



Summary of Joshua

Introduction

From the evidence in the book itself, it appears that the purpose of the book of Joshua was to recount, from a theological perspective, the events surrounding Israel's capture and settlement of the land of Canaan, with particular emphasis on God's faithfulness in fulfilling his promise to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Such an account would have been relevant to ancient Israel from its earliest arrival in Canaan and to every subsequent generation of God's people to the present day.

As well as retelling the crossing of the River Jordan into the Promised Land, it provides details of battles fought by the Israelites to gain the land, their interactions with local peoples and, indeed, with their brother tribes east of the Jordan, and lists the land allocation by tribe.

Chapter One

The first chapter of Joshua divides into two sections and consists largely of speeches. The first section (vv.1-9) contains the Lord's words to Joshua, charging him to assume the leadership position opened up by Moses' death. The second section (vv.10-18) recounts Joshua's initial response, charging the 'officers of the people' and the Transjordanian tribes to prepare to cross the Jordan into Canaan. It also records the people's resolve to follow Joshua just as they had followed Moses (vv.16-18).

Chapter Two

In Chapter One, Joshua received his charge. In Chapter Two, he begins to 'take charge.' The adventures of the spies provide the central thread around which the chapter is woven. However, at least as important is the story of Rahab's escape from the coming judgement.

Chapter Three

The time has come for the Israelites to embark on the final stage of their journey to cross the River Jordan and enter the Promised Land. They are instructed to become ritually clean and to move out at a certain distance when they see the priests set off carrying the Ark of the Covenant.

God is going to exalt Joshua in his leadership before the people. When the priests step into the river, the waters will pile up before them. With the priests holding the Ark in the centre of the river's course, the entire nation of Israel crossed on dry ground.

Chapter Four

After the entire nation had crossed the River Jordan on dry ground and entered into the Promised Land, Joshua instructed the twelve chosen men to each take a stone from the middle of the river bed with them. In addition, it seems that Joshua built a memorial on the river bed itself. Once all this was completed, the priests exited the river bed carrying the Ark of the Covenant. As soon as they had reached the far bank the waters of the river were fully restored.

The twelve stones were then set up as a memorial at Gilgal so that future generations should know of the power of God in allowing his people to enter the land via the river in the same way as he had allowed them to cross the Red Sea when he brought them out of Egypt.

Chapter Five

With Israel now finally in the Promised Land, after so many years of living in the desert, the urge to begin the conquest must have been powerful. However, this chapter underscores matters of even greater importance. The reinstatement of the covenant sign of circumcision (vv.2-9) and the celebration of Passover (vv.10-12) remind God's people of their privileged covenant relationship with him, signified by circumcision, and of their redemption out of bondage by him, signified by the Passover. These two fundamentally important rites are paralleled in the NT by baptism, the sign of covenant relationship: *<<In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead>>* (Colossians 2:11-12), and the Lord's Supper, the celebration of redemption from the bondage of sin through the sacrificial death of the Lamb of God: *<<So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, 'Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" He*

will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there'>> (Mark 14:13-15).

Observing circumcision and the Passover at this occasion requires that Israel act by faith: both to trust God for protection while they are vulnerable (vv.5:8), and to commit themselves afresh to basing their life in the land on their identity as God's people, i.e. not simply as a political entity. Fittingly, an encounter with the commander of the army of the Lord reminds Joshua of his reliance on the Lord (vv.13-15) and, with its militaristic overtones, anticipates the commencement of the conquest in Chapter 6.

Chapter Six

As was often the case in ancient Near Eastern conquest accounts, key early conflicts are recounted in detail, while subsequent conflicts are noted more briefly. As the first city to be taken in Canaan, Jericho was to be wholly dedicated to the Lord, as a kind of symbolic first fruits. The people of Israel were to take no plunder and were to leave no survivors.

The chapter may be divided into three sections: the Lord's instructions to Joshua (vv.1-5); the execution of the Lord's instructions (vv.6-21); and the aftermath of victory (vv.22-27).

