

Joshua Overview

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Overview

The handout shows the four-layered symmetry of the book.

- The core, and the largest part of the book (ch. 5-21, 17 chapters out of 24), concerns the conquest and division of the land. Law of proportion: this is the main emphasis of the book. The focus of Joshua is on how God gives his victory over the enemy so that they can enter into the enjoyment of his blessings.
- The three layers of wrapping add important insights that show the circumstances and conditions under which this victory and blessing are to be realized.

In addition, there are three further themes that are not symmetrically arranged, but distributed between the core and the outer members.

5-21, Core

The “law of proportion” in Bible study says that the amount of space an author devotes to a theme is an indication of its importance to him. On this basis, these 17 chapters are the focal point of the book. They describe first the conquest of the land by the people, then its division among the tribes.

Application.—God often involves us in the process of winning our blessings so that we will appreciate them, just as my folks gave me chores that I had to do to receive my allowance. This does not contradict grace. We contribute nothing to God’s work; he in fact works through us. It is an additional gift from his hand to involve us in his program.

5-12, Conquest

Two sections, set up by the chiasm in 5-8 and the repeated introductions in 9-12. The first focuses on the need for holiness of God’s people if they are to enjoy victory. The second shows the various responses to fear on the part of unbelievers.

5-8, Holy Courage of God’s People

A chiasmic structure, contrasting the victories at Jericho and Ai with the defeat at Ai (in the center). The outer layer shows the foundation for victory: adherence to God’s covenant. Between the victories and the defeat comes the reason for defeat: Achan’s sin.

Covenant Renewal	5 (circumcision & passover at Gilgal)	8:30-35 (curses and blessing at Shechem)
Conquest	6 (Jericho)	8:1-29 (Ai)
Achan’s sin	7:1 (described)	7:6-26 (discovered)
Defeat		7:2-5

Application.—A *victorious* people must be a *virtuous* people. Our victories are the result of God working through us, and one does not carry pure water in a filthy cup. Heb. 12:14, “Follow ...

holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.” Such virtue is the condition of the courage promised Joshua in 1:8.

9-12, Fear among the Canaanites

The structural clue to the unity of these three chapters is the repeated notice of 9:1-2; 10:1; 11:1, describing the fear that gripped the inhabitants of the country.

9:2, “gathered together to fight,” is resumed in 10 and 11, with two confederacies:

- ch. 10, southern, led by Jerusalem and including Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, Eglon.
- Ch. 11, northern, led by Hazor and including Madon, Shimron, Achshaph and others.

9:3-27 is an appendix, set off by the external inclusion of 9:1-2; 10:1. It describes another confederacy (Gibeon, and Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjathjearim, 9:17) with a very different response to their fear. They come (albeit deceptively) and seek peace with Israel.

Application.—Fear of God is the beginning point in any relation with him. As Bruce Waltke used to tell his students, there are two ways that one can respond to the fear of God.

- Frantic resistance leads to defeat, as in the northern and southern confederacies.
- Submission leads to salvation, as with Gibeon.

The same is true of our relation with God today. We can resist him and suffer his wrath, or bow before him and find our peace in the finished work of Christ.

12, Summary of Conquests

This chapter enumerates all the conquered cities, including Jericho, and thus serves to unify 5-8 with 9-11.

13-21, Division of the Land

13, RGM/2.—A historical account of how Moses gave these tribes their eastern territory. Though not part of Joshua’s division here, it is included to emphasize the unity of the twelve tribes.

14-17, Judah, Ephraim, Manasseh.—Marked by their eagerness to claim the blessings God had for them. Begins with Caleb’s claim on Hebron (14:6-15), and ends with the expanded ambition of the children of Joseph (17:14-18).

18-19, Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulon, Issachar, Asher, Naphthali, Dan.—By contrast with the first group, these are sluggish to take their territory, and Joshua has to send out a survey team and force the question.

20, Cities of Refuge.—Three on each bank of Jordan. These are included within ...

21, Levitical Cities.—Provides for teachers of the law, distributed throughout the land.

Outer Wrappers

All of these layers focus our attention on God’s people, the ones who fight the war and inherit the blessings. We learn three important truths about them.

Death of Shepherds

Lesson: God's people are only channels for his work.

1:1, Death of Moses (Deut. 34:1-12)

24:29-33, Death of Joshua and Eleazar

Why pair Joshua and Eleazar here?

- Succeeded to his father Aaron as High Priest in Num 20:23-29.
- Lead figure in distributing the land in Joshua: "Eleazar the priest, and Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of the fathers of the tribes of the children of Israel," 14:1 (initial distribution); 17:4 (daughters of Zelophehad), 19:51 (summary, inclusio with 14:1), 21:1 (Levites).

Why emphasize him at this point? Probably because this is the changing of the guard, and "the guard" throughout Israel's history consisted of separate political and priestly representatives.

- Moses and Aaron
- Joshua and Eleazar
- King and High Priest throughout the monarchy
- Zerubbabel the governor of Judah and Joshua the high priest in the return

This separation is so strong that King Uzziah was smitten with leprosy for attempting to combine the two roles, 2 Chron 26:16-21. The only OT character who combines these roles is Melchizedek, "king of Salem, priest of the most high God" (Gen 14:18), and he is explicitly a type, if not a preappearance, of the Lord Jesus. Thus the uniqueness of our Lord as the Messiah, the anointed one, who alone brings together the offices of prophet, priest, and king.

So Josh 24 records the passing of Joshua and Eleazar together to show the changing of the guard, setting the foundation for the failure of the next generation, who has not known the works of the Lord.

