



Introduction to the Book of Joshua

Welcome to the study of the Book of Joshua, the sixth book of the Old Testament. It documents the strength and courage of Joshua and the people of Israel as they took possession of the land of Canaan. Canaan was the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and it is exciting to see how God fulfilled His promise to His people as they courageously stepped out in faith.

Joshua is a book about faith in God. As you study, may you be inspired by the faith of that generation of believers who grew to understand that "faith is the victory that overcomes the world" (from the hymn by John H. Yates and 1 John 5:4). May you too grasp hold of that truth and make it a foundation stone of your life.

Place in Scripture

The Book of Joshua records the conquest of Palestine. It follows Deuteronomy which ended with the Hebrew nation poised on the banks of the Jordan River and ready for entry into Canaan, the land promised to Abraham by the LORD (Genesis 12:1). The last event in Deuteronomy was the death of Moses, whom Jewish and conservative Christian scholars have always accepted as the author of the first five books of the Bible. (See Luke 24:27, 44; John 1:45, 5:46.)

The Book of Joshua begins the historical section of the Old Testament in the Christian Bible which continues through the Book of Esther. Even though the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy are also historical, they have their own designation as The Pentateuch, The Law, or the Five Books of Moses.

The Hebrew Bible groups Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings with the prophets. "This feature draws attention to the special nature of history-writing. The Jews called these four histories the 'former prophets', and they do properly belong with the four 'later prophets', Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve (Minor Prophets)" (The Biblical Expositor, Carl F.H. Henry, editor).

The Devotional Bible Commentary says, "These books are 'historical' in that they record and preserve specific events, people, and places. They are 'prophetic' in that they declare the word of the LORD, superseding the events and interpreting the history. Their purpose is revelatory, and teaches the way of God in the affairs of men." (Volume 1, Holman Publishers). This in no way compromises their validity as history.

To quote G.T. Manley, "The treatment of the Old Testament history by Christ should be carefully studied. He never cast doubt upon its main outlines or minutest detail...He believed in its historical truthfulness" (Devotional Bible Commentary). Should we do less?

Author

Most scholars agree that Joshua recorded the account of Moses' death (Deuteronomy 34:5-12) and authored the majority of the Book of Joshua. Gleason Archer says: "It is reasonable to deduce that this book basically was composed by Joshua himself. Intimate biographical details are given from the very first chapter that only Joshua himself could have known." (A Survey of Old Testament Introduction, Gleason L. Archer). Joshua 24:26 records, *Then Joshua wrote these words in the Book of the Law of God.*

Joshua's name means "The LORD is salvation". Jesus is the Greek equivalent for Joshua and He is the Lord of salvation. So closely are the two names entwined that the King James Version translates "Jesus" in Hebrews 4:8 where Joshua is clearly intended.

Joshua was with Moses in Egypt and on Mount Sinai. He is one of only two survivors from those who began the wilderness journey. The other was Caleb. They were forty years old at the beginning of the Exodus and eighty when they reached the Jordan. Joshua died at one hundred and ten. He was a brave, loyal, dependable, godly soldier who believed and obeyed God.

Date

The composition date appears early in biblical history since Canaanite cities are mentioned by their pre-conquest names, such as Kiriath-arba for Hebron (Joshua 15:13). Also, reference is given to the Gibeonites as *woodcutters and water carriers...even to this day* (9:27). They were later massacred and their status changed by King Saul (2 Samuel 21:1-2). Furthermore, some accounts are in the first person, apparently by an eye-witness who stated, *we had crossed over when the LORD dried up the waters of the Jordan* (Joshua 5:1).

There is evidence of some events being added after Joshua's time. For example, Joshua 24:29-30 records his death, and 24:31 notes, *Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua*. So we can reasonably conclude that Joshua wrote most of this book and that it was supplemented by someone who survived him.

The Tell El-Amarna correspondence (also called Armana Tablets or Letters) are clay tablets written in Babylonian cuneiform. They were found in Egypt, at the ancient site of Akhetaton, and give a Canaanite account of the Hebrew Conquest. King Abdi-Hepa of Jerusalem reported to the pharaoh that these “Habiru” invaders were carrying all their belongings with them. There are other references in these tablets to “marauding armies.” (For a fuller discussion see [A Survey of Old Testament Introduction](#), Gleason L. Archer).

The preferred date for the Exodus under Moses is 1446 B.C. Adding forty years in the wilderness, Joshua would have begun the conquest in 1406 B.C. This fits with the *four hundred and eightieth year* mentioned in 1 Kings 6:1 when Solomon began to build the temple, a date set at 967 B.C. ([The New Bible Commentary](#), Eerdmans). The Book of Joshua covers about twenty-five years.

Events

Under Joshua, the Israelites conquered and settled Canaan, the Promised Land (Genesis 13:14-18). The Book of Joshua contains many memorable events:

1. God’s commissioning Joshua with a formula for success (Joshua 1:6-9), which still applies today;
2. The exciting and beautiful story of Rahab (Joshua 2);
3. The battle of Jericho;
4. The longest day, when the sun stood still (Joshua 10);
5. Joshua’s farewell and his timeless challenge: *Choose you...this day whom you will serve... but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD* (Joshua 24:15);
6. The extermination of the Canaanites.

Problem of Exterminating the Canaanites

The extermination of the Canaanites in obedience to God’s command is an issue frequently debated. Many wonder how God’s love and mercy can be reconciled with the seeming ruthless, yet condoned, actions of God’s people, Israel, against the Canaanites.

