



# The Role of Law in The Book of Joshua

For Israel, obedience to God meant participating in a relationship that offered strength, security, and rest.

by Larry G. Herr

**A**LTHOUGH WE EMPHASIZE THAT IT IS THE grace of God that saves us through faith, the Book of Joshua reminds us that obedience to God's law still plays a role. Throughout the Book of Joshua, God keeps his promises. After the promise of the land was first given, there was a very long delay, but Israel finally received it. Israel attained the land through obedience within a saving relationship with God.

Indeed, the whole narrative is designed to tell us how the oft-repeated promise to the fathers of the gift of the land was fulfilled. The first five books of the Bible, or Pentateuch, bring us to the borders of the Promised Land, but the actual attainment of the goal still hangs in the balance.

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The story of gaining the land is told in three main parts:

- I. The conquest of western Canaan (chap. 1-12)
- II. The allotment of the Promised Land to the tribes (chap. 13-21)
- III. Joshua's Farewell Addresses (Chap. 22-24)

## Israelite Nomads and Settled Canaanites

**T**he most important cultural factor to keep in mind while reading Joshua is that the newly arrived Israelites were nomads, wanderers living in tents, while the Canaanites lived in sophisticated, permanent walled cities. After each major conquering battle the Israelites "returned . . . to the camp at Gilgal" (Joshua 10:43, NIV). They did not settle immediately in towns and villages, but kept to their tents as they had for a generation while wandering in the wilderness.

This meant that the Canaanites probably

viewed them as temporary upstarts on a raid to loot the land. Soon they would leave and disappear into the desert, from where they had come. They probably thought of Israel much as later Israelites in the time of Gideon thought of the Midianites—a scourge to be endured until their gods saw fit to end it.

Nomadism also meant that Israel's army was not a professionally organized fighting machine. It was made up of ragtag guerrilla militias with loyalties stronger to the tribe than the central nation. Strong centrifugal forces were ready to tear them apart. The story of Achan is important because it shows how a scandal (a member of one tribe caused the death of members of other tribes) could have split the delicate tribal structure apart. Only Joshua's quick concern, God's direct involvement, and the strength of the punishment kept Joshua in control.

Indeed, formidable measures were necessary to keep Israel strong. When God told the Israelites to kill everyone in Jericho and dedicate all booty to him, he was asserting this central control. No one was to be favored; everything was to be given to God in a practice known in the ancient world as *herem*, meaning "ban" or "taboo." By being dedicated to God, everything was taboo to Israel. This practice was applied only at the beginning of the conquest and for resisting cities.

When Israel entered the land, they encountered a tightly knit political structure of allied Canaanite city-states, each with subordinate towns and villages with agricultural hinterlands. Most of the people lived in walled compounds for protection. A row of large standing stones at the town of Gezer, mentioned as one of the allied cities Israel defeated in their southern campaign, was probably a monument to such an alliance, each stone standing for an allied city.

In the story of the spies at Jericho, the harlot Rahab lives in a house on the wall. In ancient cities, the outer houses were built tightly

against each other, forming a defensive ring around the settlement. The outer wall of the house was thus the wall of the city.

The political structure of Israel had religious overtones. In the past, certain scholars called attention to the ancient Greek institution called *amphictyony*, especially the one at Delphi in which 12 tribes were bound together by religious obligations to a central sanctuary with regularly celebrated festivals and a code of laws. Although the parallels are striking, there seems to have been no connection with the Israelite league, because they were separated by about 600 years. Most researchers today are content to characterize Israel as a league of tribes sworn by a fairly basic covenant of unification.

Holy war among nomads in the ancient world was not the modern *jihad* we hear so much about, which promises favor in the next life as the paramount reward. Instead, it was a voluntary response to a summons of war given in the name of the Divine Warrior (*Yabweh Seba'ot* for Israel) to whom the tribes had sworn allegiance. It was intended to unite the tribes under divine authority when they protected their lands.

## The Conquest of Canaan

The biblical date for the conquest is around 1400 B.C., using chronological information dating the dedication of Solomon's temple to the 480th year after the Exodus (1 Kings 6:1). This date was taken for granted by everyone until the early 20th century, and is still accepted by many conservative Christian researchers. Most scholars, however, have opted for a date around 1200 B.C. based on the destruction of several Palestinian cities at that time and the apparently sudden appearance of small villages in the hill country with characteristic features identified as Israelite.

