**St. Margaret’s English Community RCIA**

**The Historical Books of the Old Testament**

[The Books of *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1st* and *2nd Samuel, 1st* and *2nd Kings, 1st* and *2nd Chronicles, Ezra* and *Nehemiah*; *NAB Bible*, pp. 228-493]

The Christian BIBLE is not arranged in the same order as the Hebrew Scriptures. For the Christian Old Testament the books are arranged as follows:

*Pentateuch*

*The Historical Books*

*Biblical Novellas*

*The Wisdom Books*

*The Prophetic Books*

The *Pentateuch* ends with the death of Moses and the election of **Joshua son of Nun** to lead the People of Israel into the Promised Land (*Canaan*) [*Deuteronomy* 34]. Chronologically the Historical Books cover a vast period from the entrance into Canaan (about 1220-1200 BC) to the fall of the Southern Kingdom and the Exile (about mid-6th-5th C BC).

The *Book of Joshua* is the story of this man, (*Yehoshua* = meaning “The Lord saves”)*.* He was originally called *Hoshea* *bin Nun* (*Joshua son of Nun* where *Hoshea* means “salvation*”*), but as happens in other places in the Scriptures, his name was changed to reflect a special role he played in salvation history (similar to *Abram* to *Abraham*). He was first mentioned in the *Book of Numbers* when he is one of the 12 spies went to reconnoitre “the Promised Land” [*Numbers 13:16*], and later was the only one to ascend Mount Sinai with Moses (*Exodus 24:13*) and is given a special privilege to accompany Moses into the Tabernacle sanctuary. Given this, it is not so surprising that God chose Joshua as the successor to Moses (*Numbers 27: 18-23*) or as we read in the last Chapter of *Deuteronomy*, “*And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid hands upon him; so the sons of Israel obeyed him, and did as the Lord had commanded Moses*. So the *Book of Joshua* serves as an epilogue to the *Pentateuch* and a transition into the Historical Books of the Old Testament. Joshua brings the People of Israel into Canaan to take possession of the land.

**The Book of Joshua**

The *Book of Joshua* begins with the preparations for the entry into the promised land that entails crossing the western bank the Jordan River. Again, spies are sent to the city of Jericho to prepare the way for the move (Chapters 1-5). In this section an important note is the story of the prostitute *Rahab* who hides the spies in her home and lies to people searching for the spies. Is this a commendation of lying? (Joshua 2: 1-13). St. Augustine addresses this in his own writings: “*No lie is just. Accordingly, when examples of lying are proposed to us from the sacred Scriptures, either they are not lies but are thought so for not being understood, or, if they are lies, they cannot be imitated because they cannot be just*… “*As for it being written that God dealt well with the Hebrew midwives and with Rahab the harlot of Jericho, he did not deal well with them because they lied but because they were merciful to the men of God. And so, it was not their deception that was rewarded, but their benevolence; the benignity of their intention, not the impunity of their invention*.”

In the presentation of Joshua here, the writer draws many parallels to the stories of Moses: sending spies into Jericho was similar to spies (like Joshua) sent into the Promised Land. The cross of the Jordan River is a parallel to the crossing of the red Sea. The celebration of the Passover is done both at the time of the Exodus and when the People of Israel arrive in the Promised Land – in these instances, the *Passover Meal* is eaten before Israel embarks on a momentous spiritual journey. These similarities highlight the connection between Moses and Joshua.

Chapters 6-12 tell the story of the Battle of Jericho, the first major city conquered in Canaan. What is important in the story is how the defeat is more liturgical and miraculous than a military strategy. Rather than lay siege to the city, they march around the city once a day for seven days, and then seven times around the city on the seventh day with shouts and trumpet blasts until he city walls collapse. Note another parallel to the *Exodus* event here: the home of Rahab is protected by a red cord tied to her window, while the Israelite soldiers (like the “angels of death” in Exodus) pass by leaving them safe while they destroy Jericho. Interestingly, **Rahab** later becomes the wife of **Salmon**, the father of **Boaz** who we meet in the Book of Ruth – and Boaz is the great-great-grandfather of King David (see Gospel of Matthew 1:5).

