

THE CONQUEST, THE ETHICS OF WAR, AND GENOCIDE

Joshua

(The NIV Study Bible)

Many readers of Joshua (and other OT books) are deeply troubled by the role that warfare plays in Joshua's account of God's dealings with his people. Not a few relieve their ethical scruples by ascribing the author's perspective to a pre-Christian (and sub-Christian) stage of moral development that the Christian, in the light of Christ's teaching, must repudiate and transcend. Hence the main thread of the narrative line of Joshua is offensive to them.

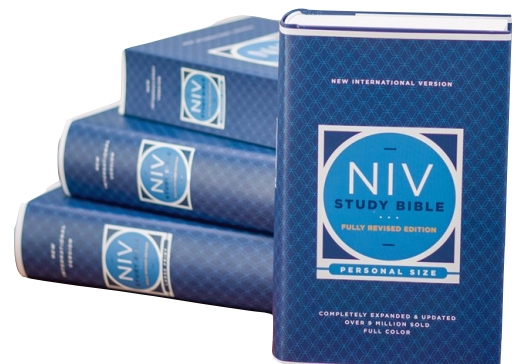
It must be remembered, however, that the book of Joshua does not address itself to the abstract ethical question of war as a means for gaining human ends. It can only be understood in the context of the history of redemption unfolding in the Pentateuch, with its interplay of divine grace and judgment. Of that story it is the direct continuation.

Joshua is not an epic account of Israel's heroic generation or the story of Israel's conquest of Canaan with the aid of her national deity. It is rather the story of how God, to whom the whole world belongs, at one stage in the history of redemption reconquered a portion of the earth from the powers of this world that had claimed it for themselves, defending their claims by force of arms and reliance on their false gods. It tells how God commissioned his people to serve as his army under the leadership of his servant Joshua, to take Canaan in his name out of the hands of the idolatrous and dissolute Canaanites (whose measure of sin was now full; see Ge 15:16). It further tells how he aided them in the enterprise and gave them conditional tenancy in his land in fulfillment of the ancient pledge he had made to Israel's ancestors — Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Joshua is the story of the kingdom of God breaking into the world of nations at a time when national and political entities were viewed as the creation of the gods and living proofs of their power. Thus the Lord's triumph over the Canaanites testified to the world that the God of Israel is the one true and living God, whose claim on the world is absolute. It was also a warning to the nations that the irresistible advance of the kingdom of God would ultimately disinherit all those who oppose it, giving place in the earth only to those who acknowledge and serve the Lord. At once an act of redemption and judgment, it gave notice of the outcome of history and anticipated the final destiny of humankind and the creation.

The battles for Canaan were therefore the Lord's war, undertaken at a particular time in the program of redemption. God gave his people under Joshua no commission or license to conquer the world with the sword but a particular, limited mission. The conquered land itself would not become Israel's national possession by right of conquest, but it belonged to the Lord. So the land had to be cleansed of all remnants of paganism. Its people and their wealth were not for Israel to seize as the spoils of war from which to enrich themselves (as Achan tried to do, Jos 7) but were placed under God's ban (were to be devoted to God to dispense with as he pleased). On that land Israel was to establish a commonwealth faithful to the righteous rule of God and thus be a witness (and a blessing) to the nations. If Israel became unfaithful and conformed to Canaanite culture and practice, it would in turn lose its place in the Lord's land — as Israel almost did in the days of the judges, and as it eventually did in the exile.

No less than twelve factors make it unlikely that the battles in Joshua were part of genocide (the destruction of an



entire race or nation of people) or even attempted genocide. (1) Israel did not actually kill a large percentage of the Canaanites. (Jos 13 and all of Judges depict how many were left.) (2) The language of total conquest in Jos 10–12 must therefore be that of hyperbole. Language of total destruction, including men, women and children, and of leaving no survivors was similar to exaggerated claims of other ancient Near Eastern people and should probably not be taken any more literally. (3) Archaeology suggests that several of the cities Joshua attacked were more like armed encampments of soldiers, their families and support personnel, much like military bases today, rather than entire cities (cf. especially Jericho and Ai). (4) The immorality of these cultures, complete with child sacrifice, was arguably as sordid as any in world history. (5) God had already given them over 400 years to repent (Ge 15:13–16). (6) The Gibeonites' ruse (Jos 9) was presumably available to anyone who wanted to save their lives.

(7) The whole land had already heard of Israel's exploits and were cowering in fear (Jos 2:9), so that an even better option for them was to turn to the God of Israel, as Rahab did. (8) Another option always available to the Canaanites was to flee the land that God had originally promised to Israel; in fact, Joshua 3:10 suggests that the Israelites' primary task was to "drive out" the people of the land, not exterminate them (cf. 13:6; 14:12; 17:18; 23:5). (9) This makes sense, because their ancestors had likewise covenanted to allow the Israelites to live in the land that they were now denying them (e.g., Ge 20:15; 26:26–31). (10) This is the only war in the Bible that God ever commanded. Later individual battles in Judges and Samuel that Israel initiates are a continuation of "unfinished business" here. All other combat involving Israel was defensive rather than offensive. (11) Progressive revelation suggests that Christ's full atonement for the world's sin means that he would never again command his people to initiate a war like Joshua's. Christians may debate pacifism vs. just war, but they have no right to claim they know God instituted any war they may fight. (12) If, after all these qualifications, we still struggle with the conquest narratives, it is probably because God in his mercy withholds the reality that death is the just punishment for sin the vast majority of the time (Ro 6:23).

War is a terrible curse that the human race brings on itself as it seeks to possess the earth by its own unrighteous ways. But it pales before the curse that awaits all those who do not heed God's testimony to himself or his warnings — those who oppose the rule of God and reject his offer of grace. The God of the second Joshua (Jesus) is the God of the first Joshua also. Although now for a time he reaches out to the whole world with the gospel (and commissions his people urgently to carry his offer of peace to all nations), the sword of his judgment waits in the wings—and his second Joshua will wield it (Rev 19:11 – 16).