

Before the King – Joshua, Judges & Ruth 2016

Before the King – Joshua, Judges and Ruth: Have you ever wondered what it would be like to live under a theocracy - a state ruled by the law of God? Why did God require the ancient church (children of Israel) to kill the inhabitants of the land of Canaan before taking possession of the land? Who was Ruth, and why is she important among personalities of scripture? These questions and more will be some of the topics that we explore together in the age before the king.

The objective of this class is: to gain a deeper understanding of the historical redemptive plan of God through the period before the Israelite Monarchy, and apply principles as revealed in three historical books to everyday Christian living.

Beginning of a New Era – Joshua (1-3) with the passing of Moses, the Israelite community was confronted with a potential for unprecedented uncertainty. However, the first few verses of chapter one of our text indicate a significant continuity between the work of God in the life of Moses and in the life of Joshua. Joshua was not allowed to sit idly on his laurels and bask in the glory of the recent conquests of Bashan. We read, *“After the death of Moses, the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua the son of Nun, Moses’ assistant, “Moses my servant is dead. Now therefore arise, go over this Jordan, you and all this people into the land that I am giving to them, to the people of Israel. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, just as I promised to Moses.”* (Joshua 1:1-3). The continuity between the leadership of Moses and that of Joshua is explicit in these three verses. The extent of God’s provision to Joshua was not limited to *“as far as the eye could see...”* as it had been with Abraham and Moses before him. In this regard, Joshua was not a visionary. Instead, the provision was, *“...every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon...”* Joshua was a man of action. He implemented the visionary promises entailed in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenant. He would witness the conquest and possession of the land of promise as well as the creation of a nation-state governed by the law of God. In the truest sense of the word, this was the beginning of a new era.

Pat One: The Authority of the Written Word – One of the most significant changes that accompanies the people of God in this new era is the absence of a mediator between God and the covenant community. Moses, being the mediator of the Mosaic Covenant, was the vehicle through which the will of God was communicated to his people. Upon the death of Moses, what oracle, what messenger would take his place? We need not progress far through the first chapter to see the high veneration that was placed upon the Pentateuch immediately after the death of Moses. The Pentateuch was not seen as the words of Moses, though undoubtedly written by him. The Pentateuch was seen as the Word of God. Therefore, God instructs Joshua, *“This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do all that is written in it.”* (1:8). The central authority governing the life of Joshua was not simply his past experience, though much of the events recorded in the Pentateuch were first-hand encounters for him, but was the written Word of God. This is important for multiple reasons. First, it establishes the fact that God, the covenant keeping God who revealed himself to Moses and the Exodus community as the “I AM” or the God who is there, had spoken in time and history. His words, though uttered in a previous generation at a far-off location were timeless and remained the central authority for the life of Israel’s new leader.

Secondly, the recognition by Joshua of the sanctity of the Pentateuch, the writing of which was very familiar to Joshua, affirms what many modern scholars deny: the association with the words of Moses (the Pentateuch) as nothing less than the Word of God himself. This was important to the ancient Israelite community as they moved forward in the conquest of Canaan, and is equally important for us today. Any worldview that does not lay hold to the central authority of the scripture, even one that Baney, Lesson 1 Winter/Spring 2016

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focusses on one's Christian experience instead, is inadequate for governing the life of the church. The only rule of faith and practice for the OT church as well as the NT church is the Word of God.

Part Two: The Submission of the Covenant Community – It is telling on the part of the ancient Israelites, that their response to Joshua was one of submission, but not unconditional submission. In 1:16-17 we read, "And they (Israel) answered Joshua, *"All that you have commanded us, we will do, and wherever you send us, we will go. Just as we obeyed Moses in all things, so we will obey you. Only may the Lord your God be with you as he was with Moses!"* Here, God's people were submitting to the leadership of Joshua in a similar way as they did with Moses. They stated, *"Only....may the Lord your God be with you..."* The word here translated as "only" is the Hebrew word, *rak* and is used here as an adverb of limitation meaning the people submitted to Joshua in faith that God would be with him and speak through him as he did Moses. This is different from the submission of the exodus community to Moses. They saw the signs first, then they believed and submitted (albeit reluctantly). It is important to note, that the exodus community submitted to Moses when he revealed to them the God who is there (YHVH). The current generation submitted to Joshua through faith in God's Word, which takes for granted that God is present, and he has spoken. The generation of Joshua's leadership believed and submitted, and God would later show the signs of his abiding presence among them.

