

Expositional Essay of Joshua 4:1-24

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## ABSTRACT

The Book of Joshua is composed of different religious and political themes, which may be conveyed in various ways at different times of its writing. Joshua's sophistication and intelligence are the results of the interrelationship of its critical themes. Therefore, rather than treating them individually, it is better to describe their operations together. Joshua is a bridge connecting the Pentateuch and the corpus of literature from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings. The book linked promises to fulfillment, linked Moses to the new leader, linked the Pentateuch to the prophets, and linked the exodus to exile. Its narrative joins landless people with walled cities, razed armies, and mighty kings in a foreign land. Guided by the steady hand of God and the leadership of Joshua, possessing the land is what Israel did— a result of God's grace. The objective of this exposition of Joshua 4:1-24 is to digest the conquest and settlement, presented here as the "memorial marker" (*'ôl, nîs*) of God's sovereignty. Thus, the fulfillment of the divine promise to the people called uniquely "the House of Israel," who occupy the promised land and partake in "rest on all sides...of all their enemies" (21:42), is comparable to Deuteronomy 12:10. "But you will cross the Jordan and settle in the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, and he will give you rest from all your enemies around you so that you will live safely."

## I. BIBLICAL AND HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

The Book of Joshua, named for its main character, opens after the death of Moses and proceeds until the death and burial of Joshua. “In Deuteronomy, Israel is on the verge of entering the land, while in Joshua, they enter it and possess it. The land is not paradise, but it is an anticipation of paradise regained, an outpost of Yahweh’s lordship over his people.”<sup>1</sup> Joshua conveys how the people of Israel entered the Land of Israel and settled it. Chapters 1-12 describe Israel's national origins as a narrative of foreigners colliding with a densely populated and fortified land, ousting the native Canaanites, and attaining ownership of their land through violent military interventions. Under the authority of Joshua, a second Moses, Israel advanced as a unified people, traversed the Jordan River in a ceremonious advance (Ch. 1-5), and established camp in Gilgal, later embarking on a string of four decisive and emblematic military campaigns. The first two are for defensive towns, Jericho in the east and Ai in the central region (Ch. 6-8), and the sweeping and "sudden" subsequent campaign strikes (10:9; 11:7) against broad alliances of kings of the southwest cities and the northern area. The four triumphal battles ended in conquering the entire land and its population (11:7-19). Only when the land is purged of its former occupants did the Israelites establish it (11:23). This method and the distribution of the land among the tribes is outlined in great detail (Ch. 13-21). Joshua concludes with the epilogue- affairs of the Transjordan tribes (Ch. 22) and a collection of discourses and commemorations centered around Joshua (Ch. 23-24). The book of Joshua advances the narrative and themes of the Torah.<sup>2</sup> “Joshua features, then, the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises. What he swore to the fathers becomes a reality under Joshua’s leadership (21:43– 45).”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty: A Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 107.

<sup>2</sup> Steven McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 39-43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

Like much of the former prophets and the history of Israel, attention to national and religious matters necessitates precedence over historicity. Joshua dispenses an overall solicitude with obeying God’s teaching. Traditions like circumcision and the Passover mark the gateway to the land. The Ark of the Covenant and the priests, altars, and sacrifices play a vital role, stressing the fundamental link connecting the sacral and the political in Israelite life. Various references to the voice and themes of Deuteronomy bolster the book’s didactic purpose rather than its concern in the accurate documentation of historical events. The book defines the conquering of the promised land as a comprehensive and unmitigated triumph conducted by God, led by a Moses-like figure, and achieved by a people who have sworn fidelity to the sovereign God. “The importance of land in Joshua can scarcely be overestimated. Scholars have argued that the book can be structured in terms of verbs that relate to land: (1) chapters 1– 5, where Israel must “pass over” (‘ābar) to enter the land; (2) chapters 6– 11, where Israel “takes” (lāqa ḥ) the land; (3) chapters 12– 22, where Israel “divides” and “apportions” (ḥ ālaq) the land; (4) chapters 23– 24, where Israel “serves” (‘ābad) the Lord in the land.”<sup>4</sup>

