

JOSHUA

Introduction to Joshua

From some points of view moving from Deuteronomy to Joshua is like taking the next step in an unfolding story. From the opening sentences it is immediately clear that the School responsible for Deuteronomy have had a dominant influence on the writing of Joshua. In many places the style and vocabulary is clearly Deuteronomic. In both Deuteronomy and Joshua the Deuteronomists (that is, the members of the Deuteronomic School in the pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic periods) are writing about their past in order to make it meaningful for their contemporaries. Both Deuteronomy and Joshua focus on what YHWH has done in the unfolding story of Israel. Both speak of the kinds of infidelity that continue to cripple the nation, while, at the same time, insisting on the fidelity and compassion of YHWH. This fidelity and compassion of YHWH is the source of their hope. There is always the possibility of repentance, because YHWH is faithful, even if they are not. The fundamental values of wonder, of awe, of gratitude, of listening, of obedience, of worship, of covenant love, of justice, of heeding the cry of the poor, these are the fundamental values of Israel. They identify Israel and make it special. When these values are lived, Israel is the people it is called to be with its own blessed life. When they are not lived Israel loses all meaning.

However, while Joshua carries on the themes of Deuteronomy, we are nevertheless moving into a different kind of literature. In Deuteronomy the Deuteronomists draw on the epic tradition of the Exodus, the revelation given on Sinai (Horeb), the desert wanderings and the battles against the Amorites in Transjordan. However, the bulk of the Book is presented as Moses' testament, in which the Deuteronomists give expression to their reflections on what it is that sets Israel apart from others as God's chosen people, called to live in covenant communion with YHWH. In the Bible as it has come down to us Joshua is the first book of what is commonly called the Deuteronomic History, which includes Judges and the Books of Samuel and Kings. The fact that there are many substantial differences between the Massoretic Hebrew text and the Septuagint Greek text supports the view of those scholars who conclude that Joshua is among the latest writings of the Deuteronomic History, and that it kept being edited after it was translated into Greek – that is, into the second century BC. It draws on some old traditions, but these have been reworked in an attempt to create a 'heroic past'. The Deuteronomists are telling their contemporaries that Israel had experienced many defeats, but it was not always like that. In the beginning, when the ideal leader, Joshua, faithfully listened to YHWH, YHWH gave them victory over their enemies, and it could be the same again if only Judah learned to be faithful.

In an article '*Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomists*' published in *Old Testament Interpretation: past, present and future* (edited by Mays, Petersen and Richards, and published by T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1995, pages 61-79), Douglas Knight writes in reference to the Deuteronomic History (page 61):

There is overwhelming evidence that the text was reworked by an editor or editors employing distinctive styles, language, perspectives, themes and intentions. These redactors did not passively collect and reproduce the old traditions that came down to them, but often recast them substantially by inserting editorial comments and organising them according to a schematic plan.

Joshua is the story of the emergence of Israel in the hill country of Canaan and it is based on legends that developed in the sanctuaries of Gilgal, a border sanctuary near Jericho, Shechem, another border sanctuary in the hill country, and perhaps other sanctuaries as well, that told of the campaigns and alliances that were part of the struggle against the city states that had dominated the whole region, and that continued to control the plain of Esdraelon and the coastal corridor to Egypt. The historical emergence of Israel in Canaan in the closing years of the thirteenth century BC has been embellished by folklore and at times is formulated in the language of cultic celebration. The stories are presented in ways that reinforce the religious convictions of the Deuteronomists.

The end of the Bronze Age was a time of great turmoil in the ancient Near East. Perhaps the most significant factor in this was the collapse of the Hittite Empire in central Anatolia [today's Turkey] and Syria. Unattached groups roamed the area seizing power where they could. Canaan was significantly affected. Bands of 'Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Gergashites, Hivites, and Jebusites' (Joshua 24:11) took control of the cities and reduced the locals to serfdom. Some of the locals fled to the hill country where they were less able to be controlled, and where they struggled to eke out an existence. The ability of the foreigners to take control of the cities in the coastal areas, the valley of Esdraelon, and even in the hill country (Jebusite control of Jerusalem is a prime example) was possible because of the weakening of Egypt at this time. The collapse of the Mycenaean Empire in Greece led to the same kind of uncontrolled marauding at sea that was happening on land. The 'Sea Peoples', as they are known from ancient sources, attacked Egypt. They also attacked along the east coast of the Mediterranean, including Canaan. One of these groups was the Philistines.

It was in the hill country of Canaan at this time that a new grouping of tribes emerged – Israel. They were held together by an understanding of God that was new, and very different from that of any of their neighbours. For this people, God was not a God of the controlling elite, nor was he a God identified with a specific geographical area. He was the God of creation and the lord of history, a God who liberated from slavery, a God whose concern was the poor. They believed that it was this God, YHWH, who chose Israel as his special people, and gave them Canaan as their land. For them, the cult was not there to provide mythical support for a ruler. It was a way to come together to celebrate the freedom that God had given them, to remember and to express their worship, their gratitude and their obedience to YHWH, who they believed had entered into a special covenant with them: He would be their God and they would be his people..

