

Joshua's theme

The theme of the book of Joshua is rather obvious: God's condition of victory is immersion in his Word and wholehearted obedience to it.

(To remind the reader of the context, Joshua and the following two books, Judges and Ruth, span an important period between Moses and the monarchy. Moses was the desert leader of a nomadic shepherding people around 1400BC. By the time of the monarchy, 1100BC they were settled in the land of Canaan and ready for such things as a King and standing army.)

Two simple admissions

In spite of this, the theme has often been missed. As a teenager I used to think that the book covered little more than the decisive battle of Jericho (after which the Canaanites all capitulated) followed by detailed lists of which tribe was sent where in the promised land (any excuse to skim!). In fact, it took years to conquer the Land. To be correct, they never did, and paid the price forever afterwards¹. The Canaanites with their detestable religious practices continued to intermingle with them and be a thorn in their side.

My second admission is that I thought that throughout the Old Testament the Israelites were by and large a God-fearing people who kept the Passover and Jewish Law more or less correctly. They were an island of monotheism in a sea of idolatrous, child-sacrificing polytheists like Egyptians, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, Philistines and others. I don't know why I thought this. Certainly the archaeology of Israel's shrines does not support this "island" view². I suppose I thought this because of what the OT taught. However, most of the OT prophets were written to call people *back* to God because they had slipped! If Israel had been such a utopian island of faithfulness, they would not have written as they did, nor do I think would we have Joshua in the form we do. To summarise, *the faithful prophets who gave us the OT were more often than not in the minority as they called people back to what was supposed to be the national religion, the worship of the one true God Jehovah.*

¹ They were commanded to take possession of the land in Deuteronomy 9 and wipe out the inhabitants – effectively a genocide authorised by God. *“And you will drive them out and annihilate them quickly, as the Lord has promised you.”* (v. 3) The rights and wrongs of this are not the focus of this article. If you are pleased that the Israelites did not carry out this command, however, you must reckon with the untold moral and social trouble that resulted. Their social and legal practices were from everything I know considerably superior to those of the nations they were commanded to replace. In those more barbaric times it was in fact the sins of greed, self-interest, faithlessness and a lack of appreciation for their morally superior law that held them back from the slaughter – not squeamishness or a voice of conscience in their midst.

² Consider the following facts from *Pagan Yahwism – the folk religion of Ancient Israel*, by Ephraim Stern, BAR May/June 2001, p. 21. (Note that Yahweh and Jehovah are one and the same.)

- God was worshipped at times with a wife – the same consort Asherah or Astarte as the gods of Canaan and Moab had! An inscription from the C9th BC at an Israelite sanctuary in Sinai refers to “Yahweh and his Asherah” and a tomb inscription near Hebron reads “Blessed will be Ariyahu to Yahweh and his Asherah.” (p. 26)
- Female statues (figurines) identified with Astarte the fertility goddess, many with enlarged breasts, typically made of clay and about 6 inches high have been found all over Israel. Exactly 822 have been found in Judah from the time of Solomon's temple, and about half (405) were found in Jerusalem near the Temple Mount. They can't all have been brought in by traders. (p. 27)
- Of the male figurines (a few dozen found in Judah), rather than being brought in by outsiders, Stern says “there can be no question that these figurines are Judahite.” (p. 28)
- Stern's verdict on national attempts to follow the Law faithfully? They “were less than 100% successful.” (p. 28)

The book's outline

The book can be broken down into the following parts which follow on from each other chronologically. The first part is a series of battles in the central part of the promised land. To use a boxing analogy, the first contest was Israel vs Jericho: won easily, KO first round. The second was Israel vs Ai: won less easily, KO second round. Then there was Israel vs Gibeon, except that Gibeon did not even show up to fight: won by default, Gibeon not even entering the ring. The second part of the book records the conquest of the Southern and Northern Kings. A glance at a map will show you that Joshua's campaign started in the centre of the land to be conquered. There were kingdoms to the South to be conquered and kingdoms to the North. Then the third long section (almost half of the book's chapters) details which Israelite tribe went where. The book concludes with three great chapters, a closing charge and the death of Joshua. Put in a table, it looks like this:

Chapter	Event
1-8	Jericho, Ai and Gibeon (central territory)
9-11	Southern and Northern campaigns
12-21	Details of land allocation
22-24	Closing events and charge given by Joshua

