

Theological Themes in Joshua

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The book of Joshua almost opens and almost closes with theological statements by a marginal Canaanite woman and a powerful Israelite man, in 2:9–13 and 24:2–24. These statements take substantially narrative form, which fits with Joshua being a narrative book. Rahab and Joshua thus begin by speaking of God's acts, but they go on also to speak of his being, and together their statements suggest a framework for articulating theological themes in the book:

- Yahweh brought the Israelites from Egypt
- Yahweh gave Israel the land of Canaan
- Yahweh is God in heaven and on earth, a holy God and a passionate God
- Canaanites can come to acknowledge him; Israelites must commit themselves to him

1. Yahweh Brought the Israelites from Egypt

"We have heard how Yahweh dried up the Red Sea water before you when you got out of Egypt, and what you did to the two Amorite kings." (2:10)

"I got your ancestors out from Egypt ... your eyes saw what I did to the Egyptians ... and I brought you to the country of the Amorites." (24:6, 7, 8)¹

Yahweh's enabling the Israelites to escape from Egypt and the Egyptians, and to get to Canaan, is the starting point in Rahab's theological statement. Joshua's declaration puts this action of Yahweh's in the broader context of his involvement with Israel's ancestors that began with Terah.

In its account of God's activity, the book of Joshua does not look back to the event of creation, though it emphasizes God's involvement with creation in the sense of the material world, the land. Nor does it look forward beyond the time of Rahab and Joshua themselves and the conclusion of the work Yahweh has begun in their time. J. N. Schofield suggested that the Israelite understanding of a relationship with history sees it as like rowing a boat—the past is in front of us (*lāpānīm*), so we can see it, the future is behind us (*'āḥōr*), so we cannot see it. This perspective is thus the opposite to the usual Western one, in which the future is in front of us and the past is behind us.² Rahab and Joshua speak confidently about what lies in front of them, Yahweh's activity in the past, and they know how significant that was. They do not speak about what lies behind them, Yahweh's activity in the future, beyond the completion of his present project. As far as they know, Yahweh has no other significant activity in mind. In other words, the book of Joshua has no eschatology. It hardly sees the need of one. Or rather, its eschatology is more-or-less totally realized. God has done what he undertook to do, and has fulfilled his purpose.

Not a thing fell of the entire good thing that Yahweh spoke to the household of Israel, in that everything came about. (21:45)

Yahweh our God—he got us and our ancestors up from the country of Egypt, from a servants' household, he who performed these great signs before our eyes, and he took care of us all the way we went and among all the peoples that we passed through the middle of. (24:17)

¹ Translations in this chapter are my own, usually corresponding to the translation in John Goldingay, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2023).

² J. N. Schofield, *Introducing Old Testament Theology* (London: SCM, 1964), 26–27.

The affirmations by Rahab and Joshua point to a related theological theme, the interrelationship of God's activity and human activity. Yahweh himself once gave a vivid picture of his bringing the Israelites from Egypt to Sinai, speaking of how "I carried you on eagle's wings" (Exod 19:4). The Israelites might have acknowledged that this was true metaphorically, in that he did make their exit and journey possible. They indeed did not have to fight the Egyptians in order to get free of them. But literally Yahweh did not carry them. Their journey involved their activity as well as Yahweh's. The book of Joshua consistently portrays the two realities, of Yahweh's activity and Israel's activity, in connection with the same events, without attempting to indicate how the two realities might interrelate.

What of the rights and wrongs of Yahweh's action and Israel's? "Your eyes saw what I did to the Egyptians" (Josh 24:7). "We have heard ... what you did to the two Amorite kings" (2:10). The Gibeonites subsequently speak of what Yahweh himself did to the Amorite kings (9:10). Now the Egyptians were oppressors, and the Amorite kings started the later fight. But the book of Joshua does not offer ethical explanations or apologies for the events it reports. It does not refer to justice (when the word *mišpāṭ* occurs, it simply means ruling, and there are no *šəpāṭîm* in Joshua; *šedeq* and related words do not appear). The book points towards the assumption that conflict and war are just aspects of the way things are in the world, like death or nightfall or anger, like Qohelet (Qoh 3:8), and Jesus (Matt 24:6),³ though it does assume that Yahweh works in and through war, sometimes.

