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## **The Path of Cross-Generational Faithfulness: Reading Joshua 23-24 as a Bridge-Text**

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**Abstract:** Biblical research aimed at clarifying the hermeneutical complexities surrounding the book of Joshua has existed for some time. In effect, the book of Joshua occupies a crucial position in current exegetical discussions. The reception history and impact assessment of the Joshua corpus, especially in its relation to other (extra)biblical books and events, are multiple, as the book's possible unitary portrait remains intensely contested. This paper offers some hermeneutic and theological insights into the textual relational character of the book of Joshua from the perspective of its final chapters (Josh 23-24).

**Keywords:** Hebrew Bible, Josh 23-24, Exegesis, Theology, Bridge and Faithfulness.

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## Preliminary Remarks

The book of Joshua occupies a crucial position in current exegetical discussions (See Dozeman 2017: 270 – 288 & Ballhorn 2020). The numerous impressions about the book emanate from the multi-layered interpretative receptions of its embedded messages. Several perceptions have emerged in the interpretive history of the book. First, the Joshua corpus is understood in Deuteronomistic terms (Noth 1991). Second, some literary analyses of the book have been carried out within the purview of the Ancient Near Eastern narratological and textual tradition, positing a synecdoche nomenclature of the book as a conquest/genocidal tale, treaty text, or identity construction myth (Baumann 2006: 84-99). Third, the book is perceived to have provided an initial geographical template of Israel’s map (Ballhorn 2011). As such, the book of Joshua appears as a *dice* whose understanding depends on its interpretive horizon.<sup>1</sup>

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## Objectives and Approach

As a result of the book’s multifaceted perceptions, the following questions seek elucidation: Is a unitary portrait of the book possible? What role(s) does the book occupy in the Hebrew Bible? What literary dynamics does the book demonstrate in disseminating its core message(s)? In other words, the study seeks to establish a possible holistic functional portrait of the Joshua corpus and determine the book’s embedded literary dynamics and its

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<sup>1</sup> This short article is an adapted excerpt of a recent doctoral thesis (Commemoration, Choice, and Commitment: Joshua 23-24 as a Literary Bridge) submitted at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Innsbruck, Austria.

implication for exegesis and theology. While one would expect the entire book to be investigated to obtain an appropriate response to the identified concerns, the study instead selects a significant passage within the book, namely Josh 23-24. Being the book's final section, these last chapters offer the Joshuarian author(s) the final chance to explicitly summarize and precisely pass across the book's core message(s). Methodologically, the study uses a narrative-critique approach.

### Exegetical Outcomes

In approaching the examined text, the study engages Josh 23-24 in delimitation, contextual, and textual criticism. First, delimitation criticism helps establish boundaries through textual division or association for clear distinctions (Goswell 2009: 89-114). The book of Joshua consists of three distinguished sections: (i) appropriation of the land (Josh 1-12), allocation of the land (Josh 13-21), and (iii) life in the land (Josh 22-24). Josh 23-24 falls within the book's final section. However, Josh 23-24 passes for an independent literary section, demonstrating clear evidence of internal textual harmony as the section has its specific audience in view – all Israel. Second, the interconnectedness between Josh 23-24 and its bordering texts (immediate or remote) is evident. It captures the fulfilment of the book's set-out agenda in Josh 1,2-9, proffers a comprehensive résumé and interpretation of the book and the Pentateuch, and prepares the reader for Israel's future historical trajectory, which plays out in subsequent biblical books, especially in the book of Judges. Third, through an in-depth comparative evaluation of different biblical translations, textual criticism seeks to reconstruct the seemingly "original" text (Fee 1992: 827-831). The strong similarities between the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) and the Greek Septuagint version (LXX) of Josh 23-24 suggest they might have accessed a similar Hebrew *Vorlage*. However, while the MT seemingly engages in a re-copying exercise of its Hebrew *Vorlage*, the LXX

demonstrates interpretative and harmonizing redactional traits through textual additions and reshuffling, especially in Josh 24,29-33. The LXX translator of Josh 23-24 seems to have substantial knowledge of the Judges' textual tradition as his translation exercise (especially Josh 24,29-33) seeks to creatively establish textual harmony between the book of Joshua and Judges. At the end of the analysis, textual evidence attesting to the Bridge or Janus trait of Josh 23-24 becomes apprehensible, validating to an extent the hypothetical Pentateuch, Hexateuch, and Enneateuch interlace.

