



THE HISTORICAL BOOKS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Lesson 2

Lesson 2 Commentary

Joshua

Lesson 3 Questions

Judges and Ruth

Introduction

When we left off last lesson, the Israelites were on the outskirts of Canaan, the land promised to Abraham in Genesis. Moses was not allowed to enter Canaan and Joshua was chosen to lead the Israelites forward. Why Joshua? Joshua played a prominent role in the Israel's journey. Originally name Hosea (הושע),¹ Moses changes his name to Joshua (יהושע).² Note how similar the names are in Hebrew, only changing one Hebrew letter. Hosea means "salvation," while Joshua means "Yahweh is salvation." "His new name, then, becomes a constant reminder of who Israel's real deliverer is."³ He appears to be the primary servant of Moses⁴ and was one of the two spies who was not afraid to invade Canaan before the Israelites were sentenced to forty years of wondering in the wilderness.⁵ Based on this, Joshua was God's choice to take over leadership from Moses.⁶

The authorship of Joshua is anonymous. Last week we mentioned James Noth and his "Deuteronomistic History" theory. Due to the similarity of language and themes, it is possible that all the book from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings were penned by the same writer or passed through the hands of the same redactor/editor. Even if Joshua was involved, in some way, in the writing of the book, he certainly would not have written the verses related to his death and those that outlived him.⁷ One of the more interesting points that suggests that the book was written well

¹ Num 13:8, Deut 32:44. All biblical citations are from the NABRE.

² Num 13:16.

³ Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 15.

⁴ Exod 24:13, Num 11:28.

⁵ Num 14:6-9.

⁶ Num 27:18-23.

⁷ Josh 24:29-33.

after the time of Joshua is the use of the term “to this day,” which is used twelve times in the Book of Joshua. The quote below cites examples.

The narrative clearly preserves ancient traditions of the occupation of Canaan—older place names and other archaic features, for example—and it is certainly possible that Joshua was the author of some parts. On the other hand, the use of such phrases as “until this day” (4:9; 5:9; 6:25; 7:26; etc.) shows the work of a later scribe, who compiled the earlier sources into a tight and consistent narrative. Some scholars suggest that the initial form of Joshua took shape around 1000 B.C., or before the rise of Israel’s monarchy, and that its final form appeared during the Babylonian Exile.⁸

As Scott Hahn eludes to in the quote, the opinions as to the timing of Joshua’s writing varies.

There are several ways to break down the book of Joshua, but I prefer the following general outline as put forth by John Bergsma and Brandt Pitre:

- I. Preparations to Take the Land (1-5)
- II. Taking the Land (6-12)
- III. Dividing the Land (13-21)
- IV. Keeping the Land (22-24)⁹

Preparation to Take the Land

Just as Moses did the first time, Joshua sends out spies to scope out their first target, Jericho. In fact, upon careful reading, there are many similarities between Moses and Joshua, as shown in the following table:¹⁰

Moses	Joshua
Numbers 13: Moses sends spies into the land	Joshua 2: Joshua sends spies into the land
Exodus 15: the Song of the Sea: “All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away, terror and dread upon them.”	Joshua 2: Rahab says: “the fear of you has fallen upon us, and . . . all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you.”
Exodus 12: under Moses Israel celebrates the Passover and shortly thereafter eats manna	Joshua 5:10–13: under Joshua Israel celebrates the Passover and shortly thereafter the manna dries up

⁸ Scott Hahn, ed., *Catholic Bible Dictionary* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; Auckland: Doubleday, 2009), 478.

⁹ John Bergsma and Brant Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible: The Old Testament* (Ignatius Press, 2018), Kindle Edition, Chapter 11, Location 6170.

¹⁰ Dale Allison, *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 23–28.

Exodus 17: when Moses with the staff of God holds up his hands, the battle goes to Israel	Joshua 8: when Joshua stretches out his hand with its sword, the victory goes to Israel
Deuteronomy 1–34: Moses delivers a farewell speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to his old age (31:2) • Promises future victory over peoples of the land (31:3–5) • Calls for obedience to the Torah (31:11–13) • Choice of serving God or other gods and the consequent blessing and curses (11:26–28) 	Joshua 23–24: Joshua delivers a farewell speech <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reference to his old age (23:2) • Promises future victory over peoples of the land (23:4–5) • Calls for obedience to the Torah (23:6), • Choice of serving God or the gods and consequent blessing and curses (23:6–16)
Exodus 24: Moses mediates a covenant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The people respond: “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (v.7) 	Joshua 24: Joshua mediates a covenant <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The people respond: “The Lord our God we will serve and him we will obey” (v. 24)

An interesting event occurs in preparation for their entry into Canaan. As background, circumcision is THE sign of the Abrahamic covenant.

