THE BOOK OF
JOSHUA

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THE BOOK AS LITERATURE, HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

The central theme of the book of Joshua is the acquisition of the land of Canaan by the people of Israel under the leadership of Joshua, the successor of Moses. That acquisition includes the conquest of the land west of the river Jordan and the division of the territory among the individual tribes. But the book of Joshua is a complex and often puzzling one. Its meaning cannot be captured by describing its major theme. That theme itself has numerous motifs; some parts seem to contradict others, and the passage of time has obscured the meaning of many words and sentences and paragraphs, leaving the contemporary reader with numerous questions.

Certain of these are preliminary questions which we must raise concerning any book from antiquity, and especially one so ancient and complicated as the book of Joshua. For the sake of clarity they may be raised under three headings: literary, historical, and theological questions. These headings are, admittedly, somewhat arbitrary since all the questions touch one another and at many points they overlap. We cannot, for example, determine the historical accuracy of the story without first understanding the book as literature, nor can we fully grasp the book's religious ideas without understanding how it was composed from different literary documents and oral traditions. On the other hand, historical and theological insight is required in order to answer the literary questions themselves.

The literary questions include inquiries concerning authorship, date, outline and contents, genres (or types) of literature,

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and – in this case as in many others in the Old Testament – the investigation of the oral traditions which preceded and to some extent paralleled the writing of the book. In other words, what are the literary characteristics of the book, and what was its literary – and pre-literary – history? In raising the historical questions we shall want to learn what we can concerning the events which this book sets out to describe, namely, the Israelite conquest of Palestine. To what extent is this book a reliable source for that history? By raising theological issues we acknowledge that this book, after all, not only comes to us as a document of more than one religious faith, but that it also *arose* as an expression of faith. What, then, is the theological and religious significance not only of the major theme of the book, but also of the subordinate motifs?

So it is necessary to raise many questions, to look at the material in the book of Joshua from different perspectives, and to characterize it in various ways. But the purpose of all such inquiries and descriptions is to lead directly back to the text itself, for that is the real focus of our interest.

LITERARY PROBLEMS

The literary context of the book and the question of authorship

The Old Testament itself preserves no tradition concerning the authorship of the book of Joshua. It is an anonymous work, as are all the other narrative books of the Old Testament. 'Joshua' is the title of the book, not the name of its writer. The title is derived from the main character in the story, who emerges at the beginning as the successor to Moses, having been designated earlier, and at the end, having said his farewells, dies and is buried. The principle which was followed in establishing the title, then, is the same that was followed with regard to the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

The anonymous character of the book reflects a significant fact which is confirmed by critical scholarship: the book is *not* the work of a single author. Rather, it is a composite work

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which is the result of a long history of composition. The variety of literary styles and genres, the presence of contradictions and duplicates and some variations in historical and theological perspective suggest that the contributions to this book were many. Some of these originated as written documents, but others arose as oral traditions, circulating perhaps for centuries before they were written down. The question of 'authorship' must thus be replaced by the much more complicated question of the history of the growth and composition of this book, from the earliest discernible stages to its final form.

First we must examine the literary and traditional context to which the book belongs. At least in terms of its content and themes, the book of Joshua is properly the link between the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy inclusive) and the historical books which begin with Joshua and continue to the end of 2 Kings. (In the Hebrew Bible the book of Ruth is not placed after the book of Judges.) This fact lies at the root of many of the problems of authorship and literary history: is it to be understood as the final chapter of the story begun in Genesis, and its literary problems resolved by methods which have been found useful for the Pentateuch, or is it to be regarded as a part of the 'historical books', and its literary history interpreted in that context?

