“ISRAEL SERVED THE LORD”
Reading the Scriptures

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series editors
"ISRAEL SERVED THE LORD"

The Book of Joshua as Paradoxical Portrait of Faithful Israel

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For Todd,

dedicated spouse and colleague
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Introduction

The Fragmentation of the Book of Joshua

Two significant developments in biblical scholarship have converged to influence the reading of Joshua in the past century. First, a shift has occurred from the dominance of theories that more or less appended Joshua to source critical readings of the Pentateuch to the view that Joshua forms part of a larger Deuteronomistic History (DtrH). G. von Rad’s classic essay “The Form-Critical Problem of the Hexateuch,” published in 1938, exemplifies the former approach at its best.1 In his reading, the book of Joshua served as closure for the story begun in the Pentateuchal books. Its origin in Solomon’s nationalistic renaissance resulted in a focus on Israel’s conquest of and claim to the land, and perhaps most importantly, on Israel in the land. This perspective soon fell by the wayside, though, when in 1943 Noth published his theory of the Deuteronomistic History, envisioning it as a brilliant, one-man project undertaken in exile. While other Deuteronomistic redactional theories preceded Noth,2 the strength of his proposal lay in

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offering critical readers a momentary glimpse of a creatively composed whole: a persuasive synthesis that inspired a reconceptualization of the compositional history of the historical books of the Hebrew Bible. Although Noth’s grand synthesis has been modified in many of its dimensions and even dismissed by some, it continues to reign supreme among critical scholars as the overarching framework for reading the books from Deuteronomy through Kings. With this development, then, the book of Joshua was swept up into a new context that shifted scholarly views of its relationship to the books before and after—not to mention the setting of its composition and ultimately the meaning of the stories it tells.

A second major development in twentieth-century biblical scholarship, which took place in the realm of trowels rather than texts, had bearing on scholarly readings of Joshua—that is, the floruit of the archaeology of the Levant. Even as Noth’s theory came into print, archaeologists—Americans in particular—were attempting a grand synthesis of their own, wedding “dirt archaeology” with their explorations of the biblical text.3 These discoveries would bring about another shift in scholarly readings of the historical books. As a result of these excavations, a new sort of data about the settlement of the land of Israel began to emerge, data based on reconstructed artifacts and occupation levels rather than texts. Confident dates and clear biblical parallels put forward by early enthusiasts were challenged as newer excavations reassessed the same evidence with better techniques—and different assumptions about how the Bible and the stuff in the dirt should be related to each other. Some archaeological readers of the Bible began to look to artifacts as the primary evidence by which to describe and explain the history of Israel. The clash between Garstang’s and Kenyon’s interpretations of the evidence at Jericho is iconic of this tension.4 At the same time, it shows how far a reliance upon archaeological evidence had already made inroads into both archaeologically and textually focused assessments of the biblical stories. As a consequence of these discoveries and developments, nearly any scholar who reads and analyzes the biblical text relies upon a critical reconstruction of Israel's history whose evidential basis lies to some degree outside the text that
he or she is reading, setting Israel’s history per se at a distance from Israel’s telling of it.

This book is written toward a concern that has been recognized and addressed by other scholars as well: that these historical excavations into both text and soil, concerned as they are with reconstruction, have neglected Israel’s stories as a finished literary product, and have thereby missed some of what they say as stories rather than as sources of evidence. B. Child’s distinction between “witness” and “source” summarizes this contrast from a theological angle: “To hear the text as witness involves identifying Israel’s theological intention of bearing its testimony to a divine reality which has entered into time and space. Conversely to hear the text as source is to regard it as a vehicle of cultural expression which yields through critical analysis useful phenomenological data regarding Israel’s societal life.” What Childs conveys in distinguishing between these two different approaches to the text is essentially two possible stances of the reader in relation to the text. When the reader approaches the text as “witness” or even as “storyteller,” the reader’s position is that of listener, hearing and entering into conversation with the text’s story. Conversely, when the reader approaches the text as “source,” the reader’s position is that of information-gatherer, with a concern for the usefulness of the text based on the reader’s own purposes more than on a concern to hear the story the text has to tell.

