

STUDIES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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“In a mighty demonstration of power and love, Yahweh had unshackled his people, had defeated their slave master, and had brought them through the Reed Sea to the place of covenant at Sinai. There he asserted his own sovereignty and offered to his redeemed people the awesome privilege of being his slaves in the mission of reconciling humanity to himself. Israel’s acceptance produced a covenant, a contract by which Yahweh and Israel bound themselves by mutual obligation and that offered to Israel’s people a re-affirmation of all the ancient promises to the fathers. They had become a nation and, like any other nation, had a king, Yahweh himself, and a constitution, the book of the covenant (Exod. 20-23) and (later) Deuteronomy. All they lacked now was a land to give their nationhood objectivity and stability. Even this was theirs by promise. Vassal Israel had only to carry out its divine mandate to seize and occupy the land for Yahweh the King.”

—Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 111.

OLD TESTAMENT FLYOVER:

Joshua

I. Introduction

- A. Joshua presents the “opening act” of the history of Israel we call the “Former Prophets.” Thus, it is the lynch pin, bridging the gap between explanation of Israel’s covenant requirements in Deuteronomy and the failure of Israel to keep the covenant in Judges, Samuel, and Kings.
- B. Because of its proximity to Deuteronomy both in history and in writing, Joshua is the most “Deuteronomistic” of all the Former Prophets.¹
- C. The events of the book span a 30-year period, beginning in 1406 B.C. with the death of Moses (1:1) and ending around 1375 B.C. with the death of Joshua and the elders who served with him (24:29-31).
- D. The date of the book’s writing, however, is more difficult to ascertain, but certain indicators seem to suggest the book may have been at least partially composed during Joshua’s days, but not later than the time of David.

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, “Deuteronomic Theology of the Book of Joshua,” *JBL* 90, no. 2 (June 1971): 140.

1. The phrase “to this day” appears repeatedly throughout the work (4:9; 5:9; 8:28, 29; 9:17; 10:27; 13:13; 14:14; 15:63; 16:10), testifying to the continuing impact of the events on the generation alive during the time of writing.
 2. The text notes that “the Jebusites live with the people of Judah in Jerusalem to this very day” (15:63), indicating that at the time the book was written, Israel had not yet driven them completely out of the region. Since David did not capture Jerusalem from the Jebusites until 1003 B.C. (2 Sam 5:6-10), it may be assumed that at the very least this portion of the book must have been written prior to the 10th century B.C.
 3. Reference is also made to the Canaanite inhabitants among the Ephraimites at Gezer (16:10). Since the Canaanites at Gezer were destroyed by an Egyptian pharaoh sometime between 978 BC. and 959 B.C. and the city given to Solomon as a dowry (1 Kgs 3:1; 9:16), reference to Canaanite occupation in Gezer indicates composition before the time of Solomon and these events.
 4. The text also notes that “Rahab the harlot...has lived in the midst of Israel to this day” (6:25), indicating that perhaps some of the text of Joshua may have been composed during the lifetime of Joshua and the generation of the conquest.
 5. However, nowhere in the book is there any attribution of authorship. The book is completely anonymous, and while some Jewish sources attribute it to Joshua, there is not even a traditional consensus.
- E. The book has also become a battleground over the historicity (or lack thereof) of the OT.
1. The largest historical question is whether there was a real conquest of the land as the book portrays. Ninety percent of the scholarly community denies that the Canaanite conquest occurred. Data from contemporary archaeology is used to demonstrate that there was no sudden change in Canaan that would suggest a military conquest.
 2. Instead, liberal scholars have offered alternative suggests for Israel’s occupation:
 - a. **Settlement Model:** the Israelites were a “loosely connected group of pastoral nomads from independent tribes who gradually infiltrated Canaan from the desert and settled there in a largely peaceful enterprise.”² Thus, the conquest was peaceful, not violent, and certainly not military in nature. It occurred over a long period of time, and involved a disparate group of people who immigrated at different times and eventually united into a confederacy known as Israel.
 - b. **Revolt Model:** During the mid-1900s, another alternative model proposed that the conquest was not the result of outside infiltration but rather consisted of a sociological event. It suggests that there was a peasant revolt that overthrew the power structures in the region. This may have occurred in connection with the entrance of a small group of “Yahweh worshippers” who provided the sociological backdrop (escaped slaves from Egypt with a common religious core) to initiate a revolt.