On the one hand the book of Joshua reports the completion of the theme which is initiated as early as Gen. 12: 1–3, the promise of land to the descendants of the patriarchs. But on the other hand it is the beginning of the account of Israel's history in the land of Canaan. In the Hebrew canon the book definitely was associated more directly with the historical books than with the Pentateuch. It belongs to the second division of the canon, the Prophets, as the first of the 'Former Prophets'. The divisions made by the canon are, however, quite late and in some cases artificial. The first five books were the first to be recognized as holy scripture, primarily because special significance was attached to the giving of the law by

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Moses. Hence as a collection they are called 'the Torah' (the Law), and individually identified as 'books of Moses', that is, *concerning* Moses.

When critical scholarship in the last part of the nineteenth century described the making of the Pentateuch in terms of a series of literary documents it also recognized the continuation of the Pentateuchal themes into the book of Joshua and thus analysed the latter by the same principles. The 'Documentary Hypothesis', which saw the Pentateuch as composed of four main sources, J, E, D, and P (the Yahwist, the Elohist, Deuteronomy, and the Priestly document; see *The Making of the Old Testament* in this series, pp. 60ff.), was extended to Joshua, and usually also to Judg. 1: 1 – 2: 5. Until recently this represented the dominant critical view concerning the book of Joshua, and some scholars still argue strongly that a modified version of that hypothesis should be applied to this book.

However, more recent studies have forced a reassessment of that analysis and resulted in what appears to be a more reasonable understanding of the literary history of the book. In the first place, the specific literary and linguistic similarities between the material in Joshua and that in the narrative sources of the Pentateuch cannot be demonstrated convincingly. And such literary affinities were, after all, the primary basis on which the narrative sources were distinguished from one another. At the very most there are remnants or traces of such sources in the book of Joshua, but even that appears doubtful. Certainly no continuous narrative strands which would represent the concluding chapters of J, E, or P can be recovered.

Second, while the presence of the narrative sources of the Pentateuch cannot be demonstrated conclusively, it is agreed almost unanimously by scholars that a great deal of the material in the book of Joshua parallels the style and the point of view of *one* of the Pentateuchal sources: Deuteronomy. Very close literary and theological affinities with Deuteronomy (i.e.

words, phrases and ideas) can be recognized in whole chapters
(e.g. Josh. 1 and 23) as well as in scattered paragraphs and
verses.

The fact that similar materials are found throughout the
Former Prophets has led to the conclusion that the books of
Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and
2 Kings comprise a single history written in the style and from
the theological perspective of Deuteronomy. Though it is
based upon and incorporates diverse traditions from various
periods, it now stands as a single work, the history of Israel
from the time of Moses to the Babylonian captivity.

Many questions concerning this Deuteronomistic history
have not been resolved. Is it the work of a single writer, or
the work of a school? Similarly, was there only a single edition
of the work, or a series of editions? (It now seems most likely
that there were at least two editions of the work.) There are
disagreements concerning the purpose of the history, turning
in part upon the answers to the above questions. However,
the date of its final writing, the basic principles of its com-
position, and the place of the book of Joshua in the whole work
are relatively clear.

The history certainly was written after – but not long
after – the last event it reports, the release of Jehoiachin, the
last Judaean king, from prison during the Babylonian exile.
It thus should be dated about 550 B.C. The Deuteronomistic
historian (or historians) was a 'redactor' in the proper sense
of the term; that is, he did not invent this story but assembled
old written and oral traditions into a coherent – if not always
consistent – unity. He provided an interpretative framework
which not only linked the older materials together but also
presented his judgements concerning the events reported. He
revised some of the materials at hand, and also supplied some
speeches and narratives which he himself composed. Among
the materials at his disposal were the books which he refers
to by title (e.g. 'the Book of Jashar', Josh. 10: 13, 2 Sam.
1: 18; 'the annals of the kings of Israel', 2 Kings 15: 21) and

numerous other unidentified works. These sources included such diverse materials as annals, records, king lists, and stories of various kinds. Some of the materials doubtless had already reached the form of collections or compositions, for example, the story of the later life of David (2 Sam. 9–20, 1 Kings 1-2) and the stories about Elijah and Elisha. The historian also incorporated an earlier version of the book of Deuteronomy, which he supplied with a new introduction and conclusion. The book of Joshua is the second chapter in the Deuteronomistic history.