Recent work has scarred this neat synthesis

somewhat. Archaeologists are beginning to realize that many of the destructions were probably caused by forces other than Israel, including Egyptians, Philistines, Hittites, and local fires. Likewise, anthropological studies have emphasized a rising consensus that nomads, used to living in tents, settle in towns only after several generations. The transition between tent and town living may take as long as 200 years. If Israelite settlements were built around 1200 B.C., one can suggest a considerably earlier date for the nomadic arrival of Israel in Canaan.

But in 1400 B.C. Egypt controlled Canaan (at least the coastal plain) and the Philistines did not arrive until around 1200 B.C. Yet the Book of Joshua mentions nothing about the Egyptians and assumes that the Philistines were present. The date for the events recorded in this book is thus still a problem.

The method of the conquest itself is a topic of hot debate. Three basic theories about the conquest predominate among archeological and biblical historians. First, the military invasion theory relies on the account in the Book of Joshua at face value. This was the general



view until the late 19th century. Here, the conquest account in Joshua describes three campaigns: (1) There was the thrust into the center of the country by conquering Jericho and Ai. (2) When the Gibeonites allied with Israel they broke a treaty with the city states of southern Canaan, precipitating a war between the former allies. Israel, as Gibeon's new ally, responded and used the opportunity to defeat most of the cities in southern Canaan. (3) This left only the northern Canaanites, who put together a massive alliance led by the largest city in Canaan, Hazor. After winning this battle, the tribes divided the land.

In reading the story of the Israelites marching around Jericho, it should be remembered that ancient cities were by no means large. Jericho itself was a moderately sized ancient city, covering an area about 300 by 150 meters. It would take less than 15 minutes to walk around it, and one would still have enough energy to clamber over the walls after walking around it seven times.

The major archaeological problems with the account in Joshua include the lack of settlements from this time at Jericho and Ai. Archaeologists have found destroyed walls at Jericho, but the destruction seems to have occurred 100 to 200 years too early. A recent analysis of the pottery from this destruction suggests a later date more in keeping with the biblical date of the conquest, but the pottery could just as easily come from 100 years earlier. Likewise, Ai was inhabited only from about 3000 to 2300 B.C. and then again from about 1150 to 1050 B.C. There have been many attempts to solve these problems, but none has been satisfactory as yet.

Even the Book of Joshua implies that the conquest was not completed by the end of the book. One verse says Joshua fought for a long time (11:18), while another context suggests it lasted five years (14:10). Moreover, at the end, when the inheritances were parceled out, Joshua had not finished the conquest (13:1).

Some scholars have noticed that the Book of Judges seems to favor a gradual, more protracted conquest and settlement process performed more by individual tribes than the whole people acting in concert. They have further suggested that Israel arrived in small groups, perhaps conforming to the tribes, gradually infiltrating the land and coalescing into a tribal league. This second view radically modifies Joshua's account.

The third view holds that, like a communist revolution, disaffected, poverty-stricken groups within Canaanite society rebelled from their rich and oppressive masters, joined a band of infiltrators who worshipped Yahweh, and established a league of tribes known as Israel. They fled their overlords in the Canaanite cities on the plains and built small, poor settlements in the hill country, which was largely unoccupied at this time.

Most students of the conquest and settlement of Israel incorporate some elements of all three theories. Typically, they suggest that a band of escaped Egyptian slaves entered Canaan in raiding forays, inspiring disaffected local groups to join them (such as the Gibeonites). Gradually they settled the empty hill country, eking out a living in small villages.

Support for this view comes from the Amarna Letters, correspondence from the kings of Canaanite city-states to the Egyptian pharaoh. The letters date to the 14th century B.C., about half a century after the biblical date for the conquest, but more than a hundred years before the late date. The letters frequently complain about a group of people known as the "Habiru," the linguistic equivalent of "Hebrew." It is clear that the term is not an ethnic designation, but a social term used by many ancient societies to indicate people outside the established order of society. In the Bible, the term *Hebrew* is used only in contexts in which confirmed members of society are involved with sojourning Israelites. The term *Hebrew* is thus most likely

derived from *Habiru*, although most doubt the Habiru of the Amarna Letters *were* the Israelites. The Amarna Letters do suggest the social forces at work when Israel arrived on the scene.

