

# Joshua

## THE CHALLENGE OF THE PROMISED LAND





Michael Hattin

JOSHUA

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THE PROMISED LAND

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*The Challenge of the Promised Land*

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*Dedicated in loving memory of*  
**Richard J. Silvera ע"ה**

*by his children*  
*Hillel, Albert and Michelle*

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## *Preface*

**T**he Book of Joshua seamlessly continues the Torah's narrative that ended with the death of Moses. The people of Israel were encamped on the outskirts of Canaan when Moses died at the end of Deuteronomy, finally preparing to enter the Promised Land after a lengthy and lethal delay. As much as the book is a concise record of the trials and triumphs of the people of Israel as they take their first tentative steps to settle the new land, it is also a personal account of Joshua's challenge to succeed his storied mentor as their leader. These two dimensions of the national and the individual, also at play in many other books of the Tanakh, unfold in the Book of Joshua simultaneously.

The basic outline of the Book of Joshua is probably known to many readers from their grade school education, but not all have studied the book from beginning to end. Fewer still have studied it in Hebrew while paying careful attention to vocabulary, grammar and syntax, literary structure, intertextuality, or historical context. Yet all of these form the basis for the fruitful work of the commentaries, ancient as well as modern, and all are critical tools for exploring the book. To neglect any of them is to compromise the potential for a more comprehensive understanding.

Our tradition of text study has been honed over thousands of years and has produced a prodigious and diverse body of secondary and

tertiary material that continues to expand to the present day. But all of it is predicated upon one methodological foundation principle that also forms the bedrock for the following study: It is through careful reading and review of the original biblical text that one acquires more profound appreciation of the book and its timeless themes.

The Hebrew text of the Bible is concise, compact and sometimes cryptic, omitting descriptive material that is not directly relevant to the matter at hand. When detail is present, it is not intended as literary artifice for the enjoyment or entertainment of the reader but rather to provide essential meaning-bearing content. Furthermore, interpreting the intent of a biblical passage sometimes hinges upon a few critical words, whose meaning in the original Hebrew may be obscure.

For all of these reasons, a cursory reading of the material can never be sufficient.

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I have had the opportunity of studying and teaching the Book of Joshua a number of times at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, where I have been privileged to teach for over a decade. I am thankful to my students and to my colleagues who have raised so many thoughtful questions and provided so many meaningful insights, challenging me to sharpen my own ideas, to frame them more precisely, and to revise them in order to yield a more coherent and consistent reading.

I would also like to acknowledge the generosity of spirit of Yeshivat Har Etzion and its innovative Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash. Much of the material in this book was first committed to writing as a series of articles for the online learning of the Book of Joshua, and the Yeshiva has kindly allowed me to make use of it for the purposes of the present study. During my time at the Yeshiva, where a rigorous and thoughtful approach to Torah study was applied not only to Talmud and Halakha but also to Tanakh, I had the honor of hearing lectures from some of Israel's most brilliant teachers. I am indebted to all of them.

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## *Introduction*

**T**he Book of Joshua is the first book in the division of Tanakh known as *Nevi'im*, and its contents describe the entry into Canaan and the settlement of the land by the Israelite tribes. “Tanakh” is a Hebrew acronym for Torah (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings), the three components of the Hebrew Bible.

The Book of Joshua is named after its protagonist, the loyal disciple of Moses, who eventually succeeds his esteemed mentor as leader of the tribes of Israel. Although the book provides very few details about Joshua’s personal life, its events are tightly bound up with the span of his lifetime and it is Joshua’s death that constitutes the book’s conclusion. Chronologically, the book succeeds the last verses of the Book of Deuteronomy, beginning its account in the immediate aftermath of Moses’ death with the tribes of Israel poised to enter the Promised Land.

The contents of the book can be conveniently broken down into several units:

Chapters 1–5: This section introduces us to Joshua, familiarizes us with the enormity of the challenges faced by him and by the people of Israel on the eve of entering the land, and consciously evokes the national failures of the past in order to highlight the triumphs of the present.

