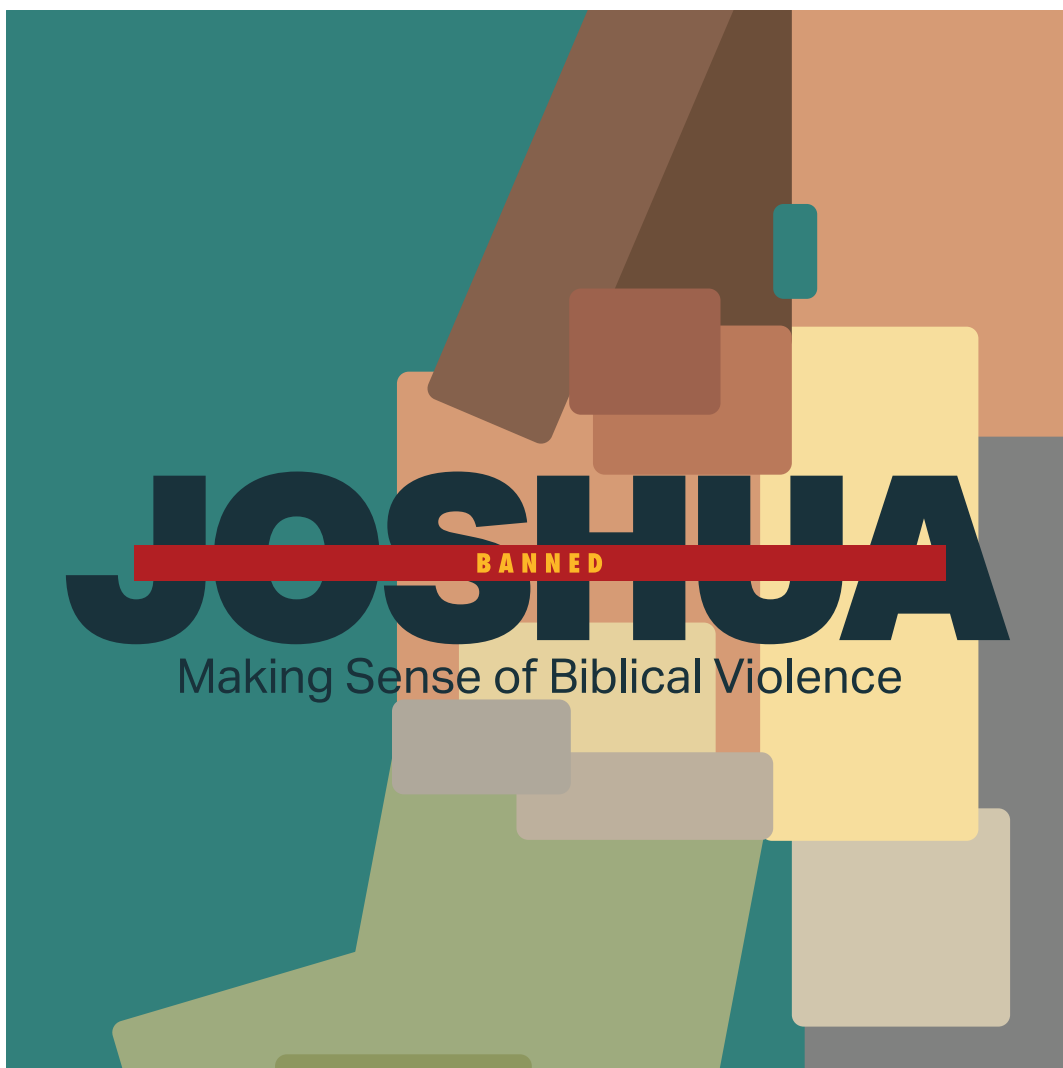




A SERIES STUDY GUIDE

Week 1

First United Methodist Church

1928 Ross Avenue Dallas, Texas 75201

firstchurchdallas.org

214-220-2727

Rev. Mitchell Boone, Senior Minister

Banned | The Book of Joshua

Week 1: God Said What?

Joshua is one of those books in the Bible that can be easy to forget is there. If not for the enduring story of the fall of Jericho—preserved in large part thanks to a particularly powerful African-American spiritual¹—it would be easy for people to move directly from stories of Moses to those of Saul and then David.

Joshua? As a standalone book? Well, it simply is not. It is impossible to read the text of Joshua, let alone try to understand it, without reference to what comes before it and what follows it. As the well known adage says, context is king, and this is true especially for Joshua.

