

Joshua

Joshua 6: The Story of Jericho

Crossing the Jordan

Biblical tradition seems to agree that Israel entered Canaan from across the Jordan River. In order to enter Canaan from across the Jordan, however, the people would have had to go around the river at some point before crossing back over it. Stories in Numbers and Deuteronomy describe the people's travels throughout the Transjordan (i.e., Edom, Amon, Moab, etc.), so going around the river simply to cross back over it again seems impractical. Why, then, does Israel choose to cross at Jericho in this story?

While the choice to cross at Jericho may seem impractical *logically*, it may have in fact been practical *narratively*. One possible reason could be that the storyteller(s) wanted to reenact the crossing of the Red Sea story from Exodus when Israel entered Canaan (although this theory raises complicated questions about the dating of Exodus). If it was clear that Israel had to cross the river *somewhere* between the Dead Sea and Galilee, another possibility could be that Jericho's ruins provided a convenient landmark along the border that required explanation. As discussed last week, storytellers often draw inspiration from the natural landscape to construct their narratives.

Good Things Come to Those Who Obey

Turning a large walled city like Jericho into rubble would have been an impressive achievement for a rag-tag wandering mixed multitude of formerly enslaved people from Egypt. One of the underlying themes throughout Joshua and Judges is a recognition that the people of Israel have no capacity to conquer *anybody* on their own. So how did they do it?

Once again, according to the Deuteronomistic Historian, the answer is simple: they obeyed. Every victory in Joshua and Judges is described as a divine victory that the Israelites could have achieved only with YHWH's help. The Israelites go about their conquest of Jericho in an unusual, highly ritualistic way. They discover in this story that if they just follow God's comedically detailed instructions to a T, they can walk right into the city. This emphasis on ritual obedience to the law suggests that priests were likely involved in crafting this story as well.

The Problem of *Herem*

Once Israel captures the city of Jericho, Joshua declares in 6:17 that “the city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the Lord for destruction.” Here we are confronted with the great moral problem of the Book of Joshua: *herem*. The Hebrew word *herem* (הָרַם) is sometimes translated in English as “the ban” or “devotion,” but neither translation fully captures its meaning. *Herem* essentially refers to an act of complete and total destruction. The underlying idea is that whatever and/or whoever is being destroyed has been devoted to God for destruction in an almost sacrificial, ritualized sense.

The violence inherent in this text can make it very difficult to read. When all is said and done, we are told in 6:21 that the Israelites “devoted to destruction by the ends of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys.” This story may naturally raise the question: What kind of a God wants all of the inhabitants of a city to be slaughtered? How could the Israelites possibly justify such acts of ritualized violence?

It seems that many ancient Near Eastern deities advocated for similar scorched-earth policies in the wake of conquest during this period of history. It is possible that claiming “our deity told us we have to” was a way of alleviating the people’s sense of personal moral responsibility. Deuteronomy 7:25-26 claims, however, that it was necessary to destroy everyone and everything after a city had been conquered in order to avoid being tempted to follow their gods instead of YHWH. Self-preservation was also at stake, according to Deuteronomy, because failing to destroy *everything* could lead you to become the next target of destruction yourself (as we will see next week in the case of Achan).

Exceptions to Every Rule

In the Book of Joshua, the character Rahab represents an exception to the rule of *herem*. The story tells us that she and those who lived with her were spared from total destruction after she helped hide Israelite messengers in the city. In light of YHWH’s zero tolerance for survivors, why was an exception made for Rahab?

Part of the answer may again be related to the storytellers’ desire to make sense of the world around them. Although Jericho was inhabited by Israelites by the time this story was written, there was still a pocket of people living there who called themselves “Rahabites.” Because they were not native Israelites, storytellers had to account for their presence in a narrative that otherwise claimed everyone had been obliterated. Hyperbolic language describing total devastation was common during this period and can be found in many Assyrian stories of war. In reality, though, it was rare to actually wipe out all the inhabitants of an entire city in battle.

The beauty of the biblical text lies in its complexity. Rahab’s story is a reminder that this is not a purely nationalistic document. There are non-Israelite characters in these stories who do good (like Rahab), just as there are also Israelite characters who do wrong.

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