Joshua tells us that this new way of looking on God was introduced to the people of the hill country by a group that entered Canaan at this time, a group that had escaped Egyptian slavery. It is a story of the spread of this idea and of the forming of a people committed to YHWH. It tells of the early years of what was to become the nation of Israel. If we are going to speak of a hero, YHWH is the hero of the book of Joshua as he is of the Moses-literature. It is YHWH who liberates these people and who defends them against the powerful enemies of the city-states of Canaan. It is YHWH who inspires other subject groups to join them and to identify as a people with a common commitment to YHWH and to the values that are expressed so powerfully in the Moses-literature.

Joshua in the Torah

The name of the book comes from a significant figure in the tribal area of Ephraim (see Joshua 24:30) and its sanctuary at Shechem. His name describes his role. He is the one through whom YHWH saves (y^hôšûa‘). As the story is told Joshua plays a key role in the establishment of Israel, not only in Ephraim but throughout Canaan. How much of this records historical fact we have no way of knowing. It is probably a literary device for holding the story together. Joshua is also mentioned in the Moses-stories. Is this a way of securing a link between what Joshua achieved and the stories attached to Moses that encompass the central convictions of Yahwism?

Joshua appears in only two scenes in Exodus. The first fits nicely with his role in the Book of Joshua: he successfully defends the people against an attack from the Amalekites at Rephidim just before they reach Mount Sinai (see Exodus 17:8-16). In the second he is described as Moses’ assistant (Exodus 24:13; see Joshua 1:1) and sets out with Moses as Moses climbs Mount Sinai. He is mentioned as being with Moses also when Moses comes down from the mountain (Exodus 32:17), and as ‘not leaving the tent’(Exodus 33:11).

Joshua is not mentioned at all in Leviticus.

Numbers seems to be quite a late post-exilic work, and so represents a late tradition. In Numbers Joshua is mentioned as trying to get Moses to stop Eldad and Medad from prophesying in the camp (Numbers 11:28). He is also mentioned among the spies that were sent into Canaan – though here there are obvious signs that his name has been inserted into an older story (see Numbers 13:16; 14:6, 30, 38; 26:65). Because of the role he is portrayed as playing in the spy scene, he and Caleb are the only ones of the Exodus generation who will enter the Promised Land, ‘for they have unreservedly followed YHWH’(Numbers 32:12). Moses is instructed by YHWH: ‘Take Joshua son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him ... So Moses did as YHWH commanded him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and the whole congregation; he laid his hands on him and commissioned him—as YHWH had directed through Moses’(Numbers 27:18; 27:22-23). Finally he, along with the priest Eleazar, are instructed by Moses in regard to the arrangement for the Transjordan tribes (Numbers 32:28), and they are named as the ones who will apportion the land to the tribes when they cross into the Promised Land (34:17).

Every time Joshua is mentioned in the Book of Deuteronomy it is as the one who will lead Israel in taking possession of the Promised Land. Since it is the Deuteronomic School that had the dominant role in composing the Book of Joshua, I will list the references to Joshua in Deuteronomy. Many of the phrases are repeated in the Book of Joshua.

Joshua son of Nun, your assistant, shall enter there; encourage him, for he is the one who will secure Israel’s possession of it.

– Deuteronomy 1:38

I charged Joshua as well at that time, saying: “Your own eyes have seen everything that YHWH your God has done to these two kings; so YHWH will do to all the kingdoms into which you are about to cross.

– Deuteronomy 3:21

Charge Joshua, and encourage and strengthen him, because it is he who shall cross over at the head of this people and who shall secure their possession of the land that you will see.

– Deuteronomy 3:28

YHWH your God himself will cross over before you. He will destroy these nations before you, and you shall dispossess them. Joshua also will cross over before you, as YHWH promised.

– Deuteronomy 31:3

Moses summoned Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel: ‘Be strong and bold, for you are the one who will go with this people into the land that YHWH has sworn to their ancestors to give them; and you will put them in possession of it.’

– Deuteronomy 31:7

YHWH said to Moses, “Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may commission him.” So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the tent of meeting ... Then YHWH commissioned Joshua son of Nun and said, “Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them; I will be with you.”

Deuteronomy 31:14, 23

Moses came and recited all the words of this song in the hearing of the people, he and Joshua son of Nun.

– Deuteronomy 32:44

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as YHWH had commanded Moses.

– Deuteronomy 34:9

The closer one looks at this and the other references to Joshua in the Moses-stories, the more likely it appears that Joshua has been read back into the story, or, perhaps better, that in composing the Moses’ story the authors wanted to illustrate that the understanding of God and the values of the nascent people of Israel (including the men such as Joshua, who were remembered as playing a leading role in their emergence in Canaan as a special people), are the understandings and the values revealed by God to Moses. As mentioned earlier, Joshua the man is portrayed as the ideal leader. In the opening verses of the book he is introduced as Moses’ assistant and his success comes from the fact that he was faithful to the teaching of Moses, that is, to the revelation given by God to Moses (and contained in the Book of Deuteronomy). All successive leaders are judged by this criterion in the Deuteronomic History. YHWH promises to be with Joshua as he was with Moses. This is the God, and these are the values to which the prophets kept referring in their critique of the sins, especially of the monarchy, but also of the people. Joshua adhered faithfully to the new understanding of God that he received from the ‘Moses-group’ who brought their message of liberation into the hill country of Canaan.

There is history in the Book of Joshua, the history of the adhesion to YHWH of scattered clans in the hill country of Canaan, but it is history always at the service of theology. The book of Joshua, like the works of the Torah, is before else, the story of God’s self-revelation in the story of the people of Israel.