Violence and war are indeed major themes in Joshua, but the book hardly sees them as theological or ethical themes (*ḥāmās*, "wrongful violence," is another word that does not occur). The non-theological and non-ethical nature of Joshua's approach to conflict between peoples is hinted ironically by its allusions to peace and the cessation of war. It refers twice to peace (*šālôm*; 9:15; 10:21), once after negotiation and once after conflict, and twice to the country being quiet after war (*šāqat*; 11:23; 14:15). But the peace with the Gibeonites following negotiation (9:15) is an interesting special case, given that it is based on deception. Otherwise peace or quiet happens when one people has won an overwhelming victory over another. Joshua has no place for the notion of peacemaking between nations.

It is eloquent but enigmatic in the way it speaks of Yahweh's relationship with nations other than Israel. Yahweh took action against the Egyptians to free or protect the Israelites. He took action against the Amorite kings who were unwise or unfortunate enough unwittingly to oppose his intention to bless the Israelites, but it does not otherwise suggest that the Amorites deserved what happened to them. It puts the emphasis on Yahweh's power to do as he wishes and on his wish to enable the Israelites to escape from Egypt and get to Canaan, without commenting further on the rights and wrongs of the actions he took. The book knows that Yahweh can control what happens to and among nations and that he sometimes exercises that control, but it does not indicate whether he consistently does so, as opposed to letting nations do as they wish. It has nothing as wide-horizoned as Yahweh's declaration in Amos 9:7, "I enabled Israel to come up from the country of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Qir."

The implicit theological perspective on the relationship of God and the nations compares with the way one might look at God's involvement with the nations in other contexts, and at the nations' involvement with each other. For hundreds of years European powers in the Christian world such as England, France, Spain, and the Netherlands fought each other, claiming God was on their side, and in the twentieth century, Germany and Britain did the same. Meanwhile, representatives of European powers had invaded the Americas and taken control of much of the two continents. In the twentieth century, Jewish groups again took control of much of Palestine, and Christian groups were inclined to rejoice in that development as paralleling the process described in Joshua, though it

³ And see Richard Overby, *Why War?* (London: Pelican, 2024).

initially involved less violence. One would not have been surprised if the Crusaders or the Europeans settling in the Americas had claimed the Joshua story as a precedent for their campaigns, but there is little evidence that they did.⁴ Yahweh's involvement in history is permissive and/or occasional.

2. Yahweh Gave Israel the Land of Canaan

"Yahweh has given the land to you." (2:8)

"I have given you a land in which you did not toil and towns that you did not build." (24:13)

An older way of thinking about Joshua's theology is the concept of salvation-history, of *Heilsgeschichte*.⁵ While it is a tricky notion, it usefully draws attention to the fact that Joshua is indeed more about what God has done than about who God is, more about historical theological truths than metaphysical theological truths. And it is usefully ambiguous about how far its *Geschichte* denotes actual events or a narrative about events. Both literary and archeological considerations indicate that a narrative such as the story of the fall of Jericho is fiction rather than fact. Its function is then to convey concretely the theological significance of Israel's entry into the promised land, the fact that Yahweh gives Israel the land. As *Heilsgeschichte*, the narrative is about "salvation" in the sense of deliverance, though not about "eternal salvation." And the wider context of Yahweh's purpose, from which Joshua himself begins in 24:2–4, starts implicitly not from Yahweh's purpose to deliver or save (which Terah does not need) but from his purpose to bless. Salvation or deliverance has a vital place in the theology of Joshua, then, but it is not the beginning or the end of it.⁶ In Joshua, to put it another way, life in the land of Canaan is the end towards which Yahweh and Israel are oriented. The land of Canaan is arguably the most prominent theme in Joshua. The book is more about salvation geography than salvation history.

In saying that Yahweh has "given" Israel the country of Canaan, both Rahab and Joshua use qatal verbs. And the book's statements about Yahweh having totally fulfilled his promises would make one think that the most that could now be needed in connection with Israel's taking control of Canaan would be for Yahweh and Israel to tie up some loose ends. Indeed, those statements hardly leave room for there being any loose ends to tie up. Yet notwithstanding the qatal verbs, neither Rahab nor Joshua refers to an event that has actually happened. Rahab speaks at a point when the Israelites have not entered the land, while Joshua recognizes that he speaks at a point when they have won control of some of the country but there is still much to enter into possession of. It transpires that statements about everything having come about that Yahweh said (21:43–45) are seriously hyperbolic. Even at the end of Joshua, Israel's entering into possession of Canaan is only half-complete: "The country remains very much for possessing" (*yāraš qal*), Yahweh himself notes, adding a substantial list of areas that remain (13:1–6).⁷ So Joshua's eschatology is only semi-realized. Yet with further irony, Yahweh goes on to bid Joshua to allocate the entire country among the Israelite clans, and Joshua does so.

