

# ONE BOOK, TWO BOOKS: THE JOSHUA-JUDGES CONTINUUM

HAYYIM ANGEL

## INTRODUCTION

The final verses of the Book of Joshua attest to the Golden Age enjoyed by Joshua and his generation: *Israel served the Lord during the lifetime of Joshua and the lifetime of the elders who lived on after Joshua, and who had experienced all the deeds that the Lord had wrought for Israel* (Josh. 24:31). Only one person in the Book of Joshua – Achan – is described as having sinned, and he had done so in secret (Ch. 7).

The opening verse of Judges, which begins *After the death of Joshua* (Jud. 1:1), demarcates a clear boundary between Joshua and Judges. As much as the Book of Joshua portrays a Golden Age, Judges delineates a Dark Age. The Israelites' laxity in eliminating Canaanite influence (1:1-2:5) led to a precipitous decline into idolatry after the death of Joshua and the elders who had outlived him:

*Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced [the deliverance of] the Lord or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel. And the Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord. They worshipped the Baalim and forsook the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt* (2:10-12).

This abandonment of God was pervasive during the period of the judges, leading to one national disaster after another. At the same time, however, there are other indicators in Joshua-Judges that this decline was more gradual, with the signs of disaster already manifesting themselves during Joshua's lifetime. In this essay, we will consider how the Book of Joshua may be understood simultaneously as a near-perfect age in Israel's history and as the precursor to Israel's darkest age.

*Hayyim Angel is Associate Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City (the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, founded in 1654) and teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. He has published articles on Tanakh in journals such as Tradition, Nahalah, Jewish Thought, Or HaMizrah, Jewish Bible Quarterly, and in several collections of essays.*

## JOSHUA CHAPTERS 13-19: FORESHADOWING LAXITY IN CONQUEST

. . . *Caleb son of Jephunneh was given a portion among the Judites, namely, Kiriath-arba – that is, Hebron . . . . Caleb dislodged from there the three Anakites: Sheshai, Ahiman, and Talmai, descendants of Anak. From there he marched against the inhabitants of Debir. . . and Caleb announced, 'I will give my daughter Achsah in marriage to the man who attacks and captures Kiriath-sepher.' His kinsman Othniel the Kenizzite captured it; and Caleb gave him his daughter Achsah in marriage (Josh. 15:13-17).*

Caleb bridged the desert generation and the new generation. As one of the faithful spies from Moses' time (see, e.g., Num. 13-14; Deut. 1), he entered the land and inherited Hebron. His son-in-law Othniel went on to become the first judge in the following generation (Jud. 3:7-11).

The narrative of Caleb's defeat of Hebron and Othniel's capture of Debir is repeated almost verbatim in Judges (Josh. 15:13-19 ~ Jud. 1:10-15). Some commentators argue that these events in fact occurred after Joshua's death, but were inserted into the Book of Joshua because of their thematic relevance to the national distribution of land under Joshua.<sup>1</sup> Others maintain that they occurred during Joshua's lifetime, and were repeated in Judges because the Judites – not the entire nation – conquered these cities. These exegetes explain that the Book of Joshua is dedicated to the national conquest and land distribution under Joshua, whereas Judges 1 enumerates the accomplishments of individual tribes.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of when Caleb and the Judites conquered Hebron and Debir, the narrative repetition creates a powerful link between the Books of Joshua and Judges by traversing the chronological boundary ostensibly erected by the opening verse in Judges.

Caleb's capture of Hebron, occurring in narratives before and after Joshua's death, invites the reader to reconsider the rest of the land inheritance described in Joshua and Judges. It appears that Joshua 13-19 foreshadows the later successes and failures in conquests described in Judges 1:1-2:5. The tribe of Judah was at the forefront of the land distribution in Joshua's time, highlighted by Caleb's enthusiastic request for Hebron (Ch. 14) and by his successful achievements with the rest of his tribe (Ch. 15). While the Judites were unable to conquer Jerusalem, that was a function of inability rather than

negligence: *But the Judites could not dispossess the Jebusites, the inhabitants of Jerusalem; so the Judites dwell with the Jebusites in Jerusalem to this day* (15:63).

In contrast with the faithful Judites, the other tribes were more hesitant to receive their inheritance:

*However, they failed to dispossess the Canaanites who dwelt in Gezer; so the Canaanites remained in the midst of Ephraim, as is still the case. But they had to perform forced labor* (Josh. 16:10).

