

Joshua 1:1-18

An End, and a Beginning

Introduction

Perhaps my favorite class to teach at the Master's University is the course on Medieval Europe. It is a course that covers western Europe from the decline of the Roman Empire through the Hundred Years War. It has great characters, a compelling narrative, and is rich with implications for our modern world today. But I always have the same problem with the class - I do not know quite where to begin.

It is difficult to start a story in the middle. If I want to talk about the decline of the Roman Empire, then I need to talk about the Roman Empire itself. And if I do that, then I need to discuss the historical context in which it began. And if I do that, well you can see the problem. The same is true this morning. We are about to embark on a study of the book of Joshua, a book that continues the narrative of the Israelite people as they enter, conquer, and distribute the land of promise in Canaan.

But can we really begin at that moment when they cross the Jordan River? To do so begs certain questions. How did they get there? Why are they there? What makes them think this is their land of promise anyway? So, rest assured, we will not need to go back to Genesis 1 to answer these questions, but we will take a bit of a running start as we begin our study of this fascinating account of God's people.

Background

First, though, some background on the text itself. The book of Joshua is classed as an historical book in our Bibles, but is part of the Former Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Its title means "the Lord saves," and comes from the main human figure in the narrative.

Traditionally Joshua has been considered to be the author of the text, though that is not certain, and there are some parts which could not have been written by him - his death and burial in Joshua 24:29-33, for example. Clearly, whoever did write the text was an eyewitness, there are too many details that cannot be otherwise explained, and on occasion the author uses the first person when describing an event.

We will not get too deeply into the various arguments regarding the date of the writing of the book, since that depends on whether you accept an early or late date of the conquest, and that depends on

whether you accept an early or a late date for the Exodus. Essentially, there are two main options, an early date of 1446 BC and a later date of around 1270 BC.

The primary arguments for the later date center around the fact that, since it is evident that the conquest of Canaan took place immediately after the Exodus, one would expect to find signs of war and conquest in the archaeological record of the time (burn layers), and there is very little in time around 1400 BC. The argument then asserts that since there is no archaeological record of significant warfare around 1400 BC, the conquest must not have been then, therefore the later date is accepted.

However, we must remember that, while the Israelites did conquer the land, they did not destroy it. As was promised by the Lord,

¹⁰"Then it shall come about when the Lord your God brings you into the land that He swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give you, great and splendid cities which you did not build, ¹¹and houses full of all good things which you did not fill, and carved cisterns which you did not carve out, vineyards and olive trees which you did not plant, and you eat and are satisfied, ¹²be careful that you do not forget the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

In other words, there is no archaeological record of violent conquest because that is not the means by which the Israelites conquered the land. People were killed, to be sure, but in general the cities were not destroyed. The three cities where Scripture informs us that the Israelites did engage in violent conquest were Jericho, Ai, and Hazor. And we do have archaeological evidence of warfare at both Jericho and Hazor, and Ai has yet to be definitively located.

Suffice it to say that most biblical scholars believe the Exodus occurred in 1446 BC. Since it lasted forty years according to Scripture, that places the date of the conquest beginning in 1406. Since the conquest took about seven years to complete, as far as it was completed, the events of the book of Joshua, then, took place in the years 1406-1399 BC. Whether Joshua himself, or another eyewitness to the events wrote the text, the work must have been compiled soon after that.

We ought next to consider the historical context of the book of Joshua, that is, the scene in Mesopotamia in about 1400 BC. The Hittites (Hatti), based in what is today central Turkey, had sacked Babylon in about 1595 BC. This created a power vacuum in the area that was filled by a people called the Kassites. They moved into power in central Mesopotamia, but did not expand into Canaan. To the north, the Assyrians were beginning to come to power, but did not reach their



supremacy in the region until after the conquest, about 1350 BC.

The Mitanni, located in the upper Tigris/Euphrates River Valley, west of the Assyrians and south of the Hittites, also came to power about 1350 BC. The Hittites, themselves, were reaching their height about this time as well.

Egypt had nominal control over Palestine at this time. However Amenhotep II (r. 1450-1425), the Pharaoh of the Exodus, had little desire to be active there, no doubt due to the defeat he had suffered when the Israelites left Egypt. His grandson, Amenhotep III (r. 1417-1379) ruled Egypt during the Israelite conquest of Canaan. He might have been disposed to interfere, the Amarna letters, which are one of our most significant written historical records of the time period, are filled with requests - pleas - asking for help, but he was more interested in hunting and artistic developments than in going to war in Canaan.