## Literary Considerations

The Book of Joshua is named after its most prominent hero. Although Jewish tradition, recorded in the Talmud, says Joshua was also the author, the book itself is anonymous. Early scholars noted that the book is the logical completion of the promises in the Pentateuch, the first five books in the Bible, and so attached the same authorship theories involving the four sources JEDP, calling the resultant six books the Hexateuch. However, most scholars today recognize much in common stylistically and theologically with the Book of Deuteronomy. The gift of the land is repeatedly said to be dependent on Israel's obedience to God, exactly as it is in Deuteronomy. Virtually all scholars thus accept the unnamed Deuteronomistic Historian or Deuteronomist as the author.

There is no doubt that this inspired historian used several sources for his work, naming one the Book of Jashar (10:13). The list of cities and boundaries sound like documents from archives. In fact, one list of cities, that of Judah, incorporates cities listed again elsewhere in the book as belonging to Simeon. It would seem that the Judean list came from an archival document made after Simeon was absorbed into Judah, most likely sometime after the reign of David, while that of Simeon stems from an earlier date. The Levitical cities were not all occupied until the ninth century B.C., suggesting a possible date for that source.

Certain parts of the text have an eyewitness quality (chapters 5-7, for example), but glosses (additions) like "to this day" show the final version was written by later generations. It

would thus appear that the Deuteronomist used archival lists, annals of events, books of stories, and perhaps oral stories in forming his book.

There are indications in the book for the date when the Deuteronomist did his work. Joshua 10:2 says Gibeon was “like one of the royal cities.” He was probably referring to the royal cities of Israel’s monarchy, the most important cities that every Israelite knew well, such as Jerusalem, Samaria, Gezer, Megiddo, Hazor, and Lachish. That the Philistines, who arrived around 1200 B.C., were thought to be in the land at the time of Joshua (13:2) suggests that the book was written long after their arrival—during the monarchy. The use of archival sources, including information about the cities of Simeon as part of Judah and about the ninth-century Levitical cities, also suggests a date during the monarchy. The many correspondences of Joshua with King Josiah that the book brings out suggest the book was written during or shortly after his reign.

As part of the canonical collection of historical books in the Hebrew Bible belonging to the Deuteronomist—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings—Joshua received its final, edited form some time during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C. The last recorded event in this collection occurred around 561 B.C. (2 Kings 25:27-40).

Several types of literary forms appear in the book, reflecting its production from a variety of sources. Joshua’s final address is a sermon. The historical material includes stories rich in detail and others with just the bare outline. Two types of lists include those of

cities and those of boundaries; both probably were official documents from an archive, but none is complete. One side of the boundary is usually missing (Simeon and Dan have no boundaries). Some cities do not even appear (Bethlehem is missing from Judah).

The book frequently includes a type of story called “etiological saga” by many scholars. These are stories told to explain the presence of an ancient ruin or monument. Standing stones, heaps of stones, ruined cities, and large stones at the mouth of a cave are all said to be standing “to this day,” commemorating events of the conquest (4:9, 5:9, 6:25, 7:26,

etc.). Were the stories associated with these monuments simply made up? Most scholars suggest there was an event behind the monument. For instance, the name Ai means “ruin,” a logical name to give to a city you have destroyed, especially one Israel worked so hard over.

On the other hand, it is also a logical name to give a site already in ruins when you first encounter it.

There is no doubt that the Book of Joshua is heroic literature. Joshua the man was one of the great heroes on Israel’s all-time list. For this reason, some parts of the book read like the heroic literature of other ancient Near Eastern cultures. In the epic of Keret from Canaanite Ugarit, Keret “marches a day and a second, a third, a fourth day, a fifth, and sixth day; then at the [setting of the] sun on the seventh, he arrives at Udum the Great.” This is reminiscent of how Israel marches around Jericho for six days and then on the seventh arrives at satisfaction.

Heroic literature is also characterized by the involvement of the gods. In Joshua, God’s

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involvement results in many miracles, the most famous of which is when the sun stood still. The Deuteronomistic Historian knows it is an extraordinary event, even as miracles go, and it is at this point, almost as if he can hardly believe it himself, he cites the Book of Jashar to give it credibility.

After God instructs Joshua that the land is to be conquered, Israel sends spies to Jericho and crosses the Jordan into western Canaan. Because this was the great moment when Israel finally entered the Promised Land and because rituals concerning the holy ark of the covenant were important to the Deuteronomist's audience, a large part of the book is given to this event. The conquest of Ai is made difficult by Achan's sin, but the strong and immediate reaction of God and Joshua forestall the crisis of tribal fragmentation. The Israelites celebrate their initial "beachhead" into Canaan by a great sacrifice and covenant renewal at Mt. Ebal, but they naively accept the lies of the Gibeonites, making an alliance with them. Because the Gibeonites broke a covenant with other city-states, they found themselves in a war with their neighbors. This gave Israel the chance they needed to conquer the alliance of southern city-states. Although they had already won the battle, the sun stood still to allow them time to secure a clear victory. After the northern campaign, where it is specifically stated that Hazor was the only city after Ai that Israel destroyed by fire, there is a summary of all the conquests, suggesting that more work remained.

