

“Two Joshuas”

Reading: Joshua 1:1-9; Hebrews 4:6-16

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The book of Joshua is a difficult one in the Bible. It's a book I don't like preaching on, to be honest, because it raises some thorny questions for our theology. It's an extremely violent book, which is also true of the book of Judges which follows it, but unlike Judges, you can't try to justify Joshua's violence by claiming that it's in self-defense. Joshua tells the story of an invasion, except that the invaders are the good guys in our story. As they move into the land God has promised them, they are specifically commanded to wipe out the nations that are already living there and have lived there for a long time, and in fact they are cursed by God when they fail to completely destroy these nations.

The Bible uses a technical term when it talks about this sort of annihilation of these nations. It doesn't translate well, so some versions of the Bible refer to it as “proscribing” or “totally destroying” or “devoting their cities to destruction;” sometimes it's called “the ban.” The idea is that as Joshua and sometimes other later leaders in Israel were leading God's people in war, especially during this time of invasion as they were conquering the land of these Canaanite nations, usually the conquered people and all of their goods — men, women, children, livestock, everything — would be killed or burned, and sometimes the valuable things like gold that wouldn't easily burn would be repurposed for use in the Lord's tabernacle. These days we would call this genocide. It's not just conquest, as bad as that would be; this is the deliberate, God-ordered annihilation of entire nations of people. That should cause some problems in our theology.

In fact, for many people, these parts of the Bible are key to why they reject our God. Many modern atheists argue that any God who commands such things in His name is not worth worshiping, and they use violence committed in the name of religion as one of the reasons why religion is dangerous and harmful. Their arguments in this area tend to be overly broad and inaccurate, but the point stands: how can our God command such things? Even supposing these Canaanite nations were *really* bad people, can anything justify genocide to this degree? Even in the most evil nations we can think of, we would never argue that *every* man, woman, and child ought to be slaughtered.

There is no easy solution to the problem of the book of Joshua. I don't think we should ever stop being uncomfortable when we read about this conquest, and we should always mourn those who die in such a fashion, in whatever time and place. But there are some things that can help us place this book in its context, and while they shouldn't make us comfortable with it, they can help us make more sense out of it. It's a tricky thing, because as horrifying as it can sometimes be, as we look back through history we need to do our best not to judge the past by our modern ethical standards. We need to judge ancient people by *their* own standards first to understand their context. For example, in American history, many of the people first fighting for the abolition of slavery were still what we would consider very racist. They wanted to end slavery, but many of them weren't arguing for civil rights, and many of them intended to send freed slaves back to Africa. Nowadays that sounds pretty bad, but in their context, they were *very* forward-thinking and progressive.

So we need to remember that in Joshua's time, devoting a conquered land to whatever god you claimed was not uncommon. This was long before people had a concept of just war and human rights; this is simply how war was often fought in those times. War was incredibly brutal no matter

where it was waged back then. And with that we need to take into account that this was intended to be a ritual act: the goal was not to inflict suffering, it was, strangely enough, to honor God, much like sacrificing a goat was not focused on making the goat suffer, it was on making a gift of a valuable creature to God.

With that there is a strong emphasis on establishing God's order in the land: it's not just taking over land so that the Israelites can live there, it's putting nations in what they perceived as the proper boundaries established by God. That sounds like a pretty shoddy excuse for widespread slaughter and it's bad luck for the Canaanites, but remember that parts of the Old Testament are very concerned with how God orders the world. The act of creation was separating out things like light and darkness and putting them in their proper places, and our act of rebellion as humans was to cross a boundary that we should not have. Likewise, the Old Testament sees that God orders entire nations. We could go back to Genesis 9 at the end of the story of Noah, when one of Noah's sons, named Ham, shames his father. Noah then curses Ham and Ham's son, Canaan, to be enslaved by his brothers, one of whom is named Shem, from which we get *Semitic*. So there was this ancient understanding of the world as being ordered by stories like this: Canaan and the peoples descended from him had long been cursed to be conquered by the descendants of Shem, or the Israelites. And along with this was the usual assumption that these Canaanites were engaged in all sorts of sinful practices in their worship of pagan gods, and if they were not removed from the land, their sin would surely cross the boundaries into the Israelites' worship.

Now, none of this mitigates the fact that here we have God ordering widespread slaughter of women and children — it in no way justifies these actions for our time — but it does help us understand how this made sense in their time, so that then we can understand what God was trying to tell His people in the ongoing story of His redemption of the creation He made and loves. As we read this story of God commanding His people to conquer the land, we can't explain away the horror at all those deaths, but we can draw out of it the timeless lessons about God that are revealed.

