

## JOSUE: GENERAL OF THE LORD

**M**ORE TERRIBLE than Caesar was the invincible Josue, less celebrated perhaps than the ill-fated Roman, but unsurpassed as the military hero of his own day. No general was more feared, no conqueror more devastating. He ruled as a dictator but was hailed as a savior. He was uncompromising with his people and ruthless with his enemies. His story is one of the most moving and colorful episodes of sacred history.

What made him victorious against such overwhelming odds? Certainly he was no match for the powerful kings of Chanaan. His troops were tired from the endless wandering in the desert; they were outnumbered and ill-equipped for a long campaign across the Jordan. Caesar himself would not have tried it; the great Alexander would have hesitated in what promised to be the greatest military debacle of all time. But where they might have failed, Josue succeeded. Before long "he conquered the entire country; the mountain regions, the Negeb, the foothills and the mountain slopes, with all their kings" (*Josue* 10: 40).

The secret of his success was not the result of superior manpower, nor even of chance. Josue had only one hope of victory; everything was staked on it. This one hope was the Covenant, the promise of Yahweh: "As I promised to Moses, I will deliver to you every place where you set foot" (*Josue*: 1, 3). But like every contract, this Covenant was a two way proposition. In exchange for divine assistance, the Israelites must be faithful to the Law of Moses, "carefully observing all that is written in it." Josue must be firm and steadfast. "Do not fear or be dismayed," he was told, "for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go" (1, 9).

The book of Josue is mainly a record of how God fulfilled His part of the contract. Several key events provide striking evidence of this: the crossing of the Jordan, for example, the capture of Jericho, and the miracle of the sun. Perhaps from a psychological viewpoint, the crossing of the Jordan was the most significant. The question of command had to be settled. Josue would need no less authority than Moses. Of course, he had already been commissioned by God to succeed Moses, but the people needed some sign that Yahweh was with him. An opportune moment was at hand. Just as the Lord made a dry passage through the Red Sea at Moses' command, so now He would do the same for Josue at the Jordan. "Today

I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that I am with you as I was with Moses" (3, 7).

It is interesting to note how the sacred writer describes this providential event. He does so in typical Old Testament fashion. Without alluding to the possibility of natural causes, such as land slides, as a sufficient explanation, the author directly credits Yahweh with interrupting the course of the river. His presence is signified by the Ark. "While all Israel crossed over on dry ground, the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord remained motionless on dry ground in the bed of the Jordan until the whole nation had completed the passage" (3, 17).

However foreign to our notion of historical method, this view of history is no less legitimate. It represents the accepted practice of ancient times and served a highly useful purpose. Its apparent disregard for important details serves only to emphasize the salient fact, in this case, the fulfilling hand of Yahweh in all the vicissitudes of His people. Whatever actually happened on the banks of the Jordan, the important result was thus summarized: "That day the Lord exalted Josue in the sight of all Israel, and thenceforth during his whole life they respected him as they had respected Moses" (4, 14).

We can hardly attach too much importance to this initial conquest. It gave the Invaders a tremendous psychological lift and firmly established them in the promised land. But it was nothing compared to what was to come. The big spectacle and the one most familiar to modern readers was Jericho where "the walls came tumbling down." The city was doomed from the moment the terse announcement came to Josue: "I have delivered Jericho and its king into your power" (6, 3).

The story of that battle is well known; the "strategy" alone is strange and obscure. It can hardly be called military. In fact, it was so completely divorced from our ordinary association between cause and effect as to leave no doubt who the real Author was. This indeed was divine strategy and it was spelled out for Josue in detail: "Have all the soldiers circle the city, marching once around it. Do this for six days, with seven priests carrying rams' horns ahead of the Ark. On the seventh day march around the city seven times and have the priests blow the horns. When they give a long blast on the ram's horn and you hear that signal, all the people shall shout aloud. The wall of the city will collapse, and you will be able to make a frontal attack" (6, 3-5).