Most of us struggle to some degree about God’s ways with election, predestination, eternal damnation and/or the extermination of the Canaanites. This is not unusual or unexpected. *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts* (Isaiah 55:8-9). Our fallen, finite minds have difficulty comprehending the Almighty. Nevertheless, though His ways are higher, they are not irrational. We can comprehend His justice.

God gave the land as a possession for the Israelites (Genesis 13:15-18). The inhabitants were to be subdued and conquered through His divine orders, which were more extensive than those for an ordinary military victory. As with the case of Sihon and Og, kings east of Jordan, God commanded the Israelites, *"You shall let nothing that breathes remain alive, but you shall utterly destroy them, the Hittite and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Perizzite and the Hivite and the Jebusite, just as the LORD your God has commanded you, lest they teach you to do according to all their abominations which they have done for their gods, and you sin against the LORD your God"* (Deuteronomy 20:16-18). The command included the reason for extermination: survival of the new nation Israel.

So all the cities...and all their kings, Joshua took, and struck with the edge of the sword. He utterly destroyed them as Moses the servant of the LORD commanded... As the LORD had commanded Moses his servant, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did. He left nothing undone of all that the LORD had commanded Moses (Joshua 11:11-12, 15). God had commanded the Israelites to *conquer, to utterly destroy, to make no covenant, and to show no mercy* (See Deuteronomy 7:2).

By the time of Joshua and the Judges, the Canaanite religion had degenerated into the most sordid licentiousness and brutality. This is historically documented in the Ras Shamra Tablets and the surviving relics of fertility cult practices unearthed at Bethshan, Megiddo, Ebla, and other archeological sites.

The Canaanites had been given four hundred years to improve since Abraham dwelt among them and lived faithfully to God in their midst. Then, as God revealed to Abraham, *"Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve [Egypt] I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions... But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete"* (Genesis 15:13, 14, 16). The Amorites were Canaanites.

The iniquity of the Amorites increased during the Israelites’ absence until degeneracy filled the land and saturated the culture with immorality, corruption, and disease. We can relate to the conditions more than recent generations, due to the demoralization of our own Western culture and its rapid decline as a moral force in the world. Education, business, government, and media have become first neutral, then secularized, and now openly hostile to Judeo-Christian standards and philosophy.

Canaanite religion was blatantly vile. It permeated the culture from the eldest to the youngest. Even little children had no innocence nor did the elderly mend their ways. No wonder God commanded the Israelites to make no alliances or marriages with them. To do so would have meant sharing in their destruction.

“First, the destruction of the Canaanites was, as the record again and again proclaims it to be, a religious service. The people of Israel were the instrument by which God exercised judgment on the wickedness of the people of the land. Just as He had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for the same kind of unspeakable corruption, without the instrumentality of human hands, so He used the Israelites to punish and root out the cancerous depravity of the Canaanites. And if there be a moral government of the world at all, such a dread possibility of judgment and divine surgery, however executed, cannot be excluded” (New Bible Commentary, Joshua, Hugh J. Blair).

At the flood, God exterminated all humanity except Noah’s family. Through Joshua and the Israelites, God cleared and cleansed one small strip of land for His name to be honored through a chosen people who were to carry out His perfect will. This would lead to the Messiah who would redeem lost humanity from its self-destructive ways.

Purpose

“God’s faithfulness to His covenant is demonstrated and His holiness seen in His judgment on the iniquitous Canaanites. He instructs Israel to fight this ‘holy war’ and to put away all evil.” (Wycliffe Bible Commentary, John Rhea).

The conquest of Canaan illustrates our Christian spiritual experience of conflict, victory, and blessing in heavenly spheres (Ephesians 1:3; 2:6; 6:12) through the mighty power of God. Hebrews 4 tells us how Jesus Christ is able to bring us into a spiritual rest through His finished work on the cross. Joshua’s work was a faint beginning of this, extraordinary though it was.

Whereas the Book of Numbers records the defeat and failure of the Israelites to enter the land through their unbelief, Joshua proclaims the victory through faith! A new generation had grown up strong and resolute in the wilderness. They relentlessly pursued the promises and attained their goal. Led by the veteran Joshua, they possessed their possessions.

Outline of The Book of Joshua

I. Canaan Conquered – Chapters 1-12

- A. Commissioning of Joshua - Chapter 1
- B. Concealing of the Spies by Rahab - Chapter 2
- C. Crossing the Jordan - Chapters 3-4
- D. Circumcision at Gilgal - Chapter 5
- E. Conquering Jericho - Chapter 6
- F. Over-Confidence at Ai - Chapters 7-8
- G. Compromised by Gibeonites - Chapter 9
- H. Conquest of Southern Canaan - Chapter 10
- I. Conquest of Northern Canaan - Chapter 11
- J. Campaigns Condensed - Chapter 12

II. Canaan Settled – Chapters 13-22

- A. Settling the Eastern Tribes - Chapter 13
- B. Settling the Western Tribes - Chapters 14-19
- C. Cities of Refuge - Chapter 20
- D. Levite Cities - Chapter 21
- E. Eastern Tribes Depart - Chapter 22

Application

Will you plan now to possess all that God has for you in this book? Will you embrace His promises, His plan, and His purpose for your life? If you will devote time each day for this, God will reward you.