

A CRITICAL INTRODUCTION OF THE BOOK OF JOSHUA

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Title and Purpose

The book of Joshua is named after its main human character, Joshua, the son of Nun, the servant of Moses. The book details the partial fulfillment of God's promise to give the land of the Canaanites to the Israelite people under the leadership of Joshua. While Joshua is the key human character in the story, it is ultimately Yahweh that takes center stage during the battles of the conquest. In many ways, the book of Joshua details a relatively bright time in the history of the people of Israel. Prior to the time of Joshua, a generation of Israelites perished in the wilderness on account of their unbelief. After the time of Joshua, a generation of Israelites rebelled against Yahweh, doing what was considered "right in their own eyes." One could argue that the book of Joshua was intended to teach the people the importance of being faithful to Yahweh's covenant in order to experience his blessings as a holy community.

Authorship

Regarding the authorship of the book of Joshua, Marten Woudstra states, "Experts are divided about few books in the OT as they are about the book of Joshua. Both the date and the authorship (editing) of the book are subjects of continuing controversy."¹ Much of the confusion surrounding the authorship of the book of Joshua is related to matters of source criticism that are beyond the scope of this paper.² Instead of focusing on the sources behind Joshua, this introduction is concerned with the final form of the literary work. Three major schools of thought on the authorship of the book of Joshua exist in the academic community: a Traditio-Conservative School, a Literary-Critical School, and a Traditio-Historical School.

The Literary-Critical school and the Traditio-Historical school overlap each other significantly in terms of presuppositions about the sources that supposedly lay behind the book of Joshua. For the Literary-Critical school, Joshua is the composite work of the editor(s) that constructed the Pentateuch. Some have concluded that Joshua's supposed relationship to the Pentateuch sources makes a strong case for Joshua being included in what is commonly referred to as the "Hexateuch."³ Such a conclusion would obviously impact one's approach to interpretation and the dating of the book's composition. As for the Traditio-Historical school, while retaining some aspects of the literary-critical approach, this school of thought's focus is

¹ Marten H Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 5.

² For a detailed and sustained engagement with source critical issues in the book of Joshua, see Pekka Pitkänen, *Joshua*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Nottingham, England : Downers Grove, Illinois: Apollos ; InterVarsity Press, 2010), 101–7; Trent Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary - Joshua*, ed. Bruce Manning Metzger, David Allan Hubbard, and Glenn W Barker (Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982), xxviii–xxx; Robert G Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 55–9; Richard D Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

³ See Gerhard von Rad, *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (London: SCM, 1984), 1–78 for more details on this subject.

more on a particular redactor that was heavily influenced by the book of Deuteronomy. A man named, Martin Noth, popularized this position. He argued “for a continuing history-work in the Old Testament from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, written by the Deuteronomist.”⁴ Therefore, one’s understanding of the authorship and date of composition of the book of Deuteronomy will also impact their understanding of Joshua respectively. Obviously, if one accepted either of the two schools of thought mentioned above, much more work would need to be done in order to establish a possible author or date of composition for the book of Joshua.

This leaves the Traditio-Conservative school of thought to be considered.⁵ In his chapter on Joshua in the *New Bible Commentary*, Bruce Waltke writes, “On the issue of authorship some scholars, following the Talmud (c. AD 500), assign the book to Joshua himself. They support this by noting that Rahab is said to be still alive at the time of writing (6:25) and that the author, using ‘we’, includes himself among those that crossed the Jordan (5:1).”⁶ The essence, then, of the traditio-conservative school of thought, is to attribute the composition of the book of Joshua in its final form to Joshua, barring, of course, the account of his death in Joshua 24, which they believe was most likely added by Eleazar, the son of Aaron.⁷ If the final form of the book can be attributed to Joshua, then the date of the book would depend heavily upon how one dates the Exodus event. However, regardless of whether one dates the exodus event to the 15th century or the 12th century, this school would still place the composition of Joshua firmly in the second millennium. It simply cannot be denied that the book of Joshua references Joshua as writing (Joshua 24:26). Furthermore, there is overwhelming evidence, as Richard Hess has demonstrated in his commentary, that substantial portions of the book “cannot otherwise be explained or can best be explained than by tracing their origin to the second millennium.”⁸ Hess mentions nine evidences of antiquity in the book of Joshua. They are as follows in an abbreviated form:⁹

1. The description of the borders of Canaan in the Pentateuch and in Joshua 1:4 matches the Egyptian understanding Canaan in second-millennium BC sources, where the cities of Byblos, Tyre, Sidon, Acco and Hazor form part of the land.
2. Joshua 2 parallels with ancient Near Eastern cultures of the second-millennium BC.

⁴ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, 7.

