Joshua

Torah left Israel on the verge of entering their promised land. Joshua covers that entry. It’s from the Deuteronomistic history source, which may or may not be the same as the Deuteronomistic source used for Torah. Chapters 2-11 (the conquest) are probably the earliest part, from the reign of Josiah (640-609 BCE). “…the book was not completed until after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, and possibly not until after the return from the Babylonian Exile in 539 BCE.” (Wikipedia). Strong textual evidence includes the many references to a monument “which stands there to this day,” and the many references to “in the place that he should choose.” The author knew full well that this was Jerusalem, but he was writing a narrative of much earlier history. In this case, 6-8 centuries later. Even John Calvin rejected the idea that the book was authored by Joshua. Textual analysis shows multiple authors. No archaeological evidence supports this narrative as historical. The message is that Yahweh keeps his end of the covenant contract. The implicit message of the bravado of the conquests to potential enemies is to scare them out of attacking Israel. This is propaganda encouraging nationalism, isolationism, and xenophobia. Stay away from foreign gods means stay away from foreign nations and tribes.

Canaan is used generically to refer to the entire region of Israel and the inhabitants of that land, but also specifically to some sub-populations of that land. How did Israel justify and rationalize their genocide of all Canaanites? The usual way, by asserting less-than-honorable parentage. Genesis 9 shows the cursing of Canaan (thus all his descendants), son of Ham.

The account begins with Yahweh telling Joshua to enter the land. The method of communication is not
mentioned; that isn’t the point. Around 1300 BCE, the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Hittite Empires occupied the described geography. At its peak, the Hittite Empire included nearly all of Turkey. Though the claimed territory is larger than anything Israel ever occupied, I don’t think the claim would have included Turkey. The rest of the text suggests they weren’t talking about anything outside of Canaan. We see new geographical references (sunset, sunrise).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year BCE</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1300 BCE</td>
<td>Egyptian, Assyrian, and Hittite empires</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1240 BCE</td>
<td>Approximate setting of the story (late Bronze Age)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>970 BCE</td>
<td>David’s reign ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>931 BCE</td>
<td>Solomon’s reign ends; north/south split</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>687 BCE</td>
<td>Assyrian conquest of Israel (north)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>609 BCE</td>
<td>Josiah’s reign ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>586 BCE</td>
<td>Babylonian conquest of Judah (south)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>593 BCE</td>
<td>Return to Israel under Cyrus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd-5th cent CE</td>
<td>Babylonian Talmud, first claim of authorship of these texts</td>
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</tbody>
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Joshua 1:8 suggests the law was oral, despite the (probably anachronistic) mention of ‘written’. As I have suggested, I think it’s unlikely they had or used writing at this time. Nomadic herdsman didn’t need it. Slaves in Egypt didn’t need it. “Wherever you go” in verse 9 was limited to Canaan. Or this is an anachronistic reference to the idea in Diaspora of “God with us.” 1:16 shows the people accepting the terms of the covenant and the autocratic authority of Joshua.

Joshua 2 begins with the reconnaissance mission to Jericho. The map on the right is from http://www.christians-standing-with-israel.org/. The ancient locations for these cities is often guesswork or unknown. The text explains why Rahab wasn’t slaughtered along with everyone else. That seemed to be an acceptable violation of their marching orders. We see no negative connotation to the role of prostitute. Her house seemed to be the inn where travelers stayed. Verse 15 says it was built into the city wall. It’s plausible that this was between the inner and outer city walls, where poorer people tended to live. That’s also a good place to house visitors, offering them some protection, while protecting the inner city from the visitors. Her location and occupations meant that she knew everything and everyone. She would be the first to hear the news from incoming visitors. The text gives no indication that the people thought there was anything wrong with her deceit. The author of Matthew places Rahab in the genealogical line of David. It’s
rare for a women to be even mentioned in a genealogy. As if to confuse us, wisdom and prophetic literature sometimes use Rahab as a reference to Egypt. The last sentence, “all the inhabitants of the land melt away because of us,” and others like it are an indication that these stories were told for the purpose of bravado, to make them sound fearsome, so others wouldn’t attack them.

Joshua 3 marks the entry into the land, including another water / dry land miracle, triggered by the presence of the ark. It is described as a sign that they will have victory in battle, as well as to ‘exalt’ Joshua in the tradition of Israel. 3:11 and 3:13 include a unique and challenging phrase, lord of all the earth. Here, the word translated lord is not Yahweh. Though there seem to be some textual variants, the phrase seems to refer to the ark of the covenant, not to Yahweh. It’s used a couple of times in prophetic literature. In the unlikely event that the author used this ambiguous phrase to refer to Yahweh, it would be an anachronism. Until Deutero-Isaiah, we see only occasional examples of limited power of Yahweh over other demographics. Only then do we see the idea of monotheism.

