

COVENANT AS AN INSTRUMENT OF RENEWAL:
A STUDY OF JOSHUA 24:1-28

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INTRODUCTION¹

The concept of covenant is one of the most important and controverted topics in Old Testament studies. Paul Williamson suggests that though the term "covenant" is somewhat familiar to most people, a "shared understanding of what is meant by this term can seldom be assumed."² Hundreds of books have been written on the significance of the covenant concept³ since gaining popularity during the times that followed the protestant reformation through the influence of men like Johann Heinrich Bullinger and Johannes Cocceius.⁴ The proliferation of writing on this concept has caused a significant amount of diversity in scholarly circles. The diversity in the academy has unfortunately led to all sorts of confusion in religious communities and traditions.⁵ A great amount of benefit could be derived from a study of these various

¹ Portions of this section originally appeared in another paper entitled, "Covenant Renewal: Joshua 24:1-28." That paper was prepared by the author in fulfillment of course requirements for Dr. Archie England.

² Paul R Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: A Biblical Theology of Covenant* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 34.

³ See John Haralson Hayes and Frederick C Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1985), 19–23 for more historical details on the development of the covenant concept.

⁴ See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1961) as an example of a relatively modern example of theological work that is organized by the covenant concept.

⁵ See John H Walton, *Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 15–23 in which Walton recognizes four different positions among scholars regarding the function-purpose of the covenant concept before spending the rest of his work arguing for the primarily "revelatory" purpose-function for the covenant concept.

understandings of the covenant, but such a study is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, this paper aims to demonstrate at least one way that the covenant concept was intended to function in the Israelites community after they had inherited the land of the Canaanites. The key text to be considered in this paper will be Joshua 24:1-28. This paper proposes that a thorough analysis of this select passage will demonstrate how the events recorded were intended to be emulated by subsequent generations for the purpose of maintaining their relationship with Yahweh. Furthermore, this paper will argue that their refusal to adhere to the practice recorded in Joshua 24 was the key element in their fall away from Yahweh.

For the sake of definitional clarity, the following synthesis by Scott Hafemann will serve as a the presupposed definition for the word “covenant.” He writes,

A covenant is the formal declaration, sealed with a ratifying oath (whether given in a verbal declaration and/or symbolized in a sign or ceremony), of the parties involved, the framework for the commitments of the relationship it defines. As such, a covenant represents "an elected, as opposed to natural, relationship of obligation under oath," i.e., it establishes or reflects "a relationship under sanctions" based on "a sanction-sealed commitment to maintain a particular relationship or follow a stipulated course of action. A covenant and the relationship it represents is therefore "an elected vs. natural relationship of obligation – established under divine sanction."⁶

In addition to defining the word “covenant,” a related concept, “covenant renewal” also needs to be defined. Simply put, a covenant renewal is a restoration or recommitment of a people to a previously issued or arranged covenant. In a biblical context, covenant renewal is the restoration or recommitment of God's people to the obligations of God's covenant. Most of the time, this expression of renewal comes in response to situations of either an act of repentance,⁷

⁶ Scott J Hafemann and Paul R House, *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Enity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 26.

⁷ See Israel’s violation of the terms of the covenant in Joshua 7 and the subsequent covenant renewal in Joshua 8. Historical details can be found in Iain W Provan, V. Philips Long,

an act of generational commissioning⁸ or an act of worship.⁹ Implicit in the aim of this paper is to show how the covenant concept functions in the practice of covenant renewal.

As for the passage that this paper will be considering, Joshua 24 “has been a focus of a great deal of scholarly controversy.”¹⁰ Questions regarding dating, sources, composition, genre, and relationship to other sections of Joshua and the Pentateuch continue to be discussed by scholars. This relative lack of consensus should not deter students from a rigorous engagement of the text. Much can be gleaned from this chapter even if its nature and place are difficult to fully ascertain. While this chapter has merited book-length analyses of its genre alone,¹¹ this paper will take a more modest approach to Joshua 24 by studying it in its historical and literary context. Conclusions regarding the passage’s historical background and literary nature will be based upon an analysis of grammatical and structural elements. Furthermore, the analysis will be conducted upon Joshua 24 as it stands in the *Biblica Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), a critical edition of the Masoretic text (MT), with only limited comment being offered on variants.

and Tremper Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 152–153.

⁸ See Joshua’s covenant renewal in Joshua 24 that points to passing on of covenantal truth and tradition to the next generation. See Walter C Kaiser, *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 172.

