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“I’m Gonna Make You Famous”: Joshua 6:23-27

Abstract

“So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land.” (Josh 6:27)

The greatest of the Egyptian Pharaohs, Ramses II provides a dramatic foil highlighting the Old Testament presentation of the figure of Joshua, a contemporary of Ramses. The accomplishments of each gave them reason to believe their contributions would be lasting, but ultimately only one changed the world, while the other was largely forgotten except by historians and archaeologists. The fame of Ramses arose from his arrogant exercise of power, while the fame of Joshua was bestowed on him as a faithful successor of Moses in serving Yahweh.

One of the most conspicuous features of the legacy of John N. Oswalt is his biblical preaching. His ability to focus the vital life of the biblical story and juxtapose it with contemporary experience consistently challenges and delights those who hear him. This is a sermon preached at Asbury Theological Seminary October 18, 2016. I wrote this sermon thinking of my professor and mentor, who also introduced me to Shelly’s poem “Ozymandias” which he would recite from memory in class.

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Introduction

Fame. It's probably one of the two or three most sought-after prizes in our world. Whether it's a horde of "friends" on Facebook, a posse of followers on Twitter, or maybe it's bigger – book sales, high profile speaking engagements, prominence in denominational leadership... Fame makes the other things people seek after just that much better. Nobody much likes to admit that they want fame, but deep down, most of us do.

Fame was important in the ancient world. Monuments, inscriptions, temples, massive burial complexes, palaces, capital cities were built on bedrock just across the river from the existing, perfectly functional capital. Fame drove the kings, warlords and elites of the ancient world every bit as much as it drives us today, and even more so, because they believed that fame in this world also made you famous with the gods! They feared that if their name was forgotten, somehow in the afterlife they would suffer or experience annihilation.

Every ancient monarch tried to put up as many monuments and inscriptions as they could, all inscribed with their name, and at the end, a declaration that anyone who defaces their name, replaces it on the monument, or just allows it to fall into disrepair and not be visible, will be punished by terrible curses! Likewise, those who ensure the monument's visibility, keep it prominent, will be blessed and at times could add a supplementary inscription with his own name, or just add his name to the restored inscription.¹

So when Yahweh says to Joshua, "I'm going to make you famous!" he was saying a lot more than "you're going to be trending on Twitter for a month!" Spoken to any aspiring leader in the ancient world, God was promising success in every endeavor, everlasting remembrance, eternal recognition of his exploits. A name above all names, a name at which every knee would bow... Or was it?

Ramses II: Poster Boy for Ancient Fame

Travel back in time with me in your imagination. The scene I'm sketching is based on facts, but with some elaboration as well. The year is 1258 BC.² The place is Per-Ramses, Egypt. A 40-something Egyptian pharaoh looks across his capital city. It is a splendid, sprawling capital. Built on the older site of the Hyksos capital of Avaris, refurbished by his grandfather, further developed by his father, the construction efforts of Ramses II ensured that this city is thought to be one of the largest, if not the largest single, integrally constructed building on the face of the earth prior to the modern era. Excavations by the archaeologist Manfred Bietak at the site known as Qantir, or Tel-ed-Dab'a, confirm this. The city proper was over 3.7 miles long and 2 miles wide, and enclosed well over 2500 acres.³ That's 10

million square meters! It was criss-crossed by canals and lakes, and has been called the "Venice of Ancient Egypt." The site was so stupendous, it's even mentioned in the Bible as the great city on which the Israelite slaves had labored.

In the distance Ramses spots 3 splendidly arrayed chariots, clearly a diplomatic dispatch, accompanied by a retinue of retainers, recorders, sycophants and camp followers. The Pharaoh, Ramses II, smiles, and for good reason. He is ending a 250-year war with the only remaining super-power of the ancient world. He is about to make an everlasting peace with the Hittite king Hatush-Ili III. Months of delicate negotiations have brought about this momentous achievement: the two most dangerous military and imperial powers of the Late Bronze Age are about to make peace!

But Ramses II knows that more than negotiations led to this moment. His mind travels back some 15 or 16 years, back to the city of Kadesh on the Orontes, in the year 1274 BC. Then a 20-something new king of Egypt, Ramses II, looks down on a field of battle. Caught by surprise during a rash, unguarded and hasty advance when he'd divided his force and been duped by Hittite spies, he'd been attacked by surprise after making camp. He'd been trapped between the walls of Kadesh and the waters of the Orontes River. He and his army faced almost certain annihilation.

