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JOSHUA
A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition

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COMMENTARY

I. JOSHUA I

BEHIND THE TEXT

The book of Joshua begins by looking back, as an epilogue to the Pentateuch, and by looking forward, as a prologue to the history of Israel's conquest of Canaan (Hall 2010, 10). This is apparent even in the grammar of the chapter. Hall notes that of the twenty relative clauses with the Hebrew word *'ašer*, half look back (vv 3, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 [twice]) and half look ahead (vv 2, 3, 7, 9, 11, 15 [twice], 16, 18 [twice]) (ibid.). The story picks up where Deuteronomy leaves off, the author presuming we know what has happened in that book. Given that much of Josh 1 paraphrases passages from Deuteronomy (see chart below), one commentator calls this chapter "a thematic reprise of the Book of Deuteronomy" (Polzin 1980, 74).

<i>Joshua 1</i>	<i>Deuteronomy</i>
v 3	11:24
v 4	11:24
v 5	7:24; 11:25
v 6	1:21; 31:6
v 7	5:32-33; 29:9; 31:6-8
v 8	29:9
v 9	1:21; 31:6-8
vv 12-15	3:18-20
v 18	1:21; 31:6

Deuteronomy stresses the unity of Israel, a theme emphasized in Josh 1 by specifically referring to the Transjordan tribes as an important part of the nation. Auld points out how Josh 1 reflects Deuteronomy in reverse order. It begins where Deuteronomy ends (ch 34), with the death of Moses, then makes reference to the book of the law (chs 4—31), and then mentions the Transjordan tribes (chs 1—3) (1984, 15). Joshua 1 even copies the literary style of Deuteronomy with speeches (four of them) in the second person.

The link is not just with Deuteronomy but with the whole of the Pentateuch. The major figure in the Pentateuch, Moses, is referred to so often in Josh 1 he nearly eclipses Joshua himself. The main theme of Joshua, the conquest of Canaan, is the fulfillment of a promise made early and often to the patriarchs (Gen 12:1-3, 7; 15:18-21; 22:17-18; 24:7; 26:3; 50:24) and to Moses and the Israelites (Num 11:12; 14:16, 23; Deut 1:8, 35; 6:10). Throughout the Pentateuch, God clearly showed that his gracious gifts were conditioned on Israel's obedience, a lesson repeated in the opening chapter of the book of Joshua. Joshua 1 emphasizes not only God's gift ("to give," *ntn*, is used eight times) but also his demand for obedience to the Law (vv 7, 8).

Joshua 1 also serves as a prologue to the book of Joshua. The chain of command pattern—God to Joshua (vv 1-9), Joshua to the people (vv 10-15)—introduced in Josh 1 is repeated several times throughout the book (chs 4, 6, 8) (Nelson 1997, 32). Elements introduced in the first chapter are revisited in later chapters: the crossing of the Jordan (1:2; chs 3—4, 22), the conquest (1:3-6, 9; chs 2, 6, 8, 10—12), the allotment of the land (1:6; 11:23; 12:1-6; chs 13—21) and the importance of obeying the Law (1:7-8; 8:30-35; chs 5, 7, 9, 23—24) (*ibid.*, 30). God's message to Joshua (1:1-9) encapsulates the rest of the book: Israel would occupy this land if they faithfully obeyed. More specifically, Josh 1 describes the initial preparation for the invasion, demonstrates that the conquest results from God's orders, and reminds the reader that all of this is in fulfillment of God's promise.

IN THE TEXT

A. God's Marching Orders for Invasion (1:1-9)

After a brief introductory phrase, the opening speech belongs to God. He commands Joshua to prepare to cross the Jordan, guarantees success in accordance with his promises to Moses, and emphasizes the importance of keeping the law of Moses.

I. Command to Invade and Promise of Victory (1:1-5)

■ I The chapter opens with a reference to Moses' death. Since several other OT books begin by describing the death of Israel's leader (see Judg 1:1; 2 Sam

1:1; 2 Kgs 1:1), one might consider the phrase to be merely stylistic, how one ought to begin an account of Israel's history. At least in this passage there seems to be more to it, for Moses' death is mentioned a second time only one verse later. The narrator of the book of Joshua clearly wants to emphasize Moses, perhaps for three reasons. First, this emphasis connects the book of Joshua with Israel's story up to this point. We are meant to hear what follows in light of what has gone before, from creation to the patriarchs, from the exodus to Mount Sinai, from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, and now to the edge of the Jordan River.

