

Sunday School Introduction to Joshua
By Josh Mauldin
(neither author nor character of the book)

What is Joshua?

Joshua, the sixth book of the Old Testament, is a narrative that continues the story of God's interactions with His people, Israel, after the Exodus and wilderness wanderings as they come into the Promised Land.

In the English Bible, Joshua is included in the "Historical Books," in the Hebrew Bible it begins the "Former Prophets." We should keep in mind this is not merely a record of historical facts. This is what makes Joshua "prophetic." "The intent of the Former Prophets is to present an interpretative (prophetic) history of God's dealings with his covenant people Israel, from the time of Moses' death until the Babylonian captivity."¹

General Principles for Interpreting Narrative

Think Big Picture

Three Levels of Narrative from *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*:²

1. Bottom Level: individual stories of any given book such as Rahab & the spies, the Battle of Jericho, etc.
2. Middle Level: the story of Israel from promises to Abraham, to Egypt & Exodus, to wanderings, to entering the Promised Land, through exile and return.
3. Top Level: whole universal plan of God from creation, to fall, redemption, & consummation.

"You will not fully do justice to any individual narrative without recognizing its part within the other two."³

So we start asking ourselves in every lesson, "How does this fit into the story of God's promises to Israel, and God's ultimate plan of salvation in Jesus?"

"As we come to the book of Joshua, the story makes a striking advance."⁴

Watch for connections to previous stories of God's work for Israel

- a. Crossing the Red Sea and crossing the Jordan.
- b. Encounters with burning bush and the commander of the Lord's armies.
- c. Eden and the Promised Land.
- d. God's promises to Abraham

¹ Woudstra, Marten. *The Book of Joshua in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Pg. 3.

² Fee, Gordon & Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*. Pg. 79.

³ Fee & Stuart, 80.

⁴ Schreiner, Thomas. *The King in His Beauty*. Pg. 107.

Remember God is the Hero and Main Character

This helps us avoid moralizing the Biblical stories, which are often not intended to teach a moral lesson, or misapplying promises and principles to our context.

Warnings about interpreting narratives from *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*:

- a. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.⁵
- b. ...you can never assume that God expects you to do exactly the same thing that Bible characters did, or to have the same things happen to you that happened to them.⁶

“Joshua was one of the outstanding persons of the Old Testament: assistant to Moses (Exod. 24:13, 32:17, 33:11), one of the twelve spies (Num. 14), successful general (Exod. 17). Courageous and godly, he serves as God’s instrument for bringing the people of Israel into the Promised Land. The book rightly bears his name, but in the end it must be realized that the book is not about Joshua—it is about God.”⁷

So we are asking “What is God doing in this passage, and what does this show me about the character and work of God?”

In the story of Rahab and the spies, the most important thing said is about God (Joshua 2:8-11), and the spies’ conclusions about what God is doing (Joshua 2:24).

“The story of the spies in Jericho is told at length, not because of the military strategy it discloses, but because of the information gained by the spies. The inhabitants of the land were all fearful because they had heard what the Lord had done for Israel.”⁸

Watch for clues from the author that give you the “point” of the story/stories

Guidelines for interpreting Historical Narrative from *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*.⁹

- a. *Editorial Comments.* Sometimes the author will give explicit editorial comments as to the meaning or importance of an event.
- b. *Thematic Statements.* Sometimes an author will begin his work or a section of his work with a thematic statement that helps us understand the reminder of the work.

⁵ Fee & Stuart, 84 (word for word)

⁶ Fee & Stuart, 93.

⁷ Hill, Andrew & John Walton. *A Survey of the Old Testament*. Pg. 177.

⁸ Hill & Walton, 185.

⁹ Plummer, Robert. *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible*. Pg. 194.

- c. *Repetition.* Biblical authors did not have the luxury of bold script or impressive graphics. When they want to emphasize something they often used repetition.

Purpose of Joshua

“So the Lord gave Israel all the land, ...and they took possession of it and settled there. The Lord gave them rest on every side.... The Lord handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the Lord’s good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled’ (21:43-45). That is what the book of Joshua is all about.”¹⁰

God keeps his covenant promise to give Israel the Promised Land.

