

Fixing Boundaries
The Construction of Identity in Joshua
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Possession of the promised land, obedience to the commands of Moses, and the extermination of the peoples of the land constitute the primary themes which configure the book of Joshua. Although there has been common agreement that these themes function to establish a sense of national identity, attempts to describe how they do so have been frustrated by the contradictory perspectives they present. Claims that Israel “took all the land” vie with assertions that vast tracts of the land must still be possessed. Demonstrations of Israel’s precise execution of divine commands conflict with episodes that depict Israelites breaking the commandments of Moses and YHWH. And reports that the Israelites slaughtered “everything that breathed” are opposed by stories which relate the survival of the peoples of the land.

These conflicting perspectives have often been explained in terms of the Joshua’s complex compositional history. That is, the tensions are seen as a consequence of a process in which multiple editors commented on and modified source materials or earlier versions of the book. While it offers an attractive scenario, this approach conveniently sidesteps the vexing difficulties that arise from the canonical form of the text. If Joshua aims to construct a national identity for Israel, why does it continually undercut those themes which seem to reinforce Israel’s distinctive character?

The ambivalent presentation of these themes in Joshua suggests that the book is not so much advancing as it is working through issues of identity. Motifs of land, kinship, and religious observance articulate common ethnic signifiers. Each is repeatedly presented and tested as the story moves from beginning to end, but none finally proves to be a definitive mark of national identity. Enclaves of Canaanites, as well as Israelites living east of the Jordan, belie the notion that Israel the nation can closely associated with the land west of the Jordan. Repeated infractions of the commandments illustrate that obedience does not essentially characterize Israel. The incorporation of indigenous peoples on the one hand, and the extermination of an Israelite family on the other, reveal that a sense of blood relatedness does not essentially define the nation. By subverting notions of identity along these lines, Joshua lays the foundation for the presentation of an alternative vision of Israel. The final section of the book (Josh 22-24) advances this vision by recasting identity in terms of loyalty and decision. In short, Joshua is a carefully crafted narrative

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which detaches Israelite identity from ideologies of land, kinship, and practice and presents Israel as a nation constituted by reciprocal choices

Conquest

The first major section of Joshua (Josh 2-12) raises the issue of national identity by introducing three reports of conquest by three stories that depict encounters with Canaan. Scenes of Israel and Canaan on the individual level thereby balance scenes of Israel and Canaan on the corporate level. The story of Rahab and the spies (2:1-25) encloses Israel's victory over the inhabitants of Jericho, the story of Achan (7:1-26) precedes the conquest of Ai, and the story of the Gibeonites' ruse (9:1-27) sets the backdrop for the rout of a Canaanite coalition. A common structure and themes unite the three campaigns. In the first and third campaigns (at Jericho and Gibeon), YHWH brings miraculous victories, even though Israel has made pacts with indigenous inhabitants of the land. The middle scenario (at Ai) reverses elements of the others and connects a disastrous defeat with an act of duplicity. In this case, Israel achieves victory only after excising the disobedience members from the community and meticulously following YHWH's directions. Taken together, the three campaigns form a narrative triptych which joins issues of inclusion and exclusion to those of obedience and disobedience.¹

Each anecdote raises the issue of identity by telling a story which involves the discovery of what is hidden. Rahab hides the spies, Achan hides plunder, and the Gibeonites conceal their identities. In each case, concealment leads eventually to exposure, and once "exposed" the characters engage in remarkable self-disclosure. Rahab reveals her knowledge of YHWH and her motives for hiding the spies (2:9-13), Achan confesses his theft and reveals the location of the plunder items (7:19-21), and the Gibeonites admit that they live within the land and not far away (9:16, 22-24). This in turn leads to a decision which challenges the nation's internal boundaries. Rahab and the Gibeonites, who have given glory to YHWH while Israelites have remained silent, are incorporated into the community (6:25; 9:27). Achan, pedigreed insider, admits that he has brought a Canaanite presence into the camp and is then executed, along with his entire household (7:24-26).