Joshua was near Jericho in the last episode of Chapter 5, and this has raised the question as to whether the early verses of Chapter 6 should be regarded as the continuation of Joshua's encounter with the 'commander of the army of the Lord.' If this is the case, the Lord's words in vv.2-5 were given to Joshua during this encounter. This is a possibility, but the evidence in the text does not clearly show whether this suggestion is correct or not.

Chapter Seven

The events of Chapters 1-6, with the possible exception of Chapter 2, were initiated by divine instruction. Chapter 7 recounts how Joshua launches an attack on the city of Ai, but it makes no mention either of a divine mandate to do so or of any inquiry made to the Lord as to how Israel should proceed. Perhaps Joshua felt overconfident after the remarkable success of Israel's battle against Jericho, or perhaps the implication is that even an apparently easy target is not easy if the Lord is against them.

Chapter Eight

The first attempt to defeat the city of Ai in Chapter 7 apparently proceeded without divine instruction, leaving Israel in the dark regarding its compromised standing brought about by Achan's disobedience. The resulting defeat was costly, as was the remedy made necessary by Achan's and Israel's offence.

The present episode recounts the successful defeat of Ai in response to explicit divine instructions, thus underscoring the importance of adherence to <<*the Word of the Lord*>> (v.8 and v.27), followed by a special ceremony near Shechem (vv.30-35). The passage goes into great detail for a small battle, probably to emphasise that success comes only from seeking the Lord and following his instructions.

Chapter Nine

As did the sparing of the Canaanite prostitute Rahab with her family and their incorporation into Israel in Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:22-25, the present episode forces reflection on the divinely mandated complete destruction of the Canaanite nations, especially since the mandate explicitly states: <<*Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy*>> (Deuteronomy 7:2b). The rationale given in the Deuteronomy passage is that to spare and intermarry with Canaanites will: <<*turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods*>> (Deuteronomy 7:4a). Thus, the issue is one of religious loyalty to the true God rather than to other so-called gods. That both Rahab and the Gibeonites express belief in the power and supremacy of the Lord eases the tension created by their inclusion.

Chapter Ten

The end of Chapter 9 finds Israel in a covenant relationship with the Canaanite city and people of Gibeon! The defection of an important Canaanite city causes alarm among other city leaders, and a coalition is formed. Despite Israel's presumptuousness in not inquiring of the Lord before making a covenant (Joshua 9:14), once made, the covenant is defended even by the Lord himself.

In Chapter 10 he decisively intervenes to defend Israel's Canaanite ally. The battle is recounted first briefly in vv.1-10, while vv.11-15 provide additional details; vv.16-27 add yet further details, focusing on the fates of the five kings; and, finally, vv.28-39 recount the so-called 'southern campaign' in which key southern cities are defeated. Because the events of Chapter 10 are precipitated by Canaanite aggression, Israel's defeat of the south can be viewed as a defensive operation. The chapter concludes with a summary of the conquest so far (vv.40-43).

Chapter Eleven

After Joshua's forces defeated several Amorite kings in the south in the previous chapter, the king of Hazor assembled the northern Canaanite kings to battle the Israelites. Joshua and his men defeated the Canaanites at the waters of Merom and pursued them to Great Sidon and the Valley of Mizpeh. Then Joshua turned back and captured the city of Hazor. The narrator again articulates that what God had commanded of Moses is carried out by Joshua.

The chapter concludes with a summary of all the battles that the Israelites had to fight to gain the land. It makes it clear that the war went on for a long time and that it was God who caused the inhabitants of each city to come out to fight Israel so that they could be defeated. Finally, the land had rest from war.

Chapter Twelve

Now that the land has been conquered, and before it is apportioned, the full extent of the conquest is summarised. Verses 1-6 describe the land east of the River Jordan. This land consisted of the territories of the Transjordanian kings whom Israel had conquered under Moses' leadership, which Moses had allocated to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

Verses 7-24 list the kings whom Joshua and the people of Israel defeated within the Promised Land, the total coming to thirty one.