⁹ Robin Routledge, *Old Testament Theology: A Thematic Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 191.

¹⁰ Richard D Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 265.

¹¹ See William T Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative* (London: T & T Clark, 2009) for a 520-page poetic analysis of Joshua 24.

THE TEXT OF JOSHUA 24

This paper seeks to study Joshua 24 as it is presented in the BHS and will not consider text-critical issues in great depth. Yet, one text-critical issue merits brief comment. In verses 1 and 25, the BHS reads שֶׁכֶם as the location of the events of Joshua 24. The Septuagint (LXX), however, reads Σηλω instead of שֶׁכֶם. Most commentators accept the BHS on account of it being the more difficult reading. The Σηλω readings most likely appeared as an attempt by scribes to harmonize Joshua 24:1 and 25 with Joshua 18:1. Boling and Wright suggest that the Σηλω reading could “equally reflect a developing anti-Samaritan bias” given that “Shechem was rebuilt by Samaritan refugees in the Hellenistic period.”¹ At the very least, these variants point to the significance of geography in the life of the people of Israel. This will be demonstrated in the sections below, as Shechem emerges as a place of profound importance as a background for Joshua’s exhortations. It is not by chance that Shechem is selected as the place for a paradigmatic event to occur for future generations of Israelites in the land.

¹ Robert G Boling, *Joshua: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 2007), 533.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JOSHUA 24

Joshua 24 is the last chapter of a book that recounts the fulfillment of God's promises to the patriarchs regarding the land of the Canaanites. As a whole, the book serves as both a conclusion to the Hexateuch and a beginning to the Former Prophets of the Old Testament. By chapter 24, Joshua and the people of Israel have crossed over the Jordan river, defeated great cities like Jericho in battle, distributed the land among the tribes, and began to enjoy their inheritance. However, in light of incidents like the sin of Achan and his family after the defeat of Ai, the deception of the Gibeonites at Gilgal, or the conflict between the Transjordanian people and the Cisjordanian people regarding an altar built by the Jordan River, the Israelites' conquest could not be considered problem-free. Their community was subject to dissolution at any moment if faithfulness to Yahweh's covenant was not maintained. All of these details provide a brief background and give the reader an idea of what the atmosphere was like during the final events recorded in Joshua 24.

Having considered the story's setting, a study of the characters in the account becomes necessary. For the sake of summary, one can conclude from verse 1 that Joshua, the people of Israel, and the LORD are all considered to be present at Shechem for this event. The text does not go into detail regarding the nature of the LORD's presence. The reader is not told whether the LORD's presence was mediated in the form of the Ark of the Covenant or whether the LORD's presence came in the form of Joshua's prophetic speech. The text simply states that the people were "called to stand before the LORD." As will become clear in later sections, the LORD makes clear what he desires for his people to know and remember him while they are in

the land. For now, though, it is sufficient to simply note that the LORD is recorded as being present at this event with a particular people before him.

So who were these that were to stand before the LORD? These people are those who had survived the conquest of Canaan and were now beginning to settle into the land. They were the children and grandchildren of the wilderness generation that failed to enter into the land under Moses' leadership. They were the people who were led by Joshua, the LORD's servant.

The LORD's servant, however, was not always considered as such. In Joshua 1:1, Joshua is not afforded the honor of being the servant of the Lord, but instead, the servant of Moses. In due time, the LORD promised to make Joshua like Moses as long as he courageously obeyed the "book of instruction" and led the people of Israel. By the end of the book, after leading the people to victory and distributing the land among the tribes, Joshua received the same honored title that Moses bore as the Servant of the LORD.

With the story setting and respective characters considered, a final element of the account that is worth considering is the geographical setting. According to verse 1, Joshua gathered all the people before the LORD at Shechem. According to Garth Gilmour, "the biblical city of Shechem is identified with the mound at Tell Balatah, situated at the foot of Mount Gerizim."¹ Gilmour continues, stating that as "the center of a major city-state in the second millennium BCE, Shechem served as a political and religious center for the Israelites tribes in the period of the judges, later declining in importance, particularly after the rise of nearby Samaria as the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in the period of the divided monarchy."²

¹ Bill T. Arnold and H. G. M. Williamson, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 889.

² Ibid.