This is true not only from the theological stance that Childs outlines above, but from a humanistic angle as well. Focusing on the utility of an object or entity can obscure our view of its beauty and artistry as a thing in itself. Certainly, for example, one can treat mountains as a source, mining them for ore, harvesting their lumber, and analyzing their geological origins. It would be a terrible mistake, however, to pursue these tasks so single-mindedly that one missed the majesty and awe-inspiring height of the mountains as features of the natural landscape. Moving to the realm of human craftsmanship, one could unravel a Persian carpet to examine its materials or to use the wool for some other purpose, or merely regard it as a handy floor-covering. To do so, however, would be to miss a central locus of the carpet’s value and distinctiveness: namely, that it is a piece of human handiwork, intricately
designed for beauty, and bearing beautiful decorative motifs developed within a long-standing tradition. Similarly, a text, too, can be broken down into its component parts to trace the origin of its content, or to access historical information it may contain. But we should be careful to balance this approach to the text as an informative historical relic with an appreciation of the text as an “artifact” in the truest sense of the word: a work of human artistry and ingenuity, whose value lies in its beauty as a created thing, not only in its usefulness.

The goal of this work, then, will be to address the past century’s two great shifts in the reading of Joshua, looking at the text once again as a unitary entity and as itself an artifact worthy of study in its final form. The point of my reading will not be to determine the facts about how Israel came to be in the land of Canaan once and for all. Rather, the idea is to see how the shape of the story expresses the meaning of the book of Joshua as a written work. At the same time, my approach will take account of the fact that this book is a written work from the past, and thus that insights about its composition, style, and setting gleaned from modern scholarship can help us to become better readers of the story. In addition, I want to offer glimpses of the nature of this book as a written work with a past, and that insights into how to read it can be gained from other readers throughout the history of its reception.

Joshua as Part of the Deuteronomistic History

While investigations into the shape and editions of the Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) have frequently touched upon the book of Joshua, the book of Kings has often been chosen as a safer proving ground for such theories. The apparently haphazard compilation of material in the book of Joshua—however artfully it may be arranged, literarily speaking—makes it challenging turf on which to stake one’s claims regarding the date and manner of DtrH’s composition. As a result, Joshua tends to get squeezed into the cracks left between readings of Deuteronomy and the royal history in Samuel-Kings. In addition,
because the question of the date of DtrH’s composition and redaction is intertwined with the kings of the late monarchy following Noth’s initial proposal of an exilic work, the era of the kings inevitably receives more attention than Israel’s earlier days under Joshua and the judges. Admittedly, the later books do provide more material to work with, simply by virtue of their greater length. In addition, more corroborative material from the broader ancient Near East is available from the Assyrian and Babylonian archives than exists for the purported span of Israel’s early days in Canaan, so it offers more fruitful ground for cross-cultural comparison. In short, Joshua contains materials too varied in origin and relating to a period too early to make them ideal material for supporting stable theories of DtrH. Sandwiched between the imposing hulk of Deuteronomy and the protracted drama of the monarchy, Joshua tends to huddle together with Judges, sparring over claims to historical legitimacy.

For Noth, the material in Joshua did not, for the most part, derive directly from the pen of a Deuteronomistic historian (Dtr), but instead largely existed in a coherent sequence prior to the composition of the Deuteronomistic History. According to Noth, this “self-contained and detailed account, already existing in a fixed literary form” consisted of a string of etiological stories related to the conquest “combined into a well-rounded whole with a few heroic legends” before Dtr ever touched pen to scroll. In most cases, the redactor only lightly retouched these stories to incorporate features of particular interest or concern to him, and modestly expanded upon this existing account. Dtr’s most significant independent contributions to the book are the introduction in chapter 1, which he composed entirely from scratch, and chapter 23, Joshua’s closing oration, of a pattern common to the major speeches Dtr inserts periodically and judiciously throughout his history.

