

SALT – Thursday 5th May 2022

“How can we justify all the violence and killing that is in the book of Joshua?”

Outspoken atheist, **Richard Dawkins** describes Joshua as: “a text remarkable for the bloodthirsty massacres it records and the xenophobic relish with which it does so”.

Xenophobia – fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners.

Joshua 6:21 records, “They devoted the city to the Lord and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys.”

The destruction of Jericho.

Q: When you read about divine judgment in the Bible, what feelings does that bring up for you?

Isn't God supposed to be loving?

The story so far...

God chose Abraham and his family became the people of Israel. They are enslaved in Egypt. Through Moses, God rescues Israel out of Egypt. God makes a covenant with them at Mount Sinai, and he brings them through the wilderness. The people camp outside the Promised Land, and Moses call the people to obey God, so that they can show all the other nations what God is like.

The book of Joshua picks up just after Moses has died, just as Israel is about to enter the Promised Land.

The first part of the book, chapters 1-5, sees Joshua lead the people into the Promised Land

The second part, chapters 6-12 sees various battles God's people have with the Canaanites who are living in the land.

The third part, chapters 13-22 is about how Joshua divides up the land between the 12 tribes

And **the fourth part** , chapters 23 and 24 are various speeches.

The two main battles in the second part of the book are between God's people and Jericho, and God's people and Ai.

The battle in Jericho signifies God's faithfulness – God is the one who will deliver his people; Israel simply needs to trust and obey.

The battle in Ai signifies the Israelite's failure. The story makes the opposite point: because of Achan's sin and deceit the people are defeated, and it is only when they obey God that they are given victory.

The point of the stories is to show that to inherit the Promised Land, the people need to obey God.

The second part of this section is about the Gibeonites (a Canaanite people group) – who like Rahab turn and follow the God of Israel and make peace with Israel.

This is in contrast to all the other Canaanite kings, who start to form alliances and coalitions to defeat Israel, but it is the Israelites who win by a landslide.

Read Joshua 5:13–15.

Q: In what ways was Joshua surprised? In what ways do you think this might have surprised its original readers?

I suggest that everything that follows in the book of Joshua should be read in the light of the man's reply in verse 14. Can you think of other places in scripture where we see God's neutrality demonstrated, or where God appears to fight against Israel?

A generation earlier than the story we just read, on the borders of the same land, this happens: Deuteronomy 1:22–33, 41–46. See in particular verse 42.

Why is God declaring war here?

1. **Why the Canaanites?** They were extremely morally corrupt, including performing child sacrifices. God didn't want these practices to influence Israel.
2. **But doesn't the land belong to the Canaanites?** In a sense this is of course true. One of the great tragedies of colonialism was that it tended to assume that people already living in a land didn't have a right to it. Nowadays we assume that however lives in a place, unless there is a clear and just reason in law to the contrary, may rightfully claim the land as theirs.

The Bible sees things a little differently – that the whole world and all the people belong to God; nations are tenants responsible to God.

Leviticus 25:23-24 says, "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers. Throughout the land that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land."

There is a big delay between God promising the land to Abraham and the entry into it. Abraham is told that there would be a 400 year period of waiting – **Genesis 15:13-16**: "Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

So the land God was giving to Israel was one where the local inhabitants stood under God's judgment. Israel's right to the land depended on them living within God's terms. The same option existed for the Canaanites.

3. **Who is Israel?** If God's purpose was simply to destroy all the Canaanites, then surely Rahab would have been a prime candidate? But she confesses her faith in Yahweh and so, along with her family, is saved.

By contrast, Achan who is an Israelite, forfeits his right to be part of Israel by taking goods that had been placed under a ban.

So a Canaanite can be included and an Israelite can be excluded.

4. **Did God command a genocide of the Canaanites?** There are several chapters devoted to the destruction of the Canaanites. In chapters 10 and 11, Israel defend themselves against groups that attack them. We are repeatedly told that the Israelites moved throughout these regions and were devoted to the destruction of whole towns and those living there.

A couple of interesting points:

- When Joshua starts allocating the land to the various tribes, some of these towns need to be taken once again. E.g. we read of Hebron's destruction in chapter 10, but when the town is given to Caleb he needs to expel its inhabitants. If everyone had been killed, who was left to expel?
- When an army was coming to attack, most of the local population would hide away in the hills and leave only those who were there to fight. So there were probably fewer casualties than the text might imply.

Reading Joshua today

Q: In what ways do you think Joshua is like Jesus?

Joshua points to Jesus, the true conqueror of evil, who announces an alternate Kingdom in the midst of ruling powers of evil.

Matthew's gospel so far has shown many parallels between the story of Jesus and the story of Israel. Following his baptism (like the Red Sea), he spent 40 days (like Israel's 40 years) in the desert, following which he went up a mountain (like Israel at Mount Sinai) and delivered a new interpretation of the law given at Sinai (the sermon on the mount).

How is Joshua like Jesus?:

1. Leader who follows the Lord's Law

Throughout the book, God tells Joshua to dedicate himself to the law of the Lord, not departing from it to the right or to the left, meditating on it, and practicing its precepts (Josh. 1:6–8). He is promised military success if he obeys the law of the Lord.

2. Warrior who conquers his enemies

Joshua is often remembered as a warrior, a conqueror who destroyed the Canaanite armies. Jesus is also presented as a conquering warrior at times in the New Testament, especially regarding the spiritual realm: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8).

3. Victor who shares the inheritance with his people