Joshua 4 begins with the placement of memorial stones in the Jordan. The phrase in verse 9, “and they are there to this day” is an obvious indication that this text was written much later than the events described. Verse 20 seems to show the stones being moved to Gilgal.

Joshua 5 tells of a painful time for males born in the last 40 years. They were circumcised at that time. By this act, Yahweh “rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.” They observe passover. Joshua has a vision which some call a theophany. I don’t think it’s described that way. The image seems to be of an agent (or just an agency) of Yahweh in charge of military force on behalf of Israel. Removing the sandals is another parallel aimed at conveying the authority of Joshua by comparing it to that of Moses.

Joshua 6 shows the conquest of Jericho, with the thorough genocide of all the humans and animals, but theft of the valuable metals. As promised, Rahab and her family are preserved. The name Jericho has been applied to a number of settlements in the general area. Some posit the curse of verse 26 as the reason that a particular settlement location was never rebuilt. The fame of Joshua is established.

Joshua 7 explains the defeat at Ai as resulting from inadequate battle staffing plus disobedience by one man of Judah in taking unauthorized plunder. That idea is new to this author! In Torah, blessing/cursing of Israel is determined by the obedience of corporate Israel, not by any individual in Israel. It carries the prophetic worldview to a ridiculous extreme. Israel is suffering, therefore Israel must have disobeyed. Worse, perhaps just one person disobeyed, but we don’t know who it was. Here, they use divination (likely urim and thummim) to find the guilty party and kill him. Worse, they don’t stop there. They kill his entire family tree, all his descendants. This was escalation on a massive scale. Torah had already prohibited it in other areas, with the ‘eye for an eye’ limitation on escalation of revenge. I suppose Israel thought Yahweh was entitled to escalate if he wanted to. Penance was accomplished by burning the booty and killing the perpetrators. Actions like this were common in religious communities all over the planet. We call it superstition when done by anyone but Israel. The penance was acceptable, Ai was conquered, genocide was complete, but this time they kept the livestock. Time for another altar and another recitation of the terms of the covenant. These names (Jericho, Ai) are important to the literary tradition of Israel. Compactness of expression lets a later author conjure a complete philosophical idea with the simple mention of Ai.
Since the practice of pillage and plunder are later accepted and practiced with no harmful side-effects, the capital offense here was not the plunder, but disobeying the priests and dictator. Perhaps the people observed that when they practiced plunder, they didn’t suffer. Then they abandoned their superstition against it, motivated by its profitability. I’m sure they weren’t the first to adjust their moral code to accommodate a profit motive.

Joshua 8 What was the role of the Javelin in verse 18? Did it have magical powers like the rod of Moses? No, it was just a signal to the troops. Look at the map. Ai and Gibeon were likely within about 5 miles of Jericho. People would have noticed a million people milling around in the neighborhood of Gilgal / Jericho. The author’s message about the Ai story should be obvious. Disobey, and you’ll lose. But even then, if you repent, and then obey, you will win.

Joshua 9 explains why certain cities were made slaves instead of being slaughtered. 9:14 complains that they didn’t ask counsel of Yahweh. But there seemed to be no precedent or previous instruction that they should do so. They were told the mechanism for divination (Urum and Thummim) in Numbers 27:21, but not when they should apply it. Depending on the translation and interpretation, the curse of 9:23 seems to apply ambiguously to all of them or some of them. The last two sentences seem to say it’s limited to the tasks of “cutters of wood and drawers of water” for Jerusalem, and probably just to support the sacrificial system for burnt offerings and ceremonial washings. Perhaps that was just the tax portion of their small vassal suzerainty treaty with Israel.

Joshua 10 covers the southern campaign, beginning with a military alliance led by Adoni-zedek, king of Jerusalem. See also my notes about Melchizedek under Genesis 14. It’s another Jebusite name, with Zedek (Ṣaduq, Tzedek) being the name of a Jebusite god. Variants of this name appear in many references to a god of the region in western Semitic languages. The name Adoni-zedek was likely taken to mean master of Zedek. Kings often also served priestly roles, so the name could mean both master of the religion of Zedek or master (ruler) of Jerusalem.