Thus, while scholars often describe Noth’s theory as attributing to the Deuteronomist the role of author, this does not most accurately describe his understanding of Dtr’s role in the book of Joshua. Noth’s reading of Joshua leaves a formidable amount of room for challenges to his single author–single edition theory, foreshadowing subsequent adaptations that will propose two or more editions of the Deuteronomist’s
work. According to his assessment, a later hand interpolated the material in chapters 13–21, supplementing DtrH’s originally quite terse summation of the division of the land among the tribes in Joshua 11:23. In addition, Joshua 24:1–28 also derives from a later hand—here, even Noth concedes, a Deuteronomistically influenced hand—supplementing the original Deuteronomistic ending of Joshua’s closing speech in chapter 23, which formerly was followed by the conclusion now shifted by this intervening material to chapter 24:29ff.

Noth understands the opening sequence of stories in Joshua 2–11 as etiological, drawing upon the work of H. Gressmann, who first suggested this analysis. By etiological, he meant that these stories were back-formations, based on a present material reality or practice that the teller of the story sought to explain. That is, these stories were composed to establish a cause-effect sequence, with the story of past causation written to make sense of a reality—the “effect”—contemporary with the storyteller. By this logic, the reality contemporary with the story’s initiator is taken as a given, but the story itself tends to be understood as more or less derivative of that reality.

Indeed, the stories in the first half of the book of Joshua do not convey the impression of having been composed as a group, but rather culled from a traditional selection and assembled in a purposeful chain. Whether this sequencing is the work of the Deuteronomist or whether this chain preexisted his work remains open to question. The sequence of the stories suggests an awareness of their arrangement and overlap, so that although the stories themselves exhibit a remarkable variety of contents and formats, they intersect and mutually reflect upon one another. We shift abruptly from the naughty puns of the Rahab tale, to the somber Deuteronomic echoes of Achan’s demise, to the blended trickster-treaty story of the Gibeonites. Explicit divine intervention in the conquest of Jericho gives way to divine silence regarding the fate of Gibeon. Yet the stories are bound together by recurring themes of interaction with clever foreigners, divine intervention in battle, cairns built over the graves of the wicked. Clearly they all share an association with Israel’s earliest days inside the land, but apart from their present context, even that feature would be obscured. Instead, it seems that we
are to look for the purpose of their assemblage in this particular context and sequence as the key to their meaning.

Many of these stories indeed involve some sort of persistent anchor that attaches it to a reality in Israel’s present experience, thus suggesting the appropriateness of the “etiological” label. Whether the text points to inanimate markers such as the heaps of stones at the Jordan, Achan’s mound, the ruins of Ai and the cairn over its king, or to the “living legends” of Rahab’s family and the Gibeonites, these stories are peppered with reminders of Israel’s earliest days in the land that exist “to this day.” Yet B. Childs rightly challenged both the clarity with which the etiological story had been defined and the implicit assumption that the explanatory story itself lay within the realm of myth and invention rather than within historical time. He argued that the label etiological would best be limited to stories of singular, reality-structuring events in mythic time that produced a lasting change that remained in effect in the present. Biblical stories of causation that account for specific historical realities should properly be distinguished from these mythic stories by some other designation, and their sequence of cause and effect should be open to examination from a historical, not only mythic, perspective. In addition, the function of these explanatory stories should be considered in relation to their context—literarily, theologically, and historically—rather than presumed to conform to a pre-established religionsgeschichtliche pattern.

Along these lines, I would argue that these stories function not so much to explain the existence of the markers, as the markers themselves exist, but to serve as touchstones for the stories as the biblical text presents them, thus spurring Israel to see and to recall its origins in the land. Each of these ongoing realities serves as the stimulus or touchstone for a story about how YHWH brought Israel into its inheritance. To that degree, these stories are didactic in the best sense of the word; their value for Israel’s instruction ranges from celebratory—recalling the miraculous crossing of the Jordan—to cautionary—underlining the dire consequences of violating YHWH’s sacred command.