² David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua*, NAC (Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 37.

- c. **Evolutionary Model:** a third alternative suggests that “Israel” as we know it was a nation that slowly developed as people living within Canaan resettled, bonded with each other, and eventually developed a common social identity that became “Israel”.
3. Obviously, none of these models accounts for the details of the text, which present a conquest that was unquestionably quick and militaristic.
 4. “For many scholars, especially in recent years, the Book of Joshua—indeed, the Bible as a whole—is almost worthless as a source of historical information, and the very idea that there was an entity called ‘Israel’ during or at the end of the Late Bronze Age and in the Early Iron Age is challenged. The debate concerning whether any events took place as the Bible depicts them pits what are sometimes called ‘maximalists’ against ‘minimalists.’.... ‘Maximalists’...use [the Bible] and other written materials alongside archaeological evidence in reconstructing the history of this period. Most ‘minimalists,’ on the other hand, insist that archaeological evidence alone should be used in such reconstructions because written texts—most especially the Bible—are late, tendentious, and ideologically biased.”³
- “A profound skepticism toward the reliability of the biblical accounts is embedded in the work of minimalist scholars.”
5. Despite the work of minimalists, the events described in Joshua are far from disproven. In fact, the Bible—as God’s Word—does not need to be “proven.” It is true because God said it is true, and thus we can trust it.
 6. We do not look to archaeology to “prove” Scripture as true, but it does provide an apologetic value by *confirming* what we find in Scripture. It also provides an illustrative value by giving cultural and historical settings to the text, a better knowledge of people, places, and events, and providing insights into more accurate translation for the biblical languages. Additionally, archaeology also provides supplemental value by filling in historical gaps of events not described in the biblical account.
 7. An archaeological discovery taken by itself provides the basis for only general conclusions. A consideration of the written sources in conjunction with the archaeological discovery will provide many specifics. Therefore, one’s approach to God’s Word will affect their view of the significance of an archaeological discovery.⁴

II. Titles

- A. **Hebrew Title:** “Yehoshua” [“Yahweh is Salvation”]
- B. **Greek Title:** “Iesous” [“Jesus”]
- C. **English Title:** “Joshua”

³ Ibid., 40.

⁴ See J. Maxwell Miller, *The Old Testament and the Historian*, 47.

III. Major Themes

A. The Land

1. The word “land” appears 106x times in the book, and every chapter of the book relates in some way to the land.
2. The land of Canaan is *the major* theme of the book of Joshua. It is “the central goal toward which the action and thought in the Pentateuch moves,”⁵ and so the book of Joshua naturally revolves around the Torah’s exposition of what the land is and means to Israel.
3. Thus, Joshua is a confluence of promises, beginning with the Abrahamic Covenant promise of land to Abraham’s offspring, extending to the promise of Israel’s possession of the land in the Mosaic Covenant and Israel’s enjoyment of the land in the Deuteronomic Covenant.
4. The Torah viewed the land as Yahweh’s gift to Israel—something that did not belong absolutely to Israel, only to God (Lev 25:23; Deut 9:4-5). Thus, He is the one who divides the land among Israel (Num 26:55-56; Josh 14:2; 18:1-10) and is entitled to its firstfruits (Deut 14:22-29; 26:9-15).
5. In general, the land is viewed in Joshua from three perspectives:
 - a. The land that has been conquered (10:40; 11:16, 23; 21:43-45)
 - b. The land that remains to be conquered (13:1-7; 17:17-18; 18:3; 23:4, 5, 13)
 - c. The land that Israel failed to conquer (15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13)