As a part of Deuteronomic History, Joshua, like many other biblical books, has a long and complicated literary history; it came into being over hundreds of years, in several subsequent editions. Its diverse materials are, in some cases, used for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended. The book depicts the fulfillment of the promise of inheriting the land in two distinct stages: conquest and settlement. First, in chapters 1-12, the land was conquered in its entirety by the nation as a whole; scholars call this section “The Book of the Conquest.” Then, in chapters 13-21, the land was divided and settled by the tribes, where scholars label it “The Book of Settlement.” These were two distinct literary compositions that have been combined. “Scholars typically posit different writers and/or

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas Schreiner, *The King in His Beauty*, 107.

different levels of writing in an effort to account for these kinds of literary unevenness. Older scholarship saw in Joshua a continuation of the sources or literary strands identified in the Pentateuch. These scholars spoke and wrote of a Hexateuch, that is a unit of six scrolls instead of five.”<sup>5</sup>

## II. ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN MATERIAL

The story of the conquest and settlement as it now appears in the book of Joshua is a literary, ideological construct, based on the divine promise of the land over a long period. Some scholars propose instead of reading the book as an endeavor at critical historiography, it is best interpreted as an ideological proclamation. One believes that a point can be made here. Holding to the Bible as God’s inspired word, Bible history, and ancient world history should overlap and never be divided. One could also call that having a Christian worldview of history recognizes God’s hand in history and interprets it through a biblical lens, one’s original point of reference to biblical history in general during biblical times— one believes historical facts, significantly as they overlap with biblical stories. These facts help to support the reliability and veracity of Scripture.

For example, Assyrian kings, Tiglath-Pileser, Shalmaneser, and Sargon are found in the Old Testament and in secular sources showing that the Bible is full of verifiable information. Given these observances, one believes that seeing Bible history in the context of the world demonstrates the sovereignty of God in the affairs of humanity. John Oswalt refutes James Barr’s view (and the minimalists, of course) — “that when we make Israel’s history the basis of our faith, that history begins to erode before our eyes, and we are forced to “demythologize” the text, seeking some other basis for our faith than God’s involvement in the human-historical experience.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Steven McKenzie, *Introduction to the Historical Books*, 43.

<sup>6</sup> John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 141.

Critical literature from the ancient Near East’s Sumerian civilization to the Age of Alexander offers historical and literary background to many parallels of the Old Testament. Joshua finds its ANE comparable in several illustrations that document the unstable social and political conditions in Syria-Palestine during the Late Bronze Age. The Annals of Tuthmosis III, first published by Karl Richard Lepsius (1810-1884) provides details of a collection of hieroglyphics carved on the north wall of the eastern hall of the great temple at Karnak in the Sanctuary of Amon. “The annals describe the siege preparations that surrounded Megiddo with a ditch and forts preventing the enemy from escaping. No final description is given of the city’s fall, but there is an extensive list detailing tribute paid by the defeated rulers of Syria-Palestine to Tuthmosis III.”<sup>7</sup> Several key verses referenced in *Karnak (Urk. IV 649 ff.)*, Twenty-First Day of Month One, Third Season, Year 23, paints a vivid portrait of the siege of Megiddo’s walled city: “If the soldiers of Tuthmosis III had not been so interested in plundering everything the traitors had abandoned on the plain of Megiddo, they could have captured the city itself on the first day of battle...”<sup>8</sup> This brief clip is linked to Joshua 11:8-9: “The Lord delivered them into the hands of Israel, and they defeated them and pursued them all the way to Great Sidon and Misrephothmaim, and all the way to the Valley of Mizpeh on the east; they crushed them, letting none escape.”

A comparison of the ancient Near Eastern literary and historical events of the Annals of Tuthmosis III and the Bible’s book of Joshua’s siege of Canaan, the Scriptures exhibit profound differences. If one agrees that there are significant differences between the Bible and modern history, the differences between the Bible and ancient “historical” resources are even more weighty. Note that the biblical characters are not portrayed as semidivine, archetypal beings, but are visibly presented to the reader of Scripture as unique individuals.

