
Joshua

Getting Started

- 1 Read Joshua 3–4. Does this account of the crossing of the Jordan remind you of an episode from the Pentateuch? How is it like that episode? How is it different?
- 2 Read Joshua 6–8. While the story of Jericho is likely familiar to you, the conquest of Ai is just as likely relatively unfamiliar. How does a continuous reading of the two episodes — the conquest of Jericho and the eventual defeat of Ai — change your perception of the first episode?
- 3 Read Joshua 23–24. In what ways do some of the parts of these two chapters recall Deuteronomy? Can you identify particular phrases and ideas that are familiar to you already from your reading of Deuteronomy?

Preliminary Comments

Stories of military conquest fill the first part of Joshua. Indeed, it is in this book that we hear the familiar account of the walls of Jericho falling at the sound of the people of Israel shouting. But a closer look at Joshua reveals that there is far more to it than a collection of battle accounts. It also relates the events leading up to the Conquest, the division of the land among the tribes after their successful campaign, and a “covenant episode” that affirms the people’s relationship to the Lord God. There is still more, for underlying the simple narrative is the first chapter in the Deuteronomist’s account of how the covenantal relationship between God and people established in Deuteronomy actually worked out. Behind the tales of war and daring lies a theological claim about the land, that it belonged to God’s chosen people, and that God was the one who secured their possession of it. But just so, if, having come into control of the land, they failed to live according to God’s design for them in it, the land could just as quickly be taken from them as it was given to them. In short, Joshua makes clear, right at the beginning of the Deuteronomistic History, the curious tension between God’s lordship over Israel’s destiny and Israel’s own responsibility for her destiny.

Reading Guide to Joshua

Preparing to Enter the Promised Land (1–5)
 Conquest of the Promised Land (6–12)
 Division of the Land Among the Tribes (13–21)
 Locating Cultic Sites (22)
 Joshua's Valedictory Speech (23)
 Covenant Renewal Ceremony (24)

A Walk through Joshua

As we already noted, there is more to Joshua than war stories. In fact, contrary to popular imagination, military campaign accounts make up less than half of the book (chs. 6–12).

Joshua 1–5: Preparing to Take the Land

The book begins with a new commission to Joshua from the Lord God. He promises to Joshua success at every turn in taking the land, saying, “from the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory” (1:4; cf. Deut 11:24). But with this comes a double warning that hearkens immediately back to the admonitions in Deuteronomy: Joshua and the people should carefully keep the law, never turning “from it to the right hand or the left” (1:7; cf. Deut 5:32; 17:11, 20; 28:14), and like kings who live according to the Deuteronomic prescription, Joshua should meditate upon the law day and night to act in accordance with all its stipulations, for that will ensure success (1:8; cf. Deut 17:19–20). Thus, from the first words of the Deuteronomistic History, God’s appointed leader of the people is commissioned according to the law as a king might be, and the people are instructed to remain true to the law. In short, from the beginning it could hardly be clearer: God is the ruler of this people through his law. Joshua 1 closes then with Joshua reminding the men of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh that they are obliged to assist in the Conquest according to their prior agreement (cf. Num 32:1–33; Deut 3:13, 18–20).

Joshua 2 then recounts Joshua’s attempt to reconnoiter the land by sending two spies to Jericho. In an act that hardly requires explanation — although pious commentators have certainly tried — the two men go straight to “the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab, and spent the night there” (2:1). Although not prohibited by the Deuteronomic Code, the spies’ choice of activities upon entering the city is hardly what one would expect, given their assignment; and if, as some suspect, Rahab was a cult prostitute, the spies’ visit foreshadows Israel’s later penchant for worshipping

foreign gods. Further, if the episode is taken to foreshadow the way of the people in the land, it is an inauspicious beginning, at least for them: for the true hero of the story is a heroine, and a foreign one at that! Rahab, the (cultic?) prostitute, recognizes the power of the spies’ God and offers to protect them and their people. To sweeten the deal Rahab agrees, along with her whole household, to worship the God of Israel. While the people of the covenant turn from the path laid out for them “to turn to the right hand and the left,” it is a non-Israelite who exhibits the greatest faith in the story. It is as if the storyteller wants to underscore from the very beginning the nature of this people with whom God has made an agreement.

