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Text and Commentary

Joshua 1:1–18



AFTER THE DEATH of Moses the servant of the LORD, the LORD said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' aide:
²"Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give to them—to the Israelites. ³I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. ⁴Your territory will extend from the desert to Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates—all the Hittite country—to the Great Sea on the west. ⁵No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

⁶"Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. ⁷Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. ⁸Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. ⁹Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

¹⁰So Joshua ordered the officers of the people: ¹¹"Go through the camp and tell the people, 'Get your supplies ready. Three days from now you will cross the Jordan here to go in and take possession of the land the LORD your God is giving you for your own.'"

¹²But to the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, Joshua said, ¹³"Remember the command that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: 'The LORD your God is giving you rest and has granted you this land.' ¹⁴Your wives, your children and your livestock may stay in the land that Moses gave you east of the Jordan, but all your fighting men, fully armed, must cross over ahead of your brothers. You are to help your brothers ¹⁵until the LORD gives them rest, as he has done for you, and until they too have taken

possession of the land that the LORD your God is giving them. After that, you may go back and occupy your own land, which Moses the servant of the LORD gave you east of the Jordan toward the sunrise.”

¹⁶Then they answered Joshua, “Whatever you have commanded us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go.

¹⁷Just as we fully obeyed Moses, so we will obey you. Only may the LORD your God be with you as he was with Moses.

¹⁸Whoever rebels against your word and does not obey your words, whatever you may command them, will be put to death. Only be strong and courageous!”

**Original
Meaning**

WITH TWO EPISODES OF preparation, the narrator launches this important story. The present chapter features three short scenes at Israel's camp on the Plains of Moab, while the next tracks a spy mission across the Jordan. The first episode prepares Israel for the coming invasion, while the second probes the enemy's internal situation. Both stories anticipate the dramatic river crossing in which Israel finally enters the Promised Land for the first time (3:1–5:1). In the background stand the long centuries since Yahweh first gave the promise of the land (Gen. 12:7). Those centuries saw the sojourning of the patriarchs, Israel's harsh slavery in Egypt, the miraculous Exodus, the covenant-making at Mount Sinai, and the wilderness wandering.

With Joshua 1, however, a new day dawns for Israel. Structurally, three scenes make up Joshua 1: Yahweh's dramatic commissioning of Joshua (vv. 1–9), Joshua's brief instructions to his officers (vv. 10–11), and a dialogue between Joshua and the two-and-a-half Transjordanian tribes (vv. 12–18). Several themes thread their way through these three scenes, in reality the central themes of the entire book. The first concerns the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua (see v. 18). Long ago, Moses had designated Joshua as his successor (Deut. 31:1–8), and now his commissioning by Yahweh makes it official (vv. 2–9). His command that Joshua prepare Israel to cross the Jordan confirms Joshua as Israel's new leader (v. 2).

The second theme concerns the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise of land. Both the commissioning and the command serve a single aim, to deliver on Yahweh's promise to give Israel the land (vv. 2, 3, 11, 15). The narrator anticipates the two phases through which the fulfillment will become reality. He hints at the military defeat of Canaan's current occupants (vv. 5a, 9, 14), the story of Joshua 1–12. The threefold call for Joshua to be “strong

and courageous" has the coming battles in mind (vv. 6, 7, 9; cf. v. 18). Two remarks foreshadow the distribution of land portions as Israel's "inheritance" (vv. 6, 11), the story of Joshua 13–24.

The third theme offers Joshua reassurance that Yahweh will support Joshua just as wholeheartedly as he did Moses (vv. 5, 17; cf. 3:7). There is no point in Israel's moving forward if Yahweh's support were only lukewarm. To verify this, Yahweh assures Joshua of complete military success (vv. 3–5a) and promises never to abandon him (v. 5b).

A fourth theme stresses that the adventure about to unfold involves Israel as a unified people. The dialogue with the Transjordanian tribes sounds this theme, one that will echo in later references to "all Israel" (3:7, 17; 4:14; 7:24; 8:33; 10:29; 23:2; 24:1). Moses had granted the two-and-a-half tribes land east of the Jordan provided they help the other tribes conquer Canaan (cf. Num. 32). The book makes special efforts to track their faithful promise-keeping and to explain their unique inheritance (cf. 4:12; 13:8–33; 18:7; 22:1–8). A later episode (ch. 22) will show some of the strains threatening that unity.