A second reason to emphasize Moses concerns his close association with the Israelites. He had been their George Washington, their Martin Luther King, their Nelson Mandela, guiding them to freedom. It was Moses who provided them with food, water, and guidance. It was Moses who interceded for them. But now Moses is dead. His death brought uncertainty for the Israelites, especially now as they stood on the brink of a significant but perilous new venture.

By connecting Moses' death with God's command to Joshua to lead the Israelites into Canaan, the narrator signals that Joshua was Moses' duly appointed successor. This smooth and divinely sanctioned leadership transition stands in stark contrast to the end of Joshua and the beginning of Judges, which omit any mention of the passing of the torch of leadership. Third, by mentioning Moses' death, the narrator illustrates how disobedience robbed one leader of the chance to do what another is now being commanded to do. By drawing this connection, the narrator inserts a warning to the reader: Israel's success depends on their obedience to God.

Joshua is the perfect successor, for he has been **Moses' aide**. The word **aide** can imply either priestly service (see Aaron in Exod 28:35) or personal service (e.g., Joseph to Potiphar in Gen 39:4). Although never having served in a priestly role, the first is possible since Joshua was connected more than once with holy sites (see Exod 24:13; 33:11). Here the reference to Joshua as Moses' aide likely emphasizes his role as Moses' lieutenant. While Joshua is described as Moses' aide, Moses is twice referred to as God's **servant** (vv 1, 2), a word that denotes a closer and more significant relationship to a superior than does **aide**.

■2 Although we have been told of Joshua's commission to leadership twice before (Num 27:12-23; Deut 31:1-8), we might have expected God's first word to Israel's new commander to be a reaffirmation of that commission, but that is not what we find. Nor do we have a general command to obey, or even a promise of God's presence. Instead, God commands Joshua to "go now and cross this Jordan" (NJB). The abruptness of the command not only emphasizes both the nature of the conquest of Canaan, however challenging, as God's will but also stresses that Israel must respond with immediate obedience. By referring

to “this Jordan” (**the Jordan**), God draws special attention to the river, which at that moment rushed nearby at uncrossable flood stage. This will not be the last time in the conquest account that Joshua and the Israelites were called upon to trust God’s power and wisdom in the face of an impossible situation.

Twice God emphasized that the conquest was to be the work of all Israel; this once disobedient and rebellious people would now obey as a single nation. The focus later in this chapter on the Transjordan tribes serves the same purpose. What God had promised to Moses would be fulfilled for Joshua and Israel.

■ **3** Everywhere Joshua steps (**where you [sg.] set your [sg.] foot**), God will give that land to Israel (**I will give you [pl.]**). As noted in the commentary introduction, the book of Joshua presents God as one who keeps his promise to give this land to the Israelites. We also see that God is a promise-maker, assuring his faithful servant of victory (v 5a), his presence (vv 5b, 9), and success (vv 7, 8).

■ **4** God provides a survey of Israel’s future boundaries, using language quite similar to Deut 11:24. The two verses are identical, apart from minor stylistic variations, with two exceptions: Josh 1:4 adds the demonstrative pronoun “this” (not included in the NIV) to Lebanon and also adds the phrase, **all the Hittite country**. Both modifications appear to serve the same purpose: to accentuate the miraculous nature of the conquest. As Howard points out, because Lebanon was not visible from where Israel stood, identifying it as “this Lebanon” meant Israel would even occupy what they could not then see (1998a, 82). The land of the Hittites could refer to the area north of Lebanon or, more likely, the land west of the Jordan River that was currently occupied by other nations. Not only would they possess what they could not yet see, but they would occupy land now possessed by others. If Israel ever extended to the full measure of these boundaries, it was during the glory days of Solomon’s reign.