All of that to say that there was no significant political or military occupation of the land of Canaan at the time of the conquest. Those civilizations to the north and east had not yet come to realize their full potential, and Egypt, to the south, was simply uninterested. When the Israelites entered the land of promise, rather than dealing with a regional power, they encountered city- states of local kings who ruled a limited area with limited means. We can clearly see the providence of God in ordaining worldly events to suit His divine purposes.

Next, we ought also to mention a people called the '*Apiru*, or *Habiru*, who appear in the Amarna letters. These people are portrayed as marauders who posed a threat to the Canaanite city-states at this time. The dating of the letters (in the decades preceding 1350 BC) and the linguistic similarity

of the name with the word, Hebrew, originally led scholars to connect the two groups of people. We now know this to be false.

The word is actually Sumerian, and means "to murder" or "robber." They were not a people group but a social class. They were wanderers, nomadic and mercenary, fighting for whatever city-state would hire them. The *'Apiru* appear in historical records before Abraham and exist in numbers far beyond the Israelites, at least until the time of the conquest. We now know that the *'Apiru* were in Canaan before the conquest and frequently fought with one Canaanite king against another.

To put it simply, while some of the Canaanites may have referred to the Israelites as the *'Apiru*, after all from their perspective they were wanderers who were killing their people and taking their lands, the Israelites were a distinct people group.

And what do we know about Joshua, the main human character of the narrative? Scripture informs us that he held a privileged position of leadership under Moses. For example, he accompanied Moses when he went upon Mount Sinai to receive the commandment of God.

¹²"Now the Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to Me on the mountain and stay there, and I will give you the stone tablets with the Law and the commandments which I have written for their instruction.'" ¹³So Moses got up along with Joshua his servant, and Moses went up to the mountain of God" (Exodus 24:12-13).

He is described as the servant of Moses (this is a great compliment), who accompanied him when he met with God in the tent of meeting.

⁷"Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, a good distance from the camp, and he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp. ⁸And it came about, whenever Moses went out to the tent, that all the people would arise and stand, each at the entrance of his tent, and gaze after Moses until he entered the tent. ⁹Whenever Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent; and the Lord would speak with Moses. ¹⁰When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would stand and worship, each at the entrance of his tent. ¹¹So the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend. When Moses returned to the camp, his servant Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, would not depart from the tent" (Exodus 33:7-11).

He led the armies of Israel in battle as a representative of Moses.

⁸"Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim. ⁹So Moses said to Joshua, 'Choose men for us and go out, fight against Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand'" (Exodus 17:8-9).

His special relationship with Moses made him jealous for the man he served.

²⁶"But two men had remained in the camp; the name of the one was Eldad, and the name of the other, Medad. And the Spirit rested upon them (and they were among those who had been registered, but had not gone out to the tent), and they prophesied in the camp. ²⁷So a young man ran and informed Moses, and said, 'Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.' ²⁸Then Joshua the son of Nun, the personal servant of Moses from his youth, responded and said, 'My lord Moses, restrain them!' ²⁹But Moses said to him, 'Are you jealous for my sake? If only all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!'" (Numbers 11:26-28).

Finally, we can see that he did not necessarily thrust himself into a position of authority.

²⁵"When they returned from spying out the land, at the end of forty days, ²⁶they went on and came to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, in the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh; and they brought back word to them and to all the congregation, and showed them the fruit of the land. ²⁷So they reported to him and said, 'We came into the land where you sent us, and it certainly does flow with milk and honey, and this is its fruit. ²⁸Nevertheless, the people who live in the land are strong, and the cities are fortified and very large. And indeed, we saw the descendants of Anak there! ²⁹Amalek is living in the land of the Negev, the Hittites, the Jebusites, and the Amorites are living in the hill country, and the Canaanites are living by the sea and by the side of the Jordan.' ³⁰Then Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, 'We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will certainly prevail over it'" (Numbers 13:25-30).

Scripture informs us that God, Himself, had commanded Moses to name Joshua as his successor, "But commission Joshua and encourage him and strengthen him, for he shall go across leading this people, and he will give to them, as an inheritance, the land which you will see" (Deuteronomy 3:28). And the Lord also confirmed personal choice to Joshua at the time of the death of Moses, "Then He commissioned Joshua the son of Nun, and said, 'Be strong and courageous, for you will bring the sons of Israel into the land which I swore to them, and I will be with you' " (Deuteronomy 31:23).

Joshua, then, was a confidant of Moses, who trusted him not only with the armies of Israel but with the secrets of his communion with the Lord as well. Joshua had been selected, and groomed, to lead.

Transitions

Having set the stage, we can now look at the book of Joshua in its biblical context. The Israelites had spent forty years wandering in the wilderness as a consequence of their moral failure at Kadesh-Barnea. This was a time of transition for the Israelites. It was an end, and a beginning. Yet, God was still sovereign, and His plan was still going forward.

