

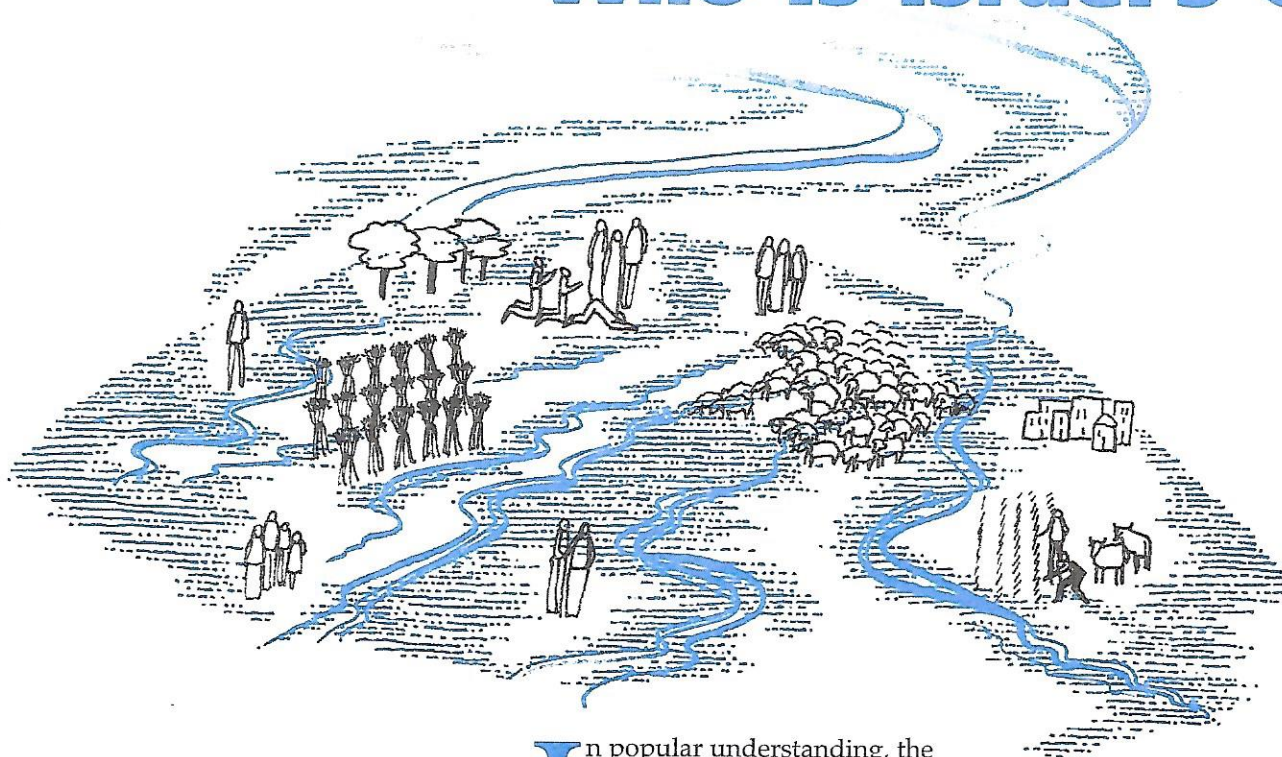
# Scripture **from** Scratch

*A popular guide to understanding the Bible*

BY BERNARD F. BATTO

## JOSHUA AND JUDGES

### Who Is Israel's God?



**I**n popular understanding, the story of the taking of Jericho by Joshua and the Israelites is a wonderfully idyllic story of how God brought the chosen people into the promised land. As the old spiritual puts it, "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and walls came tumblin' down."

When one actually encounters the story in the Book of Joshua, however, modern readers may experience revulsion—even a minor crisis of faith—at the passage when the LORD commands Joshua and the Israelites to kill every

last man, woman and child that lives in Jericho, as well as their animals. Compounding the problem, Joshua 7—12 says that the Israelites did likewise in every town they captured—again at the command of God!

It seems difficult to reconcile such wanton and merciless slaughter with the teaching of Jesus to love one's enemies. Properly understood, however, the Books of Joshua and Judges present God as gracious and merciful.

Illustrations by Jean Denton

## Deuteronomistic History

The books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings are referred to by biblical scholars as “the Deuteronomistic History,” because they build upon religious principles set out in the preceding Book of Deuteronomy. These books seem to have been composed in their final form sometime after 587 B.C., since the work ends with the beginning of the Babylonian exile.