Outline of the contents

The literary characteristics of the book of Joshua and its structure have been determined by this last fact. But, as we have seen, the Deuteronomistic historian did not invent his story, but rather composed it from older written and oral traditions which also influenced his work. Before examining the traditions which the historian used in this particular book we should analyse its contents and structure. Though the book contains speeches and lists and descriptions of the territory of Israel, its structure from beginning to end is that of a narrative; that is, it reports events from the perspective of a third person, it characterizes the main actors in the drama, and it follows a plot which develops to a climax.

The contents may be outlined as follows:

1. *Israel's entry into the promised land* (1–12)
   A. Introduction (1)
   B. The spies sent to Jericho (2)
   C. The crossing of the Jordan and the events at Gilgal (3–5)
   D. The conquest of Jericho (6)
   E. The Achan story and the conquest of Ai (7 – 8: 29)
   F. A ceremony on Mount Ebal (8: 30–5)
   G. The treaty with the Gibeonites (9)
   H. The battle with the five Amorite kings and the southern campaign (10)
   I. The northern campaign (11: 1–15)

    J. General summary, including a list of conquered kings (11 : 16 – 12 : 24)

2. *The division of the land among the tribes* (13–22)

    A. Introduction: The description of the unconquered lands and the territory of the tribes beyond the Jordan (13)

    B. The portions of three tribes (14–17)

    C. The portions of the seven other tribes (18–19)

    D. Special cities: The cities of refuge and the Levitical cities (20–1)

    E. The return of the trans-Jordanian tribes and the question of their altar (22)

3. *Joshua's farewell and death* (23–4)

    A. The last words of Joshua (23)

    B. The assembly at Shechem (24: 1–28)

    C. The graves of Joshua, Joseph, and Eleazar (24: 29–33)

The Deuteronomistic historian and the older traditions

The outline of the contents itself suggests two factors of significance for the history of the book: on the one hand, it includes a great many diverse traditions, but on the other hand these traditions are ordered into a more or less systematic unity. Our task at this point is to distinguish between the contributions of the editor and those pre-Deuteronomistic traditions. It is hardly possible to reconstruct all the stages in the development of the book, but some of the main blocks used in composing the work can be recognized.

Several large units are to be attributed in their entirety to the Deuteronomistic redactor. They are: 1; 12; 21: 43 – 22: 6; and 23. In each of these units the parallels to the style, language, and theology of the book of Deuteronomy are numerous and clear. (See the commentary for details.) This material consists in great measure of speeches (1; 22: 1–5, 8; 23) and summaries which either introduce (1) or conclude (12; 21: 43–5; 23) stages in the account. There are numerous other smaller con-

tributions by the Deuteronomistic historian, many of which also provide the connecting links between the parts of the story.

Ch. 24 presents special problems. It seems to consist of old traditions which have been thoroughly reworked by the redactor. In one sense it parallels ch. 23 – both purport to give the last speech of Joshua – and in another sense it parallels 8 : 30–5 – both report a covenant ceremony at Shechem. These parallels have led some scholars to suggest that there were two distinct Deuteronomistic editions of the book. That is quite possible, but it is very difficult to distinguish between different stages of Deuteronomistic style.