Moreover, a verse-to-verse analysis of Josh 23-24 further affirms the Bridge or Janus character of the book. As a closure text, Josh 23-24 references fulfilled promises, events, and motifs. For instance, Josh 23,3-4 summarizes the entire Joshua corpus. While Josh 23,3 proffers the summary of the first section of the book (Josh 1-12) concerning Israel's appropriation of the land, Josh 23,4 gives a resumé of the book's second segment on the allocation of the land. Also, Josh 24,29-33 displays a quartet closural character. On the one hand, it closes the final chapter (Josh 24) and section (Josh 23-24) of the book. On the other hand, it brings the book and Israel's foundational history, which began in the Pentateuch, to a substantial closure. Consequently, from a retrospective angle, Josh 23-24 re-butresses the fulfilment of the book's stipulated duo-goal in Josh 1,1-9 (i.e., possession of the land and service of YHWH) and promotes continuity, interpretation, and implementation of key Pentateuchal motifs, giving a comprehensive view of Israel's foundational history. In other words, Josh 23-24 is a summary, cumulative, and closure text, explicitly demonstrating the link between the book of Joshua and the Pentateuch (See Wenham 1971: 140-148; Koopmans 1990; Ederer 2017; Fischer 2020: 54-73 & Ballhorn 2020: 27-53). Joshua knows the Pentateuch and frequently refers to it from the *promise-fulfilment* perspective.

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Nevertheless, beyond its resumé function, a closural text offers the author(s) the last chance to explicitly articulate his core message. In doing so, a new but recognizable idea may surface. Josh 23-24 displays such a literary trait. Typical of farewell speeches, Josh 23-24 foretells Israel's subsequent history in prophetic or parabolic phraseologies. For instance, the summon in 23,2 // 24,1 and the position of the Torah as Joshua's successor in Josh 23,6 hint at Israel's movement from a unitary to a confederation State (until 2 Sam 5,1-5), such that the Torah assumes the sovereign authority within Israel's religious and socio-political sphere. The casuistry formulations in Josh 23,12-16 and the expression – "You cannot serve the Lord" – in Jos 24,19 anticipate Israel's future unfaithfulness, which eventually and repeatedly plays out during the era of the Judges, Kings, and Prophets. Also, the claim in Josh 24,31 serves as a critique of the Judges' era (Judg 2,11-19), whereby faithfulness seems to have the same lifespan as the ruling Judge. Therefore, from a prospective perspective, Josh 23-24 portrays the Joshua corpus as offering the foundational rationale for several socio-religious phenomena during the judges, kingdom, and prophetic era. In other words, Josh 23-24 presents the Joshua corpus as a forward-looking, referential, prescriptive, and evaluative text in contrast to subsequent biblical books, including the deuterocanonical books (Sir 46:1; Macc 2:20).

Finally, through structural and dynamic investigations, the study apprehends Josh 23-24 as a single farewell event with two independent literary units dominated by speeches. Assuming its farewell hortatory character, Josh 23-24 adopts an expository (23,3-5.9-10 // 24,2c-13), imperative (23,6-8.9 // 24,14-15.23),

and cautionary rhetorical tones (23,12-13.15-16 // 24,19-22), corresponding with a thematic dynamics of commemoration, choice, and commitment. In other words, Joshua's farewell audience ought to gratefully consider their divinely orchestrated past to garner the confidence to freely choose and decisively commit to securing a future characterized by exclusive faithfulness to YHWH. Hence, Josh 23-24 presents the Joshua corpus as a historical bridge, linking Israel's Pentateuchal and prophetic, stiff-necked and faithful eras.

