

## **St James by the Park – Paul Thaxter November 6<sup>th</sup> no tpresente**

Dear participants in the Christian community at St James I am really pleased that you want to pursue a more in depth study of the Book of Joshua narrative. I am not presenting a definitive view of the book but I am hopefully offering theological points and perspective as well as literary critique of this biblical text. As a follower of Jesus I deeply respect the whole biblical text and have spent much of my life trying to understand it. After more than 40 years I feel like a feeble Isaac wrestling with the Angel of the Lord as I study the bible and seek both revelation and information. My offering is resourced by many exceptional scholars on Old Testament texts and I view myself simply as an academic parasite. I just tag along, trying to keep up.

### **The church reading - Joshua 5:13-6:21 reflections on the passage.**

#### **Introduction: Joshua – just a name?**

I was in Sheffield preaching once and an Indian lady with her son came up to me after the service and she said this is my son Joshua. I said “that’s a lovely name Jesus” – she said ‘no I said Joshua’ ...I said again “that’s a lovely name Jesus” while after the 3<sup>rd</sup> verbal exchange she got a bit upset and complained to the vicar - who said “yes it does mean Joshua.” The Hebrew Yeshua in English gets transliterated as Joshua. The name Yeshua gets transliterated into Greek as ἰησοῦς which when transliterated from the **Greek** into Latin is *Iesvs*, and transliterated into English as Jesus. The hebrew name means Yahweh is salvation, God saves. (It can also have alternate spelling in Hebrew as Hoshea too!)

Instead of diving deep into this actual text of Joshua 5:13-6:21 I am going to use it as a springboard for us to see a bigger picture.

Some parts of the bible are difficult to cope with and there are texts in Joshua which on first reading seem to indicate that God has commanded the utter annihilation of a people simply so that his chosen people can have their promised land. One cannot help but think of genocide, and war crimes against humanity. So how do we understand this text and more generally the book of Joshua? I can present some hopefully helpful hints but one cannot avoid an uncomfortable aspect to this book and story. I do not want to dilute the book of its dynamic and turn God into simply a therapeutic counsellor but I also do not want to present God as a violent genocidal maniac either.

So what does the story say ...

#### **Context**

**Joshua is about taking possession of the Land** promised to Abraham. Land is a defining theme in the OT - not just a concept but real estate! The land tradition stands at the centre of Israel’s self-understanding, identity and confession. In Gen 12:1-3 God shows Abram the land God is going to give him and his descendants. In Genesis 23, Abraham bought a burial field for Sarah but by the end of the book of Genesis during a famine Abraham’s descendants end up in Egypt under the protection of one of Abraham’s descendants Joseph. Joseph asked his family to take his bones back to be buried in the promised land from where they came from. The story says they remained in Egypt for 400 years and after cruel

oppression they eventually leave Egypt under Moses leadership and will eventually go back to the land promised by God to Abraham. The transition is now to a leadership under Joshua depicted as a faithful courageous follower of Moses and the God he serves.

### **Is it Contemporary history?**

Many OT scholars do not regard the book of Joshua as contemporary accounts of what happened. In fact, Joshua was written 100s of year later than actual events and is edited fits into a flow of theological histories that tell a bigger story. These are sometimes called the Deuteronomistic histories as they are seen as following the theology of Deuteronomy.

The book of Joshua is the first book of a collection of theological histories which starts with entry into the land and gaining a foothold, then the struggle to live in the land for 200 years or so during the period of the Judges. Afterwards a united Israel is stronger under the first kings of Israel Saul, David and Solomon. After that the kingdom divides into the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom called Judah. The biblical history then recounts after 400 years through disobedience to God the northern kingdom of Israel loses the land under the Assyrians (721BC) and over 100 years later Judah loses the southern kingdom to Babylonian conquests (597BC and 587BC). So this edited volumes of theological histories tell a bigger story about land and obedience to God. A central lesson is that If they remain obedient to Yahweh they will stay in the land but if not they will eventually lose the land and go into exile. This collection of theological histories demonstrates a unified creative narrative but one which is complex and often paradoxical. We are only at the start of this phase of history with the story in Joshua.

### **Who is the Commander in Chief?**

The book of Joshua tells the story of how they settled into the promised land under God's power – (see Joshua 2, 6 and 9 ) and it seems there is a strong portrayal of religious nationalism. In Joshua there is a key pervasive tone of violence which is massively disturbing and it feeds an image of a war-mongering god. In other parts of the bible there are even Prayers/Psalms of violence PS 3:7,6:10, which implicate God. You can feel the hatred fulminating in PS 139:21-22 <sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate you, LORD, and abhor those who are in rebellion against you? <sup>22</sup> I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies." This portrayal of God and life with God is problematic for us as Christians. People always harness texts or God's name to justify what they do. But the disturbing fact is that deep in God's history and deep in Gods character is a violence that is not easily understood. Yhwh is a warrior who protects and enforces his rule.