Joshua 3–4 records the people’s crossing of the Jordan near Jericho. The episode recalls the people’s escape from Egypt through the parted sea (Exod 14:5–31; Deut 11:3–4), but it also includes significant differences. In this case the priests, instructed by Joshua, hold the ark of the covenant in the middle of the Jordan to cause the dry land to appear. As the priests stand there, the people pass between the stayed waters. Next, God commands Joshua to select 12 men, one from each tribe, to return to the dry ground around the priests to retrieve one large stone each to be set up on the shore. (Notably, there seems to be a second tradition about the standing stones woven into this account; it is most obvious in 4:9, where we hear that Joshua sets the stones up *in the middle of the river!*) Joshua decrees that the standing stones are there to remind future generations of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan and its forerunner, the crossing of the sea. (Many scholars observe, in addition, that the episode probably also recalls some cultic practice at Gilgal associated with a memory of the Exodus; standing stones were often used by ancient Near Eastern cultures to mark sacral sites.)

A series of episodes in Joshua 5 completes the cycle of stories that lead to the conquest of the land. After learning that upon hearing of the crossing at Gilgal the kings of the Amorites and of the Canaanites by the sea lose all heart before the advancing Israelites, the reader encounters two double-edged etiologies. Not only do they explain the origin or reason for a landmark or a practice (the function of an etiology), they also underscore Deuteronomic theological claims. The first is God’s instruction for Joshua to see to the circumcision of all remaining uncircumcised male Israelites. The account explains the name given to the place (Gibeath Haaraloth, “hill of foreskins”), but it also emphasizes the Deuteronomist’s assertion that, for all of the blessings God offers the people, they are prone even from the time before they entered the land toward lawlessness: that God has to make this request of Joshua indicates



Nahr Hasbani, longest of the four sources of the Jordan River. (W. S. LaSor)

that the wilderness generation has erred not only in faithlessly fearing the people of the land (Numbers 13; Deut 1:22-40) but also in failing in their obligation to circumcise their sons! The next brief notice that the people then eat unleavened bread and roast grain for the Passover near Jericho is also an etiology, clarifying why the manna ceases at that time: it is no longer necessary, as the land itself begins to provide for the people. This etiology, too, serves one of the Deuteronomist's larger theological aims, to affirm the intrinsic bounty of the land that God promised and gave to Israel.

The final event at Gilgal reported in ch. 5 is as strange as it is significant to understanding the account of conquest that follows. Near Jericho Joshua encounters a man with a drawn sword, and when Joshua asks whose side he will be on in the upcoming battles, the man answers that he is on neither side, but that he has come as commander of the Lord's army. When Joshua then asks what message the Lord intends, the sword bearer simply tells him to remove his sandals, for he stands on holy land. With that the episode ends. Its role in the Deuteronomiac account seems to be twofold: to announce that the land the Israelites are about to move into belongs to God and is subject to the rules of holiness (thus the command to go shoeless, as Moses did before the burning bush); and to emphasize that the taking of the land will not be so much by the human act of warfare, as by God's intervention on behalf of whom he chooses. The last point is equally promising and ominous, and should be read with reference not only to the Conquest stories that immediately follow, but with

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reference to the whole Deuteronomiac story that ensues, all the way to the end of 2 Kings where God's might no longer favors Israel, but rather her enemies.

Joshua 6–12: Conquest of the Promised Land

In any case, the stories of conquest that follow in Joshua 6–8 undeniably illustrate the ritual character of warfare aimed at taking the Promised Land. Purified and prepared, the people follow to the letter God's instructions for the conquest of Jericho (ch. 6), instructions that would madden any commander of military forces. Marching in circles, blowing trumpets, and shouting loudly hardly seem to be adequate military tactics. But they are precisely what bring Jericho's walls down and permit the people to enter the city and carry out the ban (*herem* in Hebrew), the destruction of all living things and the dedication of the defeated people's wealth to God.

