

The Joshua Project Research Survey

If all peoples are to be reached with the gospel by AD 2000, they will need to become the focus of earnest prayer by the Body of Christ. But intercessors cannot pray without specific information on these groups. Here is light to guide us towards our goal!

by John Robb

Walking around at night without a flashlight can result in tripping or stumbling and missing one's way. The Joshua Project on-site research survey will function like a gigantic flashlight, illuminating the path before us, and will keep us from losing our way towards the goal of "a church for every people and the gospel for every person by the year 2000." Dr. Ralph Winter is probably right that it is "the most ambitious global research project ever to be conceived." However true as that may be, there was an earlier research survey recorded in the Bible which, though narrower in scope, gives helpful guidance even 3000 years later about how our current survey should be conducted. I would like to draw out some principles from the record of this early research project described in Deuteronomy 1, Numbers 13 and Joshua 14, and also to suggest some practical guidelines to the effective implementation of the Joshua 2000 research project.

God Likes the Idea of Surveys

"The Lord said to Moses send some men to explore the land of Canaan, so at the Lord's command Moses sent them out..." [Numbers 13:1-3]. Notice that the original research survey was God's idea and Moses was just following orders in sending out the twelve spies (or researchers) into the land of Canaan. In other words, the research endeavor had been validated and supported at the highest level, by the Lord Almighty himself. Why did God command the Israelites to undertake the survey? Undoubtedly one reason was that they needed to understand as much as possible about the peoples they were being

sent in to conquer. Hittites, Jebusites, Amalekites, Amorites, and Canaanites, all peoples with different cultures, customs and situations, needed to be seen so Israel would have proper intelligence for the later conquests.

Today we are not sent to militarily conquer unreached peoples, but instead our aim is to conquer them with the love, truth and power of Jesus Christ. However, the principle is the same, God knows we need to have accurate information on who the unreached peoples are, where they are located, their cultures and situations in life so that we can pray intelligently and undertake appropriate church planting efforts to reach them. While Jesus never explicitly commanded a research survey, it is implicit in his call to his disciples to "*Lift up their eyes and look at the fields! They are ripe for harvest*" [John 4:35]. The phrase "lift up your eyes" or "look" is a research word, because research is all about careful observation. Joshua Project teams will go out to have a close up look at the fields which are white to harvest.

The information gathered by the Joshua Project 2000 teams is critical not only to the fulfillment of the AD 2000 vision, but of the Great Commission itself. If all peoples are to be reached with the gospel, they will need to become the focus of earnest, informed prayer by the Body of Christ. Intercessors cannot pray without specific information on these groups. The United Prayer Track of AD 2000 is recruiting ten churches and ten prayer groups to focus their prayer on each one of the Joshua Project peoples. Already we have seen the impact of individual

churches adopting and praying for specific unreached peoples. The most fundamental and potent mission strategy is this kind of focused and informed prayer. When Jesus saw the helpless crowds (people groups), he did not ask the disciples to raise funds or recruit an army of evangelists, but rather as the first order to pray to the Lord of the harvest that he might send forth workers into his harvest field. [Matt. 9:37, 38]

In October 1997 Praying Through the Window III will involve up to fifty million Christians praying for the unreached peoples of the world. The information gathered by the Joshua Project 2000 teams will be used to produce detailed profiles on each of these unreached groups, so that millions of believers can focus their intercession on them until a pioneer church-planting movement is established in each unreached people. These profiles will also aid mission agencies and denominations in prioritizing the work of church planting and other ministries where the need is the greatest. We can see the reasons why research is so essential to the mission task and why we believe the Lord is leading us to undertake it.