⁴ See, e.g., Douglas S. Earl, "Joshua and the Crusades," in Heath Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan, ed., *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and an Old Testament Problem* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2013), 19–43; L. Daniel Hawk, "Avatar in Three Dimensions," *Ashland Theological Journal* 42 (2010): 1–12.

⁵ Joachim J. Krause's study of "Hexateuchal Redaction in Joshua" (*Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 6 [2017]: 181–202) is a recent study of Josh 24 that speaks of the chapter in terms of *Heilsgeschichte*.

⁶ See, classically, Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and in the Life of the Church*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* 3 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

⁷ On the issues raised by this feature of Joshua, see especially L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

Yet Yahweh has indeed got the Israelites out of Egypt and to the edge of Canaan (in Rahab's declaration) and Israel has won significant victories in the land (by the time of Joshua's declaration). That is part of the basis for treating the project of Israel's gaining control of the country as certain to find completion. What Yahweh and Israel have done means that the project is, in effect, achieved. As an aspect of the book's rhetoric, its hyperbole has a theological base.

The conviction that the fulfillment of Yahweh's promise and purpose has arrived, even though it has not, is a theological theme that recurs through the Scriptures, in Ezra-Nehemiah, in the book of Isaiah as a whole, and in Daniel. According to the New Testament, the reign of God has arrived (Matt 3:2) and the last days have arrived (Acts 2:16–17), yet things continue much as they always have (2 Peter 3:4).

Reflection on the theological implications of this motif is both complicated and enriched when one takes into consideration the possible context(s) of the book's origin. For a few decades during David and Solomon's time, Israel might have controlled something like the entire area that Joshua describes, but whenever one dates the book over subsequent centuries, Israel was considerably short of such control. The Joshua narrative could thus make Israelites wistful, or it could invite them to hope.

Ambiguity about divine and human agency in connection with the Israelites getting from Egypt to the border of Canaan is sharper in connection with their gaining control of Canaan. Yahweh is giving the Israelites the country, but they have to take it,⁸ not merely receive it. If Yahweh does not speak and act, nothing happens, but if Israel does not act, nothing happens. "I sent ahead of you the scourge (*šir'āh*) and it drove people out (*gāraš*) before Israel," Yahweh says (Josh 24:12). The meaning of the word translated "scourge" is uncertain. While LXX and Vg have "hornet," the word is similar to the term for skin deformity in Leviticus 13. Whatever its meaning, however, it denotes some means of Yahweh clearing out the land for the Israelites, in keeping with promises that he would "definitely dispossess" the Canaanites and others before Israel (*yāraš* hiphil, strengthened by an infinite absolute; Josh 3:10). He would undertake some ethnic cleansing, push the Canaanites aside, displace them, and they would flee from before the Israelites, though Yahweh does not speak of "devoting" them, annihilating them, destroying them as if they were an offering to Yahweh (*ḥāram* hiphil), or striking them down (*nākāh* hiphil).

The statement about the scourge restates longstanding promises. Yet the Canaanites do not disappear before the Israelites arrive, or as they arrive. "You are crossing this Jordan to come to take possession of the country that Yahweh your God is giving you to take possession of" (1:11). Yet the Israelites are actually to do the dispossessing as well as the possessing. Joshua thus assumes that they themselves will defeat and drive out the Canaanites. Yahweh will not simply do it for them. So it is logical for him to send off men to reconnoiter the Jericho area (2:1–2), and one would have some sympathy with him if he was surprised when Yahweh's commander-in-chief shows up and speaks in a way that implies that he himself or Yahweh is in charge (5:13–15), and when Yahweh gives instructions regarding the city's taking and destruction that do not involve Israel doing anything except processing and blowing horns (6:1–5). The event involves both Yahweh giving instructions and taking action, and also Joshua giving instructions and taking action, with overlap between the two sets of instructions and actions, but not identity.

