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# Introduction

*BAM!* THAT IS THE mental sound I imagine readers hear when they encounter the book of Joshua for the first time. Reading it can be, frankly, a jarring experience, especially if one's first exposure to the Bible comes through hearing the gospel from friends and through immersion in the New Testament. The New Testament does not prepare readers for the world of military violence and ethnic cleansing in Joshua's pages. Serious, troubling questions about God's attitude toward his created peoples arise, questions with no easy answer. But the book of Joshua presents itself, warts (and wars!) and all, and asks readers to let it tell its story from its point of view and out of its ancient context. It asks them to give it the benefit of the doubt and permit it to speak to them.

This commentary aims to give its voice a clear hearing—to translate its ancient cultural form in such a way that it freely speaks about the life of faith today. Basically, the book of Joshua tells how biblical Israel navigated a major historical transition early in its national life. For ancient Israel, the transition concerns a change of leadership from Moses to Joshua and a change of lifestyle—from life as wandering clans of herdsmen to life as a settled nation of farmers on its own land. The book shows that guiding these changes is Israel's God, Yahweh, through his chosen servant, Joshua. The introductory sections to follow set the scene for entering the book of Joshua and the ancient world about which it reports.

## Getting Started

*TITLE AND CANON.* Jewish tradition claims that "Joshua wrote the book that bears his name,"<sup>1</sup> but few affirm that today. More likely, the book of Joshua is named for its main character whose exploits as Israel's leader after Moses dominate its contents. The book is the sixth book in the Hebrew Bible<sup>24</sup>, following the five books of its first canonical section, the Torah. Joshua also marks the first book of the canon's second section, the Prophets—more specifically, the subsection known as the Former (i.e., "earlier") Prophets, books often designated as "historical books" (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel,

1. See *b. Bat.* 14b.

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1–2 Kings). The Latter Prophets comprise the second subsection and include books familiar to most readers as prophetic (e.g., Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve minor prophets). Thus, the compilers of the canon regarded Joshua as a “prophetic book,” either because they traced its origin to a prophet (or prophets), or because they believed it proclaimed God’s word. At the end of the book, Joshua invokes the messenger formula like a typical prophet (“This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says”) and proclaims Yahweh’s word in the first person (Josh. 24:2–13). This may have influenced their thinking.

*Text.* Compared to other biblical books, the Hebrew text (MT) of Joshua is in relatively good condition, so scholars rarely need to propose emendations for it to make sense. It provides the textual basis for the present commentary. The situation with the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint or LXX), however, is more problematic. It is preserved in several versions (or recensions) with the Old Greek being the most important.<sup>2</sup> Its overall length is about five per cent shorter than the MT, even lacking a few verses present in the latter (6:4; 8:13, 26; 10:15; 20:4–6). Scholars have wondered how to account for the LXX. Does it imply that the translators used a Hebrew text different from MT, or did they simply abbreviate the MT while rendering it into Greek? The two fragments of Joshua among the Dead Sea Scrolls seem to confirm the former assumption and suggest that the Qumran scribes also made use of a third Hebrew text, one that even differed from MT.<sup>3</sup>

## The Contents of the Book of Joshua

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA tells the story of how Joshua led the Israelites to conquer and settle in Canaan, the land of promise. The book proceeds through three main sections: reports about the conquest (chs. 1–12), reports about Joshua’s distribution of tribal inheritances (chs. 13–21), and reports during the early years of settlement (chs. 22–24).

The conquest section opens with Yahweh’s affirmation of Joshua as Moses’ successor after the latter’s death. Joshua has his officers prepare the people to enter the land while he himself reconfirms an earlier promise by the Transjordanian tribes to help the other tribes conquer land west of the Jordan (ch. 1). As his first strategic move, Joshua dispatches spies to

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2. Cf. L. J. Greenspoon, “The Book of Joshua—Part I: Texts and Versions,” *CBR* 3.2 (2005): 229–61; idem, *Textual Studies in the Book of Joshua* (HSM 28; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1983).

