Lion and Lamb Apologetics

JOSHUA

THEME

Author and Title

The book of Joshua is named for its leading character. (For more on Joshua, see note on 1:1.) The book's author, however, is not explicitly mentioned. The Talmud—a collection of ancient writings by rabbis on Jewish law and tradition—ascribes the book, with the exception of the account of Joshua's death, to Joshua himself (*Baba Bathra* 15a). While the book depicts Joshua writing (Josh. 8:32; 24:26), it does not claim he wrote the book. Indeed, the repeated references to something existing "to this day" (see 4:9; 5:9; 6:25; etc.) seem to suggest a significant lapse of time between the events and the book's final form. Also, the narrator in Joshua 10:13 cites what may be an earlier record of Joshua's deeds.

Date

Determining the date of the book of Joshua is difficult because, as with many other OT books, it may have been edited as it became part of the growing corpus of OT texts. Its final editing may well have taken place in the exilic period (post-587 B.C.), but its original composition was likely much earlier. A number of features point to a date of origin in the late second millennium B.C.

Theme

Joshua recounts part two of God's grandest work of redemption in the OT period. In part one (the Pentateuch), under the leadership of Moses, the Lord redeemed his people out of bondage in Egypt and formalized his covenantal love for them at Sinai. Now in part two, under the leadership of Joshua, the Lord as divine Warrior brings his people into the Land of Promise and gives them "rest."

Purpose, Occasion, and Background

From the evidence in the book itself, it appears that the purpose of the book of Joshua was to recount, from a theological perspective, the events surrounding Israel's capture and settlement of the land of Canaan—with particular emphasis on God's faithfulness

in fulfilling his promise to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Such an account would have been relevant to ancient Israel from its earliest arrival in Canaan and to every subsequent generation of God's people to the present day.

Literary background. Joshua comes immediately after the Pentateuch and in many ways completes its story. The theme of the first five books of the Bible is the progressive fulfillment of the "patriarchal promise," made first to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and reiterated to him, his son Isaac (Gen. 26:2–4), and his grandson Jacob (Gen. 28:13–15; etc.). Simply stated, the Lord promised Abraham and his descendants that they would be *blessed* and become a blessing, that they would grow to become a *great nation*, and that they would be given a *land* of their own. In addition, these blessings would be enjoyed in the context of a close *covenant relationship* with God.

By the end of the Pentateuch, Israel has been brought into the blessing of covenant relationship with the Lord and has become a great people. But they remain outside the Land of Promise, on the plains of Moab. Forty years before, the Lord had raised up Moses to lead his people out of bondage in Egypt and to bring them to the land he had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 3:6–8; 6:2–8). Now, after so many years of wandering, Joshua, the "new Moses" (Josh. 1:1–9), is to lead God's people into the land, take it, and divide it among them as their inheritance from the Lord.

Historical background. (See also Introduction to the Historical Books.) The dates of the exodus and the conquest of the Promised Land are interrelated, since the conquest occurred about 40 years after the exodus. Whether the exodus occurred in the fifteenth century (about 1446) or thirteenth century (about 1260) B.C. is a matter of long-standing debate among biblical scholars. (See The Date of the Exodus.)

Were the pharaoh of the exodus explicitly named in the biblical text, this problem would be solved, but as was the custom in Egyptian records until about the tenth century B.C., he is simply called "Pharaoh." Deciding the date of the exodus and conquest does not materially affect the interpretation of the book of Joshua. Continuing archaeological work (both excavations and surface surveys) is providing helpful data, but this data requires interpretation and can often be correlated with either date of the conquest.

With regard to the manner in which Israel came to be present in Canaan, several "models" have been suggested. According to the older *conquest* model, associated with W. F. Albright, the text of Joshua describes a rapid and highly destructive conquest. Advocates of this view were convinced that the thirteenth century provided the best archaeological confirmation. Subsequent work undermined Albright's model and its archaeological support. The unfortunate result of the collapse of Albright's

conquest model was that many scholars wrongly assumed that the *biblical* testimony to a conquest was also discredited. More careful reading of the biblical text, however, reveals a conquest that is protracted and not necessarily very destructive of property, except in the case of those few cities burned: Jericho, Ai, and Hazor (see note on 11:10–15). Other proposed models of Israel's emergence include the *peaceful infiltration* model (pioneered by A. Alt), the *peasant revolt* model (of G. Mendenhall), and various more recent *endogenous* models (which assume Israel to have emerged from within Canaan, rather than having entered from without).

