase "until this day" fourteen times. In almost every case, the statement "exceeds the horizon of Joshua's own life," (David Firth, 2). The person responsible for the book's final form is unknown to us, which is of little consequence if we recognize God is the ultimate author. The date could be anywhere between 1300-1000 B.C

III. Purpose

- To chronicle the Israelite conquest of the Promised Land. Joshua is 75 at the beginning and dies at 110, so the story covers a 35-year period. Beyond the five incidents below, the process of taking the land is described in brief, summary statements (see list of 31 kings in Josh 12).
 - Jericho (6)
 - Ai (7-8)

- The Gibeonite incident (9)
- The defeat of five Amorite kings in the south (10)
- The defeat of King Jabin of Hazor in the north (11)
- To look back as a reminder of God's faithfulness, but also to look to the future with hope of nationhood in a land flowing with milk and honey.
- To declare the victory belongs to the Lord because he fights for them. Disloyalty to God, the gravest sin, will bring defeat and loss of the land.
- To point forward to the coming of Jesus as the new Joshua, who will one day lead all of God's people into their promised rest. Jesus is the lens through which we should read Joshua.

IV. Key Themes

- Taking Possession of the Land

The land is central to all things Israel, beginning with God's call of Abraham, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Gen 12:1). God made other promises, but they were all contingent on the land. In fact, when you look at Israel's history from Abraham to the present, it is not simply about the political fortunes of a people, it is about the experience of that people in relation to a particular place, the land God had promised to give them. The Old Testament as a whole is the story of God's people and their relationship to God's land, whether anticipating it, taking it, or being exiled from it with a longing to return. In fact, we can gauge Israel's relationship with God at any moment by their relationship with the land God had given them, beginning with Adam and Eve and their land, Eden. The universal yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is deep. Country music seems to have tapped into this reality (see Justin Moore, *This Is My Dirt* and Jordan Davis, *Buy Dirt*, among others). Joshua is the story of taking possession of the "dirt," that God had promised.

- The Faithfulness of God in Fulfilling His Promises

The anticipation of land is a theme that goes all the way back to creation, when God gave Adam and Eve a garden in which to thrive and experience God's presence. Once lost, the promise of another land was given, this time to Abraham, and he lives the rest of his life with this promise as the driving force. In Deuteronomy we begin to hear the preparation for it with the recurring formula, "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Deut 17:4). The book of Joshua is, at its core, an account of how Israel's God, Yahweh, fulfills his ancient promise to give Israel a land. Taking possession of the gift parallels the Christian experience of working out in our lives God's free gift of salvation (Phil 2:12-13).

- Victory Is Only by the Power & Presence of God

Joshua's name, introduced in 1:1, means "the Lord saves/rescues" which underscores a central motif of the book, that Israel's victories against the peoples of the land are accomplished only with the help of God. A central claim in Joshua is found near the conclusion: "Yahweh your God fights for you," (23:10). They must never fall into a sense of dependance on their own power & might. In short, they don't "got this" apart from God fighting for them. In the words of Jesus, the meek will inherit the land (Matt 5:5)

- The Importance of Remembering & Declaring the Greatness of God

Note the building of seven memorials for remembrance:

- Twelve stones at Gilgal after crossing the Jordan (4:4-7)
- Stones over Achan as a reminder of the consequences of disobedience (7:26)
- Pile of rocks over the dead body of the king of Ai, commemorating victory at Ai and God giving them a second chance (8:28-29)
- An altar of stones on Mount Ebal on which Joshua wrote the law of Moses (8:30-32)
- Large stones over the mouth of the cave containing the dead bodies of the five Amorite kings, commemorating Israel's victory over them (10:27)
- An altar of witness built by the eastern tribes (22:34)
- A stone of witness at Shechem as a reminder of Israel's covenant with Yahweh (24)

Structure & Commentary

I. Entering the Land (1:1-5:12)

A. Israel Prepares to Enter the Land (1:1-18)

1. God speaks to Joshua as Israel's New Leader (1:1-9)
2. Joshua Speaks to Israel's Leaders (1:10-11)
3. Joshua Speaks to the Eastern Tribes (1:12-18)

Summary: Chapter one begins with a funeral, "after the death of Moses," and narrates the transition to Joshua as God's chosen one to lead them into the land. Filling the sandals of Moses would cause anyone to tremble with fear, but God commands Joshua 3x to "Be strong and courageous," each one with increasing intensity (6, 7, 9). Also note the "rest" God promises to give them. Rest, as a cessation of motion and work, implies arrival in God's promised land along with the fulfillment of all the other promised blessings. It is a return to the ideal of Gen 1:31-2:4 and the 7th days rest (see Heb 3:10-11, 4:1-11 as an extended exegesis of Psalm 95:7-11). Paradise had been lost due to sin, but God promised to restore humanity. Paradise and the rest found in it is promised immediately through the leadership of Joshua, but it will only fully come to realization through the person and work of Christ.

