

Joshua and Conquest

March 14, 2021

Joshua 6:1-6, 15-20

Today we consider Joshua. The author of our lesson book considers Joshua as “the prophet of the conquest.” However, the Bible does not use the word “prophet” in describing Joshua. Joshua was commissioned in *Deuteronomy* 31:14-23 as the successor to Moses. He was chosen to lead the Israelites into Canaan, west of the Jordan River, and to conquer the land. God communicates directly with Joshua, as with Moses earlier. In *Joshua* 1:2-7 God gives Joshua instructions to cross the Jordan and conquer the land. *Joshua* 3:7-8, 4:1-3, and 4:15-15 has God telling Joshua details concerning crossing the river. In 5:2 and 9 Joshua is given instructions to consecrate the Israelites with circumcision. It may have been that this custom was omitted during the forty years of residing in the wilderness. In 5:13 to 6:5 Joshua is given instructions concerning Jericho. In all of these cases, the pattern is that Joshua receives the word of the LORD, then carries out the instructions. Yes, he passes on those words to the people. But, as the national leader, he has the power to directly enforce his words, quite unlike other prophets later. We see nothing of Joshua talking back to God, as Moses did at the burning bush, or pleading for the sake of his people, as in Numbers 14:10-24. We just don’t see the depth of characterization and development with Joshua as we saw for Moses earlier. Joshua looks somewhat like the Moses of Deuteronomy.

So, as we consider these writings, I’d like to step back and consider the first six books of the *Bible* as a whole. Some scholars consider them the “Hexateuch.” But with the loss of the Land in the exile, the inclusion of *Joshua* with *Genesis* through *Deuteronomy* no longer seemed appropriate. The Jews emerged from the Exile with sacred scriptures of just “The Torah,” the first five books, or called “The Pentateuch.” During the exile, various writings, traditions, and sources had been pulled together to put these books into pretty nearly the form we have them today. Scholars have teased out from language, usage, and form, several threads. I present a simplified summary here. The oldest thread, called “J”, is associated with Judah. “E” is associated with the Northern Kingdom, Israel. In Genesis, we often see both of these sources contribute to the same story. Sometimes that results in duplication or contradiction. For example, in one case (E) Joseph is taken to Egypt by Midianites, in the other (J) by Ishmaelites. There is also a “Priestly” thread concerned with records, ancestry, and numbers, called “P”. Finally, there is a thread contributed by the author/editor of *Deuteronomy*, “D”. The book of *Joshua* can be thought of as a continuation of the work of the “Deuteronomist,” who also

used historical materials drawn from “J” and “E”. Later parts of *Joshua* from Chapter 12 on consist of various lists, such as lists of kings defeated, demarcations of territory, allocations of towns to tribes. Those may be from the “P” source or similar records. As in antiquity elsewhere, even medieval Europe, priests were often the class typically charged with keeping records, especially where there was no well-established king with his own scribes and records.

The philosophy articulated in *Deuteronomy* is that those who are obedient to God and his commandments will be blessed, and will enjoy a good life. Those who are disobedient will suffer loss, and all sorts of bad things. In *Deuteronomy* Moses describes these blessings and curses in considerable detail. This way of seeing God and His Covenant is continued into the book of *Joshua*.

With the perspective available to us, through the life and teachings of Jesus, we can see that this way of understanding God, his creation, and his Covenant, is incomplete. Why do bad things happen to good people? His disciples asked Jesus, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” This was a corollary to the Deuteronomic view of life. If someone had suffered misfortune, in this case blindness, it must be because of a sin against God. The victim was merely suffering the consequences of sin that Moses had spoken about. We as Christians still struggle over issues of this sort, trying to find understanding of the bad things that happen to us and to others, outside things that could be attributable to sin. Why does a young mother with children suffer cruelly and die of cancer? Why does an earthquake or hurricane kill hundreds or thousands of people, the righteous along with the unrighteous? These are and have been problems throughout human history. In the time of the ancient Israelites, this was the best answer they had at that time.

The author of *Joshua* tells the story of the conquest of the land showing how Joshua and the Israelites were, for the most part, obedient to God’s instructions, as passed through His leader Joshua. When there was a transgression, the sin of Achan (*Joshua* 7), Israel suffered defeat, and the success of the whole enterprise was threatened. After the sin was found out and confessed, and the transgressor and his whole family were punished by stoning. Then Israelite success could continue, with the capture of Ai and subsequent campaigns. Nevertheless, the conquest of Canaan was left incomplete, and in fact was never completed.

In *Judges*, which overlaps *Joshua*, we see a much less coherent picture. Things are chaotic even. For example, in *Joshua* 11:10-13 we read of the complete destruction of Hazor, the center of resistance to the invaders in the north. But later

in *Judges*, it is King Jabin of Hazor, with his army having 900 chariots, who oppressed the Israelites for 20 years. He was finally defeated in *Judges* chapter 4. The tribes of Israel were far from unified. Some individual clans of Judah conquered specific territories. Some tribes fail to conquer their territories. Some battled alone or with a neighboring tribe or two, such as Jephthah with Manasseh and Gad against the Ammonites (*Judges* 11). Sometimes tribes fought among themselves (*Judges* 12, 20). The tribe of Dan even moved from one territory to another (*Judges* 18). Instead of a mighty tide of conquest led by a supreme commander, Joshua, we see a cycle of falling away from God, punishment in the form of oppression by neighboring nations, and eventual rescue by God, who would choose a “judge” to lead his people. In this way, it would seem that Joshua is more the first of the Judges more than being a prophet.