Do It Now

The Lord commanded his people: "*You have stayed long enough at this mountain. Break camp and advance into the hill country of the Amorites; go to all the neighboring peoples... See, I have given you this land, Go in and take possession of the land the Lord swore he would give to your fathers...*" [Deuteronomy 1:6-8]. In spite of God's clear urging, his people hesitated in fear and unbelief. Kadesh Barnea, that lush

oasis at which they were camping, became known as a place of vacillation and lost opportunity. As one commentator put it, “These events form a grand turning point in the history of Israel in which the whole of the future history of the covenant nation is typically reflected.”¹

We are at the same point in the AD 2000 Movement today. It is time to push ahead in faith, going all out to ensure the success of the Joshua Project or sealing back our expectations regarding the fulfillment of the AD 2000 goal. God is the God of “go”: Go and make disciples, go and take possession.

The Israelite researchers brought back pomegranates, figs, and a cluster of grapes so enormous that two men had to carry it. We must remember that God has been ripening the unreached peoples as fruit which is now ready to be harvested by his people. He has prepared them by the sufferings of poverty, injustice, disaster, war, even through dreams and visions, and now is the time for harvest! He has been there working among them long before the research, prayer or church planting teams arrive on the scene. But history is tragically full of lost mission opportunities either because the Church lacked accurate information or because of complacency. This is the time. Let’s work to make it happen now!

A Cooperative and Coordinated Effort

The Lord said to Moses “from each ancestral tribe send one of its leaders” [Numbers 13:21]. Each tribe of Israel was represented in the research effort in Canaan. There was obvious team work involved as well since the twelve were not sent out separately, but as part of a coordinated plan inspired by the Lord and developed by Moses. Later on, in Joshua 14, inheritances were assigned to each tribe. The Israelites realized the task of possessing the land needed to be divided and allocated so

that every part of the land would be covered. There was careful coordination involved.

The principles of cooperation, representation, and coordination will also be important for Joshua Project 2000. Sending on-site teams to all 1800 peoples on the current Joshua Project list is an enormous undertaking and is only possible if we follow these principles. As many denominations and mission agencies as possible need to send teams, but it is essential that this intention be communicated to the AD 2000 Movement International office so that proper coordination can occur!

It is also critical for those going on teams or sending teams to be in touch with local Christian workers, either nationals or expatriate missionaries in the countries of their target peoples, so that outside teams can benefit from their expertise and guidance, and be warned of any sensitive issues in the local context. Without this kind of partnership, confusion and even harm may result just as if the Israelite researchers had carelessly gone off and done their own thing oblivious of the need to work together. Expatriates and national believers have a wealth of information to assist visiting teams, and it is essential that they be contacted before and during any visit to their country.

Send Your Best

The Lord commanded that each tribe send “one of its leaders” or as one commentator translates it “distinguished persons of rank...Those men out of the total number of the heads of the tribes and families of Israel who were the most suitable for such a mission.”

Verse 3 repeats that “*All of them were leaders of the Israelites,*” giving their names and tribal allegiances [v. 4-15]. These were not just young people out on a lark, but rather seasoned people, the cream of the crop. Caleb, we know, was forty years of age, and presumably Joshua and the others were middle

aged as well. Joshua had likely served in Pharaoh’s army before the Exodus since Moses thought him sufficiently battle-tested to be put in charge of defending Israel against the Amalekites [Exodus 17]. Why was this the case? Most likely because they would have had a maturity of judgement that only comes with age and experience. In addition, because of their leadership gifts, they could motivate the people and provide leadership for the later conquest.

In the same way we also need to send our best to lead and serve on the Joshua Project research teams. This is not to say that young people should not be involved, but clearly the importance of the mission requires seasoned, gifted brothers and sisters to take part.

Niyi Cbade who provides leadership for Project Search Light, the Nigerian unreached peoples survey, describes the kind of qualities for good researchers:

(1) “A burning heart of dedication to Jesus and His call: Are you in this to please people, satisfy your ego, get some excitement, or to please the King of Kings and help be an answer to the prayer ‘Thy kingdom come’...”

(2) “A strong prayer life: You must be a prayer warrior for the spiritual battles that lie ahead...withstand the attacks of Satan on your work and turn them into blessings instead.”

