

Is God on Our Side?

Who would have guessed that listening to the soundtrack of a Broadway musical would help me understand the Book of Joshua? In the final song of *Hamilton: An American Musical* written by Lin-Manuel Miranda, George Washington begins by singing:

*Let me tell you what I wish I'd known
When I was young and dreamed of glory.
You have no control: Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?*

The cast joins in with:

*And when you're gone, who remembers your name? Who keeps your flame?
Who tells your story?*

Then Hamilton's wife Eliza sings:

*I try to make sense of your thousands of pages of writings.
And when my time is up, have I done enough?
Will they tell our story?*

The entire company ends the play with:

*Will they tell your story?
Who lives, who dies, who tells your story?¹*

The musical recounts the life of Alexander Hamilton from Caribbean orphan to supporter and fighter of the American Revolution to the 1st US Secretary of the Treasury to the loser in a duel with Vice President Aaron Burr. The musical is true, but not completely factual. Lin-Manuel Miranda adjusts timelines, creates dialogues, and abridges historical writings to make the play educational, understandable, entertaining, and artistic. He incorporates hip-hop music and casts non-white actors as the founding fathers to make this story contemporary and add more layers to it. It's impossible to separate fact from interpretation. Each member of the audience experiences the play in a different way depending on their personal circumstances.

Even trying to figure out the true story of what happened on July 11, 1804, in the duel that ended Hamilton's life, is impossible. Each of the two men who served as seconds to Hamilton and Burr issued a press statement about the duel. While these two eyewitnesses concurred that Hamilton and Burr fired within seconds of each other, they disagreed as to who fired the first shot.²

Is it any wonder that we encounter lots of questions when reading ancient biblical stories that were written down after many years of being transmitted orally from group to group and generation to generation? Each time we read something we need to consider the type of story writing it is as well as the context in which it was written. We need to realize that while it contains truth, it may not be entirely factual. We need to wonder why the writers told the story in a particular way. We need to imagine how the original audience would have heard it and let this influence how we read it today. I find this especially challenging when it comes to the book of Joshua.³

¹ Lin-Manuel Miranda, *Who Lives, Who Dies, Who Tells Your Story?* From *Hamilton: An American Musical*.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel

³ This sermon draws from the Week Thirteen Prepare Essay written by Timothy Harvey, *Shine: Becoming a People of God*, a curriculum from MennoMedia, [Shine - Menno Media](#); The Bible Project: Joshua, [Book of Joshua Summary | Watch an Overview Video \(bibleproject.com\)](#); Gordon H. Matties, *Joshua*, BCBC, Herald Press, 2012, pp. 126-168, 356-380; and Marion G. Bontrager, Michele Hershberger, John E. Sharp, *The Bible as Story: An Introduction to Biblical Literature*, Workplay Publishing, 2016, pp. 61-65, 84-89.

A few minutes ago, we heard a summary of the events leading up to Joshua's story. God's choice of Abraham and his descendants to bring a blessing to all the nations. God's rescue of the Israelites from their enslavement in Egypt. God's covenant with the Israelites and provision for them in the wilderness. Finally, as Israel camped outside the promised land, Moses called upon them to obey God's commandments, so that they could show the other nations the true character of God. The book of Joshua picks up shortly after Moses dies and Israel prepares to enter the land.

The storyline of Joshua divides naturally into four parts. Joshua leads Israel into the promised land (Josh. 1-5). Once they're there, they're met with hostility from the native Canaanites and engage in battle (Josh. 6-12). After their victories, Joshua divides up the land as an inheritance for the twelve tribes (Josh. 13-22). The book concludes with Joshua delivering his final words to the people (Josh. 23-24).