This “Deuteronomist” wrote 400 to 600 years after the events he narrates in the Books of Joshua and Judges (which most scholars place between 1200 and 1050 B.C.). For the later period of the monarchy, the author could draw upon official chronicles from the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. For the pre-monarchical period of Joshua and Judges, however, he had to rely for the most part on legendary accounts and folktales.

Historical exactitude was of little concern to the Deuteronomist. He was less interested in writing history than in conveying a religious message. His exilic audience, disillusioned at the superior power of their Babylonian captors, and perhaps even doubting the power of God to save, needed reassurance that the covenant between God and his “chosen people” was still intact. The Deuteronomist sought to bolster the sagging faith of the exiles by showing that the problem lay not with God but with God’s people, who had themselves been unfaithful to the covenant.

In Joshua, the author shows how God is gracious when the people are

faithful; in Judges he shows that, although greatly displeased when the Israelites stray, God does not withdraw his love, but continues to offer them grace.

### Other Gods

Joshua 23–24 and the Book of Judges speak of the many Canaanites who still “remained” in the land at the death of Joshua, contrary to the impression given in Joshua 1–12.

Apparently the Deuteronomist believed that it would have been a good thing if the Canaanites had been completely eradicated from the land. In his view, attraction to Canaanite “values” was the principal reason for the downfall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. He puts a warning on the lips of the dying Joshua about not “mingling” or “intermarrying” with the Canaanites (Joshua 23:7-12), lest “you...serve other gods and worship them” (23:16).

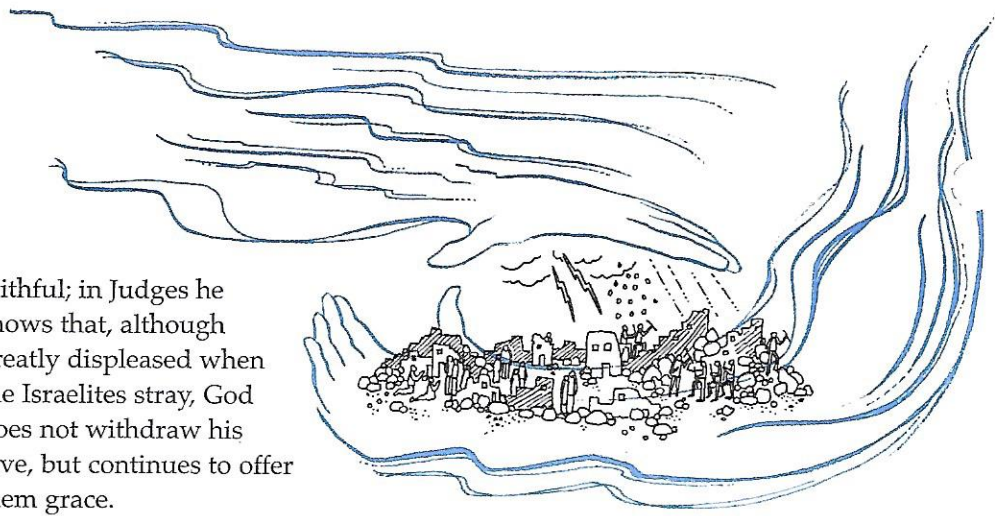
Religion in that ancient period functioned primarily to ensure prosperity in a mostly agricultural and pastoral economy. The principal Canaanite gods were either storm gods, believed to provide rain and thus abundant grain

and pasturage, or fertility gods, believed responsible for increasing one’s flocks.

Many Israelites—especially after intermarriage with the Canaanites—understood Yahweh as little more than Israel’s national or patron deity whose principal function was to look after their interests. As such, there was little to distinguish Yahweh from the gods of other nations. As Israel’s national god, Yahweh could be expected to fight for the Israelites against their enemies in much the same way that the gods of Assyria were believed to aid Assyria in battle.

In Joshua 10:11 Yahweh is described as fighting with the Israelites by hurling gigantic hailstones from heaven to kill the enemy in great numbers. This scene is reminiscent of a fragmentary painting found from Assyria which depicts a deity hovering above the Assyrian army amid storm clouds filled with many hailstones and shooting lightning bolts at the enemy.

The Book of Judges portrays the Israelites themselves as more prone to worship “the Baals” than Yahweh.



### Praying With Scripture

- **There is an old saying: “Lord what I pray for, grant me the grace to labor for.” Too often we expect our prayers to be answered without much effort on our part. Read Joshua 1. What does it say to you about the promises of God?**

### The Covenant God

To the Deuteronomist, by contrast, authentic religion is living wholeheartedly the covenant which God established with Israel through Moses. That means committing oneself to God and his word without reservation of any

kind: "Be firm and steadfast, taking care to observe the entire law which my servant Moses enjoined on you. Do not swerve from it either to the right or to the left" (Joshua 1:7). If the Israelites obey, they will be blessed. But blessing ought not to be the motive for doing good.

