

## THEOLOGY OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

At least seven major themes can be seen in the book of Joshua: (1) the land, (2) God's promises, (3) the covenant, (4) obedience, (5) purity of worship (holiness), (6) godly leadership, and (7) rest. These combine to form a rich theology that consistently points to God as the major character in the book. He was the giver of the land in fulfillment of his promises, the one to whom allegiance and obedience were owed, who was a holy and jealous God, who appointed Joshua as Moses' designated successor, and who fought for his people and gave them rest. The book, then, for all its battles and land distributions, points to God above all else.

### THE LAND

The major theme in the book is the possession of the promised land.<sup>1</sup> The land had been promised to Abraham (Gen 12:7; 13:14–15,17; 15:18–21; 17:8; 22:17), and repeated, to Isaac (Gen 26:3–4), to Jacob (Gen 28:4, 13; 35:12), and to succeeding generations (see Gen 15:13–21; 48:4; 50:24).

The land is a central goal toward which the action and thought in the Pentateuch moves. Moses was called to bring God's people to "a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exod 3:8, 17; cf. also 6:4, 8). The book of Exodus shows the beginning of the move toward that land, and the book of Numbers shows the continuation of the journey. Indeed, it has been noted<sup>2</sup> that 12 "journeying" texts in these two books form their framework,<sup>3</sup> in the same way that the "generations" formulas form the framework of Genesis.<sup>4</sup> Beyond this, several chapters in Numbers are concerned with tribal and individual land inheritances: Num 27:1–11; 32; 34–36.

The land is seen as God's gift to Israel over and over again in the Pentateuch, especially in Deuteronomy.<sup>5</sup> In Joshua, the concept occurs more than 50 times.<sup>6</sup> As a gift of God, the land never belonged absolutely to Israel: it belonged to God (Lev 25:23; Deut 9:4–5). The dividing of the land by lot further indicates that it was at God's

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<sup>1</sup> We have dealt at length with important components of the land motif in the book in several excursuses below, and the information there will not be repeated here. See (1) "The Giving of the Land in Joshua" (at 1:3); (2) "Israel's Inheritance of the Land" (at 13:7); and (3) "Patterns in the Land Distribution Lists" (at the end of chap. 13).

<sup>2</sup> Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 308–17.

<sup>3</sup> Exod 12:37a; 13:20; 14:1–2; 15:22a; 16:1; 17:1a; 19:2; Num 10:12; 20:1a; 20:22; 21:10–11; 22:1. Note also the "journeying" chapter at the end of Numbers: chap. 33.

<sup>4</sup> Gen 2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; 37:2.

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Exod 6:4, 8; Deut 1:6–8; 4:38, 40; 5:31; 7:13; 8:1–10; 9:4–6; 11:8–12, 17; 26:1, 9; 32:49, 52; 34:4.

<sup>6</sup> See the excursus on "The Giving of the Land in Joshua" at 1:3 for a full discussion of this.

disposal (Num 26:55–56; Josh 14:2; 18:1–10), as does the demand for the land’s first-fruits to be given to God (Deut 14:22–29; 26:9–15).<sup>7</sup>

The fact that a major portion of the book of Joshua is devoted to detailing the specific inheritances of individuals and the tribes (chaps. 13–21) is very important in this regard. While these chapters do not make for very easy (or interesting) reading, their importance lies in their showing that the land promises were now indeed being fulfilled, in tangible ways. It is as if the author of the book were saying, “If you don’t believe it, here is the ‘map’ and here are the details; you can check them out for yourself.”<sup>8</sup>

## **GOD’S PROMISES**

An integral part of the book’s major theme, the possession of the promised land, is the idea that Yahweh was a promise-keeping God. The land that is the book’s focus was not just any land, but it was the land that had long been promised to Abraham and his descendants (see the references above). The book of Joshua shows God being faithful to his promises in every respect, including promises that were not directly about the land.

The book begins with God’s repeating his promises about giving Israel the land (1:2–4; cf. Deut 7:24; 11:25). God also promised Joshua that he would be with him (1:5,9; cf. Deut 31:8,23), and that no one would be able to withstand him (1:5). God had promised rest to his people (Exod 33:14; Deut 12:10; 25:19), and he repeated this promise to them before they entered the land (Josh 1:13,15). This promise was fulfilled as the events of the book unfolded: the land had rest from war and Israel from its enemies (Josh 11:23; 14:15; 21:44; 23:1). God promised the Israelites that they would inherit a land whose cities they did not build, houses filled with good things they did not provide, wells they did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves they did not plant (Deut 6:11), and this was explicitly fulfilled in the book of Joshua (24:13).