¹I have developed this symmetry of structure, and its implications in greater detail in "The Problem with Pagans," in *Reading Bibles, Writing Bodies: Identity and the Book*, Timothy K. Beal and David M. Gunn, eds. (London: Routledge) 153-163. My remarks in this section summarize points made in that essay.

The stories of Rahab and the Gibeonites demonstrate that Israel's communal boundaries are elastic and address an important question: Can Israel remain a coherent community if it incorporates outsiders? If so, on what basis can outsiders be incorporated? The text introduces these questions through the story of Rahab, the quintessential outsider, by employing a subtlety commensurate with the delicacy of the issue.² By allowing her family to survive, Israel breaks the explicit commands of Moses (cf. Deut 7:1-4):

Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you and he would destroy you quickly.

The impropriety of this act is hinted at as the spies negotiate with her, but is never articulated, and Rahab herself is depicted in a manner that suggests her resemblance to Israel.³ Her story concludes with the statement that she "lives within Israel to the present day," although at a relatively safe location at the periphery of the community (6:23, 25).

The Gibeonites' story, on the other hand, confronts the reader directly with the incorporation of outsiders. The specter of a forbidden covenant is raised at the beginning of the episode, when the narrator divulges the Gibeonites' deceptive stratagem, and thereafter constitutes the focus of the episode. As with Rahab, the Gibeonites display traits otherwise associated with

²Rahab personifies qualities that represent the binary opposites of Israel in terms of ethnicity (Canaanite), gender (female) and theology. ("To prostitute oneself" is a common idiom for following "other gods" rather than YHWH [Exod 34:14-16; Deut 31:16-18; Judg 2:17]).

³Rahab is resourceful and aggressive in her quest to gain life in the land. And words of praise to YHWH issue from *her* lips, rather than from those of the Israelites in the story. Through artful allusions to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 19:1-29), the narrator intimates that she is a character worthy of deliverance. These aspects of the story are elaborated in detail in L. Daniel Hawk, "Strange Houseguests: Rahab, Lot, and the Dynamics of Deliverance," in *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, Danna Nolan Fewell, ed., LCBI (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 89-97.

Israel.⁴ And they also exhibit a knowledge of and response to the Mosaic *torah*, acclaim YHWH's mighty deeds, and display qualities prized by Israel.⁵ Their story also ends with a note of their continuing presence within Israel, although they are not assigned to the periphery but to altar, the very center of the community's life (Josh 9:23, 27). Along with the story of Rahab, the Gibeonite episode collapses perceived distinctions between Israel and the peoples of the land and establishes a precedent for the extension of Israel's boundaries to include members of other ethnic groups.⁶

The stories of Achan and the battle at Ai address the opposite issue: how to deal with undetected difference within the Israelite community—what to do if one of *us* becomes one of *them*. The plunder stolen by Achan carries radically “not-Israel” marks, both in the social and the theological sense. Taken from Jericho, it has been designated with the same *herem*, or “off-limits,” status attributed to the inhabitants of Canaan (Josh 6:17-18; Deut 7:1-4). In addition, it has been declared “holy” and has been dedicated to the “treasury of YHWH” (Josh 6:19). The story opens by demonstrating that Achan has transformed the entire community by bringing what is “not-Israel” into the camp. The campaign begins with a report that YHWH's anger burns against Israel, a divine response associated with Israel's turn to other peoples and their gods (cf. Deut 6:15; 7:4; 11:17; 13:17 [18]; 29:20-28 [19-27]; 31:17; cf. Josh 23:16). Second, the nation loses the “all-Israel” character that leads elsewhere to victory. Only

⁴Like Israel, and unlike the other peoples of the land, the Gibeonites have no king, and the text gives the impression that their decisions are communal in nature, making no distinction between the Gibeonites as a whole and the delegation that speaks to Joshua and the Israelite leaders (9:3-13).