A spiritual reading of history

Now, to address the slightly older disciple. You will notice increasingly as you read the historical parts of the Bible that they are history with a difference. The writer is not just a secular biographer or historian. The writers are men with a spiritual angle on events, and this comes through. They are preachers. They pick certain episodes from the life of, say, Abraham, Joshua or Jesus to make their point. Therefore, besides asking the Holy Spirit for guidance as we read, we should be asking, **“What is the point being made by the writer?”**

Let me give you two examples from the New Testament and work backwards. In Acts 16:6 and 7, Luke says that the Holy Spirit kept Paul from entering the provinces of Asia or Bithynia. Have you ever wondered what actually happened to make Luke say it was the Holy Spirit that led Paul? It could have been many things³. The point is that Luke here is going beyond what a secular historian would feel able to write given the facts. Next, consider the rendition of Jesus' warnings in Mark 13:14. Jesus is speaking. *“When you see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong--let the reader understand--then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains.”* Who is saying, *“Let the reader understand”*? Did Jesus really make an aside to his shorthand copyist on the Mount of Olives. Surely not! In fact a skilled and spiritual historian is leading us through events: Luke in the case of Acts, or the gospel writers themselves. There is no such thing as purely factual history or gospel. We have what the author intended us to have, guided by the Holy Spirit, but with an agenda or focus in mind.

If we come back to the Old Testament, the classic divisions are Law, Prophets and Writings⁴. They are in chart form below. (Of course our modern Bibles do not follow this Jewish classification. When you remember that each book was originally a physical scroll in a box of scrolls and the whole

³For example, was there really some kind of force-field barring Paul's way? Was it via a message from a NT prophet, or a dream to a member of Paul's group or a series of coincidences that shut some doors and opened others? I am sure it is a measure of Luke's spirituality that he was able to discern in whatever happened the will and activity of God through the Holy Spirit. Are we always so discerning?

OT was not in a single book form until much later in NT⁵ times, you will appreciate that changing the order of books was not particularly difficult to do.)

Law (also known as Torah, Pentateuch or just “Moses”)	Prophets	Writings
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	Joshua, Judges, the Samuels, the Kings, the major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and 12 minor prophets (Hosea – Malachi in our modern Bibles)	Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra-Neh and the Chronicles

You will see that history is not one of the classifications. In fact, history per se was not as appreciated in the ancient world as it is in ours. Those who wrote the historical elements of the Bible were writing for a purpose. They were demonstrating to their hearers (the originals would have been read out in the assemblies) how God had worked in history. As in the Dark Ages and Middle Ages, history and learning was guarded and fostered by the religious establishment – the monks in Europe, or the prophets in Bible times. So we find the life of Abraham and the Exodus story, both real, historical events, in the Law section, written by the prophet Moses. The big history books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings⁶ are in fact categorised as part of the Prophets.⁷ It took spiritual insight and learning to trace and record the hand of God in past events. Many small references like the ones referred to are none other than the pointing finger of the skilled and spiritual historian through whose eyes you are looking back into a past world and reading the story. Facts are not made up, and are all honestly and accurately recorded, but in some senses there is as much preaching going on as there is history.

This is not how we do history today. Let me compare, for example, a modern biography of Winston Churchill and how events are described in it. The author is the Chancellor of Oxford University, Roy Jenkins. Take the account of Dunkerque, where the British were lucky to evacuate 350,000 troops. Churchill himself expected as few as 50,000 to get away. There was much relief in the House of Commons. However, as Churchill had to remind them, this was hardly a victory. *“Wars are not won by evacuations.”* He called it more than once *“a colossal military disaster.”* If Jenkins was a spiritual man writing a spiritual history, then regardless of what Churchill himself actually believed or said, we would get some concluding remark like *“And so the Lord rescued the British that day.”* Nor are there any indications of who was praying and what they were saying, as you get in the Old Testament in times of crisis. This is not to say that no-one was. I am sure many were. But Jenkins is not trying to show how God worked in Churchill’s life or in Britain. Perhaps he is trying to analyse Churchill’s life to assess what made him a great leader. But whoever wrote the book of Joshua was writing in a different way from Roy Jenkins. He was not giving us a life of Joshua – far too much is left out. We know nothing of his wife and children for example. But a complete biography was not his intention. There was another purpose in the mind of the writer of the book of Joshua, whoever he may have been.