In addition to these general details about Shechem in the ancient world, it is important to note that this is not the first time a significant event in the history of the people of Israel has taken place here. According to Genesis 12, the LORD appeared to Abram in the land of Shechem and promised to give the land of the Canaanites to his descendants. Furthermore, the reader first encounters Abram building an altar to the LORD in Shechem. As the story continues, one once again finds the land of Shechem (Genesis 33:18-20, 35:1-7) playing a significant role in the life of Jacob, who not only builds an altar there after an encounter with the brother he betrayed, but also calls his idolatrous family to repentance there after an awful incident involving Dinah among the idolatrous Canaanite people. Therefore, a reasonable assumption can be made that Shechem was a place of significance to the people of Israel. The place reminded them not only of the LORD's promise to Abram regarding the land, but also of the actions taken by previous generations to see the promise of inheriting the land preserved through obedience to Yahweh.

Taken all together, the historical context of Joshua 24 can be summarized as the gathering of a group of significant people with a significant past at a significant place by a particular leader before a particular god for a particular purpose

THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF JOSHUA 24

Joshua 24 concludes the story of the leadership of Joshua as Moses' successor. For some, though, it is not the only conclusion in the book of Joshua. L. Daniel Hawk demonstrates this tension when he asks a question regarding whether or not chapter 24 presents "a significant contribution in its own right, or is it more in the nature of an appendix?"¹ Hawk answers his own question in his commentary on Joshua. Regarding chapter 24, Hawk writes, "The covenant ceremony completes the thematic program developed in the course of the last two chapters."² From here, Hawk moves to address the thematic contribution of Joshua 22 and 23 in light of their relationship to Joshua 24. In regards to chapter 22, Hawk concludes that "The story of the eastern tribes (22:1-34) dismantles notions of identity founded on possession of land, obedience to the commandments of Moses, and bonds of kinship by demonstrating how these notions mean different things to different tribes (dividing rather than uniting the nation)."³ In other words, chapter 22 vividly undermines by way of example the idea that land occupation, obedience to the law, or tribal relationship is an acceptable "end in itself." This, according to Hawk, becomes clearer in chapter 23 when the concept of loyalty to the LORD comes to the foreground. Hawk writes,

¹ L. Daniel Hawk, *Every Promise Fulfilled: Contesting Plots in Joshua* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 132.

² L. Daniel Hawk, *Joshua* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 261.

³ *Ibid.*

The perception that loyalty constitutes the core elements of Israel's national identity assumes greater emphasis in Joshua's address (23:1-6), which redefines the association between ethnic separation and obedience to the law. The speech portrays observance of the Mosaic commandments not as an end in itself but rather as the means by which Israel may remain separate from other nations.⁴

Joshua 24, then, when viewed from a literary perspective actually brings the themes of ethnic separation and obedience from previous chapters together into a theological context by showing that separation and obedience are ultimately the outflow of the peoples' decision to be loyal to the LORD. Hawk again writes, "In this manner the whole of Joshua address transforms an understanding of what it means to possess the land, obey the commands, and remain separate from the nation. These are no longer cast as prime directives but as expressions of Israel's choice to follow YHWH exclusively; all flow from the community's decision to devote itself to God."⁵ While more could surely be said regarding the literary features of Joshua 24, this brief thematic analysis will at least help to provide a context for understanding how the covenant renewal event was intended to function.

⁴ Ibid., 262.

⁵ Ibid.

THE STRUCTURE OF JOSHUA 24

For the purposes of this paper, Pitkänen's outline of the passage is detailed and helpful. It is as follows:¹

- I. Joshua assembles Israel at Shechem (V. 1)
- II. Joshua's first speech: Yahweh's message (Vv. 2-16)
 - a. Historical recital (Vv. 2-13)
 - i. Call of Abraham (Vv. 2-3)
 - ii. Isaac, Jacob, Esau, and going down to Egypt (V.4)
 - iii. Moses and Aaron and the Exodus (V. 5)
 - iv. Miracle at the Sea of Reeds (Vv. 6-7a)
 - v. Wilderness wanderings (V.7b)
 - vi. The conquest of Transjordan (V. 8)
 - vii. Balaam incident (Vv. 9-10)
 - viii. Conquest of Canaan with Yahweh's help (Vv. 11-13)
 - b. Exhortation to serve Yahweh (Vv. 14-15)
- III. Response by the people (Vv. 16-18)
 - a. Denial that the people will serve other gods (V. 16)
 - b. Acknowledgment of Yahweh's work (Vv. 17-18a)
 - c. Promise to serve Yahweh (V. 18b)
- IV. Joshua's second speech (Vv. 19-20)
 - a. People cannot serve Yahweh (V. 19a)
 - b. Threat of punishment (Vv. 19b-20)
- V. Response by the people, promising to serve Yahweh (v. 21)
- VI. Joshua's response, making people witnesses (V. 22a)
- VII. Response by the people, acknowledging that they are witnesses (V. 22b)
- VIII. Joshua's exhortation to put away foreign gods (V. 23)
- IX. Response by the people, promising to serve Yahweh (V. 24)

