# Joshua Goes to Kathmandu

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As I have taught online at the Asia Graduate School of Theology in Kathmandu and have simultaneously been writing a commentary on Joshua, I have wondered what happens when we put Joshua and Nepal together. What would happen in Joshua went to Kathmandu? How might he reflect?

## The Uniqueness of Israel

The Book of Joshua begins with Joshua succeeding Moses as Israel’s leader, and it ends with an account of his death and a few notes about the years that followed. So the title “Book of Joshua” fits the content of the book. It is about the period during which Joshua was Israel’s leader, which was the key period during which the Israelites arrived in Canaan and distributed the land to the clans. The book doesn’t indicate who wrote it, though it gives one or two pointers towards the time when it was written. It was after the Danites migrated from the Tel Aviv area to the Lebanese border (Joshua 19:40–48); Judges 18 tells us more about that. And the book sometimes notes that things it describes are there “until this day”: for instance, the Jebusites are living with the Judahites in Jerusalem (Joshua 15:63), as they did from David’s day. So Joshua is a story told for generations who live after Joshua’s own time, so that they can know about how their ancestors came to be in the land of Canaan (cf. Joshua 4:20–24). They might ask, How did we Danites come to be in the far north? How did some of us Judahites come to live in the beautiful oasis at Ein Gedi by the Dead Sea (see Joshua 15:62)? How did Caleb the Jephunnite come to be so important in Hebron (see Joshua 14:6–15)? How did the Josephites come to construct all the terraces for fruit-trees in the land of Ephraim and Manasseh (see Joshua 17:14–18)? By answering questions such as these, the book of Joshua preserves and articulates Israel’s memory of who it is. God brought the Israelites into the land, and God gave them the instructions about distributing it.

One aspect of its account that might be surprising is that God brought these things about in the same way as happened in the experience of other peoples. God himself comments on this fact. He brought the Israelites from Egypt to the south—and he brought the Philistines from Caphtor to the west, and the Syrians from Qir to the east (Amos 9:7). It was a process that involved migration, settlement, conflict, displacement, and assimilation, the kind of process that is commonly involved in the history of nations. The way those factors interrelate varies, but they are regularly present; hardly any nation has always lived where it lives now. This process of migration and settlement is a working out of the blessing of Noah in the life of nations (see Genesis 9–11).

The development of the Nepali people similarly involved the movement of groups from what are now India, Tibet, Myanmar, and other countries. Perhaps Nepal can see its own story mirrored in the story of Israel as Joshua tells it. It can look at itself in light of the blessing of Noah. As Christians we hold hands with the rest of our nation as we all share in the results of God bringing our nation from wherever we came from. Britain and Nepal came into being the same way as the Philistines and the Syrians. God brought us to the lands where we live. Nepali warriors are famous in Britain as the Gurkhas, and Joshua and his warriors fight in defense of the Gibeonites with the kind of courage that Gurkhas would show (see Joshua 10). Joshua’s scimitar (Joshua 8:18) makes one think of a Nepalese khukuri.

But of course God was doing something unique with Israel compared with the Nepalis or the British. The Christian church in Nepal or Britain also holds hands with Israel as the people of God, because we were grafted into Israel (Romans 11:17), so that we became part of God’s household (Ephesians 2:19). As the Christian church in Nepal or in Britain we look at ourselves in light of the account of the Israelites in Joshua. Along with the Jewish people, we are among the heirs of Israel’s story.

## Leadership and Torah

The first time God speaks in Joshua, he speaks to Joshua himself, as Israel’s leader. For Israel, for Nepal, and for the Nepalese church, its leadership matters. In general, what does leadership mean? It means being able to see where a people should go (for instance, a nation, a church, or an institution), to work out how they should get there, and to get them to follow.

Leadership has become a major preoccupation in the West and in the Western church, and if this preoccupation has influenced the Nepalese church, then God’s opening words to Joshua point to a proper focus for leadership. God lays down the criterion for the proper fulfillment of those three aspects of the task of leadership. God bids Joshua to “be strong and very courageous” as he marches his people towards their destiny (Joshua 1:6). He goes on to spell out the implications of his exhortation In a way that is unexpected in the context. He speaks of courage, not a courage that relates to fighting the Canaanites, but the courage to act in complete conformity to the Torah, to the teaching or instruction, that Moses gave Joshua. The way God speaks in this opening chapter in Joshua compares especially with Deuteronomy, so the reference to the Torah likely implies a reference to Deuteronomy.

