

The New International Commentary
on the Old Testament



THE BOOK OF
JOSHUA

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INTRODUCTION

I. TITLE AND PURPOSE

In the Hebrew canon the book of Joshua heads the second division of the OT, "The Prophets." This division includes the "historical books" (Joshua through 2 Kings, minus Ruth), as well as the books of the writing prophets (Isaiah through Malachi, minus Daniel). Traditional Jewish scholarship distinguishes between the "Former Prophets" and the "Latter Prophets," with Joshua and the other historical books assigned to the "Former Prophets." Christian scholars have gladly adopted this terminology. Indeed, it can be used to good advantage, for it provides insight into the true nature and purpose of the books.

The intent of the Former Prophets is to present an interpretative (prophetical) history of God's dealings with his covenant people Israel, from the time of Moses' death until the Babylonian captivity. Thus viewed, these books let the light of divine revelation fall upon the events recorded and so enable us to perceive the line of development that holds these events together and gives them their true meaning.

The book of Joshua received its name from its principal character. The most common Hebrew form of the name Joshua is *y'hôshu'a* (cf. Josh. 1:1), although other forms also occur (cf. Deut. 3:21; Neh. 8:17). An earlier form of the name was Hoshea (cf. Num. 13:8, 16; Deut. 32:44, MT). In the LXX the name is rendered *Iêsous*, also the form in which it occurs in the NT (cf. Acts 7:45 and Heb. 4:8). Joshua, which means "the Lord is Salvation," was also the name the Savior bore.

No attempt will be made to present an extensive sketch of Joshua the man, although the book does permit a picture of Israel's leader during the Conquest. Focusing on "Bible characters" does have merits, but the danger exists that in doing so one overlooks the fact that the aim of biblical historiography is not to focus on the human agents of the redemptive

drama, or to exploit their good and evil deeds for purposes of moral example or deterrent. How sacred history must be viewed is well illustrated in the book of Joshua itself. In ch. 24 the book offers an overview of God's past dealings with his people (vv. 2-13). This is a prophetic survey, introduced by the customary formula: "Thus says the Lord." Throughout this summary the emphasis is on what God, the covenant Lord, has done. It is this emphasis, not that of moral example, that causes the people to respond with an expression of loyalty to their Lord and demonstrate their willingness to serve only him (vv. 16-18).

It is the sincere belief of the commentator that as one reads the Former Prophets, including the book of Joshua, a resolute effort should be made to avoid putting mankind in the center. "Bible stories" tend to be weighted too much on the anthropocentric. Biblical narrative all too often is searched for moral examples that can be followed or shunned, as the case may be. Biblical history thus is dissolved into a number of instances of human conduct, moral or immoral. The historical context within which the events are placed by the biblical author tends to be ignored. When a straight line is drawn from the "then" to the "now," the uniqueness of the biblical events as instances of God's self-revelation is in danger of being overlooked. The nuances of meaning placed in the biblical account by the inspired authors fail to get their due, for everything turns around the supposed "lesson." Biblical events tend to be lifted out of their redemptive-historical context by being made into timeless paradigms of moral behavior.

But this is not in keeping with Scripture's own design and purpose. Scripture presents historical facts in order to show that history is en route to a goal: that there is dynamic movement, and that the earlier leads to a later and a last. Even those NT chapters often considered to be patterned after the example-model, 1 Cor. 10 and Heb. 11, speak of the facts in terms of an "already" and a "not yet" (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11b and Heb. 11:39-40.) Another example of theocentric rather than anthropocentric recounting of history in the OT may be found in 1 Sam. 12:6-11.

The common "Bible story approach," replete with moral lessons taken out of context, inevitably leads to widespread moralism. The example method is also found in current Liberation theology, where the Exodus motif is considered to be the mainspring for change. But in the Bible the Exodus is viewed as redemption, not just in the sense of physical deliverance from oppression, but also in the sense of freedom from the bondage of sin. When God triumphs over Pharaoh, he also manifests his superiority over the gods of Egypt. Words used to describe the Exodus

release of enslaved Israel enter the vocabulary of redemption in its more comprehensive, Christ-effected, sense.¹

Thus the example method effectively cuts us off from the true scriptural meaning of books such as Joshua and the other Former Prophets. Morality becomes the watchword. But morality as such cannot save. Only when it is woven into the fabric of redemption and flows from the redemptive work which God accomplishes for his people can morality receive its due.

II. AUTHORSHIP AND DATE

Experts are divided about few books in the OT as they are about the book of Joshua. Both the date and the authorship (editing) of the book are subjects of continuing controversy.

According to the Talmud, "Joshua wrote his own book," although the Talmudic tradition posited that the death of Joshua had been recorded by Eleazar son of Aaron, and the latter's own death by his son Phinehas. Jewish medieval expositors such as Rashi and David Kimchi believed that most of the book came from Joshua's time, but matters mentioned in 19:37 and 15:14-19 were thought to be from a later hand. Abrabanel, on the other hand, held that the book was probably from the hand of the prophet Samuel, who believed that the expression "until this day" (4:9; 5:9; 7:26, etc.) was an indication of a considerable lapse of time between the events and their description in the book. The reference to the book of Jashar (10:13) was also thought to be an indication of a date no earlier than the time of David (2 Sam. 1:18). A good many of these arguments continue to surface in modern discussion.

