

JOSHUA JUDGES RUTH



© 1981 Biblical Archaeology Society

Jordan River

The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth portray the life of the Israelites in the period between the death of Moses and the time of Samuel.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Ruth does not appear with the books of Joshua and Judges. It is found in the last section of the Old Testament, which is called the "Writings," rather than with the section called the "Former Prophets," which opens with the Book of Joshua. Persons responsible for the Greek edition of the Old Testament placed Ruth after Judges because Ruth has its setting in the same historical period. Our English translations follow the Greek order.

JOSHUA

Joshua is the first book of what is called the Former Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Other books in this section are Judges, First and Second Samuel, and First and Second Kings. These books are not what we think of as prophecy. Rather, they present the course of Israel's history. These writings were probably called prophetic because their central themes are the fulfillment of God's promises to give the people the land, and the people's subsequent loss of the land through God's judgment upon their disobedience. Like the later prophetic books, these works center on the ideas of promise and judg-

ment as God works in and through the history of Israel.

The Book of Joshua covers the period from the death of Moses to the death of Joshua. The book describes this period as the time when Israel is thoroughly obedient and when God's promise to give the people the land is fulfilled.

Joshua has two major parts. Joshua 1–12 tells how the Israelites conquer the land of Canaan, and Joshua 13–22 reports how the tribes divide the land. The book concludes with a speech by Joshua in Chapter 23 and a renewal of the covenant at Shechem in Chapter 24. In Joshua 1:1-9 God commissions Joshua to replace Moses and to lead the people across the Jordan.

In the second part of Chapter 1 Joshua prepares the people for the conquest. Joshua 2 tells the story of the two spies who enter Jericho. There, a prostitute named Rahab befriends and protects them. In Chapter 6, Joshua spares her life when the Hebrews capture the city. Later Jewish tradition—found outside the Bible—tells us that Rahab married Joshua after the conquest.

Chapters 3 and 4 tell us about the crossing of the Jordan River. When the priests who carry the ark of the covenant step into the river, the water halts and the people cross on dry land. As a memorial to the crossing, the people build a monument of twelve stones in the riverbed. The Hebrews reach the west bank of the Jordan. Chapter 5 tells us that while in Gilgal, they observe the Passover and eat of the grain from the Promised Land. With their eating, the manna ceases.

The crossing of the Jordan to enter Canaan parallels the crossing of the Red Sea when the Hebrews left Egypt. Joshua 4:23-24 makes this clear. Read this passage.

Just as the Hebrews observed the Passover as the last meal in Egypt—their last taste of bondage and slavery—so they observe the Passover as the first meal in Canaan—their first taste of freedom in the Promised Land.

Joshua 6 tells the story of the capture of the city of Jericho. Jericho falls after the army, following the ark, marches around the city for seven days, seven times on the seventh day.

Read the following passages in Joshua to find the answers to the questions below.

a. What was the basic attitude of mind that the Lord required of Joshua when he became the leader of the people of Israel? (Joshua 1:6, 7, 9, 18)

b. Rahab the harlot befriended the Israelite spies because she feared the God of Israel. What was the reason for her faith in and fear of the Lord? (Joshua 2:8-11)

c. How was the faith of Joshua and the priests tested when they came to the Jordan? (Joshua 3:8, 13, 16)

JOSHUA 7-24

After the battle at Jericho, Achan steals some of the booty devoted to God. Chapter 7 tells of Achan's punishment for his actions. In Joshua 8, we read how Joshua and his troops capture and destroy the city of Ai.

In Joshua 9 the citizens of Gibeon talk the Israelites into a peace treaty by pretending to be foreigners. The Israelites resume their war of conquest in Chapter 10. This chapter reports Joshua's defeat of a group of kings. Joshua 10:12-14 contains the famous episode in which Joshua commands the sun to stand still and not rise. Then his troops carry out their nighttime warfare.

The rest of Joshua 10 lists the cities the Israelites capture under Joshua's leadership. Chapter 11 reports Joshua's defeat of the city of Hazor, while Chapter 12 lists thirty-one kings of city-states in Canaan that the Israelites defeat.

The great success of the people is the keynote of the first half of Joshua. Joshua 10:40-41 provides a summary of the areas the Israelites capture in Canaan. These verses also note the thoroughness of the conquest. Read Joshua 10:40-41.

The second half of the Book of Joshua reports how the tribes divide the land after the conquest. Although in the first half of the book we saw that Joshua took the whole land, Joshua 13:1-7 contains a list of the land yet untaken.

