

**"THERE IS NO CHRONOLOGICAL
ORDER IN THE TORAH":
AN AXIOM FOR UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF JOSHUA**

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INTRODUCTION

The rabbinic axiom that "there is no chronological order in the Torah [*en mukdam u-me'uhar ba-Torah*]"¹ can be an effective tool for revealing the purposes of prophetic books. One always must ask why a narrator would deviate from the historical order.

The deviations from the chronological sequence of events in the Book of Joshua are particularly instructive for unlocking the inner meanings of the Book. In this essay, we will consider some of the more significant departures from the historical sequence of events, and how they help elucidate the narrator's purposes.

CHAPTERS 1-2

The Book of Joshua begins with God's encouragement and exhortation to Joshua (1:1-9), followed by Joshua's preparing the nation to cross the Jordan. He addressed the officials of the nation: '*Go through the camp and charge the people thus: Get provisions ready, for in three days' time you are to cross the Jordan . . .*' (v. 11). He then exhorted the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh to fulfill their promise to help their brethren in the conquest (vv. 12-18). Chapters 3-6 then resume the action from Chapter 1: *Three days later, the officials went through the camp and charged the people . . .* (3:2-3).

Joshua 2, which describes Joshua's sending two spies to scout Jericho and their encounter with Rahab, does not seem to fit into its surrounding context. It interrupts the flow of the narrative. The chronology militates against the position of this chapter within the framework of Chapters 1-6.

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Chapter 1:10-11 has Joshua informing the elders that they will cross the Jordan in three days, and 3:1-5 continues this point of reference. Meanwhile, the spies of Chapter 2 needed an extra day to return – they spent one day in Jericho, and then hid three more days before returning to the camp: *She said to them, 'Make for the hills, so that the pursuers may not come upon you. Stay there in hiding three days, until the pursuers return; then go your way'* (2:16). The spies heeded Rahab's advice and hid for three days before returning to the camp (2:22). If this story were in chronological order, they should have found Joshua and the nation on the west bank of the Jordan having already crossed the day before.²

Addressing the chronological problem, Ralbag (on 1:10-11) suggests that Rahab's telling the spies, '*Stay there in hiding three days*' means 'stay there until the third day.' Alternatively, Yehudah Kiel suggests that *in three days' time* (1:11) could mean 'in three more days,' thus referring to the fourth day. From this point of view, the crossing of the Jordan took place on day four, shortly after the spies had returned.³

A number of commentators, though, do not reconcile the order of events with the narrative sequence. Instead, they assert that Joshua sent the spies prior to Chapter 1.⁴ Assuming that Chapters 1 and 2 are not in chronological sequence, what might have been the narrator's reasons to favor a literary over an historical ordering?

One might ascertain a negative dimension in this literary sequence. Moses opened Deuteronomy with a condemnation of the episode with the spies:

*'I said to you, "You have come to the hill country of the Amorites which the Lord our God is giving to us. See, the Lord your God has placed the land at your disposal. Go up, take possession, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. **Fear not and be not dismayed.**" Then all of you came to me and said, "Let us send men ahead to reconnoiter the land for us and bring back word on the route we shall follow and the cities we shall come to"' (Deut. 1:20-22).*

Moses encouraged the people to enter the Promised Land, but *the people* demonstrated their lack of faith by sending spies to scout the land. Similarly, and surprisingly, God had encouraged Joshua, *do not be terrified nor dismayed* (1:9), but he too sent spies anyway.⁵ If the events of Chapter 2 in

fact occurred

before Chapter 1, then Joshua was taking an initiative by sending spies and was not ignoring God's explicit encouragement. By rearranging the sequence, the narrator successfully highlights Joshua's lack of confidence at the beginning of his tenure, confirming the need for the chorus of *be strong and resolute* in Chapter 1 (vv. 6, 7, 9, 18).⁶

Concomitantly, on the other hand, this sequence implies a positive dimension to Joshua's leadership. Throughout the Book, Joshua and the people upheld the Torah that already had been given to Moses, but also increased their active participation in shaping their destiny. Similarly, Chapter 1 stresses God's prophetic guidance to Joshua, and is followed by an account of Joshua's personal initiative in Chapter 2.

