

## Lesson 1

# Overview of Joshua

## Introduction

The book of Joshua provides details about an important point of transition for the nation of Israel as it serves as a bridge between their life as sojourners in the wilderness and their new experience inside the land of promise. Joshua is the first of twelve Old Testament books of history. The books of history, spanning from Joshua to Esther, pick up where the books of the law left off. Finally, after seven centuries (~2092 b.c.) the land promise of Genesis 12 will now be fulfilled. The sentence of forty years of wandering, Numbers 14.29-35, has concluded and that chapter of history will close. *The glorious vision of faith set forth by Moses in his closing speeches now become the venture of faith. . . Israel was on the pinnacle. The predominate note (with an occasional sour note) in Joshua is one of joy, confidence, and exuberance.*<sup>1</sup>

When the book opens, we learn that Moses had died and now Joshua was God's chosen one to lead the nation into Canaan. Moses had been their leader during their exodus from Egypt, at Mt. Sinai, and through the wilderness. When he died, Israel stood on the precipice, but had yet to take the land into its possession. God called upon Joshua to take the people across the Jordan, initiate the conquest, and lead the first generation of Israelites into receiving the gift promised by God.

The Book of Joshua serves more than just a transitional role, however. It picks up the suspended narrative thread from the conclusion of Numbers. It raises the curtain on the intense cultural clash with Canaan, a conflict hinted at in previous texts and outlined in Deuteronomy. In those last two books of Law, the latter chapters detail the last days of the wilderness wanderings. God's people were beginning to encounter strong resistance from peoples who lived just outside of the promised land. Israel engaged in significant conflicts in Transjordan with the Amorite monarchs Sihon and Og, Numbers 21.21-35. Encamped at Shittim, on the fringe of Canaan, the Israelite men succumbed to the allure of Midianite women and their fertility rites, Numbers 25.1-3. In response to this transgression, Moses initiated a campaign of vengeance and retribution against the Midianites, Numbers 31. After delivering his concluding addresses to the people, Moses ascended Mount Nebo to view the Promised Land and to take his leave, joining his Creator, Deuteronomy 34.5 Following a duly observed period of grief over Moses' demise, 34.8, the Israelites stood ready to advance into the promised territory, guided by Joshua, son of Nun, 34.9.

The first half of Joshua, chapters 1–12, focuses on the Israelites' acquisition of the land, confronting us with the stark reality of territorial expansion and warfare. This part of Joshua demonstrates the fulfillment of the covenant made on the plains of Moab, with a significant reference in Joshua 8.30–35 to the ceremony found in Deuteronomy 27.

The second half of the book, chapters 13–24, details how the land was apportioned among the tribes. This section goes from abstract concept to tangible reality. The tribes of Israel must not only defend the land from adversaries but also methodically carve out boundaries within it. Practical arrangements are

also made for refuge cities in chapter 20 and the Levites in chapter 21. This segment, and indeed the entire book, reaches its climax with another significant covenant ceremony at Shechem, in chapter 24, reinforcing the book's overarching theme of covenant fulfillment.

## Getting to Know Joshua

Joshua the son of Nun, was known originally as Hoshea, which means *salvation* or *deliverance*, Numbers 13.8; Deuteronomy 32.44. As Israel prepare to send the spies to explore the land of Canaan, Numbers 13.16 explains that Moses gave Hoshea his new name, *Joshua*. This is not the only place in the Old Testament where we read of a prominent servant of God having his name changed. Abram and Jacob are two other examples, and all three of the name changes shed light on each individual's character and/or future role as God's representative for His people. *Joshua* means "Yahweh is salvation." In the Greek language, *Joshua* became known as *Jesus*.

Joshua is identified 27 times between Exodus and Deuteronomy. We see him first in Exodus 17.8-13 as a warrior and confidant of Moses leading Israel to victory at Rephidim over Amalek. Exodus 33.11 and Numbers 11.28 reveal to us he had been Moses' assistant "since his youth." The term "assistant" also describes him in Joshua 1.1. This term is more specific than the word *servant*, which we might more commonly see. It demonstrates the special relationship they enjoyed and lends credibility to Joshua as he assumes the role as successor to Moses.