B. The Possession/Dispossession of the Land

1. Joshua is about Israel’s *possession* of the land through the *dispossession* of the Canaanite inhabitants.
2. But because the land belongs to Yahweh and is being given as a gift to Israel, the possession/dispossession portrayed throughout the book has dual emphases. On the one hand, it highlights the responsibility of Israel to obediently and trustingly take possession of the land by driving out the Canaanites. On the other hand, it also highlights God as the one who is dispossessing the Canaanites. Thus it is because of God’s working that Israel can fulfill her own responsibilities.
3. But the book is selective in the events it describes. It mentions only four campaigns (Jericho, central, southern, and northern). Yet chapter 12 indicates that other battles occurred.
4. An important theological question flows out of the book of Joshua: *were the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant fulfilled during the conquest of Canaan?*
 - a. Some theologians see the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant have been fulfilled in the book of Joshua.

⁵ Ibid., 56.

- b. By seeing the complete fulfillment of the land promises, it is then possible for them to argue that, because Israel was given the land but later *lost* the land, it no longer belongs to them, and the promises related to it now apply spiritually to the church.
- c. “Many readers of the Bible who hold the fulfillment of the land promises position consider Josh 21:43-45 to be their proof text clearly showing that God has already fulfilled the land promises given to the Jewish people in the Abrahamic Covenant, and consequently one should expect no future fulfillment for either the land or the nation of Israel.”⁶
- d. But the issue is not as clear cut as it appears. It is clear that Israel actually took the land—they were in actual possession of it. But it is also clear that Israel did not take possession of *all* the land.
- e. Thus, the dual dynamic of human and divine roles comes into play. God fulfilled all of his promises *to the extent that Israel fulfilled all of her obligations*. Where Israel failed to possess portions, God did not give those portions to her.
- f. Thus, the statement in 21:45—“not one of the good promises which Yahweh had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass”—can remain absolutely true, for the promises were couched within a Mosaic Covenant framework that rested upon Israel’s obedience.

C. The Law

1. The covenant law remains central to the narrative of Joshua.
2. At the start of the book, Joshua—as Israel’s new leader in replacement of Moses—is to be faithful to the law and meditate on it continually (1:7-8).
3. Following Israel’s victory at Ai, Joshua offered up sacrifices to Yahweh on an altar carefully constructed according to the law. He also wrote a copy of the law before the Israelites and entered into a ratification of the Deuteronomic Covenant at Shechem according to the God’s requirement (Josh 8:30-35; cf. Deut 27).
4. Joshua frequently exhorted the Israelites to remain faithful to the law (22:5; 23:6).
5. At the end of his life, Joshua led the people in renewal of the Deuteronomic Covenant at Shechem, making a copy of the law once again and erecting an altar to serve as a witness against Israel (24:26-27).

D. The Obedience and Disobedience of Israel

1. Joshua is viewed by many commentators as a book of Israel’s victories.
2. But in reality, victory and defeat are directly related to obedience and disobedience.

⁶ Gregory H. Harris, “Did God Fulfill Every Good Promise? Toward a Biblical Understanding of Joshua 21:43-45,” *MSJ* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 57.

3. Joshua presents moments of Israel's obedience (chs. 1-6, 8, 10-12, 13-14, 20-21). However, it also presents moments where Israel is disobedient or warned about the consequences of disobedience (chs. 7, 9, 15-17, 22-24).
4. It was the disobedience of one man (Achan) that rendered the entire nation guilty, leading to their defeat at Ai (ch. 7).
5. It is also interesting that Joshua did not seek Yahweh's counsel until after the defeat occurred. Similarly, Joshua failed to seek Yahweh's counsel regarding the Gibeonites, leading to the breaking of the covenant by making a treaty with the inhabitants of the land.
6. Additionally, the narrator makes a frequent point that certain tribes failed to dispossess all the inhabitants from the land.
7. Thus, the book sets the stage perfectly for the moral decay that will occur during the period of the Judges. The higher moral fervor of Joshua's day will wane and disappear as time goes by, eventually leading to each individual following their own law rather than the law of God.

