

The Old Testament: Part Seven

Books of Joshua, Judges and Ruth

With the Book of Joshua, we move to the second main section of the 46 books of the Old Testament—the Historical Books. The first group of books in this section comprises Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles. They cover Israel's entry into Canaan, the Promised Land, the period of the Judges, the monarchy, a nation divided into two kingdoms, a nation destroyed and carried into exile. The period extends from about 1250 B.C. to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.

THE BOOK OF JOSHUA – A Promise Fulfilled

This book begins with God saying to Joshua, *“My servant Moses is dead. So prepare to cross the Jordan here, with all the people, into the land I will give the Israelites”* (1:2-3). With these words, God commissions Joshua to lead the Israelites into the land he promised to Abraham (Gen 12:1-3), to Isaac (Gen 26:3), to Jacob (Gen 28:13), and to Moses (Ex 6:7-8). This book can be divided into three parts:

Part One: Conquest of Canaan (chs 1-12)

Part Two: Division of the land amongst the tribes (chs 13-29)

Part Three: Joshua's farewell address (chs 23-24)

Warning. If you are not familiar with the Book of Joshua, brace yourself for what may be the most violent book of the Bible, making it all the more challenging because God is seen as the one ordering the Israelites to deal with their enemies in a most violent way.

Suggested chapters to read

For a fuller introduction and commentary on this book, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Articles 18-19 (www.ascensioncatholic.net).

Chapter 2: Rahab and the Israelites spies

Introducing this story in his commentary on Joshua, Jerome Creach writes: *“Joshua 2 is one of the richest and most intricately woven narratives in the Book. It employs irony, humor, and folkloric qualities to create an irresistible plot in which a prostitute outsmarts two groups of men in order to preserve herself and her family during the Israelite attack on Jericho. The narrative has suspense, sexual innuendo, and an underdog who triumphs – everything a modern audience expects in a great story!”* (p.31).

Just as Moses sent spies to reconnoiter Canaan, now Joshua sends spies to reconnoiter Jericho. The chapter can be subdivided into four sections.

Verses 2-7. When the spies reach Jericho, they enter the house of a harlot named Rahab (v.1). We may wonder why the spies would enter such a house. Some commentators suggest that it was a good place to gather information without having to answer questions. Anyway, the local king becomes aware that spies are in the city and tries to locate them. The king's men come to Rahab's home. Rahab, having hidden the spies on the roof, gives the king's men false information and sends them on a wild goose chase.

Verses 8-14 show the two spies concealed under a pile of flax on Rahab's roof. There the smart harlot cuts a deal with them, thus buying safety for herself and her household when the city is destroyed.

Verses 15-21. Rahab lowers the spies from the city wall and gives them instructions for their escape. Rahab is the savviest person in this story. She thwarts the king's efforts to capture the spies, and she maneuvers the spies into an oath that will protect her and her family when the Israelites invade Jericho. And most importantly, she is the one most keenly aware of God's sovereignty and makes a powerful profession of faith in verses 9-11. She recognizes:

- that the land of Canaan belongs to God and that he has given it to the Israelites.
- that it is God's might and power that enable the Israelites to take possession of the land.

The Walls of Jericho come tumbling down

Verse 6:2 states: *“And to Joshua, the Lord said, ‘I have delivered Jericho and its king into your power.’”* In and through this word of the Lord, Joshua is told that he does not have to worry about this battle. God will be taking care of it.

The whole thrust of the account of the fall of Jericho is to show that God is the one who gives Israel the victory. Having the walls collapse as Israel conducts what looks like a prayer service is a dramatic way of stating what happens when people place their trust in God. The focus in Joshua is not an *historical account* as we understand history, but a *theological declaration* of God's role in the events of Israel's life.

Throwing light on the ban of destruction

“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 asses.” (6:21)

In this chapter of Joshua, we read about one of the most reprehensible practices in ancient Israel, namely, God's

command to destroy every man, woman and child after the Canaanite city had been conquered.

In carrying out the practice of what is called the “ban of destruction,” the Israelites are obeying what Moses told them to do when the Lord gave them victory over the cities in the land of Canaan. *“In the cities of those nations which the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage, you shall not leave a single soul alive...lest they teach you to make any such abominable offerings as they make to their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord, your God”* (Dt 20:16-18).

While the mass slaughter of whole populations greatly offend us, we too in our own time have experienced the mass execution of Jews, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the conquest of North America by white European settlers who believed it was their *divine right* to drive the Indians out of their land and mistreat them in gross ways. While the mention of these modern atrocities is not intended to justify the ancient practice of the ban, they may help to sober our outrage.

