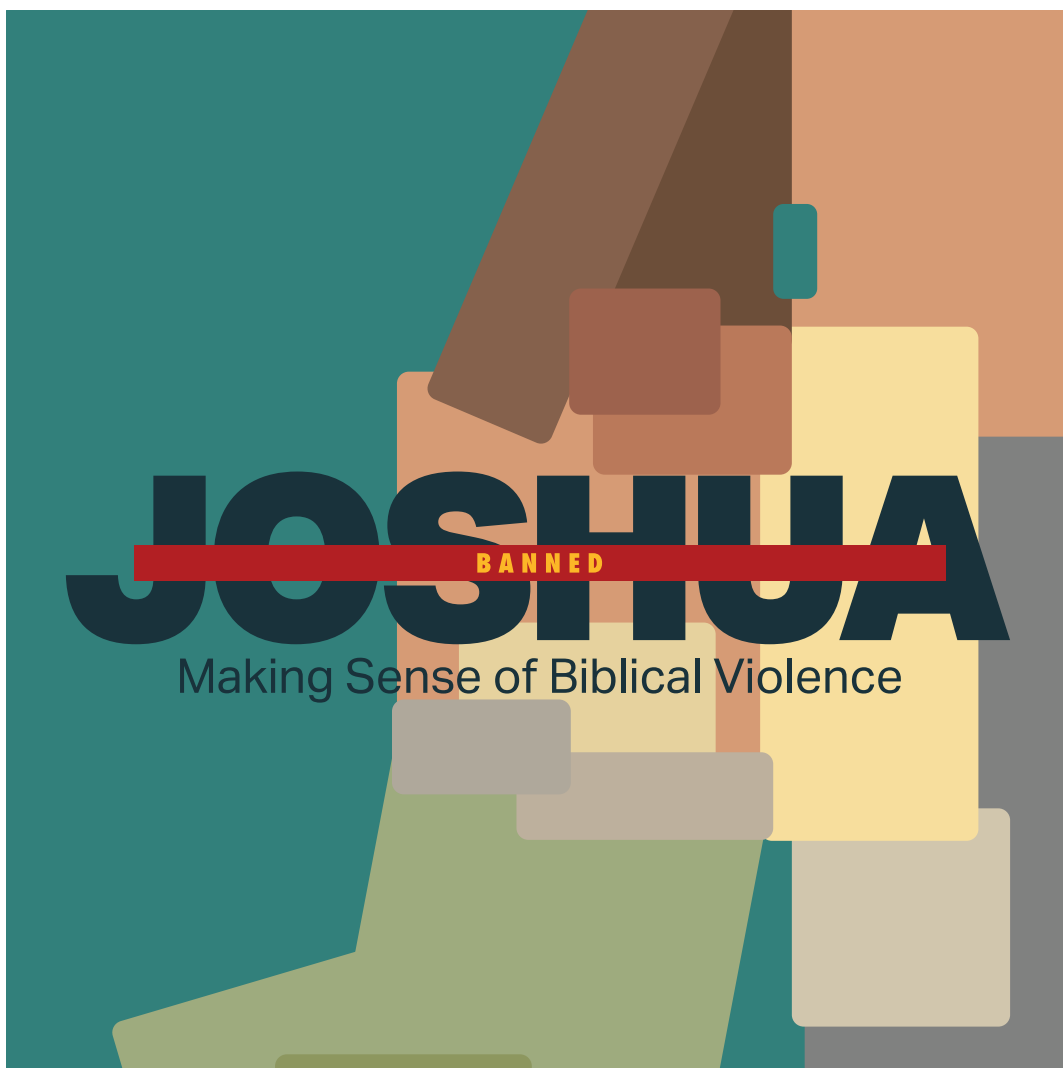




A SERIES STUDY GUIDE

Week 2

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Banned | The Book of Joshua

Week 2: Whose Land Is It?

The need to *belong* could be one of the fundamental needs of humanity.

To be known, seen, understood, loved—sure, of course.

But to *belong*.

To *have* a place, not simply to take up space, is—if history and literature from every culture and every age around the world is to be believed—one of the deep drives of our souls.