The tribal inheritances included four main geographical regions: (1) Canaan south of Jebusite Jerusalem (Judah and Simeon); (2) Canaan north of Jerusalem (Benjamin, Ephraim, and half of Manasseh); (3) Galilee (Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan); and (4) Transjordan (Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh). After stating that, although the land is not yet fully occupied (especially Syria), the allotment is first given to the

Transjordanian tribes. Along with the tribes in western Canaan, Caleb's inheritance is specially mentioned. By far most of the detail is given to Judah and the Joseph tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, probably because these were the central tribes during the late monarchy when the book was compiled. Indeed, the Galilee tribes virtually disappear in the remainder of the Old Testament. Miscellaneous allotments include the cities of refuge to protect manslaughterers from blood avengers, and the Levitical cities.

Joshua's farewell includes an exhortation to the Transjordanian tribes that, although they are settled far from the central sanctuary, they should remain true to Yahweh. On their way home they built an altar at the Jordan that angered the western tribes, apparently because it was done on their side of the river. However, when they confronted the eastern tribes about the deed, their concern was only that the eastern tribes not institute the worship of foreign gods. The eastern tribes make it clear that the altar was meant as a monument to the glory of Yahweh, and the western tribes are satisfied. Interestingly, Joshua does not figure in this story. His speech to the western tribes, exhorting them to obey God, is followed by the assembly at Shechem, which is the final covenant renewal ceremony before Joshua retires to his inheritance.

While the second half of the book, with its lists of place names and tribal allotments, is very seldom used except by geographers and archaeologists, there are a significant number of important Old Testament themes in the book. Perhaps the most important is obedience to the law of God. Israel can take the land only when they are obedient. This was not a detached, legalistic obedience that might somehow demonstrate to God Israel's worthiness. Rather, it was understood holistically and relationally. Within the relationship with God, Israel responded with

faith, confidence, trust, worship, obedience, etc. It was God at work in Israel and Israel in response to God.

Disobedience (like that of Achan) brings defeat. Almost everything Joshua does and says deals with obedience to God. He seldom does anything on his own. This implies that Israel's source of power comes from God, and that the land is a true gift from God, with Israel as his tenants. Especially obedient people, like Caleb, receive exceptional grants of land.

The Book of Joshua is the fulfillment of the repeated promises given in the Pentateuch from Genesis 12 onward. Although there are minor hints in the book that the conquest was not quick and final, the Deuteronomistic Historian probably minimizes these because he is trying to show that this was the ultimate occupation of the Promised Land in accordance with divine purpose. The goal was to show how Israel occupied as much land as possible in as short a time as possible, even bypassing some Canaanite enclaves, such as Jerusalem. The second half of the book with its dry list of cities and borders is there to confirm graphically to anyone who knew the geography of the land that this was the concrete, actual possession of the land.

The theme of covenant renewal is strongly stated in the section on the assembly at Shechem (chap. 24). This is perhaps one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament. Shechem was associated with Jacob and Joseph and apparently did not need to be conquered by Israel. It had a large temple to Baal Berit ("Lord of the Covenant"—Judges 9:4) which has probably been unearthed by archaeologists. It is likely that at this ceremony the formal covenant of the league, the 12-tribe confederacy, was made. The chapter includes five of the six parts of an ancient suzerainty treaty or political covenant between a sovereign (suzerain) nation and its satellites: preamble (24:2a—who is involved); historical pro-

logue (24:2b-13—Yahweh's benevolent deeds); stipulations (24:14-24—serve only Yahweh); preservation of the law (24:25, 26—written on stone); witnesses (24:22, 27—the people and the pillar are witnesses); and blessings and curses (8:30-35).<sup>1</sup>

One theme that we wish we could ignore, but cannot, is violence. How could God command the total extermination of the Canaanites? Today we would use the term *holocaust* for it. For many people, this concept of God is so far from what they want their God to be that they actually reject the Old Testament as part of the Bible. In what way can such violence be a revelation of the love of God?! This is not an easy question, and we cannot hope to give a completely satisfying answer.

