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JOSHUA, JUDGES

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ABBREVIATIONS

Books of the Bible

Acts—Acts of the Apostles
Amos—Amos
Bar—Baruch
1 Chr—1 Chronicles
2 Chr—2 Chronicles
Col—Colossians
1 Cor—1 Corinthians
2 Cor—2 Corinthians
Dan—Daniel
Deut—Deuteronomy
Eccl (or Qoh)—Ecclesiastes
Eph—Ephesians
Esth—Esther
Exod—Exodus
Ezek—Ezekiel
Ezra—Ezra
Gal—Galatians
Gen—Genesis
Hab—Habakkuk
Hag—Haggai
Heb—Hebrews
Hos—Hosea
Isa—Isaiah
Jas—James
Jdt—Judith
Jer—Jeremiah
Job—Job
Joel—Joel
John—John
1 John—1 John
2 John—2 John
3 John—3 John
Jonah—Jonah
Josh—Joshua
Jude—Jude
Judg—Judges
1 Kgs—1 Kings

2 Kgs—2 Kings
Lam—Lamentations
Lev—Leviticus
Luke—Luke
1 Macc—1 Maccabees
2 Macc—2 Maccabees
Mal—Malachi
Mark—Mark
Matt—Matthew
Mic—Micah
Nah—Nahum
Neh—Nehemiah
Num—Numbers
Obad—Obadiah
1 Pet—1 Peter
2 Pet—2 Peter
Phil—Philippians
Phlm—Philemon
Prov—Proverbs
Ps(s)—Psalms
Rev—Revelation
Rom—Romans
Ruth—Ruth
1 Sam—1 Samuel
2 Sam—2 Samuel
Sir—Sirach
Song—Song of Songs
1 Thess—1 Thessalonians
2 Thess—2 Thessalonians
1 Tim—1 Timothy
2 Tim—2 Timothy
Titus—Titus
Tob—Tobit
Wis—Wisdom
Zech—Zechariah
Zeph—Zephaniah

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Joshua

The book takes its name from its central character, Joshua, son of Nun, the faithful aide of Moses. He is the designated leader of the Hebrew people as they take possession of Canaan, the Promised Land. In him the leadership of Moses finds its continuation, even to the point of echoing moments of the Mosaic exodus, the crossing of the Jordan (Red Sea) (chs. 3–4) and the renewal of the covenant at Shechem (Sinai) (ch. 24).

In the figure of Joshua, the author(s) of the book continues the early history of Israel, recounting the fulfillment of the promise of land possession, a promise which stands at the heart of the Deuteronomistic history.

The Deuteronomistic History

Although complete in itself, the book of Joshua is actually part of a much longer historical record which proceeds from a particular school of religious thought. As is commonly held today, the book of Deuteronomy served as the inspiration for the historical books which follow it, viz., Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings. It is the theological perspective of that fifth book of Torah which colors the entire history of Israel from the occupation to the time of the Babylonian exile. That viewpoint can be summarized in the oft-repeated admonition: Fidelity to the Lord's commands brings success, while infidelity brings only failure and rejection (Deut 5:32; 6:24f; 7:4). It is against this background that the dominantly successful career of Joshua is judged.

The record of this history was long in the making, extending over six centuries and comprised of various documents and sources (not all of them in total agreement). If any moment was central in this process, it would have to be the reign of King Josiah (620–609 B.C.) who inaugurated a reform strongly influenced by the thinking of Deuteronomy. In fact, the discovery of a lost book of laws at the time of Josiah's temple renovations (2 Kings 22) is often identified by scholars as an early copy of Deuteronomy. Whatever the evolution of this historical corpus may have been, the final result is clear enough. The accounts of the Israelite monarchy and its precedents, extending back to the twelfth century B.C., provided the Deuteronomists

with a framework in which to explain the country's successes and failures from a distinctly theological point of view. If the Assyrians were to destroy the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C. and Babylon were to do the same in the sixth, the reason was not military or political inferiority but the failure of the Israelites to live as a sacred, covenanted people.

The final editing of the Deuteronomistic History, which included Joshua, comes from a period shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem in 587–586 B.C.

The theology of Joshua

It is the religious perspective on Israel's successes and failures that permeates the book of Joshua. If the occupation of Canaan was marked by success in the invaders' military undertakings, this was simply due to their obedience to the Lord's directives.

The book of Joshua brings to fulfillment the promise initially made to Abraham. That promise was twofold: many descendants and the making of a great nation (Gen 12:2ff). It is with the last part of that promise that this book primarily deals, i.e., the occupation of Canaan, the land of promise.

Covenant fidelity, so important to the Deuteronomist, is centered principally in this book on the first precept of the Decalogue, i.e., the exclusion of false deities. Canaan was a land wherein foreign cult abounded, especially the worship of fertility gods. It is clear throughout that the Hebrews are to see any form of religious compromise as categorically excluded. To underscore the exclusivity of YHWH's sovereignty the book ends with a ceremony of covenant renewal.

The book's division

There are two main sections of Joshua, the first dealing with the occupation of the land of Canaan (chs. 1–12), and the second with the distribution of the land to the twelve tribes (chs. 13–21). The final chapters deal with a dispute regarding a Transjordanian altar (ch. 22), the renewal of the covenant, and the death of Joshua (chs. 23–24). The account of the occupation does not extend to the entire territory which later made up the country but is more limited and centered around the land of the tribe of Benjamin. The documentation underlying this narrative of seizure is considered very ancient, probably dating from the twelfth century, whereas the text dealing with land distribution dates from the time of the established monarchy.

Joshua and history

When it comes to a historical appraisal of the Joshua narrative, the reader must proceed with a measure of caution. The book forms part of the "historical" literature primarily because it is a broad record of the country's

origins and early development. That is not to make of it a totally objective picture of what actually transpired, refraining for the moment from the question of whether historical accounts are ever objective. The book, for example, presents the occupation of Canaan in lightning fashion, with little or no strong military opposition. That the actual occupation was a much slower process of elimination and incorporation is evident from both biblical (see Judg 1–3) and extra-biblical sources. The destruction of Jericho and Ai is evidently more idealistic than real, with archeological evidence pointing to no significant occupation of those cities during the period of the Israelite incursion. As we shall see, there are other instances of difficulty in squaring the biblical data with other historical sources. What is intractable, however, is the appearance of the Hebrews in Palestine in the twelfth century B.C.

All of this is but to say that a theological perspective is dominant in this and the other historical books of the Old Testament. The land was a gift of the covenant God to the Israelite population and, regardless of the actual circumstances that made this a reality, the basic belief is never compromised. This accounts for the marked idealization which is present in the story of the occupation.

The figure of Joshua

While Joshua was certainly a towering figure at the time of the conquest, historical accuracy does not permit us to see him as responsible for all the remarkable strides taken in the book that bears his name. He is presented as the idealized hero of the conquest and the one who presided over the subsequent distribution of the land. But the fact is that much of the activity presented in the first twelve chapters is localized, largely related to the single tribe of Benjamin and its sanctuary at Gilgal. The land of Canaan was brought under control only after a century of Israelite expansion, and the account of the allotment of the land largely reflects the period of the monarchy.

Yet in all of this Joshua stands as a larger than life figure. Not unlike Moses, he has been drawn to some events recorded in this book more in spirit than in fact. It is under the mantle of his leadership that the events of the occupation of the land find their appropriate setting.