The practice of the *ban* is seen as a way to make sure that the pagan practices of the Canaanites do not contaminate Israel’s loyalty to God. *“It is necessary to realize that the ancients saw evil as an infectious reality; it had to be rooted out and destroyed in its totality”* (Roland Faley, TOR). The Israelites living in the thirteenth century B.C. did not have the benefit of the fullness of revelation that came with Jesus.

Fr. Oscar Lukefahr, C.M., in his commentary on Numbers, does address this question. He writes:

We cannot imagine Jesus telling Joshua to put innocent men, women, and children to the sword. We ought not then feel compelled to believe that God gave such orders in Old Testament times. Most probably, slaughters like those described in Joshua occurred less frequently than reported, and when they did occur, they were due to the mistaken perceptions and sinfulness of human beings rather than to a direct command from God.

We are not doubting the inspiration of Scripture when we question whether God actually commissioned the “holy wars” and the systematic slaughter of innocent people. We are saying that the Bible is accurately recording the perceptions of Israelites of long ago, but that those perceptions were wrong. The inspired message, the one intended by the inspired authors, is not that God orders the destruction of pagans, but that the readers of the Bible should not be ensnared in paganism. (A Catholic Guide to the Bible, p.57)

Chapters 12-21: Division of the Land

These are chapters which we will most likely *not* read. What is their purpose in this book? Having a plot of land is very important for survival. This is the way one is going

to care for one’s family. The division of the land is an act of justice. Every tribe and family is cared for.

Chapters 23-24. In these final two chapters, we have two addresses by Joshua to his people. In chapter 23, Joshua reminds Israel to love God (v.11), the Torah’s greatest command. But then Joshua issues a warning that any failure on Israel’s part to remain completely and exclusively loyal to God will have the gravest of consequences (vv 15-16). While the land is a gift from God to Israel, the gift can be revoked.

In chapter 25, Joshua calls together the tribes and their leaders and challenges them to renew their commitment to the Lord: *“Decide today whom you will serve”* (v.15). The people respond: *“We will serve the Lord and obey his voice”* (v.25).

As the Book of Joshua ends, we notice that he has appointed no successor. Israel is a *nation* with its own *land* but with no recognized leader or capital. It’s only recognized sign of unity is the Ark of the Covenant. The lack of a leader to unify the nation sets the stage for many leaders. From this period in Israel’s history, we now turn to the Book of Judges.

THE BOOK OF JUDGES – Struggle between Faith and Culture

This book received its name from the main characters in the text called Judges. As we shall see, judges in this book do not refer to black-robed characters sitting behind a bench, holding a gavel and making decisions on matters of law. Rather, judges in this book are charismatic military leaders raised up by God to deliver the Israelites from oppression by their Canaanite neighbors. The book covers about a 200-year period from 1200 B.C. to 1,000 B.C., from the time of Joshua’s death to the time of Samuel.

At the end of the Book of Joshua, we may get the impression that the Israelites have overtaken all of the land of Canaan. But that is not true—they have seized some of the land. Unfortunately, having to live side by side with their pagan neighbors, they are driven to adopt some of their pagan ways.

To give some idea of the challenge that the Canaanite culture and religion presented to the Israelites, consider the following. The Canaanites are good farmers while the Israelites, formerly a desert people, do not know much about farming. In the eyes of the Canaanites, a good harvest is almost guaranteed by worshipping the fertility god, Baal, recognized as lord of the earth, giver of rain, and source of grain, wine, and oil. *“To ignore Baal Rites in those days would have seemed impractical and even reckless”* (Bernhard Anderson). Given these conditions, it is not surprising that many Israelites turn to their neighbors, especially when it comes to harvesting the land.

Other temptations. Besides the temptation to worship Baal, the Israelites are also vulnerable to embracing other Canaanite practices that are abhorrent to the Lord, e.g., temple prostitution and child sacrifice.

The period of Judges is a harsh and ruthless time when the Israelites and their pagan neighbors engage in bloody conflicts for survival. In this book, we will hear tales of intrigue and assassination (3:15-30), deceit and murder (ch. 3), war (chs. 6-8), treason and fratricide (ch. 9), rash vows (ch. 11), civil conflict (ch. 12), vandalism, treachery, and suicide (chs. 13-16). There is an appendix of stories about the tribes of Dan and Benjamin (chs. 17-21) which are even more gruesome than those in Chapters 1-16. The book paints a dreadful picture of what happens when people turn away from God. Left to itself, humanity degenerates into a frightful caricature of what it ought to be. We have seen examples of this in the last century when some leaders sought to construct a godless society and ended up in war and self-destruction.