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Matthews and Don Benjamin, *Old Testament Parallels: Laws and Stories from the Ancient Near East* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 2016), 153-54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Joshua is no Tuthmosis III, nor are his journeys those of Every-man. Even in the case of outspoken individuals, such as Samson whose adventures seem like they are of a legendary flavor, he is obviously presented as a historical individual living in a specific space and time. Emphasizing his contribution to the biblical narrative is of great importance because it is distinct from the rest of the ancient world. “The Bible insists that truth is not to be found in the norms but in each one whose individuality transcends the norms.”<sup>9</sup>

### **III. THEOLOGICAL THEMES AND MOTIFS**

#### **1. The Gift of the Promised Land**

The book of Joshua carries forward the story and themes of the Torah. Now part of the Deuteronomistic History (Deut.- 2 Kings), the book, like many other biblical books, has a long and complicated history; it came into being over hundreds of years, in several subsequent editions. Its diverse materials are, in some cases, used for purposes other than those for which they were originally intended. This book pronounces the promise’s fulfillment of land inheritance and is divided into two different stages: conquest and settlement. First, in chapters 1-12, the land was conquered in its entirety by the nation as a whole; scholars call this section “The Book of Conquest.” Then, in chapters 13-21, Joshua divides the land, and the tribes settle it, in what is labeled “The Book of Settlement” by scholars. These were two distinct literary compositions that have been combined.

Walter Brueggemann views the theme of land as a central, if not *the* central theme.<sup>10</sup> Norman Gottwald proposes that the Deuteronomic historian makes an appeal to history in urgency of the “land question” at the time of the exile.<sup>11</sup> His proposed thematic schema consists of “the land” as broad and complex outlined in the following theological view: the

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<sup>9</sup> John Oswalt, *The Bible Among the Myths*, 125.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 3, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 146-47.

land as a gift and promise; crossing into the land; and the land's conquest. He agrees with McKenzie's point of no separation in the text between the land as a promise and the land as a gift and he addresses the mode difference between Deuteronomy and Joshua— Deuteronomy is mostly hortatory, while Joshua is more narrative.<sup>12</sup>

## **2. The Sovereign Presence of a Holy and Loving God**

One has presented the why and how of Israel's acquiring the land while also showing that God's granting the land to Israel is the fulfillment of the promises made to their ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a covenant never revoked but enacted in them. These reasons and their themes provide the richness of Joshua, where God's sovereignty and grace are on display. This idea provides that Israel's virtue and strength were not considered. Instead, God's gift to the people was undeserved, showing his covenant love for them. How else could Israel venture to possess a land that is filled with enemies much more powerful than they? It is because God of promising them the land and his pledge to defeat their enemies.

The God of Israel is the sovereign, living God, who alone will drive out the land's enemies and give it to his people (3:10). However, Israel must cross over the Jordan and obey God's commands at all costs. Their crossing of Jordan is a reminder of their crossing the Red Sea on dry ground (3:17). "The priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD stopped in the middle of the Jordan and stood on dry ground, while all Israel passed by until the whole nation had completed the crossing on dry ground." The phrase, whole nation (goy, גוי), repeated in 4:1, reaches from a late layer of the book (5:8), linking the crossing of Israel with the twelve stones memorial (אֲזָכָר, 'ôz) theme.

Provided is God's divine command for Joshua and Israel to erect memorial stones, each representing one of the twelve tribes (4:2-3). A parallel is drawn between the erected

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<sup>12</sup> Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh*, 146.



standing stones at Sinai (Exod. 24:4). The priests remain in the riverbed with the ark carried between them in God's presence despite the danger of the walled water of the Jordan. As an example, to the congregation of Israel, while they cross, the priests stand dependent on God. As reminders of this occasion, the stones also initiate conversations with the children who question what they symbolize. A motif is noted here connecting the stones with the ark played out in 4:9 and 4:20. One notes the position of the priest's feet mentioned again, but an alternative tradition concerning the stones is stated: "in the place where you will spend the night" (v.20, recognized as Gilgal), the stones are to be put down. "Pass on before the ark of the LORD your God into the midst of the Jordan, and take up each of you a stone upon his shoulder" provides another example of this motif (4:5).