The conquest of Jericho illustrates the principle that God wins battles for those whom he favors. The ensuing episode in Joshua 7 further affirms that principle, for when the people attack Ai with reduced forces because the advance team determines it to be a poorly defended city, they are turned back and 36 Israelites are slain. Joshua responds by accusing God of misleading the people into a disastrous situation, and God replies that he let them suffer defeat because someone in their midst has withheld some of the wealth of Jericho for himself. Israel is bound to identify the covenant breaker and destroy him. The lot falls to Achan and his family, and they are stoned (thus explaining an apparently well-known mound — another etiology, gruesome as it may be!). With the breach in Israel's covenant loyalty repaired, God sends Israel against Ai a second time with a battle plan that entails considerably more cooperation between God and people, and this time they experience enormous success, routing Ai as they had Jericho, making of it a heap of ruins visible "to this day" (8:28) and burying its defeated king under a separate pile of stones which also "remains to this day" (8:29). To conclude the episode and reaffirm the Israelites' covenantal relationship to God, Joshua builds an altar at the important site of Shechem on Mount Ebal (another stone memorial!) and makes a sacrifice to God. He also cuts a new copy of the law in stone to commemorate the occasion and reads the law to the assembled people as they stand in two groups before Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

Having established a "theology of conquest," the remaining account of the taking of the land is narrated in relatively quick order. First, hearing of the Israelites' reputation, the Gibeonites deceive Israel into making a mutual defense treaty by disguising themselves as travelers from afar who come to make peace with Israel



Standing stones in the Middle Bronze III high place at Gezer, possibly a covenant-renewal sanctuary for a ten-city league. (Phoenix Data Systems, Neal and Joel Bierling)

(Joshua 9). The deceit succeeds, and so Israel is obliged to come to Gibeon's defense when other Canaanite city-states hear of the deception and decide to punish their neighbor for joining forces with Israel. The result is Israel's divinely-aided defeat of the five southern city-states occupying what would be Judah, including Jerusalem (ch. 10). Word travels once more of Israel's success, this time to the north, where Jabin of Hazor (a powerful city-state in northern Canaan in the period of the conquest) organizes a coalition to fight Israel. Israel achieves victory once more and conquers the northern territory as well (ch. 11). Joshua 12 then lists the conquests to indicate the totality of Israel's occupation of the land.

Joshua 13–21: Establishing Tribal Territories

This seldom-read section of Joshua is a dry account of the distribution of territories to the tribes. In spite of the tedium associated with it, though, it does further the theological agenda pursued by the author. In Joshua 13–19 the lands are distributed among the tribes mostly by lots, a further indication of the fact that God is its true owner: they are divided according to divine will! The provision of Levitical cities in ch. 21 (ch. 20 assigns cities of refuge for accidental murderers) may also have been used to advance the author's agenda. Assuming that the Deuteronomists were themselves instructors of the Torah, reporting God's provision of property in hoary antiquity for personnel who were charged with the same

duty, the Levites, is a none-too-subtle Deuteronomic claim to ownership privilege in their own day.

Joshua 22–24: Covenantal Conclusion

The conclusion of Joshua approaches the issue of covenantal fidelity from several different angles. First, Joshua 22 narrates the return of the Reubenites, Gadites, and half-tribe of Manasseh to their territory on the other side of the Jordan and their construction of an altar there. The other tribes perceive sacrifice apart from the ark of the covenant as a violation of covenantal loyalty (thus foreshadowing the centralization of worship in Jerusalem so important to the Deuteronomists). So they send a delegation to complain and threaten civil war. The three Transjordanian tribes reply that they have erected the altar only to signal their connection to the other tribes in Canaan, and that they too belong to the God of Israel. To avoid war they agree to forego sacrifice and retain the altar as (another) stone heap that will memorialize their relationship to the other tribes and God.

Joshua 23 reports that after the passage of quite some time Joshua gathers the people to address them. In a speech that borrows from Moses' sermons in Deuteronomy (and foreshadows others from key figures in the Deuteronomistic History) Joshua reminds the people that God has fulfilled the promise of land, and that now they should be faithful to their role in the covenantal relationship. But like Moses before him, Joshua also warns the Israelites that if they take up the practices of the survivors of the Canaanite peoples whom they drove out, God will punish them with exile from the land.

Finally, Joshua 24 takes on the issue of covenant loyalty from one more perspective, reporting that Joshua gathers the people at Shechem to renew the covenant in what amounts to another treaty-signing ceremony. After a historical review from the days of Abraham to the present the people are challenged to be faithful to the one God. They reply that they will serve God alone, and Joshua reminds them that vowing such loyalty and not honoring the vow will bring destruction. Still they make the vow, and Joshua records the agreement on (yet another) memorial stone. The chapter closes with Joshua's death and the interment and the burial of Joseph's bones at Shechem (cf. Gen 50:25; Exod 13:19).

