

Aquifer Open Study Notes (Book Intros)

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Joshua

The account of Israel's soldiers walking around Jericho until its walls came tumbling down is one of the most famous in the Bible. Joshua had served as Moses' apprentice, so when God appointed Joshua as Israel's leader, he was ready. He led the Israelites across the Jordan River and through two campaigns that enabled them to settle the hill country of Canaan. As they began to live there, Joshua divided the land among Israel's twelve tribes. The book of Joshua reveals much about God: He judges sin and faithfully keeps his promises.

Setting

When Israel was in Egypt, they were enslaved by a nation that was the most powerful, prosperous, and secure on earth. But God intervened on Israel's behalf, and Egypt was devastated. The Israelites then spent forty years in the wilderness because they refused to believe that God could do for them in Canaan what he had already done in bringing them out of Egypt. The disbelieving generation died and a new generation came of age. The new generation believed God's promises and was ready to invade the land of Canaan.

Ancient Canaan was subdivided by geographical features into four narrow north-south strips. (1) To the east of the Jordan River was the plateau of Transjordan (the land "across the Jordan"). (2) Westward, the land drops steeply into the deep cut of the Jordan River valley. The deepest dry point of this valley, the shore of the Dead Sea, marks the lowest dry land on the surface of the earth. (3) The central hill country runs from the mountains and hills of Galilee in the north to the Negev in the south. (4) The Coastal Plain lies along the Mediterranean Sea, interrupted near its northern end by the ridge of Mount Carmel that juts into the sea. In the narrative of Joshua, Israel began at Acacia Grove in Transjordan, crossed the Jordan River, conquered Jericho and the central hill country, and took up settlements in the regions that had been cleared.

Much of Canaan was organized into small city-states, each with its own king. These city-states were grouped in ever-shifting coalitions. The assembling of a southern and then a northern coalition against the invading Israelites was as close to total unity as these city-states ever came. However, even these coalitions were not enough to save the Canaanites.

Summary

The first half of Joshua (chs [1–12](#)) is among the most dramatic narratives in the Bible. In preparing Israel to cross the Jordan, Joshua sent two young men to scout out Jericho, a town Israel would have to conquer in order to enter the hill country. The young scouts were aided by a woman named Rahab, and they promised to spare her and her family in return for her help (ch [2](#)). The Israelites crossed the Jordan River, the flow of which had been miraculously halted (ch [3](#)). Then God gave Israel the city of Jericho by causing its walls to fall (ch [6](#)).

Possession of Jericho opened the routes that ascended westward into the hill country. But a man named Achan disobeyed God's instructions, displeasing the Lord, and Israel suffered a setback before Achan's sin was discovered and judged (ch [7](#)). God then gave Joshua a resounding victory over the hastily gathered coalition of southern Canaanite city-states; God even granted Joshua's request for the sun and moon to stand still until the victory was complete (ch [10](#)). Joshua then turned northward, where he gained a similarly decisive victory over a northern coalition of city-states (ch [11](#)). The entire hill country, from the Negev in the south to Upper Galilee in the north, now lay open for Israelite settlement.

The second half of Joshua (chs [13–24](#)) contains the informative account of the allotment of Israel's territory, including detailed descriptions of the territories given to Judah, Benjamin, and Joseph (chs [15–19](#)); these tribes became the central tribes of Israel. Caleb's and Joshua's inheritances begin and end this section of territorial allotments (chs [15](#) and [19](#)). The designation of six cities of refuge (ch [20](#)) and the assignment of towns to the Levites within each tribal territory (ch [21](#)) complete the process of allotting the land to the tribes. The 2½ tribes given land on the east side of the Jordan River were released to return home, but they had to clear up a misunderstanding with the western tribes about the building of a memorial (ch [22](#)). The book concludes with Joshua's farewell (ch [23](#)), his convening of the people to renew their covenant with God, and three prominent funerals (ch [24](#)).