A final introductory word is one made by Clinton McCann in his commentary on Judges. He writes:

In the book of Judges, God's opposition to the Canaanites should not be understood to mean God's hatred of a particular people; rather it indicates God's opposition to a way of life that was based on injustice and unrighteousness that consequently resulted in deadly oppression.

"Canaanites" in Judges, is a kind of code word referring to those forces, structures, and individuals who were seen to be in opposition to the good order of God. The real adversary was not a whole people, but a way of organizing society. To oppose the Canaanite system is, in essence, to choose life as God intends it. But as we shall see in this book, this is a choice the Israelites did not make. (p.21).

What is the story? The Israelites continue their conquest of the Promised Land. But the Canaanite natives who have not been driven out by the Israelites regroup and counterattack. In addition, the Israelites begin to adopt the customs and idolatrous worship of their pagan neighbors. A series of 12 leaders, each in a time of grave national crisis, arise to rouse the people and lead them against the threatening enemy. And every time, in response to the people's repentance, the Lord has mercy and rescues Israel.

Commentary. For a fuller commentary on the chapters of this book, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Articles 20-21.

A fivefold pattern in Judges

As we read this book, we will notice several times the following fivefold pattern.

- The people do evil in the sight of God. They forsake the God who delivered them from Egypt by worshipping the gods of their neighbors.
- God's anger flares up against the Israelites. He allows their Canaanite neighbors to oppress them.
- In their affliction, the Israelites cry out to God.
- Moved to pity for his oppressed people, God raises up a judge or military leader to deliver them. As long as the judge lives, Israel enjoys peace and rest.
- When the judge dies, the people revert to worshipping false gods. God becomes angry and the people are allowed to fall into the hands of their neighbors again. This fivefold pattern is clearly outlined in Judges 3:10-19.

Chapters 4-5: Deborah

Deborah is the only female judge. She is also a prophetess, civil magistrate, charismatic leader, wife and mother.

This story features not only Deborah, but also Barak and Joel. After being oppressed for twenty years, the Israelites cry out to the Lord (4:4). Then Deborah appears on the scene as one who plays the role of judge for the people. She calls General Barak and tells him that he and his men are to go out and fight the powerful General Sisera and his mighty army. Barak is told that he need not fear, for the Lord will win the battle for him. But Barak refuses to 'man up' and place his trust in Deborah's prophetic word. He refuses to go into battle without her.

Chapters 6-8: Gideon and the Midianites

Gideon is the most famous of the Judges. His story begins with Israel being harassed by the Midianites. Mounted on camels, they frequently steal the harvest that the Israelites work hard to produce. This happens because they turn away from the Lord.

When they repent and call out to the Lord, God raises up Gideon to deliver them. Gideon's call is one of the great call stories in the Bible, similar to the call of Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Mary. Like Moses and Jeremiah, Gideon does not think he is up to the job. He says: *"Please, my Lord, how can I save Israel? My family is the meanest in Manasseh (a tribe), and I am the most insignificant in my father's house"* (v.15). What Gideon does not know yet is that God loves using the "weakest" and the "least" so that they will know clearly that their victories are due to God's power. God's response to Gideon is the same that he offered to Moses, *"I will be with you"* (v.16).

In chapter 7, we see God twice reducing the number of soldiers in Gideon's army so that the people will know that it is God who gives them the victory.

Samson, “Great Colossus with feet of clay” (chs 13-16)

Samson is one of the Bible’s most colorful characters. His story has inspired artistic renderings, poetry, movies and operas. The *Collegeville Commentary* states: “*Though there is no reason to deny its historicity, it is clear that the cycle of traditions that make up the Samson story have been deeply colored by legendary, cultic and folklore elements*” (p.259). Like previous judges, Samson does not command an army. Samson’s story can be subdivided into four parts: his birth (ch.13), marriage (ch.14), victory over the Philistines (ch.15), and capture and death (ch.16).

Chapter 13: Birth of Samson

The angel said to Manoah: “*Though you are barren and have had no children, yet you will conceive and bear a son*” (v.3).

Samson is marked out as special from the beginning due to his birth to a barren woman, announced by an angel. Her son is to be dedicated to the Lord in a Nazarite vow (see Num 6) that imposes three conditions: no alcohol, no haircuts, and no contact with deceased bodies to ensure ritual cleanliness.

Chapter 14: Marriage of Samson

Samson’s parents say to him: “*Can you find no wife among your kinsfolk or among all our people?*” (v.3).

Samson lives life with gusto and with a larger-than-life enthusiasm, as shown in the following occasions.