Critical Issues in Studying Joshua

Among the many we can choose from, we treat just two critical issues in the study of Joshua, namely the sources used in its composition (especially etiological narratives) and the trustworthiness of Joshua as an account of the land's conquest. Treating these two issues prepares

us well to address the theological themes the Deuteronomist pursues in Joshua.

But before turning to our more detailed consideration of sources and history in Joshua, it is worth noting at least in passing an issue that our survey of Joshua's contents may have raised. It is hard to miss the similarities between the story of the crossing of the Jordan and the escape story in Exodus. This and other echoes of content and rhetoric in the Tetrateuch prompted an earlier generation of scholars to wonder if Yahwist or Priestly material stretched into Joshua, requiring one to speak not of a Tetrateuch or Pentateuch, but instead, of a Hexateuch. That hypothesis, once popular, has lost nearly all of its supporters over the past decades as it becomes ever more apparent that Joshua is a thoroughly Deuteronomic composition. And a closer look at Joshua 5 indicates that in addition to the absence in particular of a pursuing army that is destroyed by the waters, this is a very "priestly" account of the crossing, unlike the story in Exodus 14. Although this last observation has prompted some scholars still intent on finding some of the Tetrateuch in Joshua to suggest that at least the Priestly Writer's hand can be detected in the book, that too is an idea that founders on the evidence: Joshua's "sacerdotal" passages do not match the stipulations found in the Priestly material of the Tetrateuch. All of this has led others to suspect that, while the Deuteronomist knew an independent tradition of the Exodus and sought to mimic it in Joshua 5, he also had access to a variety of sources rooted in a certain priestly tradition (different from the one that produced so much of the Tetrateuch) that he found useful in composing Joshua in particular. This observation leads us to address the issue of sources in Joshua.

Etiologies and Other Sources in Joshua

It is hard to miss in even a casual reading of Joshua that its creator was more of a collector-redactor than an author in the strictest sense of the word. As the figure indicates, even an incomplete list of the episodes that appear to have been built from inherited tales and traditions is impressively long.

The list reveals that very little of Joshua came solely from the hand of a Deuteronomic author. Instead, he relied on a large array of source material that ranged from tales of encounters between human beings and angelic soldiers to lists of tribes and the lands assigned to them. But especially notable are the many etiologies among the sources, stories that explain a variety of phenomena such as communal conditions and relationships and physical features of the Promised Land. Communal conditions and relationships explained in Joshua include the presence of Rahab's descendants among the

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Episodes Built From Sources in Joshua

- 2, The spies in Jericho and the inclusion of Rahab's family in the people of Israel
- 3, The crossing of the Jordan
- 4, Two explanations for standing stones at Gilgal
- 5, Explanations for the names Gibeath Haaraloth and Gilgal, and for the cessation of manna; the encounter with the angelic warrior
- 6, The legend of the fall of Jericho (and an explanation for a *tel* at the site?)
- 7, An explanation for a stone heap in the Valley of Achor
- 8, Explanations for the *tel* at Ai, a stone heap at the site, and the sanctuary at Shechem
- 9, An explanation of the Israelites' relationship with Gibeon
- 13–21, Lists and other genres as explanations for tribal locations in the land and the existence of cities of refuge and scribal training centers
- 22, An explanation of a stone heap in the Transjordan

people of Israel (ch. 2), the cessation of manna (ch. 5), the presence of Gibeonites among the people of Israel (ch. 9), and the affiliation of certain tribal groups with particular places in the land and of some cities with special functionaries (chs. 13–21). However, the length of the list of stories that explain physical features in the land — virtually everything else on the list in the figure — suggests this author's special fondness for such etiologies, and especially for offering reasons for the existence of stone heaps and *tels* (a *tel* is a mound that contains below its surface, layer by layer [each of which is called a stratum], the remains of human settlements over the course of hundreds or even thousands of years). Below we shall see what this latter observation indicates about the reality of Israel's conquest of the land, and we saw already in our survey of Joshua the role some of these etiologies play in the Deuteronomist's larger theological agenda. In any case, the prevalence of such stories in Joshua suggests the author's access to a collection of "physical feature" etiologies that came in handy in composing his account of the people's conquest of the land.