*The Manassites could not dispossess [the inhabitants of] these towns, and the Canaanites stubbornly remained in this region. When the Israelites became stronger, they imposed tribute on the Canaanites; but they did not dispossess them* (17:12-13).

Both Ephraim and Manasseh did not dispossess the Canaanites despite their ability to do so; this failure foreshadows their laxity reported in Judges:

*Manasseh did not dispossess [the inhabitants of] Beth-shean and its dependencies . . . or the inhabitants of Megiddo and its dependencies. The Canaanites persisted in dwelling in this region. And when Israel gained the upper hand, they subjected the Canaanites to forced labor; but they did not dispossess them. Nor did Ephraim dispossess the Canaanites who inhabited Gezer; so the Canaanites dwelt in their midst at Gezer* (Jud. 1:27-29).

More remarkably, the other tribes did not even enter their tribal inheritance until Joshua exhorted them to do so:

*But there remained seven tribes of the Israelites which had not yet received their portions. So Joshua said to the Israelites, 'How long will you be slack about going and taking possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has assigned to you?'* (Josh. 18:2-3).

Thus, the northern tribes were reluctant even during Joshua's lifetime but still had Joshua as a powerful counterweight. After Joshua died, though, their laxity prevailed unchecked. While Judges 1 describes seven cities that the Judites successfully captured and only one that it was unable to capture,<sup>3</sup> it lists 21 cities the other tribes did not capture despite their ability to do so, while mentioning only the capture of Bethel.<sup>4</sup>

Rather than viewing the two periods exclusively as Golden Age versus Dark Age, one also must take into account the gradual progression of the decline – much of which began during Joshua's lifetime. In the Book of Joshua, Caleb and Othniel are heroes contrasted with an increasingly reluctant north. Caleb requested Hebron with its giants, whereas the Josephites and the other tribes were afraid of Canaanites. In Judges, Caleb and the Judites fulfilled their charge, but the north no longer had Joshua to encourage them, so the contrast became even more pronounced.<sup>5</sup>

The boundaries between Joshua and Judges regarding the conquest become even more blurred in Judges 2. Immediately after Joshua's death, the people were slack in the elimination of Canaanite influence, eliciting prophetic rebuke. Malbim (on Jud. 2:6) maintains that the laxity described in Judges 1:1-2:5 occurred during the lifetime of the elders who outlived Joshua. Although that generation did not yet worship idols, they failed to eliminate paganism, thereby paving the way for the epidemic of idolatry that plagued subsequent generations. Despite the testimony that *Israel served the Lord during the lifetime of Joshua and the lifetime of the elders who lived on after Joshua, and who had experienced all the deeds that the Lord had wrought for Israel* (Josh. 24:31; cf. Jud. 2:7), the opening chapters of Judges modify that idealized picture. Israel's "faithfulness" in the generation of those elders was limited to refraining from idol worship.<sup>6</sup>

Even more unexpectedly, Judges theologically projects the failures of the post-Joshua generations back into Joshua's period (though not onto Joshua himself). As a result of God's foreknowledge that Israel would lapse into idolatry in later generations, God did not allow Joshua to complete the conquest:

*For it was in order to test Israel by them – [to see] whether or not they would faithfully walk in the ways of the Lord, as their fathers had done – that the Lord had left those nations, instead of driving them out at once, and had not delivered them into the hands of Joshua* (Jud. 2:22-23).

Viewed in isolation, the Book of Joshua displays some difficulties; but Joshua and the elders always resolved the crises. In considering the Books of

Joshua and Judges together, however, there is an unmistakable continuum between the two periods, rather than a sudden and unforeseeable decline.

#### JOSHUA 22-24: FORESHADOWING CIVIL WAR AND IDOLATRY

Joshua 22 introduces the ugly prospect of civil war, as the nine-and-a-half western tribes, accompanied by Phinehas, mobilized against the two-and-a-half eastern tribes because of the altar the eastern tribes had built. Fortunately, the eastern tribes convinced the western tribes of their sincere motivations for building the altar. Disaster was averted, again preserving the ostensible perfection of Joshua's era. Read alongside Judges, however, this narrative becomes a precursor to the disaster at Gibeah, where Phinehas again accompanied a coalition (Jud. 20:28) – this time leading to a full-scale war of annihilation (19-21). Thus, the seeds for wars between tribes were planted during Joshua's lifetime.