At first glance the summaries might lead one to believe that the first part of the book (1–12) reports the conquest of the entire land of Canaan west of the Jordan. But closer reading of the individual stories presents a different picture. Those stories do not deal with the conquest of the entire land at all; the events they report are concentrated in the territory of one tribe and revolve around one place. The place is the old sanctuary at Gilgal and the tribe is Benjamin. The crossing of the Jordan (3–4) is near Gilgal, where the people established their first camp (4 : 19–24). Gilgal was the site of the first celebration in the promised land (5), and Jericho apparently was in the immediate vicinity (2; 6). When the tribes first moved out of the Jordan valley they took the cities in the central hill country in the territory traditionally assigned to the tribe of Benjamin (7; 8; 10 : 1–27). So the main body of tradition in the first part of the book concerns the tribe of Benjamin, and probably was once handed down – and preserved at the sanctuary at Gilgal – as the report of the way that particular tribe acquired its land. The other main stories in the first part of the book report the southern expedition (10 : 28–43) and the conquest of the north (11 : 1–23). However, even these traditions about the non-Benjamite territory have been related to the stories concerning Gilgal and Benjamin.

In terms of their literary type or genre a great many of the individual stories in this first part of the book are aetiological stories; that is, they explain the existence of a present phenomenon by reference to an event in the past. Thus the name 'Gilgal' is explained in terms of the first circumcision in Palestine (5: 2–9), the story of the spies sent to Jericho explains the preservation of the family of Rahab the prostitute (2; 6: 22–5), and the 'Vale of Achor', or 'valley of Trouble', was so named because it was there that Achan brought trouble on Israel (7: 24–6). Some scholars have argued that questions about origins (aetiological questions such as, 'when your children ask you what these stones mean', 4: 6) in most cases created such stories, that is, that the stories were created as answers to the questions. Certainly many of the stories in this book have aetiological conclusions (e.g. 'Therefore the place is called Gilgal to this very day', 5: 9), but it is difficult to determine whether the question about the origin of a name or the like created the story or the account depends upon an accurate historical memory. Some have argued that in most cases the aetiological conclusion was a secondary development in the tradition, but the literary character and the historical reliability of each story must be examined individually.

The main traditions which underlie the second part of the book (13–22) are lists of various kinds. Until relatively recently most scholars regarded these lists as very late exilic or post-exilic idealizations of the land of Israel. But now it seems much more probable that some of these lists do in fact relate to actual stages in the geographical organization of Israel. There are two main kinds of lists here: town lists and boundary lists. The town lists (see Map 3) simply enumerate the cities belonging to various tribes. Twelve groups of towns are given, but though there were twelve tribes the town groups do not always correspond to the tribal holdings. Only the cities in the southern part of Palestine are given. The town lists apparently gave administrative districts as they were organized during the Israelite monarchy, probably in the time

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of Josiah (640–609 B.C.). Some, however, have dated the lists in the time of earlier kings.

The boundary lists on the other hand (see Maps 4 and 5) describe a line, the border between the individual tribes. The line is traced on a map: 'It started from the Edomite frontier at the wilderness of Zin and ran as far as the Negeb at its southern end, and it had a common border with the Negeb at the end of the Dead Sea, where an inlet of water bends towards the Negeb. It continued from the south...' (15: 1ff.). Most scholars now are agreed that the boundary lists give an ancient map of Israel from the time of the judges, not long after the conquest. While this map may not have described the actual tribal holdings, it at least stated the claims of the individual tribes, and thus served as the basis for arbitration of conflicts among them. But we must bear in mind that even if these lists are old, we must still carefully consider the reason why they have been preserved and how they have been used in the work as a whole.

The major old tradition in the third part of the book is the pre-Deuteronomistic material in ch. 24, the report of the renewal of the covenant at Shechem. There is abundant evidence that this account reflects an institution of great importance and great antiquity in Israel.

HISTORICAL PROBLEMS

Why cannot we simply recite the story as it is told in the book of Joshua as the history of the conquest? There are many reasons. First, there are inconsistencies and contradictions within that story itself. Some of these appear to be minor points, but even they begin to show the difficulties. For example, after the crossing of the Jordan, was the monument set up 'in the middle of the Jordan at the place where the priests stood' (4: 9), or near the river 'in the camp where you spend the night' (4: 3)? And how many men did Joshua send to wait in ambush before the second attack on Ai, thirty