

The Book of Joshua

St. Matthew Parish Bible Study

Who was Joshua?

Joshua's original name was Hosea, which is Hebrew for "salvation" (Numbers 13:8; Deuteronomy 32:44), but Moses changed his name to Joshua (Hebrew, *yehoshua*), meaning "the Lord saves," after Moses chose him to be one of the twelve spies sent to scout out the land of Canaan before Israel entered. Thus Joshua is one of the only figures in the Bible whose name is changed to reflect his role in the history of salvation (e.g., Abram - Abraham; Sarai - Sarah; Simon - Peter). Joshua was also honored to ascend Mount Sinai with Moses, which was even higher than did Abraham's brother, Aaron, and the other elders of Israel (Exodus 24:13; 32:17). In addition, Joshua was privileged to accompany Moses into the Tabernacle sanctuary itself (Exodus 33:11). It was also Joshua who led the Israelites to victory over the Amalekites as Moses prayed (Exodus 17:8-16). Therefore the biblical tradition extols Joshua as a great warrior, a man of unshakable faith, and ever obedient to God's commands. In light of such distinction, God instructs Moses to commission Joshua as his successor (Numbers 27:18-23; Deuteronomy 31:7; 34:9).

The Stages of the conquest of Canaan

1. Preparation and conquest (1-12). After the death of Moses the Book of Joshua opens with the Lord exhorting Joshua to be strong and courageous to enter the Promised Land (1:1-9). With his commission to conquer the land which God promised the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob), and before crossing the River Jordan, Joshua reminds the twelve tribes about their commitment to the Lord. Joshua then chooses spies who will secretly enter Jericho and report back to him (2:24). By God's power, the River Jordan is opened for the spies to pass through and they erect twelve stone columns to commemorate the miracle. After the tribes cross over into Canaan, Joshua has all the men circumcised. Circumcision was unnecessary while the Israelites journeyed in the desert. However now that they have finally reached Canaan, circumcision would be the sign of belonging to Israel (5:2-9). As they marched, the Israelites conquered Jericho after a seven day siege: **"By faith, Jericho fell down after they had been encircled seven days"** (Hebrews 11:30). At the end of chapter eight the covenant is renewed at Mount Ebal, and the first part of the book ends with the account of three more conquests: 1) over the five kings—Amorites, Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon (when Joshua "stops" the sun to give himself an advantage); 2) southern Palestine; and 3) northern Palestine.
2. Distribution of land (13-19). The newly won territory is divided among the twelve tribes and cities of refuge are established (20). Two chapters are devoted to the allotment of forty-eight cities for the Levites, the only tribe not to receive any tribal territory due to their new role as priests for all the tribes (Exodus 32:25-29). Chapter 22 finishes with the return of the Transjordanian tribes and the erection of an altar by the River Jordan (see below, **Keeping the land**).
3. Last dispositions (23-24). The book ends with Joshua speaking his mind about the still unconquered territory and instructing his fellow countrymen to be faithful to God's laws.

The Walls of Jericho (6-12)

Across from the west bank of the River Jordan, Jericho is the first major fortified city that stands in the way of Israel's advance. Rather than a strategic and military victory, the defeat of Jericho was primarily *liturgical* and *miraculous* (6:1-7). The people and the Levitical priests carry the Ark of the Covenant in liturgical procession. They are to march around the city once each day for seven days, and seven times around on the seventh day. At the conclusion of all this marching, the people shout to the Lord and the walls of the city collapse. The entire city was then put to the sword.

Did Joshua and the Israelites completely conquer the land of Canaan? (13:1-5) It is one thing to conquer an enemy, but very much another to occupy the conquered territory. In ancient near Eastern warfare, it was

possible to defeat the king and his army in the open field without being able to take possession of the king's city. Israel was able to capture certain cities, but the expelled inhabitants of those cities would later return and re-fortify. Therefore, we see the apparent tension between the passages of Joshua that celebrate his successes and those that reflect the reality of the continued occupation of the land by different Canaanite peoples. Because the Israelites expected eventually to occupy the towns themselves, they typically did not burn the cities they captured (11:13; Deuteronomy 6:10-12).