B. Rahab Saves the Spies and Her Family (2:1-24)

Joshua, like Moses before him sends spies into Jericho, the first city they will engage. Apparently, the Israelites are not very good at espionage. They are immediately discovered hiding in Rahab, a prostitute's home. Rahab protects them at grave risk to her own life because of her belief that Yahweh is the true God. As a result, she exacts an oath from the spies that the Israelites will spare her and her family when they conquer Jericho. The condition of salvation involves a scarlet cord in her window when the invasion occurs. The deliverance of Rahab is a salvation-by-faith story, a Canaanite "mini exodus." Their oath with Rahab does raise questions about their ability to obey Yahweh's demand that the city and all its spoils are "devoted" (*herem*) to the Lord. Every living thing is supposed to die.

C. Israel Crosses the Jordan and Sets up a Memorial (3:1-4:24)

This is the most important single event in the book, and the narrator takes two chapters to tell the story. The echoes of crossing the Red Sea at the Exodus marks the crossing of the Jordan as a continuation of God's covenant faithfulness, bringing Israel from slavery to freedom, from wondering in the wilderness to occupying the land he had promised to them as an inheritance. The memorial, comprised of 12 stones taken from the riverbed, will serve as a reminder for future Israelites of God's faithfulness in bringing them into the land. We must not discount the power of triggers that help us remember God's faithfulness.

D. Final Preparations for Jericho: Circumcision and Passover (5:1-12)

As a final preparation, Yahweh instructs Joshua to circumcise all male Israelites at Gibeah-haaraloth ("hill of foreskins"). This was necessary because none of the males born during the forty years of wilderness wanderings were circumcised (Gen 17:9-14). The other act of preparation was celebrating Passover, marking the occupation of the Promised Land as a continuation of the Exodus story.

II. Taking the Land (5:13-12:24)

The second half of the narrative tells the story of actually taking possession of the land promised to Abraham.

A. God's Faithfulness: Divine Victory & Divine Violence at Jericho (5:13-6:27)

The Lord provides the plan (6:1-5), an unusual plan with little military value, but one that eradicates any arrogance or boasting of Israel's military prowess. The plan leaves no doubt that Israel wins because God fights for them. The Israelites execute the plan to perfection (6:6-14), and the walls come tumbling down (6:15-25).

Yahweh commands that all the spoils of victory are to be "devoted" (*herem*) to the Lord and go into the national treasury and every living thing must be killed.

Christians must not ignore or deny the moral challenge of God-sanctioned violence. Whatever we do with the *herem*, we must never use it to justify the use of violence in the name of God in our own time. Jesus has shown us the better way. We are to love our enemies, pray for those who curse us, do good to them that wish us harm (Luke 6:27-28; Matt 5:44).

B. Israel's Failure: Defeat at Ai, Judgment on Achan, Victory at Ai (7:1-8:29)

On the hills of the euphoria of victory, One man, Achan, rains on the victory parade. He steals the spoils from Jericho. As a result, Israel is defeated and humiliated at Ai. Thirty-six men are killed, and the remainder of the army is chased from the city.

Achan's sin is exposed and he and his whole family die in the Valley of "Achor" = "Trouble." By his violation of the *herem*, Achan and his family become *herem*. Once the sin has been dealt with, Israel burned Ai and made it into a heap of stones. Israel learned an important lesson: If they are to take the land, God requires obedience. Israel will not get special treatment from God if they disobey.

C. The Gibeonite Deception (9:1-27)

Israel's victories lead to an alliance between the kings of Canaan. One of those city-states, Gibeon, planned deception rather than war. Joshua falls for their ruse and

makes an oath of peace with them. As a result of their oaths with Rahab and now the Gibeonites, Israel will be forced to go forward in something other than complete obedience to God.