But...the young king showed his mettle and through fierce personal, raw physical courage, enormous skill handling his chariot, and lethal effectiveness with his personal weaponry, fought back, rallied his troops, and staved off utter disaster.⁴

Ramses didn't win. But he didn't have to. All he had to do was fight to a draw. Which is what he did.

Before him is the carnage of the battlefield. Wrecked chariots, dead horses, dead men, now stripped of their armor and weapons, being loaded for whatever burial they would get.

But something monumental had happened. All through the Late Bronze Age, the great powers had fenced and feinted at one another, masking their hostility behind diplomatic exchanges and predatory trade-deals, always fighting each other via proxies, their client kings in Canaan and Syria.

But this day, almost by mistake, the two great kings, Ramses II of Egypt and Muwatalli II of the Hittites, met *directly* on the field of battle, their *full* forces engaged. It was as if the United States and Russia collided on the battlefield of Syria, fully deployed, fully committed, locked and loaded, safeties off, nuclear codes keyed in. And disaster was averted, albeit after a brutal, bloody battle.

The young Ramses had negotiated a cease-fire with the Hittite king. Both men had decided to go home and tell a tale of victory so glorious only the gods

could have given it; or god-kings. Both men decided to let the other one get away with it.

Both men clearly knew they had in the other not just a formidable adversary, but also, someone with whom they could deal. Terms were reached.

It had taken 16 more years, a Hittite leadership crisis, the rise of a new empire in the east and a new Hittite king, but today, the Hittite chariots were bearing solid silver tablets inscribed, in elegant Mesopotamian cuneiform, the first known written peace treaty between two world-class super-powers, including an agreement, by the way, to return any fugitive escaped slaves that might stumble onto their territory.

So watching those chariots approaching, in his 40's, Ramses believed that he'd secured a peace that would last forever. He felt he had reached the pinnacle of influence, power, beneficence, and fame and that the whole world had opened up before him, a future of Egyptian-fostered peace; wealth, power and fame seemed inevitable. Among the many temples, inscriptions, monuments and statues that Ramses II raised for himself, to promote his fame and everlasting memory, one was over 30 feet high, carved from a single stone, and weighed over 80 tons.

What Ramses did not know was that the world for which he had secured peace was about to vanish. The Bronze Age culture, which had stood for thousands of years, achieved a pinnacle of splendor, wealth, sophistication and power in his own person and rule. But now it was about to explode into a million shards and fly across the land, then be blown away in the wind and covered with dust.⁵

The end of the Late Bronze Age was so traumatic, so cataclysmic, that historians refer to it as "The Catastrophe." Ramses died after an epic, 67-year rule, in 1212 BC. A dozen years later, it was all over. A darkness of confusion, violence, destruction, and chaos descended on the ancient Near East, with no relief coming for 200 years. Egypt didn't fall. It just shriveled. From the Sun God of the ancient world, Egypt dwindled to a flickering lamp in a hurricane. Within a generation, the Egyptians would abandon the land of Canaan and hunker down in their traditional homeland; a mere shadow of the power they had been, never, ever again to emerge as a world-class power. By the time of Samuel and Saul, Ramses' great capital city had been abandoned. The branch of the Nile River upon which it had been built silted up, and the Venice of Egypt found itself with no water, an instant ghost town. The capital shifted, stones and monuments were robbed out of the abandoned ruins, and the sands, the eternally victorious desert sands, covered the site. The name "Ramses" would continue to be borne by the great king's descendants, but none would equal his stature, and the glorious city he built was all but forgotten.⁶

Ramses thought he'd done something great, but it was over in a blink of the eye.

That's the fame of the world.

Joshua: A Different Type of Fame?

Now, let's leave Ramses in peace back at his capital, contemplating a new world order, everlasting fame, and 1000-ton colossi, and think ahead a few years, about 1240 BC.⁷

Another man, Joshua, faces a challenge. This man is no Ramses, though he's about the same age. But he's from the entirely other end of the social spectrum. This man is not a mighty king. He has no capital city, no golden chariots, no retainers. Instead of solid silver tablets inscribed with dozens of lines of ornate cuneiform, he has two rough tables of stone inscribed with a few lines of primitive Hebrew script, some scrolls, and his memory of a great man: Moses. Joshua is a former slave of Egypt. In Egypt's eyes, in the eyes of the great Ramses, he is a fugitive from justice. He has to guide his people, all escaped slaves and the children of slaves, across the torrential flood of the Jordan river, and take on the city-rulers of Canaan—about 30 of these kings, all in the employ of... Ramses... all devoted to advancing the power of Egypt and their own careers. They will not stand by and allow the Israelites to return to the land where their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, had lived, which was promised to them by Yahweh. Not a chance. Though Canaan is, in the grand scheme of things, a backwater, and these town rulers were pretty much third-rate warlords, to a rag-tag army of former slaves coming in from the desert, these town rulers pose a lethal threat. They are better armed, better trained, better supplied. They are professional soldiers, many foreign mercenaries. Every one would have been committed to destroying these escaped slaves or returning them, like the fugitives they were, to Egypt.⁸ In the service of Egypt's voracious appetites, these rulers had systematically stripped the land of its agricultural produce, steadily reduced the peasant population to desperation, subjected them to forced labor, and expatriated thousands to Egypt to serve the Pharaoh.⁹ They are accustomed to stomping the daylight out of peasant uprisings and third-rate revolutionaries. To them, Israel, poorly armed, ill-trained, is at this moment, a mere annoyance. Israel is out-gunned before they even enter the land.