In his book, *The Land*, Walter Brueggemann defines the concept of ‘space’ as a kind of neutral emptiness, a void with no definition or accountability. ‘Space’ is time and location that is free to be filled as we choose, with no real defined meaning or purpose until we assign it.

On the other hand, the way he describes the idea of ‘place,’ is very different. Place is linked to “an established identity” often throughout generations, a location of historical meaning, where “things have happened and are now remembered.” ‘Place’ has history, and definition. Place doesn’t just receive meaning, it gives meaning to individuals and experiences. We might make a ‘space’ into a ‘place,’ but in return, our places *make us* who we are. Because while space might be undefined freedom, place is home.

So then, to find our place, to find where *home* is, is an essential human quest. And once we’ve found it, the drive to do everything to remain in it or return to it is powerful. Countless beloved stories throughout history include characters wrestling with, defining, and pursuing their idea of home, often regardless of the cost.¹ Home: there truly is no place like it.

Throughout scripture, it is clear the Israelites’ have a deep drive to belong. To find a place and a home is a central theme for the texts of the Deuteronomistic History, which include the books Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings. This drive, this need for place—for defined land that belongs to them and to which they belong—is a fundamental part of their identity as a people. The Israelites were so focused on identifying and claiming their place,

that even as they encountered the risen Lord, Jesus’ disciples asked, is this the time when you will restore the throne of David in his kingdom? To this day, much of the Jewish faith practices and worship includes acknowledgment of this hope and yearning.²

This fundamental part of their identity predates the story of Moses, as they explicitly tie their expectation that they have their own land to the covenant God made with Abraham in Canaan, which we find in Genesis. In Genesis, God establishes an “everlasting covenant” and explicitly says to Abraham, “And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:8)

This family, this covenantal dynasty, this core identity as God’s people is then marked physically (by circumcision)³ and ever directed towards a set goal (land). Circumcision is a one and done deal.⁴ But the pursuit of land is an ongoing process. Before they even get close to entering the land God has promised to them, they have to travel a long way, and their journey is pretty circuitous. Beginning with Abraham, and following Isaac, Jacob, and finally Moses, the people of God are led from modern southern Iraq, to modern day Turkey, down to Egypt, and then through the Sinai Peninsula and into modern Jordan, before arriving at the banks of the Jordan river, a total journey of thousands of miles, over the course of generations.

Throughout their story, the people of God have gone from sojourner (between lands), to enslaved (oppressed by land), to wanderer (no land), which leads up to this moment of finally about to enter the land that they believe belongs to them. While there are many contradictions, contrasts, and shifting details in the narrative from Genesis to Kings, the story of God and God’s people is told over and over again, always with the similar throughline: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to the

1 The Odyssey, The Wizard of Oz, Gone with the Wind, Great Expectations, Tarzan, Beloved, the Lord of the Rings, Homeward Bound...we could go on and on.

2 The text of the Amidah, the central part of Jewish Shabbat liturgy, includes asking God to bring all exiles back into their land, restore Jerusalem and the Temple, and settle them within their borders.

3 Genesis 17:9-11

4 Although the Israelites end up having to be recircumcised several times throughout the centuries, first by Joshua himself (Joshua 5:2-7), since later generations periodically let this ritual fade away, before a zealous leader reups their commitment to God’s law and forces the entire nation to go under the knife again.

land I have promised your ancestors. Follow my law and keep my commandments.”

It's in the book of Joshua that we finally arrive at the pivotal moment when the sojourning, formerly enslaved, wandering Israelites enter into the land. The account is dramatic. The flooding waters of the Jordan part as the Israelites walk across an aqueous valley, while the Ark of the Covenant is held aloft by priests who stand in the middle of the dry river bed. It mirrors the Israelites crossing the Dead Sea all of forty years ago, and indeed, the Lord uses this moment to establish Joshua's leadership. Not in his own right, but only as a continuation of Moses. “The Lord said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.” (Joshua 3:7).

After crossing the river, and circumcising all the males (and then healing from their circumcision), we are told that the people “ate the produce of the land.” The day they ate from the land, the manna—the food which God provided for them every day for the past 40 years—ceased to appear. They no longer had access to the miraculous daily provision of God once they received sustenance from their new domain.