Chapters 6–12: In these chapters, the people of Israel embark on the wars of conquest, first capturing Jericho and then defeating two coalitions of Canaanite kings from the southern and northern hill country respectively. The section concludes with a list of the conquered tyrants.

Chapters 13–21: In this unit, the conquered territories are distributed by lot among the tribes, with the boundaries demarcated according to topographical features and place names. The cities of refuge and the Levitical cities are carefully enumerated at the end of this section.

Chapters 22–24: The book's last unit opens with the return of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half Menashe to the Transjordan. It ends with two parting addresses by Joshua to the people of Israel in which he exhorts them to follow in God's ways so that they might succeed in the new land.

Any serious study of the Book of Joshua involves not only grappling with textual difficulties and the intricacies of exegesis, but also reflecting upon the many foundational issues that are introduced by its narratives. These include defining the confluence of divine intervention and human initiative, understanding the physical geography as well as the metaphysical sanctity of the land of Israel, attempting to delineate the parameters of just warfare, contrasting individual choices with communal responsibilities, and recognizing the awesome struggle of forging disparate tribes into the united people of Israel. Before considering any of these issues, however, a number of preliminary remarks and observations are in order.

### **TRANSLATIONS**

The biblical Book of Joshua is available in many different translations. There are a number of good English translations of the text available, but it is critical to bear in mind that a translation of any sort cannot take the place of the original Hebrew text. Biblical Hebrew is a rich and layered language, full of subtle nuances and multiple gradations of meaning. A translation cannot but convey only one out of a large number of possible readings of the text, and perhaps not the best reading at that. A translation is itself an interpretation that offers the reader a window into the text, but it can never replace a study of the text in its original language. Critical literary and interpretive elements such as alliteration, word play,

and meter are difficult to reproduce in translation, and most translations can therefore convey only an incomplete reading.

Additionally, the Hebrew Bible chooses its words with extreme care. Recurring expressions and phrases, both within a book as well as with reference to the larger context of the other books of the Tanakh, often carry the possibility of additional interpretation. This is a possibility that simply does not exist in most translations, where no attempt is made to link remote references by utilizing a vocabulary of equivalent terms.

To offer a striking example, the ark of Noah is described in the biblical text by the word *teva* (Gen. 6:14). The only other usage of this term in the entire Hebrew Scriptures occurs in the context of Yokheved's poignant attempt to save the life of her infant son Moses by placing him in a box of reeds, a *teva*, and then positioning it among the reeds on the Nile River's edge (Ex. 2:3). Studying the text in translation (in this case, that of the *New JPS Translation*, Philadelphia, 1988) indicates that Noah built an "ark," and that Yokheved prepared a "basket," and suggests that there is absolutely no connection between the two episodes. Reading the text in the original Hebrew, however, in which the same word *teva* is used in both passages, raises the possibility that there is in fact a fundamental link between them.

In biblical Hebrew, a sea-going vessel is often called an *oniya* (for example, see Gen. 49:13, Deut. 28:68, and Jonah 1:3), or rarely a *sefina* (as in Jonah 1:5), but never, barring the context of Noah and Yokheved, a *teva*. What is the structural difference between a *teva* and the vessels described by these other terms? Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (twelfth century, Spain) remarks that with respect to Noah, the Torah uses this choice of words for the following reason: "*Teva* rather than *sefina*, because this craft does not have the form of an *oniya*, and has no oars or rudder" (Ibn Ezra on Gen. 6:14).

The significance of this unusual maritime deficiency is quite obvious. The lack of oars or a rudder for the ark effectively renders it incapable of being steered. The rising flood waters will bear the craft, but Noah will play no role in piloting it or in directing it to land. Only God's merciful providence will ensure that the ark successfully weathers the torrential flood waters and is set down intact on safe shores. God alone



is the guiding power who drives the ark through the churning deep and steers it clear of mishap.