After Joshua, there is never an individual who is both the national leader in battle as well as being a prophet. Samuel was a “judge” as well as prophet, the last one in fact, but was not a military leader in the sense Joshua was. The offices of “judge” (and later king) and “prophet” had become distinct. Meanwhile, the priesthood continued, centered upon worship of God at the tabernacle, or temple, in Shiloh. (A “temple” there is mentioned in 1 Samuel 1:9.)

Returning to Joshua at Jericho, he was given instructions to have the Ark of the Covenant, together with seven priests blowing trumpets and an escort of soldiers, march around Jericho for six days, then do the same seven times on the seventh day. Then the trumpets would sound, the walls would fall, and the Israelites would attack and be victorious.

At that time in antiquity, walled cities could only be defeated by siege. The battering ram had not been invented, nor catapults or siege towers and such. Cities were important refuges. Outside a city, people were exposed to both wild animals and robbers or brigands. Walls represented security. We recently read as part of the worship service on Feb. 28, from Psalm 107:

Leader: Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in;

People: hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them.

Leader: Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress;

People: he led them by a straight way, till they reached a city to dwell in.

The wall of Jericho was a double wall, a “casemate” wall, which was quite common at the time. Between the two walls were chambers of about 12 feet in

depth, and these were used as houses, the dwellings being built up and even above the outer wall. The space between the walls could be filled with dirt or rubble in times of siege to give the outer wall reinforcement. This extra living space was important, because cities were small. Ancient Jericho was all of about six acres. The population was limited, and crowded. The houses in the wall would have had windows overlooking the outside. It was through such a window that the spies escaped in Joshua 2:15. Paul escaped from Damascus similarly in Acts 9:25.

In *Joshua* 6:1 we read, **“Now Jericho was shut up inside and out because of the Israelites.”** The Israelite camp at Gilgal was only a few miles away. The Israelites were overwhelmingly more numerous than the inhabitants of Jericho. But the walls were an impassable barrier. In time, the numerous Israelites would likely run out of food in the surrounding countryside before the city would run out of food stores within. That was the nature of a siege. Or, a pestilence or some other enemy could drive off attackers. In the case of Jericho, though, the city stood alone. Like the other Canaanite city-states, it was an entity to itself ruled by a king. It could expect help from none of the other cities of the Canaanites. Still, if it took a year for the siege to succeed, and other cities likewise, the Israelites could not expect to succeed. Alliances would be formed, and perhaps appeals made to nearby empires of Egypt or the Hittites, with large and well equipped armies, for help.

We know what happened. On the seventh day the trumpets sounded, the walls fell, and the city was conquered. The Israelites, under Joshua’s direction, had been obedient to God and were given the victory.

What happened next is troubling to us as modern readers. In *Joshua* 6:17 we read, **“The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction.”** An exception was made for Rahab, who had helped the spies, and her family. The word “devoted” meant that all of these were to be given to God. In the case of gold, silver, bronze and iron, all such was to be put into the temple treasury. Goods were to be burned with the city. As to anything alive, in verse 21, **“Then they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.”** The lesson writer tries to mitigate our horror at this by writing, **“The walls defended the rich and the powerful while the poor and destitute lived in the outskirts or on the city’s walls. This means that the attack on Jericho was not aimed toward the poor, but rather at the specific group of royal and rich inhabitants of the city.”** No. This is to give a modern class-warfare interpretation to what we read. What happened was clearly an action of deliberate extermination of the residents of Jericho, as if a sacrifice of lives, human

and otherwise, to God. Later the attacks on other cities differed in that material goods were allowed to be kept as booty.

I don't have a satisfying explanation. Some have thought that perhaps the Israelites misunderstood God. But, in fact, Canaanite culture and religion were a threat, a mortal threat, to Israel and the Covenant with God. Could God really have required extermination like this? Did the Canaanites in some way deserve it? That is, were the Israelites an instrument of God's judgment on Canaan as the Assyrians and Babylonians would be against the Israelites centuries later? Without having an answer to this, and I don't, I find it hard to understand Joshua, especially as a prophet. This problem does not end with the conquest of Canaan. Later Samuel would require the same of Saul in warfare against the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15). Indeed, it is failure to do this that separates Saul from God and Samuel. My (John's) mother told how she had been interested in archaeology until reading about the Canaanites. They found in Canaanite sites a large number of infant skeletons, babies sacrificed to their "god." They were pagans; their practices were against what we understand of God's laws. That's not to say we really understand.

I find myself coming away from this reminded that there is a vast chasm in my understanding. This is especially true of my understanding of God's way as shown in the life and teachings of Jesus, and how that contrasts with what we read of how Joshua led the Israelites in that particular and far distant time and place. We can discern the call for obedience, and faithfulness. That is understandable. But could we possibly be called to do as the ancient Israelites did? It would seem absolutely wrong in our time and place. I cannot cast any judgment on people of three millennia ago. We have the responsibility to test anything we believe comes from God against what we read in the Bible, and especially of Jesus. We have a church community, with its traditions and knowledge, to help us do that. God has promised us the Holy Spirit to help us with such issues. We can but trust that God will be with us in times of trouble, including troubling decisions. Even when we should err, we can count on God's forgiveness and grace. With that assurance, we can endeavor to do God's work without fear. Cindy observed that, in light of Jesus's birth, life, and teachings, as Christians we can feel God would not give us the task of such destruction of others, as we read of in the Old Testament.

Prayer: Dear God, tear down the walls of hatred in our hearts. Win for us the truth of your salvation. Amen.

(I hope to see some of you on Sunday! We had four present this past Sunday.) JG