Joshua is human, and he makes mistakes. The story about Ai and Achan in Joshua 7 is the most obvious one. Nevertheless, one can say that Joshua does keep the Torah in front of him, all through his exercise of leadership. That actually makes him unusual. Saul, David, and Solomon didn’t manage to do that, and in the West, Christian leaders often go astray. So for Christian leaders in Britain and in Nepal, God’s opening exhortation to Joshua is important. Be strong and courageous in living by the Torah.

On that first occasion when God speaks to Joshua, his words are also significant for the people Joshua leads. First, God has made a promise to them as a people, a promise about entering into possession of a land of their own (Joshua 1:3). Now God has a sovereign purpose for all the world’s nations, so there is a sense in which the Nepali nation can also claim such a promise. God has given the Nepali people a land of their own. But God’s encouragement with which the Book of Joshua opens relates specifically to Israel, the people of God through whom he is going to bring blessing to the world in fulfilment of his promise to Abraham. The implication is that God’s promise to Israel relates more directly to the Nepalese church than to the Nepalese nation as a whole. God has worked in an astonishing way for the Nepalese church and with the Nepalese church over the past thirty years, and the opening of Joshua invites it to see what he has done as only the beginning.

Likewise, it is not just Joshua who needs to live by the Torah. The challenge to heed the Torah applies to the entire people. After the first two stories in Joshua about the conquest of Jericho and Ai, there comes an account of Joshua building an altar on Mount Ebal (Joshua 8:30–35). The Israelites worship Yahweh there, but the account puts more emphasis on the role the Torah plays.

First, the account notes that when Joshua built the altar, he was doing what the Torah said. The instructions are in Deuteronomy 27. That chapter speaks of action the Israelites are to take as soon as they cross the Jordan, and a Qumran manuscript of Joshua includes this story as part of the aftermath of the Jordan crossing, which was related back in Joshua 5. But the event takes place on a mountain at the very center of Canaan, because building an altar in Yahweh’s name is a way of declaring that Yahweh claims ownership of this land. It was the first thing that Abraham did when he arrived in Canaan, in the same location (Genesis 12:5–7).

In addition, on this occasion Joshua also writes a copy of the Torah on some rocks. Presumably he didn’t copy out onto the rocks the whole of the Torah; maybe it was the Ten Commandments. And it’s not clear whether the passage describes him as writing on the rocks from which the altar was constructed, or whether he was writing on another set of rocks. What is quite clear is that he was demonstrating before the people as a whole that this Torah is vitally important for them. It applies to them. The story makes a point of noting that the company that take part and witness this event includes the entire people: ordinary Israelites as well as elders and officials, women as well as men, children as well as adults, and foreigners as well as native Israelites. As usual, the First Testament thus makes clear that Israel is not an exclusive nation. If you make a commitment to Yahweh, in the way that a Canaanite such as Rahab or a Jephunnite such as Caleb did, then you belong.

Joshua read the Torah out to this entire people. It put them all under obligation. He makes the same point again in his final address, again at Shechem, at the foot of the same mountain, at the center of the land (Joshua 24).

A thousand years ago in England, churches didn’t have seats. If people came to a church service, they didn’t have to stay very long, and they didn’t need to sit down. Five hundred years ago, priests in England started reading the Scriptures more systematically in the people’s own language and started preaching and teaching, and seating was introduced into churches so that people could listen. My impression is that nowadays in England, there is less systematic reading of the Scriptures again, and less preaching and teaching. If Joshua came to Kathmandu, he would want to ask questions about the reading of the Scriptures in church and how the pastors of Nepalese churches are expounding the Scriptures.

## The God Who Acted and Who Is Lord

God’s opening exhortation to Joshua, and Joshua’s subsequent exchanges with the Israelites, are clear and straightforward. The first story in Joshua, which then follows in Joshua 2, is more complex. The Israelites are encamped east of the Jordan, where they have arrived after nearly forty years of living as Bedouin, as nomads. Joshua takes an initiative in sending two men to reconnoiter the situation in the region across the Jordan and in Jericho in particular, and they stay the night there. The beginning of the story thus raises several questions. Joshua assumes he should take an initiative in connection with Jericho: was he right? He apparently assumes that the Israelites are going to fight: was he right? Later, God takes over the initiative from Joshua and reveals a plan indicating that the Israelites are not going to need to fight (Joshua 5:13–6:5).

There is a further question. The Israelites had been whoring at Shittim, worshiping other gods (Numbers 25:1). Now the two men depart from Shittim and go to stay with a whore in Jericho (Joshua 2:1): is that okay? And they agree to exempt Rahab from the slaughter that she knows is going to happen to her people: is that okay? But there is no doubt that they are right to exempt her, because the whore turns out to be a theologian who makes a pair of key confessions (Joshua 2:8–11). She acknowledges how Yahweh acted for Israel at the Red Sea and how Yahweh has given Israel the land. And she acknowledges that Yahweh is God in the heavens above and on the earth below.

