

Paradise to Promised Land

A Bible study about the history of the Old Testament

Entering the Promised Land – Frontier Stories

Today we're taking a look at how Israel enters into the land of Canaan and sets up a settlement within the land promised to them by God. These stories and ideas are recorded in the books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth. They are very much like American "frontier" stories that record the westward expansion of the United States.

- **When you think of the term "frontier stories" what kind of stories come to mind?**

Joshua: Major Events in the Text

We can break Joshua up into 4 parts with the use of four words: Cross (the Jordan), Take (the land), Divide (the land), and Serve (the LORD). These four parts give us an overview of what God commands Joshua to do in the book. Joshua is to cross the Jordan, take land for Israel, divide it up among the tribes, and then call those tribes to faithfully serve God.

- **Cross the Jordan** – Joshua is appointed the new leader of Israel in Moses' stead. After sending in spies who meet Rahab, Joshua leads the people of Israel across the Jordan and there meets a man with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua asks if the man is there for the Israelites or the Canaanites. The man says "Neither" but reveals that he is the Angel of the Lord who has come to do God's bidding in the land.
- **Take the Land** – Joshua and the people of Israel engage in a variety of battles with the Canaanite people. This includes the battles of Jericho and Ai as well as some other notable cities. These portions of the text are often violent and troubling, but are likely overstated and are using the hyperbolic language of the day. Notably this shows up as the people of Israel are told to utterly destroy the people of Canaan, but then are later told not to trade with them or marry them.
- **Divide the Land** – While a very dry portion of Scripture for most modern readers, Joshua contains something of a legal record or land survey of the extent of Israel's land holding and how these are divided up among the 12 tribes of Israel.
- **Serve the Lord** – The final portion of the text shows us an elderly Joshua who calls Israel to covenant faithfulness to the God that has given them the land. This sets the scene for what we will see in Judges.

Joshua brings the story of Israel from just before claiming the land, to having possession of the land and an ultimatum leveled at Israel.

- **Read Joshua 24:14-28**
- **How does this book of Joshua come to a close?**

Judges: Major Events in the Text

The story of the Judges of Israel is a very difficult passage of Scripture for us to read. First, the book of Judges is simply a book that would receive an "R" rating in today's movie theaters, especially for notable violence and sexuality. Secondly, the book is disturbing in how it records the story between God and Israel.

The book opens up after the death of Joshua and records the story to the point where Israel has largely turned away from God completely.

- **Setting the Scene** – The first few chapters of Judges tell of the setting of Israel and their Canaanite neighbors and sets up the downward cycle that will be repeated through the book: Sin, Oppression, Repentance, Deliverance, Peace.
- **The Cycle** – Each of the stories of the Judges of Israel basically repeat the cycle above, showing that after each completion of the cycle, Israel overall is worse. It starts with the stories of Othniel, Ehud, and Deborah. Each of these stories essentially show Israel returning to favor with God. The stories of Gideon and Jephthah show less of a return. By the time that we arrive at the story of Samson, Israel has essentially moved away from God entirely.
- **Conclusion**– By the end of Judges, we have a few stories that wrap up and show that Israel has largely moved away from God and is worshiping at the altars of false idols. Even though God has raised up faithful leaders for them, they have refused His leadership.

Each of the judges of Israel show that God is willing to work with Israel, even when they have gone astray.

- **Read Judges 2:16-23**
- **This passage shows the cycle of Judges. What do you notice?**

Ruth: Major Events in the Text

The book of Ruth is set in the time period of the Judges. It is difficult to determine when in the period of the Judges the events of the book occurred, with theories arguing for both early and late in this period. The short four chapters of the book give us something of a “slice of life” of this period of time. It shows a foreigner, Ruth, who is included into the story of Israel. Some scholars believe that the book was written by Samuel as something of a prequel to his writing about King David.

- **Read Ruth 4:13-17**
- **How does the story of Ruth tell a similar story to that of the Judges?**

Historical Connections: Joshua, Judges, Ruth

- **Amarna Letters** – The Amarna Letters are some 300 letters discovered in Egypt that come from communications between Egypt and vassal states in Canaan. In 16 of these letters, there is a mention of “hapiirus” who were noted to be mercenary migrants into the Canaanite lands. Scholars have wondered about the linguistic similarity between “hapiuru” and “Hebrew”. It is possible that these letters refer to the Hebrew armies of Joshua which were seen as mercenaries rather than a people group settling in the area. A further note of interest is that the term “Hebrew” when used by non-Israelites in the text of the Torah seems to be a slur (e.g. Potiphar’s wife, Pharaoh’s daughter).
- **Destroyed completely or not** – One of the claims leveled against the book of Joshua is that cities were left standing, namely that of Jericho. It does appear from archaeological records that parts of Jericho crumbled and were rebuilt. In addition to this, scholars point out that hyperbole was used very often in Canaanite texts when it is clear that cities continued to exist. For example, while Israel is commanded to “utterly destroy” a city, they are also commanded not to trade with or marry into the people of the city.