My Personal Review:

Karl Barth, perhaps more than his peers, understood the Biblical sense of "covenant" and the serious methodological flaw of glossing over the history of Israel in the work of Christian theology. For serious students of the Scriptures who share these sentiments, the New American Commentary is a worthy academic and theological entry into the thrust of both Hebrew and Christian canons. David M. Howard, Ph.D., associate professor of Old Testament at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, has produced this 400-page study of the Book of Joshua, a scriptural text about which most of us know a great deal about a very little portion of the work.

The importance of Joshua in the scriptural canon cannot be overstated. If in the course of history the text of Obadiah, for example, had been tragically lost, the dynamism of the covenant would still have been conveyed in the Hebrew Canon. The Book of Joshua, on the other hand, is an historical and theological lynchpin to the history of the Covenant. The Pentateuch texts, the five books prior to Joshua, were books of promise: the reward of faithful adherence to the Law and the possession of a land delivered by God as a perpetual inheritance. The Pentateuch had promised these things: Joshua is the story of the Pentateuch's fulfillment. Without Joshua, the Pentateuch's vision of the future is as lame as that of, say, Marxism.

The first dozen chapters of Joshua describe the takeover of Canaan and contain the vignettes we are most familiar with: the walls of Jericho tumbling down, the courage and faith of Rahab the prostitute in sheltering the spies, etc. The second dozen chapters are perhaps less read and thus
less well known because of the technical style involved in precise land measurement and allotments to the various tribes.

Howard traces the continuing ventures under Moses' hand-picked successor Joshua, and the linguistic and narrative segue between this work and the preceding Deuteronomy is virtually seamless. Much of this continuity may be due to the probability that in terms of authorship, the Book of Joshua, like Deuteronomy, owes its existence to Deuternomic sources, one of the four discernible sources traditions in the historical books. Moses having died at the conclusion of Deuteronomy, this work begins with Joshua actually leading the Israelites across the Jordan River in a scene nearly parallel to the crossing of the Red Sea forty years earlier. Having enshrined the Tabernacle and circumcised this new generation of Israelites, Joshua turns to the task of conquest.

What is troubling for readers of the Book of Joshua—as with the Pentateuch itself for that matter—is the seeming ruthlessness of God who commands Joshua's armies to destroy the Canaanites [an umbrella term for numerous kingdoms and cities of the region] to the last man, woman, and child. Like other Biblical commentators, Howard offers his explanations in an excursus [184ff] which, broadly speaking, suggests primarily that the Canaanites are being punished post facto for generations of evil including child sacrifice, with the attendant purposes of emphasizing Israel's need for cleanliness and obedience to the Law, and God's desire that Israel understand the land is totally theirs, as His gift. Howard's intentions are good; whether they are convincing to the reader is probably a personal matter of value and belief.

In truth only a handful of battles are recounted, and Israel lost one of them at the city of Ai in punishment for violating the Lord's prohibition against looting. Oddly, despite the divine command of total population destruction the Israelites seemed to have made some accommodations with wily natives—indentured slavery of a sort. Overall the impression one gets is that the conquest went smoothly, with limited casualties, under the direction of the Lord as commander-in-chief, as in the Jericho campaign. Howard estimates the campaign as a five year effort. [273n]

Chapter 13 marks a major division of the Book of Joshua. Howard observes correctly that the optimistic tenor of the previous chapters may have been somewhat overstated [295]. Joshua himself observes in 13:1 that large portions of the land remained unconquered. The main thrust of the second half of the Book is the division of the Promised Land and its allotment to the nine and on-half tribes without designated territory. [Moses, it may be recalled, had apportioned some land east of the Jordan to parts of three tribes.] This portion of the work is more detailed and less glamorous, but Howard's commentary goes a long way toward clarifying its importance. He notes the exactitude of the surveyor's efforts and descriptions, as well as the problem of future resistance, since some tribes were allotted portions that would prove too hard to capture.
Howard does his best to balance some theological inconsistencies in the text itself. On the one hand, the Book goes to pains to show that each tribe's land allotment was made by the direct intervention of God. On the other hand, several tribes--Judah, most notably--did very well in terms of the quality of the land they received, while others, like Dan, were never able to even settle their land but moved elsewhere. Howard notes that the distribution seems to favor certain tribes for a variety of reasons reaching back to Genesis. On the other hand, Joshua himself was open to special situations with Caleb and others regarding land arrangements, and he made provision for Levite cities and the so-called cities of sanctuary for accused murderers. From both the Biblical text itself and Howard's commentary, Joshua does little wrong. At the end of the work the author[s] refer to him with the title applied to Moses, "the Servant of the Lord."

Howard himself is highly conversant with recent Biblical scholarship of the Evangelical tradition, and he is successful in producing a smooth reading commentary while providing the technician with an oasis of sources. At minimum, a thorough reading of the Pentateuch is a prerequisite for this work, preferably with a mainstream commentary.

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