Perhaps the most unexpected element of Joshua's Golden Age is his demand that the people put away their idols:

*Thereupon Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have by your own act chosen to serve the Lord.' 'Yes, we are!' they responded. 'Then put away the alien gods that you have among you and direct your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel' (Josh. 24:22-23; cf. 24:14).*

Did the Israelites have idols during Joshua's lifetime? Troubled by the stark conflict between these verses and the idealized summary of Joshua's period (Josh. 24:31; Jud. 2:7), Abarbanel (on Josh. 24:23) suggests that Joshua was demanding mental perfection; that is, the Israelites certainly had no physical idols. Similarly, Yehudah Kiel insists that Joshua was not accusing the Israelites of owning idols. Rather, he was speaking rhetorically in the context of enacting a permanent covenant between God and the Israelites.<sup>7</sup> However, Radak and Ralbag assume that if Joshua instructed them to abolish idols, this indicates that they had them in their possession. According to these commentators, the idolatry that appears to have emerged suddenly in the period of the judges already was affecting at least certain segments of the nation during the Golden Age of Joshua.

Read in a vacuum, the Book of Joshua shows how problems surfaced but were quickly solved by Joshua and the leadership. Civil war was averted in Chapter 22, and Joshua enacted a remarkable covenant to reject idolatry in Chapter 24. Read in conjunction with Judges, however, Joshua appears merely to have forestalled disasters that were waiting to happen, and that did happen shortly after he died.

#### THE PLACEMENT OF JUDGES 17-21

The stories in Judges 17-21 – Micah's shrine with a graven image, and the story of the concubine at Gibeah leading to a war of annihilation against the Benjaminites – were placed at the end of Judges. Most commentators maintain that these events actually occurred at the beginning of the period.<sup>8</sup> Among textual arguments are the fact that Moses' grandson Jonathan was the priest of Micah's shrine (18:30),<sup>9</sup> and Aaron's grandson Phinehas was present in the war against Benjamin (20:28).

One might posit several purposes for placing Chapters 17-21 at the end of Judges. Abarbanel (on Jud. 17:1) suggests that the narrator of Judges wanted to follow Joshua's leadership with the accounts of more leaders. R. Yaakov Fidanque (on Jud. 17:1) adds that the narrator of Judges sought to begin on a positive note before describing the decline. The placement of Judges 17-21 immediately before the Book of Samuel also paves the way for a full treatment of monarchy that occurs in the latter.<sup>10</sup> Finally, this placement distances these tragic events from Joshua's generation. Phinehas may be considered one of the elders who outlived Joshua, and the disaster at Gibeah demonstrates the extent of sinfulness even that generation attained.

#### JUDGES 2:6-11

*When Joshua dismissed the people, the Israelites went to their allotted territories and took possession of the land. The people served the Lord during the lifetime of Joshua and the lifetime of the older people who lived on after Joshua and who had witnessed all the marvelous deeds that the Lord had wrought for Israel. Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of one hundred and ten years . . . And all that generation were likewise gathered to their fa-*

*thers. Another generation arose after them, which had not experienced [the deliverance of] the Lord or the deeds that He had wrought for Israel. And the Israelites did what was offensive to the Lord (2:6-11).*

The near-verbatim repetition of the closing verses in the Book of Joshua (Josh. 24:29-32 ~ Jud. 2:6-9) demands explanation. Rashi, Radak, Ralbag, and Abarbanel maintain that these verses are repeated in Judges in order to protect Joshua's reputation in light of the disasters; that is, they all occurred after his death. In light of what we have seen, however, this explanation is only half of the story.

A fuller appreciation of this repetition may be derived from Ramban's commentary on the Book of Exodus, in his discussion of the similar verses that appear at the end of Genesis and the beginning of Exodus:

. . . It is for this reason that He [i.e., God] returns to the beginning of the subject [stated in the Book of Genesis], which is the verse, *And all his seed he [Jacob] brought with him into Egypt* (Gen. 46:7). There is it written afterward, *And these are the names of the children of Israel, who came into Egypt, etc.* (Gen. 46:8). This is the very same verse that He repeats here. Even though they are two separate books, the narrative is connected with subjects which follow one another successively . . . A similar case is found in the Book of Chronicles and the Book of Ezra . . . . The author repeated the very language of these two verses at the beginning of the Book of Ezra in order to connect the narrative . . . (Ramban on Ex. 1:1).<sup>11</sup>

Although Ramban notes only two pairs of biblical books that fit his description (Genesis-Exodus; Chronicles-Ezra/Nehemiah), we may submit a third pair: Joshua-Judges. Rather than viewing Judges 2:6-9 exclusively as a flashback to contrast Joshua's generation with the following era, we may view the repetition as a means of linking the Book of Judges to the Book of Joshua. Joshua-Judges are far more intimately connected than other prophetic books, to the point where it may be said that they form an organic unity. Viewed together, the negligence in conquest, idolatry, and civil war characteristic of Judges in fact all were developing in the Book of Joshua. On one level,

Joshua-Judges may be viewed as a larger Book, similar to the other pairs Ramban adduces.