¹ Pitkänen, *Joshua*, 389–90.

- X. Summary about making a covenant (V. 25)
- XI. Joshua writes the words of the covenant in a book of the law of God (V. 26a)
- XII. The stone of witness (vv. 26b-27)
 - a. Setting up the stone (V. 26b)
 - b. Joshua's summary about the role of the stone (V. 27)
- XIII. Joshua sends the people back to their home (V. 28)

The essential content of Joshua 24 is a report of covenant renewal. Such a designation is due to the fact that while closely corresponding to the “stylized features” of suzerain-vassal treaties, Joshua 24 does not perfectly fit the ancient Near Eastern form. Hence, it is considered a report of a covenant renewal as opposed to the actual, written form of the covenant itself. In speaking of this treaty form, Steve Cowan writes,

Suzerainty treaties had certain stylized features that are paralleled in the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19-23). These features include: A historical prologue reviewing the past relationship between the parties, a statement of obligation the parties have to each other, provisions for occasionally reading the treaty in public; and lists of blessings and curses to follow from keeping or breaking the treaty.²

Accessing Joshua 24 in light of these “stylized features,” Eugene Merrill writes

Scholars are generally agreed that Joshua 24 is either a covenant renewal text or the report of one, but there is little consensus as to the delimitations of the various elements. There is clearly a preamble (v. 2a) and a historical prologue (vv. 2b-13), and a loosely organized set of stipulations may also be discernible (vv. 14-25). Verse 26 provides for the deposit of the text, and verse 27 speaks of a great stone as a witness. The curses and blessings are implicitly embedded in verses 14-25 (cf. vv. 19-20).³

Whether a consensus regarding the structure of Joshua 24 and its relationship to other ancient Near Eastern treaty forms can or will be met is beyond the scope of this paper. It should,

² Steve Cowan, “Covenant,” ed. Chad Owen Brand, Charles W Draper, and Archie W England, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 357.

³ Eugene H Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2006), 419.

however, be obvious that Joshua 24 records a covenant event that corresponds at least to some degree to the covenant forms of its implied historical context.

THE FORM OF JOSHUA 24

In terms of the form of Joshua 24, William T. Koopmans' book is the most exhaustive work to-date.¹ While most scholars are content to label Joshua 24 as historical narrative marked by dialogue,² Koopmans finds poetic form in at least the first 28 verses.³ This is not to say that Joshua 24 "is of less historical value than if it had proven to be prose,"⁴ but rather, that its use of repetition and parallelism is deliberate and most likely points to the passage functioning to "strengthen the overall rhetoric of Joshua in exhorting the Israelites to follow Yahweh exclusively."⁵ Koopmans' work supports the idea advanced in this paper that Joshua 24 captures not only a significant event in life of its original participants but also an event that should have become paradigmatic for subsequent generations. In summary, this paper suggests a nuanced position on Joshua 24's form that takes the best of Koopmans' work and integrates it with the best work of other form critics. This integrated approach means that Joshua 24 should be analyzed as a poetically styled, dialogue, framed by narrative.⁶

¹ Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*.

² Nelson, *Joshua*, 267.

³ Koopmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 461.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 465.

⁵ Pekka Pitkänen, *Joshua* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary; Nottingham, England : Downers Grove, Illinois: Apollos ; InterVarsity Press, 2010), 391.

⁶ Nelson, *Joshua*, 267.