Here are a few of the other places where we see Joshua while he is developing into a leader:

- Exodus 24.13 – he accompanied Moses up to Mt. Sinai.
- Exodus 32.17 – As Moses is returning from the summit of Mt. Sinai, Joshua is the first to warn him of a problem in the camp. In this way, the story makes it clear he was not a participant in the incident with the golden calf.
- Numbers 13-14 – he was one of the 12 spies sent into Canaan, with he and Caleb being the only ones who gave a faithful report. These two men alone are promised entrance into the land, Numbers 14.6, 30, 38.
- Numbers 27.18-23 – he is commissioned to succeed Moses. Numbers 27.18 says Joshua had the Spirit in him.
- Numbers 34.17 – he was charged, along along with Eleazar, with assigning the land to the families of various tribes.
- Deuteronomy 1.38 – he is described as "standing before" Moses, who was encouraged to strengthen, as he would lead Israel to its inheritance.
- Deuteronomy 3.28 – similar instructions are given to Moses; only this time he is to *encourage* and *strengthen* Joshua. See also Deuteronomy 31.6-7, 23.
- Deuteronomy 31.23 – God tells Joshua he will "bring" the people into the land.
- Deuteronomy 32.44 – Joshua is identified here, and in Hebrew his original name is used, i.e., Hoshea.
- Deuteronomy 34.9 – Moses lays hands on Joshua as he is endowed with a spirit of wisdom.

The extensive references to Joshua throughout the books of the Law are significant as we see a great example of leadership preparation. Someone like Joshua, already familiar with specific tasks involved in the role as well as someone who consistently demonstrated loyalty to God, even if that means going against the majority view, would have been a natural choice. This was due to His constant visibility and identification with Moses.

While there is much to learn about leadership and the role it plays, one must not forget who Israel's true leader was: God. Moses and Joshua were both committed servants of the Lord and sought to comply with His wishes in every way. God was the one giving them the land. He was the power behind their military victories. He supplied and equipped Israel for every need. The conquest is actually God's mission, and Moses/Joshua are set in the role to do His will.

## Author

Jewish tradition identifies Joshua as the author. The Talmud says, "Joshua wrote his own book."<sup>2</sup> As Israel reaffirmed the covenant just before his death, Joshua wrote these things *in the book of the law of God*, 24.26. Only a person who was viewed as having been inspired would have been allowed to add something to Moses' writings. So, Joshua was viewed as a prophet, which serves as sufficient proof of authorship.

Whoever wrote the book was also a participant in the events described therein, Joshua 5.1, 6. Rahab was still alive when the book was written, 6.25. Obviously, the last section of the book that details Joshua's death would have been added by another inspired writer, maybe Samuel. Woudstra mentions the writing of the Talmud which says the events about Joshua's death were recorded by Eleazar, the son of Aaron. It is thought that Phineas, Eleazar's son, recorded the story of his father's death. Other conservative scholars have suggested Joshua was written during the time of the Judges, and a few have it around David's time.

## Timeline

Most historians date the crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 3) to around 1407 b.c.. Caleb, Joshua 14.7-10, helps us to understand how long it took to expel the Canaanites from the land. The events of Numbers 13-14 occurred when he was 40 years old. He was 85 when he received his personal inheritance in Judah, 14.10. The wilderness wandering lasted 38 years, Deuteronomy 2.14. So, the actual length of time for the conquest must have been around 7 years, with the final dispersal of land coming around 1400 b.c. Some think the period encapsulated in Joshua is just under 30 years.

## Major Theological Themes

### *God is Real*

In the book we observe God communicating directly with Joshua as he did in 1.1, 7, at other times we see Him manifesting his will by lot, 7.14, and at other times through a divine representative, 5.13-15. But in every way, God's existence and involvement is assumed and never in doubt. His hand is clearly seen throughout the book. To those who obey, He promises blessing and sustenance, 23.5. To those who

disobey, His hand will be against, 23.12,16. God clearly orders Israel into battle against the Canaanites as He could no longer tolerate their evil. In this case, Joshua and the Israelite army are agents of God's wrath executed on the unrighteous.

His direct involvement is also seen in his gift of His land, Joshua 13.21. God is the one who has acquired it — not Israel, 22.19; Leviticus 25.23. Its use and enjoyment, and the life that it sustained, were gifts from God. All gratitude and worship were due to the Lord, Israel's God, alone.<sup>3</sup> This was all intended to highlight the covenant fellowship Israel had with God. *Can you think of any New Testament applications here?*

## ***Judgment on Sin***

God handed over the land to Israel as part of His judgment against the Canaanite nations, as the time of their iniquity had reached its full measure, Genesis 15.16. An explanation of their depravity is explained throughout the books of the law, i.e., Deuteronomy 9.1-6; 12.29-30. Leviticus 18.24-25 ties it to their great immorality:

Do not defile yourselves by any of these practices, for the nations I am driving out before you have defiled themselves by all these things. The land has become defiled, so I am punishing it for its iniquity, and the land will vomit out its inhabitants.