He chances on a beautiful woman whom he must have, regardless of her Canaanite origin and his parents’ objection. Verse 4 suggests that God may have his reasons for allowing the marriage. Commenting on verse 4, Clinton McCann writes: “*14:4 is an affirmation that God works incarnationally, he works with the human resources at his disposal, flawed as they may be in Samson’s case, and indeed, and in our cases as well*” (ibid, p.102).

16:4-22—Samsan and Delilah. Even though it is not explicitly stated that Delilah was a Philistine, scholars generally assume she was. If so, she is the third Philistine woman that Samson becomes involved with. We notice that the Philistines always use women to try and trap Samson. They fail the first two times, but succeed the third time. In his relationship with Delilah, Samson shows himself to be pretty stupid. The story could be titled “Sleeping with the Enemy” or “Fatal Attraction.” Despite ample warning that she is a woman with “honey on her lips and poison in her heart,” Samson finally reveals the true secret of his strength. In this final breaking of his Nazarite vow, the Lord leaves him (v.20). But according to verse 22, Samson’s hair begins to grow back in prison and with it, his physical strength.

What are we to say of Samson? John Collins writes: “*His story is preserved in the Bible as part of the lore of Israel, and it is a gripping and entertaining story. The Deuteronomist writer gives it only a light sprinkling of piety, and never suggests that Samson is a moral exemplar. Rather, he is a tragic hero; a person of extraordinary (if brutish) talent who has a fatal weakness in his attraction to Philistine women*” (Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, p.212).

The Book of Judges ends with words we have heard several times in this book: “*In those days there was no king in Israel*”— words that prepare us for the period of the monarchy. But first we will look at the Book of Ruth which belongs to this period in Israel’s history.

THE BOOK OF RUTH – Faithful Woman, God’s Universal Love

The Book of Ruth is one of the most loved books of the Bible. Its main characters are ordinary people like ourselves. The events that make up the story are ones that we can easily identify with. As we read the book, we feel the pain of Naomi and we are inspired and touched by the loyalty of Ruth and the goodness of Boaz.

Ruth is one of only three books in the Bible that bears the name of a woman. The other two are Esther and Judith. Ruth is one of four women mentioned in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5).

God’s universal love. In the larger picture of the history of salvation, the purpose of the Book of Ruth serves a twofold function:

- To show God’s love for *all* people. The main character in the book is a non-Israelite who comes to know and love the God of Israel. She is shown as acceptable to God. By including her in God’s genealogy, Matthew shows that Ruth participated in God’s plan to save all people—Jew and Gentile alike. God’s love is inclusive and not exclusive.
- To set up the ancestral lineage of King David, Israel’s greatest ruler, Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of David.

From the above, we can say that “*the theme that runs throughout the whole book and holds it together is that of fidelity, loyalty born of covenant bonding. Both human fidelity and divine fidelity are combined in such a way that potential tragedy is turned into ultimate happiness*” (Eugene Hensell, O.S.B).

God in the book. Although God never speaks or directly acts in the book, his presence is very tangible. That presence is frequently referred to in the blessings spoken by the main characters.

Naomi blesses her two daughters-in-law (1:8); Boaz blesses Ruth for her loyalty to Naomi (2:12) and her good character (3:10); Naomi blesses Boaz for his kindness to Ruth (2:20); the blessing of fertility is bestowed upon Ruth by the men at the city gate (4:11-12); and finally, the lady friends of Naomi bless her and her grandson (4:15).

The Story. Because of famine, Naomi's family migrates to Moab where her sons marry Moabite women. Later, Naomi's husband and sons die, so she prepares to return home. One daughter-in-law, Ruth, insists on going back to Canaan with her. There she meets and marries Boaz, a kinsman. They bear a child, Obed, who will become the grandfather of King David.

This short book can be subdivided as follows:

- Chapter 1:1-18:** Naomi and her family in Moab
- Chapter 2:** Ruth meets Boaz
- Chapter 3:** Naomi, the matchmaker
- Chapter 4:** Ruth marries Boaz

Commentary. The story does not need much commentary. If interested, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Article 22, on our website.

Best known verses 1:16-17. After her sons die, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to go back to their parents' homes until they find a new husband. After an emotional farewell, Orpah follows Naomi's advice, but Ruth insists on going with Naomi and delivers the most famous words of this book:

*"Wherever you go, I will go,
wherever you lodge, I shall lodge.
Your people will be my people
and your God shall be my God.
Wherever you die, I will die
and be buried beside you..."* (vv. 16-17)

By leaving her homeland, Ruth leaves behind whatever security she may have enjoyed with her own people, and she goes with her mother-in-law out of love for her and her deceased husband.