To this man, Joshua, God offers *to make him famous!*

Is the fame that God will offer Joshua really the same thing as that sought by all the great ones of the ancient—and face it, modern—world?

The book of Joshua shows how God went about making Joshua famous.

First of all, Joshua actually needed something of a public relations

branding boost: look who he had to follow, Moses! The Babylonian Talmud observes, “The elders of that generation said: The countenance of Moses was like that of the sun; the countenance of Joshua was like that of the moon. Alas, for such shame! Alas for such reproach!”¹⁰ Moses, who faced down Pharaoh, presided over the divinely-sent barrage of plagues, led the nation out of slavery, crossed the Red Sea, stood before God at Sinai, received the Ten Commandments (twice!), and mediated the covenant between Yahweh and his people. This Moses is called “The Servant of Yahweh,” which is the highest accolade an Old Testament character can receive! And yet, Joshua, in the first verse of his book, is called “the assistant of Moses” and even though Moses is dead, he, not Joshua, is still called “The Servant of Yahweh.” So Joshua needs some elevation. Israel was in a stature crisis. As the memory of Moses faded—which it did if the book of Judges is any indication—who would be the next person to wear those sandals?

Joshua also needed a publicity boost because the text hints that for some in Israel, Joshua was somewhat on trial. When he challenges the tribes settling east of the Jordan River to cross over and fight with their fellow Israelites west of Jordan, they answer, “Sure, we’ll do it, we’ll obey you just like we obeyed Moses, as long as the Lord is with you the same way he was with Moses!” I’ve adjusted the translation there a tad so you can hear the emphasis in the original. It’s not well wishes! It’s a condition, indeed, a *sine qua non*, almost an ultimatum: we’ll follow you like we followed Moses, BUT, you had better be someone whom the Lord is with, the same way he was with Moses.

That’s why it’s vital to notice that God really does give Joshua prestige and favor in the eyes of the people. As they cross the Jordan at its full flood stage, a huge and dangerous undertaking, the narrator tells us, “Now the LORD said to Joshua, “This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, that they may know that just as I have been with Moses, I will be with you” (Josh. 3:7). Then as they complete the passage of the Jordan, we are told, “On that day the LORD exalted Joshua in the sight of all Israel; so that they revered him, just as they had revered Moses all the days of his life” (Josh. 4:14). And then after the victory at Jericho, we read the words I chose as an epigraph over this reflection: “So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame was in all the land.”

But for Joshua, fame is not really the goal. Fame was just a means to a larger purpose. After they cross the Jordan, Joshua reminds the people that their actions are so that “all the peoples of the earth may know the hand of the LORD, that it is mighty, so that you may fear the LORD your God forever” (Josh 4:24). Later people will speak not of hearing of Joshua’s fame, but of hearing the mighty deeds of Yahweh.

So how does that work out for Joshua?

Run ahead 5 years. This man, Joshua, stands on a hilltop. This time, it's in the north of Canaan, on the heights of Naphtali. From these heights, about 2500 feet above sea level he can look down about 1400 feet to the great citadel of Hazor. This town is the crown jewel of Canaan. The Bible calls it "The head of all those kingdoms." It's ruler alone, among all the rulers of Canaan's towns and cities, got away with calling himself, in letters to the great rulers, a "king" (rather than "mayor"). As Hazor goes, so goes the entire northern third of Canaan, all of the Galilee. Joshua has led his people's fighting force, all former slaves of Egypt, in a series of pitched battles against the Thug rulers and Warlords of Canaan.

The escaped slave, Joshua and his fighting force of escaped slaves, knew they could never have their old home of Canaan back, knew that nobody could ever live in peace in Canaan, as long as these Thugs, these petty gangster-kings of Canaan, had their way.