Note in the ANE it was believed that different gods belonged to different territories and peoples. In the passage we read we see that Yahweh is in charge of the land and Joshua is de facto his general. But note this <sup>13</sup> Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?" <sup>14</sup> **"Neither,"** he replied, "but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." You can never put God under your control or under national control. The Lord of hosts will not be reduced to a national god. He does what he does. He is who he is. Under Moses Yahweh described himself as I am who I am. God is understood by what he does, by his actions. In other parts of scripture we see that God cares for the other nations too.

### **Collapse of the wall of Jericho**

The commander of the Lord's Army tells Joshua to march around the city once each day but on the 7<sup>th</sup> day to march around 7 times. \*In Oxford I met a woman who told me in the ANE she saw a procession of a celebration of a local god and for 6 days before the god's special remembrance day the townfolk process each day around the town but on the god's special day they do it 7 times! In this narrative Yahweh was being celebrated and his name was to be held high and honoured. They were to be courageous in their trust of God! Although the priests with trumpets/shofars did have an armed escort. They were proclaiming Yahweh as the true God of this land and he is for them.

The Trumpets were to be blown by priests. The trumpet or shofar was a call of God for all the people to unite and fight together....and put fear into their enemy. On the 7<sup>th</sup> day the walls fell down and the men went in to capture the city. The lesson is clear it is God who fights for us...it is God we must trust in whatever we are faced by, it is God who delivers, It is God who saves, - as a people we need to respond to his call....to trust in him...to obey him. In 2 Chronicles 20:15 *For the **battle** is not yours, but God's.* The land and in fact our lives belongs to the Lord too. We so often fight all our own feeble battles but when we will we trust God to fight for us? You cannot have a deliverer who does not exercise power. A God that saves must encounter and navigate violence and channel his power appropriate to his character.

In the Joshua narrative when the people obey God they are successful but when they do not like in their next battle at Ai they lost. (In Israel the notion of Kherem related to devoted things is significant but not for explaining here)

### **Campaign war rhetoric**

One way of understanding this book is through recognising that different books in the bible are from different genres....like in a library there are biographies, thrillers, self-help, crime, romance, history, novels etc. so each genre share common features. Here the book of Joshua is likely to be part of the wider genre of war reports of the ANE. The trouble today is that many people think they are reading actual history. They may not like what they read and find the implications regrettable but if God said it and it is written in the bible it must be true. This very simplistic literalist reading of scripture does not do justice to the complexity and nuance of many biblical texts. In fact, this approach can actually misread and misinterpret matters, if taken in isolation from other texts.

So how are we to understand the book of Joshua? Well as I said it is shaped in part as a war report – it is war rhetoric. If you have been following the horrendous conflict in Ukraine – both Russia and Ukraine have a style of war rhetoric. In the UK we do too and report a particular view of any conflict in line with our perceived national interests. Look at the current rhetoric about immigration.

Shirley Parish Hall in the Second World War was used to help build spitfires that helped us win the war in the air against Germany. Churchill on August 20<sup>th</sup> 1940 said “never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few”...this is, of course, a rhetoric focusing on strengthening the morale of the RAF and nation. There were about 1.5 million

Bomb girls building the ammunitions, and many women and men building spitfire parts so that the RAF could conduct the air war. Churchill could easily have said never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so **many** but he did not – it was not a sufficiently strong soundbite and believe you mean Churchill knew a thing or two about soundbites!

But so did ancient rulers. The first mention of Israel outside of the bible is on an inscription of Pharaoh Merneptah who claims to have defeated a people named Israel located in Canaan in the 5<sup>th</sup> year of his reign – 1209BC...this could well be about Joshua's time...it says "Israel is laid waste, his seed is not." Clearly that's the way to tell the story...

### **Complete conquest?**

The bible itself does not regard it Joshua as a complete conquest at all. The extensive archaeological evidence does not support the view that Israel left Egypt and settled in the land at a particular point in time.

Extensive archaeology at Jericho has not shown evidence of genocide. Also note we are told that Rahab and her family and even the devious Gibeonites become absorbed into an emerging nation of Israel.

