

# “WHAT ARE THE STONES SAYING?”

---

*JOSHUA 24:14-28*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

*BY: RYAN DUECK*

*SEPTEMBER 1, 2013/15<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST*

Today we come to the conclusion of our summer-long series that explores biblical themes of creation, and how elements of the created world function as metaphors throughout Scripture.

A few weeks ago, we looked at the metaphor of God as our “rock.” We’re going to be returning to this metaphor of a “stone,” not as a comparison to God, but as a reminder to us.

But before we get to that I want to spend a bit of time talking some more about our relationship with the biblical text.

As I was saying last week, the Bible—and the OT in particular—is... complicated 😊.

I heard a number of comments after the service and throughout the week indicating that many people struggle with the OT and how to reconcile the God they see there with Jesus in the NT.

Last week we talked about Leviticus being a good example of a book people tend to scratch their heads at.

The book of Joshua is one that Christians in general and, perhaps, those of us from the historic stream of peace churches in particular, have real problems with.

The story narrated in the book of Joshua is that of the Israelites coming to occupy the Promised Land. It is the story of a holy war waged against the Canaanites. It is a story of brutal violence—much of it said to be sanctioned, even commanded by God.

We read this story as followers of Jesus and it doesn't seem to fit. We may even wish we could expunge it from our Bibles—perform a “textectomy,” as one commentator I came across this week put it!

How does the one who commands us to love our enemies and to not return evil for evil have any connection to this tribal God who wages war with his conquering people?

What do we do with this image of the people of God forcibly entering the land at the expense of others?

What do we do with all of this violence?

Our passage today doesn't deal directly with these issues, but I feel that I must at least offer some kind of response to these kinds of questions, because divinely sanctioned violence precedes and provides the narrative framework for Joshua's speech in chapter 24.

In addition, these are not just biblical questions for us. It's not just that we would like to know how to reconcile apparently irreconcilable differences in how God is portrayed at various parts of our Scriptures.

We look around at our world and we see countless examples of nations behaving like the people of Israel in Joshua, and we cringe.

The examples of global conflict based on one group of people feeling like they have a claim on the land (often divinely justified) are too many to even enumerate.

The story of present-day Israel is the most obvious one, but we could think of our own continent as well. We could think of the first Christian pilgrims to North America, who were convinced that they had a divine right to the land, and the effects this had and continues to have for Indigenous populations that were here long before white European settlers (similar story in Australia).

Biblical stories like the one in Joshua have often provided explicit or implicit support to this kind of aggression.

So Joshua is a troublesome text, for a wide variety of reasons.

What do we do?

---

The first thing that I should probably say is also the simplest.

I don't know.

I have spent a lot of time reading about this issue, both this week and in the past. I have spoken with some very smart people. I have come across some useful and helpful comments, but at the end of the day, most people come down to the same conclusion that Gordon Matties from Canadian Mennonite University articulates in his excellent commentary on Joshua:

*Joshua belongs to an intrabiblical "difficult conversation." To speak of such a conversation implies that no simple "resolution" may be found.<sup>1</sup>*

I remember a rainy afternoon during one of my classes at graduate school, where a professor looked his drowsy students in the eye and said, "You know, a lot of you will end up in churches some day where you will be asked to explain difficult things, where people will be looking to you for guidance. And sometimes the truest, and most profound thing you will ever say is, "I don't know."

I'm hoping he was right 😊.

But there are a few things that I would like to say, as well.

First, I think it's important to remember that the conquest of Canaan in Joshua is a single biblical episode. It is *never* presented as normative or as a template for God's people for all time or anything like that. It is an utterly unique event that plays an utterly unique role in the story. It is never set out as an example for how the people of God are to behave toward others.

Second, we must remember that Scripture is a narrative, not a straightforward codebook of moral examples and instructions where every verse or passage functions in exactly the same way. There are some parts of the Bible that play a role at a certain part of the story, and are not meant to be repeated. Some parts are no longer relevant.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matties, 30.

Some texts are *descriptive* (they just describe things that happened) and some texts are *prescriptive* (they are meant to be emulated).

The Bible is a library, not a single “book” and there are parts of this library that frequently engage in a lively conversation with other parts—even disagreeing with one another, at times. Remember last week: despite Deuteronomy’s prescription to never allow a Moabite into the assembly, Ruth, a Moabite woman, becomes part of the people of Israel and the lineage of Jesus himself; she even becomes an example of faithfulness and fidelity **to** Israel!

Third, we must acknowledge the role of cultural context. The story in Joshua takes place in a tribal culture where gods were simply *assumed* to fight for their people. If we take seriously the idea that God always accommodates his revelation and activity in human history according to the period in which he is involved in, then perhaps this goes some distance in explaining how God could get himself bound up in the violence of Joshua for the purposes of advancing the story forward to a different, higher level, even if we aren’t quite sure how much it represents God’s purposes or the people’s developing *understanding* of God’s purposes.

Fourth—and this is perhaps the least welcome of the bunch—we need to remember that God is holy, and that God judges sin. The Canaanites were not, as one person I spoke with this week put it, “timid hobbits tending some primeval version of the shire.” They were violent people—some even offered their own children as sacrifices to their gods—and they were being judged for their wickedness. The Canaanites represent a constant temptation for Israel to turn away from allegiance to Yahweh. There is an important sense in which the Israelites’ inheritance of the land is bound up with God’s judgment on the land’s inhabitants for their detestable practices.