The confessions are important for the Nepalese church in two ways. First, the Nepalese church lives in a majority Hindu context. Hinduism is often described as a polytheistic religion, as is the religion of the Canaanites which is Rahab’s background. But various meanings can attach to the description of either religion as polytheistic. People can claim that their religion isn’t polytheistic really, even if it may look polytheistic. It is important what you mean by God and by gods. So it’s important to be clear how the Scriptures understand God, so we can distinguish the Scriptures’ understanding from various other understandings of God or the gods.

There are two things that Rahab has come to recognize. She has come to recognize that there is only one God who really counts, one God who rules in the heavens and on the earth. And she has come to recognize that this God is the one who rescued Israel at the Red Sea. Those two statements are closely related to each other. Rahab does not have a theoretical belief in monotheism. She does not just say that there is only one God. Her statement is that Yahweh is the only God. That’s the important thing. And her basis for saying so is not a theory but something that Yahweh did.

Let me draw an analogy. Many people belief in an afterlife or in reincarnation, but if you ask them about the basis for their belief, they will likely say it just seems to make sense or it’s just a matter of faith or hope. Those are not the kind reasons why Christians believe in an afterlife. We believe that we will be raised to new life on the basis of the fact that God raised Jesus to new life, and promised that we would follow. Our conviction about what God will do is based on something that God has already done.

Rahab’s conviction about what Yahweh will do and who Yahweh is has its basis in what Yahweh has done. And when we tell people about Jesus and about our reason for trusting him, we are telling people about something that has its basis in something that God did. We talk about what God did in Jesus, not just about what we feel in our hearts.

## Rahab and Joshua the Theologians

In many cultures, women have had less opportunity than men for the exercise of leadership, both in the nation and in the church. In Joshua, the preeminent leader, Joshua himself, is a man. So is Eleazar, the priest who joins with him in the allocation of the land to the different clans. So are the heads of the kin-groups or extended families who also join in that process. But a series of insightful and courageous women also play key roles in Joshua; indeed, the book tells us about more women like that than about men like that.

Rahab is the first. She shows herself to be a brave and insightful theologian in the description she gives of God as the one who dried up the Red Sea and needs to be recognized as God in the heavens above and on the earth below (Joshua 2:10–11), and she turns out to be one of Jesus’s ancestors (Matthew 1:5). Then there is Aksah, who insists on having some resources of water in the land that forms part of her marriage gift, so that she can make good use of it (Joshua 15:16–19). She resembles the resourceful woman in Proverbs 31. There are Maḥlah, Noah, Ḥeglah, Milkah, and Tirsah, who insist that their family is not to be dispossessed of its land just because their father has died (Joshua 17:3–6). Like Genesis and the Gospels, Joshua thus accepts the reality of male leadership but also portrays women having the opportunity to exercise their leadership gifts and instincts. So it sets a vision before a country such as Nepal and the church there.

The first great statement about God in Joshua is Rahab’s statement near the beginning of the book. The other great statement about God comes at the end. In his last address to the Israelites (Joshua 24), Joshua himself summarizes what God has done for his people over the centuries—God made promises to their ancestors, delivered them at the Red Sea, and has now given them the land of Canaan. And then he reminds them of who God therefore is: the holy or sacred God, the passionate or jealous God. The logic of Joshua the theologian is the same as the logic of Rahab the theologian: this is what God did, and that’s how we know the kind of God he is.

On the basis of what Yahweh had done for them, Joshua also challenges his people to commit themselves to Yahweh. They reply that they will commit themselves. And then he tells them that they can’t, because those facts about the kind of person Yahweh is make it too risky! Joshua also makes more explicit something that Rahab may only hint at. If you’re not going to serve Yahweh, then serve anyone you like from among the other gods. But in light of the way Joshua has been talking about Yahweh, it would be stupid to turn in some other direction. “You can choose any god you like instead of Yahweh. They are all much the same, and all useless.” There is a sense in which Joshua is joking: of course he does want them to commitment themselves to Yahweh, and those other gods are indeed useless. But he wants them to see how serious is the commitment they are making.