E. Moses and Joshua

1. Joshua is presented in the book as Moses' true successor.
2. Descriptions used of Moses in the Torah become descriptions of Joshua
3. Joshua had the presence of Yahweh like Moses (1:5), obeyed like Moses (1:17), and was sanctified before Israel like Moses (3:7; 4:14).
4. Israel's crossing of the Jordan River—the last obstacle that lay between them and conquest—served to exalt Joshua in the eyes of the nation. Just as Moses had led them across the Red Sea and into freedom, exalting him before the first generation, so Joshua led them across the Jordan into the land, exalting him before the second generation.

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN MOSES AND JOSHUA

Encounter with Yahweh	Exod 3:5	Josh 5:15
Miraculous water crossing	Exod 14	Josh 3-4
(water in a heap)	Exod 14:22	Josh 3:16
(dry ground)	Exod 14:22	Josh 3:17
Intercession for Sinning People	Deut 9:25-29	Josh 7:7-9
Wrote law on stones	Deut 10:1-2	Josh 8:32
Yahweh listened to his voice	Deut 9:19	Josh 10:14
Enemy's heart was hardened	Exod 9:12	Josh 11:20

IV. Purpose

- A. With land as the central motif, the purpose of the book revolves around the land as well.
- B. The purpose of Joshua is to show that Yahweh gave the land of Canaan to Israel through holy war in accordance with his promise to Abraham.

- C. It also purposes to show that Israel dwelt in part of the land according to her faithful obedience to Yahweh.

V. The Literary Structure

A. *The Taking of the Land (1:1-12:24)*

1. *Entering the Land (1:1-5:12)*: A significant portion of narrative is dedicated to Israel's entrance into the land by crossing the Jordan. This highlighting its importance to the book as a whole. Their crossing of the Jordan marks the end of the wilderness. It is here that the 2nd generation is circumcised (their fathers did not circumcise them in the wilderness). It is here that the manna ceased, meaning that they must now live off the land. And it is here that they celebrate the Passover for the third time (implying that the Passover had not been observed during their wilderness wandering).
2. *Conquering the Land (5:13-12:24)*: Joshua's encounter with the captain of Yahweh's army introduces a time of holy war for Israel. It is now time for Israel to take the land, and they do this as one army with one leader. By the time these four campaigns conclude, Israel is secure enough in the land that it can be divided among the tribes.

- B. *The Distribution of the Land (13:1-21:45)*: Following the initial conquest, the land is divided among the Israelite tribes and responsibility shifts to the individual tribes to take possession of their lands. Joshua has fulfilled his task of leading Israel militarily into Canaan. Israel will no longer be able to fight as one man as they did when entering the land. Additionally, there will be less unified leadership. Once Joshua dies, the judges that arise to liberate Israel come mostly within the tribes, not the nation as a whole. The entire section ends with a sweeping theological statement emphasizing the faithfulness of Yahweh to everything he promised regarding the land.

- C. *Retaining the Land (22:1-24:33)*: This portion of the book could be viewed as an appendix to the narrative. It outlines three challenges facing Israel at the close of the conquest: (1) the geographical challenge of tribes on either side of the Jordan; (2) the leadership challenge, since Joshua will soon die; (3) the obedience challenge, since Israel must maintain obedience to the law if she wishes to dwell securely in it. As Judges will show, her lack of safety and security in the land directly results from her infidelity to Yahweh.

Taking the Land		Distributing the Land			Retaining the Land	
<i>Entering the Land</i>	<i>Conquering the Land</i> Jericho Ai [Jerusalem] Hazor	<i>The Remaining Land</i>	<i>Apportioning the Land</i>	<i>The Given Land</i>	<i>Three Challenges Concerning the Land</i>	<i>Three Burials in the Land</i>
1:1 – 5:12	5:13 - 12:24	13:1 - 7	13:8 - 21:42	21:43 - 45	22:1 - 24:28	24:29-33

VI. Suggested Resources

Howard, David M., Jr. *Joshua*. New American Commentary. Nashville, TN: Broadman and Holman, 1998.

Hess, Richard S. *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.

David, Dale Ralph. *Joshua: No Falling Words*. Focus on the Bible. Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus Publications, 2010.