Chapters 13 through 19 list the tribal land allotments. In Chapter 20, the Israelites choose the cities of refuge; and in Chapter 21, they allot certain cities to the Levites. In Chapter 22, Joshua allows the tribes whose territory is east of the Jordan, but who fought to take the area west of the river, to return home.

Like Moses before his death, Joshua gives a farewell address to the people and renews the covenant. His speech in Joshua 23 stresses three main points. First, he admonishes the people "to observe and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right nor to the left." Second, he promises God's continued support if they continue to love and obey God. God will drive out the nations before them. Third, Joshua warns the people that, if they disobey, God will cause them to perish.

At Shechem, in Chapter 24, Joshua leads the community in reaffirming its faith and in renewing the covenant. Shortly after this ceremony, Joshua dies at the age of 110. The Israelites bury him in his inheritance.

1. Read Joshua 7:1-5. How did the sin of Achan affect the rest of the people of Israel?

2. List the high points in Israel's history that are summarized in Joshua 24.

a. (24:3)

b. (24:5)

c. (24:6)

d. (24:7)

e. (24:13)

JUDGES 1-2

In turning to the Book of Judges we confront a book that appears to have two introductions. The first introduction in Judges 1:1 begins like this: "After the death of Joshua, the Israelites inquired of the LORD, 'Who shall go up first for us against the Canaanites, to fight against them?'" The second introduction, Judges 2:6-3:6 continues the story of the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. It begins like this: "When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites all went to their own inheritances to take possession of the land."

We find some interesting differences when we compare the first introduction in Judges 1 and 2 to what we learned from the Book of Joshua. In the opening chapters of Judges, the Canaanites are still on the scene. They are not all slaughtered as Joshua 1 through 12 reports. In Judges, the tribes fight and capture territory individually rather than fighting as a united body of tribes.

Judges 1 has no main leader of the people. This chapter also tells us that the Israelites take possession of the hill country, but cannot drive out the inhabitants of the plain.

ISRAEL'S JUDGES

- | | |
|--------------|-------------|
| 1. Othniel | 8. Jair |
| 2. Ehud | 9. Jephthah |
| 3. Shamgar | 10. Ibzan |
| 4. Deborah | 11. Elon |
| 5. Gideon | 12. Abdon |
| 6. Abimelech | 13. Samson |
| 7. Tola | 14. Samuel |

What are we to make of the great differences between the story of the conquest in Joshua and the account in the opening chapters of Judges? We realize that we have accounts from two different traditions. Perhaps the well-organized and completely successful conquest found in Joshua is an idealized version of how the tribes came to possess the land in Canaan.

Read Judges 2:8-19. What are the main events in the time of the judges?

a. (2:8)

b. (2:11)

c. (2:14)

d. (2:16)

e. (2:19)

JUDGES 3-16

The second introduction indicates that Israel's history following the death of Joshua will move in cycles. While a strong leader is around, the people will be faithful. But with the death of the leader, Israel will forsake God. The Lord will become angry with them, and their enemies will oppress them. When the people repent, God will hear and send another leader to save the Israelites from their enemies. Then the cycle begins again.

In Judges 3 through 16 the writer shows how Israel, time and again, moves through this cycle. A judge saves Israel who later becomes disobedient, enemies attack, Israel cries out for help, and God raises up another judge.

In Chapter 3:7-31 Othniel defeats the king of Mesopotamia, Ehud fights the Moabites and kills the king of Moab, and Shamgar defeats the Philistines.

In Judges 4 and 5 Deborah rallies the troops to battle in a war against the Canaanites under Sisera. Chapter 4 narrates her great efforts on behalf of Israel. The poetry of Chapter 5, which glorifies Deborah, was probably sung as a popular ballad in ancient Israel.

In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 Gideon saves Israel from the camel-riding Midianites after he reduces his troops from 32,000 to 300 by testing them. At the end of Chapter 8, we see that the cycle of Israel's disobedience continues after Gideon's death.

In Chapter 9 Abimelech tries to set himself up as king. But during one of his battles, a woman in a tower drops a millstone on his head and severely wounds him. Then, Abimelech's armor-bearer kills him at Abimelech's own request.

Judges 10, 11, and 12 refer to several judges, but we only receive details about Jephthah. Jephthah fights the Ammonites and wins. To fulfill his foolish vow made in battle, he sacrifices his daughter.