AN EXPOSITION OF JOSHUA 24

With the form and structure of the passage defined and outlined, an exposition of the passage will now be considered. The first clause

וַיֵּאסֹף יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶת־כָּל־שְׁבֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׂכֻמָּה

is an initiatory clause that not only “sets the story proper in motion,”¹ but syntactically “joins chapter 24 closely to the preceding narrative” with the use of the imperfect וַיֵּאסֹף.² Butler states that “the use of אָסַף ‘to gather,’ to begin a narrative is unique in the biblical literature. It belongs in midstream after a setting and purpose for the gathering has been established (e.g. Gen 29:22; Exod 3:16; Num 11:16,24). The narrative appears to be purposely atemporal, setting itself up as an example for repeated use.”³ Joshua 24, therefore, is not only thematically related to Joshua 22-23, but also syntactically related, despite the attempts of some source critics to isolate it from the rest of the book.⁴ The next two clauses

וַיִּקְרָא לְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְרָאשֵׁי וּלְשֹׁפְטָיו וּלְשֹׁטְרָיו וַיִּתְּצֻבוּ לְפָנָי הָאֵל הַיּוֹם

¹ Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books*, 37.

² Trent Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary - Joshua* (ed. Bruce Manning Metzger, David Allan Hubbard, and Glenn W Barker; Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1982), 265.

³ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴ See Koopsmans’ “The History of Interpretation of Josh. 24:1-28” in Koopsmans, *Joshua 24 as Poetic Narrative*, 1–95 for examples of scholars who isolate this chapter on a source critical basis.

are both sequential clauses that detail the actions that follow Joshua's action of gathering the people and their leaders to Shechem. Of particular interest in these clauses is the use of the phrase, **לְפָנַי הָאֱלֹהִים**, which means "before God." Boling and Wright suggest that this phrase "implies the presence of the Ark"⁵ at the covenant renewal event. Butler suggests that this expression is "rarely used in the Old Testament" and "perhaps *has* its ultimate derivation in the language of the court (Job 33:5; 41:2; Prov 22:29; cf. Exod 8:16; 9:13)."⁶ Woudstra believes the expression does not necessarily require the presence of the Ark, but "is sufficiently accounted for through Shechem's sacred associations going back to patriarchal times."⁷ For whatever position one takes on the presence of the Ark at Shechem, the most important thing to see is that God is considered to be present among his people in a significant and special way.

The next phrase, **וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אֶל-כָּל-הָעָם**, focuses the event on Joshua speaking as a prophet to the people of Israel. At this point, Joshua 24 employs the messenger formula, **יְהוָה** **פָּה-אָמַר**, so commonly found in Old Testament prophetic literature. McCarthy argues that while the phrase "is usually attributed to prophetic influence, the original of the phrase is the royal decree."⁸ However, Butler believes the form "is definitely used in a prophetic sense rather than in the literary form of treaty."⁹ It is most likely, though, that the phrase is used as Boling and

⁵ Boling, *Joshua*, 534.

⁶ Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary - Joshua*, 270.

⁷ Marten H Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 342.

⁸ Dennis McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant - A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Analecta Biblica Book 21; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981).

⁹ Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary - Joshua*, 270.

Wright suggest to “introduce Joshua as ambassador, representative of the court of Yahweh, delivering the communiqué which serves as ground and motivation for the vassal’s acceptance of the treaty.”¹⁰ What follows, then, is not just the word of God spoken by his chosen prophet, but the word of God spoken through his prophet to a people with whom he is in relationship.

The next section of phrases from verse 2b till verse 13 deviate from the *wayyiqtol* clauses seen previously to be advancing the action of the event at Shechem. This section introduces a dialogue that will carry on until verse 24. In a ten-verse span, there are 16 occurrences of the first-person, singular, waw consecutive construction; all of which highlight Yahweh’s initiative in bringing the Israelites out of the bondage of slavery and idolatry and into the land promised to Abraham. On this point, Nelson notes, “Yahweh the God of Israel is unambiguously the initiator of this election relationship, the subject of almost twenty first-person verbs.”¹¹ Essentially, these verses fit into what could be considered the historical prologue section of the suzerain-vassal treaty form. The prologue covers events from the time of patriarchs (Vv. 2-4) till the time of the conquest (Vv. 8-13) with a brief mention of the exodus (Vv. 5-7a) and wilderness (V. 7b) periods in between.¹²

Nelson rightly asserts that this “dialogue portion, the indicative of Yahweh’s actions (Vv. 2-13, 17-18) serves as the foundation (“and now,” V. 14) for Joshua’s imperative challenges (Vv.14-15) and the people’s commitment (Vv. 16-18).”¹³ As such, Yahweh’s speech can be labeled as an example of persuasive-dynamic speech function aimed at “changing hearers

¹⁰ Boling, *Joshua*, 534.