⁵ In Luke 4 we read about Jesus asking for and reading from the scroll of Isaiah the prophet in the Nazareth synagogue.

⁶ 1-2 Samuel was a single scroll in the OT canon, as was 1-2 Kings.

⁷ 1-2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah are both considered to be in the Writings, more because of their later date of writing than because their writers are considered to be any less prophetic or spiritual than the other so-called history books we are discussing.

The point of the book of Joshua

The insight of the writer of Joshua is this. **Joshua won when he immersed himself in the Word and obeyed it wholeheartedly, and (by implication) so will we when we follow the Bible this way.** I believe the book is arranged in such a way as to illustrate this principle. It is not “my insight”. It was the writer’s insight. Before setting out the evidence in the book for this being the theme, can we consider why the writer might have wanted to say this? It is actually not hard to imagine. Maybe he saw people drifting in their obedience in the way archaeology has shown they did. Very likely he is writing during one the times of upheaval when the Judges ruled. Perhaps some advocated *increasing* devotion to foreign gods in a time of political or agricultural crisis, when the writer (along with the Judges) knew that this was the very worst thing they could do! Perhaps Samuel himself was the person writing, but all we can say for sure is that something at that moment moved someone spiritual to exhort the people to go back to the Bible. Who better to use than the national hero Joshua? What was the key to his victories? It was his immersion in the Law and wholehearted obedience to it.

The writer then pens his work, re-enunciating his theme at key points, as we shall see. He impressively shows that Joshua had a good beginning, middle and end (excepting the Ai incident, which only serves to underline the point further). At every point he kept the Book of the Law. This was hardly a co-incidence - it was the key to his victory. Is there a blindingly simple lesson for us even today that we may be missing as much as the writer’s generation missed it? Has the Holy Spirit not inspired and preserved this book for the benefit of every generation, including our own?

Let us break down the book again and consider Joshua’s adherence to the word at these points.

Phase	Chapter	Event
Beginning	1-8	Jericho and Ai
Middle	9-21	Rest of conquest
End	22-24	Concluding charge

Joshua’s theme at the beginning

It is not uncommon for a book’s theme to be given in the opening chapter, if not the first few verses. This is true of Romans, Mark, Galatians, Luke, Acts and here in Joshua. If not (or indeed in addition) it may turn up in the last chapter, as in Romans, Luke, John and here in Joshua. The theme is laid out: immerse yourself in the Word day and night, obey it, and victory will be yours. What do you notice from reading the exact words that challenges your own Bible study?

JOS 1:6 "Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷ Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸ Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹ Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

1. **Be strong and courageous.** Is our Bible study kept to the dusty privacy of our homes, or does it explode into transformed, bold living and witness?
2. **Be careful to obey all the law.** Have I an eye for detail? Do I look up extra passages? Do I “examine” it like a manual or the letter of a loved one (Acts 17:11)? Or do I merely scan it like a newspaper, dull college textbook or a long novel? Do I take notes?
3. **Do not turn from it to the right or to the left.** Do I read it as the very words of God, to be obeyed without question?

4. **Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth.** The NT exhorts us to let the Word dwell in us richly as we teach and admonish. How often is the Bible open in disciplining times? When do we look for what the Scriptures teach on a subject? Do we quote Scriptures in our fight against temptation as Jesus did?
5. **Meditate on it day and night.** How much time do we spend in the Word, and the Word alone? Do we memorise it for our own benefit, or only for church exams?
6. **Do not be terrified.** Boldness comes from being filled with the Word! Am I easily intimidated or fearful?

Joshua's theme at the middle

Joshua has his first conquests of Jericho and Ai. What does he do? Well, what does a conquering army normally do? After the looting, pillaging and rape, there will be an honouring of the heroes, awarding of medals, party after party, boasting of great feats and the distribution of bounty. Joshua in contrast builds an altar to God. He then follows Moses' instructions, there in the moment of his life's greatest victory so far. He used uncut stones, exactly as the Lord had said to do. With the Israelites watching, Joshua writes out the words of the Law, chapter after chapter, onto the stones of the altar. You can read the amazing obedience that Joshua showed in the text below. It was picking up the theme from chapter 1. He was doing exactly as Moses had instructed. Just see how many times the writer brings this theme out: "*just as Moses had commanded..., he built it according to what is written..., half stood... as Moses had formerly commanded..., he read... just as it is written*" and so on.