### Theological Finesse

Josh 23-24 depicts YHWH as the central character of the book. YHWH is the first subject in the section (Josh 23,1), the most referenced personality, and the book's main focus. Of its 224 occurrences in the book, the Tetragrammaton YHWH appears 38 times in the examined section – 17 times in Josh 23 and 21 times in Josh 24. The frequent reference to YHWH in the book's concluding chapters, contextually characterized by farewell speeches, indicates the ultimate purpose of the farewell speeches. Joshua seems determined to establish, before his death, the proper perception and consciousness of YHWH among the people. In effect, Israel's response to the summon in Josh 24,1 (*they presented themselves before God*) gives the impression that the exodus out of Egypt does not only lead Israel to a place (promised land) but ultimately to a person – YHWH.

YHWH offers rest, conquers enemies, and gives the land, thus redefining the book of Joshua from the perceived chronicle of *Landnahme* (Taking of Land) to *Landgabe* (Giving of Land). In effect, Josh 23-24 exposes the correct and proper sense of the causal expression “for YHWH fights for you.” It corrects the book's erroneous genocidal impression and depicts the transition from conquest to co-existence with the nations as a sign of Israel's maturation. Instead of provoking spiritual trauma, the expression (*YHWH fights for you*) reinforces salvific hope. In other words, portraying YHWH as a deity who frowns at the oppression of the

feeble, the active role of YHWH in the conquest provides hope for victims of oppression and terrifies the victimizer (Nysse 1987: 192-201). Victims of oppression now have a justice system and a judge to trust.

Israel's decision and decisiveness towards faithful commitment to YHWH are overwhelmingly expressed through the Hebrew root word עָבַד (to serve). In effect, no chapter in the Hebrew Bible refers so often to Israel's ability to serve (YHWH) as Josh 24, where the verb עָבַד registers eighteen occurrences. Such repetitive reference emphasizes Israel's exclusive commitment to YHWH. Josh 24,31 clarifies

Consequently, Josh 23-24 reveals a pattern defined by covenantal faithfulness. YHWH is the first to be faithful, as manifested in the promise-fulfilment agenda on the one hand and the commemoration, choice, and commitment agenda on the other hand.

that Israel's divine service transcends Joshua's existence. Hence, to serve YHWH appears as a prerequisite, a theological bridge that enables Israel's passage from unfaithfulness (Josh 24,2.15) to cross-generational faithfulness (Jos 24,31).

Consequently, Josh 23-24 reveals a pattern defined by covenantal faithfulness. YHWH is the first to be faithful, as manifested in the promise-fulfilment agenda on the one hand (Josh 1,2-5 // Josh 23,1; 24,2-13) and the commemoration, choice, and commitment agenda on the other hand. YHWH gives rest, land, and fights for Israel. YHWH also recalls his covenantal history with Israel and his favourable choices for Israel (Josh 24,2-13) as he re-commits to the latter in the covenant ritual in Josh 24,25-27. Reciprocally, Israel also embraces faithfulness towards YHWH. Josh 23-24 twice explicitly attests to Israel's fidelity (23,8; 24,31). Such revelation establishes the book of Joshua first and foremost as a

theological piece before its historiographical considerations. In other words, YHWH's story of faithfulness entwines Israel's story so that the book's human hero is not only Joshua but also the people of Israel, as the latter fully partakes in the mission of the former (Josh 1,6-9). Hence, thanks to the provided summary in Josh 23-24, the book of Joshua demonstrates sufficient evidence of YHWH-Israel's history of *fulfilled faithfulness*.

### Concluding Remarks

Based on its exegetical and theological considerations, Josh 23-24 portrays the book of Joshua as a literary bridge. In other words, the Joshua corpus displays a transitory function, facilitating the movement from legal legislation (Torah) to its historical implementation, from divine promise to covenantal fulfilment, and from past to future. The commemoration, choice, and commitment agenda embraced by YHWH and Israel appears as the core pillars of the transiting bridge.

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