Fifth, in connection with the preceding, we must remember to read Joshua alongside *other* passages of Scripture that speak favourably about “foreigners.” We’ve already mentioned Ruth, the Moabite. Deuteronomy 10:17-19 says,

*“17 For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, 18 who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. 19 You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”*

Even the book of Joshua itself notes the presence of God-fearing “foreigners” that continue to reside within the land among the people of Israel; they, too are the recipients of the Law of Moses (Joshua 8:35).

Sixth, and most importantly, we must remember that the vision of all of Scripture—OT and NT—is a vision of *shalom*. Holy war and separation from one’s enemies are not the goal. The goal is the beating of swords into plowshares (Isaiah 2). The goal, according to the prophet Zechariah, looks like this:

*“He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the war-horse from Jerusalem; and the battle bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations.*

The goal is the peaceable kingdom.

Whatever we make of this or that specific part of the Bible, we must remember that the narrative *as a whole* is always oriented in this direction. Again, Gordon Matties puts it well:

*[T]he biblical narrative as a whole is rooted not so much in a warfare worldview that justifies ongoing human violence as in a hopeful vision that transposes and transforms that worldview.<sup>2</sup>*

None of these six things magically makes the troubles we might have with reconciling Joshua with Jesus disappear. But they can at least help us move to a place where we are approaching Joshua with what Matties calls, a “hermeneutics of hospitality.”

We can grant Joshua a place at the table as a conversation partner, and can tune our ears to the word of the Lord, even from what is sometimes seen to be a strange and even repellent text.

---

I realize that I just spent a great deal of time on Joshua as a *whole* and not our text in *particular*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Matties, 33.

I think it's important though. These are difficult issues that I hear about a lot. I know that many people struggle with how to make sense of the Bible, so I felt the time was warranted.

I'm not going to take as much time with what I take to be the message of our text today because, a) I don't have much time left; and b) I think the application is quite straightforward.

Joshua has gathered all of the people of Israel together at Shechem and is addressing them one last time. He is an old man by now, and this is his farewell address. He is calling them to *remember* what God had done for them, and to *recommit* themselves to serving God alone.

He sets up a large stone, it says in verse 26, as a witness.

The stone Joshua sets up at Shechem is meant to remind the Israelites of three important truths. They are to:

1. Revere the Lord as holy
2. Put away false gods
3. Serve the Lord alone

Stones can't witness anything, technically. They are inanimate. They don't have ears, and they can't speak.

But they serve as landmarks, as identifiable points in time where we committed ourselves to something. They are solid, unmoving.

Joshua says, "this stone will be a witness against us." It was here before we got here, and it will be here long after we're gone. It was here when we made these promises to God and each other.

The challenge Joshua gave the people of Israel at Shechem is the same at the challenge to has echoed down through the ages.

**Revere the Lord**—*remember that God is holy and will judge wickedness. This is an important reminder in our day, when many people—inside and outside the church—think God is little more than a cosmic therapist in the sky.*

**Put away false gods**—as we've seen this summer, each age is prone to wander, each age has its own gods that lure us away

**Serve the Lord**—love God, love neighbour, proclaim the kingdom of God in word and deed.

And we need our own stones as well.

We need reminders of the One to whom we have pledged allegiance. We need pointers, markers to bring us back to promises we have made to God.

Some people use a real stone. Some use candles. Some use significant objects from significant times in their lives where God met them in a unique way. Some remember their baptism certificate or photo. Some wear a cross or a dove around their neck.

Any kind of a physical reminder that we belong to God, that we have committed our lives to God, and that we are to serve God alone can be helpful.

Of course, we know that Israel was never able to keep these three commands. We know that the day would come when the land would no longer be their home—that they would be driven out by foreign armies as God's judgment for their idolatry and injustice.

We know that the very people who forcibly removed the Canaanites from the land would one day be forcibly removed from this same land.

We know that, metaphorically speaking, the stone at Shechem spoke against them.

**We read of other stones in Scripture as well. What do the stones say?**

We could think of Luke 19:37-44, where Jesus, the new Joshua (the name "Jesus" is a variation of the Hebrew *Yeshua* which means "to deliver") approaches Jerusalem.

When attempts are made by the Pharisees to silence those who are praising him, says that the stones will cry out and acknowledge Jesus as king, if we do not.

We read of Jesus himself as the stone that the builders rejected. The very people who should have embraced the new thing that God was doing in his life, teaching, death, and resurrection refused to listen to the living stone that God was setting in Zion (Isaiah 8:14)—the living stone that would become the cornerstone not by conquering through violence but by being “conquered” by violent human beings and defeating evil in giving himself as a ransom for many.

**And, of course, the stone that speaks the loudest of all in this grand narrative of Scripture is the one that is rolled away from the tomb on that famous Sunday morning so long ago.**

This stone proclaims that new life is available to all because of what God has accomplished—the magnificent truth that it is God’s faithfulness, not our own, that is the final word.

As we head out into a new year of school and work and the regular routine of fall, I pray that we would remember the stones and to listen to what they are saying.

Will they speak against us? Will they bear silent witness to our unwillingness to revere the Lord, to resist the lure of idolatry, and to serve the God revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ?

Or will the stones remind us of who we serve? Will they point us to Jesus, the “living stone,” as Peter puts it in 1 Peter 2:4-6? Will we, too, become living stones being built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood for our Lord and Saviour?

May God help us to listen well, to remember, and to commit ourselves to faithfulness as we head out into fall.

Amen.