The text continues to speak highly of the people of Gibeon and these other cities. They used intelligent trickery to avoid conquest and destruction. Now they parlay that legal protection into a plea for mutual defense. Apparently Yahweh approved. After imprisoning the kings while the soldiers finished the battle mop-up, Joshua publicly killed them all, hanging them on trees. No wonder Israel came to think of hanging on a tree as a curse. More brutal ethnic cleansing follows, now described more briefly. The central and southern campaigns are completed.

Referring to the legend of the sun standing still, Joshua 10:14 provides a working definition of a miracle, while claiming its uniqueness. “There has been no day like it before or since, when the LORD heeded the voice of a man, for the LORD fought for Israel.” A miracle is a direct intervention by God, perhaps violations of physical laws, on command. Surely this author was familiar with the legends of the exodus, though perhaps he rejected them. The Book of Jashar, mentioned only here and in 2 Samuel 1:18, no longer survives.

Joshua 11 moves on to the northern campaign. The Goshen of 11:16 and 15:51 is probably not the
same as the Goshen wherein they dwelt in Egypt. Instead of killing the horses, he tortuored them by hamstringing them (11:9). That’s cutting the Achilles tendon, rendering them lame, unable to forage for food or defend themselves. They would die slowly of dehydration and starvation until killed by predators. These acts are at best nauseating to any modern moral sensibility of the civilized world. This led Marcion to conclude that Jesus could not possibly be the god of Israel, whom he viewed from texts like this as a brutal tyrant. We have no textual or other evidence that Israel used horses at this time or before, though they had been used in warfare since 3000-4000 BCE. By this time, their use was widespread.

In Joshua 11:11, Hazor was the only kingdom (city) burned during the northern campaign. Perhaps they vented their rage against the leader of the northern alliance, despite the profit motive of plunder. The chapter concludes by saying that Joshua completed the task assigned to him, conquering the land. This is one of many statements that Israel had fully obeyed their instructions. “The land had rest from war.” Well, of course, there was no one left to fight besides those who survived through deceptive contracts.

The expression in 11:20 of the idea that Yahweh manipulated the Canaanites to enable their annihilation is an anachronism. Israel did not acquire this idea until Babylonian Diaspora. They said their god was so powerful that he could manipulate great empires to do his bidding. Here, they rewrite earlier legends to incorporate their modern idea. 11:23 shows that the authors of the Deuteronomistic history thought Canaan was all the land that Israel was supposed to get. Though chapter 12 concludes by crediting Israel with defeating 31 kings, 13 opens with “… there remains yet very much land to possess.”

Joshua 14 revives the nearly-forgotten Caleb, uniquely granting his line a specific sub-allocation of the lands of his tribe. But he’ll have to deal with the Anakim. Texts in this source tend to refer to them as ordinary people, not the demigods of earlier mythology, Numbers 13:33 and Genesis 6, offspring of matings between gods and humans.

Joshua 15:19 shows riparian water rights were always important. Judah claimed a lot of land. These several chapters comprise their legendary explanations for why tribes occupy the land they occupy. They also justify stubborn refusal to give up land. The argument is used to this day by Zionists, who assert that their god gave them their land, so no one else could possibly have any right to it.

Joshua 17 explains an exception to their strong patriarchal practices by granting an inheritance to daughters. This was codified in Numbers 36. 17:13 restates their practice of enslaving fellow residents of the land of Canaan. 17:14 cites another exception for Joseph, thus why Joseph owns too much land.

Joshua 18-19 conclude the apportionment of the land. The written descriptions are likely an anachronism in the story. See the Syllabus for notes on the earliest known Hebrew writing from perhaps 1000 BCE. It’s also plausible that some people among them knew Egyptian hieroglyphics, or that these writings were some other forms of symbols or pictures for the purpose of representing a geographic area.
The scenario best matching the text is that of a group of people from among the remaining tribes exploring the lands. I can imagine a committee meeting with Joshua in which all the parties negotiated territories, what would be a fair division, and what kinds of lands were best suited to the favorite activities of each tribe. We already saw that in play for the lands east of the Jordan, and continue to see it in these chapters on the allocations. In that case, Joshua would use divination merely to confirm what they had already decided would be a good division. It seems less likely here that the divination was in the form of a mere roll of the dice.

Numbers 13:8 shows Joshua son of Nun to be of the tribe of Ephraim. Joshua is honored by an exclusive sub-allocation within the lands of Ephraim. Away from major population areas, some consider this this an indication of Joshua’s retirement from active duty. 19:51 shows that Eleazar, Aaron’s son who succeeded him at his death, participated in the allocation process, along with Joshua and the tribal patriarchs. He would have been the only authorized user of the Urim and Thummim.