A theological thread that plays out through the ***Book of Joshua*** is that God’s mercy and favour can go beyond the people of Israelite to others, and the story of Rahab is an example of this. The actions of Rahab are not just to protect her own life – they stem from her knowledge of what she has already heard about the Israelites (*Joshua 2: 5-14*) and she makes a confession of faith in YHWH, the God of Israel. Rahab makes a covenant with the people of God, and by means of that covenant she and her family are delivered from death. There are similar stories of other Canaanites (the Gibeonites) who are permitted to enter into God’s service. The Gibeonites first try to deceive the Israelites, are then pressed into service to provide the labour for the material needs of the Tabernacle sanctuary, and – because of their faithfulness – are given a job as custodians of the needs for liturgy or worship so they are always and forever placed in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple precincts in service to God (*Joshua* 9).

Chapters 13 to 21 tell the story of the division of the Promised Land into sectors for the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Map 3 in the Bible (after p. 370) shows this. These are the Twelve Tribes of Israel:

1. **Asher 5. Gad 9. Naphtali**
2. **Benjamin 6. Issachar 10. Reuben**
3. **Dan 7. Judah 11. Simeon**
4. **Ephraim 8. Manasseh 12. Zebulun**

Even before the whole area of the Promised Land is conquered, Joshua begins the arduous task of dividing it among the people of the 12 Tribes. Although many of the areas eventually apportioned to the sons of the 12 Tribes are not yet subdued, the important issue is that this was the land God gave to them. It is God’s and they are the stewards. Chapters 22-24 (and the death of Joshua) are a reminder to the people that they must remain faithful to the COVENANT. Fidelity to the Lord is key. Joshua’s “last will” ion Chapter 24:15 sums this up: “*And if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, chose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River* [Transjordan], *or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but for me and my house, we will serve the LORD*.”

In some spiritual interpretations of the *Book of Joshua*, he is seen as a type of Christ, who leads Israel through prefigurements of the sacraments into the Promised Land, a foretaste of heaven and life in God’s presence. The warfare against the Canaanites poses some theological questions about warfare – or “just war” – but these can only be understood in the light of the Cross. We need to recall that the name *Joshua* in Greek is *Jesus*, and these struggles and wars are a way of explaining the spiritual war between God and evil in the world overcome, conquered by the Cross of Christ.

**The Book of Judges**

The Book of Judges cover the period from the time of the death of Joshua until the time of the rise of the prophet Samuel. This is a time of great difficulty for Israel, a time of religious, social and political chaos, alleviated only occasionally by the intervention of charismatic leaders (*judges*) who delivered Israel from oppression from their enemies but who also served as religious and civil authorities. There are 12 Judges (major and minor) and one “anti-judge” in order:

*Major* *Minor* *Anti-judge*

Othniel

Ehud

Shamgar

Deborah

Gideon

Abimelech

Tola

Jair

Jephthah

Ibzan

Elon

Hillel

Samson

There are six major and six minor judges and the “anti-judge”, Abimelech, comes almost in the centre. The judges are fairly well distributed among the tribes of Israel, and their opponents are from the traditional enemies of Israel (Mesopotamians, Moabites, Philistines, Midianites etc…).

After the opening of the Book of Judges is meant to show a continuation with the Book of Joshua. Here we see that the tribes of Judah, Simeon and Ephraim have some military successes after Joshua’s death but for the most part there are more noticeable failures to drive out the Canaanites from their territories. An angel (messenger) brings a message from God (2:1) telling them that they have been disobedient to the command to drive out the people of the land; therefore God will punish Israel by means of these people.

In the *Book of Judges* we see that a pattern is set up that is repeated throughout – where the people abandon their exclusive devotion to the Lord and begin worshipping the gods of the Canaanites among whom they live. This religious infidelity is both the cause and an effect of their inability to drive the Canaanites from the land (often because of inter-marriage). They fall into a cyclical pattern of: 1) sin; 2) suffering; 3) supplication; 4) salvation; 5) setback… or

1. rebellion; 2) retribution; 3) repentance; 4) redemption; and 5) relapse..

The reference in Judges 3: 1-10 of “nations the Lord allowed to remain, so that through them he might test Israel,” sets up the pattern mentioned just now. The individual stories of the judges begins here (*Judges 3:7 to 16:31*). Of these stories I would like to review a few.

**Ehud**. A Benjamite raised up while the people were subject to the Moabites. The point of the story is that Ehud was LEFT HANDED, which was considered something negative in the Old Testament. Yet, it was because of this, he could hide a sword on his right thigh, and while in the presence of King Eglon (a play on words as he was obese and the Hebrew for round is *agol*), and the king receives the special message from Ehud while sitting in his privy (the cool upper chamber).