⁵ This section is adapted from Casey Hough’s paper, “The Dating of Joshua and Its Interpretive implications,” submitted to Dr. Harold Mosley for the seminar, *Interpreting Former Prophets*.

⁶ D. A. Carson et al., eds., *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, 4th Edition. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 233.

⁷ Tremper Longman and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 109n7.

⁸ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries v. 6 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 27–33.

3. Joshua 3:18 lists the groups of people whom God will drive out before Israel. Among these are three groups that have a distinctive association with second millennium with the second millennium: the Hivites, the Perizzites, and the Gergashites.
4. The act of God in bringing down the walls of Jericho has a parallel in a Hittite text.
5. The list of items that Achan stole fits best in the latter half of the second millennium BC.
6. The Gibeonites of Joshua 9 occupied the Benjaminite plateau that extends from Jerusalem in the south to Bethel in the north.
7. The names of the defeated kings in Joshua 10 and 11 provide clues to the origins of key narratives found in other parts of the Old Testament.
8. In Joshua 15:14, the names of the three Anakites appear, Sheshai, Abiman and Talmai. Sheshai and Talmai are Hurrian names, originating in the Hurrian culture to the north Palestine which was influential in 1550-1200 BC. Ahiman is a West Semitic “Canaanite” name.
9. Joshua 24:2-27 contains a report of a covenant that, in its form and content, most closely resembles the Hittite vassal-treaty structure unique to the second millennium BC.

In conclusion, regardless of where one stands on the issue of authorship and final redaction, the Hess’ evidence demonstrates that substantial portions of the book were either composed or came from sources that belong to the second millennium, and could very well have come from Joshua himself.

Occasion

Given the fact that the authorship and date of composition of the book of Joshua are disputed and unlikely to be resolved with complete satisfaction, the occasion for the writing of the book must be kept fairly broad. Eugene Merrill’s comments on the “purpose” of the book of Joshua are helpful. He writes, “The purpose of the book of Joshua is to show the fulfillment of God’s covenant promise to patriarchs to give the land of Canaan to their descendants (Gen 12:2; 15:6; Deut 30:20). Not one of his promises to the house of Israel failed (Josh 21:45).”¹⁰ Merrill’s statement is applicable for what J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams would call a “succession of audiences.” In other words, a specific audience does not necessarily have to be in view in order to understand and benefit from the book of Joshua. One does not have to know who the final author/redactor was or when the final form was accepted to appreciate and understand the occasion of the historiography of the book of Joshua.¹¹

¹⁰ Eugene H Merrill, Mark F Rooker, and Michael A Grisanti, *The World and The Word: An Introduction to The Old Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H Academic, 2011), 279.

¹¹ See V. Philips Long, *The Art of Biblical History*, Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation v. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994); V. Philips Long, “Historiography of the Old Testament,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W Baker and Bill Arnold (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 145–75; Iain W Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Walter C Kaiser, *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998) for scholarly discussions on the matter of Israelite historiography.

Context

The book of Joshua details the historical events that followed the death of Moses up until the death of Joshua. Those details center on Yahweh's work to fulfill his promise to give Abraham's descendants the land of the Canaanites. Yahweh performs his work through the leadership of Joshua, the son of Nun, the servant of Moses. Ultimately, the specific timeframe for these events depends on how one dates the Exodus event.¹²

Beyond the question of historical context, there lies the issue of the nature of the conquest. Scholars have presented several suggestions. Some have suggested that the conquest never happened on the basis of the conviction that Israel "did not even exist until the Persian period or later."¹³ This position has been called the "total rejection model." Others have suggested an immigration model, which posits a "peaceful infiltration" of the Canaanite land.¹⁴ Still others hold to a model of conquest referred to as a "peasant revolt,"¹⁵ which suggests that a "small number of slave-labor captives" overthrew the indigenous people of the land. A final model to consider is the "Biblical Conquest Model," which takes the biblical account at face value. This model recognizes that the Israelites entered the land by force, and that despite conflicting archaeological evidence; nothing has been discovered that requires a rejection of the Bible's account.¹⁶

Theology

In their popular book, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, Tremper Longman and Raymond Dillard point out five theological motifs¹⁷ that stem from the influence of

¹² For more details on the historical context, see David M Howard, *Joshua*, vol. 5, *The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Scripture* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 46–50.

¹³ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 126.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Pitkänen, *Joshua*; Howard, *Joshua*, 5:; Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*; K. Lawson Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (New York; London: T & T Clark, 2009); Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*; Merrill, Rooker, and Grisanti, *The World and the Word* for examples of this model.

¹⁷ Howard identified "seven major themes," adding God's promises, obedience, purity of worship, and rest while excluding the unity of Israel and holy war. Howard, *Joshua*, 5:56–64.