It is clear that Joshua is an ideal account and many regard the book of Judges as a much more real account. Does Joshua present how Israel should have taken the land from an ideal perspective? The book of Judges 1:27-36 indicates the reality of lack of conquest and implies that Joshua is an idealised account - therefore the text should offer no legitimising paradigm or model for plundering land in the name of God. However, European Christian colonial conquest may have used these texts in Joshua around the world to justify them bringing civilisation, Christianity and commerce to the conquered natives of the land. There are many things within our Christian history we should be ashamed of.

Clearly the people are not wiped out. In Joshua 12:8 <sup>7</sup> Here is a list of the kings of the land that Joshua and the Israelites conquered on the west side of the Jordan, from Baal Gad in the Valley of Lebanon to Mount Halak, which rises toward Seir. Joshua gave their lands as an inheritance to the tribes of Israel according to their tribal divisions. <sup>8</sup> The lands included the hill country, the western foothills, the Arabah, the mountain slopes, the wilderness and the Negev. These were the lands of the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites. Notes some texts only mention 5 nations or fewer (Ex 13:15, Ex 23:28) or sometimes the term Amorite (Josh 7:24:15) or Canaanite (Ex 13:11Josh 13:4) are a generalised term for the inhabitants of the land or possibly all those people that do not worship Yahweh. I think the term Canaanites or Amorite has the feeling of being castigated as "the other" a bit like Albanians being described in the immigration rhetoric of today. Clearly in the Joshua narrative there is a lot of fluidity about the identity of these people.

**Compare Joshua 11:23 and Judges 13:1** - you get one impression reading – Joshua 11<sup>23</sup> “So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war.” But if you read Joshua 13:1 it is not so clear cut as the bible says “When Joshua had grown old, the LORD said to him, “You are now very old, and there are still very large areas of land to be taken over.”

The people were not wiped out at all and the land not all conquered at one time. (Perhaps the sad bitter irony when reflecting on these texts is that the people most subject to genocide have been the Jewish people under supposed Christian rule but recently more so under anti-Christian Nazi rule.)

### **Commands and promises of God are fulfilled**

All in all Joshua depicts the miraculous and almost processional holy entry into the land led by the priests and how they celebrated Passover in the promised land then they faced the challenge ahead of them and encountered the fortified city of Jericho. In Joshua there are about 4.5 chapters depicting battles mainly in the south but one victory against a northern coalition of forces at Hazor. Therefore the allocation of land to the tribes is aspirational. Note also that the tribe of Judah in the south has the most details about its boundaries. Other tribal boundaries were often vague. Consider what this means.

The book of Joshua wants to demonstrate God as faithful and that all the commands and promises of God to Moses have become realised.

Then the **Cities of refuge were created 20:1** *Then the LORD said to Joshua: <sup>2</sup>“Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, <sup>3</sup>so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.* This sounds like a merciful God!

**Joshua 21:41-43.**<sup>41</sup> *The towns of the Levites in the territory held by the Israelites were forty-eight in all, together with their pasturelands.* <sup>42</sup> *Each of these towns had pasturelands surrounding it; this was true for all these towns.* <sup>43</sup> *So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their ancestors, and they took possession of it and settled there.* <sup>44</sup> *The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their ancestors. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD gave all their enemies into their hands.* <sup>45</sup> *Not one of all the LORD's good promises to Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.*

The Joshua narrative ends with Joshua saying as for he and his household he will follow the lord and then he challenges the people in a covenant renewal ceremony to agree to do the same. However, Joshua thinks the people are not willing to do so and will worship false gods and will lose the land but the people say no we will follow the God who led us into the land. Has the book of Joshua given us a spoiler alert to the time when the people themselves will lose the land through disobedience. Remember that this is retrospective history and the theological perspectives of later authors/editors of the tradition have to be factored into the reading.

And the book of Joshua ends

<sup>31</sup> "Israel served the LORD throughout the lifetime of Joshua and of the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the LORD had done for Israel. <sup>32</sup> And Joseph's bones, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem in the tract of land that Jacob bought for a hundred pieces of silver<sup>[d]</sup> from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. This became the inheritance of Joseph's descendants. <sup>33</sup> And Eleazar son of Aaron died and was buried at Gibeah, which had been allotted to his son Phinehas in the hill country of Ephraim"

So the end of the book of Joshua shows that all of God's commands and promises to Moses have been fulfilled.

It is a very neat and tidy theology of a united obedient multi-tribal Israel, but life is rarely that ideal! And the actual retrospective story in Joshua implies this for those with discerning minds. In the sequel, the book of Judges, it is much more real and there is a constant refrain that everyone did what is right in their own eyes! And there was much idolatry, tribal disunity and multiple struggles and battles in the land.