■ **5** Hearing God reaffirm the promises he had made to Moses (vv 2-4) must have been incredibly encouraging to Joshua. Even this encouragement is surpassed, however, by God’s promise to be with Joshua as he had been with Moses. The phrase **stand against you** could refer both to opposition from within Israel or to enemy resistance. Joshua would be unshakable because God would neither **leave** nor **forsake** him. Using both terms when only one was necessary may have been God’s way of emphasizing his intent to remain present with Joshua.

2. Counsels Courage and Obedience to Law (1:6-9)

■ **6** Absolutely crucial to the success of this invasion would be Joshua’s courage and obedience to the law of Moses. The phrase that opens this section, **be strong and courageous**, appears three more times in the chapter. By emphasizing this phrase, the narrator accomplishes at least three things. First, he has alerted the reader to the impossible challenge facing Joshua. God has already

spoken of “this Jordan,” emphasizing the watery barrier. He has referred to “this Lebanon” and the Hittites, emphasizing land still unseen and still occupied. As if these were not terrifying enough, God repeatedly commands Joshua to be courageous. Joshua and the Israelites are facing very real challenges, making fear a constant temptation.

A second reason to emphasize this call to courage is to contrast Israel’s mind-set with their enemies, often described as trembling with fear (2:9, 24; 5:1; 10:2). Third, by repeating this phrase three times, the narrator has connected this scene with an earlier one, recorded in Deut 31. There Moses repeats this same phrase three times, once to all Israel and twice to Joshua (vv 7, 23). Linking these scenes allows the narrator to remind his readers that God is now fulfilling the promises he made earlier. The link also provides a subtle warning, since the context of the scene in Deuteronomy was God’s sobering announcement of Israel’s eventual rebellion.

■ **7-9** Hawk (2000, 10-11) has observed that verses 7-9 are arranged chiastically:

- A **Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you** (v 7*ab*);
- B **do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go** (v 7*c*).
- C **Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips** (v 8*a*);
- C' **meditate on it day and night** (v 8*b*),
- B' **so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful** (v 8*cd*).
- A' **Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go** (v 9).

JOSHUA
1:7-9

This type of chiasmic arrangement, quite common in the OT, allows a narrator to subtly make several important points. By placing A parallel to A', we are shown that the command (A) is balanced by the promise (A'). We are also shown that while Joshua must obey the Law given him by Moses, God’s servant, God promises to be especially near to Joshua. The Hebrew literally reads *with you is the Lord your God* to emphasize God’s nearness. What it means to obey the Law is described in B and B', first negatively (B), then positively (B'), with success as the result. The central element in a chiasmic structure is most important; here there are two, both focusing on **this Book of the Law**, for therein lay the secret to success.

Comparing the Law to a path, Joshua must not turn from it (see Josh 23:6; Deut 5:32; 17:20; 31:29). Should he remain on that path, he and all Israel will arrive safely at their proper destination; should he deviate from that path, disaster will follow. Such warnings remind me of the wooden boardwalks in Yellowstone National Park where the ground is unstable due to the abundance

of hot springs. What appears to be solid may be nothing more than a thin shell of mineral deposits. Staying on the boardwalk is the only safe route; stepping off invites disaster.

God told Joshua to **Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips** (v 8a) and **meditate on it** constantly (v 8b). Some see these commands as suggesting that Joshua was to have a teaching role. More likely, God was commanding him to incorporate the Law into his daily life and leadership. The verb for **meditate** is elsewhere likened to the sound of doves (Isa 38:14) and the growling of a lion (Isa 31:4). God called on Joshua to speak the Law to himself, so that its tenets would take root in his mind and thus, in his behavior. Here lies the path to success and prosperity.

B. Joshua's Marching Orders for Invasion (1:10-18)

I. Command to Leaders of People (1:10-11)

Immediately after the mantle of leadership was placed on his shoulders (vv 1-9), Joshua responded, first by commanding the leaders of Israel (vv 10-11), then the Transjordan tribes (vv 12-15). His prompt and ready response reveals his intention to faithfully follow the directions he had been given both by Yahweh and by Moses. At the same time that we see Joshua the obedient follower, we also see Joshua the innovator. God commanded him to "get ready to cross the Jordan River" (v 2), but Joshua determines when the crossing will occur and what needs to happen in preparation (vv 10-15). We will see this initiative again as he sends out the spies (2:1) and determines how the crossing will occur (3:1-6). God values obedience but also welcomes the innovation and initiative that arise from our having been created in his image.