None of the standard "models" does full justice to the biblical evidence, but each may capture an aspect of the biblical portrayal. Military conquest certainly played a part in Israel's entry into Canaan, and archaeology provides at least some interesting correlations (see notes on 6:5; 11:10–15). Further, archaeological surface surveys indicate a rapid proliferation of small settlements in the central hill country, beginning in the late thirteenth century B.C., whose inhabitants appear to have avoided eating pork. It is tempting to associate these new villages with the settling down of Israelites, perhaps after a longer or shorter period of existence as nomadic herdsmen in Canaan. Peaceful infiltration may have played some part in the settlement; Gibeon came under Israelite control without a fight (ch. 9), as did perhaps Shechem (see note on 8:30–33) and other sites. Revolt and realignment by disaffected Canaanites such as Rahab (ch. 2) almost certainly contributed to Israel's "mixed multitude" (cf. Ex. 12:38), so some degree of "endogenous" origin need not be ruled out.

For background information on the man Joshua, see note on Joshua 1:1.

The Destruction of the Canaanites

The account in Joshua presents the sensitive reader with a deep problem, namely, the apparently wholesale slaughter of the indigenous Canaanite population in order to allow the people of Israel to occupy their land. How did Israel have any right to seize that land? And how can it be God's will for them to spare none of those who resisted them in defense of their own land? Could this be a level of barbarism that God tolerated in the OT but now forbids in the NT?

Certainly people hostile to the Bible decry ancient Israel for its "ethnic cleansing," and many sensitive Christians find this deeply troubling as well. To handle the topic thoroughly would take a longer essay, but the discussion here can guide thoughts for fuller reflection.

One must begin by acknowledging that the questions are legitimate. Christians rightly condemn this kind of behavior in other circumstances, and there is no warrant today

for nations to destroy other nations in order to take their land. But there are special features of the command to Israel that both make it unique (and therefore not open to be imitated) and allow it to be seen in a moral light. This command is one reason why Exodus records the call of Moses in such detail (Ex. 3:1–4:17; cf. Num. 12:1–15): Moses is God's unique choice to be the lawgiver for his people, and the commands given through Moses come from God's own mind (cf. Deut. 18:15–20). Believers accept God's appointment of Moses to speak his will. Without this command from God as delivered through Moses, Israel would have had no right to the land.

A second point to clarify is that the Pentateuch sets out laws of warfare, distinguishing between battles fought against cities outside the Promised Land (Deut. 20:10–15) and those fought against cities inside the land (Deut. 20:16–18). It is only the latter case that requires Israel to spare no one ("you shall devote them to complete destruction"); see the notes on Deuteronomy 20:1–20 and 20:16–18. The law appears to be unconditional and implacable. With these clarifications, one can now outline why this command is not an unsolvable "problem."

(1) A fundamental OT conviction is that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is the Creator of all there is, and therefore the owner of all lands. He has the right to distribute territories according to his good and holy will (cf. Ex. 19:5; Ps. 24:1). As the universal Creator, he is also the universal Judge, to whom all people everywhere are accountable: cf. Genesis 6–8 (the flood story affects all kinds of people); Genesis 11:1–9 (the Tower of Babel); Exodus 12:12 (judgment on the gods of Egypt); the prophetic oracles about the nations (see chart). The NT shares this basic conviction: cf. Acts 14:15–16; 17:24–31. This means that God has the ultimate rights over the land of Canaan, and that he has the right to bring the Canaanites to judgment for their moral condition and deeds.