## Relationships Between Different Religious Communities

A link between the gods of Canaan (from among whom the Israelites might in theory choose) and the gods of Hinduism is that it’s possible to make images of these gods. In contrast, Yahweh forbids Israel from making images of him. In Deuteronomy 4 Moses explains that it’s partly because it’s impossible. Yahweh has two distinctive characteristics that make it impossible to make an image of him. One is that Yahweh speaks; the other is that Yahweh acts. Images have ears, mouths, hands, and feet but these body parts don’t work; images can’t speak or act. Yahweh has ears, mouths, hands, and feet that work; he does speak and act. Rahab and Joshua themselves don’t refer to these differences, but they are implicit in the affirmations the two theologians make. The book of Joshua’s two most frequent statements about Yahweh are that Yahweh gave and that Yahweh spoke. A being who can be imaged is a being who cannot give and cannot speak.

Christian faith, the Christian gospel, is about something God did. Many Hindus may emphasize the reality of God’s presence in their hearts and lives. Christians have the same emphasis. But even in this connection, Christians have a different understanding of God, and also a different basis for believing in the God we say is present in our hearts and lives. The God of Israel who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ acted to deliver Israel from Egypt and to deliver us from the domination of sin. It is because we know that he acted in that way that we can believe he is real and active now and that he looks for our trust and commitment.

Yet the difference between what the Israelites knew about Yahweh and what the Canaanites believed didn’t mean there had to be hostility between them. In fact, in due course Israelites and Canaanites lived harmoniously together. We have noted how the Jebusites and the Judahites lived together, and David thus has quite easy dealings with Araunah the Jebusite (2 Samuel 24:15–25). And for many centuries in countries such as Israel or Afghanistan, different religious communities lived together quite harmoniously, though that became harder in the context of modernity.

There is another significant aspect to the relationship between the practices of different religions. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan, they circumcised all the men (circumcision had evidently been suspended during the time in the wilderness), and they celebrated Passover and ate flat bread. We have noted that when they gathered on Mount Ebal, they built an altar and offered sacrifices. None of these practices were peculiar to the Israelites. Other peoples practiced circumcision, celebrated shepherding and agricultural festivals, built altars, and offered sacrifices. In each case it seems that God gives the Israelites instructions about how to adopt and adapt practices that other traditional peoples also have.

## What God Has Done and What God Will Do

The second half of Joshua is dominated by the distribution of the land of Canaan among the clans. Although I have imagined someone wondering how they came to be living in the beautiful oasis of Ein Gedi, neither Joshua nor the rest of the First Testament comments on the beauty of the land of Canaan. Their interests are more practical. What they appreciate about the land of Canaan is that it is a country full of milk and honey (Joshua 5:6)—that is, it has plentiful pasture for sheep and trees from whose fruit they can make molasses. Joshua later speaks of the land’s ready-planted vineyards and olive trees (Joshua 24:13). The Levites weren’t too worried about not having land to farm, because the people were to give them tithes, but they did need pasture for their flocks and herds (Joshua 21:1–2).

In a way, the fair distribution of the land among the clans is not too much of a difficulty. The clans are roughly similar in size. The exception is that Judah is big and Simeon is small, but between them they come to roughly the size of two regular-size clans and they share what could have been two clans-worth of land. The different areas where the clans would have their allocations have different assets and drawbacks, in terms of how big they are, how much rainfall they receive, how vulnerable they are, and so on. It’s hard to argue that one area is so much better than another. But just in case, the land is allocated by a lottery process, undertaken before Yahweh. So it’s hard for any clan to claim that it was unfairly treated.

Like Canaan, Nepal has both beauty and practicality. It has the Himalayas and it has land that can grow crops. What Joshua points to is fairness in the distribution of resources. He would be glad to find that the caste system in Nepal counts for so much less than it once did.

So Joshua and Eleazar allocate the land by lot around the clans. Yahweh is the God who has acted in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt and bringing them into Canaan. Towards the middle of Joshua, and towards the end of its account of the Israelites’ battles, the book declares that Joshua has conquered the entire country of Canaan (Joshua 11:16–23). Yet on the next page Yahweh is noting that actually there is much more of the country to be possessed (Joshua 13:1–6). The first way the book of Joshua speaks involves some hyperbole, some exaggeration, as other ancient battle reports do, and as modern battle reports do (“Mission Accomplished,” said a banner after the invasion of Iraq by the United States in 2003). Paul uses hyperbole, too: “The gospel has been proclaimed in all creation under heaven,” he says (Colossians 1:23). The hyperbole that appears in Joshua and in Paul is a statement of faith and hope, and when Yahweh speaks about the land that Israel is still to take, he is inviting Joshua to continue to live in hope, as he did at the beginning of the book. God has done great things for his people; he will do great things for his people. What he has done is part of the basis for believing what he will do.

God has done amazing things in growing the church in Nepal over the past thirty years, but there is so much land still to be possessed. The Joshua story embodies what it means for the people of God to live in hope.