■ **10-11** In these verses, Joshua addressed those responsible to carry out his instructions. The term **officers** elsewhere describes elders and judges (Deut 1:15; 16:18), but later passages in Joshua (8:33; 23:2; 24:1) distinguish officers from both elders and judges. This being a military expedition, it makes sense that Joshua would turn at this moment to military commanders; those prepared to lead Israel's soldiers (see similar use in Deut 20:5-9).

Joshua commanded the people: **get your provisions ready** in preparation for crossing the Jordan. This indicates that a change is about to take place in how Israel receives its food. Until now, they had depended on the manna, but that supply will cease on their arrival in the land (see 5:12). God would continue to provide, but in a different way, a way that would require Israel to take a more active role. The second notable thing about this command is that it is not what one might expect. A command to prepare their supplies rather than a command to arm themselves indicates that the principal combatant in the battle will be God, not Israel.

It is unclear how to understand the reference to **three days**. Taken literally, three days would not be long enough for the spies to reach Jericho and return (ch 2). Keil and Delitzsch suggest as many as eight days would be needed for that trip (1978, 31), although Howard considers that estimate too high (1998b, 539-50). Three days may be an idiom for a short time (see Exod 19:11; Esth 4:16; Hos 6:2) (Pitkänen 2010, 117), or the journeys of the spies and the Israelites could be described as happening simultaneously over the course of three days (Hall 2010, 35). Perhaps three days refers only to the amount of time given to the Israelites to prepare to move and does not refer to when they actually set out (Harris 2000, 24; see Keil and Delitzsch 1978, 31, citing Gen 40:13, 19, 20). It is also possible that the spies had been sent prior to the events of Josh 1.

2. Command to Transjordan Tribes (1:12-15)

■ **12** Joshua turns next to the tribes who had already been allotted land east of the Jordan. They are called Transjordan tribes because they would settle across the Jordan, to the east, as opposed to those that settle on the western side, known as the Cisjordan tribes.

■ **13** Joshua begins by calling them to remember what Moses had commanded them (see Deut 3:18-20). God was giving them **rest**, an important term denoting security (Deut 12:10; 25:19) and settledness, the awareness that one has reached one's proper place. **Rest** is the Sabbath's chief occupation, as modeled by God himself (Exod 20:8-11). **Rest** was to characterize the Israelites when they had taken full possession of the land (Josh 21:44; 22:4; 23:1). For the OT believer, rest came to represent the reward of obedience (see 2 Sam 7:1, 11; 1 Kgs 5:4; 1 Chr 22:9, 18; 23:25; 2 Chr 14:6-7; 15:15; 20:30). Micah described God's coming kingdom as a time when all could rest peacefully beneath "their own vine and under their own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid" (Mic 4:4; see vv 1-4; Isa 2:2-4).

Little wonder that the writer of Hebrews chose this term to describe God's salvation (Heb 4). The rest promised by Joshua in ch 1 anticipates this more complete rest, as pulling into a rest area on the highway anticipates and is surpassed by pulling into one's home driveway. God intended more for his people than a place to live; even their entry into Canaan was part of his larger plan to remove the curse of sin from our lives and from this world. This is the ultimate rest, to be fully reconciled to God, freed from the guilt and the power of sin, and to be fully reconciled to our neighbor, ourselves, and the natural world.

■ **14-15** Joshua instructed the Transjordan tribes to lead in the invasion, leaving behind all their possessions except what they would need for war. **Ready for battle** in Hebrew is literally the number **50**. This term could refer to military formation (i.e., each unit having fifty soldiers or arranged in five

squadrons), as in the NJB's translation: "you fighting men must cross in battle formation." Or it could be an idiom describing preparations for battle (as NIV). By leading Israel into battle, the Transjordan tribes would illustrate how Israel is one nation, a unity that will be tested later in the book (see Josh 22).

