

Joshua and Jeshua

A Story Exegesis of the Books of Joshua and Luke

The stories of Joshua and Jesus are intimately connected by name, structure, and dynamics. They are also representative of the way in which the understanding of how God would redeem and empower God's people changed over a long period of time. The controversy within the community of Israel about the issue of how God would save the nation remains an issue to this day.

Iasous (Ἰησοῦς) is the Greek form of the Hebrew name, *Jeshua* (ישוע) *Jeshua* in turn is a later form of the Hebrew name, *Joshua* (,Just for the record יושוע) *Jesus* is the English transliteration of the Greek name *Iasous* (). So Jesus' name is a Greek form of *Jeshua* (ישוע) , which was a later Hebrew form of the name, *Joshua* (. יושוע) *Iasous* (Ἰησοῦς) was a common name among Jews until the 2nd century AD. Thus, in the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew, Joshua's name is translated as *Iasous* (Ἰησοῦς).

It was a common practice in Israel in the period after the conquest of the entire region by Alexander the Great, when the nation was under Greek influence, for Hebrew names to be replaced or translated into similar sounding Greek names. The full form of the Hebrew name, *Joshua*, means "God helps" or "God saves." As always with the traditions of Israel, there is a lot in the name. And these names are very closely linked together.

Joshua was the military leader of the people of Israel when they came into the Holy Land from the desert. He led the armies of the Israelites in a series of battles in which the cities were variously destroyed or reorganized as Israelite cities. The conquest of the city of Jericho is the paradigm of the conquest. The entire city and everything in it, except the family of Rahab, is "devoted to destruction." This phrase means that something is separated from ordinary common use by a ritual act. The slaughter of that animal or person is a ritual action of devoting or dedicating that thing to God. By this ritual action, the community receives no economic benefit from the conquest. In Joshua 7 the Israelites are initially defeated in their effort to conquer the city of Ai because Achan had stolen some of the devoted things for himself as booty. When he confessed his crime against God and the devoted things were discovered inside his tent, he and his entire family and all his possessions were stoned and burned with fire (Joshua 8.24-26).

Thus, in the story of Joshua, God helps the nation of Israel by giving them the land. Joshua 12-21 gives the details of the distribution of the land to the particular tribes of Israel. A relatively small part of the story of Joshua is spent on the battles and destruction. The major theme is the detailed description of the graceful gift that the people have received from God and the covenant renewal ceremony with which the book

concludes (Joshua 23-24). This is one of the paradigmatic examples of storytelling as the central action of the establishment and renewal of covenant between Yahweh and the people. Joshua's recital of the story of Yahweh's mighty acts on behalf of the nation at Shechem (Joshua 24.2-15) is the primary ritual action of covenant renewal.

The conquest of the land and its more or less total transfer from Canaanite to Israelite ownership as told in Joshua is only one of two stories in the Old Testament about the Israelites' possession of the land. The other story is told in Numbers and Judges, and is much more ambiguous in its picture of the conquest. As Norman Gottwald has argued in his book, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, the story in Numbers and Judges is more historically probable as a description of what actually happened than the more idealized story in Joshua.

The historical probability is that the Israelites and Canaanites lived together throughout this period. The Israelites only gradually acquired ownership of the land. Gottwald concludes that another historical factor of the transfer of the land to Israelite control was the revolts of Canaanite peasants against the oppressive monarchies of their kings. These peasants overthrew their Canaanite lords and joined the tribes of Yahweh who practiced a far more just distribution of the land and its benefits. Thus, in contrast to the story in Joshua, the story in Numbers and Judges is that the conquest was a very gradual process that took centuries. Furthermore, it was never complete because the Canaanites retained control of significant parts of the land.

Many scholars now believe that the final version of the entire story of the Hexateuch, the ten books of the history of Israel, was completed during the Babylonian exile. In that context, the stories of Israel's wars including Joshua were told as tragic stories in which the military exploits of Israel's military leaders led to ultimate disaster. The stories of Samson, Saul, and David, for example, begin in glory and end in tragedy. The story of the wars between the northern and southern kingdoms, that went on sporadically for more than 100 years, are told as an ongoing story of rebellion against God. The conquest of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 ended the independence and ethnic identity of the nation. Then in 587 after a final rebellion by the government of Judea, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple and took the entire ruling class into exile in Babylon. The story of the nation's confidence in warfare as the means of their deliverance was told as a tragic misplacing of faith.

Thus, when heard in the context of the whole of the salvation history of Israel, it is clear that the conquest of the land was the inauguration of a story of a long series of wars that ended in tragedy. Although many of the wars of the Judges, Saul, David, and the Maccabees were initially successful, none of them ended well. The Roman-Jewish war of AD 66-70 was the last war in the biblical period and it was the most disastrous war in Israel's history.

The Gospel of Luke is appropriately heard against the background of the story of Joshua. The name of Jesus and the overall structure of the Gospel are clearly intended to make the connection. There are many points of structural identity. Jeshua/Jesus like Joshua comes to set the people free by establishing a new kingdom. The Jesus story is a series of victories over the forces of evil. Jesus like Joshua forms a band of followers who follow him in his battles. A new covenant is established between God and the disciples that is an invitation to the audience to remember and participate in this new covenant. And Jesus is finally victorious in his establishment of the new kingdom.

However, Jesus' victory is of a different character. His enemy is Satan and the powers of evil, not any particular nation, city, or tribe. He sets people free and helps them by healing their illnesses, casting out demons, and feeding them. His kingdom is not a geographical land but is a spiritual kingdom that potentially includes the whole earth. His disciples win their victory by utilizing the same powers of the spirit that Jesus utilized: forgiveness, love, compassion. A dimension of the establishment of the new covenant, mainly in Luke's second book of the Acts of the Apostles, is that members of the enemies of Israel, the Gentiles, are welcomed into the new covenant community. Jesus wins by suffering and dying at the hands of his enemies rather than by killing his enemies. And the resurrection establishes a new community across time rather than in a particular space.

Finally, the victory of Jesus in Luke is a victory over war and violence itself. In this sense, the Gospel of Luke is told against Joshua. No one except Jesus gets killed and the power of love rather than the power of the sword is God's primary means of help and salvation. The kingdom of God that Jesus proclaims and establishes is a peaceable kingdom. The Gospel is then good news of peace rather than war. In this sense it is an answer to the tragic history of war and violence in the story of Israel that begins with Joshua. The story of Jesus has elements that are in continuity and discontinuity with the story of Joshua. It is a continuation of the same theme—God's saving and helping acts—but the theme is developed in a very different way.

To hear these two stories together is an invitation to think in story with the storytellers of Israel. The evangelists knew all of the stories of Israel intimately and they are constantly making connections with those stories that explore the continuities and discontinuities of Jesus' story with the earlier stories. The epic telling is an invitation to think with the evangelists about the single most important issue facing the world then and now: If we believe in God, how do we imagine and cooperate with God in God's work of saving and helping us? Is it through war or non-violence? Is it by establishing an ethnic nation separated from the nations or by establishing an inclusive people? Is it by the sword and weapons of war or by the spirit and the power of love and forgiveness? Who is the one God has sent to save us and to lead us into the realm of God? Can we learn from the biblical story the centrality of the ways of peace and reconciliation?

For detailed analysis of 16 stories in the book of Joshua in a Website designed by a team from United Theological Seminary including Tom Boomershine and Amelia Cooper Boomershine, visit <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/Joshua/>