Immediately after this, they go about destroying Jericho, the walls do indeed come tumbling down, and it doesn't stop there. Nation after nation falls to Israel's army, all the inhabitants are slaughtered, and after they've conquered the land, they divvy it up between themselves. Israel, it seems, has arrived.

But let's go back to that first meal on the other side of the Jordan. The stopping of the manna is a small moment, just a sentence in the text, but it has a huge implication for what will change in the relationship between God and God's people once they acquire a place of their own. In fact, it's a portent of forgetfulness and disconnection. Because, once they are settled, it will be all too easy for the Israelites to forget all God did to get them there.

Throughout the text, even as the Israelites are urged towards the promised land, there are these warnings and disclaimers. Having land is great, but having land can also make them complacent, dependent on their own cultivation of the earth, and not on the Lord who created it. The stability that having land provides as well as the identity that comes with it, makes it easy for them to forget that their identity and foundation actually lies within their covenant with God.

They are warned not to be forgetful by Moses when he shares God's promises of land with the Israelites:

“When the Lord your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

And again,

“When you have eaten your fill and have built fine houses and live in them and when your herds and flocks have multiplied and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied, then do not exalt yourself, forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery...Do not say to yourself, ‘My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But remember the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 8:11-18a)

The gift of underserved land is an act of grace for the Israelites. But it is also a potential temptation away from relationship with God. For a people who have wandered, landless for generations, finally possessing land is a relief. And, as Brueggemann says, it is also “the enemy of memory.” In a way, the land replaces the covenant between the people and God. They have the land now, they don't need a covenant.

Even though they are warned, the Israelites cannot resist. *God is the one who wants to give them the land, in the first place! God not only leads them to the land, but conveniently helps them destroy or drive out any other nations who might already be there! How can having the land be bad? It's actually for the sake of the world that the Israelites have the land! They are blessed to be a blessing!*⁵

Reading Joshua, it is important to remember that this was compiled at a time when Israel's control of their land was slipping away. Before, during, and after the exile, Israel's core identity was significantly challenged and their awareness of their diminishing political power was, literally in many ways, bringing them to their knees. For them, God's presence, faithfulness, and fulfillment of the covenant is comforting and encouraging

during a time when there is great uncertainty and instability.

Still, the logic of a conquest narrative, or the idea that there is a chosen people receiving a promised land by displacing its inhabitants with divine sanction, is deeply troubling, AND it does not apply only to Israel. It has been replicated across centuries and cultures, and as Christians we find it in our history, as well. The Crusades. The colonization of the Americas. The founding mythology of the United States.⁶ Apartheid South Africa. Even today, Christian nationalism operates with the same message of Joshua: Christians (but only the really “faithful” ones) are

6 The Doctrine of Discovery was formally articulated in a series of papal bulls beginning in the 1450s used the logic of Joshua to authorize European Christians to claim dominion over any land not inhabited by Christians. The Puritan settlers explicitly understood themselves as the new Israel entering a new Canaan.

God’s chosen people, and must wield whatever political power they can to claim their rightful place over and above all others.

If the conquest narrative is true still today, the warnings to Israel are also true. Having land—power, authority, place, identity—might mean security in one sense, but it can create forgetfulness, lack of humility, and a deep perversion of a relationship with God in another very real sense.

Israel gets the land, but they struggle to keep it, and that struggle leads them to make choices that go against their foundational relationship with God. We have the same temptations, and the same choices. What do we long for, justify by divine provenance, and then allow to distort and displace our faithful alignment to God’s call in our lives?

Reflection Questions

- * The Doctrine of Discovery was cited in U.S. courts as recently as 2005. Does it change how you read Joshua to know its interpretive legacy has had legal force within your lifetime?
- * Where have you encountered the Christian nationalism logic (chosen people, promised land, God who sanctions power) in your own faith formation? What do you do with that inheritance?
- * Christians bear responsibility for how scripture is used, not just what it says. Have you ever benefited from an interpretation of scripture you now find troubling? What does faithful accountability look like for that?

SERMON NOTES