

Introduction to Joshua

Where is it in the Bible?

Joshua is the sixth book of the Old Testament, the first book following the Torah or Pentateuch. It is the first of the historical books in Christian Bibles. In the Hebrew Bible, it is first book in the second section, called Prophets or Nevi'im. It is named for its main character Joshua, Moses' assistant and the military leader who brought the Israelites into Canaan.

Who wrote it?

Joshua is part of a larger work which scholars refer to as the "Deuteronomistic History" that includes the books of Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. Together these books tell the story of Israel from the settlement in Canaan to the Babylonian exile. They were written by an author or group of authors whose theology was based on the laws and stories in Deuteronomy.

When was it written?

Scholars generally agree that the book of Joshua reached its final form during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century B.C. However, some argue that there were two "editions" of it and suggest that the first one was written during the reign of King Josiah in the late seventh century B.C.

What is it about?

The book of Joshua recounts the story of Israel's entry into Canaan following the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It tells how its inhabitants were conquered and the land was divided among the twelve tribes. Although we think of the book as history, that was not its sole purpose. The author also wanted to show that God was faithful and fulfilled the promises that had been made to Israel, God's people.

How is it structured?

- I. Entering the Land (1:1-5:15)
 - a. God Commissions Joshua (1:1-9)
 - b. Joshua Instructs the People (1:10-18)
 - c. The Spies in Jericho (2:1-24)
 - d. Crossing the Jordan (3:1-4:24)
 - e. Ritual Renewal (5:1-12)
 - f. Divine Encounter (5:13-15)
- II. Taking the Land (6:1-12:24)
 - a. The Battle of Jericho (6:1-27)
 - b. Defeat at Ai (7:1-26)
 - c. Victory at Ai (8:1-29)
 - d. Covenant Renewal at Mount Ebal (8:30-35)
 - e. Campaigns in the South (9:1-10:43)
 - i. The Treaty with the Gibeonites (9:1-27)
 - ii. The Sun Stands Still (10:1-15)
 - iii. Southern Cities Conquered (10:16-43)

- f. Campaign in the North (11:1-23)
- g. List of Defeated Kings (12:1-24)
- III. Dividing the Land (13:1-21:45)
 - a. God's Instructions to Joshua (13:1-7)
 - b. Allotments to the Eastern Tribes (13:8-33)
 - c. Allotments to the Western Tribes (14:1-19:51)
 - d. Cities of Refuge and Levitical Cities (20:1-21:42)
 - e. Summary of the Conquest (21:43-45)
- IV. Serving the Lord in the Land (22:1-24:33)
 - a. The Altar of Witness (22:1-34)
 - b. Joshua's Farewell Exhortation (23:1-16)
 - c. Renewal of the Covenant at Shechem (24:1-28)
 - d. Deaths and Burials (24:29-33)

What are some of its themes?

- **Covenant Loyalty:** Joshua 24:15 summarizes the call to covenant loyalty that is found throughout the book: "Choose this day whom you will serve ... as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." When the people are faithful to God, their efforts are blessed. When they are disobedient, there is failure. This continues the theme of blessings and curses that was introduced in Deuteronomy 11:26-32.
- **God's Faithfulness and Abiding Presence:** In spite of Israel's repeated unfaithfulness, God is faithful and remains with them. At the beginning of the book, God promises to be with Joshua (1:5, 9), and that promise is kept throughout the rest of the book.
- **Holy War:** The most challenging question surrounding the book of Joshua is the violence of the invasion of Canaan. Many people find the idea of God ordering war that leads such destruction and loss of life very difficult to understand. This is an important issue, and there are no easy answers. There are a number of things that should be kept in mind when considering it. The first is that archaeological evidence and the book itself (see 11:22; 13:1-6; 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13) indicate that the Canaanite population was not annihilated. The second is that the book of Joshua in its final form was addressed to people who were oppressed and in exile. The book provided them with encouragement and evidence of God's faithfulness and strengthened their identity as God's people. Others have argued that God, as the Creator, had the right to distribute the land in accordance with God's will and to punish sinners. This judgment applied to all people, including the Israelites. However, we should remember that "unprovoked conquest of one people by another is an act of injustice, and that injustice is often cloaked with legitimacy by claims of divine authorization. At the very least, we should be wary of any attempt to invoke the story of the conquest of Canaan as legitimation for anything in the modern world."¹
- **Jesus and Joshua:** The name *Jesus* is the Greek form of the name *Joshua*, and both mean "the LORD saves". Reading about Joshua's military campaigns in this book gives us some insight into why the people of Jesus' day expected him to use force to overthrow the Romans and reclaim the promised land.

¹ John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 195.