God’s promises to the entire nation about the land are the most prominent in the book. Yet, other promises also are mentioned. For example, God promised Joshua that he would exalt him in Israel’s eyes (3:7), and we read in 4:14 that this came about precisely as God had promised. Also, God promised the daughters of Zelophehad that they would receive a portion in the land, even though their father had no sons (Num 27:7–11), and this promise was explicitly kept (Josh 17:3–6). Furthermore, God promised his people to drive out the Canaanites from before them (Deut 9:3–5; Josh 3:10; 13:6; 23:5), and he did this (23:9) or enabled the people to do this (13:12; 14:12; 15:14; 17:18).

The most dramatic illustration of the importance of God’s keeping his promises comes in the summary of his activities at the end of the land distributions, in 21:43–45: “(43) So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. (44) The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. (45) Not one of all the Lord’s good

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7. See also Patrick D. Miller, Jr., “The Gift of God: The Deuteronomistic Theology of the Land,” 451–65; Gerhard von Rad, “The promised land and Yahweh’s Land in the Hexateuch,” 79–93; B. L. Bandstra, *ISBE*, 3, s.v. “Land.”

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller introduction to this aspect of chaps. 13–21, see the excursus on “Patterns in the Land Distribution Lists” at the end of chap. 13.

promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.” Here we have an all-encompassing affirmation of Yahweh as the promise-keeping God.<sup>9</sup>

## THE COVENANT

Another prominent theme in Joshua is the covenant. The focus is on God’s *fulfilling* the covenant (see on “God’s Promises,” above), as well as on Israel’s *keeping* of the covenant. Like Deuteronomy, the book stresses obedience to the law (the covenant), and the cause-and-effect relationship of obedience and blessing, disobedience and punishment. Obedience to the law and the covenant is urged upon Joshua (1:7–8), upon the Transjordan tribes (22:5), and upon the people (23:6,16; 24:15). These references emphasize the law, i.e., the Mosaic Covenant, but the book also emphasizes the Abrahamic Covenant when it speaks of the promises about the land.

Two covenant renewal ceremonies are recorded in the book. The first took place on Mt. Ebal, when Joshua built an altar to the Lord and offered sacrifices (Josh 8:30–35). There, “Joshua copied on stones the law of Moses, which he had written” (8:32). Then he read the entire Law to the people (8:34–35). In doing so, Joshua was fulfilling the requirements that a king was supposed to keep (Deut 17:18–19).

The covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem in chap. 24 is also very significant. See especially vv. 25–27, where Joshua wrote the words of their covenant renewal in “the Book of the Law of God,” and erected a large stone as a witness and a memorial for them. The people committed themselves to keeping the law, as well (24:16–18,21–22,24,27).

The covenant is even important in the book’s emphasis on the ark of the covenant. In chap. 3, it occupied an especially important place in the account of the crossing of the Jordan, as well as in chap. 8, where it was part of the covenant renewal ceremony. The ark was a symbol of God’s very presence, and the covenant was a sign of his relationship with his people. In chap. 3, the priests were responsible for carrying the ark, in accordance with the Mosaic legislation.<sup>10</sup> Since the ark was the symbol of God’s presence, a healthy distance was to be maintained between it and the people (Josh 3:4). The ark is referred to in various ways in this chapter, the most common phrase being “the ark of the covenant.”<sup>11</sup> In chap. 8, the ark was at the center of the entirety of the ceremonies when Israel recommitted itself to the covenant (8:33), again highlighting the close relationship between the ark and the covenant.

## OBEDIENCE

Closely related to the idea of the covenant is Israel’s adherence to it. Over and over again in the book, we read of the importance of obedience to the law. God charged Joshua to obey all the words of the law (1:7). Joshua charged the Transjordan tribes to obey God’s commandments, to keep the law (22:5), and he charged the entire nation to

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<sup>9</sup> On passages that stand in tension with these affirmations, see the commentary on 10:40–43 and 21:43–45.

<sup>10</sup> Deut 10:8; cf. 31:9. The ark was to be carried with poles, and not touched: Exod 25:12–13; 37:3–5; Num 4:4–15.

