

Joshua and Judges – Session Six

Joshua's Farewell

(Joshua 20 - 24)



Joshua's Tomb at Kifl Haris, Palestinian town in Northern West Bank (Wikipedia)

Joshua and the Deuteronomist: The Status of the Transjordanian Tribes

Three Grave Traditions

Map of Joshua's Tomb

Joshua and the Deuteronomist: The Status of the Transjordanian Tribes

The Book of Joshua's constant theme of the outsider in Israel now (in Chapter 22) reaches its climax with a story about how the two and a half tribes, as they are returning to their Transjordanian lands, built an altar in Canaan at Geliloth " in addition to the altar of the LORD our God which stands in front of his Tabernacle". If the first two sections examined the role of the outsider in Israel by considering the status before the law of those elements within their midst who lived *in* Israel but were not fully *of* Israel, this section continues the examination by clarifying the status before the law of those elements within their midst who were in some sense *of* Israel but did not live *in* Israel. First the outsiders inside the land, then the insiders outside the land.

The story is ingenious. The plot revolves around a decision by the two and a half Transjordanian tribes to build a memorial altar in Canaan as a witness forestalling

any future cisjordanian Israelites [Israelites living east of the Jordan River] from claiming that since the former lived outside Canaan, they should have no share in the LORD. After the altar is built, it precipitates a cisjordanian delegation going to the builders and suggesting that, whereas the Transjordanian land perhaps is unclean, the two and a half tribes should probably cross over to “the LORD’s own land”. By the building of an additional altar, the two and a half tribes bring about what they had intended thereby to avoid. The story is clearly about the status of the Transjordanian land inhabited by the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh, and about these tribes’ full inclusion within the community of Israel.

When the captain of the LORD’s army had said to Joshua, immediately after the crossing, “Take off your sandals; the place upon which you are standing is holy” (5:15), could this evaluation be applied to *all* the land possessed by the twelve tribes of Israel, or just to the “LORD’s own land” west of the Jordan? Is the land possessed by the two and a half tribes truly unclean, as the Israelite delegation implied in 22:19? What is the correct assessment of Israel living outside Israel? It goes without saying that the answer to these questions was as relevant to the Deuteronomist’s audience as it appears to be to Joshua’s earlier audience. Another way of expressing the central problem of this story is to ask, “Who belongs to Israel? Who belongs to the ‘whole community of Israel? Is it just those tribes whose land was west of the Jordan, or does it include the two and a half tribes whose land was east of the Jordan? In spite of the overwhelming evidence for the full complement of the twelve tribes of Israel found everywhere throughout the Deuteronomistic History and the Bible itself, Joshua 22 testifies that the inclusion of the two and a half Transjordanian tribes as full-fledged members of the community of Israel was a serious issue.

One of the surest ways of determining the phraseological composition of a text is to examine the manner in which an author, narrator, or character *names* those he talks to or about. One way then to get at the question of membership within the community of Israel is to inquire how various elements in the story are designated. In other words, besides the proper names of the Israelites tribes, how are they *named* in this story both individually and collectively? Joshua calls the nine and a half cisjordanian tribes “brothers” of the Transjordanian tribes (22:3,4). Phinehas and the ten tribal leaders refer to “the entire community of the LORD” (22:16), “the entire community of Israel” (22:18, 20), “each of the [ten] tribes of Israel” (22:14), and “Israelites” (22:31,32,33). The two and a half Transjordanian tribes talk about “Israel” (22:22), or about “our sons “ and “your sons” (22:24, 25, 27). Finally, the reporting speech of the narrator refers to “the entire community of Israelites” (22:12), “Israelites” (22:12, 31, 33), the “clans of Israel” (22,21, 30), and simply “the community” (22:30).

There are a number of interesting features of this terminological inventory. For one thing, whenever “the entire community of the LORD/ of Israel” is used, that is by the narrator in 12:12 and by Phinehas and the ten tribal leaders in 22:16, 28, 2, *the two tribes of Reuben and Gad are obviously excluded from membership according to the*

context. Thus, those delegated to speak to the alleged culprits in behalf of “the entire community” include, besides Phinehas, representatives from each of the ten tribes whose inherited land is west of the Jordan, that is, from each of the tribes except Reuben and Gad. When the “entire community” assembles at Shiloh to deal with the problem at hand (22:12), it is clear that Gadites and Reubenites are not present since they *are* the problem and it is *to them* that the delegation is finally sent. (The Transjordan half-tribe of Manasseh is sometimes named, sometimes not, when the Transjordanian tribes are spoken to or about in this story; it is clear from this that since half of their brethren did have land west of the Jordan, their plight was not so dire as that of the other two tribes, Reuben and Gad, who had no land west of the Jordan.). Moreover, it is significant that after the explanation of the Transjordanian tribes is reported as acceptable to the delegation from Shiloh in 22:30, there is no reference again in the story to “all Israel” or “the entire community”; so that when the narrator describes the delegation’s return trip and their reception back at Shiloh, those whose interests they represent and who live west of the Jordan are referred to three times only as “Israelites “ (22:32, 33). They are no longer referred to as “the entire community of God/Israel.”