Samson is the hero of Judges 13 through 16. Note that in Judges 13:5 God designates Samson as a Nazirite. You will recall from the last lesson that Nazirites were a special order of persons who drank no strong drink and who did not cut their hair. We remember Samson as a long-haired, adventurous character who fights the Philistines, but whose exploits and love affairs lead to his ruin.

1. Among the fourteen judges, six are described in some detail. List the names of the six below.

a. (3:9)

b. (3:15)

c. (4:4)

d. (6:11)

e. (11:1)

f. (13:24)

2. One phrase is used repeatedly in connection with the judges (3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6). Write the phrase below and indicate what you think it means.

JUDGES 17-21

In the last five chapters, Judges breaks the pattern of telling about war heroes. These chapters include two stories. In Chapters 17 and 18 Micah builds himself a shrine and hires a professional priest, a Levite. The tribe of Dan, while migrating to another district, carries off his priest and his temple treasures.

The second story, in Chapters 19 through 21, is about the war that the rest of the tribes fight against the tribe of Benjamin. This war comes about when several men from the town of Gibeah, in the territory of Benjamin, greatly abuse a visitor's concubine. The woman dies from their harsh treatment. When the tribe of Benjamin does nothing to correct the situation, the other tribes take up arms against Benjamin and almost wipe out the tribe completely.

These last two stories in Judges 17 through 21 lay the groundwork for the rise of the monarchy that develops in the books of Samuel. The writer of Judges shows the many problems the tribes experience; for as he says in the last verse of the book: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes."

RUTH

When we move from Joshua and Judges to the Book of Ruth, we move into a different world, although the same time period.

Unlike the other two books, the Book of Ruth is not about war and fighting or the nation's fortunes. Ruth tells about a family with two women, Naomi and her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth.

In the Book of Ruth, Elimelech, a native of Bethlehem, goes to live in Moab. When this Israelite man dies, his sons marry Moabite women. When the sons die, Naomi, the wife and mother, decides to return to Bethlehem. Ruth refuses to stay in her homeland. She pleads with her mother-in-law to let her go with her. Her words were probably familiar to every foreign woman who converted to Judaism. Read Ruth 1:16-17.

Ruth returns to Bethlehem with Naomi. Finally, Ruth, with some intrigue on the part of her mother-in-law, marries Boaz, a distant kinsman of Elimelech. In the course of time, Ruth becomes the mother of Obed, the grandfather of King David.

Read Ruth 1:1-5. When and where does the story take place?

SUMMARY

The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth contain familiar stories about the people of Israel. When you think about this portion of the Bible, remember the following events in Israel's history.

- (1) Joshua and the battle of Jericho (Joshua 6)
- (2) Joshua's renewal of the covenant with God after the conquest of the Promised Land (Joshua 24)
- (3) The cycle of faithfulness and disobedience during the period of the judges (Judges 3-16)
- (4) The stories about Samson and his struggle with the Philistines (Judges 13-16)
- (5) The story of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi (Ruth 1-4)

By the time the Book of Ruth closes, the Israelites are established in the Promised

Land. The promise of land, which God gave to Abraham, is now fulfilled.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The group of books called the "Former Prophets" in the Hebrew Bible includes Joshua and Judges. In what way can we call these two books prophetic?

2. Judges 7:1-8 describes how Gideon selected 300 warriors at the direction of God. They were selected from an original group of 32,000. Discuss the qualities of the men that separated them into the three groups. What does this story suggest about having God's person in the right place of service in the church? Where in the life of the church are your talents best used?

3. The last verse of Judges states: "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." This statement may be understood as either positive or negative. How might not having a king be preferable to having one? How might having a strong central government be an advantage in Israel? Is a strong central government an advantage or a disadvantage for us today? Give reasons for your answer.

4. Note Ruth's confession of faith in Ruth 1:16. How does the story of Ruth disprove the opinion that the Gentiles were left out by God in Old Testament times? Ruth 4:17 tells us that Ruth was the great-grandmother of King David. What is Ruth's importance in our Christian tradition? (See Matthew 1:1-18.)

DAILY READINGS FOR FIRST AND SECOND SAMUEL

- | | |
|--------|------------------|
| Day 1: | 1 Samuel 3:1-14 |
| Day 2: | 1 Samuel 7:5-17 |
| Day 3: | 1 Samuel 8:4-22 |
| Day 4: | 1 Samuel 13:5-15 |
| Day 5: | 1 Samuel 16:4-23 |
| Day 6: | 2 Samuel 7:1-17 |
| Day 7: | 2 Samuel 23:1-7 |