<sup>11</sup> On this point, see further the commentary on 3:3.

do the same thing (23:6). In the context of the covenant renewal ceremony, the people committed themselves to serving and obeying the LORD (24:24).

The law of Moses is mentioned eight times in the book of Joshua, and, in each case, the context concerns obedience to this law. Either Joshua or the people were being urged to obey it (1:7,8; 22:5; 23:6), or they were committing themselves to do so (24:24), or they were copying and reading it (8:32,34), or they were actually obeying it (8:31).

The point is made in Joshua (echoing a motif found more prominently in Deuteronomy) that possession and retention of the land were tied to Israel's obedience to the law. In Joshua, for example, the complete possession of the land and extermination of its inhabitants is seen as a result of Joshua's obedience to God's command (10:40; 11:20, 23; 23:9–13). Furthermore, Israel's continued possession of the land was tied to its obedience (23:9–13,15–16).<sup>12</sup>

Not only is obedience to God's law important, however, but also, more immediately, obedience to his specific commands. In several places, we see God commanding something and Joshua and the people carefully obeying, down to the smallest detail. Examples of this include 3:8,15; 4:2–3,10,12; 5:2–3; 8:8,27; 8:30–35; and 11:6,9.

An obvious example of Israel *disobeying* God's commands and suffering the consequences is in the case of Achan in chap. 7 (cf. 6:18; 7:1). Other examples include the texts where Israel failed to drive out the inhabitants of various territories (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:11–12; 19:47).

In addition to obedience to God, obedience to Joshua's commands is also important in the book. Israel committed itself to obey Joshua and to punish those who did not (1:17–18). They obeyed Joshua's instructions in the matter of memorializing the crossing (4:8,10). In this case, Joshua's instructions had come from Moses and God himself (4:10). Thus, obedience to Joshua was also obedience to the LORD. Joshua was revered all the days of his life, a process that had begun on the occasion of the crossing and the memorializing of that crossing (4:14). Joshua's instructions at Jericho about Rahab were obeyed to the letter (6:22–23). The nation obeyed Joshua when he told them to bring out the five kings who had opposed Israel at Gibeon (10:22–24). And, the Transjordan tribes fully obeyed Joshua in what he and Moses had commanded them (22:2–3).

## **PURITY OF WORSHIP (HOLINESS)**

The idea of Israel's separate identity in Canaan—especially religiously—pervades the book of Joshua. That is the essence of holiness in the Old Testament: the Hebrew word **קדש** (“holy”) has at its core the idea of separateness—away from the everyday and the mundane, from evil, and set apart for the sacred, the good.

The word “holy” only occurs three times in the book (5:15; 24:19,26), but the idea is much more important than these three references would indicate. The fact that the Israelites were to maintain a distance of 1000 yards between themselves and the ark of the covenant showed them that theirs was a holy God; they could not get too close to him (3:4; cf. Exod 19:12–13,23–24). In Josh 24:19, Joshua confronted the people with the

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<sup>12</sup>. In Deuteronomy, see Deut 4:1,25–27,40; 6:17–18; 8:1; 11:8; 30:15–20; 32:46–47.

uncomfortable fact that they could not serve the LORD, and reminded them that he was a holy and a jealous God. His holiness set him apart from them.

Wherever God was to be found, that was a holy place. He was most closely identified with the ark (see especially chap. 3), but also with the tent of meeting (18:1). When the people presented themselves “before God” at Shechem (24:1), this was undoubtedly before the ark (see the commentary on 24:1 on this point). When Joshua met the commander of the LORD’s army, he was standing on holy ground, just as Moses had been (5:15; cf. Exod 3:5).

An important passage in Joshua that speaks of holiness is chap. 5. Here we find recorded several ceremonies, all of which show the importance of ritual purity. First, there is a circumcision ceremony (5:2–9), in which those who had not been circumcised in the wilderness were now circumcised. Second, the Passover was kept (5:10–12), after which the manna stopped appearing and the Israelites ate from the fruit of the land. Third, Joshua met the commander of the LORD’s army (5:13–15). In this little episode, the key to the encounter lies in Joshua’s falling face down to the ground and in the commander’s indications that Joshua was standing on holy ground and that he should remove his sandals (vv. 14–15).