The Bible says "His fame was in all the land." But seriously, for Canaan, that's not saying much. It's like saying "He was famous all over Lake Wobegon!" Here at the end, just as in the beginning, Joshua has to remember that the battle, as, ultimately, does the fame, belongs to the Lord.

So he'd waged a series of battles aimed at decapitating Ramses' administration in Canaan. The rulers of Jericho, Ai, Lachish, Ashkelon, Azekah, and many others—30 in all—had joined together to stop him. All failed.

And now, looking down on the daunting 200 acre city of Hazor, Joshua can tell his compatriots: this is the last one. When this city falls, the campaign is over. Canaan will be free from Egypt's tyranny. It will be able to breathe again. The blood of centuries of civil war and imperial oppression will wash from its soil. The fields trampled every year by horses, chariots, wagons and carts, the boots of thousands of soldiers, will blossom with crops and flowers. Roads once choked by military convoys will bustle with commerce.

The Israelites would do something they had fantasized about for generations: They would *farm*, on their own land. They would hand that farm to their children, secure in the knowledge that their great king, Yahweh, unlike Ramses, happily gave them the land and would ensure they could keep it. They would live kindly on the land, not stripping it, not wrenching from it every single morsel it could produce, leaving it tired and depleted. They would live kindly on it. And the land would reward their kindness with bounty.

Canaan's highland fields only yielded crops to those with discerning minds and sensitive hands, who could be intimate with the land and fit the cultivation technique precisely to each little patch of soil. Now this land would

begin to support hundreds of small farming villages and towns popping up after about 1200 BC, like mushrooms after a spring rain.

These former slaves, these peasants born in the wilderness of Sinai, Edom, and Moab, would do something daring: they would *plant vineyards*, which needed years to mature. They would plant *olive trees*, which couldn't yield for a generation. Such plantings say they could imagine a future, a future without Ramses or his Thug-Princes.

And this Joshua, looking down at Hazor, probably knew the great powers of his age, the Late Bronze Age, were doomed. He knew the restiveness of groups on the move, the Philistines, the Moabites, the Ammonites, the little kingdoms, the mice in a game of big cats; but mice growing claws and teeth. But he didn't need pundits and researchers, he knew this because he knew his God. Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, had declared his promise, a promise that gave Israel hope. And Yahweh's law, especially as seen in Deuteronomy, had cast a vision for a completely new society, one in which Kings were not tyrants, but guardians of the covenant, the alliance binding Yahweh with his people, and binding his people one with another. A society in which each person considered the other a brother or a sister, where each family would be a sacred enclosure, safe from predation and violation. Where each person's land would be inviolate. Where one day each week was devoted to rest and celebration. Where life, truth, honor, marriage and family were the highest goods. Where God alone was truly king, and the human king was simply his glad and humble steward, as was prophesied by Jacob in Genesis: "The scepter will not depart from Judah, *until he comes to whom it belongs*" (Gen 49:10). The king in Israel was merely a steward, a humble custodian of the authority that ultimately belonged to God.

This Joshua! Really, he was a nobody. He came from nobody we know. I like to joke that Joshua the son of Nun was the "Son of None" because we have no idea who "Nun" was. Joshua left behind no descendants we can identify. The text reports no marriage, no children, though according to the Talmud, Joshua married... Rahab the Harlot!¹¹ I like to hope that's true! But we don't really know. Once the little patch of ground promised to Israel was secured, Joshua retired from soldiering. No life in campaign tents for him. No triumphant marches trailing spoils and captives from foreign wars would commemorate Joshua. By every single measure of ancient Near Eastern grandeur – land, cities, ancestry, offspring, palatial residences, worldwide conquest and domination, monumental inscriptions – Joshua was ultimately a loser. No kingdom, no glory, no wealth, no palaces, no descendants.

Then, this Joshua did something Ramses would never have done, that no self-respecting world-class ruler would do. *He just vanished*. He retired to his own

patch of ground, inherited by divine lot, like everyone else. He farmed, for how long exactly, we don't know. We do know he emerged again at the age of 110 years to give a speech, and then to die.

A nobody.

No Ramses II is he.

And yet, this old earth would circle the sun over 3200 more times, and the name of Joshua would still be known and celebrated. But really, other than historians, who knows of Ramses II? He has become a cinema cartoon character, Yule Brenner in eye-liner, moaning "Moses, Moses, Moses!" Who recalls the name of the Hittite king he made his peace with? And what happened to that everlasting treaty of peace?