Consciously or unconsciously, the book of Joshua once more raises the tricky philosophical and theological question of the relationship between the acts of God and the acts of human beings, when it sometimes says that the Israelites "did not" dispossess certain areas (13:13; 16:10; 17:13),

⁸ Cf. Walter Brueggemann, "The God of Joshua.... Give or Take the Land," *Interpretation* 66 (2012): 164–75.

and sometimes that they “could not” (15:63; 17:12). The first formulation implies that they should have done but have not played their part, the second that Yahweh has not played his part.

Rahab and Joshua and the book of Joshua thus do affirm some narrative theological facts about the Israelites’ taking Canaan, yet even in connection with facts that the book affirms, it does not say everything we might like it to say about them. Yet narrative always works by choosing what to say and what to omit, and that is true of theological narrative. Indeed, it may tell its readers all that the narrator knows about the events it records, but necessarily leave unsaid what the narrator does not know.

The Jericho story illustrates further how a narrative may leave theological questions open. After Yahweh’s commander-in-chief informs Joshua that he is in charge, and Yahweh gives Joshua instructions for a daily procession around Jericho, eventually the Israelite priests blow their horns and the city walls fall down, and one might expect to read that the Jerichites then make a run for it across the Jordan or into the hills, fulfilling Yahweh’s promise to drive them out. But no, Joshua tells the Israelites to “devote” them all. While this is in keeping with instructions Moses gave in Deuteronomy, it was not part of Yahweh’s instructions to Joshua. Again without specific instructions from Yahweh, Joshua initiates an attack on Ai. Yahweh lets the army from Ai kill some of the Israelite attackers, Joshua protests to Yahweh like someone who has learned from the Psalms how to pray, and Yahweh puts him in his place. The reason is that an Israelite had appropriated some of the plunder that Joshua had declared “devoted.” He in due course confesses, but he is executed nevertheless, and Yahweh now tells Joshua to treat Ai as he had treated Jericho. After a gathering on Mount Ebal where Joshua reads the Torah to the Israelites, people from Gibeon perceive the danger they are in, and deceive Joshua into making a treaty with them that he does not feel free to go back on. Thus through Joshua 1–8, the narrative can seem to be raising as many theological questions as it makes theological statements. It leaves much open, but that is the nature of narrative.

The book describes Canaan as a good land (23:16), flowing with milk and molasses—full of pasturage for grazing sheep and of fruit trees such as date palms (5:6). Yet Joshua does not say a great deal about its characteristics. An audience that knows the land and reflects on the characteristics of the territory allocated to (say) Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, or Naphtali (19:10–39) might do so with a smile of pleasure. But the book does not point to the land’s attractiveness. It is more interested in emphasizing simply that the land is Israel’s endowment and possession, and that the individual clans have their endowment and possession within it. It speaks of “the land of the Hittites,” “the land of the Perizzites,” and so on. Yahweh does not speak of Canaan as “my land” and Joshua does not describe it as “his land.” On the other hand, Yahweh does speak of “the land that I am giving them” (1:2), and one cannot give someone something unless one owns it. Perhaps the implication is that all countries belong to Yahweh, and he can do with them as he wishes, without offering a justification for his action.

Joshua knows that the gift follows Yahweh’s taking Abraham from Mesopotamia and taking the Israelites from Egypt, but beyond that, he simply reports Yahweh’s commission to “endow [*nāḥal* hiphil] this people with the country that I vowed to their ancestors to give them” (1:6). The country thus becomes Israel’s “endowment” (*naḥālāh*; e.g., 13:6). The traditional translation “inheritance” could be misleading. The Israelites do not inherit the land from anyone, nor will they pass it on to anyone. The noun’s significance is to designate the land as their secure holding. Actually, it more often applies to the endowment of areas within the land to individual clans, and it would make sense if the notion of endowment began in this connection. Any individual clan is secure in having its endowment, and so is any individual kin group within the clan. Unless they are shepherds, they need a stretch of land to call their own, on which they can grow their food. Possessing some land is essential to a family’s viability. To say they have an endowment is to say they can live a viable life. The application of the notion of endowment to the people as a whole is then an extension of that

usage. The converse may be true of the other noun to describe Israel's relationship with its land, as its possession (*yaruššāh*; e.g., 12:7). Israel as a whole takes possession of the country (*yāraš*; e.g., 1:11). Each clan then takes possession of the share (*hēleq*; e.g., 18:5) that Israel allocates to it (*hālaq*; e.g., 14:5). If the audience of the book of Joshua would be wistful, or invited to hopefulness, about the nation's possession of the land of Canaan as a whole, then these statements would also encourage wistfulness and hope in connection with the endowments of individual clans.