Simultaneously, however, the Books of Joshua and Judges are two distinct books and periods. To highlight the differences between the periods of Joshua and the Judges, the narrator/author placed Judges 1:1-2:5 between these Books in order to drive a wedge between them. Judges 2:6-11 again stress that the disasters of the period occurred after Joshua's generation died out. Additionally, Judges 17-21 was moved to the end of Judges, keeping Joshua's period clean of disaster. Viewed in isolation, then, the period of Joshua in fact was a Golden Age. Joshua's strong leadership prevented his nation from straying and guided his nation to spiritual heights.

By repeating Joshua 24:29-32 and Judges 2:6-9 and by separating these verses with post-Joshua laxity (Jud. 1:1-2:5), the narrator(s) of Joshua-Judges achieves the desired complex result. Joshua's period was a Golden Age, and Judges was a Dark Age. However, no longer is the Book of Joshua exclusively a happy conclusion to the Torah narrative. It also paves the way for the Dark Age of Judges.

#### NOTES

1. See, for example, Rashi (on Josh. 15:14), Kara (on Jud. 1:12), and Ralbag (on Jud. 1:10).
2. See, for example, Radak (on Jud. 1:8), Abarbanel (on Josh. 11:21), and Malbim (on Josh. 10:37).
3. See Targum and R. Isaiah of Trani on Judges 1:19.
4. See further discussion in Y. Amit, *Mikra LeYisrael: Judges* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 1999) pp. 28-31.
5. See further discussion in *Olam HaTanakh: Joshua* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Divrei HaYamim Ltd., 1999) pp. 137-138, 170; K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The Configuring of Judicial Preliminaries: Judges 1:1 – 2:5 and its Dependence on the Book of Joshua," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 68 (1995) pp. 75-92.
6. Alternatively, one might argue that the events described in Judges 1:1-2:5 occurred after those elders' death. See Y. Elitzur, *Da'at Mikra: Judges* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1976), introduction, pp. 10-11.
7. Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Joshua* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1970) p. 222.
8. E.g., *Seder Olam Rabbah* 12, Rashi, Kara, Ralbag, R. Isaiah of Trani. See further discussion in Elitzur, introduction, p. 12; commentary, p. 156; Amit, pp. 12, 258-259.
9. See *Bava Batra* 109b, followed by Rashi, Kara, Radak and others.
10. Cf. Amit, pp. 12, 258-259.

11. Translation from *Ramban (Nachmanides) Commentary on the Torah: Exodus*, translated and annotated by Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1973) pp. 6-7.

The book of Joshua shows us God's faithfulness to his covenant with the Israelites to bring them into the land he promised to Abraham. This book points to the importance of covenant obedience before, during, and after God fulfills his promises. Read Scripture. The Promised Land. At the start of the book of Joshua, Joshua is appointed as Israel's new leader, a new Moses. These two cities show two contrasting pictures of Israel's battles. When fought by their strength, Israel is defeated. When they follow God's direction, they find victory. The book of Judges shows how corrupt God's leaders and people can become but offers hope for the future. Learn More. Blogs. The Book of Joshua (Hebrew: ספר יהושע "Sefer Yehoshua") is the sixth book in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, and is the first book of the Deuteronomistic history, the story of Israel from the conquest of Canaan to the Babylonian exile. It tells of the campaigns of the Israelites in central, southern and northern Canaan, the destruction of their enemies, and the division of the land among the Twelve Tribes, framed by two set-piece speeches, the first by God commanding the conquest. The two books of Samuel record an important transition in political organization. The period of the judges came to an end with Samuel, who is also referred to as a seer and a prophet, and who anointed Saul to be the first king of Israel. The history of the monarchy contained in these books is believed to have been compiled during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. Because of the reformation that he inaugurated, Josiah was regarded as a great king. 2 Samuel is concerned almost entirely with the career of David. An excerpt from the Book of Yashur the Upright reports a eulogy spoken by David in commemoration of Saul and Jonathan. An account is given of the way in which David was made king first over Judah and later over all of Israel.