

The faithful of old— studied by the young

Joshua: the leader of Israel

Jerome Alderson

ACTING as a type of Christ, Joshua is a fascinating character to consider. Through the study of his life we gain a greater understanding and appreciation of our Lord and Saviour. In this article we will consider five different roles that Joshua undertook. These will help highlight Joshua's significance in Scripture and provide us with a number of exhortations relevant to our walk in the Truth, on both an ecclesial and an individual level.

Leader of the army

We first meet Joshua in Exodus 17. The children of Israel had set up camp in Rephidim (v. 1). They had taken rest from their journeying and were thirsty and irritable. To make matters worse, it was not long before Amalek arrived and "fought with Israel" (v. 8). The people would have already been familiar with Amalek, as Deuteronomy 25:17-19 tells us that Amalek had met the children of Israel "by the way", killing off stragglers, the weak and the feeble. He had attacked them when they were "faint and weary". Rephidim would be the first time that Israel would stand and face the forces of Amalek head on.

The role to which Moses calls Joshua is extremely important when we consider him as a type of Christ. Moses summons Joshua and instructs him, "Choose us out men, and go out, fight with Amalek" (Ex. 17:9). Joshua was to select a number of men to lead into battle (Jesus acted similarly in the New Testament by choosing men to be his disciples). As the first nation to fight against God's people, Amalek can be seen as a representative of all the enemies of God. The battle was not won in Exodus; it is a continuing battle, for "the LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation" (v. 16).

This symbolism refers us back to the record of Jacob and Esau (Amalek was a descendant of Esau—Gen. 36:16). These brothers were "Two

nations . . . and two manner of people" (25:23). Esau was "a cunning hunter, a man of the field" (v. 27); he married Hittite women (26:34). In Malachi 1:3 God says that he "hated Esau". The children of Israel are descendants of Jacob, whom God loved (v. 2). This, then, is the battle of brothers that Jacob expected in Genesis 32. It is the same battle we face today; one essentially stemming from the enmity placed between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15. It is Christ who leads the fight against the enemies of God, battling against the ways of the world that would pick off the weak and the stragglers from the ecclesia.

The battle at Rephidim did not spell the end of Amalek, but it did weaken him (Ex. 17:13). It is made clear, however, that this was God's victory and not man's. Victory only came by the raising up of Moses' rod. Such complete reliance on God was to be a feature of all the battles Joshua fought: God brought down the walls of Jericho, set out the tactics for the defeat of Ai, stopped the sun, and sent hornets and hailstones before the army (Josh. 6:20; 8:1,2; 10:11-13; 24:12). Thus the victory was always the Lord's. The battle at Rephidim, however, did set Joshua apart as special. Verse 14 hints at a future role for Joshua. He was to begin a spiritual education via the words of a book.

The events in Exodus 17 serve as a fitting introduction to the man who would later lead the whole nation. It is a mark of his humility and flexibility that his next job was to be the personal servant of Moses (24:13).

Servant

It is interesting to consider that Joshua was probably born into slavery in Egypt. This conversion from a slave in Egypt to a servant of God is one mirrored in our own lives, and it is described beautifully in Romans 6:16-18. There is not much record of Joshua throughout this time; he appears

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Picture: Mark Pennington

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only sporadically. When he is mentioned he is always found by Moses' side, presumably glean- ing wisdom and further developing his character.

Joshua was not the only servant of Moses; he was but "one of his young men" (Num. 11:28). He was not always right in his judgement, and he could be outspoken at times (Ex. 32:17), but he was extremely loyal to Moses and completely devoted to God. In later years this dedication and commitment would be extended to the whole nation.

Moses must have had a close relationship with Joshua, for he was the only person allowed to accompany Moses up Mount Sinai (24:13). He did not go all the way with Moses (after six days it was only Moses who was called "out of the midst of the cloud"—v. 16), but he would have been closer to the action than anyone else. This also means that Joshua was one of the few people who did not sin in the golden calf incident. His time acting as a servant set him in good stead for the rest of his life, keeping him humble even when he was "magnified . . . in the sight of all Israel" (Josh. 4:14).

King and priest

Joshua descended from the tribe of Ephraim, so it is surprising that at times he seems to take on an almost priest-like role. Exodus 33 is a prime example. This comes right after Israel sinned in the creation of the golden calf. In verse 7 the tabernacle of the congregation is moved out of the camp of Israel. Everyone in Israel was physically separated from God—all except Joshua, who "departed not out of the tabernacle" (v. 11). Some commentators suggest that Joshua, as the only person who stayed with the tabernacle, may have taken up some priestly duties and looked after the tabernacle for a time. This is also the first occasion that he is described as "the son of Nun". We can see clear similarities between this title and that of Christ as "the Son of God". Nun means 'to perpetuate' or 'to propagate from shoots'. Joshua was to perpetuate his father's name, as did Christ (Ps. 72:17).

Not only does Joshua act as a type of priest, we also see him acting as a type of king. Joshua

fulfilled the instruction of Deuteronomy 17:18-20 by writing out a copy of the Law (Josh. 8:32). In Joshua 1:8 God had told him to “meditate therein day and night”. However, Joshua could only ever partially fill these roles—a reminder to us that Christ was the only person who could ever fully fulfil them.