On another level, the literary positioning of Chapters 1-2 allows for Joshua 1 to follow the conclusion of the Torah. The Book of Joshua addresses the continuity from Moses to Joshua, as well as from the Torah to the Book of Joshua. Joshua 1 depicts the succession of Joshua as leader and prophet with a strong emphasis on Moses' leadership. The language of Joshua 1 echoes that of Deuteronomy, stressing the similarities of the Book of Joshua to the Torah.⁷

To summarize, the literary sequence of Joshua 1-2 draws attention to some of the most important themes of the Book of Joshua: Joshua's fears; increased emphasis on human initiative; the leadership succession from Moses to Joshua; and continuity with the Torah. Were the chapters reversed and placed in chronological sequence, these literary-thematic points would have been obscured, if not eliminated.

THE CEREMONY AT GERIZIM AND EBAL

At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal . . . They offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and brought sacrifices of well-being. And there, on the stones, he inscribed a copy of the Teaching that Moses had written for the Israelites. All Israel – stranger and citizen alike . . . stood on either side of the Ark . . . Half of them faced Mount Gerizim and half of them faced Mount Ebal . . . There was not a word of all that Mos-

es had commanded that Joshua failed to read in the presence of the entire assembly of Israel, including the women and children and the strangers who accompanied them (8:30-35).

The ceremony at Gerizim and Ebal fulfilled the commandment from Deuteronomy (11:26-30). Additionally, there are parallels to the Sinaitic Revelation that are in consonance with Joshua's personal initiative. Not only did the people bring burnt and well-being offerings (cf. Ex. 24:5), they also engraved commandments onto stones, and proclaimed the Torah to the rest of the nation from the tops of the mountains. While emulating the Sinaitic Revelation, it was the people who engraved the laws and who taught the Torah from mountaintops, rather than God. Thus, the people accepted a pre-existing Torah, but were far more actively involved than the previous generation who had received the Torah directly from God.

It is difficult to ascertain when this covenant occurred.⁸ Some commentators (e.g., Abarbanel, Malbim, Kiel) maintain that that the narratives are in chronological sequence. That is, Joshua conducted this ceremony after the conquest of Jericho and Ai in Chapters 6-8. Some other commentators, however, prefer the literal reading of the commandment in Deuteronomy; that this ceremony was performed on the actual day that the people crossed the Jordan, during the events described in Chapters 3-4.⁹ Alternatively, R. Yishmael (*Yerushalmi Sotah* 7:3, 21c) suggests that Joshua brought the nation to Gerizim and Ebal after the conquest and distribution of the land were completed. Josephus shared this view (*Antiquities*, V: 1:19).

Those who do not believe the ceremony is in its proper chronological location may ask: Why did the narrator place the event here? First, observance of the Torah must be at the forefront of the conquest. This dramatic ceremony affirming Israel's faithfulness fittingly was placed after the first loss and re-prieve as a result of Achan's sin, driving home the point that Israel's success was entirely dependent on following God's commandments.

L. Daniel Hawk derives further meaning from the broader flow of Chapters 6-8. Rahab's joining the Israelites in Chapter 6, followed by Achan's being treated as a Canaanite in Chapter 7, accentuates that the battle was not an ethnic cleansing. Religious and ethical choices were the determining factors for inclusion in or exclusion from the nation. Chapter 8:30-35 then stresses identity through acceptance of the Torah. Significantly, both Israelites and

others who had accepted the covenant were present at this ceremony, and the brief narrative twice notes the outsiders' inclusion (8:33, 35).¹⁰

CHAPTERS 22-24

Chapters 22-23 appear to be the perfect conclusion to the Book of Joshua, with both chapters completing the cycle begun in Chapter 1. In Chapter 22, the tribes east of the Jordan River received their inheritance, tying the narrative back to Joshua's exhortation to those tribes to assist in the conquest (1:12-18). With his address to the nation to remain faithful to God in Chapter 23, Joshua had developed into the nation's strengthener, reminiscent of God's address to him at the outset of the Book when he had needed encouragement:

'But you must be very strong and resolute to observe faithfully all the Teaching that My servant Moses enjoined upon you. Do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go . . .' (1:7).

'But be most resolute to observe faithfully all that is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses, without ever deviating from it to the right or to the left' (23:6).

Although the Book of Joshua could have concluded after Joshua's address in Chapter 23, it continues with another covenant Joshua made with the people at Shechem. Joshua surveyed the nation's history, and offered the choice between accepting God or other gods:

'Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve Him with undivided loyalty; put away the gods that your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Or, if you are loath to serve the Lord, choose this day which ones you are going to serve . . . but I and my household will serve the Lord' (24:14-15).

Thus, Chapter 24 breaks out of the circle completed by Chapters 1→22-23.