Our account begins with "After the death of Moses" (v. 1). The man who led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, the man who spoke with God and received the Law, the man who interceded with God after the Golden Calf, the man described at the end of his life, probably by Joshua himself,

"¹⁰Since that time no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face, ¹¹for all the signs and wonders which the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt against Pharaoh, all his servants, and all his land - ¹²and for all the mighty power and all the great terror which Moses performed in the sight of all Israel" (Deuteronomy 34:10-12).

This man had died. This is the situation as we begin our narrative. Yet God has a way of subverting our expectations. For example, Jesus washing His disciples feet John 13 ("Wash one another's feet"), or John 15 ("Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it"). Here, it is not "My servant Moses is dead, so let's regroup" but "My servant Moses is dead, now therefore arise, cross this Jordan" (v. 2).

Until the death of Joshua, only Moses is given the title "the servant of the Lord" (v. 1). It is a term that expresses not only the relationship of servanthood, but a personal relationship as well. Recall that Joshua was the servant of Moses. He had that same relationship and this was validated when "the Lord spoke to Joshua" (v. 1). He was to receive that same direct revelation, like the great patriarchs and Moses, himself.

The Command and the Promise

Verses 2-5 present a summary of the book of Joshua. Verse 2 talks of crossing the Jordan River. Verse 3 outlines the conquest. Verse 4 speaks of the distribution of the land. Verse 5 tells of the faithfulness of God through the entire series of events.

Let's look at the command itself. "Cross this Jordan" the Lord commands. As the narrative begins, the Israelites are on the plains of Moab, east of the Jordan River Valley. To cross the Jordan River involves not only the river but the valley as well. The Jordan River Valley, which leads to the Dead Sea, is perhaps the deepest valley on the planet. There are mountains on both sides. There is a deep rift, the Ghor, and then an even deeper depression of one hundred feet in depth forming the actual river bottom. There are steep slopes, and it was flood time (Joshua 3:15).

Their destination was "The land which I am giving to them" (v. 2). This is the land of promise, the land first mentioned to Abram in Genesis 12:1. This is a central and indispensable element of the history of redemption as portrayed in Scripture. Like any other nation at the time, Israel had a king, God. They also had a set of laws, the book of the covenant (Exodus 20-23). What they lacked was territory. And now they were to take possession of that land.

And God's intention was that they should take possession of all of that land, though we will see as we go through the narrative that did not happen, for various reasons. "Every place on which the sole of your foot steps, I have given it to you" (v. 3), God declares. We see two things here, two elements that often combine in our walk with God. First, the land is God's gift, God is always sovereign and gives us every good thing. But second, the Israelites must fight for that land. There is something for them to do. And, in this particular case, they must fight in accordance with God's commands and according to His timetable.

The boundaries of the land are given (v. 4). Only during the reigns of David and Solomon will they be approached, and even then not in full. The "wilderness" describes uncultivated land of the Judean desert and the lands west of the Jordan River and to the south. "This Lebanon" describes the forested region west of the Jordan River to the north. The "great river" is the Euphrates. "All the land of the Hittites" is probably the remaining land of Canaan-Syria (referred to in both Babylonian and Egyptian letters as the land of the Hatti). The Hittites themselves were based in what is today central Turkey. The "great Sea" is the Mediterranean.

Finally, God concludes with the promise that "I will be with you" (v. 5). This brings to mind Exodus 3:12, when God made that same promise to Moses or, for us today, the words of Christ in Matthew 28:18-20. There is no greater assurance we can have than that the Lord is with us.

The Exhortation

Then God expands on this command and promise with an exhortation to Joshua. "Be strong and courageous" (v. 6). This exhortation is immediately restated, accompanied by the divine command

to "do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you" (v. 7). And this is the point. Often, we think of the command to Joshua to be strong and courageous as an exhortation to fight bravely in the name of the Lord against the Canaanite armies. But, in fact, God will win those battles. The command to Joshua to be strong and courageous is to show those attributes in leading the people in obedience to the Law of God despite the presence of, and pressures from, pagan Canaanite deities.

The land of Canaan will present any number of temptations, and Joshua is directed to "not turn from it [the Law] to the right or left" (v. 7). This is a common phrase, and the promise that if Joshua is obedient, he will "have success wherever you go" (v. 7) echoes the promises of Psalm 1. In other words, as the Israelites are about to enter the land of promise and engage in warfare to claim what God had given them, Joshua must make obedience to the Lord his first priority. Yet, it is clear from Scripture that Joshua will not simply strive on his own to be faithful and obedient to God and hope to succeed. He, like us, has a sinful fleshly nature that will overpower him on occasion. Rather, it is the presence of God in his life that will empower him to obey. Only as Joshua walks in the Spirit can he hope to succeed. The promise of the presence of God, and the command to obey, are linked.