Deuteronomy on the author of Joshua.¹⁸ They are as follows: Holy War, The Land, The Unity of Israel, The Role of Joshua, and The Covenant.

The concept of Holy War is closely related to the concept of “the ban” or the *herem*. Admittedly, a precise definition of “the ban” is difficult to ascertain.¹⁹ It essentially means to devote to destruction, but must be nuanced enough to include a devotion of items to Yahweh as well. In Holy War, the Israelites were obeying the express command of Yahweh to destroy the inhabitants of the land according to the principles of war outlined in Deuteronomy.²⁰ For some, Holy War would mean preventative measures to protect the purity of the people of Israel. For others, Holy War would mean retributive actions to punish the rebellion of the people in the land. Yet, in both circumstances, Yahweh was the active agent in Holy War carrying out his purposes according to his plan for the sake of righteousness.

The theological significance of the land in Joshua is hard to overstate. Occupying the land is the goal. Expulsion from the land is the threat. The largest portion of book is dedicated to detailing the division and apportioning of the land to the tribes of Israel. This theological significance, while being important for Deuteronomy, is ultimately rooted in the promises to the Patriarchs that are recorded in the book of Genesis. From the very beginning, Yahweh promised land for Abraham's descendants. The book of Joshua is the culmination of those promises.

The unity of Israel relates to nature of the nation. When Joshua leads with integrity and the people follow him, Yahweh blesses them with victory by fighting for them. However, when the people disobey their leader, judgment falls on the whole nation, not just the individual. This concept has been called “corporate solidarity,” which stresses the individual’s relationship and responsibility to the national covenant. One does not need to look any farther than the account of Achan’s sin (Josh 7) to see the importance of understanding corporate solidarity in the life of the people of Israel.

In terms of the role of Joshua, he provides an example of Godly leadership to future generations. Though it is not specifically stated in the book of Joshua, if one understands it to be the beginning of a Deuteronomic history, then is not hard to imagine that Joshua prefigured the role a godly king was to play in the life of the people of Israel. Furthermore, Joshua’s obedience to Yahweh's law served as a reminder to the people that God was faithful to bless those who were faithful to him.

Canon

Finally, the book of Joshua plays a significant role in the canon of Scripture. Not only does it testify to Yahweh's faithfulness, but also points to litany of biblical-theological themes

¹⁸ Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 129–31.

¹⁹ Philip E Satterthwaite and J. G McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Historical Books* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2012), 46–47.

²⁰ See Deuteronomy 7:1-26; 20:1-20; 21:10-14; 25:17-19

that will be fulfilled and properly interpreted in light of the coming of Christ. In Hebrews 4, the author highlights the failure of the conquest generation to enter into God's rest. Instead of Joshua bringing the people rest, Jesus would bring God's people into God's promised land to enjoy God's eternal rest.

Outline²¹

- I. Preparations for Inheriting the Land (1:1-5:15)
 - a. Instructions for Inheriting the Land (1:1-18)
 - b. A Foreigner's Welcome (2:1-24)
 - c. Crossing the Jordan (3:1-5:1)
 - d. Ritual Preparations (5:2-15)

- II. Inheriting the Land (6:1-12:24)
 - a. The Destruction of Jericho (6:1-27)
 - b. Covenant Disobedience (7:1-26)
 - c. The Destruction of Ai (8:1-29)
 - d. Covenant Renewal (8:30-35)
 - e. The Gibeonite Treaty Established and Tested (9:1-10:27)
 - f. Southern Campaign Completed (10:28-43)
 - g. Northern Campaign Begun (11:1-15)
 - h. Northern Campaign Completed (11:16-23)
 - i. List of Conquered Kings and Land (12:1-24)

- III. Apportioning the Land (13:1-21:45)
 - a. The Command to Distribute the Land (13:1-7)
 - b. The Transjordan Distribution Recalled (13:8-33)
 - c. The Cisjordan Distribution Introduced (14:1-5)
 - d. Judah's Inheritance (14:6-15:63)
 - e. Joseph's Inheritance (16:1-17:18)
 - f. The Other Tribe's Inheritance (18:1-19:51)
 - g. Joshua's Inheritance (19:49-50)
 - h. The Cisjordan Distribution Concluded (19:51)
 - i. The Cities of Refuge (20:1-9)
 - j. The Levitical Cities (21:1-42)
 - k. The Land Distributions Concluded (21:43-45)

- IV. Farewells (22:1-24:33)
 - a. Joshua's Farewell to the Transjordan Tribes (22:1-8)
 - b. A Crises of Loyalties (22:9-34)
 - c. Joshua's Farewell to All Israel (23:1-16)
 - d. Covenant Renewal (24:1-28)
 - e. Conclusion - Burial Notices (24:29-33)

²¹ Taken from Howard, *Joshua*, 5:.

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