⁵The Gibeonites demonstrate initiative and ingenuity. Their ruse, in which they represent themselves as travelers from a distant land, is concocted in accordance with the Deuteronomic rules for warfare, which allow Israel to accept the surrender of peoples outside the land but not those within (Deut 20:1-20). They also acclaim YHWH's mighty deeds (9:9b-10), while the Israelites in the story do not even bother to consult YHWH (v. 14)

⁶Even though covenants with Canaanites are explicitly forbidden by Moses, the narrator pointedly never refers to the relevant Deuteronomic texts, nor does YHWH respond with the anger which Moses warns will result from such acts. For a fuller discussion of this point, see Lyle Eslinger, *Into the Hands of the Living God*, JSOTSup 84 (Sheffield: Almond/Sheffield University, 1989), 23-54.

a fraction of the nation assaults Ai, and these troops are routed with the “melting hearts” that have previously characterized the Canaanites (Josh 7:2-5; cf. 2:11; 5:1). Israel therefore suffers precisely those consequences that Moses warned would result from the transgression of social and theological boundaries. By intimating that Israel’s defeat is a consequence of one person’s transgression, the narrator also points to the deeper implications of the theft. Achan has broken Israel’s distinctive integrity by introducing a strange element into the camp *and hiding its presence from the rest of the group*.

The narrative accentuates the symbolic implications of Achan’s transgression in a number of ways. Lexical and thematic allusions to Deuteronomy 13:1-18 link Achan with the apostates who entice Israel to the worship of other gods.⁷ YHWH characterizes the crime as a corporate transgression of the covenant and declares that, as a result, Israel has become *herem*, just like the peoples they are to destroy (7:12). Achan himself embodies the paradox of the insider-turned-outsider. The text stresses his ethnic purity by introducing him with an extensive pedigree: “Achan son of Carmi son of Zabdi son of Zerah of the tribe of Judah” (7:1). His name, however, is nonsensical and derives from no known Hebrew root. On the other hand, it is mysteriously suggestive. A transposition the first two radicals of his name (עכ) yields the root of the name Canaan. Does Achan (עכח) represent the hidden presence of Canaan (כנען)?⁸ The entire tale, with its concentration on discovering identity, thus constitutes a paradigm for confronting and eliminating heterogeneous elements from the community. Following Deuteronomy’s directions for dealing with seducing apostates (13:6-18), the

⁷Deuteronomy calls for death by stoning for those who seduce Israel to follow other gods. In case of cities which apostatize, a careful investigation is called for. If the matter is confirmed, the whole town is to be destroyed and burned, with its citizens, cattle, and materials. The same procedure is followed to identify and execute Achan and his family.

⁸1 Chron 2:7 lists his name as “Achar (עכר) the troubler (עורר) of Israel.” This form of the name coheres with Joshua’s pronouncement (“Why have you troubled Israel?” Josh 7:24) and explains the etiological thrust of the story with reference to the valley of Achor (Josh 7:26). It may therefore represent the more original rendering of the name. Some have argued that the difference in terms is the result of a scribal error which mistook resh for final nun. This seems improbable, however, since the scribe would have had to make this mistake repeatedly and consistently while copying the text, not only throughout Josh 7 but also in Josh 22:20.

nation separates itself from this insider-gone-bad and destroys all traces of the “not-Israel” presence he has injected into the community. Achan, his family and livestock are killed and burned along with their possessions.

With communal integrity thus restored, the focus turns outward in the ensuing battle at Ai, where Israel reverses the tables on Canaan. Now Israel hides and deceives, laying an ambush which entices the people of Ai to leave the safety of their communal boundaries (8:1-29). Having been enticed by Israel’s deceit, the Canaanites rush out of the city into the open and are quickly destroyed. By hiding from Canaan, in a sense turning its own hidden seductiveness against it, Israel demonstrates its mastery and supremacy over the threat of Canaanite difference.