D. Israel's Defeat of the Five Canaanite Kings and Southern Cities (10:1-43)

The war with the five Canaanite kings came about as a result of Joshua's unwise alliance with the Gibeonites. These five kings were alarmed that the powerful city Gibeon had made the alliance with Israel, which would shift the balance of power against them. The five kings are led by Adoni-Zedek ("the Lord is righteousness"), who is king of Jerusalem. The story abounds in irony. The king calls to mind the mysterious priest to whom Abraham pays a tithe in Gen 14. Melchizedek ("King of righteousness") was king of Salem associated with Jerusalem in Ps 76:2. Adoni-Zedek is the king of the city that will be the capital of King David, the location of Solomon's temple, and thus Yahweh's dwelling place. Victory over the five kings comes about by Israelite swords but also by cosmic forces. The Lord throws large hailstones (11) on them and the sun stands still for almost a full day (12-13). The five kings flee, hid in a cave, are caught and executed, hung on trees, and thrown back in the cave, and the cave covered with large stones as a memorial commemorating Israel's victory (10:27).

E. Israel's Defeat of the Northern Cities and the List of Defeated Kings (11-12)

Just as Joshua defeated the alliance of southern kings in chapter 10, now he defeats an alliance of northern kings led by King Jabin of Hazor (11:10). The section ends with a summary of the territory captured by the Israelites. First, there is a summary of the territory captured east of the Jordan (12:1-6). Then, there is a list of thirty-one specific kings that Israel had defeated west of the Jordan in the order of events beginning with Jericho (12:7-24).

III. Dividing the Land (13:1-21:45)

Chapter 13 marks a significant transition from entering and taking possession of the land to the allotment of the land to the Twelve tribes. Joshua 11:23 anticipated this section with the words, "Joshua then gave the land as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotment." The goal was not simply to take the land from the Canaanites, but to live in the land. This would require the tribes knowing what land was theirs. The allotment had already begun when Moses allotted the land east of the Jordan to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the 1/2 tribe of Manasseh. It was Joshua's task to allot the land west of the Jordan.

A. The Land Still to Be Allotted (13:1-7)

B. The Allotment of the Land East of the Jordan (13:8-33)

C. The Allotment of the Land West of the Jordan (14:1-5)

D. The Allotment for Caleb (14:6-15)

E. The Allotment of the Land for Judah (15:1-63)

F. The Allotment for Joseph (16:1-17:18)

G. The Allotment to the Remaining Seven Tribes at Shiloh (18:1-19:51)

H. Cities of Refuge (20:1-9)

With the land distributed among the tribes, the everyday issues of living in the land must be addressed. The first of these is the appointment of six "sanctuary cities." These cities of refuge are first referenced in Num 35:9-28, Deut 4:41-43, and Deut 19:1-10. They arise out of the reality that there will be homicides in Israel. The cities of refuge will allow for due process in situations where a murder was not deliberate, or a person was wrongly accused.

I. Levitical Cities (21:1-45)

As a result of their priestly vocation, Moses had determined the Levites would not have their own allotment (See Deut 10:8-9; 18:1-2; Josh 13:14; 14:4). Rather, Yahweh would be their inheritance. Although lacking in their own territory, they would receive a special spiritual blessing, spending their lives immersed in leading the people to worship Yahweh. They would also be entitled to the use of vast grasslands for their cattle (Num 35:2-5). This ensured that in every tribe, there would be individuals who represented devotion to Yahweh.

IV. Preparation for Living/Remaining in the Land (22:1-24:33)

A. Joshua's Farewell Address to the Transjordan Tribes (22:1-8)

B. The Building of an Altar and Possible Civil War (22:9-34)

C. Joshua's Farewell Address to All Israel (23:1-16)

After the passing of considerable time, an aging Joshua assures Israel of the full and final allotment of the promised rest in the Promised Land (1-5), as well as a charge to remain faithful to Yahweh (6-13), and a final warning that just as God has kept his promises of blessing, so he will keep his promises of judgment (14-16). Everything God has given them stands to be lost. The narrative began with Israel just outside the land; it ends with Israel inside the land. If they choose to disobey God, they stand to lose it all.

D. Joshua's Final Farewell Address & the Covenant at Shechem (24)

The final scene in Joshua is much like the one in chapter 23. This is the third speech that rounds out the end, each lengthier than the previous. The third is part of the great covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem.

E. Conclusion: Three Funerals: Joshua, Joseph, and Eleazar (24:29-33)

The narrative began with a funeral and ends with three. These theological obituaries bring the narrative to a proper conclusion, recalling the past, emphasizing God's faithfulness, and looking ahead with expectation about who will lead next.