

Reading Joshua

For those of you who were wondering why we started our study of the Hebrew Scriptures with Exodus instead of Genesis, the book of Joshua provided some good insights.

The story that is told/retold most often in the Hebrew Bible is that of the exodus—how God intervened one human history to help the Chosen People. While there were human leaders, first Moses, then Joshua, it is clear in both the exodus story and the conquest of Canaan, that it is the power of God that controls the destiny of the Chosen People.

Probably the most significant similarity between the exodus story and the conquest of Canaan has to do with water. First the Hebrews leaving Egypt were saved from the pursuing army of Pharaoh when they were able to cross the Reed Sea on dry land. In Joshua, the people were able to cross the Jordan (which was at its banks because of the season) on dry land to enter the Promised Land.

Once in Canaan, the people celebrate the Passover, according to the calendar. You will remember from Exodus that the first Passover was celebrated before the people set out from Egypt. The place where the people crossed over the Jordan was Gilgal, a word that means circle in Hebrew. This comes from the circle of 12 memorial stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel that were put in place to commemorate the crossing. Gilgal is one of the sanctuaries or high holy places where people gathered to worship God even before the Temple was constructed.

The book of Joshua was compiled by the Deuteronomistic Historian (DH for short) and there are literary clues in Joshua to this authorship. See Joshua 1:7-8—“...be careful to observe the entire law which Moses my servant enjoined on you. DO NOT SWERVE FROM IT EITHER TO THE RIGHT OR TO THE LEFT....RECITE IT BY DAY AND NIGHT....

Our readings for this week covered only one battle, that of Jericho. There were other battles to conquer the land. What these battles have in common is the “ban” or the utter destruction of the people who lived there, even their animals. This may seem unduly harsh and cruel to us from our vantage point. What is behind this destruction is removing the foreign gods and their worship so that the people would have no temptation to stray from their worship of their one God.

Remember the words of the Shema: Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord alone! This is the prayer said daily by the Chosen People to this day. It is not just an affirmation of their God, but a rejection of any other gods.

The covenant renewal ceremony in the last chapter of Joshua might seem almost anticlimactic after the celebration of Passover in Chapter 5. It comes down to a choice, a matter of free will. Joshua sums it up succinctly: as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord....he is our God.

One interesting thing I noticed in this week's reading is the spacing of the people following the Ark of the Covenant into the land, 2000 cubits (Joshua 3:4). As we practice social isolation in light of the Coronavirus, I was struck by the distance the people put between themselves and the Ark.

I invite your questions and comments about the readings for this week. In the meantime, be well, be safe, care for yourselves and your loved ones. My family and I are all well.

May the Lord watch between us while we are apart from one another. Shalom

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