(3) “Faith: Settle it in your mind by talking to the Lord whether this project is right, is accomplishable and is for you to be involved in. Then if it is, claim God’s promises and hold on to the shield of faith despite all attacks.”

(4) “Boldness joined with wisdom: Be brave enough to go for the information even at some risk...But don’t act foolishly in the name of boldness. Let God convince you to take risks, then take them.”

(5) “A team spirit: Be ready to make this work, a real team effort. Don’t be content to just gather information academically. Stir each other up and encour-

age each other spiritually. Sacrifice for each other; bear with each other; spend time together and you will be amply rewarded for the effort you have put in. You need each other because gathering this information takes a variety of skills and personalities. Your report will be more balanced and accurate if you work on it together.”

(6) “Openness to hear the call and catch the vision: You are not in this research by accident. It is the people who do the research who should catch the vision for action first. We are the people who will know what has to be done!”²

Adequate Preparation and Allow Enough Time

There is evidence of careful preparation and briefing of the Israelite researchers by Moses [Numbers 13:7-20]. He gave them a list of detailed questions and clear instructions. In addition, verse 25 tells us that they took their time—they spent forty days in the effort. In the same way our Joshua Project 2000 research teams need to be carefully prepared in advance of their survey work, and they need to allow adequate time for the whole process. Be sure to get a copy of *Life Changing Encounters* a training manual which provides valuable guidelines for recruiting and preparing Joshua Project teams. It recommends lead time of six months for this preparation process. Some of its key recommendations are:

(1) The team size should be at least two and, ideally between five to twelve. Smaller teams are easier to manage and transport around.

(2) Team members need to be teachable, submissive to authority, emotionally resilient, in good health, and, above all, willing to be flexible and adjust to another culture.

(3) All team members should go through some sort of cross-cultural orientation and training and/or take the Perspectives course. (Contact the AD

2000 and Beyond International Office for suggestions on training programs.)

(4) Ideally, the leaders should have previous experience in cross-cultural situations and team ministry, and, if possible, should visit the target country before the rest of the team to explore relationships with national believers and missionaries, and to make arrangements for the team’s stay.

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(5) The essence of good research is asking good questions. Keep the end-result in mind, discovering information that will aid in a pioneer church-planting movement being established. Use the Joshua Project 2000 Prayer Profile Survey found in the back of the *Life Changing Encounters* book or available from Caleb Project.

(6) Your goal is to gather information and to pray for that unreached people group, not to engage in evangelism, which when prematurely undertaken could actually hinder future efforts.

(7) Prepare for the trip by reading about the country, city and people group. Visit your university or research library and ask the librarian for help.

(8) Spend quality time together as a team praying and learning from one another. Involve other members of

your church or agency as much as possible so they will own and support your efforts.

(9) A few months in advance, contact field missionaries or national Christian workers who can provide briefing and any information already available on that people group as well as alert you to any political or cultural sensitivities which need to be kept in mind.

(10) Maintain security. Most governments in the 10/40 Window open and read personal mail, and often tap the phones of Christian workers. Contact the missionaries’ home organization and ask what security guidelines there may be before attempting to write or call. Write carefully, wisely and don’t mention them as being missionaries, church planters, etc. Remember: If you don’t proceed with wisdom *it could cost them their ministry or their life!* The AD 2000 and Beyond International Office may also be able to assist you with in-country contacts.