3. Yahweh is God in Heaven and on Earth, a Holy and Passionate God

"Yahweh your God is God in the heavens above and on the earth below." (2:11)

"He is a holy God—he is a passionate God—he will not carry your rebellions and your offenses." (24:19)

While the nature of a narrative book is to focus on things that have happened, and to focus theologically on what God has done, the Tanak (and the New Testament) includes discursive or analytical theological statements as well as narrative theological ones. It includes statements describing how things are as well as ones relating what has happened, statements about who God is and what God is as well as what God has done. And Rahab and Joshua make discursive or analytical statements about God that complement their narrative ones. Rahab speaks of Yahweh's supernatural, metaphysical nature, Joshua of his personal qualities and disposition.

Rahab does not comment on how many gods there are, which became an important theological question in a Christian context. She is interested in who is God. While her answer to that question has implications for the question of monotheism (only Yahweh is God, so there is only one God) that is not what interests her. She is interested in mono-Yahwism, which is not a stage on the way towards the important question of monotheism, but a different kind of theological notion, and one that is at least as important in its own right. Rahab would acknowledge that there are lots of gods (with lower case g, a distinction we can usefully make in English) in the heavens and on the earth, and the rest of the Tanak would agree. But she and the rest of the Tanak declare that there is only one God (upper case G). The important thing is that Yahweh is this God. Epistemologically, that fact emerges from the narrative facts that Joshua recounts, because substantially it lies behind them.

The company addressed in Joshua 24 presuppose Rahab's point and profess themselves ready to acknowledge Yahweh as she does, but it's not clear to Joshua that they are really prepared to make this commitment. Joshua's saying that Yahweh is "a holy God," *'ēlôhîm qadôšîm*, makes a similar statement to Rahab's, though it may be slightly less forthright. Joshua says "a holy God," not "the holy God." It is also slightly ambiguous, as he uses the plural form of the adjective, a plural of majesty (GK 124h), which makes for a contrast with the formulations in 1 Samuel 6:20; Isaiah 5:16; and Habakkuk 1:12. And in Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar uses the equivalent Aramaic expression, *'ēlāhîn qaddîšîn*, to denote "holy gods" (lower case g). In either connection, the adjective refers to the metaphysical nature of God or of gods. He or they are not human or earthly but supernatural. Thus to say that Yahweh is holy is simply to say that he is God.⁹

It does imply that people therefore need to be careful. This need in relating to the holy God will be a consideration behind Israel's having a priesthood, a prominent feature in Joshua. Priests play an important protective role in the Jordan crossing, and a vital proactive role in the fall of Jericho. Eleazar the priest stands alongside Joshua in the distribution of the land among the clans, and his son Phinehas plays a key role in the story of the Transjordanian clans' altar in Joshua 22.

⁹ See David J. A. Clines, "Alleged Basic Meanings of the Hebrew Verb *qđš* 'Be Holy': An Exercise in Comparative Hebrew Lexicography," *VT* 71 (2021): 481–502.

Joshua goes on to suggest reasons why people need to be careful about their relationship with the holy God. First, he is passionate and/or jealous: he is *'el qannā'*. He feels things strongly, and this fact can issue in energetic action. That is good news if he is on your side, but bad news if you offend him. Supposing you are engaged in rebellion against him (*peša'*, traditionally "transgression") or you commit offenses against his expectations (*ḥattā't*, traditionally "sin") (24:19). His strong feelings mean he will not "put up with it," he will not "carry it" (*nāšā'*, traditionally "forgive").

Joshua begins his address to the clans at Shechem, "Yahweh, the God of Israel has said this" (24:2). It is the only time Joshua uses this expression, with which prophets commonly begin their statements. But the book refers frequently to Yahweh speaking, using less technical, more everyday expressions to introduce what "Yahweh said to Joshua." This particular phrase practically opens the book (1:1). Yahweh's being one who speaks is an ongoing truth about Yahweh. He interacts with Israel in instruction, exhortation, reminder, argument, and encouragement, like a parent or a teacher.