The campaign at Ai thus reverses many of the elements of the stories set at Jericho and Gibeon. In the latter stories, communal boundaries are extended to incorporate others who resemble Israel. At Ai the community borders are confirmed by excluding an Israelite who resembles Canaan. Taken together, all the accounts argue both for the elasticity and maintenance of communal boundaries. But they also demonstrate that neither land, ethnicity, nor religious confession constitute the definitive mark of Israelite identity, the standard of exclusion and inclusion from the nation.

The Allotment

The allotment of tribal territories follows the program developed in the conquest stories but gives primary focus to geographical boundaries rather than those of ethnicity and law. The process of apportionment takes place in three stages. First, the narrator reports the apportionment of land east of the Jordan to the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh, pointedly referring to their territory as the land Moses gave (as opposed to the land YHWH gave [13:15, 24, 29; cf. 1:14; 22:7]). The text then moves to the lands apportioned to Judah and the Joseph tribes. The description of Judah’s territory consists of a boundary which is elaborated in striking detail (15:1-12) and a precise and systematic list of cities (15:20-62). By contrast, the descriptions of Ephraim and Manasseh’s territories are sparse, muddled, and fragmentary. And while the description of Judah’s territory begins with the inspiring story of Caleb, that of the Josephites’ concludes with a report of the tribes’ unwillingness to take cities within their inheritance.⁹ Thus, while the territory of Judah seems to embody the ideal of

⁹The accounts of both Ephraim and Manasseh conclude with reports that the tribes could not dispossess the indigenous inhabitants of the land. A similar note appends the report of Judah’s settlement (15:63). However, in this case, the note refers to the tribe’s failure to take Jerusalem, a city that lies *outside* its

a homogeneous territory swept clean of Canaanite elements, the territories of the Josephites take on a distinctively heterogenous character.¹⁰

Inserted within the descriptions of these tribal lands are two stories which challenge Israel's system of geographical and social organization just as the stories of Rahab and the Gibeonites challenged communal boundaries. The concepts of possession and inheritance are closely linked to a patriarchy network which give divine sanction to claims to property and provide an organization scheme for tribes and clans. The stories of Achsah (15:16-19) and Zelophehad's daughters (17:3-6), however, relate situations in which women are given land. Following an earlier tactic, the issue is introduced in muted terms through the story of Achsah, who seeks a "field" and receives springs of water in the Negeb, safely within the patrimony of Caleb. The story of Zelophehad's daughters then presents the issue more directly. Here the text begins by suggesting an equivalency between the daughters and the Manassite clans, first by the listing of their names (corresponding to the listing of Manassite clans [17:2]) and then by referring to them as the "daughters of Manasseh" (v. 6), who receive "an inheritance (נחלה) among the brothers of

assigned boundaries.

¹⁰The picture is punctuated, at the end, with an anecdote that reports the Josephites' desire to clear new land rather than to challenge Canaanite power in the region (17:14-18). The anecdote illustrates the Josephites' reluctance to fulfill the commands of Moses and links this reluctance with the survival of the land's inhabitants within their tribal allotments.

The story of Caleb stands in contrast to the Josephites' reluctance to engage the Canaanites. The stories thus work together to illustrate the connection (positively and negatively) between fulfilment of Moses' commands and success in taking the land. Caleb embodies the tribe of Judah. He aggressively seeks the strongholds of Canaan and prevails. Judah the tribe also succeeds in taking the whole of the territory allotted to it. On the other hand, the Josephites fear the Canaanite strongholds. The description of their territory mirrors their trepidation. They do not take the major cities and never completely drive out the indigenous inhabitants. For more on the intersection of the territorial descriptions and themes of obedience, see my discussion in *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua*, LCBI (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 98-114 .