In stark contrast to this heavy use of sources in Joshua, very little of it seems to have come directly from the pen of the Deuteronomist; but what little there is of such distinctive material is quite efficient in accomplishing the purpose of making the book as a whole an unequivocally Deuteronomic composition. The first chapter, the commissioning of Joshua, bears many of the hallmarks of a Deuteronomic composition (e.g., "servant of the Lord," "act in accordance with the law,"

etc.), as do the closing chapters 23–24. Both sections of text frame the work as a whole with their clear determination that the land is possessed by God’s people, not by their own might but by God’s will and determination, but that to remain in the land the people must obey the law God gave them through Moses and that Joshua read aloud to them. Moreover, to fail with respect to the law would risk expulsion from the land. There is little about this that is *not* Deuteronomic in tone!

The clever use of sources in Joshua does not stop with the provision of framing chapters. On numerous other occasions the collector-redactor has strategically arranged and redacted source material. For instance, by juxtaposing the story of God’s propitious use of the spies’ choice of activities in Jericho with the divinely-directed defeat of Jericho, the failed attack on Ai, and the discovery and correction of Achan’s sin, the editor makes a typically Deuteronomic point: God is determined to give this people the land in spite of their own foibles and will even welcome outsiders into the covenant if they trust in the God of Israel (the spies and Rahab). Where the people violate God’s commandments they will pay a price (the defeat at Ai), yet they can also experience renewed success if they correct their ways and eliminate their sin (the punishment of Achan and his family and the second, successful attack on Ai). Likewise, by adding just a little to these cleverly arranged sources, the Deuteronomic editor-redactor makes of them a thoroughly Deuteronomic work. By reporting the inscription of the law as a celebratory act after the defeat of Ai (ch. 8) the meaning of the preceding string of stories is crystal clear: they prove the significance of the law for Israel now that the land promised has been granted.

The Historical Reliability of Conquest Narrative

Already readers may have doubts about putting too much stock in Joshua’s account of the Conquest; for our discussion of sources in Joshua certainly suggests the author had less concern for history than for theology. Not only that, the narrative of the Conquest in Joshua 6–11 does little to support the occasional claims for complete conquest of the land (e.g., 10:40–43). For instance, the places mentioned in chs. 6–10 (and in 2–5 as well) focus attention almost exclusively on Benjaminite tribal territories in the south, and the ostensible evidence for Israel’s conquest of the north in ch. 11 provides evidence of only a limited engagement in that region. Meanwhile, inconsistencies between Joshua and Judges abound, and there are a few within Joshua as well. For instance, Judges 1 lists a host of places where Canaanites persisted in the land and Josh 23:7 has the book’s namesake warn the people against associating “with these nations left here among you,” yet the Joshua

Conquest account suggests a completeness gainsaid by these elements. Also, according to Joshua 11 Hazor and its allies were soundly defeated by Joshua’s army, but Judges 4–5 tells a tale of Canaanite power in the same city many years later. The evidence against the biblical record’s reliability is considerable.

As a consequence, historians have turned attention to the material evidence, archaeology, to construct a more accurate picture of the rise of Israel in the land. Regrettably, the archaeological record is as ambiguous and diffident about yielding sure results as the Bible! So rather than a single alternative to the Bible’s accounting of the Conquest we have as many as four other explanations.

One model that relies only modestly on the archaeological record and heavily on a critical reading of the text comes from the German scholars Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth. On the basis of the archaeological evidence they observed that, while urban centers persisted on the plains in the 2nd millennium B.C.E., the highlands of that era exhibited less developed population centers and fewer numbers of inhabitants. Relating this to the claim in Judges 1 that the residents of the lowland cities survived after the initial Israelite conquests, Alt and Noth suggested that the newcomer Israelites initially inhabited the highlands and only later immigrated into the lowland country. Thus Alt and Noth grant no historical reliability to the Conquest account in Joshua (and their model also suggests that some of the ancestral stories in Genesis originated from the later lowland encounters with the people of Canaan).