In the attempt to begin understanding this problem, some rely on the concept of progressive revelation. That is, God's will comes in ways that humanity can understand and recognize as the divine will. Today we recognize God's will as love and grace. Our God would never kill all of Achan's family for a sin the father alone committed. To us this seems unjust, but in Achan's day everyone recognized that this was how it was done and they would not understand our way of punishment. If God had done it differently in their day, they might not have recognized it as the hand of God at all. In the ancient world, every society devoted conquered peoples to their gods, that is, destroyed them. Egypt did it; Babylon did it; the Hittites did it; the Canaanites did it; and Israel did it. Only as times slowly changed could God make his will of love known more clearly to them. This doesn't make the violence right, but Israel did not think it wrong.

Another approach, which does not tend toward the idea that later civilizations, including ours, are morally so much better than previous generations, is the reminder that God is always accommodating to human beings

whenever and wherever they have lived—even to modern believers. This does not take away from God's intentions, which the Bible clearly indicates are positive and redemptive toward created humanity, but does recommend that, even at the risk of being misunderstood by us, God meets people where they are.

Moreover, the Deuteronomistic Historian is also applying Deuteronomic law to the wicked Canaanites. While Israel for the most part is obedient, the Canaanites are drastically disobedient with their religion of fertility rites and child sacrifice. According to the law of God that Israel knew, they must therefore be punished. There is also a concern expressed in the book that the Canaanites could seduce Israel to sin with their evil practices (note the story of the altar built by the eastern tribes). Israel undoubtedly saw a preventive aspect to the command to kill. These are not happy explanations, and our world is saddened by this violence. But it was Israel's world, not ours, in which it was done. That's the best we can do.

Certainly we should not take the idea of violence and transplant it into our day to advocate holocaust, as a few people do. That was a different day, and we must interpret and apply it in light of Christian principles of respect for life and other people.

Lastly, and perhaps the theme with the most

relevant value, when the Israelites entered the Promised Land (Joshua 1:13; 11:23), they enjoyed rest from their wanderings. The wilderness was an extremely trying place. Many people died, and food and water were in short supply. Archaeology has shown that the basic climate of Palestine has not changed since Israelite times. It may appear like a desert to some of us, but, to the Israelites coming out of the desert, Palestine was incredibly productive. In Canaan, manna was no longer necessary. Metaphorically, the land flowed with milk and honey. Here they could plant trees, resting in their shade and eating their fruits. Here they could harvest some of the sweetest melons in the world. Here they could build great cities and produce enough food to feed every inhabitant and still export a surplus. This was "rest."

Undoubtedly ancient Israel saw the rest in the Promised Land typified in the Sabbath. Although Exodus 20 says the Sabbath memorializes Creation, Deuteronomy 5 says it should remind Israel of the Exodus and the gift of the land, rest in the land. From here it was just a minor step for the writer of the Book of Hebrews to connect the gift of the land with the rest Christians receive through Christ (Hebrews 3, 4). Just as Joshua gave Israel rest in the Promised Land, so Christ gives us a heavenly rest.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. There are many similarities between Joshua and Josiah, with both being portrayed by the Deuteronomistic Historian as leaders of covenant renewal movements. First, the two names mean the same thing and are actually interchangeable. Second, Joshua is portrayed in a kingly role several times: in 1:1-9 Yahweh charges Joshua much as he did Solomon (1 Kings 2:2-4). Joshua takes power immediately upon the death of Moses, unlike judges did, but like kings. Joshua performs the royal deed of partitioning the land (compare 1 Kings 4:7-19); according to Deuteronomy 17:18, it is the king who is to write the law for himself, but Joshua does it too (8:32). Third,

several of the things Joshua does are never described again until the time of Josiah: Chap. 1:7 quotes Deuteronomy 17:20, as does 2 Kings 22:2. In 1:8 Joshua is exhorted to meditate on the "Book of the Law," a phrase used elsewhere by the Deuteronomist only in connection with Josiah (2 Kings 22:8, 11). The Book of the Law is mentioned several times in Joshua, but drops from mention until Josiah's time when it is discovered in the temple. It is only Joshua and Josiah that the Deuteronomist reports as covenant mediators (Joshua 8:3-35 and 2 Kings 23:1-3). Finally, the account of the Passover in Joshua 5:10-12 fits Josiah's celebration exactly (2 Kings 23:22).