In recounting the appointment of Joshua as the new leader of Israel, the author presents him as the new Moses. Like his predecessor, Joshua calls on the people to obey the terms of the covenant given to Israel at Mount Sinai. In chapter 2, Joshua sends spies into the land, just as Moses had in Numbers 13-14. This is where we find the story of Rahab the Canaanite prostitute who chooses to follow the God of Israel and helps the spies escape. When Joshua leads the Israelites across the Jordan River and into the promised land, the river parts to let them across just as the sea parted for Moses in the Exodus. The people set up stones to remember this historic event. They also honor their covenant with God by circumcising the new generation and celebrating their first Passover in the new land.

This section ends with an encounter between Joshua and a mysterious warrior who, it turns out, is the angelic commander of God's army. Joshua asks the man a question and receives a surprising answer.

Once when Joshua was by Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing before him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him, "Are you one of us or one of our adversaries?" He replied, "Neither, but as commander of the army of the LORD I have now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and he said to him, "What do you command your servant, my lord?" The commander of the army of the LORD said to Joshua, "Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place where you stand is holy." And Joshua did so.⁴

Joshua asks if God is on Israel's side or on their enemy's side. Joshua expects to hear that God is on Israel's side. After all, they're God's chosen people. But the warrior responds, "Neither," and then asks Joshua to show his allegiance to God. The real question is whether Joshua is on God's side.

This sets the stage for the next section of the book, in which we find stories about all the conflicts Israel had with different Canaanite groups as they entered the land. Chapters 6-8 retell the story of two battles in detail, followed by chapters 9-12, which condense years of battles into a few brief summaries.

The first two battles offer contrasting portraits of God's faithfulness and Israel's failure. At Jericho, Israel is to take a completely passive approach, letting God's presence ark lead them around the city with music for six days. Just as Rahab turned to the God of Israel, perhaps the people of Jericho will do the same. They do not, sadly, and so on the seventh day when the priests blow their trumpets, the walls miraculously crumble, and Israel is led to victory. The point of this story is that God is the one who will deliver the people. Israel simply needs to trust and wait.

The battle at Ai makes a contrasting point, showing what happens if Israel doesn't trust their God. An Israelite named Achan stole goods from Jericho that were meant to be devoted and offered to God. Then he proceeded to lie about it. So when Israel enters the battle of Ai, they are defeated. It's only after humble repentance and severely dealing with Achan's sin that they gain victory over Ai.

⁴ Joshua 5:13-15, *Common English Bible*

Perhaps these two stories are placed at the front of the battle narratives to make an important point. To inherit the land, Israel must be obedient and trust in God's commands. This isn't their battle, and God isn't their trophy.

The second part of this section begins in Chapter 9 as the Gibeonites, a Canaanite people group, do what Rahab did – turn to follow Israel's God and make peace. This is in stark contrast to many other Canaanite kings, who form coalitions to destroy Israel. Israel, however, wins all of these battles by a landslide. The section concludes with a summary list of all the victories won by Moses and Joshua.⁵

I wonder how these war stories sound to you. You're probably familiar with the battle of Jericho. Perhaps a song about it is running through your mind right now. The battle at Ai isn't as well-known. We're used to reading about battles in the Old Testament. But how often do we read the details of the stories?

Listen to a few verses from the last part of the Jericho story. *Then Joshua said to the people, "Shout, because the LORD has given you the city! The city and everything in it is to be utterly wiped out as something reserved for the LORD. Only Rahab the prostitute is to stay alive, along with everyone with her in her house.*

As soon as the people heard the trumpet blast, they shouted a loud war cry. Then the wall collapsed. The people went up against the city, attacking straight ahead. They captured the city. Without mercy, they wiped out everything in the city as something reserved for God—man and woman, young and old, cattle, sheep, and donkeys.⁶

Suddenly, the picture changes from a peaceful, music-filled march around a city to lots of rubble and the slaughter of people and animals. This isn't what I want to read. This isn't what I want to imagine God would tell faithful people to do. Didn't Jesus tell his followers to love their enemies? Didn't he instruct them to do good to those who persecute them? Why then is God declaring war? It's tempting to ignore this story completely and focus on the teachings of Jesus. But it's here. How might we approach it?