In sharp contrast to the German school, the American “biblical archaeology” movement of the mid-20th century was confident of the biblical account and that archaeology could verify its accuracy (for more on “biblical archaeology,” see Chapter 3 above). These scholars hoped that with the excavation of the *tels* in the region that correspond with the sites mentioned in the biblical account, the biblical account would be confirmed. And indeed, initial work proved that in the 1200s and 1100s — the period to which the Conquest is usually assigned — there were violent disruptions of some cities in Canaan. But the problem is that the destructions did not occur in places corresponding with the biblical narrative. Numbers 21:21–35 reports that the Israelites fought successful battles in the Transjordan even before entering the land, but excavation of the corresponding sites tells a different story, revealing that all the Israelites would have found were *tels*, not inhabited cities. The same is true of Jericho and Ai, the conquests featured in Joshua 6–8. And to make matters worse, Hazor did suffer destruction at the right time, but as we have already seen, Judges 4–5 admits Canaanite possession of the

city at a much later time. Ironically the biblical archaeology movement's effort to prove the Bible "true" accomplished quite the opposite. It developed impressive evidence that the Joshua accounts of conquest could not be taken at face value as a report of what actually transpired. On one hand, the stories appear as (more) etiologies targeted at explaining large stone heaps, the *tels* that no doubt dotted the land as the people began to establish themselves there (e.g., Num 21:21-35; Joshua 6-8). On the other hand, further stories appear to have been adaptations of real conquests carried out by indigenous Canaanites, not outsider Israelites (e.g., Joshua 11 on Hazor).

An alternative hypothesis, also originating among American scholars, provides a slightly different use of the archaeological evidence. The archaeology of the region actually suggests a long period of sporadic violent destructions of Canaanite city-states and a transition over time in the lowlands to a less developed urbanized culture. This hypothesis also takes special note of the brigands mentioned in the el-Amarna Letters from the 14th century B.C.E. (on the nature of these letters, see Chapter 3 above), the *'apiru*. Reading the evidence of the letters and the archaeological record together, this hypothesis suggests that the rebels were indigenous Canaanite peasant-nomads weary of Egyptian taxation and the concomitant oppressive actions vassal city-states took against them. The Israelites who escaped from Egypt joined these *'apiru* under the banner of the liberator God of Israel, and together they carried out a long guerilla war against the city-states and their kings. Clearly this theory is attractive for its open embrace of the archaeological evidence that points to a long period of conquest and a transition to a "lower culture," but it also suffers from some obvious drawbacks. The first is textual: there is no evidence in the biblical record that Joshua and the Israelites were part of a "liberate Canaan" movement. Second, that the hypothesis is built as much on Marxist political theory as it is on the textual and archaeological evidence understandably makes critics wary. One is left wondering — with considerable justification — if the theory trumps the evidence.

A last explanation dubbed the "gradual emergence" model is nowadays perhaps the most popular. Proponents of this approach depend on a variety of evidence, little to none of which is biblical. First, they take seriously the recent observation that during the 13th to 11th centuries numerous unwallled villages sprang up all around the central highlands, especially in places later identified particularly with the emerging nation-state of Israel. Notably, though, the four-room houses and collared-rim jars that distinguish these sites are

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not distinctively "Israelite" as once thought, but rather reflect a somewhat diminished version of the culture found in Canaanite city-states of the lowlands. Thus the influx of population to the central highlands appears to have originated from within Canaan, perhaps as a movement of poor, disaffected city-state residents to the countryside. Second, this approach also acknowledges the evidence of the late-13th-century victory stela from the Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah claiming victory over Israel in Canaan: this proves that there was by that time some group in the land that went by the name "Israel." Together these pieces of evidence suggest that Israel was an entity that arose from (slave?) flight out of Canaanite city-states to the central highland. In short, Israel was an indigenous Canaanite development. Advocates of this approach do acknowledge that the unique worship of Yahweh may have come from escaped slaves from Egypt who joined the settlements or from Midianite traders who brought to the region their storm-god. But of course, we cannot be certain of either possibility.

Regardless which of the preceding approaches one favors, it should be clear that not one of them matches well with the story told in Joshua. This leaves us conceding once again that Joshua is more theology than history. So we turn now to its witness as theology.