Spy

In preparation for the invasion of Canaan, God instructed Moses to send out spies to “search the land” (Num. 13:2). The fact that Joshua was one of them gives us an insight into the position he held at the time. One man was selected from each tribe, “every one a ruler among them”. In verse 3 we are told that these men were “heads of the children of Israel”. This job had been initially established by Moses in Exodus 18. The role held great responsibility and authority; they acted as judges for the people (vv. 25,26) and are described in Numbers 1:16 as “renowned of the congregation, princes of the tribes of their fathers”. The head of Ephraim had previously been Elishama (Num. 1:10; 10:22), who was Joshua’s grandfather (1 Chron. 7:26,27). By Numbers 13, however, it seems that Joshua had taken over this position (v. 8). This probably helped to further hone his leadership and judgement skills. It is also here (v. 16) that his name is changed from Oshea (‘saviour/salvation’) to Joshua (‘he shall save/salvation of God’), a name that binds his life to Christ’s.

For forty days Joshua and the other spies scoured the land. It is interesting to remember that these twelve men had not been called on to give advice; God had already said that the people would inherit the land (v. 2). The twelve were simply given specific information to collect: how many people were in the land, how strong they were, whether they lived in tents or cities, etc. (vv. 18-20). Yet the “evil report” (v. 32) which ten of the spies brought back easily convinced the whole nation to reject the land that God had given them. By chapter 14 Joshua is one of only four people in Israel who wanted to enter the Promised Land. His frustration is evident in verses 5 and 6. Once again we see Joshua’s resolute faith and obedience to Moses and to God shining through.

Leader of the nation

Israel mourned for thirty days after the death of Moses (Deut. 34:8), and the transition to Joshua’s leadership was a smooth one. The children of Israel could not have inherited the land without Joshua. He was the one who would “cause them



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to inherit it” (31:7). Before his death, Moses had even imparted to him the “spirit of wisdom” (34:9). Here, and in the early chapters of the book of Joshua, we see him most clearly represent Christ. Such leadership must have been uplifting and inspiring for the people as they began to prepare for the upcoming invasion.

One of the nearest threats was now the Hittites (Josh. 1:4), their name derived from a word meaning ‘terror’. We find that even Joshua needed support and encouragement. “I will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” and “Be strong and of a good courage” (vv. 5,6) are phrases we will always associate with Joshua. These timeless words of encouragement were not just for him, though; they were also given to the whole nation (Deut. 31:1, 6). It was even part of the priest’s responsibility to give similar encouragement to the army before they went out to battle (20:2-4).

God offered them this support even though He knew that they would turn from Him (31:16). The parallel to our own situation today is clear. We even find the same phrase quoted to us in

Hebrews 13:5, reminding us that, even though we invariably fail Him, God will never forsake us. However, we also have a responsibility to be “strong and of a good courage” (Josh 1:6). Joshua was initially told this in relation to the dividing of the land, but in the next verse he is told to be “strong and very courageous” (v. 7) in observing the Law. This must have struck a chord with Joshua, as he repeated it to the people in 23:6. This odd turn of phrase provides a challenging exhortation to all those who endeavour to follow God’s Word.

As Joshua became more respected in the eyes of the people (4:14), the people became more united around him. This initially began with the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 3 and peaked at the defeat of Jericho (Joshua is not mentioned in Hebrews 11; in verse 30 the walls fell “by faith”). A new word is used in Joshua 3:17 to describe the children of Israel. In English it is often translated ‘people’, but the Hebrew word signifies a nation. In crossing through the Jordan the people became one nation. Similarly, we know that in baptism we are united in one ecclesia. It also appears that, like Christ, Joshua was the first to cross through the waters. We are told in Deuteronomy 31:3 that he was to “go over before” the people.

The unity of mind between Joshua and the people was not always helpful. This is most evident after the defeat at Ai, when “the hearts of the people melted, and became as water”

(Josh. 7:5). Joshua voices the people’s anguish and launches into an emotional prayer full of questions: “wherefore hast Thou at all brought this people over Jordan . . . to destroy us?” (v. 7). Even after all the support and encouragement God had provided, Joshua still fell into despair.

God’s answer to Joshua was a blunt one. He was told to get up off the ground and sanctify the people. We can all relate on some level to the way Joshua felt, whether we have been worn down with sin, sickness or suffering. God is used to such prayers of despair and fatigue, yet His answer to Joshua is simple: do something about your situation; root out sin and set your paths straight.

Summary

In this brief study we have barely scratched the surface of Joshua’s exciting life. We first met Joshua as he was plucked out of obscurity, chosen by God for a challenging task that would inextricably link his life to Christ’s. Joshua undertook a number of roles in his service to God, and for the most part he provided a stable example of faith and devotion for the nation to follow: “Israel served the LORD all the days of Joshua” (24:31). It is also important to remember that his representation of Christ was not perfect. Joshua made a number of mistakes and had many personal difficulties to overcome, but towards the end of his life he was still able resolutely to proclaim, “as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (v. 15).