Author and Date

Nowhere does the book of Joshua claim that Joshua was its author. Both the frequent occurrence of the phrase “to this day” and the reference to *The Book of Jasher* the book of Jasher as a source for Joshua indicate that the book was written after Joshua’s death. Yet the occurrence of the pronoun “we” in portions of the narrative provides evidence that at least some of the book is based on personal recollections of Joshua and of those under his command. It is likely that the book of Joshua existed in more or less its present form no later than Israel’s early monarchy (the time of David and Solomon). The human author or authors of Joshua remain anonymous.

Joshua as History

In the last two centuries, some scholars have attempted to discredit the historical validity of Joshua by arguing that Transjordan (the area east of the Jordan River) and the cities of Jericho and Ai were not occupied when Israel entered Canaan, so Israel could not have conquered them. However, archaeological surveys show that Transjordan was occupied when Israel entered Canaan and that Jericho was indeed destroyed as Joshua describes.

Other scholars argue that accounts having an explanatory purpose (such as those explaining the origin of a name) cannot be historical. However, although some explanatory accounts found in ancient texts are mythical or false, many others are historically accurate. The content of the book of Joshua was probably first written down near the time of the events it includes. It shows every indication of being historically accurate, even though it does not answer every historical question readers might bring to it.

For most of the time that it has been part of the Scriptures, the book of Joshua has been regarded as reliable history. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings stand in contrast with the epic, mythical, and royal self-congratulatory literature produced by surrounding cultures. These biblical books provide a selective history of ancient Israel in the land where God placed them. And they were written from a prophetic perspective—from the same point of view as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve Minor Prophets—which regarded Israel as living in a covenant relationship with God.

Joshua thus records only the broad outlines of Israel's entry into Canaan. The book of Joshua neither states nor implies that Israel destroyed all of the Canaanites and their cities. Many Canaanites remained, as the following book of Judges also makes clear. The multi-generation history of Israel recorded in Judges shows that Israel gradually became stronger and absorbed the Canaanites. By the time of King David, most people of the land regarded themselves as Israelites, although some distinct groups still remained (e.g., [2 Sam 5:6–8](#)).

Meaning and Message

The book of Joshua emphasizes the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The patriarchs had traversed the land as resident aliens; now their descendants occupied it as the beneficiaries of God's faithfulness to his promise. Even the burials at the close of the book emphasize that point. Whereas Abraham had to buy a small parcel of land to bury Sarah, now Joseph, Joshua, and Eleazar were honored with burials in the territory God had given to their descendants.

The book of Joshua demonstrates that God speaks and acts with integrity and that he can be trusted to fulfill his promises. The book conveys this message in both subtle and obvious ways. The scouts' faithfulness to Rahab and her family reflects and affirms the faithfulness of the God who had brought them to her house. The giving of Caleb's inheritance at the beginning of the tribal allotments and the giving of Joshua's at the end bear testimony to God's recognition of those who remain faithful to him throughout their lifetime. Joshua also records that Israel constructed stone memorials throughout the country. These monuments served as visual aids to teach generations of Israelite children about God's absolute faithfulness. These stone monuments eventually crumbled or were carried away for other uses, but the book of Joshua itself remains as an enduring memorial, still giving testimony of God's goodness and faithfulness.

The book of Joshua also records some disturbing events. Israel destroyed Jericho and Ai and all their people. Many Israelites, including Achan and his family, died because of Achan's sin. God fought the Canaanite coalitions that tried to prevent Israel from establishing themselves in the land. These and other episodes remind readers of the deadly seriousness of sin.

In a culture where women and their rights were held with little or no regard, Joshua records a different perspective. When the land was allocated among the clans of Manasseh, the daughters of Zelophehad received their father's inheritance, as God had instructed. Rahab's saving of the two young scouts in the dramatic opening episode of the book also provides a radically positive assessment of a woman's place in God's economy.

The book of Joshua has much for contemporary readers to ponder about God himself, the

consequences of human good and evil, and God's passionate commitment to human redemption and the restoration of the divine-human relationship.