**Deborah**. She was a prophetess and was a civil leaders recognized by many. She calls on Barak to march against Mount Tabor. But Barak is so timid he demands Deborah accompany him. This pushes Deborah to warn him that for this timidity and lack of courage, another woman will claim victory (not Deborah). This was in the woman, Jael in whose tent the fleeing King Sisera took refuge. She killed him by driving a tent peg into his skull while he slept. The victory won by Jael leads to the famous “*Song of Deborah*” (Judges 5:1-31). The story of Deborah emphasizes God’s ability to raise up and use the marginalized – here two women – in order to lead his people and work his salvation.

**Gideon**. Another example of how God chooses the weak is Gideon of Manasseh, a weak coward, hiding in the land of the Midianites. He is hiding behind a wine press when God’s angel finds him. Gideon demands a special “sign” to prove the messenger is from God. After putting God to the test, he reluctantly obeys and leads a very limited force of some 300 poorly trained soldiers, yet through a surprise attack they rout the enemy and win the battle. Weak though he was, he was chosen to rule over the people, and to pass on that leadership through his sons. Unfortunately, among his “70” sons, Gideon also had an illegitimate son from a concubine in Shechem whose name was **Abimelech**. He convinced the Shechemites to reject the rule of the sons of Gideon, and has them all killed off except the youngest one, Jotham, who curses Abimelech who goes on to eventually be put to death after a woman hurls a stone at him and cracks his skull.

**Samson**. The last judge who we discuss is one whose name is already known to many, Samson. Samson was from the tribe of Dan, a man possessed of great physical strength who used his strength to vandalize the Philistines. Unfortunately, while he liked to vanquish the Philistine men, he had a weakness for Philistine women, especially in the person of Delilah.

A common question for many who know some of the story of Samson concerns his long curly hair. What was the significance of the hair? Was it the source of some sort of mythic power? But to really understand this, we have to look back on how Samson is introduced. His parents were unable to have children. A messenger from the Lord appears to the woman and promises a son, but then ways, “*No razor shall touch his head, for the boy is to be a Nazarite* *for God, from the womb*.” We know that a Nazarite goes back to Numbers 6: 2-8 which refers to a “vow of the Nazarites” which means to dedicate oneself to God, and while under this vow, no razor shall touch their head. We now from our New Testament studies that St. Paul himself took such a vow, which is why he is often depicted as “bald.” In fact the Nazarite vow has 3 parts: a) no contact with a dead body (yet Samson eats honey from the corpse of a lion); b) no “wine or strong drink,” (yet Samson hosts great feasts with wine and strong drinks); and c) no razor shall come upon his head (yet he allows or is tempted by Delilah to cut off his hair).

Understanding this Nazarite vow we see that the tragic fall of Samson is a result of breaking all three parts of the vow. Samson is also so smitten by Delilah that he fails to see her deception – so he is foolish. The author here is trying to underline the problems that arise from mixed marriages with Gentiles that would lead to the destruction of the civil and religious identity of the Israelites. Although in his death, Samson achieves a great victory killing so many Philistines in the destruction of the temple of Dagan. But the tragedy is that his own lack of self-control prevented him from being a successful leader of the people.

The trajectory of the story of the history of the period of the judges is one that sees Israel as a nation slowly disintegrating.

**The Book of Ruth**

The *Book of Ruth* follows *Judges* in the Christian canon of the Bible, as it is a tale that takes place during the time of the Judges (*Ruth 1:1*), and ends with the genealogy of David (*Ruth 4:18-22*), who is the main subject of 1st and 2nd Samuel, the books that follow. Another important aspect is the mention of Elimelech and Naomi (*Ruth 1:2*), Ephrathites who are from BETHLEHEM and we saw how *Bethlehemites* figure in the last sections of the epilogue of *Judges* (*Judges 17-18* and *19-21*) as a place of refuge for Israel and the place where a good king might be found.

Although the *Book of Ruth* tells its story from a female perspective, the narrative unfolds on a man from Bethlehem named Elimelech, a name which means “*My God is King*.” He is an Israelite from the tribe of Judah, he and his wife and sons have been forced to leave their home in the Promised Land and seek refuge in the Kingdom of the Moabites, southeast of the Jordan River because of famine. [This recalls how the sons of Judah sought refuge across the Nile River because of famine in the Book of Genesis.] Once settled there, his two sons marry Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. Unfortunately, both Elimelech and his two sons die, leaving behind three widows: Naomi, Elimelech’s wife, and the Moabites Orpah and Ruth.