## ***Sin***

In Joshua, sin is seen objectively. It leads to death. Not only does its consequences impact a person directly, but its impact also spreads to an entire community, 7.1, 11, 15. Even though it was Achan who sinned, guilt came upon the entire nation:

Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant that I commanded them; they have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen and lied and put them among their own belongings, 7.11.

The great attention paid to Achan drives home the point that *a holy land must be occupied by holy people*.<sup>4</sup> In the story we see two perspectives juxtaposed against each other. In the first perspective we see God's red-hot anger (which is burning before Israel is even made known of the situation) and the other perspective focuses on the people's responsibility.

## ***God Keeps His Promises***

This may be the most important aspect of the book. Repeatedly, the text reminds us of what God has accomplished. Most notable is the statement in 21.43-45:

So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there. The LORD gave them rest on every side according to all he had sworn to their ancestors. None of their enemies were able to stand against them, for the LORD handed over all their enemies to them. None of the good promises the LORD had made to the house of Israel failed. Everything was fulfilled.

See also Joshua's farewell address:

"I am now going the way of the whole earth, and you know with all your heart and all your soul that none of the good promises the Lord your God made to you has failed. Everything was fulfilled for you; not one promise has failed.

With that reading in view, it might be good to revisit God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12.7; 15.18-21. That promise certainly appeared to be on shaky ground after Israel refused to enter the land, Numbers 13-14, but God did come through. His promises will never be thwarted or defeated by human wickedness.

### ***The Land was a Gift, But Israel was Obligated to Obey***

Inherent in the covenant making ceremonies described in 8.30-35 and 24.1-27 is Israel's continued obedience. Even in the first chapter, with God's opening commission of Joshua, the new leader is told to fight *and* obey, 1.7-8. Compliance with the Law and the commands of Moses and God are a constant theme. Command and obedience are seen with the Jordan River crossing, chapters 3-4, Jericho, chapter 6, and Ai, chapter 8. We observe how worship and ritual practices were observed in the proper manner, 5.2-12. Stones of remembrance, mentioned in Deuteronomy 11.29-30 and 27.13 (see also Joshua 8.30-35) demonstrate the importance of the law's demand for obedience at every level of life in Israel. That the law was publicly displayed sheds light on the significance of every person keeping it.

Penalties for disobedience are also seen. Previously mentioned, the story of Achan, chapter 7, quickly comes to mind. But there are other stories that warn too.<sup>5</sup> Joshua's farewell address serves as a compelling call to the future generations of Israel, urging them to uphold the most important commandment, which involved total devotion to God. See 23.6-8, 11, 16; 24.14, 23. The prevailing theme in Joshua underscores the notion that adherence to divine commands results in prosperity, while defiance leads to downfall.

### ***The Holy and Redeeming God***

The book of Joshua emphasizes God's gracious and redemptive actions on behalf of Israel and Joshua. In Chapter 1, God takes command of both. Chapter 2 underscores God's mercy in delivering Rahab and His justice in defeating those who resist His plan. The crossing of the Jordan River, chapters 3-4 demonstrate His divine power over nature and follows a pattern of divine revelation, starting with God's representatives, then representatives of the people, and finally the people themselves. This pattern echoes throughout the books of the Law and Joshua.

Chapter 6 recounts the fall of Jericho as a divine judgment on its inhabitants for failing to acknowledge the true God, contrasting with Rahab's confession. It reaffirms God's purpose for Israel and the importance of faithfulness. In chapter 7, the necessity of holiness is emphasized as Israel learns that devoted things belong to God alone. Achan's sin disrupts the covenantal relationship, emphasizing the seriousness of disobedience. Chapter 8 shows that when Israel removes sin from its midst, divine blessings follow. Obedience leads to victory, while disobedience led to defeat at Ai. Everything hinges on God's word and the people's willingness to believe and obey. Despite its nationalistic tone, Joshua includes non-Israelites like Rahab and the Gibeonites in the covenant community, illustrating the international character of the covenant.

