

Old Testament Survey 4 – Joshua  
July 1, 2018 Adult Sunday School

*On the last day of his short life, 10-year-old Sami had something important to say to his friend. “This will be the last time I see you,” the boy said. “I have a feeling that I will die.” His friend, Hussein Hatem, loyally told his mate that he wished he could take his place, and die instead.*

*That afternoon, a group of IS fighters came to the boys’ primary school in a suburb on the outskirts of the city of Mosul. They knocked on the door of every classroom. “Let them come out. We’ll teach them a lesson,” the fighters told the teachers.*

*Outside in the cement schoolyard, the men held Sami as the rest of the school gathered to watch. “Then my friend got really sad. He was all alone,” Hussein remembers.*

*One of the men raised his sword and hacked off Sami’s head.*

*“They told us to learn like this. This is the way to cut people’s heads off,” Hussein says. “The girls were crying on his body. And I thought, ‘My poor friend.’ We took his body. One of my friends carried his head, and I carried his body. We threw him on the garbage pile.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Shout, for the LORD has given you the city [of Jericho]. . . .” So the people shouted, . . . and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, . . . and they captured the city. Then they devoted all in the city to destruction, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys, with the edge of the sword.<sup>2</sup>*

Our world is no stranger to religiously-motivated violence. And though we worship the Prince of Peace, we now come to the book of Joshua, “a bloody tale of battle, violence, and wholesale slaughter, a slaughter in which God assists with his mighty acts; the smoke of burning towns and the stench of rotting flesh hangs over its pages.”<sup>3</sup>

How can we worship such a God? How can we make sense of this story, knowing that we worship the utterly non-violent Crucified One? Can we dare hope that Joshua has something to teach us today?

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Bachelard and Kate Geraghty, “Surviving ISIS in Iraq: Stories from Mosul,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/interactive/2017/mosul/hussein/>.

<sup>2</sup> Joshua 6:16, 20–21.

<sup>3</sup> John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 243.

## “BE STRONG AND COURAGEOUS”: JOSHUA ON ITS OWN TERMS

Before addressing these challenging questions, we first need to understand the book of Joshua within its own context.

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”<sup>4</sup>

The book of Joshua is a story of God fulfilling his promises. After the disaster of Israel’s faithless and fearful disobedience keeping them in the wilderness for 40 years,<sup>5</sup> now Israel is finally entering the land that God promised to Abraham.

The book begins with repeated exhortations for Joshua to be strong and courageous.

- Fear kept Israel from obedience last time! God knows how Israel is being tempted, and he responds accordingly. There is a word of comfort here for us: If we have ears to listen, God is not subtle in directing us on how to live.
- There is no military advice in God’s first words to Joshua. There’s a sense in which Israel isn’t even fighting the battles; God is. And so their success is contingent not on typical military measures, like army size or tactics, but on their fidelity to God.

Why does Joshua need to be obedient? What direction from God are they to obey?

### The *Herem* Command

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you, . . . you must devote them to complete destruction [Heb: *herem*]. You shall make no covenant with them and show no mercy to them.<sup>6</sup>

In the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction [Heb: *herem*], . . . that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.<sup>7</sup>

God commands Israel to devote all of the inhabitants of the promised land to destruction. The Hebrew word used to describe this act of devoting to destruction is *herem* (חָרַם), which “involves consecration, the giving over of the captives of war to God.”<sup>8</sup> As Israel kills every living thing in the promised land, it is almost an act of worship.

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 15:18–20.

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 13–14.

<sup>6</sup> Deuteronomy 7:1–2.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 20:16–18.

<sup>8</sup> *Show Them No Mercy: Four Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 163.

### *What about Rahab?*

Not every living thing is actually killed; this command isn't obeyed to the letter.

- In Joshua 2, Rahab cooperates with the Israelite spies and is spared.
- Rahab is one of only a few women specifically mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus.<sup>9</sup> As we look back on Joshua, there is a seed of messianic hope even in the morass of violence in this book.

### **“NOT AGAINST FLESH AND BLOOD”: UNDERSTANDING JOSHUA AS A CHRISTIAN**

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.<sup>10</sup>

How do we make sense of this book in light of our utterly non-violent Lord Jesus?

First, we need to recognize what Joshua *is not*.

- The command for *herem* warfare is *not* a general, perpetual command; it's a one-time event. Deuteronomy provides different laws for wars after the conquest of Canaan recorded in Joshua.<sup>11</sup>
- Our horror at Joshua is not something new. From very early on, Christians have been uneasy this horrific violence. We have inherited from generations of Christians different approaches for addressing the book's challenges.