This common thread of “anchors” may suggest that the string of stories did in fact preexist its location in DtrH, rather than coming
together as the product of Dtr’s literary activity. Certainly stories connected with and reminding of Israel’s entry into the land would have existed in advance of his composition of his own version of the history, and the lack of frequent and obvious literary intervention into these accounts in Dtr style suggests that the form of these stories as we have received them reflects their pre-Dtr form to some considerable degree. The fact that the sites associated with these early stories—namely, Jericho, Gilgal, Ai, and Gibeon—are clustered quite close together on the map bolsters the idea that a story complex existed in this area which Dtr adopted into his work. We might expect the stories to be preserved at Gilgal in particular if it was in fact the site of ongoing liturgical rituals associated with its sacred significance in the process of Israel’s entry into the land. Thus, it seems entirely possible that the sequence of stories in the early chapters of Joshua stems from an earlier collection that Dtr incorporated into his work relatively intact.

Nonetheless, the sequence of stories in Joshua 2–11 exists not merely as an incorporated collection, but as an integral part of Dtr’s account of Israel’s settlement of the land as it stands. Presumably he could have selected variant traditions—perhaps even other complexes—which were in circulation; surely these were not the only stories told about Israel’s earliest days. Yet this particular sequence reflects an interwoven dynamic of anticipation, fulfillment, and subversion, intertwining the three threads of YHWH, Israel, and the Canaanites in a complex network around the central theme of the land, which Dtr fully adopts as his own template for the book. The stories portray Israel’s mixed history of obedience and disobedience, complete and incomplete reception of the land, and tension and harmony with other peoples which characterizes its present experience under Josiah as well.

Dtr establishes his ownership of these stories most clearly by splicing into them two key episodes that reflect his concern for the law. The first comes at the opening of the book, bracketing the entire story of Israel’s occupation of the land within the theme of obedience as the key to success, firmly situating the law as Joshua’s companion and guide in leading Israel, and interpreting military conquest as a task that remains
wholly subject and subservient to the law rather than beside or outside of it (Josh 1:7–9). That is to say, the book of the Law is primary, and fearless facing of Israel’s enemies in the land exists only as a subset of Israel’s faithfulness to Torah. Israel’s taking of the land is rooted once more in Mosaic obedience at the end of chapter 8, where Dtr ensures that the entire congregation hears the reading of the law and stands in the presence of the carved stones that record its words. Of course, the law stands outside of this sequence of stories, at the end of the book as well (Josh 23:6), recalling Israel once more to the basic principle of its existence, and reminding of its presence in Israel’s midst. The Law is both faithful and inescapable in Israel’s experience; Israel both receives its promised rewards and risks its threatened punishments by living in the presence of YHWH and His Law.

Recent Readings of Joshua

Literary and thematic studies written subsequent to the inception of the DtrH theory have demonstrated that the book of Joshua can continue to be read as a literary entity, presumably in the face of the facts (a) that it is a composite text and (b) that it is part of a larger work. In this book, I will interact primarily with five particular studies that have dealt with the book of Joshua as a literary unity to some degree. The significant studies that have dealt with Joshua in this way have covered a broad spectrum in their methods, focuses, and conclusions.17