Application

The human shepherds that God gives his people are only temporary, and serve under him (cf. 1 Pet. 5). The Scriptures never let us lose sight of our own mortality and insignificance in the large scale of things. Joshua himself recognized this, 23:14 "I am going the way of all the earth." We call this book "Joshua," just as the fifth book of the NT is conventionally called "The Acts of the Apostles." But these are only man-made titles. It has been rightly said that the fifth book of the NT really should be called, "The Acts of the Holy Spirit through the Apostles," and similarly this book might better be remembered as "The Mighty Acts of God through Joshua."

Exhortation to Successors

Lesson: God's people are united through time.

1-2, Exhortation to Moses' Successor (Joshua)

I have put ch. 2 here because, in contrast with the journey of the 12 spies from Kadesh Barnea, it was a private mission for Joshua's information alone (2:1, Hebrew accents make "secretly" modify "command," not "spy," and it is to them that they report). Thus we have a bipartite exhortation: direct and verbal in ch.1, indirect and more illustrative in ch.2.

23-24, Exhortation to Joshua's Successors

Again, a bipartite exhortation, though both are this time verbal. Ch. 23 is personal, while 24 is couched in highly symbolic language, the language of the suzerainty treaties.

Application.—We need to encourage one another, and especially the older generations need to exhort and guide the younger ones. It is a daunting thing to be a channel for God's Spirit to work in a sinful world. We should not despise godly counsel, but treasure and encourage it. This layer emphasizes the *unity of God's people through time*, as each generation receives the torch from the previous one.

Memorials of Unity

Lesson: God's people are united through space.

3-4, Crossing Jordan , RGM/2, Memorial

This episode is chiasitic, and centers about the construction of the pile of twelve stones in 4:1-9.

- There are twelve stones in the memorial because twelve tribes crossed the river.
- Twelve tribes crossed the river, even though RGM/2 already had their inheritance, because a detachment of 40K men from those tribes fulfilled their promise to Moses (Num 32:20-28) to help the other tribes secure their territory, fulfilled here (4:12-13).
- Thus this memorial is a memorial to the unity of the people, though divided across the two banks of the Jordan.

Staging on the river bank	3:1-6	4:19-24
Divine Commands re. Stopping the river	3:7-16	4:14-18
Emphasis on Joshua's reputation	3:7	4:14
Exceptional height of the water	3:15	4:18
Summaries of the crossing	3:17	4:10-13
Divine Command re. Memorial	4:1-9	

22, Jordan, RGM/2, Memorial Altar

Here we have the same elements as in 3-4:

- Focus on the precincts of the Jordan River, the boundary between the eastern and western tribes
- Explicit reference to RGM/2
- A monument to the unity of the twelve tribes (in this case, to their common worship).

Application.—The victories of the conquest were the result of God’s power flowing through a diverse people. RGM/2 differed from the other tribes in their circumstances, yet were still Israelites, worshipped the same God, had Levitical cities and cities of refuge, and they were part of the conquest.

The other tribes are not free to live where RGM/2 live; they have their territory assigned by the Lord. But it would be a mistake for the other tribes to shun them, and these memorials were intended to guard against such a event. Even so, we need to cherish an attitude of love and unity for other believers who may differ from us, even when we cannot in good conscience toward God live where they live or conduct our activities as they do.

Asymmetrically Repeated Elements

These link the outer members to the conquest part of the core, binding the book together like a string that runs through the pearls.

Converts from the Pagans, 2 → 9.—The family of Rahab and the Gibeonites are exceptions to the universal destruction of the Canaanites. God will always show mercy to a penitent sinner.

Threat of Sin to the People, 22 → 7.—The ambassadors to RGM/2 concerning the memorial altar are acutely aware of the lesson of Achan (22:20): the sin of an individual can deprive the whole congregation of victory and blessing. The unity that brings God’s people victory in spiritual warfare also means that we are vulnerable to God’s judgment on one another’s sins.

Covenant Renewal, 24 → 5, 8b.—The foundation for our victory is the covenant that God has graciously established with us. We are to remember it, using the memorials that God has ordained to keep it fresh in our minds. For Israel, these were circumcision, the feasts, the stones at Ebal and Gerizim, and the recital of the treaty. For us, they are baptism (water, signifying spirit) and the Lord’s Supper.

The End of the Story?

Joshua is not the only book in the Bible to end with a funeral. Such endings are characteristic of Gen-Josh, the historical foundation of the OT.

- Genesis (50:26) ends with Joseph’s death and being placed “in a coffin in Egypt,” in the land of bondage.
- Deut (34:5,6) ends with Moses’ death and burial in the land of Moab, in the wilderness. Better than the land of bondage, but not yet in the land of promise.
- Joshua ends with three burials in the land of promise. Thus it lays the foundation for the rest of Israel’s history.
- Josh 24:31 sounds an ominous note, anticipating the recurrent failure that characterizes that later history (Judges through Kings). Israel is in the land, but the departure of her spirit-filled human leaders means that the ordinary people, without the presence of God’s spirit, will fall away.

Compare the end of the foundation books of the NT, the gospels.

Joshua Overview

- Each of the gospels ends with a death and burial, but then with a resurrection (e.g., Mark 15:37; 16:6).
- In spite of the departure of the NT Joshua (Jesus), the church goes on victoriously—just contrast the book of Acts with Judges-Kings. Now God's people are indwelt by the HS, and have no need for charismatic human leaders to guarantee their holiness.

It may be worth looking ahead to the Revelation, which ends with the death of death and the destruction of all evil (21:4,8).