3. A. H. W. Curtis, *Joshua* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 12–14.

Jericho, where a Canaanite prostitute named Rahab shelters them, reveals Canaanite terror of Yahweh and Israel, and receives an oath of safety from the spies (ch. 2). On Yahweh's orders, the ark of the covenant leads Israel's dramatic, ceremonial crossing of the Jordan. When it reaches the river, the Jordan stops flowing and Israel crosses on dry land, a miracle whose meaning Israel is to teach future generations (chs. 3–4). On Joshua's orders, a prechosen representative from each tribe also carries a stone from the dry riverbed, and Joshua arranges the twelve into a stone memorial at Gilgal.

At Gilgal, Israel's first campsite inside the land, Joshua circumcises all uncircumcised males and leads Israel in celebrating the Passover (ch. 5). These acts ritually sanctify Israel for doing Yahweh war and celebrate their long-awaited arrival in the Promised Land. Further, Israel's daily wilderness staple, manna, stops, so produce of Canaan will now feed them. Empowered by a surprise, mysterious meeting with the commander of Yahweh's heavenly army (5:13–15), Joshua leads a seven-day ceremonial conquest and fiery destruction of Jericho—sparing Rahab, of course—and curses the city (ch. 6).

Advised by a second spy mission, Joshua sends a small military force inland to capture the city of Ai, but they are unexpectedly routed. The defeat upsets Joshua but also reveals the secret sin of a Judahite named Achan at Jericho. Lot-casting unmasks him as the criminal responsible for the rout, and Joshua and Israel take him to Trouble Valley, where they stone and burn him and his family. They pile rocks over him to mark his gravesite, and the name "Trouble" Valley forever recalls the terrible "trouble" he caused Israel (ch. 7). On Yahweh's orders, Joshua and the whole army again attack Ai, this time toppling it by a clever ambush. Joshua burns the city and executes its king, piling stones over his body to mark his burial place (ch. 8).

The implications of Ai's fall to Israel so frightens kings in Canaan that they gather to prepare for war. But one threatened ethnic group, the Gibeonites, visits Gilgal pretending to be foreigners on a long trip to make peace with Israel. Their ruse succeeds and Israel swears an oath by Yahweh to seal the treaty. When their deception comes to light, Israel lets the Gibeonites live but assigns them permanently to supply Yahweh's sanctuary with wood and water (ch. 9). Learning of the treaty, the king of Jerusalem rallies Canaanite allies to lay siege to Gibeon, but with Yahweh's assurance of victory, Israel breaks the siege and destroys the fleeing army. The day's highpoint is that Yahweh answers Joshua's petition to have the sun "stand still," and the battle has amazing results. Israel not only captures and executes the original five royal conspirators but, more importantly, ends up capturing all of southern Canaan (ch. 10).

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Next, a northern campaign wins Israel all of northern Canaan and includes the burning of Hazor, its most prominent city. A long closing summary (ch. 11) celebrates the totality of Joshua's conquests—all of Canaan and even the dreaded Anakites—and its resulting rest from war. Joshua 12 tallies up Israel's victories: thirty-one kings defeated on both sides of the Jordan.

The book's second section opens with a survey of areas of Canaan not yet in Israel's hands and of lands in Transjordan previously distributed by Moses to Reuben, Gad, and East Manasseh (ch. 13). Then Joshua and Eleazar the priest distribute inheritances among the tribes, the first allotments going to the hero Caleb, Judah (chs. 14–15), Ephraim (ch. 16), and West Manasseh (ch. 17). But for the first time the Bible writer also sounds an ominous note, the inability of these tribes to dislodge the Canaanites from their inheritances (15:63; 16:10; 17:12–18). Next, after surveying the areas still available, the remaining seven tribes cast lots at Shiloh to distribute land to Benjamin (ch. 18), Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan (ch. 19). The people of Israel also give Joshua his inheritance—the town of Timnath Serah in Ephraim (19:49–50)—and a concluding summary draws the distribution of tribal inheritances to a close (19:51). But the book's settlement section also reports two special land provisions: the naming of cities of refuge throughout the land (ch. 20) and the assignment of towns and pastures within every tribe's inheritance for the Levites (ch. 21). To conclude, the writer emphatically affirms that Yahweh has kept every promise, including his ancient promise of land and rest (21:43–45).