Why would Joshua exhort the nation in Chapter 23, and then move everyone to Shechem for another address in Chapter 24? First of all, Joshua brought the people to Shechem because of its patriarchal significance. As Radak (on 24:1) suggests, Joshua brought the people to Shechem since the importance of keeping the Torah is paramount and deserves repetition. Alternatively, Abarbanel (on 24:1) posits that Joshua was unimpressed with the nation's lack of response in Chapter 23, so he brought the nation to Shechem,

the place where Jacob had told his sons to eliminate their idols (Gen. 35:2 ~ Josh. 24:14). Both commentators assume that these covenants occurred at the end of Joshua's life. Therefore, they must explain the apparent redundancy as well as Joshua's decision to relocate the nation to strike a similar covenant. Nonetheless, the questions appear stronger than their answers.

As noted, R. Yishmael (J.T. *Sotah* 7:3, 21c) believes that the covenant at Gerizim and Ebal (8:30-35) occurred after the conquest and the distribution of the land. There is logistical merit to this view. Instead of positing that the entire camp moved from Gilgal to Shechem and back to Gilgal, the nation now remained at its base in Gilgal throughout the conquest and distribution, and then went to Shechem – located at the base of Gerizim and Ebal – to conduct the ceremony. It appears that R. Yishmael's view should be extended to include the ceremony recorded in Chapter 24 that was also in Shechem. Perhaps it occurred at that same time – after the conquest and distribution of the land, and years before Joshua's farewell address in Chapter 23.¹¹

This theory solves several problems. Foremost, it obviates the redundancy of the covenants in Chapters 23-24; years separated them. When Joshua 24 reports that *on that day at Shechem, Joshua made a covenant for the people and he made a fixed rule for them* (24:25), this covenant was related to the ceremony at Gerizim and Ebal in 8:30-35. There are further parallels between Chapters 8 and 24: Joshua presented alternative choices to the nation, erected a stone altar, and wrote a copy of the Torah in both. Logistically, the entire Israelite encampment moved from Gilgal to Shechem for the ceremony – including both Gerizim-Ebal and Joshua's challenge to the nation in Chapter 24 – and then on to their tribal inheritance. At the end of his life, Joshua reconvened the nation for his closing exhortation in Chapter 23.

All that remains to explain is *why* the narrator placed the covenant of Chapter 24 at the end of the Book. The freewill covenant presented in Joshua 24 is one of the most remarkable variations of the Covenant between God and Israel in biblical history. Some commentators were stunned by Joshua's apparent offer of the option to reject God. Metzudat David and Yehudah Kiel maintain that the people did not really have the choice to refuse the covenant, but Joshua rhetorically made them feel as if they could. Alternatively, Gersonides (Ralbag) and

Abarbanel suggest that Joshua had absolute confidence that the people would accept God, and therefore seized the opportunity to distance them even more from idolatry.¹²

The plain sense of the narrative, however, indicates that Joshua did offer the people the choice of acceptance or rejection. Rashi adopts this reading:

Joshua foresaw that they would rebel in the days of Ezekiel and say, '*We will be like the nations*' (Ezek. 20:32). Therefore, he made it more difficult now. In this vein, he answered them in the days of Ezekiel, '*And what you have in mind shall never come to pass As I live – declares the Lord God – I will reign over you with a strong hand . . .*' (Ezek. 20:32-33). You already accepted upon yourselves in the days of Joshua. And you may not say, 'We accepted the covenant in the days of Moses only so that we could enter the Land.' In the days of Joshua you had already entered and you [nevertheless] accepted (Rashi on Josh. 24:22).¹³

Thus, Rashi asserts that the people could truly accept the Torah only once they had been given the Promised Land. Until that point, they were vulnerable and dependent on God's good will. Rashi adds that in a sense, the covenant in Joshua 24 was more binding than the original Sinaitic Covenant, since freewill acceptance is essential to a mutual covenant.

From this point of view, Chapter 24 was placed in the climactic position of the Book because of its unique freewill covenant. This is the essence of the Book of Joshua, featuring greater human involvement in accepting the pre-existing Torah. As we saw above, the covenant at Gerizim and Ebal – which likely occurred at the same time – followed the identical pattern.