In those words with which the book almost opens, Yahweh speaks in two ways. He first issues a command concerning action that Joshua and the people are to take. In such a connection he is often described as commanding or charging Joshua (*šāwāh piei*; e.g., 1:9). His second word is a promise, about giving the land to Joshua and the people. Promises also recur in the book, though Hebrew has no special word for "promise." "Say" or "speak" generally suffices, though Yahweh recalls that he "swore" (*šāba'* niphāl; 1:6) to give the land to Israel's ancestors. The book does not speak of Yahweh "instructing" (*yārāh* hiphil), but it refers to the earlier results of such "instruction" (*tōrāh*; e.g., 1:7, 8), on the basis of which Israel is to act.

While Yahweh's speaking is thus a significant theological theme in Joshua, the book manifests no curiosity or omniscience about how that works. Did Joshua hear a voice, with his ears? Did Moses and Joshua have an internal sense of God speaking? Did they work out what must be the right instruction to articulate? Did theologians in the writers room where Deuteronomy or Joshua was composed have discussions and arguments about what Yahweh must have been thinking and saying? What would their audience infer about "Yahweh said"?

And what might they infer theologically about how the Joshua narrative came into being? The story in Joshua 1–10 is assertive, confident, intriguing, open, and opaque. It makes vital theological statements but it indeed shows no signs of omniscience. It raises questions that its audience will not be able to answer, but that they may profitably (or unprofitably) think or argue about. Humanly speaking, the narrative issued from reflection by Israelite theologians who made some things clear, but could perhaps have made other things clearer than they do. Its audience might wonder why they did not. If God's providence lies behind the formulation of the narrative, why did he let it stop where it did? Narrators and readers cannot know everything, then. But they do not know nothing. The narrative does suggest to readers a basis for living in Yahweh's world, in Yahweh's land. They can be sure in having some understanding of what God has done, without being overconfident, as if they knew everything. It is possible to be confident but also humble.

As the book says nothing about a basis for Yahweh's taking action against the Egyptians, it says nothing about a basis for driving the Canaanites out of their land, except Yahweh's determination long ago to give it to Terah's descendants. It has no hesitation and it manifests no unease in attributing dispossessing, devoting, striking down, and destroying to the Israelites, and it again does so without implying a framework that modern thinking would call ethical. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether we should describe the Israelites as arriving in Canaan as colonizers.¹⁰ Both they and the Canaanites are underlings of the imperial power of Egypt. The conflict between them is a conflict between subalterns. In having the Israelites take control of Canaan, we might again

¹⁰ See Carolyn Sharp, *Joshua*, Smith and Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2019), 44.

see Yahweh as acting against the oppressive empire, as taking action against Egypt, and see Joshua as implying an ethic about Yahweh's relationship with the nations. But Joshua does not articulate one. It does not give the impression that it thinks ethically about the matter. The Israelites' coming to Canaan once again tallies with the way things regularly work in the world. When the Romans (possibly including my own ancestors, to judge from my DNA) invaded what is now England, and when Anglo-Saxon tribes later invaded and pushed Celtic peoples (from the area where I now live) to the edges of Britain, this did not happen because the people deserved it. It's just the way history works. And Yahweh sometimes works through it. Insofar as right and wrong are associated with Israel's action, it lies in an obligation on Israel to do as Yahweh says, and in Yahweh's having an intention that he is fulfilling.

So Yahweh's bidding to Joshua to take the Israelites across the Jordan (1:1–9) includes no comment on the deserve or destiny of the people who are there already, except that they will not be able to resist the invaders. In not being specific about an estimation of the Canaanites or articulating a critique of them, the book contrasts with Deuteronomy and Judges on either side. It does not describe Yahweh's action in terms of redress or discipline for the Canaanites' waywardness, as the Torah does. Indeed, the Torah's asserting that the Canaanites deserve what comes to them makes all the more noticeable Joshua's not appealing to that logic.

On the other hand, the book's also recording no commission to the Israelites to "devote" Jericho raises the question whether it has some unease about the devoting. Such unease would be in keeping with the report in Numbers 21:1–3 that devoting had originally been Israel's idea. An inscription by the Moabite king Mesha, using his equivalent of this same verb, illustrates how devoting is the way nations act in war.¹¹ It almost seems that the book of Joshua wants to associate Yahweh with the action that put Israel in control of the land, but to avoid associating him with the death-dealing involved in this process.