In contrast to those who think of Yahweh as their national deity, to be at their beck and call, the author holds up Rahab as a model believer. Far from being a common Canaanite prostitute, Rahab recognizes that Yahweh is the universal divine sovereign: "God in heaven above and on earth below" (Joshua 2:11). Having come to this insight, Rahab immediately abandons her past and commits to Yahweh.

When Joshua and the Israelites entered the promised land (Joshua 3—4), it is said that the river Jordan stopped flowing when the priests carrying the ark of Yahweh stepped into the water, allowing the Israelites to cross dryshod. The Deuteronomist makes the symbolic point with this story that the land is a gift from God, as God opened up the land for their taking.

Much the same point is made by the stories in Joshua 6—12 about the "conquest" of the land. Despite the fact that



## Living the Scriptures

■ **God sent several people to the aid of the Israelites in their distress. Who are the people who have been sent into your life to help? Have you thanked them? Pick up the phone or write a note today.**

the Deuteronomist knows of a tradition that the Israelites actually engaged in battle against the inhabitants of Jericho (Joshua 24:11), in Joshua 6 he suppresses that version in favor of a story which tells how God gave Jericho to the Israelites without them having to unsheath their swords or fire a single arrow. After marching in liturgical procession around Jericho for six days, on the seventh day they blow their ram's horns, and the "walls came tumblin' down," as the song puts it. This story is placed as the first "conquest" story to symbolize that the former "land of Canaan" did not become "the land of Israel" because of the Israelites own military might or moral superiority but because God gave it to them (Joshua 1:13-15). Other stories, including how God fought against the Canaanites using huge hailstones (Joshua 10:11),

make the same point. Everything that Israel is or has is a gift of God.

This theme of God's "graciousness" is further elaborated in the Book of Judges. If under Joshua the Israelites were mostly loyal and obedient, after Joshua's death they

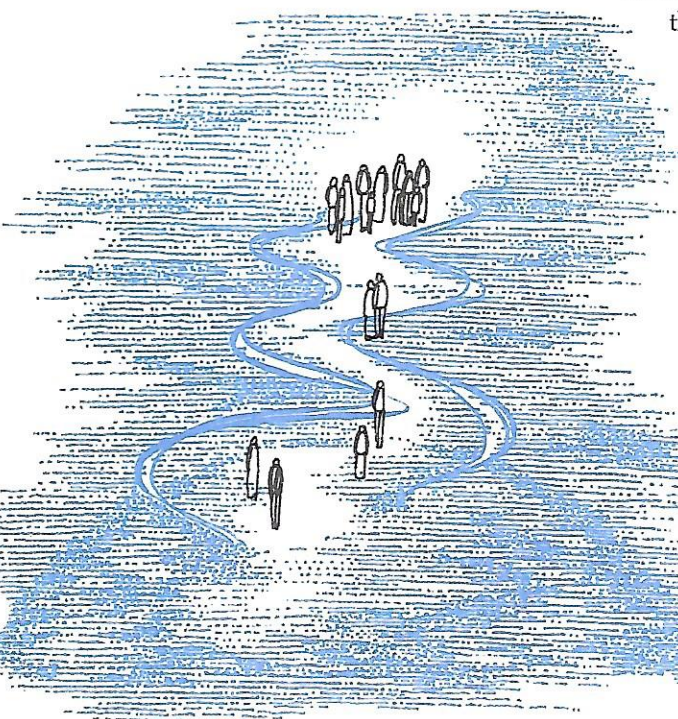
quickly fell into apostasy and turned to worshiping other gods, not once, but time and again!