Joshua had played a prominent role in the life of Israel from the very beginning, and was a highly visible character among the Israelite community even before the death of Moses. For instance, he was with Moses and accompanied him on the top of Mt. Sinai (Exodus 32:17) as well as the tabernacle when Moses entered to communicate with God (Exodus 33:9, 11). Moses charged Joshua in the sight of all Israel before his passing, (Deuteronomy 31:14-23) and commissioned him to be his successor. Despite all this careful preening for the position, Joshua's success depended on his adherence to the written law of God. The people of God would follow him so long as God was with him, which evokes the third and final feature of the new era – the abiding presence of God. God's presence abode with Israel not in the same manner as when they wandered in the wilderness (cloudy pillar by day and pillar of fire by night), but through his Word and his presence.

Part Three: Salvation in the House of a Prostitute – The story continues to unfold through the commissioning of spies sent to search out the City of Jericho, the first sentinel at the gateway to the land of promise. These spies entered the city and turned into the house of a prostitute. I think we would be remiss if we assumed they had impure intentions. It is more than likely they entered the house of Rahab because it would not be alarming for her neighbors to observe two unknown men enter her house. Nonetheless, the king of Jericho did hear of the spies and immediately sent someone to search for them. Rahab deceived the king's men admitting they had been there but stating they had left, while hiding the spies on her roof. After this incident, two very important incidents are recorded: 1) the spies learned of the great reputation of the God of the Covenant. Rahab tells the spies, *"I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how that the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath"* (2:9-11). The inhabitants of Jericho had heard of God's great might among his people and were fearful knowing that this community, purportedly led by the very presence of God camped at their doorsteps. 2) The spies were saved and allowed to escape to bring the

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account of God's great reputation back to the camp of Israel who waited armed ready to possess the land of promise. The contrast between the report of these two spies and the original twelve is notable.

Before we move away from the story of Rahab we must admire the faith of this woman who is factored into the ancestry of Christ. She did not hesitate to pronounce, "...the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath." Her faith in this "foreign" God was so sure that she asked the spies to spare her life and the lives of her father, mother, brother and sisters when they returned to conquer the City. The spies agreed under one condition, that she bring all her family into her house and mark her house with the scarlet cord upon which she allowed the men to escape. The symbolism in this account is undeniable. The house of the prostitute became the ark of salvation, and the scarlet cord became the sign of the promise. Can it not be said that the house represented none other than the covenant community under whose protection she had already taken shelter though an inhabitant in the land of a heathen king? Can the scarlet cord that was a sign of her salvation not evoke the images of the blood of the paschal lamb which, when applied to the doorposts of the houses of the Israelites signifying the covenantal relationship between them and God, caused the angel of death to pass over them? Finally, both accounts (scarlet cord and paschal lamb) evoke images of the final sacrifice, the blood of the Lamb of God under whose protection we come and are rescued from the just judgment of God.

Part Four: Crossing the Jordan – One of the ways that God affirmed his selection of Joshua to lead his people into the land of promise was through the parting of the river Jordan. As we have already seen, this correlates to the parting of the Red Sea witnessed by the exodus community under the leadership of Moses. God's instruction to Joshua at the River Jordan revealed his purpose: "*Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that as I was with Moses, so I will be with you*" (3:7). The priests were instructed to take the Ark of the Covenant (the seat of God's presence among his people) and step into the water. As soon as the priests stepped into the water, the water was cut off and a dry path was prepared for the peoples' crossing. Such a mighty act served not only to authenticate God's leadership among them (Joshua was only the instrument of his guidance), but also God's presence among them. This would play a significant role in the faith of the community as they set forth in conquest.

Conclusion: In the first three chapters of Joshua, we witness the beginning of a new era among the people of God. When one contrasts the manner in which God deals with the generation under Joshua's leadership with Abraham and the patriarchs, we see a shift away from individualized, sporadic appearances between God and his people, and see the constant abiding presence using the spoken word to make himself known to his people. This God of the covenant is a God who has spoken in time and history. The principle of God's authority revealed in scripture continues today and is the central stone in the foundation of the life of God's NT church.

Questions:

What role do you see the scripture playing in the life of the NT church?

What criteria do you use for submitting to those in authority?

How does it make you feel to know that Rahab (a harlot) was part of the elect in Israel, and factored into the lineage of Christ?