

JOSHUA

*“...choose this day whom you will serve
...as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.” (JOSHUA 24:15)*

The book of Joshua recounts the transition of authority from Moses to Joshua and Israel’s entry into the land of Canaan, narrating both the conquest and the division of the land among the tribes. Its narrative setting lies in the late Bronze Age, when Canaan was a patchwork of fortified city-states under diminishing Egyptian influence. Within this world, Joshua leads Israel in a series of stylized battles and covenantal acts that portray land possession as Yahweh’s gift realized through obedience.

As a written work, however, Joshua is a product of the 7th–6th centuries BCE, shaped within the Deuteronomistic History—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Its first major redaction likely occurred during Josiah’s reforms (641–609 BCE), when older traditions were gathered to model an ideal Israel under ideal leadership and to call Judah back to covenant fidelity. A second shaping during the Babylonian exile (after 586 BCE) framed Joshua as a theological commentary on loss: Israel once flourished through obedience, and exile revealed the cost of covenant failure. During both redactions, authors and editors collected pre-existing material and created new historiography as commentary on the circumstances of their own time.

Literarily, Joshua blends conquest narrative, covenant ceremony, and boundary texts, using ritual, speeches, and highly stylized battles to present Israel’s entry into the land as a sacred drama of divine faithfulness and communal identity.

NARRATIVE UNITS in JOSHUA

Josh 1-12 — Conquest of the Land, including:

Joshua’s commissioning (1), crossing the Jordan (3-4), destruction of Jericho and Ai (6-8), and the covenant with Gibeon (9)

Josh 13-22 — Division of the Land

Josh 23-24 — Conclusion, including:

Joshua’s farewell (23), the covenant renewal (24), and Joshua’s death (24:29-31)

THEMATIC & LITERARY CONSIDERATIONS

The Land — The book of Joshua presents Israel’s entry into Canaan as the fulfillment of God’s ancient promise to the ancestors. The crossing of the Jordan marks a decisive moment when a formerly powerless people are empowered by God’s initiative—if God once gave the land, God could give it again. The book stresses that possession and success in the land depend on obedience to the LORD; covenant fidelity is the condition for flourishing. The tribal allotments underscore that the land is a divine gift entrusted to each tribe, shaping Israel’s identity and communal structure. Joshua frames the conquest as the realization of promises made to

Abraham, Moses, and the ancestors, revealing that God's faithfulness anchors Israel's future. Geographic lists and borders reinforce the ordered, communal life God intends for Israel.

Covenant Obedience & Renewal — Obedience is the central theological force in Joshua, shaping every victory, failure, and dimension of Israel's communal identity. Israel's life in the land rests not on military strength but on fidelity to Yahweh's commands. Joshua's opening charge establishes the pattern: meditate on the law and act accordingly. Jericho's fall, Achan's sin at Ai, and the covenant renewal at Shechem reveal that obedience brings blessing while disobedience fractures the community.

Rituals at Gilgal and Shechem reinforce Israel's identity as a people bound to Yahweh, rooting them in shared memory and covenant commitment. These acts mark the land as gift and vocation, not mere territory. As the narrative closes, Joshua summons Israel to sustained faithfulness to the God who has given them an inheritance. The book ends not with conquest but with a call to fidelity—a reminder that covenant life requires continual renewal and that obedience is the posture securing Israel's future.

Holy War — Battles in Joshua are theological events rather than military reportage. Victory belongs to Yahweh, who fights for Israel and directs its actions. As in the wider ancient Near East, warfare was understood as a contest between deities—Israel fought for the honor of Yahweh, just as Canaanites fought for Baal or Philistines for Dagon. The narratives emphasize this worldview by portraying each conflict as a demonstration of divine supremacy. Israel's victories and the spoils of war are consistently attributed to Yahweh, reinforcing the book's central claim that the land is gained not through human strength but through divine initiative and covenant faithfulness.

Historiography & Testimony — Historiography in Scripture is purposeful historical writing, shaped for a particular audience and crafted to interpret God's activity within Israel's story. Within this framework, testimony functions as a theological form of history—an account of how God has acted in the life of the narrator and community, whether through ordinary events or extraordinary intervention. The book of Joshua is historiography and testimony preserved and formed to present an ideal history of the people's obedience under Moses's successor (Joshua) as well as the history of disobedient actors who reaped negative consequences.

Violence & Judah's History — The Deuteronomistic History, especially Joshua and Judges, is marked by intense violence shaped by Judah's historical experience of foreign domination and exile in the 8th–6th centuries BCE. These narratives arise from a community that had suffered Assyrian and Babylonian conquest and lived with profound political powerlessness. Their stories of warfare and destruction are therefore theological expressions of hope, not records of actual military capacity.

From the perspective of a subjugated people, violent imagery becomes a way to affirm that Yahweh remains just, attentive, and ultimately sovereign over the nations. Israel could not act on such violence, but they could trust that God would confront their enemies and oppressors. In this context, the violent motifs function as acts of faith, asserting that divine justice would one day overturn imperial power and restore the people.

TYPOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

SELECTED USES OF JOSHUA IN THE IMAGINATION OF EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITERS

Joshua appears only sparingly in the New Testament, yet its themes echo widely. The most explicit reference is Hebrews 4, where Joshua's gift of rest in the land becomes a foreshadowing of the deeper, eschatological rest offered by Christ. Acts 7:45 briefly recalls Joshua's leadership, but the New Testament's primary use is theological: Joshua represents faithful obedience, God's fulfilled promise, and the anticipation of a greater salvation.

Early Christian writers expanded these motifs. Origen, Jerome, and Augustine read Joshua typologically, seeing him as a figure of Christ the divine warrior who leads God's people into the true inheritance. The crossing of the Jordan becomes a symbol of baptism; the conquest becomes the spiritual struggle against sin; the allotment of land prefigures the distribution of spiritual gifts within the Church.

Irenaeus and Hippolytus emphasized Joshua's role as successor to Moses, interpreting him as the one who brings the people from law to grace. The fall of Jericho, with its trumpet blasts and salvation of Rahab, was read as an image of the Church's mission and the final judgment.

For the Fathers, Joshua was not merely ancient history but a pattern of Christian life—a book revealing how God keeps promises, forms a people, and leads them toward the fullness of salvation in Christ.

MORAL IMAGINATION

QUESTIONS TO HELP DISCOVER JOSHUA'S RELEVANCE TO THE CONTEMPORARY READER

- How does Joshua challenge our assumptions about what faithful obedience looks like in daily Christian life?
- Where do we see God's faithfulness sustaining us when circumstances feel uncertain or overwhelming?
- What might Joshua's careful attention to borders and structure teach us about ordered communal life?
- How do memorials like the Jordan stones shape Israel's—and our—spiritual memory?
- What does "be strong and courageous" mean for Christians facing fear, change, or conflict?

- How does Rahab's story expand our understanding of who belongs in God's saving work?
- What does Achan's sin reveal about the communal impact of individual choices?

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Creach, Jerome. *Joshua*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Curtis, Adrian. *Joshua*. Old Testament Guides. Sheffield Academic Press, 1994, 1998.

Hattin, Michael. *Joshua: The Challenge of the Promised Land*. Maggid Studies in Tanakh. Maggid Books, 2014.

McConville, J.G. *Joshua: Crossing Divides (An Introduction and Study Guide)*. T&T Clark Study Guides to the Old Testament. Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017.