Finishing touches are made to the allocations with the cities of refuge (ch. 20, see Numbers 35) and 48 cities with pasture to the Levites (ch. 21). The chapter concludes with yet another statement that, to this point, all had been fulfilled as promised. “Not one word of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.”

The whole of Joshua 22 is an anachronistic explanation of a remembrance monument. Remember, this is the Deuteronomistic history, written after the reforms of Josiah centralized worship to Jerusalem. The explanation is that this edifice was a monument, a landmark, a remembrance, and a property boundary marker, not an altar [for sacrifices]. While Israel just received the carrot of the Mosaic Covenant, Joshua reminds them of the stick. The emphasis shows what this author considered to be the primary requirement of the covenant: monolatry.

In chapter 23, the aging Joshua reminds Israel there’s still work to do. There are more nations [tribes] to drive out. This statement of etiology reminds the reader of the explanation for why there are still Canaanites living among them. 23:7 makes clear that the priests are requiring xenophobia for the purpose of preserving their monopoly on their priestly roles by insisting on monolatry.

Every vassal suzerainty treaty requires regular rehearsals and recitals of the treaty. Joshua 24 provides that, including the famous recommitment by the people to remain bound by the treaty. 24:32 shows Israel was obedient, “Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the LORD did for Israel.” Obedience was not impossible. 24:2 admits that the early patriarchs were polytheists. 24:23 suggests this is still the case, though one could argue that ‘among you’ could mean just within your geography (in the tribes not yet driven out) rather than their consistent usage of the phrase to mean among Israel (such as Genesis 35:2, Exodus 13:2, 17:7, 23:25, and especially 29:45).

Joshua 24:19, “But Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.” We have never before seen this idea, and it contradicts what we have already seen. Yahweh consistently promised forgiveness and restoration after repentance. This looks more like a Pauline idea. I’ll be on the lookout for

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explanations. Perhaps this is from the Jahwist source?

Eleazar the priest was a son of Aaron, so in Joshua 24:33, in whose land is he buried? The Levites didn’t get land. But they did get cities. Perhaps that was assigned in 22:13.

**Judges**

What idea is this author trying hardest to communicate? Of what is he trying to persuade his readers and listeners? Who acts as priest? What systems of governance did they have for national/tribal, civil, and religious matters? Was there any leadership above the level of tribe?

The text is the product of a long period of writing, redacting, and editing, finishing during (or just before) the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BCE. It continues the Deuteronomistic history body of writing. The type scenes are apostasy, punishment, repentance, and rescue.

But this isn’t the book. It’s the movie based on the book, in the best of Hollywood. It’s serious politics told in drama, comedy, and song. Or it’s blockbuster Hollywood entertainment with some serious political messages woven into it.

Judges begins with an attempt to establish continuity with the book of Joshua, which ended with the death of Joshua and of Eleazar the son of Aaron. Who performed the divination of 1:1? The text doesn’t say. Divination was still standard practice. The author of this text didn’t know, and that wasn’t the point of the story.

This first chapter describes in a casual, matter-of-fact way the conquest of an empire. Adoni-bezek was an emperor, or a king of kings. Yet the tribes of Judah and Simeon dispatched this empire with a single sentence. Beyond being a symbolic act of humiliation, permanently visible, cutting off the thumbs and big toes made the king incapable of leading an army or even participating in battle. Adoni-bezek wasn’t a proper name, but a title. He was the lord of Bezek. While that was the name of a city, I suspect the name also was used to refer to the entire empire in the same way that Rome refers to both the city and the empire ruled from it. Some say this is the same person as the Adoni-zedek of Joshua 10, or that this is a variant of that story. They might be successors to the Melchi-zedek of Genesis 14, see my notes there.

He then copies the story from Joshua 15 about Caleb offering his daughter to his nephew as a prize for military conquest. It’s as a wife, but I’m not sure the status of a wife was much better than the status of a slave. The word sometimes translated dowry in Exodus 22:16 is better translated bride-price, since it is paid to her father. It’s in the context of property rights law, and from the previous chapter, laws about slaves including a daughter sold as a slave.

Judges 2 begins with a new explanation / rationalization for ethnic hatred of people living in the same territory whom they considered to be bad or inferior. It’s still the excuse for ethnic cleansing and violence today. The entire Middle East is saturated in this mindset, the greatest and most persistent barrier to peace and egalitarian cooperation today.

