

# Joshua

## ORIENTING DATA FOR JOSHUA

- **Content:** the partial conquest, distribution, and settlement of the promised land
- **Historical coverage:** from the beginning of the conquest to the death of Joshua
- **Emphases:** the engagement of the holy war, as God through his people repeatedly defeats the idolatrous Canaanites; the gift of the land to God's people, thus fulfilling his covenant promise to the patriarchs; Israel's need for continuing covenant faithfulness to the one true God

## OVERVIEW OF JOSHUA

Following the five books of Moses, the book of Joshua begins the second large section of the Hebrew Bible known as the Former Prophets (Joshua—2 Kings, apart from Ruth). Later scholarship has called the same group of books the Deuteronomistic History. Both designations are full of insight. This section of the Old Testament is intended to be prophetic, in the sense that it records Israel's history with the purpose of instructing and explaining from the divine perspective how and why things went the way they did; they are Deuteronomistic in that they tell the story from the very decided point of view of Deuteronomy. Thus, for example, Joshua's farewell speech in chapter 23 repeats language from Moses' farewell exhortation in Deuteronomy 7, but now from the perspective after the conquest; at the same time Joshua calls for obedience to "the Book of the Law of Moses" (Josh 8:31), a term that occurs only in Deuteronomy in the Pentateuch—and will appear again at the end of the Former Prophets in 2 Kings (2 Kgs 14:6; 22:8, 11; cf. 23:2).

Joshua itself tells the story of how a second generation of former slaves succeeded in invading and possessing Canaan, thus inheriting the land that God had promised to Abraham and his seed hundreds of years earlier (Gen 12 and 15). The story is told in four parts:

**Chapters 1:1–5:12** focus on Israel's *entrance* into the land (with several echoes of the account of Israel's exit from the land of Egypt). After some crucial preparatory matters, the Jordan River is crossed. Accounts of circumcision and the celebration of the Passover (recall Exod 12) bring closure to this part of the story.

**Chapters 5:13–12:24** tell the story of the (partial) *conquest* of the land. Featured here are the divine overthrow of Jericho (ch. 6) and the defeat at Ai (ch. 7), which are told in detail and serve as the paradigm for what follows—that this is God's holy war, not theirs, and everything is predicated on obedience and loyalty to the covenant with Yahweh. Hence the covenant renewal ceremony (8:30–35) immediately follows the taking of Ai (8:1–29). Following the

Gibeonite deception (ch. 9), which serves as grounds for victory in the south (ch. 10), the rest of the conquest is briefly summarized (chs. 11–12).

**Chapters 13–21** narrate the *distribution* of the land, setting out the administrative organization of Yahweh's earthly kingdom. After repeating the settlement of the eastern tribes (ch. 13; cf. Num 32), the focus is on the tribes that will play the leading roles in the history that follows (Judah, Ephraim; Josh 14–17); Benjamin (from whom the first king comes) leads the summation of the rest of the tribes (ch. 18–19). It concludes with provision for those who kill unintentionally (ch. 20) and for the Levites, who otherwise do not inherit land (ch. 21).

**Chapters 22–24** are concerned primarily with Israel's continued loyalty to Yahweh and thus conclude with the *renewing of the covenant* at Shechem (cf. 8:30–35).

## SPECIFIC ADVICE FOR READING JOSHUA

You will notice that the story in Joshua is told from the perspective of a later time, as the narrator repeatedly mentions certain kinds of memorials that “are there to this day” (4:9; 5:9; 7:26; 8:28–29; 10:27), as are many of the Canaanite peoples (13:13; 15:63; 16:10). The former serve as reminders of God's faithfulness in the past, the latter as reminders of what had not been done.

Both the structure of the book and God's opening words to Joshua (1:2–9) reveal the three major concerns. First, there is the engagement in the holy war. Notice how the emphasis is always on God's initiative and participation (“I will be with you,” 1:5). Thus the opening battle (Jericho) is God's alone; after that, the Israelites are themselves militarily involved, but always with God fighting for them (8:1; 10:14; 23:10); as David would put it later, “the battle is the LORD's” (1 Sam 17:47). This is God's holy war, not just to give Israel the land, but especially to rid the land of idolatry (false gods)—all of this so that Yahweh will dwell as King among a people who are to reflect his likeness and follow his ways. In this regard be watching also for the several instances when the author speaks of the gift of “rest” following the holy war (Josh 1:13, 15; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1), a theme picked up negatively in Psalm 95:11 regarding the wilderness generation and then in Hebrews 4:1–11 as warning and assurance.

Second, even though chapters 13–21 are not a good read as such, they are profoundly important to the story, for here at last is the fulfilling of God's promise to Abraham and to his seed that they would one day inherit this very land. It was to be their special territory precisely so that here God could develop a people who, by honoring and serving Yahweh, would bless the nations.

Third, and most important, everything has to do with the Israelites' covenant loyalty to the one God. This is the key element in the opening address to Joshua (“Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it,” 1:8). This is the central factor in the defeat at Ai (7:11, 15). It also accounts for the early insertion of the covenant renewal at Mount Ebal (8:30–35) and for the final covenant renewal at Shechem with which the narrative concludes (24:1–27).

You will readily see how much all of this picks up and carries on the concerns of Deuteronomy: God's war against false gods; God's promise of the land; and the concern for loyalty to the one true God against all forms of idolatry.

Two further things might help you to read Joshua well. First, read with helpful maps in hand (such as those found in Marten Woudstra's commentary on Joshua [see *How to 1*, p. 269]). This will give you a good sense of the geography mentioned throughout.

Second, it may help you to know that, at the time of Israel's invasion, Canaan was not occupied by a superpower, as it had been earlier by the Egyptians and Hittites. Thus, Israel did not have to face that kind of powerful opposition. Rather, the land was organized in the form of city-states, so that each major city and its surrounding villages had its own king, each of whom was politically independent. Such an arrangement meant that the Israelites, though a small people themselves, could fight each state or small grouping of states (9:1–2; 10:5–27; 11:1–9) separately and thus gradually possess much of the land<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, [\*How to Read the Bible Book by Book: A Guided Tour\*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 62–66.