In Biblical order, the book of Joshua follows Deuteronomy. While Deuteronomy is part of the Torah, Joshua begins the section of books known in the Hebrew Bible as the *Nevi'im*, literally meaning *Prophets*. Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings are known as the *former prophets*.²

Although it is considered a separate section, as a narration, Joshua follows immediately after the story of Moses. In fact, it picks up right where that story leaves off. In Joshua 1:5b, God says explicitly, “As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.” Joshua is to step seamlessly into Moses’ shoes as the people’s leader.

At the same time, the narrator is able to continue the same themes introduced in Deuteronomy itself. Namely, that Israel was promised land via the covenant with Abraham, and has received the law via Moses, which they must keep faithfully in order to actually gain sovereignty over the promised land. If they keep the law, then they get to keep the land.

Spoiler alert: in Joshua, they keep the law, and get the land.

Joshua 1:7-8 lays out the transaction clearly,
Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you

1 Believed to have been written by enslaved people during the first part of the 19th century, “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho” was and is a popular song, still sung by ensembles and individuals today.

2 Chronicles is considered part of the *Ketuvim*, or writings, in the Hebrew Bible, but is placed after Kings in the Christian Old Testament as part of the historical books of Israel.

go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.

So what is “the law”? In Deuteronomy, the first law that Moses gives to the people at the banks of the Jordan river as they prepare to cross over, is to purify the worship practices in the land they are about to enter. The Israelites are to do this by destroying all the places of worship of other gods, and seeking the one place where God has designated worship of God to be.³ This will eventually lead to the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, and Moses passes this mission to Joshua and expects him to lead. For now, the most important thing is that the people worship God faithfully, according to the covenantal relationship that they have had with God throughout the centuries. This is the God who brought them out of Egypt, and provided for them in the wilderness! Now God is finally leading them into the land their ancestors were promised. They would be God’s people and God would be their God in their chosen place.

From one perspective it’s a moving testament to the ongoing generational faithfulness of a people, and the gracious reciprocity of a caring deity.

But the thing is that Joshua isn’t a lovely book about a devoted people humbly following the lead of their loving and generous God to a beautiful land that is empty and waiting for them. There’s a reason people so often overlook or skip this text when moving through the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament.

Many of the stories in Joshua are atrocious. The land that Israel has been told belongs to them is not empty, but is quite full of other people. Some of these people have been there for generations, but Israel moves in and claims it all. The Book of Joshua is a book of bloody battles and conquest. The people of Israel engage in ethnic cleansing, genocide and displacement of native people, and full massacres of entire communities, including all adults, children, and even animals. And the story claims that all of it is under the direction of God.

3 Deuteronomy 12:5a “But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there.”

So like with a bad song on an otherwise banger album, it would be nice to just hit “skip” and ignore that it’s there.

But we should not. It is a part of our faith tradition, and unfortunately it informs too much of how some people still see the world for us to pretend it doesn’t exist. We must read it and wrestle with it, and discover the presence of God within it. And this is why context matters especially for this book.

Which brings us to the questions of when Joshua was written and why. In order to understand that, we need to look at the text that follows Joshua.

What comes after Joshua is the book of Judges, in which Israel struggles to remain faithful to God while being led by various temporary local or tribal leaders.

After Judges comes the books of Samuel, in which, according to the scriptural account, the first united monarchy of Israel is established. This is where we get the stories of Saul’s and David’s reigns, and even though they each make some mistakes and break the law, overall, their faithfulness is established and Israel rises to the height of its power and identity as a landed people in right relationship with the Lord their God.

Things start to go downhill after that, with few exceptions. The book of Kings follows the line of succession with the stories of Solomon, the prophets Elijah and Elisha, and the other Davidic kings, who, except for a few, do what is evil in the sight of the Lord and seem to forget their side of the covenant. Increasingly then, according to the deal struck in Deuteronomy, God allows other nations to encroach on Israel’s territory, and more and more of Israel is lost. The books of 1 & 2 Kings take us through the fall of Israel (the Northern Kingdom), to the Babylonian Exile of Judah (the Southern Kingdom) and finally the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Most scholars believe that it was during the reigns of the kings of Israel and just after that the Book of Joshua, and indeed all of the *former prophets*, were collected and written as scriptural texts. It started perhaps as early as Hezekiah’s reign in the 10th century, or Josiah’s reign in the 7th century, or both, and continued into the Babylonian exile. In stories of these kings, the Book of Deuteronomy is referenced or rediscovered, and religious reform is initiated accordingly.