Finally, the author introduces the absolute centrality of obedience to the Instruction (*torah*) of Moses.¹ Joshua's success hangs totally on his unswerving obedience to it (1:7–8), as does Israel's continued blessing by Yahweh in the future (22:5; 23:6; cf. 24:26). The book carefully traces how Joshua and Israel carry out things that Moses had commanded (1:13; 4:10; 8:31, 33, 35; 11:12; 14:2; 22:2).²

Joshua's Marching Orders (1:1–9)

THIS IS HOW A new day dawns for Israel, camped east of the Jordan but with all eyes aimed west toward Canaan and Israel's future there.

The introduction (v. 1a). The brief opening report formula, "after the death of Moses," signals that Joshua 1 picks up where Deuteronomy 34 left off and pushes the story forward.³ Readers are to regard everything to follow as the continuation of events in Moses' life. Indeed, although we presume a major canonical break between the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua, the narrative does not.⁴ Further, it reiterates that the chapter's

1. I read Heb. *torat mošeb* (lit., "law of Moses") as a technical term and prefer the rendering "instruction of Moses" or (in some cases) simply "the instruction" (instead of "the law").

2. Several texts also recall "as the LORD commanded Moses" or "the command of the LORD through Moses" (11:15; 14:5; 17:4; 21:2, 8).

3. The phrase *wayebi 'ahare mot X* (lit. "It was after the death of [proper name]") introduces other significant transitions in Israel's history (Judg. 1:1 [death of Joshua]; 2 Sam. 1:1 [death of Saul]) and may reflect the literary style of the DH; cf. also Gen. 25:11.

4. For a discussion of canonical issues, see B. S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 113–14.

geographical setting remains that of Deuteronomy, the Israelite camp in the plains of Moab east of the Jordan River.

The death of Moses leaves a leadership vacuum in Israel, so it is no surprise that the book immediately turns to a speech by Yahweh (v.1b). The compiler of Joshua to 2 Kings (DH) often includes speeches, especially farewell speeches by historic leaders, to sound important themes (e.g., Samuel to Israel [1 Sam. 12]; David to Solomon [1 Kings 2:1–9]). The book of Joshua itself ends with three speeches by Joshua to various Israelite assemblies (22:2–5; ch. 23; 24:1–15). Joshua 1:1–9 marks the first of many occasions on which Yahweh will address Joshua (3:7; 4:1, 15; 5:9; 6:2; 7:10; 8:1, 18; 10:8; 11:6). But on only two occasions does the address amount to a speech—concerning ridding Israel of Achan's sin (7:10–15) and concerning Yahweh's past great deeds for Israel (24:2–13).

That Yahweh addresses Joshua son of Nun also is not a surprise. Joshua's long career of leadership precedes this moment.⁵ He was the hero of Israel's first military victory, the defeat of Amalek (Ex. 17:9, 13). A comment in Numbers 13:16 implies that Moses either changed the future leader's name from Hosea ("salvation") to Joshua (Heb. *yebošua'*, "Yahweh is salvation") or (more likely) preferred the latter. Moses' intention was perhaps to identify him as an Israelite who consistently obeyed Yahweh.⁶ The LXX renders "Joshua" as *Iesus*, the New Testament name for Jesus, an apt name for one who brought "salvation" both to Israel and to the whole world.

In Numbers 14, Joshua and Caleb were the only spies who favored invading Canaan. Hence, only they of the generation that had escaped Egyptian slavery were permitted to enter the land (vv. 6, 30, 38; 26:65). His long career as Moses' "aide" (Heb. *mešaret*; Ex. 24:13; 33:11; Num. 11:28) culminated in God's command that Moses publically commission Joshua as his successor (Num. 27:18–23; 32:28; Deut. 31:3). Yahweh recognized in him two spiritual qualifications for leadership, the indwelling of Yahweh's spirit (Num. 27:18 ["a man in whom is the spirit"]) and a consistent pattern of obedience (32:12 ["followed the LORD wholeheartedly"]).

When Moses died, Israel readily accepted Joshua's leadership because Moses' hands had given him "the spirit of wisdom" (Deut. 34:9). Nevertheless, with Moses gone, Yahweh's address here establishes his personal

5. For a more in-depth treatment of his life and career, see "Who Is Joshua?" in the Introduction.

6. Cf. D. M. Howard Jr. *Joshua* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 73, who notes that Joshua is the first personal name in the Bible to incorporate God's personal name, "Yahweh." For the thesis that biblical narratives purposely delayed Joshua's emergence until Joshua 1, see G. C. Chirichigno, "The Use of the Epithet in the Characterization of Joshua," *TrinJ* 8 (1987): 72–79.