### **Some Helpful (But Not Quite Sufficient) Approaches to the Conquest**

#### ***Marcionism***

Marcion of Sinope was a second-century Christian theologian who taught that the God of the Old Testament is evil and distinct from the God and Father of Jesus. His teaching was quickly denounced as heresy by the church, because Jesus teaches that the whole Old Testament is about himself.<sup>12</sup> But we're indebted to Marcion for raising the concern that there is an incongruity between the God of the Canaanite genocide and the God of Jesus Christ.

#### ***Divine Command Theory***

Some Christians approach Joshua using what's known as “divine command theory”:

. . . [O]ur moral duties are constituted by the commands of a holy and loving God. Since God doesn't issue commands to Himself, He has no moral duties to fulfill. He is certainly not subject to the same moral obligations and prohibitions that we are. For example, I have no right to take an innocent life. For me to do so would be murder. But God has no such prohibition. He can give and take life as He chooses. . . . God is under no obligation

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<sup>9</sup> Matthew 1:5.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:43–45.

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 20:1–15.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 24:25–27.

whatsoever to extend my life for another second. If He wanted to strike me dead right now, that's His prerogative.<sup>13</sup>

In this view, if we're uneasy about the Canaanite genocide, we are actually in the wrong and need to be corrected; in this view, God is morally perfect even when God kills the innocent.

#### *What's Good about It?*

- Having a heart that trusts that God's commands and actions are good is a good thing. There are commands of Jesus that don't make sense sometimes, and it is good to simply trust that God knows better than we do.

#### *What's Not so Good?*

- There's precedent for us to question God's justice, saying with Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?"<sup>14</sup> But under divine command theory, God's actions can never be questioned, and Abraham was wrong for questioning about the destruction of Sodom. A faith that does not permit questions is not a faith that will last very long.
- If we are made in God's image, then our moral intuition is not to be completely discounted, especially when that intuition is reinforced by Christ's command for non-violence.<sup>15</sup>
- Non-Christians share our intuition that genocide is a bad thing. We should affirm their disgust with texts like Joshua. Not to do so can drive people away from Jesus.

### **More Helpful Approaches to the Conquest**

#### ***Conquest as Divine Judgment***

Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you . . . .<sup>16</sup>

- God is using Israel as an agent of his judgment against the Canaanites.
- Leviticus 20:1–5 suggests that the worship of Moloch, an Ammonite god, included child sacrifice.
- If we're horrified by the Canaanite conquest, then we should remember that Jesus says he will judge the whole world at his return.<sup>17</sup>
- God is not capricious in his judgment on these nations; he's incredibly patient. When God tells Abraham that it would be 400 years before his descendants receive the promised land, God's rationale for the delay is that "the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> William Lane Craig, "Slaughter of the Canaanites," *Reasonable Faith* (blog), August 6, 2007, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/question-answer/slaughter-of-the-canaanites/>.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 18:25.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 5:38–48.

<sup>16</sup> Deuteronomy 9:4–5.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew 25:31–46

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 15:16.

- God is being patient now, too, as Peter writes, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise [to return in judgment] as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”<sup>19</sup>

“*What about the Canaanite infants? They’re killed, too!*”

The Bible has a much more communal perspective on guilt than we typically have, and this often makes the Bible challenging for us.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation.*<sup>20</sup>

“*But isn’t this awfully violent? Don’t we worship a God of love?*”

God’s judgment—even violent judgment—is not incompatible with God’s love. God’s judgment is good news for the poor and oppressed who are victims of violence and injustice. As one theologian puts it,

[O]ne could . . . argue that in a world of violence it would not be worthy of God *not to wield* the sword; if God were *not angry* at injustice and deception and *did not* make a final end to violence God would not be worthy of our worship.<sup>21</sup>

### ***Conquest as Allegory for the Christian Life***

One of the oldest Christian approaches to the conquest in Joshua is to read it as an allegory for the spiritual life. This approach is suggested in Ephesians.

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike Joshua, in which the violence of God’s people is directed against flesh and blood human beings, our violence is metaphorical and spiritual, directed not against human beings but against sin and the forces that choke human flourishing. Just as Israel is commanded to utterly destroy the Canaanites, we are commanded to utterly destroy the sin in ourselves that keeps us from God.

Joshua is challenging—even horrifying—to our moral sensibilities. But even here we find a good word for us from God. We are not to toy around with sin; we are to destroy it to the last man, in order that, just as God plants Israel in the land of promise, we also might enjoy the eternal rest that God promises for us in Christ.

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<sup>19</sup> 2 Peter 3:9.

<sup>20</sup> Exodus 34:6–7.

<sup>21</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 303.

<sup>22</sup> Ephesians 6:10–12.