Dividing the promised land (13-21)

While Joshua's campaigns subdued the land so that the remaining Canaanites were not a threat, there still remained a number of unconquered cities and territories. Still, Joshua divides up the land among the tribes, and sets aside forty-eight "cities of refuge" (given to the Levites) for those who commit unintentional manslaughter, as opposed to premeditated murder (20-21).

Keeping the land: reminders to remain faithful (22-24)

A controversy erupts over an altar that the tribes from across the River Jordan erect along the banks of the river. The other tribes who had crossed over into Canaan interpret this as a deliberate breach of the covenant, a violation of the rule of having one central sanctuary (Deuteronomy 12). They gather for war with these Transjordanian tribes but the offending tribes insist they meant no harm. They contend the altar was to witness to their fidelity to the Lord: **"The Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar *Witness*, 'For,' said they, 'it is a witness between us that the Lord is God'"** (22:34). The leaders of the other tribes accept this explanation and peace prevails. The altar remains as a reminder of the commitment of the tribes to worship the Lord.

The Transjordanian tribes

Along their 40-year journey in the wilderness, the Israelites defeated their enemies and were now finally ready to take possession of Canaan—the Promised Land. But just before making their move, the tribes of Gad and Reuben (descendants of two of Jacob's twelve sons) decided they didn't want to cross west over the River Jordan into Canaan, but wanted to settle where they were, east of the River Jordan. Speculation is that these tribes had more livestock than the others because fewer of their animals were slaughtered for food along the forty-year journey. Moreover the land east of the River Jordan had vast pastures more suitable for raising livestock than the mostly arid Canaan interior. Besides, they reasoned that they were not needed to fight alongside their brethren since God had clearly been fighting for Israel every step of the way. Moses was unhappy with their request and said their reluctance to join the other tribes in conquest could be interpreted as fear of the Canaanites; and that this would scare the people just as the earlier episode of the spies had done (Numbers 14:1-4). However to allay Moses' fears, the tribes of Gad and Reuben promised to fight until the conquest was complete. Only then would they return and settle their land. Moses ultimately agreed and gave the land east of the River Jordan to the tribes of Reuben and Gad, as well as half of the tribe of Manasseh, on condition that when the battle began, they would assemble themselves on the front lines ahead of the other tribes. Still, Moses knew they were fighting only because they believed it necessary so as to get the land they wanted. So Moses instructed them to "bear arms for God." Only then can the war be honest and just, and *peace* remain the primary goal.

Religious scope of Joshua

After the conquest of Canaan, given the miracles at the River Jordan and the staying of the sun, Joshua knows that God is at his side. Even Joshua's name is a symbol of Jesus, as the Book of Joshua prefigures the New Covenant that will come about centuries later in the person of Christ. For salvation will not be found in the Law, the Levitical priesthood, or the sacrifices of the Old Testament. Instead faith in Jesus Christ, accompanied by works, will have power to bring a person into the new Jerusalem that comes down from Heaven (Revelation 21:1-2).

Settlement of the Promised Land

Tribes receive land after conquest 1467 B.C.E. Saul anointed as king 1117 B.C.E.

4000 B.C.E. 2000 B.C.E. B.C.E. / C.E. 2000 C.E.

Judges

- 1 Othniel
- 2 Ehud
- 3 Shamgar
- 4 Barak
- 5 Gideon
- 6 Tola
- 7 Jair
- 8 Jephthah
- 9 Ibzan
- 10 Elon
- 11 Abdon
- 12 Samson



GREAT SEA,
WESTERN SEA

0 mi 20
0 km 20

- Enclave Cities of Simeon
- Enclave Cities of Manasseh
- Cities of Refuge