God said to Abraham: For your part, you and your descendants after you must keep my covenant throughout the ages. This is the covenant between me and you and your descendants after you that you must keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. Circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. That will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout the ages, every male among you, when he is eight days old, shall be circumcised, including houseborn slaves and those acquired with money from any foreigner who is not of your descendants. Yes, both the houseborn slaves and those acquired with money must be circumcised. Thus my covenant will be in your flesh as an everlasting covenant. If a male is uncircumcised, that is, if the flesh of his foreskin has not been cut away, such a one will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.¹¹

So how do we explain what we read in chapter 5 of the book of Joshua?

On this occasion the LORD said to Joshua: Make flint knives and circumcise Israel for the second time. So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the Israelites at Gibeath-haaraloth. This was the reason for the circumcision: Of all the people who had come out of Egypt, every male of military age had died in the wilderness during the journey after they came out of Egypt. Though all the men who came out were circumcised, none of those born in the wilderness during the journey after the departure from Egypt were circumcised. Now the Israelites wandered

¹¹ Gen 17:9–14. All biblical citations are from the NABRE.

forty years in the wilderness, until all the warriors among the people that came forth from Egypt died off because they had not listened to the voice of the LORD. For the LORD swore that he would not let them see the land he had sworn to their ancestors to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey. It was the children God raised up in their stead whom Joshua circumcised, for these were yet with foreskins, not having been circumcised on the journey. When the circumcision of the entire nation was complete, they remained in camp where they were, until they recovered. Then the LORD said to Joshua: Today I have removed the reproach of Egypt from you.¹²

This text gives the reader the impression that under Moses's leadership the divine injunction to circumcise had not been enforced during the period of wandering. The fact that they are about to celebrate Passover is the reason why circumcision is necessary.

The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: This is the Passover statute. No foreigner may eat of it. However, every slave bought for money you will circumcise; then he may eat of it....The whole community of Israel must celebrate this feast. If any alien residing among you would celebrate the Passover for the LORD, all his males must be circumcised, and then he may join in its celebration just like the natives. But no one who is uncircumcised may eat of it.¹³

This commandment explains why they were circumcised. However, it does not address why they did not follow the law of circumcision on the eighth day as outlined in Genesis. Bergsma and Pitre speculate that it is a sign of the “grave spiritual infidelity manifested by the second generation of Israelites to which Moses gives the book of Deuteronomy.”¹⁴ John Calvin suggests that the cessation of circumcision was God's sign of rejection of the generation that died in the desert: “Attention should be paid to the reason here given, namely, that the children of Israel wandered through the desert till the whole of the generation which had refused to follow God was extinct; from this we may, in my opinion, infer, that the use of circumcision ceased during the whole of that period as a sign of malediction or rejection.”¹⁵

Taking the Land

One of the most difficult subjects to address is the issue of total or *herem* warfare outlined in the Book of Joshua. The noun (*herem*) and verb (*haram*) are used some eighty times in the Old

¹² Josh 5:2–9.

¹³ Exod 12:43–48.

¹⁴ Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 11, Location 6230.

¹⁵ John Calvin and Henry Beveridge, *Commentary on the Book of Joshua* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 79.

Testament and in Joshua chapters 6-11 more than any other place in the Old Testament (twenty-five times).¹⁶ “The most common translations for the noun are “things devoted for destruction” and “the things under the ban,” while for the verb the most common choices are “utterly destroy” and “put under the ban.””¹⁷ So how should we take such verses as follows:

The seventh time around, the priests blew the horns and Joshua said to the people, “Now shout, for the LORD has given you the city. The city and everything in it is under the ban. *Only Rahab the prostitute and all who are in the house with her are to live*, because she hid the messengers we sent. But be careful not to covet or take anything that is under the ban; otherwise you will bring upon the camp of Israel this ban and the misery of it. All silver and gold, and the articles of bronze or iron, are holy to the LORD. They shall be put in the treasury of the LORD.” As the horns blew, the people began to shout. When they heard the sound of the horn, they raised a tremendous shout. The wall collapsed, and the people attacked the city straight ahead and took it. *They observed the ban by putting to the sword all living creatures in the city: men and women, young and old, as well as oxen, sheep and donkeys.*¹⁸

Even Moses demanded *herem*.