Each time the Israelites lapsed, God would punish them by allowing them to fall into the

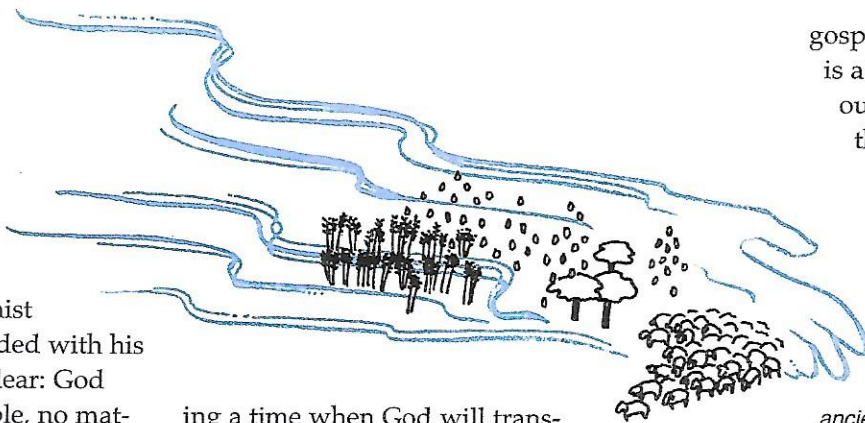
hands of their enemies, a kind of "early warning system" that they were on the wrong path. To some extent these warnings worked. In dire straits, the Israelites would "cry out" to God, that is, they would suddenly "get religion" and ask God's forgiveness. Inevitably, God would relent and "save" them from their enemies by the hands of a "judge"—the ancient Israelite equivalent of a "Lone Ranger." And just as inevitably, when the judge died, the Israelites would lapse once more into apostasy.

Some have taken God's threat in Joshua 2:20-21, namely, that God will not continue to rescue the Israelites from their enemies because of their repeated infidelity, as a statement that there are limits to God's mercy. In fact, the Deuteronomist's message is just the opposite. In the scenes which follow, each time the people lapse into sin and God punishes them, they again "cry out" to God. And God continues to rescue them by sending yet another judge. This apostasy-punishment-repentance-rescue cycle happens so many times in the Book of Judges that it is obvious the author wishes to make the point that, although God may "talk tough," at heart God is a "real softie." Even though God threatens that his forgiveness has limits, yet anytime God's people truly repent, God invariably "saves" them yet another time.

Even so, by the end of the book it is obvious that the institution of judges is completely bankrupt and unworkable. The last judge, Samson, does everything an Israelite should not: He breaks his vows of dedication to God, marries a Philistine woman, cavorts with Philistine prostitutes, and more. But



even then, God searches for yet another means to save his people, this time through the institution of "kings" (which is detailed in the following Books of Samuel and Kings). Like many preachers, the Deuteronomist is perhaps a bit heavy-handed with his message. But his point is clear: God never gives up on his people, no matter how deeply into sin they may slide.



gospel—that, above all, God is a merciful God—turns out to be more profound than even the Deuteronomist could fathom.

The Books of Joshua and Judges are truly "Good News." ■

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*and literature from Johns Hopkins University. His research has focused on the interpretation of the Bible within its ancient Near Eastern cultural and historical context.*

**Next: The Lord's Prayer (by Leonard Doohan)**

## An Incomplete Theology

**N**o one theology is able to capture adequately the mystery that is God. Each work in the Bible has a unique insight about God. But taken together, these various "portraits" of God help us to arrive at a more adequate theology.

Despite the fact that the Deuteronomist believed Yahweh to be "God in heaven above and on earth below," he seems not to have comprehended that God's sovereignty means that God's love also extends beyond Israel to include also people outside the Mosaic covenant. At the same time the Deuteronomist was opining how it would have been better for Israel had the Canaanites actually been eradicated back in the days of Joshua, one of Israel's greatest prophets was envision-

ing a time when God will transform the covenant so that Israel itself becomes "a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6).

Likewise, the Book of Jonah can be read as a polemic against the narrow-mindedness of those who think that God desires the destruction of one's enemies. Jonah attempts to run away rather than preach to Israel's enemy, the Ninevites, that God is displeased with them and that their destruction is imminent. Jonah becomes exceedingly angry when his worst fears are realized: the Ninevites repent and, true to character, God spares them. The author's point that divine mercy is universal is tellingly made in God's concluding reprimand to the sulking Jonah: "Should I not be concerned over Nineveh, the great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot distinguish their right hand from their left, not to mention the many cattle?" (Jonah 4:11).

In the end the Deuteronomist's own

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## Talking About Scripture

- **The Books of Joshua and Judges often show a God who is seemingly ruthless and unmerciful. They can also show a God who is gracious and merciful. In what ways are these books actually "good news"?**



## Reading About Scripture

- ***The New Interpreter's Bible*, volume 2 (Abingdon Press, 1998): Robert B. Coote, "The Book of Joshua," pp. 555-581; Dennis T. Olson, "The Book of Judges," pp. 723-728.**
- **Hawk, L. Daniel. *Joshua*. Liturgical Press, 2001.**
- **Schneider, Tami. *Judges*. Liturgical Press, 2000.**