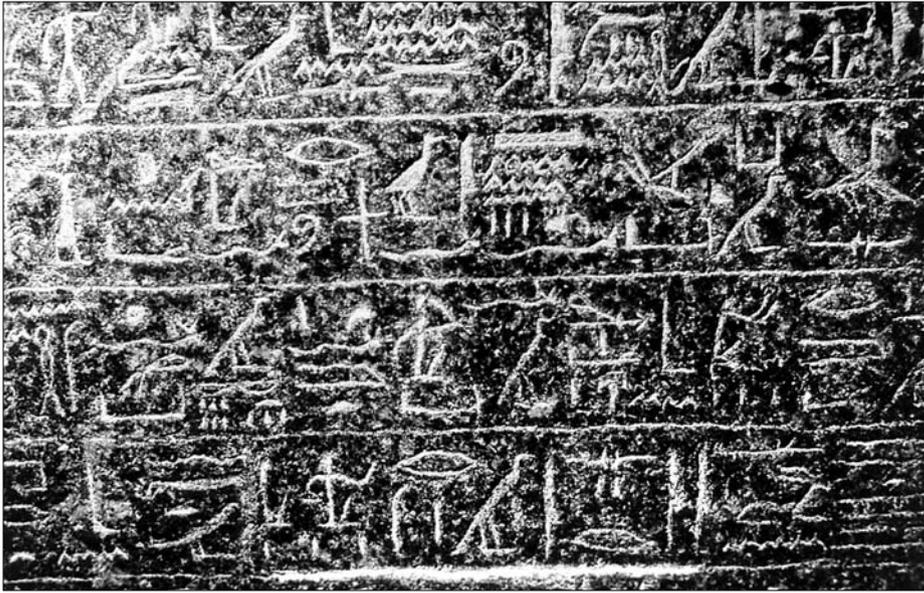
Theological Themes in Joshua

Throughout our treatment of the books of the Deuteronomistic History we will focus mostly on the major theological theme that can be found in all of them: the way the covenant relationship actually worked out in history and what it proved about the nature of God and humanity and the relationship between the two. We will also trace the effort of the Deuteronomist to answer what appeared to have been competing theological perspectives grounded in kingship, wisdom, and prophecy.

The Covenant in Joshua

The opening verses of Joshua set out plainly the terms of the covenant between God and Israel announced already in Deuteronomy and their implication for taking and remaining in the land.

The elements of God's commission to Joshua set the stage not only for the Conquest account that follows but also for the entirety of the Deuteronomistic History. First, we read that God *gives* the land unilaterally to Israel. Second, we understand that no one shall be able to stand against Joshua, and by extension, the people of Israel whom he leads into the land. But third, the taking of the land given as a gift *does* require strength and courage and the keeping of the law. And last, retaining the



Detail of the Merneptah stela (ca. 1210-1207 B.C.E.) containing the earliest extant reference to Israel outside the Bible. (Service de Musées, Cairo)

land in prosperity also requires careful keeping of the law given by God.

Key elements of the story that follows prove the accuracy of these propositions. First, at the crossing of the Jordan the power of God's presence to separate the waters and permit the people to pass underscores God's commitment to securing the land (chs. 3-4). Second, Joshua's encounter with the angelic commander of God's army in 5:13-15 confirms that, much as God intended Israel to possess the land, God remained free to take whichever side God might choose. Third, the sequence of events from the miraculous taking of Jericho, to the failed conquest of Ai, to the discovery of Achan's sin, to the successful conquest of Ai proves that even with God's commitment to Israel's possession of the land, the people must still live by the laws God provided to receive the fulfillment of that promise. Finally, Joshua's valedictory speech and the covenant ceremony at Shechem in chs. 23-24 articulate clearly — even doubly — the absolute necessity of faithfulness to the laws for maintaining possession of the land.

The Emerging Portrait of God and Humanity Together

While Deuteronomy provides only a theoretical sketch of how God would behave in a covenantal relationship and only the evidence of the wilderness generation for how the people of Israel would act, Joshua begins to add much more substance to this picture.

As for the people of Israel, we learn that in spite all of the warnings regarding the necessity of courage and strength and heedfulness of the law, they fail almost immediately and in a wide spectrum of ways. The spies' choice of the (cultic?) prostitute's house to visit upon entering the city of Jericho signals a certain dereliction of duty and even perhaps provides the first sign of Israel's penchant for worshipping the gods of the people in the land.

Joshua's overblown response to the loss of some Israelites in the first attack on Ai — after having utterly eradicated the population of Jericho! — is surely an instance of loss of courage and strength. The Achan incident reveals a dangerous lack of regard for God's direct command. And the exchange with the Gibeonites heralds the people's occasional vulnerability to a certain dimwittedness that undercuts their chances of success in the land. By contrast, when the people do live according to the law, they experience the success that God promised them: they take the city of Jericho by trusting in very unusual battle plan instructions; they cooperate with God in the eventual defeat of the city of Ai; and the rest of their successful conquests in the book come through faithful adherence to God's directions for war.