Thus, we can see that all three episodes concern holiness in one way or another. That such spiritual preparations preceded the actual “conquest” of the land illustrates the biblical priorities, i.e., proper relationship with God was the key to success (see 1:7–8; cf. Matt 6:33). Thus, the real “action” of the book is delayed by several important—even essential—preliminaries: memorializing God’s miraculous help (chap. 4) and sanctifying the people (chap. 5). The tasks ahead of battle were far too important to enter lightly—to enter unprepared in any way, including spiritually.

Another passage that speaks of purity of worship is found in Joshua 22. Here, when the Transjordan tribes built an altar of commemoration, the other tribes were greatly concerned that this was a rival and illegitimate altar of sacrifice, which would compromise the purity of the one true altar of the LORD.

Holiness is rooted in God’s very nature. Leviticus 19, a crucial chapter in a book on holiness, shows that the commands to be holy are rooted in God’s own character, since he himself is holy (19:2): “Be holy, because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” This command was behind Israel’s self-understanding in the land of Canaan. An important insight into holiness is given us in Numbers 16, as well. This chapter concerns the rebellion of various individuals against the authority God had given Moses and Aaron. In v. 38 (Heb 17:3), the censers of the sons of Korah are seen as holy because they had been offered to the Lord (see vv. 17–18).

Thus, we see that *dedication to the Lord* is an important part of the concept of holiness. Such dedication had the effect of separating the individual who was dedicated out and away from the ordinary or the profane (i.e., the common). This is the thrust of the rituals in Joshua 5. Circumcision marked the dedication of the individual to the Lord, to the covenant he had established with Abraham and his descendants. The Passover observance marked the individuals’ dedication to him, as well, and commemorated the separating out of the Israelites from the Egyptians years earlier.

It is here that we enter another of the book’s important motifs: the destruction of the Canaanites. This destruction was accomplished in order that the Israelites might take possession of the land, as well as to punish the great wickedness of the Canaanites.

However, it was also for the purpose of cleansing the land, of dedicating its inhabitants—even its cities and its booty—to the LORD. These were to be devoted to the LORD for destruction, emphasizing his absolute holiness and his intolerance of evil. When the land and its inhabitants were thus “dedicated” to him, they became “holy” and thus fit to be his people’s inheritance.<sup>13</sup>

## **GODLY LEADERSHIP<sup>14</sup>**

The beginning of the book of Joshua places the reader at a significant transitional point. Israel’s great leader, Moses, who was “the servant of the LORD,” had just died and Joshua, who was merely “Moses’ aide,” was his designated replacement (1:1; cf. Num 27:15–23; Deut 31:1–8; 34:9). Moses was a prophet par excellence: no one had arisen since in Israel like him (Deut 34:10–12). He was the great lawgiver and one whom the LORD knew face to face, who had performed mighty deeds in the sight of all Israel.

Moses’ stature as the LORD’s servant is reiterated in Joshua. He is called “the servant of the LORD” 14 times in the book (out of a total of 18 times in the entire Old Testament). The book carefully avoids calling Joshua this until the time of his death, when it is clear that he had indeed fulfilled his obligations as Israel’s leader and Moses’ successor (24:29).

Joshua stepped into Moses’ shoes and did the job well that was expected of him. God promised him his own presence, just as he had been with Moses (1:5; 3:7), and he exalted Joshua in the people’s eyes (3:7; 4:14). Over and over again in the book, what Joshua said carried the authoritative weight of what God said, just as Moses’ words had. People listened to him and obeyed (see, e.g., 1:12–18; 4:1–8, 15–18; 6:2–11; etc.). In this respect, this theme is tied in closely with that of obedience, which we have discussed above.

The key to Joshua’s success lay not in administrative or military genius—although he appears to have had abilities in both areas—but in his devotion to God. God instructed him that he was to be rooted in the law, and therein would lie his success (1:7–8). In this regard, Joshua was to be a leader in the model of the godly kings, for whom the key to success was also a rootedness in the law, not a dependence on their own wealth or military might (Deut 17:14–20). Joshua wrote the words of the law at the covenant renewal ceremony on Mt. Ebal (8:32), just as a king was to do (Deut 17:18–19).

The results of Joshua’s godly leadership were impressive: the land was pacified, the people settled in their allotted territories, and he was buried in his own land at a ripe old age (24:29–31). Things had gone well, and not one of the LORD’s good promises had failed (21:43–45).