Finally, three dramatic scenes comprise the last section (chs. 22–24). Joshua dismisses the Transjordanian tribes to their inheritances east of the Jordan, the end of an important theme from ch. 1. The discovery of a huge, suspicious altar built by them on the west bank, however, leads a west-bank delegation to visit the Transjordanians and to accuse them of idolatry. But the east-bank tribes explain that the altar is not for idolatrous sacrifices but a witness to their worship of Yahweh and membership in Israel. Their persuasive explanation ends the threat of civil war (ch. 22).

About this time, Joshua gives a passionate farewell speech before an all-Israelite assembly, probably at Shiloh. He urgently warns Israel to keep their distance from the remaining Canaanites lest the latter ensnare them in religious compromise (ch. 23). At another national assembly at Shechem, Joshua leads Israel to renounce other gods and willingly to covenant together to serve only Yahweh. The book ends where it began—with death—specifically, with three burial notices of key Israelite leaders (Joshua, Joseph, and Eleazar). The author applauds Joshua and his generation of leaders for keeping Israel faithful to Yahweh during their tenure (ch. 24).

## Who Is Joshua?

JOSHUA IS BEST KNOWN as the hero of the book that bears his name. He assumes the helm of Israel after Moses' death, leads the conquest and settlement of the land, and prepares Israel for life with Yahweh in Canaan after his death. Often overlooked, however, is his long, notable career prior to his succession of Moses. He makes his narrative debut rather suddenly in Exodus 17 when Moses abruptly tasks him—canonically, unheard-of before but certainly well known to Moses—with leading Israel's defense against Amalekite raiders (17:9–10).<sup>4</sup> Joshua's victory—fledgling Israel's first—early confirms his leadership abilities later put on display in Canaan. More telling, after the battle Yahweh orders Moses to make sure that Joshua hears God's promise to wipe out Amalek (v. 14). Implicitly, this comment hints that Joshua will eventually succeed Moses, although Israel has not yet even reached Sinai (v. 14).

Joshua next appears as Moses' aide during the period at Mount Sinai when Yahweh issues his instructions (Ex. 24:13; 33:11). Joshua's first reported words may reveal something of his military instincts. As he and Moses descend Mount Sinai, Joshua immediately interprets the shouting coming from the direction of Israel's camp as "the sound of war" (32:17). In reality, the ruckus is the sound of Israel worshiping the golden calf.

Joshua seems to emerge as a leader during Israel's itinerary through the wilderness toward Canaan. His second-reported words are a short, passionate plea that Moses stop two Israelite men from prophesying, a plea Moses rejects (Num. 11:28). More importantly, Joshua makes a fateful choice in connection with Moses' dispatch of twelve spies to reconnoiter Canaan. A man named Hoshea son of Nun represents the tribe of Ephraim among the spies (Num. 13:8), and a later parenthetical comment explains that Joshua was the name that Moses used for Hoshea (v. 16).<sup>5</sup> Moses' preference for Joshua (Heb. *yebošua*<sup>c</sup>, "Yahweh is salvation") over Hoshea ("salvation") certainly highlights Joshua's relationship with Yahweh and perhaps even attests his life of loyal obedience.<sup>6</sup> Among the returning spies, only Joshua

4. Numbers 11:28 says that Joshua "had been Moses' aide since youth," so Exodus 17 may assume him to be in that position already despite the absence of the term "aide." For the Hebrew term, see below.

5. So NLT. If so, Hoshea probably was simply a shortened form of Joshua. Alternatively, Numbers 13:16 may claim that Moses actually changed Hoshea's name to Joshua; cf. NIV; NRSV; TNK.

6. Cf. D. A. Howard Jr., *Joshua* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman, 1998), 73. According to Howard, Joshua is the first personal name in the Bible to incorporate God's personal name, "Yahweh." Interestingly, the LXX renders "Joshua" as *Iesus*, the New Testament name for Jesus. For the thesis that biblical narratives purposely delayed Joshua's emergence until