The portrait of God that emerges from this first portion of the Deuteronomistic History possesses some nuance that is not present in Deuteronomy. When confronted with the people's first failure, God becomes a didact rather than a vengeance-seeking deity, offering Joshua instruction on how to redeem Israel's relationship with God. Further evidence of that instructional role comes in the first verses of the book, as well as in the rhetoric of the last two chapters. And clearly, God evinces in this, the first unit of the Deuteronomistic History, a corresponding penchant to that exposed in the people for worship of foreign gods: a will to offer second and third chances to a people forewarned of the consequences of lawbreaking. Moreover, the Rahab episode proves God's willingness to embrace all who confess him as Lord and submit themselves to the laws of God.

Finally it is important to note that Joshua makes clear the centrality of the land to the Deuteronomic vision:

it is what God promises to provide to his elect people, it is what they must exert their strength and courage to take possession of in cooperation with God, and it is the keeping of it that their law-keeping is intended to achieve. As we turn to Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings we see how that remains a focus for the people and for God in the Deuteronomist's imagination.

The Violence of the Conquest in Joshua: A Theological Problem?

One additional issue requires our attention here, namely the disturbing violence of the Conquest narrative in the book of Joshua. Its overwhelming, categorical character has long troubled readers. The fact that God mandates the slaughter of innocents — though this is hardly the only place in the Old or New Testaments where that is the case — has given more than a few cause to look askance at the God of the Bible. What “explains” this bloody account? Is it not a “theological problem”?

Some have sought solace in pointing out the parallels between what is described in Joshua and a wider ancient Near Eastern practice. For instance, it was in fact customary across the ancient Near Eastern world to obliterate one's defeated foe. Indeed, the Moabite Stone of King Mesha from the 9th century B.C.E. describes his use of the ban against Nebo, and in bloodier fashion than most biblical accounts of destruction. Others have tried to soften the offense to some extent by noting that the ban was in fact a religious act, a way of dedicating by sacrifice all life to the Lord of the winners, and this too was a common ancient Near Eastern practice.

One might also explain the problem away by observing how this narrative works, given its implied audience. That is, perhaps thinking of this from the perspective of the Deuteronomist, who writes in exile and with a sense of the narrative flow, overcomes some of the moral objections one might raise against the God of Joshua. From that writer's perspective it was Israel's divine right to possess the land, whether anyone occupied it or not. The way to maintain possession of that land was by eliminating the temptations within it, by carrying out God's beneficent instructions for cleansing it. But the story the exilic Deuteronomist tells is one of the persistence of the natives in the land — see Joshua's admission in 23:7! This proves that for all of their fine intentions, Israel did not succeed in the cooperative effort to possess the land entirely. They failed in realizing in cooperation with God the ideal of a land purified of other influences. And as we shall see, this fact is further underscored by the refrain in Judg 1:1–2:5, “and they did not drive out the

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people in the land,” and by the angelic speech that condemns the people for their faithlessness to the enduring presence of the people of the land to plague them (Judg 2:1-5). In short, from this perspective the violence of the Conquest is not a theological *problem* so much as it is part of a larger theological *lesson*.

Having said that, full disclosure requires one to admit that still, after all things are considered, the account in Joshua crystallizes for the reader an aspect of the God of the Bible that remains deeply troubling to readers of all times and places. And no matter what we may say to explain it away, the God of these stories, and still others we are yet to encounter even within the Deuteronomistic History, remains a mysterious and often threatening power.

Questions for Review and Discussion

- 1 What does the book of Joshua suggest about the conquest of the land by the people of Israel? How does that account compare with the archaeological evidence? What four models have been developed to reconcile (or dismiss!) the biblical record in relation to archaeological evidence?
- 2 Setting aside the question of just how Israel came into possession of the land, what seems to be the thrust of the “theological history” that we read in Joshua 1–12? How does this fit into a larger Deuteronomistic agenda?
- 3 As noted in the closing section of this chapter, the violence God mandates of the people of Israel in taking the land has long troubled readers. We noted some attempts to understand that violence of God. Do you find any of them convincing, or does the issue remain one of concern? What contribution to theology — an understanding of God — does this pattern, and others like it in the Bible, make?

Further Reading

- Dever, William G. “Israel, History of: Archaeology and the Israelite ‘Conquest.’” *ABD* 3:545-58.
- Nelson, Richard D. *Joshua*. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997.
- Younger, K. Lawson, Jr. “Joshua.” In *ECB*, 174-89.