In a similar vein, when Yokheved places her infant son into his *teva* and releases him to the unknown, she is not simply attempting to save his life by aiding his escape down river. Her seemingly hopeless gesture, after all other possibilities of concealing Moses have been exhausted, actually represents an act of great faith. By constructing this craft for him and deliberately locating it among the reeds at water's edge, she is actually entrusting the life of her child to the merciful God. It is He who will care for Moses and lovingly guide him into the unexpectedly tender arms of Pharaoh's own daughter. Here again, the *teva* represents God's role in shaping human destiny, and by entering the realm of the *teva* we entrust our survival to a transcendent Being who cares, preserves, sustains, and saves.

Of course, a reading such as that offered above is not possible in translation except as a fanciful literary leap of imagination, since there is no reason to textually link "arks" with "baskets." It is only in the original Hebrew that a meaningful connection emerges. In our study of the Book of Joshua we will come across further examples of this critically important interpretive tool.

#### **CHAPTER AND VERSE**

The conventional numbering of the biblical text into chapters and verses is not the product of Jewish tradition. In the handwritten Torah scroll, for example, the content is divided into paragraphs and sections according to visual breaks in the text. These breaks consist in the main of two types: a minor division signified by a space between two paragraphs on the same line, and a major division signified by a blank space that concludes a line. Verses may be regarded as separate sentences, but are not numbered.

It was Jerome, a prominent fourth-century Church father responsible for translating the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and New Testament into Latin, who first introduced the basis for the system of chapters that is now universally accepted. His translation, undertaken for the benefit of the common people, was known as the Vulgate (from the Latin "vulgata," meaning "popular"), and became the official Scriptures of the Roman

Catholic Church. Stephen Langton, a thirteenth-century English cardinal and later the Archbishop of Canterbury, refined Jerome's work by dividing the Old Testament books of the Vulgate into the chapters and verses as we now know them. Ironically, the impetus for his work was the desire to facilitate disputations of the Scriptures with the Jews, by introducing a more uniform method for citing references. In any case, these divisions into chapter and verse were accepted by all subsequent translations and, with the invention of the printing press, became an indispensable feature of the printed Hebrew editions as well.

Often, Jerome's divisions are at odds with the traditional Jewish separations of the biblical text. Thus, for example, chapter seven of the Book of Joshua begins with Akhan's trespass and theft of booty from the conquest of Jericho. There is no such division in the Hebrew text, where the verse describing Akhan's indiscretion is connected to the previous one describing Joshua's spreading fame in the aftermath of the victory over Jericho. Some of the modern Jewish translations of the Hebrew Bible (such as the *Jerusalem Bible* by Koren Publishers, Jerusalem, 1992) have attempted to remedy the situation by incorporating the traditional divisions into their translated text.

It is important to realize that sometimes, the text's internal divisions may be critical tools in helping us evaluate its intent. After all, a verse does not stand on its own but must be understood as part of the larger context. The interpretation of a passage may hinge upon how it is connected to the verses that precede and follow it. Thus, it will be necessary for us to bear in mind that the chapter/verse divisions are not immutable, and are in fact unsubstantiated from the point of view of Jewish tradition. We should also not be surprised if occasionally interpretations are offered that seem to conflict with the chapter divisions themselves.

## MODERN CONTRIBUTIONS

The modern age has witnessed an explosion of knowledge concerning the world of the Bible. Archaeology has unearthed and revived ancient and forgotten civilizations that had been known only from the biblical text, paleography has deciphered ancient Near Eastern languages long ago extinct, stratigraphy has provided the possibility of correlating far-flung discoveries to provide a more solid historical framework, and

intense study of cognate languages has provided much assistance (and conjecture) for interpreting unusual biblical terms and references otherwise inexplicable. Modern literary analysis has searched for underlying structure, characterization and plot, tonal qualities, and cadence. All of this information and analysis sheds much light on the biblical text, and to ignore it is to overlook an important dimension of biblical exegesis that was, sadly, unavailable to the classic commentaries.