Key Elements:

Promise

The threefold promise to Abraham: numerous descendants, land, bless the nations

Genesis 12:1-7, 13:14-17, 15:17-21, 17:1-8, 24:7 to Abraham

Genesis 28:13-14, 35:9-12, 48:3-4, 50:24 to Abraham’s descendants

Exodus 3:7-8 to Moses

This becomes a dominant theme for Numbers (failure to trust God and enter the land, Numbers 13-14) and Deuteronomy (renewal of the covenant and preparation to enter the land, Deuteronomy 1:8, 34:4)

When we get to Joshua, the first part of the promise is fulfilled and the second is now ready to be fulfilled. The ensuing story is how God carries out this part of the promise.

Joshua 1:2 & 6-promise to Moses and promise to fathers (Abraham)

Joshua 21:43-45-summary of complete fulfillment of promises.

What is the “striking advance” in the story? “Now the second element of the promise of Abraham is about to be fulfilled.”¹¹

This is the connection to the middle level of the narrative.

Land

“The importance of land in Joshua can scarcely be overestimated.”¹²

“In Israel’s perception of herself as the covenant people of God, nothing is more central than the land. ...Forever after, the land is viewed in the history and literature of Israel as

¹⁰ Hill & Walton, 187.

¹¹ Schreiner, 107.

¹² Schreiner, 107.

evidence of Gods' having chosen her as his covenant people and bestowing his favor on them."¹³

Land provides the content of the promise.

-see above

Land provides the substance of the story.

-Word *land* occurs 102 times, *inheritance* 50 times, *boundary* or *territory* 84 times, *allotment*, 26 times.¹⁴

Land provides the structure of the book.

Various outline proposals:

Entering the Land: Joshua 1-5
Conquering the Land: Joshua 6-12
Dividing the Land: Joshua 13-21
Living in the Land: Joshua 22-24¹⁵

"Pass over" to enter the Land: Joshua 1-5
"Takes" the land: Joshua 6-11
"Divides" the land: Joshua 12-22
"Serves" the Lord in the land: Joshua 22-24¹⁶

The Promise Land Conquered: Joshua 1-12
The Promise Land Distributed: Joshua 13-22
The Promise Land to Be Kept in Covenant Obedience: Joshua 23-24

Again, the connection to land makes sense at the middle level of the story.

God's Role

The author goes out of his way to make sure that anyone reading this account knows that God is the one providing the land from beginning to end.

Repetition of "giving" language. All throughout Joshua and in key passages we see that God gives Israel the land. Just in the opening of the book we see this in 1:2, 3, 6, 11, 13, 15; 2:9, 14, & 24. And as we saw above the summary passage of 21:43-45 emphasizes the same thing. Israel does not take the land, they do not earn it, they do not conquer it, God gives it.

¹³ Hill & Walton, 187.

¹⁴ Schreiner, 107.

¹⁵ Hill & Walton, 185-187.

¹⁶ Schreiner, 107. And Hamilton, James. *God's Glory in Salvation through Judgment*. Pg. 144.

Repetition of God's intervention in battles. Even the battles show God's intervention. More than Israel conquering the land, God is conquering it for them.

We see this where God explicitly fights Israel's enemies as in chapter 10, summarized in vs. 14 "the Lord fought for Israel." But even in Israel's efforts to conquer their enemies we see their victorious strength and winning strategies attributed to God, as in chapter 6-the Battle of Jericho.

"The bizarre strategy confirmed that Israel could not attribute victory to its own military prowess. Their victory was a gift of grace—an astounding work of the Lord."¹⁷

"We see that when military strategies are described in the text, they are God's strategies, not Joshua's. In each battle narrative, only enough information is given to convey that (1) God was the one who engineered the victory, and (2) God's instruction were carried out."¹⁸

As we mentioned before, God is the hero from beginning to end.

Covenant

The idea of covenant means two things. First and foremost, it includes what God does for Israel (providing the land, defeating their enemies, etc.). But it also includes the expectations for Israel as a result of God's relationship with them. As a response to God choosing Israel and dwelling with them, God expects them to obey Him.

This includes general covenant stipulations such as circumcision and keeping the Passover. We see that these are kept before the conquest of the land in 5:1-12. Israel is aligning itself with God's desires and continuing in the blessing of being God's covenant people.

This also includes obedience to specific commands in situation throughout Joshua. For example the account of Achan's sin shows that God will not bless the community of Israel while in blatant disobedience to Him. They are defeated in the Battle at Ai (Joshua 7:10-12). Of course, Achan and his family ultimately suffer the consequences of this individual sin.