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Angel of the LORD

We have the first use of the phrase angel of the LORD (malakh Yahweh, מלאך יהוה) in Deuteronomistic writings. It means messenger of Yahweh, as malakh Elohim means messenger of Elohim. It is a personification of a perceived communication from a god, whether by dream, vision, or a prophet acting in his prophetic role. These phrases appear often (around 150 times) in Tanakh. From context and usage, it seems to me each is a reference to a generic messenger, perhaps unique to the instance, but not unique in Tanakh. In March 2017, Stephen Fox in the Old Testament Hebrew Facebook group confirmed that understanding. Then David Levin, a rabbi (and high school classmate) reconfirmed it. “For it to refer to a single messenger it would need the letter heh in front of the word malach meaning the malach. In Hebrew and especially in the Tanakh, if the letter heh is not included prior to the word (hamalakh) it indicates that there are likely others.”

Judges 2:10 introduces the transition from Joshua 24:31. What a transition! According to this author, the party’s over. The time of obedience has ended. “And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals.”

Like adonai, Ba’al (Ugaritic: ?, Phoenician: ?, Biblical Hebrew: Başer), began as a title of honor, meaning lord. Over time, this generic word was applied by Northern Semitic people to gods. Still later, it referred to Hadad, storm and rain god, variously said to have Dagan (grain god) or El as a parent. See the stele of Ba’al, right, image from Wikipedia. These deities appear in texts with various names such as Ba’al Hammon, Ba’al Berith, and Ba’al Zebub (Beelzebub). In Torah, we’ve already encountered people and places bearing the names of this god, Ba’al Hanan (Gen 36:38-39), Ba’al Zephon (Ex 14:2,9), Ba’al Peor (Numbers 25:3,5) and more.

If this Judges account is true, then clearly Israel was not even monolatrous, much less monotheistic. They were polytheistic like everyone around them. This was confirmed in Joshua 24:2 and suggested in 24:23.

Judges 2:16 portrays the judges as people acting the role of savior. “Then the LORD raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them.” As you read the text, see if the judges are any different from prophets or kings or some combination of them like Moses.

Judges 3 claims a purpose for those populations Israel didn’t annihilate or drive out. Despite the hatred of the priests and their authors, the people do what people always do. They integrate with the societies around them. Today, we have countless stories if Israeli-Arab couples falling in love. They are sad stories, since they tend to be ostracized by both sides. Same for racially-mixed marriages in the US.
Catholic-Protestant marriages. Some demographics still have not learned this lesson.

Judges 3:7 is *Déjà vu* all over again. You lose battles because you fail at monolatry. Then a gory scene, true to its Old English etymological origin with ‘gor’ (dung), perpetrated by Ehud, their deliverer. In their view, this is was a deliverer would do. The chapter ends with Shamgar, who also saved Israel. In chapter 4, Jael did Sisera with a tent peg through his temple. She is glorified in the *Song of Deborah and Barak* in chapter 5. Based on grammar and context, this song is also considered to be one of the most ancient texts of the Bible, from somewhere in the 12th century BCE. Others suggest the same criteria indicate authorship no earlier than the 7th century BCE. While Jewish victory hymns were common, not so those about women. Don’t expect a perfect match between the narrative and the song.

I feel sorry for those who do nothing more than read this in English. You wouldn’t know that *eglon* means fatted calf, so you’d be puzzled why the audience broke into laughter as soon as they heard the name. And you’d miss the obvious clue that this was parable, myth, legend, rather than history, just as you missed that the first man was named man, so you wouldn’t even think of the early Everyman morality play you learned in school. You miss not only the understanding but the beauty of the literary craft. You’d miss the sexual innuendo of Ehud getting Eglon alone, then reaching under his garment with his left hand, the hand used for handling genitals. Had you read even the most rudimentary informed commentary, you could at least spot the trickery of hiding the weapon where the right hand couldn’t access it readily.

Judges 13 is another extended narrative where malakh Yahweh and malakh Elohim seem to be used somewhat interchangeably. The source is still Deuteronomistic, so the authors may be continuing the theme that Yahweh and Elohim are really the same god. In Zechariah 12:8, the author seems to be saying that Yahweh (the speaker in the narrative) is calling Elohim malakh Yahweh, perhaps saying that Elohim is nothing more than the messenger of Yahweh. Bias from the Yahweh side?

**Review**

What are the key ideas expressed in Joshua? Which have we seen before (in Torah)? Which are new to Joshua? How about Judges?

After you have considered these questions, test your answers with a quick read through Joshua and Judges and see if your answers are consistent with the text. Justify any remaining differences and/or adjust your answers.

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Resources

The Evolution of God, by Robert Wright