(2) Since all people are sinners, all are rightly subject to God's judgment. The Pentateuch gives a moral rationale for the removal of the Canaanites, seeing it as divine judgment for their iniquities (see note on Gen. 15:13–16; cf. Lev. 18:24–30; Deut. 9:5). This action against these peoples, then, is an expression of God's judgment on them through the agency of Israel. This judgment therefore announces the moral nature of God to the whole world for their instruction (that announcement in all its clarity is itself part of the blessing that Israel is to bring to the whole world). In ways that are not entirely clear, the faithful will participate with God in carrying out the final judgment (1 Cor. 6:2; cf. Ps. 149:6–7), and Israel's bringing of judgment on the Canaanites foreshadows that great responsibility as well (see note on Josh. 6:17).

God's judgment allows no double standard: he did not base his choice of Israel on any merit of theirs (Deut. 7:6–9), and he calls them to embrace his love faithfully.

Unfaithfulness will lead to judgment upon Israel itself, whether at the level of the individual (Ex. 22:20) or the whole people (Josh. 7:11–12; Mal. 4:6; cf. Lev. 18:28). This cannot be called "ethnic cleansing," since the treatment is just, regardless of ethnicity.

(3) Further, the Sinai covenant sets Israel up to be a "theocracy," a unique combination of what is now called "church" and "state." Membership in the people is both political and religious, and thus "citizens" are under obligation to be faithful in observing the covenant. Those who carry out egregious violations must be removed (e.g., Deut. 13:5; 17:7; etc.), and if Israel were to allow unrepentant Canaanites to remain in the land, they would drag the whole people down into idolatry, injustice, and evil (e.g., Deut. 7:4; 12:29–31), which, sadly, is just what happened. Christians are not to carry out this kind of warfare, because the people of God are no longer identified with a particular nation-state.

(4) Finally, even though the laws about destroying the Canaanites are stated in an uncompromising and unconditional way (in keeping with the rhetoric of ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, which allows for this kind of unqualified statement), the way Israel applied those laws apparently made room for some of the Canaanites to surrender and survive, particularly if they professed faith in the one true God (see note on Josh. 2:9 for Rahab and her whole family; see note on 9:1–27 for the Gibeonites; cf. 11:19). This means that the appearance of implacability in these laws is just that, an appearance, and there is an implied allowance for exceptions. This is another point showing that, strictly speaking, the command given to Israel is nothing like "ethnic cleansing," since ethnicity itself is not the reason for the action.

These factors—God's right to allocate land and judge the world with perfect justice; the need to protect the purity of the Israelite theocracy; and the provisions for even Canaanites to be saved—all illustrate the justice that lies behind these provisions. At the same time, it is also clear that the practices known as genocide and ethnic cleansing are indeed evil, and the Israelites were not commanded to commit them. These factors were a unique part of Israel's mission; no people today have any right to use them as a warrant to support injustice.

Key Themes

The book of Joshua is fascinating not only in respect to literary and historical questions but perhaps especially in regard to several theological topics: land, leadership, the Book of the Law, covenant, Yahweh's war (Hb. *kherem*), judgment and mercy, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, promised rest, God's faithfulness and his

people's response, and so forth. The theological lessons to glean from the pages of Joshua are many:

I. The Lord's abiding presence as the key to strength and courage (e.g., 1:5, 9).

II. The centrality of the Lord's instructions for succeeding in one's mission and acting with insight; land and rest as divine gifts (1:7–8).

III. The ability of the Lord to save the "outsider" (Rahab), and the danger of the "insider" falling away (Achan; see chs. 2 and 7).

IV. The Lord as divine Warrior and the reality of judgment when iniquity is full (e.g., 10:42; 11:19–20).

V. The danger of presumption and failure to inquire of the Lord (e.g., 9:14).

VI. The Lord as protector of the covenant (e.g., 10:1–15, esp. v. 11).

VII. The unity of the people of God (18:1–10; 22:34).

VIII. The sovereignty of God in giving his people place and rest (1:13; 11:23; 21:43–45).

IX. The faithfulness of God in fulfilling all his good promises (1:2; 21:43–45).

X. The necessity of removing false gods and worshiping God alone (ch. 24).

The list could continue. Given the virtual identity of the names Joshua and Jesus (both are rendered "Jesus" [Gk. *Iēsous*] in the Gk. of the Septuagint and the NT), and in light of passages such as Hebrews 4:8–11, it is not surprising that the leader Joshua has been interpreted as a "type" of Christ.