While there is much debate still as to the number of authors, and the number of versions and

revisions of these texts, it is clear that they contain a common throughline rooted in the Mosaic laws presented in the Book of Deuteronomy.⁴ One of the significant outcomes of the law that Moses gives to the people is not simply a fulfillment of the covenant with God. Their faithfulness to the law also, conveniently, leads to the centralization of power and identity of the Israelites. Both things that a king who was struggling to hold onto their kingdom would want to emphasize and justify. For the kings of Israel, being able to point to a narrative that linked faithful, centralized, worship to the original covenant with God, resulting in clearly defined, stable boundaries of a land which was at the same time woven into their cultic identity, was a heady thing. Cue Joshua.

This is why destroying the other places of worship, the other gods, and yes, the people who worship those gods was so important. Because it aligned with the goals of a monarch, which was the leadership dynamic that developed after Joshua, and is the actual context in which the text of Joshua was most likely put together.

This can be understood by modern readers from a socio-political viewpoint. Even if we vehemently disagree with it, it makes sense that a leader would want to promote a narrative that supports their consolidation of power through a nationalistic identity, and would do anything to accomplish that, including horrific acts of violence towards any who threaten their success.

But as Christians, we believe that Jesus was God incarnate and that he rejected the power constructs of his day, loved his enemies, preached forgiveness of sins, and humbled himself even to death on a cross. And while we believe in the saving work of Christ, we do not ignore the texts that came before Jesus. We hold the entirety of God’s story as sacred, which means the most difficult thing we have to wrestle with in the text of Joshua is God’s role in it. Because Joshua, taking the lead from Moses in Deuteronomy, makes clear that all of this war and violence and destruction is because God commanded it. In Deuteronomy 7, Moses says to the people,

When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy and he clears away many nations before you—the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, seven nations more numerous and mightier than you— and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant

⁴ Which is why the biblical theory of this collection of texts is referred to as the Deuteronomistic History.

with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.

The Hebrew word *herem* is the technical term for utter destruction in Joshua and the other Deuteronomistic History texts. It functions as a kind of consecration, ensuring that the Israelites remain pure and unsullied by the other nations, especially from their worship of other gods. Nothing can be kept from the conquered city because it would ultimately corrupt the Israelites and their relationship with God.

It's worth noting that the archaeology research of Canaan doesn't reveal anywhere close to the scale of destruction of the cities described in Joshua. This, as well as a socio-political context in which Joshua was written, leads many scholars to believe that these narratives reflect the theological memory of a community attempting to maintain its identity during a failing monarchy and then even more so after a completely failed monarchy. These texts, when understood in their context, are clearly not a precise historical reality.

However helpful it is to understand the context of these texts in order to recognize that they are not describing the actual intensity of events that occurred, *it does not lessen the moral weight of these texts*. God is still presented as only caring for one people, and cosigning the complete annihilation of all others.

Not only that, but it is God who hardens the hearts of the other nations: "For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed and might receive no mercy but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses" (Joshua 11:20).

In the narrative, Joshua could be considered merely a puppet for God's plan, much in the same way that his very character is a marker of the political influence of the kings of Israel at the time the book was written. Joshua does not do anything of his own volition, but in all things follows God's commands, simply finishing what Moses started. As Joshua 11:15 says, "As the Lord had commanded his servant Moses, so Moses commanded Joshua, and so Joshua did; he left nothing undone of all that the Lord had commanded Moses."

God is the true actor in this narrative. And God acts according to the covenant that God made with the Israelites, both blessing them and cursing them as a result of their faithfulness or lack thereof to the covenant. It is true that God offers grace upon grace to the Israelites, though. At no point does God ever abandon them forever. God always turns back to them, forgives and blesses them once more. And yet, in blessing the Israelites, God does terrible things to the other nations.

We'd rather look away, skip over the accounts of the atrocities done at the will of and sometimes by the divine hand of God. We justify things by trying to focus on God and Israel's relationship, limiting justice to one group, and allowing that to overshadow injustice done to others.

But we have permission to be troubled by this text. To be troubled by how God shows up here. That's exactly why this worship series exists and why reading this text is important. We have permission to wrestle with the violence and cruelty and to be upset by it.

We do not have permission to stop reading. For us, Joshua must be approached in context. And not only in the context of the Deuteronomistic History, but also in the context of the entirety of the Christian Bible as a whole. This is just one part of the story, and regardless of how disturbing and uncomfortable, we also know that the story isn't finished yet.

Reflection Questions

- * Where in your own faith journey have you encountered a portrait of God that felt impossible to reconcile with the God you meet in Jesus, and what did you do with that tension?
- * The text gives us permission to be troubled. What has the church taught you, explicitly or implicitly, about whether that kind of trouble is allowed?
- * *Herem* frames total destruction as an act of consecration - violence made sacred. Where do you see the impulse to name as holy the harm at work in the world today, and where might you see it in yourself?