their father".¹¹ The possession of "inheritances" by women explicitly challenges the structures which equate ownership of land with the male members of the community and, more fundamentally, the patriarchal system which undergirds it. Whereas the stories of Rahab and the Gibeonites contest an exclusionary ethic which seeks to preserve stark ethnic boundaries, these stories of women and land challenge an ideology that gives only men a privileged place in the nation.¹²

The third round of allotments (concerning the remaining tribes [18:1-19:51]) parallels the second. This stage begins with a precise description of the boundaries and cities of Benjamin. However, the pattern gradually disintegrates as each successive tribal territory is recounted. The allotments of Simeon and Dan, which display a complete lack of territorial integrity, bracket other confused or incoherent descriptions. The report of Dan's possession breaks the tight connection between "inheritance" and "possession" altogether by reporting that the tribe exercised its own initiative and took possession of land that was other than its assigned inheritance (19:40-48).¹³

Through its juxtaposition of conflicting or incongruous materials, the description of tribal allotments continues to destabilize the territorial and social boundaries that configure Israel's identity. The reader may therefore be surprised by the narrator's concluding declaration that Israel took possession of the land YHWH had given (21:43-45). The remarks have puzzled many interpreters, since the whole tone of the preceding account has indicated the opposite; large tracts of land remain in Canaanite hands and Canaanites continue to live among Israelites. The summary's meaning, however, is to be found in its focus on YHWH's faithfulness in the light of Israel's diffidence. While the preceding description has focused on what Israel did, the summary emphasizes what YHWH did. Israel's resolve may not be complete, but nonetheless "not one of the good words YHWH made to Israel failed; all came to pass" (v. 45). In contrast to the uncertain state of Israel's affairs depicted in

¹¹The root נחל, which denotes legitimate claim to property, occurs four times in vv. 4-6. For a fuller discussion of נחל as claim see Norman C. Habel, *The Land Is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies*, OBT (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Fortress, 1995) 33-35.

¹²In a sense, the story of Rahab introduces this concept as well. Like Achsah and the daughters of Zelophehad, she exemplifies the initiative required to take possession of the land.

¹³See *Every Promise Fulfilled*, 110-113.

the previous reports, the narrator's comments assert that YHWH is ultimately responsible for all that Israel has and is.

Working through Identity

The concluding section of Joshua comprises a series of texts which bring the issue of Israelite identity into explicit focus. The story of a conflict between the tribes to the east and west of the Jordan (22:1-34) brings together defining questions of territory, obedience, and kinship and for a final time illustrates the uncertain character of each. Joshua's testamentary address (23:1-16) then picks up these themes and locates them within the matrix of Israel's choices, in preparation for a final scene where Israel is constituted by choices during a covenant ceremony at Shechem (24:1-28).

The confrontation at the Jordan (Josh 22:10-34) revisits the issue of community integrity. At issue is an altar which the eastern tribes have constructed in the boundary region of the Jordan. The altar threatens a dangerous plurality which erases community integrity and union with YHWH, for Deuteronomy stipulates that sacrifice may only be conducted at the "place where YHWH has chosen to place his name" (cf. Deut 12:10-14). The episode centers on conflicting perceptions of Israelite identity. The western tribes view the construction of the altar as catastrophic act of rebellion and sacrilege and equate it with the apostasy at Baal-Peor and with Achan's sin (vv. 17, 20). From their perspective, Israel is defined by geography. They refer to their side of the Jordan as "YHWH's land," insinuate that the land east of the Jordan is "unclean," and bid their kindred to join them.