But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD, your God, is giving you as a heritage, *you shall not leave a single soul alive*. You must put them all under the ban—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—just as the LORD, your God, has commanded you, *so that they do not teach you to do all the abominations that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the LORD, your God.*¹⁹

In the liturgical sense one might see *kerem* as something like a burnt offering. It is totally dedicated to God so that no human can use it. In a military sense, it seems to take on the same meaning. Instead of burning a sacrificial victim like a lamb or cow, the enemy is totally annihilated (men, women, children, possessions) as a dedication to God so that no human can use the spoils. At least in the case of Moses, he explains why they must be destroyed. How do we address the moral issues related to what appears to be the destruction of non-combatants? One possible solution is that the Book of Joshua contains exaggerations or claims not meant to be taken literally – that is, hyperbole. This was a common approach in the age of Joshua to describe military victories. In the interest of time, I will only cite one such example:

¹⁶ Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 33.

¹⁷ Hamilton, *Handbook on the Historical Books*, 33.

¹⁸ Josh 6:16–21, emphasis added.

¹⁹ Deut 20:16–18, emphasis added.

The great army of Mittani is overthrown in the twinkling of an eye. It has perished completely, as though they had never existed, like the ashes of a fire. — *from a victory stele of Thutmose III, ca. 1450 B.C.* ²⁰

Various scholars provide possible theological explanations also. ²¹

- First, there is the “Divine Pedagogy Explanation.” This proposal suggests that the human author recorded what he or she thought God “willed” as opposed to what he “permitted.” In other words, due to the cultural constraints of the human author, they may not have been privy to God’s “active” will (causing something to happen) versus God’s “permissive” will (allowing something to happen). This would account for the “reason” that Moses gives in Deut 20:18. ²²
- Second, there is the “Allegorical Explanation.” Under this explanation, the scripture should be read in relation to its fulfillment in Christ. Origen of Alexandria (ca. A.D. 200) suggested that, since Joshua and Jesus, are the same name, it represented the enemies of Christ that must be completely destroyed. If you couple this thought process with the use of hyperbole, it could make sense.
- Third, there is the “Divine Judgment Explanation.” This proposal suggests that God used the Israelites to judge the Canaanites. This is not without precedence in the Bible, as God will later use Assyria and Babylon to punish the Northern and Southern Kingdoms, respectively. We see support for this position in the Book of Wisdom: “For truly, the ancient inhabitants of your holy land, whom you hated for deeds most odious— works of sorcery and impious sacrifices; These merciless murderers of children, devourers of human flesh, and initiates engaged in a blood ritual, and parents who took with their own hands defenseless lives.” ²³ In addition, combine this thought process with Moses “reasoning,” above and it could make sense.
- Fourth, and finally, there is the “Deuteronomic Concession Explanation.” The reasoning here is that Moses gave the order found in Deut 20:16-18 due to Israel’s “hardness of heart,” much in the same way as Moses allowed for divorce. In Matthew’s Gospel we read: “They said to him, “Then why did Moses command that the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss [her]?” He said to them, “Because of the hardness of your hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” ²⁴

²⁰ Source taken from Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 11, Location 6346.

²¹ For a more thorough discussion of these, see Bergsma and Pitre, *A Catholic Introduction to the Bible*, Kindle Edition, Chapter 11, Locations 6542 to 6675.

²² Matthew J. Ramage, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and St. Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2013), Kindle Edition, Chapter 5, Locations 4099-4105.

²³ Wis 12:3–6.

²⁴ Matt 19:7–8.

We also read in Ezekiel, “Therefore I gave them statutes that were not good, and ordinances through which they could not have life.”²⁵

Whether or not we find any of these explanations satisfying, as faithful Catholics, we must keep several things in mind. First, God is all good. He cannot do evil. If we do not understand why God does something or allows something to happen, it is because God has not chosen to reveal it to us yet. Second, Scripture is inerrant, but genre is important. The use of hyperbole was a well-attested literary device in the Ancient Near East.

²⁵ Ezek 20:25.

QUESTIONS FOR LESSON 3

Judges and Ruth

Day 1 – Scan the lecture notes. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 2 – Read “The Book of Judges,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

Day 3 – Read Judges 3:7-30. This group of verses contains the stories of the Judges, Othniel and Ehud.

Do you notice similarities between the two stories? (Hint: sequence of events.)

Based on what you read in these two stories, how would you characterize the role of the “Judge?” (Hint: Judge as we know it, King, Hero?)

Day 4 – Read Judges 13-1 to 16:31

In a few sentences, write your thoughts about Samson and his role as a Judge.

Day 5 – Read Judges 19:1 to 21:25.

Based on our modern sensibilities, there are many parts of this story that are disturbing. However, keep in mind the “primitiveness” of the people of this time. When you read the story, how would you characterize the people of Judah (those in Bethlehem) and the people of Benjamin (those in Gibeah)? Why would the writer make such distinctions? (Hint: David is from Judah, Saul is from Benjamin). What might this suggest about the timing of the writing?