In other words, both reporting and reported speech begin the story by referring to the western tribes as “all Israel” or “the entire community of Israel/the LORD,” but by 22:30 both reported and reporting speech uses only “the community” when referring to all or part of the twelve tribes. The story begins as if the ten cisjordanian tribes constituted the entire community of Israel but shifts its point of view before the end of the story.

The compositional importance of the shift in terminology can not be overestimated, since the story’s subject matter centers around the fear of the Transjordanian tribes that some day their “brothers” across the Jordan might say to them:

What have you to do with the LORD, the God of Israel? The LORD put the Jordan as a boundary between our sons and your sons. You have no share in the LORD, you men of Reuben and Gad. (22:24 – 25)

It was because of this fear that the additional nonsacrificial altar was built, and it was because of this altar that the delegation from the west traveled across the river to adjudicate the action of their eastern brothers. We see here how a specific interpretation and application of the Mosaic legislation about the legality of sacrifice only at that altar located “in the place the LORD your God will choose,” legislation that is so often expressed in the book of the law, becomes the vehicle for the Deuteronomist’s depiction of Israel’s identity. The decision of the Israelite community’s delegation reported in the words of Phinehas (22:31) and those of the narrator (22:32 – 33) was not just a decision that acquitted the Transjordanian tribes to be considered full-fledged members of the community of Israel. Surely this is the deeper meaning of Phinehas’s remarks to the two and a half tribes, “thus you have preserved Israel from punishment at [the LORD’s] hand” (22:31). Another decision would also have dismembered the community called Israel. . . .

We are now in a position to see why the Transjordan tribes have occupied an unusually prominent position in the Book of Joshua. They were given special attention in the opening chapter (1:12 – 18), cross over the Jordan at the head of the entire procession (4:12 – 13), and go in front of the Ark of the LORD in the procession around Jericho’s walls (6:7). Moses’ prior allotment of land to them is narrated in detail in chapter 13, and reference to this special situation of theirs is repeated (14:3; 18:7). Now Joshua 22 gives us additional evidence for their typological status within the Book of Joshua itself. Intent upon emphasizing the continuing unworthiness of Israel and her lack of right to the land she is herein described as occupying, the Deuteronomist has chosen the two and a half eastern tribes of Israel to dramatize these themes. Like the other “aliens” – Rahab, the Gibeonites, Caleb, the Levites and dependents in the Book of Joshua all of them representative versions of the same typology – the Transjordanian tribes are a permanent representation of the obedience to God’s law that never quite makes it. As Phinehas testifies to these “outcasts,”

We know this day . . . that you have saved the people of Israel from the hand of the LORD. (22:31)

– Robert Polzin (*from. Moses and the Deuteronomist: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History Part One:* University Press, Indianapolis and Bloomington, 1980)

Three Grave Traditions

Three grave location traditions conclude Joshua. The death and burial formula for Joshua provides closure for a career that began with a notice of the death of Moses. The memory of grave sites and veneration of tombs has been a persistent feature of religious life in Palestine. Although the last two notices (Joseph and Eleazar)

were certainly attached to the end of the Joshua book late in the course of its formation they are not alien to the book’s purpose and spirit. Remembering burials and land purchases are ways for a people to claim land and identity, similar in function to battle reports and topographic lists. As the book’s concluding reports, these brief notices supplement and fortify the preceding conquest stories and geographic catalogs. The tombs of Joshua and Eleazar are located in the hill country of Ephraim, while the tomb of Joseph at Shechem was considered to be a possession shared by Ephraim and Manasseh.

The last information reported about Joshua attaches to the close of the Shechem assembly with a generalized temporal connector. His death report is a functional parallel to Genesis 35:28 – 29 or Deuteronomy 34:5 in that it brings an era to an end. Implicit comparisons with Moses serve to evaluate Joshua. Only here is he given the Mosaic title “Servant of Yahweh.” Previously he was only “attendant of Moses.” Locating Joshua’s burial place inside the land contrasts with Moses’ unknown grave outside the promised land (Deut 34:5 – 6). This signals a momentous change in Israel’s circumstances that Joshua has brought about. Dying at one hundred ten, Joshua is the equivalent of Joseph, although he still falls ten years short of Moses. He turns out to be the last of those foundational figures whose piety and significance are symbolized by extraordinary life spans. Joshua’s success in leading Israel to obedience prepares for the influential role that royal religious leadership would have, for good or for ill, in later portions of the Deuteronomic History.

Joshua’s inheritance and his foundation of Timnath-serah was already covered in 19:49 – 50. The bestowal of a special family inheritance is paralleled by the endowment of Hebron to Caleb, Joshua’s fellow spy. Timnath-serah ties Joshua to Ephraim in tradition history. Apparently, readers were thought to require help in locating the site, so it was associated with Mt. Gaash, which today cannot be identified.

The next generation will also be faithful, but their fidelity is coordinated with the circumstances that the elders are directly acquainted with Yahweh’s saving deeds. This leaves the future under a potential cloud, and the groundwork is laid for a new narrative problem launching the plot of the book of Judges. The overlap between vv. 28 – 31 and Judges 2:6 – 9 indicates that the Deuteronomic History form of Joshua ended at v. 31. Verses 29 – 31 may be seen as a balancing frame to the introductory 1:1 – 6.

– Richard D. Nelson (from *Joshua (The Old Testament Library)*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997)

Map of Joshua's Tomb, Kifl Haris, West Bank



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