Yet, the book contains several hints that all was not well. Several foreign peoples remained entrenched within Israel’s borders (13:13; 15:63; 16:10; 17:11–12; 19:47), and this fact would come back to haunt Israel during the period of the judges. Furthermore, even though the nation served the LORD during Joshua’s days (24:31), we learn from the book of Judges that a new generation arose who did not know the LORD nor what he had done for Israel (Judg 2:10). This is a tragic fact, although curious, since so much

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<sup>13</sup> For further development of the motif of the destruction of the Canaanites, see the excursus on “Destruction and Devoted Things in Joshua” at the end of chap. 6.

<sup>14</sup> See also the section above, on “Joshua: Title and Man.”

emphasis had been placed upon remembering what God had done (especially chap. 4) and on obeying (see chaps. 23–24). Had there been a godly leader in place like Joshua, the situation certainly would not have deteriorated to the degree that it did. The book of Judges affirms the value of godly leadership when it states ““In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit” (Judg 17:6; 21:25). If Israel had had a king in place, leading as a godly king should (Deut 17:18–20), then things would have been different.<sup>15</sup>

Joshua did not designate a successor, as Moses had done, and Butler has suggested that this fault can be laid at his feet.<sup>16</sup> However, this is not clear, because nowhere is Joshua condemned for not having done this. Nevertheless, what can be asserted with clarity is that, despite the positive picture of Joshua’s leadership in the book, its effects were short-lived. In this regard, the lessons of godly leadership laid out in Deut 17:14–20 are confirmed: Israel needed godly leaders who depended on God, or it would fall into apostasy. Almost no judge provided such leadership in the way that Moses and Joshua had done so.

## REST

The idea of the possession of the land as the accomplishment of God’s “rest” is important as we consider the book of Joshua.<sup>17</sup> The “rest” is a gift, part of the inheritance. The inheritance is of two parts: (1) the land and (2) “rest” from conflict with enemies.<sup>18</sup> This was promised from the beginning. To the Transjordan tribes, Joshua said “Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: The LORD your God is giving you rest and has granted you this land” (Josh 1:13). This refers back to promises given in Num 32:20–22 and repeated in Deut 3:18–20. The idea of rest for the entire nation from their enemies is found in such passages as Deut 12:10 and 25:19, and it is echoed in the summarizing passages in Josh 21:44 and 23:1. In two places, we read that the land itself had rest from war.<sup>19</sup> This anticipates the same idea repeated several times in Judges: “And the land had rest XX years.”<sup>20</sup>

Typologically, the New Testament equates the Old Testament concept of rest with entering into Christ’s “rest.” Hebrews 3 and 4 develops this in greatest detail, and speaks of God resting on the seventh day of creation. Hebrews 4 quotes several times from Psalm 95, mentioning the rebellious wilderness generation, whose disobedience prevented them from entering the Lord’s rest (building upon Heb 3:7–11, quoting all of

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<sup>15</sup> See D. M. Howard, Jr., “The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets,” *WTJ* 52 (1990), 101–15.

<sup>16</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Understanding the Basic Themes of Joshua* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 27; *idem*, “The Theology of Joshua,” *Review and Expositor* 95 (1998), 214. For Butler, the book of Joshua is a “biography of a leader,” and the theme of Joshua’s leadership is paramount (*Basic Themes of Joshua*, 6–16, 23–34). However, as important as the leadership theme may be, to elevate it to a status as the primary theme of the book, and to classify the book as a biography, seems to stretch the evidence overmuch.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard von Rad, “There Remains Still a Rest for the People of God: An Investigation of a biblical Conception,” 79–93.

<sup>18</sup> The passages in Joshua about Israel or the land having rest are the following: 1:13, 15; 11:23; 14:15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1.

<sup>19</sup> Josh 11:23; 14:15; cf. Deut 12:9–10; 25:19; 2 Sam 7:1, 11; 1 Kgs 8:56.

<sup>20</sup> Judg 3:11; 3:30; 5:31; 8:28.

Ps. 95:7d–11!). The offer of rest to that generation was rejected, but in the “today” of Ps 95:7d and Heb 3:7, 15; 4:7, the offer is repeated. Hebrews 4:8 mentions Joshua, under whom the rebellious generation was *not* allowed to enter the land; it was rather a new generation to whom the offer of rest was made. This was an offer that was to be appropriated in each generation.