A further irony then is the book's indications that factually there was much less death-dealing than a skim or selective or careless reading of Joshua might suggest, and current views of the actual course of events whereby Israel became the controlling power in Canaan likewise do not see it as a particularly violent process (though views on the nature of this process change from decade to decade). Conversely, the Tanak reports how much assimilation actually went on between the Israelites and the population of Canaan, which also fits inferences one might make on a historical basis. This might further link with the way Joshua's victims are commonly more the rulers of Canaanite city-states than their people. Joshua 10 and 12 provide spectacular examples, the former for its macabre concreteness, the latter for the relentlessness of its listing. This might also fit with Israel's having no king in Joshua (other than Yahweh, though that is only implicit). Joshua succeeds Moses as "Yahweh's servant," though only on his deathbed (24:29), and no one succeeds Joshua. There is a theological question about leadership that this might raise. Judges will note how badly things went when there was no king in Israel, but Joshua portrays them going well in these circumstances.

¹¹ See, e.g., Christopher B. Hays, *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 193–99; *ANET*, 320–21; *COS* 2:137–38.

4. Canaanites Can Come to Acknowledge Yahweh; Israelites Must Commitment Themselves to Him

“So now, swear to me, please, by Yahweh, that I have shown commitment with you, and you yourselves, too, will show commitment with my father’s household.” The men said to her,... “When Yahweh gives us the land, we will show commitment and truthfulness with you.” (2:12–14)

“So now, put aside the foreign gods that are among you and direct your minds to Yahweh the God of Israel.” The people said to Joshua, “Yahweh our God we will serve and his voice we will listen to.” (24:23–24)

As Yahweh is the Holy One of Israel, Israel is the people of the Holy One. Foundational and central to the theology of the book of Joshua is Israel being Yahweh’s people and Yahweh being Israel’s God. The book does not claim tolerance as one of Yahweh’s traits. Yet this points to a contrast between the attitude taken to Rahab at the beginning of the book, and the attitude taken to the company gathered at Shechem at the end of the book. Joshua’s final address is confrontational towards a company that affirms its willingness to commit itself to Yahweh. He speaks as if he simply does not believe them.

Whereas “Joshua 1 prepares readers for the exclusion, meaning destruction, of all Canaanites and their practices,” this expectation is problematized by Joshua 2.¹² While Rahab assumes that the Canaanites will be defeated, she also assumes that she can change sides and save her life, and her family’s. And the Israelites are indeed open to a Canaanite family associating itself with Israel, on the basis of recognizing Yahweh. As a result Rahab “has lived within Israel (*bəqereb yiśrā’ēl*) until this day” (6:25). She cannot become an Israelite, any more than an Israelite could become a Canaanite, because that is a matter of birth. Israel and Canaan are ethnic entities. But Rahab can become the next best thing, someone living “within Israel,” the expression used of foreign residents in a passage such as Deuteronomy 26:11. She is a foreigner who lives in Israel permanently, like a *gēr*, a resident alien, though the book of Joshua does not use the word. She is like Ruth who continues to be a Moabite and Uriah who continues to be a Hittite, but who identify with Israel and accept a commitment to Yahweh and celebrate his involvement with Israel, so that Israel’s story becomes their story.¹³

The droll tale of Joshua and the Gibeonites has overlapping implications. Like Rahab, the Gibeonites are scared, and they, too, are prepared to recognize Yahweh. In the end they not only acquire residence permits but become people who serve in practical ways in Yahweh’s sanctuary. Modern translations describe them as “slaves,” but this is misleading. In transporting wood and water to the sanctuary they fulfil the same role essential to the sanctuary’s functioning as a family’s servants and young people fulfill for a household.

In between Rahab’s story and the Gibeonites’ story with their amusing features there comes the unamusing Achan story, which makes a converse point.¹⁴ Whereas Rahab and the Gibeonites are outside Israel but become more or less members of Israel, Achan is inside Israel but gets thrown out of Israel. It happens not merely by death but by cremation, which implies exclusion from joining the family in a family tomb, and exclusion from rest in Sheol with the family of Israel.

One can set the attitude to Rahab, Gibeon, and Achan alongside Joshua’s declaration in Joshua 24, though this involves considering a different form of ambiguity from the theological

¹² David G. Firth, ““Models of Inclusion and Exclusion in Joshua,” in Hallvard Hagelia and Markus Zehnder, ed., *Interreligious Relations: Biblical Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 70–88 (77).

¹³ A passage such as Judg 3:5 describes the Israelites as having “lived among the Canaanites” and serving their gods, but the expression is also used perhaps more neutrally in Judg 1:29–30.

