

JOSHUA 1:1–9

GOD'S COMMISSION TO JOSHUA

The book of Joshua opens with God giving the eponymous hero a divine calling to be Moses's legitimate successor. Moses's death is reported in Deuteronomy 34:5–8.¹ Because the great lawgiver of Israel was forbidden by the Lord to enter the land of Canaan (see Deuteronomy 32:48–52), Joshua received the responsibility of conquering the land and overseeing the allotment of the tribes of Israel to their territories.

The opening chapter of the book of Joshua is a series of four speeches: first by God (verses 2–9), then two by Joshua (verses 10–11, 12–15), and finally a response by the Israelites (verses 16–18). The first speech, given by the Lord, acts to frame the ensuing narrative, which in broad strokes follows a thematic pattern (for example, the crossing of the Jordan [1:1–5:12]; the conquest [5:13–12:24]; and the allotment of land [13:1–22:34]).

The “book of the law” mentioned by the Lord in verse 8 is most likely an early form of the book of Deuteronomy. Indeed, the books of Joshua through 2 Kings are widely understood as being the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH). The Deuteronomistic History, as might be guessed by its name, is a retelling of Israel's past through the political and religious lenses of the book of Deuteronomy.² This included a strong emphasis on the overruling, all-encompassing nature of Jehovah's covenant with ancient Israel—a covenant which

¹ Intriguingly, the Book of Mormon seems to preserve an ancient tradition that Moses did not suffer death but instead was translated (see Alma 45:19). Extra-biblical sources and interpreters from antiquity grappled with Moses's ultimate fate, with some speculating whether Moses truly died or ascended into heaven (that is, was translated). See the summary article in Evidence Central, “Book of Mormon Evidence: Translation of Moses,” December 23, 2020, online at evidencecentral.org.

² Building on older theories from the nineteenth century, German biblical scholar Martin Noth is credited with coining the term “Deuteronomistic History” in the 1940s and laying the groundwork for its modern iteration, which since that time has undergone additional adaptation and refinement. See Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1981).

demanded the latter's total fidelity to the former in something like a suzerain-vassal relationship. The covenant also established a rather ambivalent attitude toward the institution of kingship by the Israelites (Israel was led by kings deemed both wicked and righteous at different times), the legitimacy of the temple cult instituted in Jerusalem at the expense of competing religious sites, the important role of prophets in religious and civic affairs, and a theological rationale for why Israel was so often defeated by its enemies—namely, its failure to abide by the stipulations of God's covenant. True to this worldview, the book of Joshua portrays God as commanding Joshua to “observe to do according to all that is written” in the book mentioned in Joshua 1:8, with the promise that if Israel obeyed, “then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success.”

Knowing the daunting challenges that lay ahead, the Lord concluded His speech to Joshua with words of encouragement that still reverberate in the lives of God's covenant people in the present: “Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest” (verse 9).

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