A common theme among these readings of Joshua is one of the issues that will be of central interest to this work: namely, the tensions and themes that run throughout the length of the book. Robert Polzin, in Moses and the Deuteronomist (1980), understands these as competing “voices,” with the more accommodating voice of “critical traditionalism” making itself heard over the stodgy voice of “authoritarian dogmatism” as regards the interpretation of the Law—a debate that begins in the book of Deuteronomy.18 Nelson’s article “Josiah in the Book of Joshua” (1981) is the most straightforwardly Deuteronomistic of the
readings; Nelson interprets the figure of Joshua as a detailed prototype of Josiah. Briefly presented in his article “Joshua-Judges” in The Literary Guide to the Bible (1990), Gunn’s perspective on the book’s apparent contradictions is beautifully summarized in his conclusion, “In the gap between fulfillment and nonfulfillment we discover also the tension between divine justice and mercy.”\(^{19}\) Hawk, in Every Promise Fulfilled (1991), reads the book as an ominous interplay between two dominant strands: a portrait of complete fulfillment of all YHWH’s promises to Israel, subverted by a dark undertow of Israel’s failure and disobedience at every turn.\(^{20}\) The result is that the assertions of fulfillment largely become empty truisms, while the reality is that Israel’s actions mean that Israel’s hopes are never fully consummated. Lastly, Mitchell’s Together in the Land (1993) focuses on interactions and tensions between Israel and the nations in particular, arguing that the book projects a wistful ideal of a foreigner-free land while contending with the reality that Israel can never really be alone and autonomous.\(^{21}\)

All of these literary-holistic studies, although they may vary in their level of persuasiveness and interest, have made valuable contributions to our reading of the book of Joshua. I do not seek to supplant what these other authors have written, but rather to supplement and build upon the readings that they have proposed.
Above all, previous holistic readings of the book of Joshua have shown one thing: that any convincing reading must deal with the tensions that the book presents to the reader. Paradoxically, this multitude of tensions sends the reader in search of some theme or focal point by which to gather together the multifarious strands and weave them into an integrated story. That does not necessarily mean that the reader must find a way to eliminate the conflicting themes that pull at the fabric of the text. In fact, I suggest that the best reading will let these tensions remain as tensions, rather than try to eliminate them. Yet for the book to be read as a book, they must be rallied toward some common telos. That telos, I will argue, is the verdict in Joshua 24:31 that Israel “served the Lord during all the days of Joshua.” Many—perhaps most—scholars would read this verse as an exaggeration or an ironic declaration. I suggest instead that if the reader accepts this verse as a sincere statement, it becomes a literary clue pointing to a theological
interpretation of the totality of Israel’s actions in the book of Joshua. Specifically, it broadens and deepens the reader’s understanding of Israel’s service to the Lord, allowing it to encompass Israel’s repentance and YHWH’s mercy, not only Israel’s obvious acts of obedience.

In four major narrative episodes in the book, Israel acts questionably in relation to YHWH’s laws or commands. These include the story of the oath to Rahab (Josh 2), Achan’s violation of the herem command (Josh 7), the treaty with the Gibeonites (Josh 9), and the altar built by the Transjordanian tribes (Josh 22). In addition, doubts remain in the book as a whole about whether Israel succeeds at the overall task of occupying the land, a task that also relates to Israel’s obedience. This could lead the reader to take the statement of Israel’s faithfulness in Joshua 24:31 as a hopeless contradiction or mere pious gloss. Instead, I will argue that it should be read as a “hermeneutical key” that simultaneously problematizes and illuminates these threads that have an ambiguous relationship to YHWH’s prohibitions and commands.

At the conclusion of the book of Joshua, immediately preceding the burial notices of Joshua, the faithful “servant of the Lord,” and Eleazar the priest, the text declares a sweeping verdict on the era of Joshua’s leadership: “Israel served the Lord during all the days of Joshua and of all the elders who outlived him and who had experienced everything the Lord had done for Israel” (Josh 24:31). More than one commentator reads Joshua 24:31 as the stirring epitaph of one of Israel’s great leaders, a tribute to his faithful example that kept the people on the right path during his lifetime and influenced the leadership of those who immediately followed him. This conclusion would be perfectly logical, were it not that the contents of the book of Joshua call this verdict significantly into question. One might wonder whether the person who penned Joshua 24:31 actually read the book before inscribing such a positive conclusion, since Israel, as depicted in the book of Joshua, seems to have a rather mixed record of faithfulness in serving YHWH. Rather than drawing Israel’s first days in the land as a steady line of obedient behavior and covenant faithfulness, the narrative vacillates between dramatic ups and downs, recounting the questionable alongside the upstanding.