First of all, we get a reaffirmation that our God is the Lord of all things. He claims the entire world and all of creation, without exception, as rightly belonging to Himself. That's actually an unusual claim, though it doesn't sound that way to us today because we're used to it. But in the days of Joshua, gods and goddesses and spirits and demons were usually assumed to have a specific realm or area of influence. Marduk was the patron god of one country, while Molech was the chief god in another country, and Ba'al might be the god of another nation. Each god claimed a certain group of people and the land they lived in, and you would have lots of lesser gods that ruled over the sea or the sky or a certain valley. But our God makes a bold claim: He says it's all His, and it belongs to no one else. In this conquest He is beginning the process of taking back the creation that has rebelled against Him; this land and the people following Joshua are God's beachhead in His invasion to retake what is His.

There are a few places where this is explicit in the book of Joshua, when God is referred to as "God in heaven above and on the earth below" (2:11) or as "Lord of all the earth" (3:13), but the implicit point is that God has a right to this land because all of creation is His. Thus, as difficult as it is to understand, the Canaanite people are therefore also seen as belonging to God, and they are being devoted to Him. So because our God is the Lord of all the earth, He is therefore taking the initiative in carving out a holy space in His creation and putting it in the order that is required for it to be a holy

space. And it's not just the Canaanites who have to be put in their proper boundaries, because the Israelites are also put in their proper boundaries. A solid third of the book of Joshua is taken up with describing how the land is to be divided among the different tribes of Israel. Each one is given their proper place. Our God is Lord of all the earth, and He puts things in their order so that creation can be made holy.

And as God lays claim to His creation, and as He puts it back in order, the story of Joshua makes it clear that it is God who fights and works to bring about His purposes. God is on the march, and He invites us to follow Him. Again, Joshua is a book that is full of battles, but the idea is that while the Israelites show up for battle, it is the Lord who does the real fighting for them. They arrive at Jericho, an indomitable fortress, but as they are faithful in following God's commands, the walls miraculously fall down and the battle is won. Time and time again, their victory depends on their faithfulness, because God's presence depends on their faithfulness, and it is God who is fighting for them. Just to drive the point home, at the end of the book, at the end of Joshua's life, when the land has been claimed, the people gather to renew their covenant with God, and God reminds them of what He did for them. "You did not do it with your own sword and bow," God tells them (24:12), "so I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build."

So because God claims all of creation as His own, and because He is working to restore it to holiness, and because God is fighting for His people, therefore the refrain of the book is "do not be afraid, do not be discouraged, be strong and courageous." Time and time again, when God's people are faced with insurmountable foes, God reminds them, "do not be afraid." That's a message of comfort — "don't be worried" — but it's also a commissioning — "don't let your fear stop you from what you need to do." It comforts us but it doesn't let us get comfortable, because it motivates us to do the work God calls us to. I don't know about you, but I can't turn my fear on and off. Fear doesn't work like a light bulb. God is not so much telling His people to control their emotions as He is telling them to control their actions: fearless people might not actually be without fear, but they act according to the needs and the mission regardless of their fear.

So what does all of this mean for us today? Obviously Joshua's mission was bound to that one time and set of circumstances. But what it reveals about God — that He is Lord of everything, that He is making things holy, that He fights for His people, and that we ought not to be afraid — that is still very, very relevant. It is especially relevant to us in light of the work of Jesus. It's quite accurate to say that Joshua was a precursor or foreshadowing of Jesus; Jesus' real name *Yeshua* was a version of *Yehoshua*, both of which have the meaning of "the Lord saves." So in other words, Jesus and Joshua are basically the same name. And both Joshua and Jesus saved the people of God by fearlessly laying claim to God's eternal, expansive kingdom of holiness on earth. What that means is that Joshua and Jesus had the same mission, but they accomplished it through vastly different methods: Joshua through conquering others, Jesus through conquering death by giving Himself for others. Joshua pointed us toward the aims of God's kingdom, while Jesus revealed that kingdom's character and methods of love.

What this means for us today is that the whole earth, and every part of your life, belongs to the Lord, and His goal is to have it all ordered according to holiness. He wants all of creation, from the greatest galaxy to the smallest habit in your life, brought back under His Lordship, as it was intended to be from the beginning. That is His mission, and we are invited to it. Therefore, we are called to

fearlessly submit all of our lives to Him, to give of ourselves fearlessly for those who are not yet in His kingdom, and never to quail in fear before the walls or opposition of those who are apart from God. This is not a call to arrogance, it is a call to greater love and devotion to God. What is there in your life and in your world that needs to be fearlessly ordered by God?



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