¹⁴ Cf. L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000, e.g., 25–33).

ambiguity over a question such as the relationship between divine and human action. Joshua 24 begins by identifying the company that gathers at Shechem as “all the clans of Israel.” But how does the entirety of Israel come to be assembling at Shechem, a central Canaanite town that Israel has not attacked and defeated? And how does Joshua come to be challenging such an assembly to decide whether it will serve Yahweh or some other deity, and come to be expressing doubt about its capacity to serve Yahweh?

Perhaps the story is an imaginative, more expansive version of the narrative in 8:30–35, and one need not ask about the attitude of actual Shechemites in Joshua’s day. Joshua then speaks figuratively or hyperbolically in challenging the people about choosing Yahweh or some other deity, and the story has implications that generalize those of the Achan narrative. Israel as a whole has to make a commitment to serve Yahweh if it wants to (continue to) be Israel.

Or perhaps the assembly is a more mixed one that includes people who have long lived in Shechem and did not come from outside, as Joshua and his company did, and they are here making a commitment to Yahweh for the first time and affirming that the incomers’ story will become their story, too. This would fit with a regular view of Joshua 24 half a century ago, when the chapter was commonly seen as pre-Deuteronomistic or Deuteronomistic.¹⁵ But it is presently seen as more likely belonging to the Persian period,¹⁶ and one can imagine it as reflecting relations between Judahites and Samaritans in that context. Either way, the chapter’s implications might then generalize those of the Rahab story. Any company of Canaanites or Samaritans that wants to live within Israel (cf. Judg 1:29–30) has to make the kind of commitment that Rahab made. Joshua thus seals (literally, “cuts”) a covenant or pledge (*barîṭ*) “for” this company (not “with” it). The assembly is making a commitment to serve Yahweh that is correlative to the beneficent action that Yahweh has taken on Israel’s behalf (24:2–13).

Joshua’s address then brings to a climax a theological theme running through Joshua.

- For no reason that Joshua provides, Yahweh chose to make Israel his people and elected to give them the land of Canaan.
- This action meant throwing the Canaanites out of the land for no reason Joshua provides, but it did not mean rejecting all other peoples, specifically all Canaanites.
- Such people can choose to align themselves with Yahweh and with Israel, though this means a commitment to serve Yahweh alone.
- Israelites have to choose to align themselves with him if they want to maintain their position.

Both Rahab’s words and Joshua’s words could be significant for the audience of Joshua in various contexts where the book might have been composed or might be read. If people who are not ethnically Israelite want to associate themselves with Israel, they may do so, but they have to make Rahab’s kind of commitment. The principle would be significant through the pre-monarchic and monarchic period, and in the Second Temple period in a context such as that documented in Ezra-Nehemiah. On the other hand, people who are ethnically Israelite, and see themselves as within the covenant people, have to accept the challenge that Joshua sets forward and that the prophets often urge. Perhaps it is thus significant that Joshua speaks like a prophet in saying, “Yahweh, the God of Israel has said this.”

¹⁵ See, e.g., Robert G. Boling and G. Ernest Wright, *Joshua: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 6 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982).

¹⁶ See, e.g., the essays on “Joshua 24” in *HeBAI* 6/2 (2017).

It fits that something like spirituality or ethics emerges both in Rahab's words and in Joshua's. Each of them refers to truthfulness (*'ēmet*), in human relationships and in relationships with Yahweh. Rahab refers to steadfast love or commitment or loyalty (*hesed*). Joshua refers to loving Yahweh or giving allegiance to Yahweh (*'āhēb*; 22:5; 23:11). While the book of Joshua does not have a vision for ethics between nations, it does have a vision for ethics in relationships within Israel, between families and between groups that seek to relate to one another.

It implies as much in a paradoxical fashion in the further intriguing and amusing story of the Transjordanian clans building an altar near the Jordan. The rest of the clans muster to make war against them (!), but before mounting their attack, they send Phinehas, known as the wielder of a spear who gives no quarter (Num 25:7–13), to confront the Transjordanians. They clarify that they were not undertaking an action that needed to cause alarm.

The story thus implies a vision for the people of Yahweh to be one, that could again have implications in the context of the Assyrian or Babylonian or Persian period. The narrative about the God who brought the Israelites from Egypt and gave them the land of Canaan, who is God in heaven and on earth and is holy and passionate, does have an ethical vision for this people.