Day 6 – Read “The Book of Ruth,” attached. Write down one or two points that you consider most interesting.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES²⁶

The Hebrew word translated “Judges” in the English title of the book refers not to specialized judicial officers or magistrates but to leaders in general. According to the biblical narrative these judges led Israel from the end of the conquest of Canaan until the beginning of the monarchy. The period of the Judges, therefore, extended from the death of Joshua (Josh 24:29–31; cf. Judg 1:1) until the installation of Saul as Israel’s first king by the prophet Samuel, who was also the last judge (see 1 Sam 7:15–17).

The Book of Judges begins with two introductory passages. The first (chap. 1) gives a description of the situation in Canaan after the Israelite conquest. It emphasizes the continued existence of the indigenous inhabitants of Canaan in many parts of the land because of Israel’s inability to drive them out completely. The second passage (2:1–3:6) is a thematic introduction to the period of the Judges, describing a cyclical pattern of infidelity, oppression, “crying out,” and deliverance (see note on 2:10–19).

The main part of the book (3:7–16:31) consists of a series of stories about thirteen leaders whose careers are described in greater or lesser detail. The exploits of six of these—Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson—are related at length, and all are shown to have delivered Israel from oppression or danger. They are customarily called “major judges,” whereas the other six—Shamgar, Tola, Jair, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon—who appear only in brief notices, are designated “minor judges.” The thirteenth, Abimelech, is included in neither group, since his story is essentially a continuation of that of Gideon and his career is presented as deplorable, a cautionary tale of royal ambition.

The final section of the book consists of two episodes, one about the migration of the tribe of Dan (chaps. 17–18) and the other about an intertribal war directed against the tribe of Benjamin (chaps. 19–21). These stories illustrate the religious and political disorder that prevailed at the time when, as yet, “there was no king in Israel” (see note on 17:6).

The principal contribution of the Deuteronomistic historian to the Book of Judges is the thematic introduction to—and theological evaluation of—the period of the Judges in 2:1–3:6, as well as editorial comments structuring the narrative throughout, e.g., 3:7; 4:1; etc. The historian drew the stories of the judges themselves from older sources, which could have existed in written form but derive ultimately from oral tradition.

²⁶ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to the Book of Judges.

Thus, the principal divisions of the book in outline are as follows:

- I. The Situation in Canaan Following the Israelite Conquest (1:1–3:6)
- II. Stories of the Judges (3:7–16:31)
- III. Further Stories of the Tribes of Dan and Benjamin (17:1–21:25)

THE BOOK OF RUTH²⁷

The Book of Ruth is named for the Moabite woman who commits herself to the Israelite people by an oath to her mother-in-law Naomi and becomes the great-grandmother of David by marriage to Boaz of Bethlehem. Thus, she is an ancestor in the messianic line that leads to Jesus (Matt 1:5).

The book portrays the love and loyalty of human beings in working their way through tragic circumstances to participation in the community of the faithful people of God. The key is responsible and loving decision-making: Ruth's loyalty (2:11), her generosity (1:15–17; 2:2, 7) and her willingness to take risks for the sake of righteousness set in motion a chain of beneficial events, while behind the scenes God blesses each step in the developing drama. Ruth is so frequently designated "the Moabite" in the book that the audience of the story is constantly reminded of the universality of the embrace of salvation.

In the Greek and Latin canons, Ruth follows Judges, to which it is related by its opening time reference ("Once back in the time of the judges ..."), and precedes Samuel, serving as transition from Israel as tribal union to monarchy. In the present sequence of the Hebrew canon it is placed among the "Writings" immediately after the Book of Proverbs, which ends with a powerful portrayal of "the woman of worth" (Prov 31:10–31; cf. Ruth 3:11). Ruth is the primary liturgical text in Judaism for the celebration of the feast of Weeks (Shabuot).

The beauty of the story's construction, its use of dialogue (nearly two thirds of the text), and the sheer drama of its content mark it as one of the classic short stories of world literature. Based on the recollection of an historical figure, a story is developed which grips its audience with profound insight into divine and human relationships. The story is presented from a point sometime after the course of events, as is indicated by the explanation of an obscure custom in 4:7. Wherever and whenever it was told, its claim of God's universal concern for humankind and the attractiveness of caring human responsibility shines forth.

The date of composition is disputed. Many authors date it early in the monarchy, and valid arguments can be presented for that position. Others argue for a postexilic date; they see the favorable presentation of a Moabite woman who became David's grandmother as a counter to the stringent measures of Ezra and Nehemiah against marriage with Moabites and other non-Jews (Ezra 9–10; Neh 13:23–29).

²⁷ *New American Bible*, Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Introduction to the Book of Ruth.