(11) Go as humble learners and listeners. Ask questions. Show interest in the culture and let the people teach you. Be alert, keep your eyes open and learn all you can, and afterwards write it down so that others will benefit from your learning experience. Like a detective looking for clues, don’t jump to conclusions. Remember that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and that things are not always as they appear initially. See the resources list in the *Life Changing Encounters* book for helpful materials on the cross-cultural research process.³

Keep a Perspective of Faith

When Israel’s researchers returned from Canaan, most of them gave way to unbelief, “*We went into the land to which you sent us, and it does flow with milk and honey! Here is its fruit. But the people who live there are powerful and the cities are fortified and very large. We even saw the descendants*

of Anak there” [Numbers 13:27-28]. Have you ever noticed whenever the call of God comes to people, including ourselves, that the first response is “but”? Unbelief looks at the difficulties connected with the mission, and cannot see the God of the impossible towering far above it. These researchers had forgotten the wonders which the Lord had performed before their very eyes only months before in Egypt and crossing the Red Sea.

They focused on the fortifications of the cities and the fierceness of the peoples rather than on the greatness of God. There are many in the church today and in the missions movement who echo the negative viewpoint of the majority of Israelite researchers when faced with the challenge of reaching the unreached peoples by the year 2000. They say, “It’s impractical. It’s unrealistic. We can’t do it... And they are stronger!” “*We seem like grasshoppers in our own eyes and we look the same to them.*” Interestingly enough this subjective interpretation of the research data was not accurate. Rahab later confirmed that the peoples of the land were quaking in fear when they heard how God had been helping Israel [Joshua 2:9-11]. So, we must be careful to interpret our findings correctly and always with a faith perspective which takes God into full account.

Contrast their negative appraisal with Caleb’s “we can” and “we should” spirit. “*We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it*” Caleb is later praised because he “followed the Lord wholeheartedly” and asked for the most difficult part of the land to conquer—the area around Hebron where the giant sons of Anak lived.

Certainly, given the size of some

of these unreached peoples, their traditional resistance to the Christian faith, their poverty and ignorance as well as the hold which the evil one has upon them, coupled with the harsh living conditions and the probable political interference in restricted access nations, we are tempted to despair and wonder how a Christian movement could ever arise. It is then that we need the spirit of Caleb and Joshua. Caleb recognized the difficulties. However, even as an old man of 85, he went to take possession of his inheritance with this confidence, “The Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said [Joshua 14:12].

As one researcher put it, “Missionary research is spiritual warfare. Satan has held sway for thousands of years in many of places we will go to, and he is not about to give up his secrets or give the Kingdom of God the advantage of any strategic information. He will try to stop you with fear, illness or other circumstances. He will try to make those who have the information uncooperative. He will try to hinder you with lack of funds. He will attack you with doubt and discouragement. Research is not for the timid, but it can be successfully done by the meek. It is not at all easy, but it is altogether possible done in the power of God through the Holy Spirit and for His kingdom. All the plans in the world will fail without that power, but that is the very power we have.”⁴

It is appropriate that the name Joshua means “Jehovah help” or “Whose help is Jehovah.” In carrying out the Joshua Project research survey, we will need to rely completely on the help of the Lord, apart from whom we can do nothing, but with whom we can accomplish all things. Reaching these peoples with the Good News of Jesus Christ is the very heartbeat of God. We can

count on his help, and he will enable us to claim what is his and ours. As he said to Joshua, “Every place you put the sole of your foot I will give you as your territory” [Joshua 1:34]. “Ask of me and I will make the peoples your inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth your possession” [Psalm 2:8].

Whatever it is

However impossible it seems
Whatever the obstacle that lies
between you and it
if it is noble

If it is consistent with God’s
kingdom,

You must hunger after it and
stretch yourself to reach it.

(by Charles Paul Conn)

End Notes

1. C.F. Keil and F. Delitsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1973 Volume 1, pg. 84-85
2. Niyi Gbade, “Stories and Lessons from the Nigerian Survey” in John Robb, “Some Lessons Learned in Translating Research into Strategy” *International Journal of Frontier Missions*, Vol.9, Jan. 1992
3. Debra Sanders, editor, *Life Changing Encounters: A Handbook for Research Among Unreached Peoples* (Caleb Project, 1995)
4. Niyi Gbade, *Translating Research into Strategy*, pg.31

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