

Joshua

by Mark Glanville

The Canaanite destruction texts, underline the importance of the law and thereby also the vital importance of protecting and including outsiders within the community.

Joshua may well be the most disturbing book in the bible, at least at first read. However, reading carefully, beneath the surface of the text, we can see that something very different from the destruction of Canaanites is going on.

Structurally, Joshua is roughly divided into two halves. In the first half, Joshua 1-12, Joshua leads the Israelites to conquer and possess the land of Canaan. These chapters are infamous for the command to destroy the populations of the Canaanite cities. In the second half of Joshua, the Israelites settle in the land of Canaan.

This, at any rate is how the surface of the text reads. However, all is not as it seems. The first clue that something different is going on is the inclusion of outsiders, including Canaanites, within the people of God in the book of Deuteronomy (which

is closely related to Joshua). God's people are to protect the stranger and to enfold the stranger as kindred (see Deut 10:17-19; 24:19-21; 31:9-13). This point is crucial: the inclusion of outsiders, including Canaanites, is a key aspect of the law of Yahweh.



Rahab's Window by Mat Barber Kennedy

The second clue that more is going on is the remarkable inclusion of many Canaanites in the stories of Joshua.

For example, Rahab (Josh 2 and 6) is enfolded within the community of God's people. The third clue is that there is a pattern of reversal of Israelite and Canaanite: Israelites become Canaanites, and Canaanites become Israelites. For example, Rahab is not only included in the community of Israel, but she is an *exemplary Israelite*. And, Joshua and the Israelite spies are fearful and mistrusting of Yahweh and Yahweh's promises. The fourth clue is that the narrative arc of this part of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy

to 2 Kings) traces the demise of Israel—not the demise of the Canaanites. The destruction of the Canaanites is a very minor theme; the great theme is the fall of Israel. This signals to us that the destruction of the Canaanite texts must be *saying something about Israel*.

Furthermore, and this is the fifth clue, the requirement for Israel to obey the law, and the disastrous consequences for Israel if they fail to obey the law, appears constantly in the Canaanite destruction texts in both Deuteronomy and Joshua.

This last point is key. The Canaanite destruction texts are operating as a metaphorical warning to Israel of the dire consequences if Israel should fail to give their allegiance to Yahweh and to Yahweh's way. These texts are as much as saying to Israel: if you fail to follow the law, you will become Canaanite, and Yahweh will forsake you and you will be destroyed. In this way, the texts are all about Israel – rather than about Canaanites.

So, the key interpretive move is to see that the Canaanite destruction texts are underling for Israel the great importance of heeding the law of Yahweh. If this is the case, then the pinnacle of interpreting Joshua is to realise that this law insists that outsiders (including Canaanites) must be protected, loved, and enfolded as kindred. In this way, the book of Joshua,

through the strange and paradoxical motif of destroying Canaanites, underlines the importance of the law and thereby also the vital importance of protecting and including outsiders within the community.

[Author note: I am in the process of publishing more extensive material on the book of Joshua, and I hope that the reader can track these down if needed.]

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