Similarly, Chapters 23-24 follow the same pattern as Chapters 1-2, which also may be out of chronological sequence. Chapters 1 and 23 echo the Book of Deuteronomy by highlighting Joshua's succeeding Moses and by utilizing the language of Deuteronomy. Chapters 2 and 24, in contrast, underscore the initiative and innovation of Joshua and the nation. While the progression of Chapters 1-2 may also exhibit a dimension of Joshua's fear, the sequence of 23-24 is purely positive, and points to one of the highest points in Israel's history. This was an age of mature covenant, specifically accepting that which Moses already had received. By breaking out of the cycle formed by Chapters 1→22-23, Chapter 24 becomes the defining feature of the Book of Jo-

shua. Thus, the Book of Joshua is the successor of Deuteronomy, and Joshua the heir of Moses. Yet the Book, and Joshua, also began a new age of initiative, creating a binding covenant that Moses could not.

CONCLUSIONS

The Book of Joshua stresses the nation's following Moses' teaching, and also taking initiative and an active role in accepting the covenant (Chapters 8, 24). Joshua was Moses' successor and closely echoed the language of Deuteronomy (Chapters 1, 23). Yet he also took initiatives, such as sending the spies and creating a unique freewill covenant (Chapters 2, 24). By placing Chapter 1 immediately after the Torah, there is clear continuity. By placing Chapter 24 at the end, the final stress of the Book is on the initiative of Joshua and the nation in accepting God and the Torah.

By accentuating these themes, the narrator has positioned the Book of Joshua as the natural successor to the Torah, and simultaneously as the first biblical book after the Torah – initiating the era of the prophets. Thus, the Book of Joshua maintains an independent identity, marking off one of the greatest eras in Israel's history.

NOTES

1. See, for example, *Pesahim* 6b; *Mekhilta D'Rabbi Yishmael Beshallah* 7; *Sifrei Bemidbar* 64; *Ecc. Rabbah* 1:12, and many others.
2. Cf. *Olam HaTanakh: Joshua* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Divrei HaYamim Ltd., 1999) p. 38.
3. Y. Kiel, *Da'at Mikra: Joshua* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1970) pp. 9-11.
4. See, for example, Rashi (on 2:1), Radak (on 3:1), R. Isaiah of Trani (on 2:22), Abarbanel (on 1:10), and Malbim (on 1:10).
5. Cf. *Olam HaTanakh: Joshua*, p. 46, which adds that while Joshua failed to gain confidence from God's commands and encouragement, he did from the testimony of Rahab.
6. One midrash pinpoints Joshua's confidence as a central theme of the Book: 'The Lord said to Joshua, "This day, for the first time, I will exalt you in the sight of all Israel" (Josh. 3:7) – this should have been at the beginning of the Book, only the Torah does not follow a chronological order' (*Ecc. Rabbah* 1:12). Although Joshua 3 clearly follows Chapter 1 chronologically, this midrash uses the principle of 'The Torah does not follow a chronological order' to expound on the inner meaning of the Book of Joshua.
7. See especially Deuteronomy 3:21, 28; 31:7-8 ~ Joshua 1:6-9; Deuteronomy 11:24-25 ~ Joshua 1:3-4. Cf. *Gen. Rabbah* 6:9, 'R. Simeon b. Yohai said: The Book of Deuteronomy was an ensign

for Joshua.'

8. J. A. Soggin, *The Old Testament Library: Joshua* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972) p. 241 observes that 9:1ff. follows 8:28-29, indicating that 8:30-35 are out of place. See further discussion in R. D. Nelson, *The Old Testament Library: Joshua* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997) pp. 116-117.

9. Deuteronomy 27:2 commands that the ceremony be performed *ba-yom asher ta'avru et ha-Yarden*, literally, 'on the day you cross the Jordan.' See *Tosefta Sotah* 8; *Sotah* 36a, followed by Rashi, Kara, and Radak.

10. L. D. Hawk, *Berit Olam: Joshua, Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry*, ed. D. W. Cotter (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000) pp. 32-33.

11. Soggin, pp. 220-222 actually rearranges the text here, placing 8:30-35 after 24:27. See further discussion of the placement of Chapter 24 in S. Ahituv, *Mikra LeYisrael: Joshua* (Hebrew) (Tel-Aviv: Am Oved Publishers Ltd., 1995) pp. 366-367; M. Leibtag, lectures on Joshua 8 and 23-24, at <http://www.tanach.org/yeho.htm#shiur5>, <http://www.tanach.org/yeho.htm#shiur12>.

12. It is noteworthy that Abarbanel had explained the apparent redundancy of the covenants in Chapters 23-24 by suggesting that Joshua brought them to Shechem precisely because he was not confident about the people.

13. See also Kara on Joshua 24:15; Rashi and Kara on Ezekiel 20:32.



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