In the current phase of Joshua criticism two views "stand opposed to one another without compromise."¹ The one is a primarily literary-

1. That Liberation theology is not consistent in its use of OT materials has been pointed out by R. H. Preston, "From the Bible to the Modern World: A Problem for Ecumenical Ethics," *BJRL* 59 (1976), p. 185. Preston urges care in the use of the OT as a model, warning against "sudden darts from a Biblical text to a specific conclusion" (example: Karl Barth!) and pointing out that Liberation theology, while making much of the Exodus as the model of God's activity for today, is silent on the events of the Settlement or of the Exile. "Why," Preston asks, "is that central event [the Exile] in Old Testament history not made a key model of interpretation?" His remark that this "all savours of covering subjectivity in using the Bible with a mask of objectivity" appears to be well taken; see also M. H. Woudstra, "A Critique of Liberation Theology by a Cross-Culturalized Calvinist," *JETS* 23 (1980), pp. 3-12.

1. See O. Kaiser, *Introduction to the OT* (Minneapolis: 1977), p. 135.

critical view; the other, while not rejecting literary criticism, believes that it must be combined with the traditio-historical view.

Following in the footsteps of J. Wellhausen (1844–1918) a group of contemporary scholars continues to believe that Joshua, together with the Five Books of Moses, must be regarded as part of a six-book unit called the Hexateuch. They therefore hold that the alleged sources of the Pentateuch, the so-called Jehovist (Yahwist), Elohist, Deuteronomist, and the Priestly document can be detected in the book of Joshua as well. But there is no consensus of opinion about how to divide the book among the various sources.²

Since Wellhausen, the basic form of the narrative of chs. 2–11 has usually been thought to derive from the Elohist source. This assumption, however, is based on the opinion that this presentation of the events of the Conquest differs from a supposedly parallel description of the same events in Judg. 1. Since the latter is believed to represent the J source, the conclusion was drawn that the Joshua materials came from the E source,³ but doubts have arisen as to the propriety of this assignment. W. Rudolph argues strongly that the first twelve chapters of the book belong to J, not to E.⁴

The second part of the book, especially chs. 13–22 dealing with the distribution of the land, has been frequently ascribed to the P source. The role of the Priestly editor, however, has been variously described. Moreover, most scholars adhering to some form of Wellhausian source hypothesis are agreed that the book in its present form owes its existence to a Deuteronomistic redaction. The fact that not P but D is believed to have been the final hand at work in Joshua's redaction should actually come as a source of embarrassment to the adherents of the documentary hypothesis, for in the Pentateuch itself P is considered to be the foundational document.⁵

A commentary on Joshua is not the place to deal extensively with the broader question of Pentateuchal criticism and the documentary hy-

2. E. M. Good, *IDB* II, p. 990, writes: "The results are so inconclusive that it seems justifiable to doubt that the Pentateuchal documents continue into Joshua."

3. Cf. Kaiser, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

4. For a summary of divergent opinions that is still very useful, cf. N. H. Snaith, "The Historical Books," in H. H. Rowley, ed., *The OT and Modern Study* (London: 1951), pp. 84–86.

5. Cf. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the OT* (Grand Rapids: 1969), p. 668; see also E. J. Young, *Introduction to the OT* (Grand Rapids: 1960), p. 156. Young also presents some cogent reasons why the assumption of a Hexateuch lacks sufficient support.

pothesis. Suffice it to say that we are unable to accept that hypothesis. If, as P. C. Craigie has demonstrated satisfactorily,⁶ the book of Deuteronomy may be assigned confidently to the Mosaic age, the very foundation of the documentary hypothesis has been removed.

The traditio-historical approach to the authorship of Joshua abandons the literary-critical solution with regard to chs. 1-12. M. Noth holds that there are three sources in chs. 2-12, namely a group of etiological legends (chs. 2-9) along with two hero legends (ch. 10 and 11:1-9). According to Noth, some of these stories were not originally national in scope. Rather, they were handed down in connection with a sanctuary in Benjaminite Gilgal and were originally Benjaminite in scope.⁷ As Saul became Israel's national king, however, this Benjaminite material became the property of the nation and was broadened so that Joshua grew in stature as a national hero. A collector is believed responsible for the combination of these materials in chs. 2-9; 10; and 11. He was active about 900 BC.

Noth argues for a continuing history-work in the OT from Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, written by the Deuteronomist. His approach, therefore, represents an important modification of the documentary hypothesis but does not break radically with it.

O. Kaiser has asked some searching questions regarding Noth's approach to chs. 2-11.⁸ One of them concerns the choice of Gilgal as the presumed site for the handing down of these early Joshua materials. Kaiser suggests that the choice of this site may simply be a fiction and points out, rightly so we believe, that 9:27 is more likely to be connected with Gibeon and ultimately with Jerusalem than with Gilgal.

Another critical question arises with respect to the relation between Judg. 1, which supposedly gives a true picture of the course of events during the Conquest, and Josh. 2-11, which is thought to present a fictional account of an all-Israelite conquest. The question is how this fic-

6. *The Book of Deuteronomy*. NICOT (Grand Rapids: 1976), *passim*.

7. See M. Noth, *Das Buch Josua*. HAT VII (Tübingen: 1953), pp. 7-17. Noth follows A. Alt who also wrote extensively on the date and authorship of Joshua. See Alt, "Judas Gaue unter Josia," in *KS II* (Munich: 1959), pp. 276-288; cf. also "Das System der Stammesgrenzen im Buche Josua," in *KS I* (Munich: 1953), pp. 193-202. In the same volume see also "Josua," pp. 176-192.

8. See Kaiser, *op. cit.*, p. 138. Kaiser's questions must be seen as based on assumptions essentially similar to those of Noth and are intended as intrinsic criticism. Although we do not share these basic assumptions, we would note the ongoing debate around Noth's hypothesis, which has been widely followed; see, e.g., J. A. Soggin, *Josua*. OTL (Philadelphia: 1972), *passim*, which adopts many of Noth's positions.

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Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., general editor

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PUBLISHING CO.**
Grand Rapids, Michigan

ISBN 0-8028-2525-7



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