Chapter 10 highlights God's role in giving Israel the Promised Land and performing miracles in the south. It also emphasizes Israel's faithfulness to the Gibeonite treaty and God's involvement in their

political activities. Chapter 11 shows that God is the ruler of both the north and south, demonstrating His supremacy over all of Canaan.

The book concludes in chapters 23-24 with acts and memorials that highlight God's holiness and special place His people occupied, including the erection of an altar and the establishment of a memorial stone.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the book of Joshua serves as an important moment in Israel's history, marking the transition from their wanderings in the wilderness to the fulfillment of God's promise to inherit the land of Canaan. It introduces us to Joshua, a faithful leader chosen by God to lead the nation into their new home after the death of Moses. Throughout the book, we see major theological themes at play. For example, it underscores the reality of God's presence and involvement in the lives of His people. God communicates directly with Joshua, guiding him through various means, and His hand is evident in the victories and blessings bestowed upon Israel.

Joshua also highlights the concept of judgment on sin. The conquest of Canaan is seen as a form of divine judgment against the Canaanite nations, whose wickedness had reached a point of no return. The story of Achan serves as a stark reminder of the consequences of disobedience. The book also emphasizes God's faithfulness in keeping His promises. Despite challenges and setbacks, God fulfills His covenant with Israel, giving them the land as He had promised to Abraham. Joshua stresses the importance of obedience to God's commands. The people of Israel are called to obey the law and follow God's guidance closely, as disobedience leads to dire consequences.

Finally, Joshua highlights the holiness of God and the redemption He offers. Rahab's redemption and inclusion in the covenant community, along with the acceptance of the Gibeonites, demonstrate God's mercy and His willingness to extend His grace to those who turn to Him.

The book of Joshua is not only about history, but it is a testament to God's faithfulness, His demand for obedience, His judgment on sin, and His redemptive work in the lives of His people. It serves as a reminder of the enduring nature of God's promises and His presence throughout the journey of His chosen nation.

## For Class Interaction and Discussion

### *Lesson Outline:*

1. Introduction to the book of Joshua and its historical context.

- Getting to know Joshua
- Author
- Timeline

2. Major theological themes in Joshua:

- God's presence
- Judgment on sin
- God's faithfulness
- Obedience and redemption

### *Thought Questions for Discussion*

1. How does Joshua's leadership compare to that of Moses, and why was Joshua chosen to lead Israel into Canaan?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. In what ways did God demonstrate His presence and guidance to Joshua and the Israelites throughout their journey?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What lessons can we learn from the story of Achan regarding the consequences of disobedience and the importance of holiness?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. How does the book of Joshua illustrate God's faithfulness in fulfilling His promises, particularly in giving the land to Israel?

5. Discuss the significance of obedience in the book of Joshua. How did it impact the success of the Israelites?
  
6. Explore the theme of redemption in Joshua, particularly through the examples of Rahab and the Gibeonites.
  
7. How do the events in Joshua relate to God's plan for Israel and the fulfillment of His covenant promises?
  
8. Reflect on the overarching message of Joshua and its relevance to our faith journey today.

### ***Group Activities***

- 1. Character Study:** Assign different characters from Joshua (e.g., Joshua, Rahab, Achan) to group members and have them research and present on the character's role and lessons.
- 2. Scripture Memory:** Memorize key verses from Joshua that highlight God's promises and faithfulness.
- 3. Discussion Panel:** Organize a panel discussion where participants can share their insights on how the themes of Joshua apply personally.



**4. Map Exploration:** Use this map of Canaan and mark key locations mentioned in Joshua. Discuss the significance of these places in the Israelites' conquest.



### ***Final Encouraging Word:***

Just like the Israelites, we too face our own journeys, battles, and challenges in life. Joshua serves as a powerful reminder of God's unwavering presence, His call for obedience, and His faithfulness in fulfilling His promises. Let us strive to apply these lessons in our own lives, trusting that God is with us every step of the way, leading us to the promised land He has prepared for us. May we find strength, hope, and inspiration in the pages of Joshua as we continue to walk with God.

<sup>1</sup> Smith, James E. *The Books of History*. Old Testament Survey Series. Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Woudstra, Marten H. *The Book of Joshua*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981.

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<sup>3</sup> Hess, Richard S. *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 6 of *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 51.

<sup>4</sup> Woudstra, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> See the incident with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 as well as the altar east of the Jordan in Joshua 22.