**Canon of Scripture**

In the Protestant bible the book of Joshua is set next to Judges and the book of Ruth which is set in the time of the Judges. The book of Ruth is where a Moabite woman gets an inheritance in the promised land and ends up being the great grandmother of King David. So some natives of the land become part of the national story of the Israelites. This is a reminder that the books of the bible - the canon of books, are in constant creative conversation with each other. We do not all have to agree with the same view or perspective despite what some people say.....who like things very black and white....and often very literal without necessarily understanding the context of each text or comparing that text/book to other texts/books in the biblical canon.

There is a legitimate diversity of interpretation to the book of Joshua and I have to admit it is hard to reconcile the text, the historical context and the archaeological evidence. This is also a warning to reading simplistically a text which makes theo-logical sense but neither historical nor common sense. Life is not easily explainable. We do not have an eggbox theology – we cannot explain everything and put every egg in its compartment in the box – we so often do not have a clue what is really happening in life so it is best to avoid religious clichés. We may well have to navigate between the ideal and the real.

### **Contrast Joshua 1 and Joshua 2**

Christians we too have the life of Jesus and the rest of the canon of the New Testament to be in conversation with the book of Joshua and its tale of conquest.

We see how Jesus reframes the narrative...of course he has the same name Yeshua– Joshua and then eventually is known most by his transliterated Greek name Jesus. Jesus is the God who saves, who comes to the rescue. At the beginning of Jesus public ministry – where is he? Where does he get baptised by John the Baptist? In the same area of the Jordan where Joshua and the people entered the land. John the Baptist is baptising people in the Jordan river to repent of their sins and live a new holy lifestyle. When John the Baptist sees Jesus he describes him in John 1:29 as “the lamb who takes away the sins of the world”, the Passover lamb who frees all people from their sin-ridden oppressed past. This Joshua 2 was going to set everybody free. Joshua 2 gets baptised in the river Jordan. In Joshua 2 there is also a testimony of what God is doing – it is not a stone memorial (like in Joshua 2) but God’s voice from heaven testifying says this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased. The dove, a symbol for the Holy Spirit rests on him. God has chosen Joshua 2 as his faithful obedient servant son. He goes into the wilderness led by the Spirit and encounters spiritual opposition when he fasts for 40 days and 40 nights. (Note that the people under Moses wandered in the desert for 40 years in the midst of temptation and as a result of their disobedience). He meets the opposer of God’s purposes and faces a series of spiritual temptations - of political power over all the nations, the adulation of fake religion, wealth consumption but each time Jesus replies with the words from Deuteronomy that he will serve his God – he will be a courageous faithful obedient Israelite son. After winning his first spiritual battles in the land he goes into the land not to destroy the inhabitants but to announce that the kingdom of God has come near – and to save them. You see Joshua 2 fights against the real enemies of humankind which are sin, the world and the devil - through his life, courageous death and resurrection. Jesus often said to people Luke 12:32 “fear not little flock for its your father’s good pleasure to give the kingdom” – ie also as the apostle Paul says is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.(Rom 14:7) His

people become united in the Spirit and there are people from every tongue, tribe, race and ethnicity bravely living out the way of Joshua 2 who conquered via sacrificial service.

The apostle Paul says in Ephesians 6 where we are to put on the roman soldier's uniform that we are to fight not against flesh and blood but the principalities and powers in the heavenly realms – to fight in prayer and by a radical lifestyle of peace and truth. Ultimately Joshua 2 disarms all the principalities and powers and conquers evil through his powerful love and authority. You can trust a leader like that for leading you in life and for exercising power and authority to deal with evil and bring in a reign of justice where all can live in his peace.

In my life I have seen the amazing courage of people who follow in the long line of Joshuas who go for it and I have seen vast number of people taking the next timid but brave step in faith. In our own Christian community here we have people who have demonstrated great bravery in the face of very dire situations. There is not enough time for me to tell of people I have met around the world who are courageously living out their faith with no applause, but great bravery and paitience. The Moravian missionaries bravely sold themselves into slavery into the Caribbean to witness to the enslaved peoples and they did so in order that the Lamb may receive the reward of his sufferings!

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is our key hermeneutic of the biblical texts and by his Spirit we come into fullness of life. Alongside this we are encouraged to seek out understanding of the texts we read. There will always be stimulating, boring, challenging, creative and sometimes heated conversations about the biblical texts in church life. There is a saying '2 rabbis 3 opinions interpretations'. Learning more about the genres of the bible and the bigger picture of each book of the bible and the way these books interrogate or affirm each other is a fascinating journey. Furthermore, being able to see the big picture of the whole bible is helpful.