Similar to the Hamilton musical, the Book of Joshua is true, but not completely factual. It's impossible to separate fact from interpretation. *An initial reading of Joshua gives the impression that all the land is conquered, and all the Canaanites are defeated. The story of invasion and conquest is told as three decisive campaigns. In each case, Joshua is reported to defeat the whole land and all their kings. The victory is reported as complete. But later in the story, the Lord tells Joshua, "You are old and advanced in years, and very much of the land remains to be possessed."⁷ Nevertheless, the Lord orders Joshua to divide out the land among the tribes of Israel, with the confidence that the Lord will eventually drive them all out. The book of Judges expands on the suggestion in Joshua 13 that many unconquered people remain around the Israelites.⁸*

So, what really happened? Most likely there was some combination of invasion, conquest, infiltration, and revolution. In keeping with other stories of conquest from that time, the author uses hyperbole. The reports of total annihilation aren't meant to be taken literally.

We see the same thing when reading God's original command in Deuteronomy 7.⁹ Israel is first told to "drive out" the Canaanites as well as to "totally destroy" them. This is immediately followed by commands to not intermarry or enter business deals with them. You can't marry or do business with people that you've literally destroyed. Moses is using hyperbole, an exaggerated expression, to make his point with force. Joshua does the same.

⁵ This summary is directly quoted from the Bible Project overview video.

⁶ Joshua 6:16b-17, 20b-21, *Common English Bible*

⁷ Joshua 13:1

⁸ This summary comes from *The Bible as Story*, pp. 84-89

⁹ Deuteronomy 7:1-6

We could read these stories as examples of the false security we find in political, military, and economic defenses; of the power of faith in God; and of God's ultimate conquest over evil. Even as we find value in these non-literal interpretations of the conquest stories, we continue to live with elements of uncertainty, discomfort, and even revulsion we sometimes encounter as we read the Bible we value.

In the third section of the book, an aging Joshua divides up the land for the 12 tribes. Most of this section is made up of lists of boundary lines. It makes for boring reading, but these lists were super important to the Israelites. This was the fulfillment of God's ancient promise to Abraham that his descendants would inherit the land.

This all leads to the final section of the book. Joshua gives two final speeches to the people – again, very similar to Moses' s final speeches in Deuteronomy. Joshua recounts for the people everything the Lord has done for their ancestors and for them. He reminds them of God's gracious acts and their appropriate required response of grateful obedience. Surrounded by all the Canaanite peoples and their gods, Joshua gives the Israelites a choice.

“So now, revere the LORD. Serve him honestly and faithfully. Put aside the gods that your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt and serve the LORD. But if it seems wrong in your opinion to serve the LORD, then choose today whom you will serve. Choose the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the Euphrates or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you live. But my family and I will serve the LORD.”¹⁰

Whose side is God on? From the medieval Crusades to the Holocaust to the Palestinian Catastrophe to current Christian Nationalism, the Joshua story and other biblical references have been used and continue to be used to justify horrific atrocities, mass displacement, or privileging one religion over all others. In each case, the perpetrators claim that God is on their side and condones their actions.

Is God on our side? Or is God on our enemy's side? Joshua's story could – and should – show us that we're asking the wrong questions. The real question is whether we are on God's side. Do we remember God's gracious acts? Do we respond in grateful obedience? Do we choose to follow God's way?

This is the choice that all of us encounter over and over again. Choose today who you will serve. Will you serve the God who created you, saves you, and sustains you; the God who pursues you and fights for you; the God who works to restore right and just relationships with, among, and within all people and all of creation? Or will you serve the gods that people have created, that you have created; the gods of greed, division, and selfishness; of national, political, economic, and military power.

Choose today who you will serve. As for me, I will serve the Lord, the God who is the source of hope and justice for everyone in the entire world. And, even after reading the Book of Joshua, the God who I believe is the God of mercy, love ... and peace.

Amen.

¹⁰ Joshua 24:14-15, *Common English Bible*