History of Salvation Summary

The story of Joshua continues on from the Pentateuch, as God uses Joshua's leadership of his people to give them what he had promised to the patriarchs. In such circumstances, there is even (in a limited way) blessing coming to Gentiles. In order to flourish and to fulfill their calling, the people of God require faithful leadership and faithful members. In Joshua, this mostly does happen (with a notable lapse, 9:14). The book closes with the people pledging continued faithfulness. The story of Israel after this time shows that their heirs did not remain faithful to this pledge, and the book warns all subsequent generations that each of them must renew this commitment. (For

an explanation of the "History of Salvation," see the Overview of the Bible. See also History of Salvation in the Old Testament: Preparing the Way for Christ.)

Literary Features

In the Hebrew canon, the book of Joshua is included (along with Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings) in the "Former Prophets." In English Bibles, these same books are often called the "Historical Books." Both designations are apt. The book of Joshua qualifies as historiography (history writing), but it is not like the ostensibly disinterested, largely political histories that modern secular historians write. It is, rather, a didactic history written from a prophetic (that is, theological) point of view.

Multiple genres converge in the book of Joshua. The overall format is narrative or story. The specific type of story is epic—the story of a nation engaged in matters of state, including warfare. A feature of epics is the inclusion of epic catalogs (lists), and in the book of Joshua they are so extensive that the book becomes a historical chronicle in addition to an epic story.

To read the book of Joshua in keeping with its literary purpose, one needs to place oneself in the narrative world of the text. Readers need to imagine themselves present at the events, and take the literal, physical details seriously. They need to relish the suspense, the danger, and the plot conflicts that the storyteller puts forward. An *epic* presents heightened images of good and evil, and all the more so with the implied holy war motif encountered in the OT. Along with the images of good and evil, there are images of heroism to admire and emulate. Finally, the reader should look not only *at* the world of the story and its characters but *through* that world to life as it is now. Having relived the events in the story, one must ponder the recognizable human experiences and the underlying principles, especially in leadership, community, and spiritual warfare.

The Setting of Joshua

c. 1406/1220 B.C.

The book of Joshua recounts the Israelite conquest of the land of Canaan under the command of Joshua. The book opens at Shittim with Joshua's commission from the Lord as the leader of the Israelites, progresses through his victories over the Canaanite kings and the allotment of the land, and ends with Joshua's charge to the people to remain faithful to the Lord.

Outline

The book of Joshua divides logically in the middle, with the first half focusing on Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan and the second half on the distribution of the conquered territories among the Israelite tribes. Better, however, is an analysis of the book as four sections, each characterized by a key Hebrew word. The sound similarities between the Hebrew words yield the following pattern:

- *'abar* Cross the Jordan into the land (chs. 1–5)
- *laqakh* Take the land (chs. 6–12)
- *khalaq* Divide the land (chs. 13–21)
- *'abad* Serve the Lord in the land (chs. 22–24)

I. Crossing into the Land (1:1–5:15)
   A. Joshua's charge (1:1–18)
   B. Joshua, the spies, and Rahab (2:1–24)
   C. Crossing the Jordan (3:1–4:24)
   D. Ritual renewal and divine encounter (5:1–15)

II. Taking the Land (6:1–12:24)
   A. Jericho's fall: firstfruits of war (6:1–27)
   B. Israel's failure: Achan's sin; corporate guilt (7:1–26)
   C. Israel's renewal: Ai's defeat (8:1–35)
   D. Israel's Canaanite covenant: the Gibeonite ruse (9:1–27)
   E. Defense of Gibeon, conquest of the south (10:1–43)
   F. Conquest of the north and a list of defeated kings (11:1–12:24)

III. Dividing the Land (13:1–21:45)
   A. It's yours, now take it! (13:1–33)
   B. Western territories (14:1–19:51)
   C. A land of justice and worship (20:1–21:45)

IV. Serving the Lord in the Land (22:1–24:33)
   A. One nation, under God (22:1–34)
   B. Joshua's charge to Israel's leaders (23:1–16)
   C. Covenant renewal at Shechem (24:1–33)[1]

[1] Crossway Bibles. (2008). *The ESV Study Bible* (pp. 389-393). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.