The order was carried out on schedule. But there was one important detail, not mentioned above, which proved as difficult for the Israelites to

execute as it is for us today to understand. This concerned the ancient practice called the "ban" or, what comes to the same, the total destruction of all life and property. The inspired author describes how it took effect at Jericho: "They observed the ban by putting to the sword all living creatures in the city: men and women, young and old, as well as oxen, sheep and asses" (6, 21). Such wholesale slaughter is indeed shocking to civilized and cultured men of the twentieth century. On second thought, however, the massacre described here appears quite tame in the light of modern equivalents. Hiroshima and Nagasaki are horrible examples. The Israelites acted according to the custom of that time. They had not yet received the more refined teachings of the Old Testament, much less Christ's law of love and mercy in the New.

There was "mercy" at Jericho, nevertheless. The one notable exception to the general holocaust was none other than the town harlot. "Because Rahab the harlot had hidden the messengers whom Josue had sent to reconnoiter Jericho, Josue spared her with her family and all her kin, who continue in the midst of Israel to this day" (6, 25). She fared even better. In his epistle, St. James adds that Rahab the harlot "was justified by works when she welcomed the messengers and sent them out another way" (2, 25).

Many more remarkable victories followed in the wake of Jericho. One in particular should be noted. It involved the so called "sun miracle" which occasioned the famous dispute with Galileo. Did Josue actually cause the sun to stand still? It would seem so from a literal analysis of the text. The Confraternity edition translates the famous passage as follows:

Josue prayed to the Lord,  
and said in the presence of Israel:  
Stand still, O sun, at Gabaon,  
O Moon, in the valley of Aialon!  
And the sun stood still,  
and the moon stayed,  
while the nation took vengeance on its foes (10, 12-13).

The foes in question were the Amorrites who were besieging Gabaon. Josue had responded to an appeal from the Gabaonites for immediate assistance. After an all night march from Galgal he made a surprise attack and "inflicted a great slaughter on them." Their flight was cut short, however, when the Lord "hurled great stones from the sky . . . more died

from these hailstones than the Israelites slew with the sword" (10, 10). At that point, Josue uttered his well-known command.

There have been numerous explanations offered. For centuries the literal interpretation was held since it was commonly believed that the sun went around the earth. After this theory was disproved a more scientific approach was followed, some explaining the phenomenon in terms of light refraction, others as a shower of meteors, etc. In our own time, the advance of biblical science has provided a better understanding of ancient customs and modes of expression. It is possible now to interpret this passage as the sacred writer so intended. Thus Father De Vault, S.J., in his recent commentary on the book of Josue (Paulist Press) had this to say: "These pseudo-scientific 'explanations' (light refractions and meteor showers, etc.) collapse of their own tortured weight. Happily, they are being replaced by a sane exegesis which recognizes the passage for what it is—a highly poetic version of an emotionally charged cry of Josue, who hoped for time, for daylight, in which to crush the enemy utterly. The enemy was crushed, so the time was granted, and this is expressed poetically in verse 13a, prosaically in verse 13b."

Of course, the above conclusion does not depreciate the book of Josue as an historical document, much less as an inspired work. On the contrary, when properly understood, its value as a reliable witness to ancient thought and practice is greatly enhanced. The difficulty is to understand the book in its historical context. The inspired author wrote in the idiom of the time, with his own special purpose. Frequently his meaning is hidden beneath the literal sense of the words. Even today, for example, no one is fooled or misled when the newspapers report the time for "sunrise" and "sunset." However unscientific these expressions, they are meaningful for us. Should we expect one who was writing for an uncultured audience to be more precise? The important fact remains that the Israelites understood his message. As these dramatic events reveal, the Lord had delivered His people and had kept His promises. The book of Josue is thus a valuable record of God's fidelity to the chosen people. That this fidelity was not reciprocated is the sad testimony of subsequent history.

—Anthony Breen, O.P.