JOS 8:30 Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel,³¹ as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses--an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings.³² There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua copied on stones the law of Moses, which he had written.³³ All Israel, aliens and citizens alike, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the LORD, facing those who carried it--the priests, who were Levites. Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel.

JOS 8:34 Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law--the blessings and the curses--just as it is written in the Book of the Law.³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.

It is impressive. Success tests the heart like little else. In his greatest hour, Joshua does not get delusions of grandeur and become complacent. He is careful to honour God. Perhaps he learned his lesson at Ai, the city where he did get complacent, lead an attack with a small detachment, failed and suffered bouts of self pity before realising that the problem (as God had said it would be) was disobedience in the ranks. He strayed from his first love, got slack and disaster was quick to come. His first response is to blame God and feel self-pity, but God (and the writer) brings us back to the book's theme. "*Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? Israel has sinned.*"⁸

It is easy to start well. God knows how many Januaries and new ministries I have started well. He knows the fire of my early Christian life. (A good beginning makes success more likely, so I am not advocating any lack of zest for fear of being phoney.) I know the times I have strayed tend to be

⁸ Joshua 7:10, 11. God does not always offer encouragement to those with their face to the ground. It is not always what is needed. The other "favourite" rebuke which I sometimes administer to myself is Jeremiah 15:9-20. The general message is to toughen up.

when I'm discouraged, or, perversely, when everything's going great. That's when I can get complacent and my prayers lack pungency. Perhaps as a man I thrive on adversity. Whatever the reason, it affected Joshua too, but he did not let it stop him having a great middle. He learned after Ai that he's been wrong to slacken off his obedience after a Jericho. The Word is not just an encouragement when we're down, but a salutary reminder of our place in the universe when we've had a victory.

Joshua's theme at the end.

It is a testimony to a great man to see his convictions at the beginning of his life unchanged through the middle to the end of his life. After writing out the Law on stones we read specific examples of his obedience in 11:12-15 and 22:1-5. By then we are taken to the end of his life and to his closing charges. What will he say? No more than the conviction given him by God in chapter 1 which has sustained him through his life⁹. Here is what he says to the younger generation. You will not fail to be astonished when you read this if you keep God's charge to Joshua from chapter 1 in mind.

JOS 22:2... "You have done all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded....⁴ Now that the LORD your God has given your brothers rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan.⁵ But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul."

JOS 23:6 "Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left... JOS 23:14 "Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed."

Like book-ends, these charges to study and obey the Law start and end the book. What God gave to Joshua in chapter 1 Joshua gives to us at his life's end. He testifies to the truth of God's promise: that he will bless those who immerse themselves in his Word and wholeheartedly obey it.

Dare I believe that this promise made to Joshua may not also be for me?

Bible study and obedience is the one non-expendable, the sole condition of victory, the book of Joshua claims. While humility, prayer, love and many other qualities and disciplines have claimed pre-eminence from time to time (with scriptural backing), here is the conviction of one spiritual man from his study of the life of Joshua. When times are hard and the golden days seem to have gone (as some claim from time to time), an easy route is to return to the ways of the surrounding nations. Some do it almost subconsciously. At those moments a conscious return to the narrow road of Jesus' teaching is most necessary. As Jeremiah put it at another crisis time, *"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."*¹⁰

I have tried to make two points. The first has broad relevance to all Bible study, namely that all Scripture has been written under the influence of the Holy Spirit by real men. These writers had themes they intended to make, and one of the first jobs of the serious Bible student approaching any book seriously is to identify what point the writer intended to make. I won't spoil the fun by saying what I think the themes of different books are – that's for the reader to work out for him or herself!

⁹ We see this in 23:6-11, 24:12-14 and 24:25

¹⁰ Jeremiah 6:16

Secondly, Joshua's own theme is that God's condition of victory is immersion in the Word and wholehearted obedience. So often when victories seem remote the first thing we lose is simple adherence to the Word. Suddenly a new technique gleaned from a book, class or new spiritual guru provides the key. A more relatable and admittedly more comfortable life is another option, or even a solution outside God's kingdom altogether. The path back to victory, however, should begin with an honest question: Dare I believe that this promise made to Joshua may not also be for myself? Instead of giving way to fear, is this not what the unknown writer, Joshua the general and even God himself would want us to do?

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do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.
Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth;
meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it.
Then you will be prosperous and successful.*

Have I not commanded you?

James Greig
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