The eastern tribes respond by articulating a sense of identity based on kinship ties, and they bring the question of national identity to the surface. First they deny the explicit charges leveled against them (rebellion, sacrilege) and then the implicit accusations underlying them (that they have built the altar "to turn Israel away from following YHWH" [vv. 22-23]).¹⁴ They then explain that the altar has been constructed to ensure that the bonds that hold the nation together will remain intact well into the future. The altar, they imply, is meant to unify, not divide: "We did this out of concern that at a later time your children will say to our children, 'What have you to do with YHWH the God of Israel?'" (v. 24). The explanation reveals an understanding of national identity

¹⁴The text prepares the reader to see other issues beneath the charges by introducing the episode with a scene in which Joshua endorses the easterners' obedience to YHWH (22:1-6). Joshua's emphatic commendation thus stands in striking contrast to the subsequent (and equally emphatic) condemnation of the delegation.

based on maintaining kinship bonds, even across geographical boundaries. The conflict, then, arises because the two groups perceive "Israel" in different terms. Israelites west of the Jordan equate their identity with the land they possess, while those in the east understand their identity in terms of kinship. The conflicting perceptions highlight the difficulty in sorting out questions of obedience to YHWH. Who is obedient to YHWH in this story? And how can obedience be determined amidst contrary motives and perspectives? The situation is resolved only through a tenuous explanation that the altar will not really be a place of sacrifice but a "model" and a memorial.

Joshua's farewell address (23:1-16) takes up the themes of land, obedience, and separation and subsumes them under imperatives that emphasize the importance of the choices Israel faces; that is, to cling to YHWH and remain YHWH's people or to follow the ways of the people of the land and their gods. Here as well Joshua sets Israelite integrity against Canaanite plurality. Joshua addresses "all Israel" (v. 2; cf. v. 14) and admonishes the assembled nation to observe carefully the whole of the book of the law (i.e. Deuteronomy; v. 6), to cling to YHWH (v. 8), and to love him (v. 11). If so, he promises, Israelite integrity will prevail over Canaanite plurality: "one of you sets one thousand fleeing" (v. 10). On the other hand, Joshua reminds the people that they must not "go among these nations which remain among you" (v. 7), and warns that contact with the Canaanites is tantamount to following after their gods (v. 7). Clinging to the many gods of Canaan will yield the opposite result: YHWH's anger will be kindled and they, like the people of the land, will disappear (vv. 12-13, 16). Joshua ends his address by turning the promise motif on its head and setting choices and consequences before Israel. Just as YHWH fulfilled all the good he promised, so will he fulfill all the bad if Israel ever transgresses the covenant (vv. 14-16).

The final scene of the book (Josh 24:1-28) then takes up the theme of choosing and presents it as the foundation of Israel's national identity. At Shechem, Joshua brings the nation to a point of decision. The episode opens with a retelling of Israel's history which concentrates on what YHWH has done to bring the nation into being. YHWH, through Joshua, recasts Israel's story in first person, making the nation the object, rather than the subject, of its own story. By emphasizing divine initiative at each point of Israel's life as a nation, the retrospective demonstrates that YHWH's commitment to Israel sets the nation apart from all others. As a consequence, Joshua calls on Israel either to put away the other gods in its midst and serve YHWH alone or to serve the many gods of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan (vv. 14-15). In response, the nation declares its choice repeatedly and emphatically for YHWH, and Joshua confirms the decision by making a covenant and erecting memorial stones (vv. 25-27). The book, therefore, ends with a climactic scene that recounts that YHWH has

chosen Israel and that Israel in turn has chosen YHWH.

As the book draws to a close, Canaanites remain in the land and peoples of the land live among the people of God. Israel's ethnic homogeneity, its obedience to the commands of Moses, and even its connection to the land have proven equivocal marks of national identity. Rather than constituting ends in themselves, the final scene of Joshua leads the reader to acknowledge that all find their meaning against the backdrop of those decisions which form the basis for Israel's unique existence as a people. In this way, the book of Joshua argues against associating Israel's distinctive identity with racial, religious, or territorial programs. Instead it affirms that Israel exists because YHWH created it, accompanies it, and accomplishes the divine will through it. Ultimately, God's people are not defined by possession of a particular land, the correct and uniform performance of laws and commands, or by a sense of ethnic purity. Instead, Israel is a nation both created by YHWH and established by the decisions of its members.