There is a bit of irony in this story starting in Bethlehem, as the city name means “House of Bread” in Hebrew. It was formerly a place with abundant food supplies. So, it is ironic that the famine was so bad that it forced the Bethlehemites such as Elimelech and his wife and sons to flee to Moab, the long-standing enemy of the people of Judah. It was in Moab, again going back to Genesis that figures in the story of Lot and his daughter (*Genesis 19: 36-37*), who after getting her father drunk, slept with him, became pregnant and named the child “Moab” meaning “from my father.” The land of the Moabites came to mean the land of those begotten from incest, a land of sin.

Now, following the death of their husbands, the mother and her two daughters-in-law Orpah and Ruth, decide to return to Bethlehem, the hometown of Naomi. But before setting out, Naomi gives a beautiful speech to Orpah and Ruth, freeing them from their ties to her allowing each to return to her own home and family as she could not provide for both. Orpah decides to heed the advice and leave, but Ruth swears a beautiful oath never to abandon Naomi. [*Ruth* 1: 16-18, a very popular reading chosen at weddings). This is a wonderful confession of faith in the God of Israel and fidelity to family ties. Interestingly – as we have seen in the books of *Joshua* and *Judges*, this confession comes from the lips of a pagan woman whose family was rooted in immorality, idolatry, and opposition to God. So, in this context, Ruth’s proclamation is seen as a covenant-oath by which she formally binds herself as kin to Naomi and breaks the ties of kinship with her own family. Thus, her covenant-oath also involves a formal change of religious belief to follow the God of Israel, what we would today call a “conversion.” Like Rahab in the *Book of Joshua,* Ruth puts her whole future in with the God of the people of Israel. Her oath sets up the tension that has to be resolved in the rest of the book: Will the God of Elimelech and Naomi show faithfulness (*hesed*) to this foreign woman who now binds herself to him by covenant?

Naomi and Ruth travel together and arrive at Bethlehem during the harvest season. Once settled, they go to work gleaning barley in the fields of Boaz, a wealthy relative of Naomi. Boaz is concerned for Ruth’s welfare, and shows this by giving her extra food and instructing the servants to treat this foreign woman with respect, and not to “molest” her, a word that highlights Ruth’s physical and social vulnerability as a poor “foreign” widow.

Bo’az’s name means “in him is strength, and he lives up to this name by his protection of both women, and saving them and their family line by marrying Ruth. Boaz is a pious man: his first words uttered are a greeting we use often today “The Lord be with you!” In fact throughout the *Book of Ruth*, Bethlehem is seen as a sacred place of high devotion to YHWH, and Boaz himself is a righteous man who followed the Mosaic law, “*When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in your field, you shall not go back and get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands*.” [*Deut. 24:19*  and *Lev. 19:9-10*]

Ruth falls into all three categories here: she is a sojourner, she is fatherless (having renounced her kin) and she is a widow. In the *Book of Judges* we saw vicious examples how foreign women were sacrificed, abused, murdered, dismembered and abducted. So the *Book of Ruth* offers a juxtaposition to the *Book of Judges* making in now clear that here we find prescriptions or norms on how to treat such women, and the relationship also between the sexes. *Ruth 2: 11-12* shows Boaz calling down a blessing on Ruth because of her covenant fidelity.

And the fulfilment of that blessing shows how God places her “under his wing” through the marriage to Boaz. Although kindness (*hesed*) toward the vulnerable is commanded in Mosaic law, Boaz goes above and beyond any legal prescription in his care and love for Ruth.

In a final scene, the people of Bethlehem pronounce a blessing over Ruth that likens her to one of the mothers of Israel (*Ruth 4:11*) – and through this Ruth now becomes not just a part of Israel, but a matriarch in Israel, the mother of future kings. In the end, another importance of this book is that it opens the way to the story of David through the genealogy going from Elimelech through the descendants of Perez, the ancestor of Boaz that will lead to David the King. It is a story that goes from tragedy to triumph and it is a story of God’s Divine Providence for the ancestors of King David – who is at the centre of the books of Samuel that now follow.