At the same time, these modern tools have often been used for quite a different purpose, to bolster arguments both for and against the authenticity of the biblical accounts. Some archaeologists have enthusiastically donned the mantle of polemicists, using the conclusions of their work to undermine the biblical account. More significantly, they have thrust aside the God silent and steadfast behind the text, with all of His moral, ethical, and spiritual demands. Proponents of various critical schools with a focus on historicity and textual origins have deconstructed the apparently cohesive narratives to reveal a multiplicity of faceless authors and unskilled editors. Biblical scholars introduced emendations into the text ostensibly to reconcile what they perceived to be divergences and inconsistencies, but their approach frequently hinges upon charging the text with a literary superficiality that is ludicrous. In the process, they have often relegated the underlying message of the narrative, its profound pith, to the proverbial dustbin.

The Tanakh is, at its core, a sacred document that describes the ongoing interaction between God and humanity, between God and the people of Israel. It is a document that continuously challenges us to ask penetrating questions that relate to the essence of human nature and to the purpose and meaning of existence. Its ancient but timeless words kindle the spiritual yearning that glows in every human heart, the longing for God, for goodness and a better world. No assault on the text can ever rob it of this transcendent quality. To approach the Tanakh as a secular historical account or else as a fanciful mythology, only to then reject it on the grounds of inaccuracy or else absurdity, divests it of its fundamental character and does a grave disservice to both text and reader.

In short, this book does not look towards archeology or other modern disciplines to substantiate the account of the Book of Joshua. The divine element that animates the text requires no external proof for its

validation. However, where archeology or literary analysis can shed light on properly understanding a biblical text or event, those contributions are cautiously embraced, bearing in mind the limitations stated above. In the end, the veracity of the text and the “objective truths” provided by modern scholarship must be reconciled, but tentative facts based upon inconclusive findings (or lack thereof) can be calmly ignored.

### **TERMS, TRANSLITERATIONS, AND READING AHEAD**

In general, this study will adopt English translations for place names and personal names. Thus, Yehoshua will be referred to as Joshua, Moshe as Moses, Yericho as Jericho and Yarden as the Jordan River. Additionally, biblical books will be referred to by their English names, such as Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus. With respect to grammatical syntax, English conventions will be adopted. Thus, for example, the “Emorim” (Hebrew plural for “Emori”) will be referred to as the Amorites, utilizing English language plural endings.

This study is not meant to stand alone as a substitute for a close and careful reading of the biblical Book of Joshua. It is highly recommended that those who are not familiar at all with that book’s contents avail themselves of the opportunity to read it alongside this study. It will not be possible to recount at length every episode occurring in the primary text. No such assumptions, however, will be made concerning readers’ familiarity with external sources.

### **COMMENTARIES**

The Hebrew Bible is one of the most studied books in human history. It has been intensively learned for millennia and has inspired innumerable commentaries. The earliest rabbinic interpretations that have survived as authorized texts are from the late Second Temple period (first century, CE) and there has been a continuum of exegesis until the present day. The medieval period constitutes one of the most fruitful epochs insofar as commentary is concerned, and our study will focus on some of the luminaries of this age.

While many readers have heard of Rashi, who lived in France in the eleventh century, fewer are familiar with Rabbi David Kimḥi, who lived in Provence in the thirteenth century. Known by the acronym

Radak, he wrote extensively on the Hebrew Bible and laid the groundwork for Hebrew grammar as we now know it. These two commentaries will receive particular attention, though not in a comprehensive way. There will be no attempt made to lay out their respective methodologies in a systematic fashion, but only to give the reader an indication of how they, and other commentaries like them, were careful readers of the text. The basis of any true understanding of the work of the commentaries in our tradition begins with a thorough and thoughtful reading of the biblical text. To read the Tanakh carefully is to be sensitive to issues of a linguistic, grammatical, or thematic nature and to anticipate the sorts of questions that the commentaries raise. To read the medieval commentaries carefully is to appreciate that they rarely provide us with a complete thesis on any given issue. Instead, they extend to us an invitation to explore matters further.