3. People's Response (1:16-18)

■ **16-18** Although the author presents the response as coming from the Transjordan tribes, he likely meant the reader to understand the response of these tribes as the response of all Israel. This would explain the silence of the Israelite officials after Joshua gave them their instructions in vv 10-11. It would also support the "all Israel" theme, which is pervasive throughout the book of Joshua. By putting the response in the mouth of the Transjordan tribes, the author has portrayed the eager obedience of all Israel. The Transjordan tribes have less of an obligation to enter into battle, having already attained their land. If these who had already received their land were willing to fight, how much more the rest of the Israelites.

They begin their response with enthusiastic obedience, specifically promising to do whatever Joshua commanded and go wherever they were sent (vv 16-17*a*). They then offer a word of counsel to Joshua (v 17*b*). Some see in their counsel a veiled threat or nagging doubt (Nelson 1997, 36), but Hess is likely correct to understand their words as a "confession and prayer that the LORD may abide with Joshua just as he did with Moses" (1996a, 79). If any doubt did remain within the people at this point, Yahweh removes it in 3:7 (Woudstra 1981, 66). The people then swear a strong oath (1:18). This is the only place in the OT where rebellion against words refers to the words of a human leader rather than God. This oath anticipates the punishment of Achan (ch 7) but also confirms that leadership has been fully transferred to Joshua from Moses.

FROM THE TEXT

In God's commands to Joshua, especially 1:6-9, we can discern several important truths. First is God's change of strategy. For decades he spoke through an individual, Moses, but now it was the words of Moses as recorded in the book of the law that were to guide his people. This strategic change helped establish the written law of Moses as normative for all future generations of Israel. The written Law provided an important benchmark for God's people in a way that even divinely inspired leadership alone never could. Though we serve an unchanging God whose ways are always perfect, his ways may change without diminishing his perfection.

The written Law also facilitated the development of Israel as God's chosen nation. By inspiring Scripture, God provided yet another demonstration of his willingness to reside with his people. He had already done so through the tabernacle; the gift of the written Word demonstrates even further his desire

to be known and loved. Israel's awareness of the Law as a source of blessing is abundantly displayed in the psalms that celebrate the Law, such as the beautiful Ps 19 and the exhaustive litany of Ps 119. By increasingly revealing himself to his people, God was preparing them for that time when the Word would become flesh and tabernacle among them (see John 1:14).

We also see in these verses a clarification of the connection between obedience and God's blessing. The opening verses of Joshua seem to support the "prosperity gospel" so prominent in some Christian circles. Those opposed to this message have reacted by reinterpreting OT promises like these, omitting any reference to material blessings and confining them only to spiritual blessings. This reaction, while well-intentioned and partly true, has obscured an important truth. No, God is not a heavenly vending machine dispensing health and wealth to the faithful. But we must not miss the truth that our best hope of experiencing the goodness of God's creation is by living according to God's eternal Law.

These verses also challenge the erroneous view that claims that the purpose of the Mosaic law was only to show the Israelites that they could not keep it and needed a different way to be reconciled to God. Clearly, the Mosaic law was not impossible to keep or how could Joshua be expected "to obey all the law" (v 7) and "do everything written in it" (v 8)? Only by keeping the Law could he know success (v 8), and success is precisely what he knew. If the Mosaic law was impossible to keep, what are we to do with passages like Deut 30:11-14, which claim that keeping God's command is within Israel's reach? How are we to read the psalmists' claim to be blameless before God (see 18:23, 25 and many other passages)? What are we to say to Paul, who claims to have kept the Law blamelessly (see Phil 3:6)? How are we to make sense of psalms like 19 and 119 (and others) that celebrate the Law as God's good gift to his people?

In his new covenant, God changes the specific provisions of the Mosaic law but not its essence. He removes the necessity for sacrifices by offering once for all the spotless Lamb of God, and he removes the necessity to observe those provisions of the Law that were culturally conditioned. The essence, however, remains obligatory for every believer, whether during the OT period, the NT period, or today. What is that essence? According to Jesus, the whole Law is fulfilled by loving God and loving one's neighbor (Matt 22:34-40). To live by love fulfills the Law. We may not always be happy, healthy, and wealthy, but God has designed this world so that our greatest hope for happiness and our surest defense against self-destructive and self-impoverishing behavior is a life of love. He has also placed within us his Holy Spirit so that we can know and do what love requires. We see the perfect example in Jesus, the greater Joshua.