God then expands on the command, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night" (v. 8). Joshua cannot obey what he does not know. The truths of the Law are to permeate his life and thinking. The same is true for us today. Recall Paul's exhortation to Timothy, "Pay close attention to yourself and to the teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will save both yourself and those who hear you" (1 Timothy 4:16).

Joshua takes Command

After one additional "be strong and courageous" and a promise of His guiding presence (v. 9), Joshua takes command. He began by addressing "The officers of the people" (v. 10). These people do not hold military positions but rather they function in an administrative capacity. Moses had reminded the people,

¹⁰"The Lord your God has multiplied you, and behold, you are this day like the stars of heaven in number. . . . ¹²How can I alone endure the burden and weight of you and your strife? ¹³Obtain for yourselves men who are wise, discerning, and informed from your tribes, and I will appoint them as your heads.' ¹⁴And you answered me and said, 'The thing which you have said to do is good.' ¹⁵So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and informed men, and appointed them as heads over you, commanders of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens, and officers for your tribes" (Deuteronomy 1:10, 12-15).

These popularly-selected officers served as a secular counterpart to the priests.

Joshua tells these officers to help the people prepare for crossing the Jordan. The statement "For within three days you are to cross this Jordan" (v. 11) means not that they will actually cross in that time, but that their preparations should enable them to be ready to do so. Joshua still has other preparations himself to make that will take some time.

As if crossing the Jordan River valley at flood tide with two million men, women, and children (not to mention animals), immediately after the death of the one man who had led them for more than forty years was not enough of a concern, there was one other issue to be faced. The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh had already been given their lands east of the Jordan River (Numbers 32). But that allotment had been conditional upon their agreement to fight alongside their fellow Israelites in conquering the lands west of the Jordan.

¹⁸Then I commanded you at that time, saying, 'The Lord your God has given you this land to possess it; all you valiant men shall cross over armed ahead of your brothers, the sons of Israel. ¹⁹However, your wives, your little ones, and your livestock (I know that you have much livestock) shall remain in your cities which I have given you, ²⁰until the Lord gives rest to your fellow countrymen as to you, and they also take possession of the land which the Lord your God is giving them beyond the Jordan. Then you may return, each man to his possession which I have given you'" (Deuteronomy 3:18-20).

What was at stake here was the unity of the people of Israel. Those tribes, the Reubenites, Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh, which had already received their allotment of land east of the Jordan River, had promised that they would not enter their rest until all the Israelites were able to be at rest.

Yet, Joshua was in a precarious position in that the agreement of those tribes to participate in the conquest had been made with Moses, not him. That is why Joshua references their agreement in terms of Moses, "Remember the word which Moses the servant of the Lord commanded you" (v. 13). And his words are specific, "All your valiant warriors" (v. 14) implies a battle formation. The women, children, and livestock were to remain east of the river, but the warriors were to cross over and fight alongside their fellow Israelites, and they were to do so until all the land was conquered and all the people were at rest.

The People Respond

The response was both immediate and complete. "All that you have commanded we will do" and "wherever you send us we will go" (v. 16) give no room for negotiation. This was a recognition of Joshua's leadership of all the Israelites. They promised to obey Joshua "Just as we obeyed Moses in all things" (v. 17), though Joshua's memory of the golden calf and the constant complaining of the Israelites in the wilderness may have caused Joshua to take this assertion with more than a grain of salt.

Yet, the people resolved to obey. Indeed the word they used for those who did not comply was "rebel" (v. 18), a word specifically referencing disobedience to God's commands. It was a recognition that, ultimately, it was not Joshua who would lead them, but the Lord.

Takeaways

The moments we have considered this morning are an example of the already, but not yet element of faith. The Israelites had been promised the land, but had not yet taken possession of it. So too do we, as believers, have the promise of glory that awaits us. It has been promised by the Lord, but there is work to do and battles to be fought before we come into possession of it.

And like those Israelites we have the assurance that God will be with us. I pray we never grow weary or complacent when we reflect on the promise of God that He will never leave or forsake us. Through many battles, both physical and spiritual, our Lord goes before us as the Lord of Hosts, the King of Glory. Our call is to follow Him obediently.

Because, like Joshua, we also have the command before us to be strong and courageous in living a life of obedience in a hostile environment among many temptations. Consider the importance of obeying God's Word in your life. Consider the fact that you cannot obey the Word of God if you do not read it, study it, meditate upon it, as God told Joshua, "day and night." (v. 8).

May God give us grace to be strong and courageous in obeying Him, regardless of the temptations before us, resolved to one day enter into His rest as good and faithful servants of the Lord.