The last few chapters of Joshua call Israel to renew their desire to live under God's covenant stipulations. Twice we read how God has provided for Israel and "therefore" they now live in response to God's goodness by keeping his covenant (23:1-13, & 24:11-14). They are also warned that breaking God's covenant through disobedience will bring consequences.

¹⁷ Schreiner, 110

¹⁸ Hill & Walton, 184

As we come to the end of the book, we are asking if Israel will obey God and be blessed in this new (eden-like) land, or will they disobey (like Adam) and suffer the consequences?¹⁹

This is especially true when we note that many inhabitants of the land have not yet been conquered. Those outside of the covenant still live in the land. Will God's people conquer them, or will their devotion to false gods bring down Israel?²⁰

Our application of Joshua should keep in mind the ultimate failure (perhaps even expected failure, 24:19) of Israel in the Promised Land. Adam fails in Eden. Israel fails in the Promised Land. Can anyone not fail?

A Major Issue

Devoted to Destruction

A major issue for most people in reading through Joshua is that entire cities and their populations are killed as the people of Israel conquer the land. In fact, God specifically commands His people to completely destroy cities and punishes them if they don't. Here are some suggestions on dealing with this issue.

1. We are talking about judgment not genocide.
 - a. God does not give His people permission to kill anyone they want. He specifically destroys certain people in certain places at a certain time. For me, the allotment of land and boundaries given speak to this. God's judgment through destroying the inhabitants in the land was limited.
 - b. God cites judgment for sin as the reason for this destruction. They are not killed because of their ethnicity but because of their rejection of God and His people.
 - i. Deuteronomy 9:5- their wickedness
 - ii. Joshua 9:1-4, 10:1-5, 11:1-5-desire to destroy Israel
 - iii. Deuteronomy 20:16-18- temptation to Israel that would cause even more wickedness and judgement.
 - c. God still shows mercy in these passages, to Israel and to others (Rahab & the Gibeonites).
 - d. God does not expect us to kill now in any situation.
 - e. God's judgment is just as fierce today as it was then.
 - f. It's ok to say "I don't know."

¹⁹ Schreiner, 116.

²⁰ Hamilton, 152.

Keys to Application

Remember the three levels and that God is the hero.

Connect the stories to New Testament teaching.

-How is our situation similar or different?

Some Examples:

Certainty of God's promises

If we can say anything about how the book of Joshua applies to our lives, it is that God keeps his promises. In every lesson we should find applications for the faithfulness of God in our lives.

“In the present age of insecurity and fear, of staggering world-wide problems and challenges, the primary need is to stress the truth of the everlasting faithfulness of God as set forth in Joshua. This was, so we believe, the primary purpose of the book.”²¹

Salvation through Jesus

As we consider the promises of God, we know they ultimately point to Jesus. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in [Jesus]” (2 Corinthians 1:20). Salvation is the ultimate promise of God.

Whereas the Israelites got land (for a time), we get heaven-Revelation 21-22

-There is no New Testament promise of land, other than the New Jerusalem, New Heavens, and New Earth.²²

Whereas the Israelites get temporary rest in the land through Joshua's leadership, we get eternal rest through Jesus' salvation-Hebrews 4:8-16.

Whereas the Israelites experience victory over enemies, we experience victory over the ultimate enemy, sin & death-1 Corinthians 15:50-58

Whereas Israel fought enemies in the land, I fight sin in myself-Galatians 5:16-24, 1 Peter 2:11.

Whereas Adam, Israel, and I fail, Jesus doesn't-Matthew 4:1-11, Romans 5:12-21

God's Holiness & Expectation of Obedience

Disobedience to God's commands is no less serious today than in Joshua. Through the cross the outcome is different, yet we should never diminish the seriousness of sin or the

²¹ Woudstra, 33.

²² Woudstra, 34.

holiness of God. Beware of sliding into a works-based salvation, but nevertheless the New Testament speaks to the expectations of obedience and consequences of disobedience.

Applying Achan, Joshua 7

Romans 3:9-20, 23

-I have broken the covenant like Achan

-My sin has consequences like Achan's

-I deserve punishment like Achan.

Romans 3:21-26, 5:6-8, 6:1-2, 8:1-11

-Unlike Achan, Jesus takes the punishment for my sin.

-Unlike Achan, I am not condemned.

-Unlike Achan, I can repent of my sin and be changed.