In 1818 the British Museum announced that it would be receiving a 7.25-ton fragment of a massive statue of Ramses II. It would be 3 more years before this treasure arrived, but the announcement, and the fact that this massive statue had been hidden in the desert sands for thousands of years, inspired the poet, Percy Shelly, to pen one of his most famous poems, using one of Ramses' throne names, in an anglicized form, "Ozymandias:"

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.





Statue of Ramses II in the British Museum

(image used with permission)

Joshua, the nobody, son of nobody, is immortalized in scripture. More importantly, when God decided to become an actual human being, to enter into this tired, dying world and breathe new life into it, when God took on flesh to suffer and die and rise again for the redemption of creation, when he decided, like Joshua, to lead a host of captives into a far greater promised land, to save his people from their sins, he took a name:

“And they shall call his name, Jesus.” In Hebrew, Joshua.

Which prompts me to ask: *who are we trying to be?* Ramses, or Joshua? In whose eyes do we seek to be famous? In the eyes of the world and its gangster-

princes and thug-princesses? Do we seek the fame of power, wealth, politics, big churches with giant budgets and sprawling campuses... awards, accolades, media attention, thousands of people hanging on our every word? Do we imagine that a thousand years from now, our legacy will live on if we just get a little more wealth, a little more power, a little ...whatever?

Somewhere, a breeze is already blowing, ready to cover our monuments with sand. In the world's fame, the sand always wins.

Joshua's fame was known throughout the land, and for all eternity.

Ramses is known to historians as the greatest of all the kings who had no clue how soon it would all be over.

In whose eyes do we seek fame? Which audience is the one for which we play?

End Notes

¹ Cf. S. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology: lšakkēn šēmō šām in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (BZAW 318; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 134-135. 179-182. For the less common practice of a king writing his own name alongside a predecessor while restoring monuments, cf. the inscription of Ashur-Resh-Ishi I. (Grayson, A. K. *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC [to 1115 BC]* [Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987] 314.

² For the life of Ramses II, see K. A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1982); and more briefly, idem, "Pharaoh Ramesses II and his Times," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006; orig. Scribners pub. 1995), 2:763-774.

³ Marc Van De Mierup, *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramses II* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) 73-74.

⁴ For Ramses' account: W. W. Hallo, ed. *The Context of Scripture*. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 2003) II:32-40 and the *editio princeps*: A. Gardiner, *The Kadesh Inscriptions of Ramesses II* (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1960).

⁵ For summary with extensive bibliography, cf. L. G. Stone, "Early Israel and Its Appearance in Canaan," in *Ancient Israel's History: An Introduction to Issues and Sources*, ed. B. T. Arnold and R. S. Hess (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 138-142. Most significant studies include: William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowski, eds., *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century From Beyond the Danube to the Tigris* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1989); Robert Drews, *The End of the Bronze Age: Changes in Warfare and the Catastrophe of ca 1200 BC*, (Princeton, 1993); E. Cline, 1177 BC: The Year Civilization Collapsed. (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014).

⁶ J. Weinstein, "The Collapse of the Egyptian Empire in the Southern Levant," in Ward and Joukowski, *The Crisis Years*, 142-150; I. Singer, "Egyptians, Canaanites, and Philistines in the Period of the Emergence of Israel," in Israel

Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman, eds. *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994) 282-338; L. H. Lesko, "Egypt in the 12th Century," in Ward and Joukowsky, *The Crisis Years*, 151-156.

⁷ For the chronology of Israelite origins, cf. L. G. Stone, "Early Israel and Its Appearance," 130-38.

⁸ Repatriation of escaped slaves was a standard provision in treaty texts, such that T. Bryce, (*Letters of the Great Kings of the Ancient Near East: The Royal Correspondence of the Late Bronze Age* [London: Routledge, 2003], 86-93, 213-217) concludes Hittite failed usurper Urhi Teshub must have fled to Egypt prior to the treaty of 1258 B.C., though the Hittite king still threatened Ramses with "another Qadesh."

⁹ J. Weinstein, "The Egyptian Empire in Palestine: A Reassessment," *BAOR* 241 (1981): 1-28; N. Na'aman, "Economic Aspects of the Egyptian Occupation of Canaan," *Canaan in the Second Millenium B.C.E. Collected Essays, Volume 2* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 216-231, orig. pub. 1981; N. Na'aman, "Pharaonic Lands in the Jezreel Valley in the Late Bronze Age," *Canaan in the Second Millenium*, 232-241, orig. pub. 1988.

¹⁰ Baba Bathra, 75b.

¹¹ Talmud, b. Meg. 14b. Naturally this tradition triggered multi-generational debate in rabbinic commentary about the legitimacy of Joshua's marriage to a woman of Canaan.

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