A concentric structure is prominent in 4:6-7, providing the significance of Joshua's instructions to the twelve men (one considers the significance of the promise of 1:5 concerning Joshua's career and Rahab's identification with Israel instead of Jericho's people in 2:9-11):

- a to serve as a sign among you, when your children ask in time to come,
- b "What do these stones mean to you?" then you tell them
- c the waters of the Jordan were cut off
- d before the ark of the covenant of the Lord.
- d When it passed over the Jordan,
- c the waters of the Jordan were cut off.
- b So these stones shall be
- a to the people of Israel a memorial (*'ôl, תיזר*) forever.

Similarly, Deut. 6:20-25 suggests the opportunity to instruct Israel's future generations on the meaning of God's salvific work in delivering them from Egyptian slavery, an indication of God's grace. The land that Israel is about to possess is a gift from God, fulfilling his promise to their fathers in which they will enjoy God's rest. Thus, the significance of this "memorial marker" is a visual aid reminding Israel's future generations of how God provisioned them—

the center, though, is the ark itself. No obstacle, whether natural (Jordan), or man-made (Jericho), can stop the forward movement of God.

A standard feature common to Hebrew narratives is presented in 4:8-9. The element of repetition where Joshua, as the story's character, gives the instructions and the story's narrator gives confirmation using the same words is a critical literary device. The instructions here are almost verbatim of those in 4:5. As noted earlier, a reference to the priest's feet provides that when they touched Jordan's waters, the flow was cut off and only returned when their feet touched dry land. Perhaps these stones that Joshua erected in the river bed are those on which the priests stood, or perhaps these are different stones from 4:3, 8.

An overview of the conquest provides a two-fold reflection— the leadership hierarchy of God-Moses-Joshua, and the people's obedience (4:10-11). Joshua must do only that which God has commanded. His execution of these commandments is indicative of observing Moses' orders. Conceivably, there is a connection with Deut. 31:7-8: "Then Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land that the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall put them in possession of it. It is the LORD who goes before you. He will be with you; he will not leave you or forsake you. The priests stood while the crossing continued until the full congregation passed over. God's presence was with them, even the Ark of the covenant. As the priest advanced onto dry land, they passed the people, resuming their position ahead of them.

God's promise to make Joshua as great as Moses (3:7) finds its fulfillment in the proceeding verses (4:12-14), where all Israel "revered [Joshua] all his days as they revered Moses." The description of the congregation's crossing orders them, first, the warriors of a tribal military unit whose number is undetermined and the larger Israelite army. Joshua, by God's commands, orders the priests to conclude the tradition mentioned in 3:11, 13-17. The

observance of 4:16-19 provides a mirror of 3:15, concluding the miraculous episode of Jordan's crossing under God's sovereign hand. "On the tenth day of the first month" (Nissan) provides for the preparation of Passover observance (5:10). Gilgal, located east of Jericho, references the stones erected there and is connected to the questions by the children (4:6-7). The references related to 4:20-24 find the words of Rahab coming to pass, "we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea" with "just as your God did to the Sea of Reeds" and provides the end of the crossing "so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, that you may fear the Lord your God forever."

The account of Jordan's crossing combines various traditions—one where Gilgal and its twelve standing stones are highlighted, while another emphasizes the feet of the priests touching the water's edge, causing the water to part and wall up. Questions of perhaps two memorial sites, one at Gilgal and another at Jordan's water's edge, may arise, yet according to another version, both are related. Though these accounts may differ according to traditions, a notable miracle and "memorial marker" (‘ֹטֶן, תּוֹת) stands as a witness to God's sovereign rule.

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