Chapter Thirteen

Before beginning to describe the tribal allocations west of the Jordan in Chapter 14, the text stresses that, although Israel has gained the upper hand, there remains much land to possess, particularly along the coast and in the far north (vv.1-7). A rehearsal of what was allocated east of the Jordan under Moses (vv.8-33) sets the stage for what follows, as does the ominous notice that the eastern tribes have failed to drive out some of their enemies, leaving them to dwell in the midst of Israel 'to this day (v.13).

Chapter Fourteen

The method by which Joshua and Eleazar will allocate the land to the various tribes is to be by lot, overseen by the tribal elders. The faithful Caleb and his family are allocated the hill country around Hebron.

Chapter Fifteen

As the western allocations begin, pride of place goes to the important tribe of Judah. In keeping with the general pattern of the subsequent allocations, the tribal boundaries are first described (vv.1-12), followed by listings of cities according to region (vv.20-62).

Chapter Sixteen

This chapter describes the land allocation to Ephraim, the first of the two tribes descended from Joseph.

Chapter Seventeen

The account continues and describes the land allocation to the remaining Josephites - the second half tribe of Manasseh. The account includes the

allocation given to the daughters of Zelophehad who died without leaving sons to inherit from him.

The chapter concludes with a dispute over the land allocation given to Ephraim, who believed they were too numerous for the portion of land given.

Chapter Eighteen

The people are gathered at the tent of meeting in Shiloh and Joshua is dismayed that the remaining seven tribes have not yet taken the land. He instructs the elders to select three men from each of the remaining tribes to go out and make a record of the land so that it can be apportioned and taken.

The land allocation of the tribe of Benjamin is then described, with their allocation being between that of Judah and Ephraim, thus forming a buffer zone between the major northern and southern tribes that would later be the focal points of two kingdoms.

Chapter Nineteen

The final six tribes of Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali and Dan now receive their land inheritance by lot. After this is completed, Joshua receives his own town in the hill country of Ephraim, thus completing the allocations.

Chapter Twenty

As instructed by God, six cities of refuge are established west of Jordan. The purpose of these cities was to provide refuge for someone who had killed another accidentally and was being pursued the avenger of blood, a close relative of the deceased who is seeking retribution against the slayer.

Chapter Twenty One

From the beginning of the division of the land, this section in which the Levites receive their inheritance has been anticipated. The Levites receive no designated territory as such but they are given forty eight cities and towns to live and surrounding pasture land for their flocks and herds.

The chapter concludes with a broad summary statement of all that the Lord has done for Israel.

Chapter Twenty Two

In this chapter, the eastern tribes of Reuben, Gad, and eastern Manasseh are released to return to their homes, having fulfilled their duties to their fellow Israelites west of the Jordan. Their construction of a symbolic altar on the bank of the Jordan is at first misunderstood, and a disaster is narrowly averted. The reader does not learn the eastern tribes' motive until vv.21-29, which creates

suspense. It is to the credit of the western tribes that they make a generous offer (v.19) and then listen to the explanation and accept it. Both sides are determined to be faithful to their calling as Israel, and the account shows things working out right. The key word serve occurs three times. Before their departure, Joshua charges the eastern tribes to serve the Lord <<*with all your heart and with all your soul*>> (v.5). In v.27, they insist that they <<*do perform the service of the Lord*>>, literally ‘serve the service.’

Chapter Twenty Three

In many respects this episode mirrors the opening episode in the Book of Joshua. The book began with the passing of the mantle of leadership to Joshua, after the death of Moses. Joshua, now old and well advanced in years, and so the next generation of leaders is charged in terms reminiscent of Joshua’s own commission in Chapter One.

Chapter Twenty Four

Towards the end of his life, Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and led the people to renew their covenant with God with the same fervour he led them into war to take possession of the land. God’s relationship with his people is defined by covenant. However, covenants can be forgotten, not by God, but by people. This is why covenant renewal is so important. Covenant renewal requires a reminder, a resolve, and a remembrance memorial.

The Book of Joshua ends with notification of the death and burial of both Joshua and the high priest Eleazar. In addition, the bones of Jacob that had been brought out of Egypt at the exodus were buried in Shechem just as Joseph had requested should happen.