¹¹ Nelson, *Joshua*, 269.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 267.

personally.”¹⁴ Specifically, Pitkänen identifies the aim of change as being obedience in light of “Yahweh’s great acts of salvation.”¹⁵ The phrase, וַיִּתֵּן לְכֶם אֶרֶץ, which means “and I granted you the land,” in verse 13 culminates these great acts of salvation. Boling and Wright assert that this final act is the “supremely legitimating achievement of the great Savior-King.”¹⁶ While all the other generations anticipated the day they would be “granted the land,” this generation before God at Shechem in this event was enjoying the fruit of Yahweh’s faithfulness.

In verse 14, the indicative nature of verses 2-13 gives way to the imperative. The obedience that God was attempting to motivate in his people through his speech comes into light. As Butler notes, “The text abruptly changes speakers and moods. The prophetic Joshua now assumes the role of an attorney pleading for the proper verdict for his client.”¹⁷ The move goes from “saving history to its ramifications for the assembled people.”¹⁸ The ramifications take the form of four imperatives, which are as follows:

- יִרְאוּ אֶת־יְהוָה - Fear the LORD
- וְעָבְדוּ אֹתוֹ בְּתָמִים וּבְאֵמֶת – And serve him in blamelessness and truth
- וְהָסִירוּ אֶת־אֱלֹהִים - And turn away from other gods
- וְעָבְדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה - And worship the LORD

All four imperatives essentially point to one supreme imperative - be loyal to Yahweh alone! Yet, there is more going on here than mere command. The gods that the Israelites are told to turn

¹⁴ Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books*, 60.

¹⁵ Pitkänen, *Joshua*, 393.

¹⁶ Boling, *Joshua*, 537.

¹⁷ Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary - Joshua*, 272.

¹⁸ Nelson, *Joshua*, 269.

away from are qualified as being those **בְּעֵבֶר הַנָּהָר וּבְמִצְרַיִם**.¹⁹ Why does Joshua refer to these gods? One cannot help but conclude that Joshua wants the people to not only consider what Yahweh has done for them, but also how previous generations of Israelites responded to God's saving acts with repentance from idolatry and loyalty to Yahweh. The Israelites' history should have become an instructive paradigm for them. They should have looked at how faithful men and women responded to the LORD's action and emulated their obedient behavior. Furthermore, they should have looked upon the behavior of faithless men and women and known that disloyalty to Yahweh never led to good results for their people. The only heritage of blessing that the Israelites knew at this time should have made idolatry repulsive to them. They should have seen how men like Jacob turned away from other gods at Shechem and subsequently was blessed by the LORD.

In verse 15, Joshua lays out a choice before the Israelites between worshipping Yahweh or the gods "their fathers had served" and the "gods of the Amorites." The choice, therefore, transcends location and history. It was not enough to simply reject the idolatry of the past. They were to reject the idolatry that was presently among them. Furthermore, they were to resolve to reject any idolatry that would present itself to them in the future. In order to guide them, as he had so many times before, Joshua set the example that he desires for them to follow, declaring his resolve to serve (**עָבַד**) the LORD. As Butler writes, "When Israel chooses Yahweh, she has a leader to show her the way."²⁰

¹⁹ Translation - "which your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt"

²⁰ Butler, *Word Biblical Commentary - Joshua*, 274.

Verses 16-18 resume the action of the event with ׀ַׁׁׁ by detailing the people’s favorable response to Joshua’s challenge. Boling and Wright state, “The people indicate that they have already made up their minds. Yahweh is going to continue to be their God.”²¹ Pitkänen rightly asserts that the people’s response to Joshua in the event “would be likely to impress on *subsequent generations* that just as the people of the past were willing, so should they be.”²² The essence of their response is to agree with Yahweh’s speech through Joshua. They affirm that it was in fact the LORD who brought them out of Egypt and drove out the inhabitants of the land. In summary, using a “short confessional formula,” the author records the people as confessing, “For Yahweh is our God... for he is our God.”²³ The persuasive-dynamic speech act of the LORD has accomplished its purpose in the life of the people by provoking them to reject other gods and affirm their trust in Yahweh.

In verses 19-20, however, the reader finds somewhat of an unexpected response from Joshua to the people’s affirmation. Joshua, after calling the people to chose to serve the LORD, now tells them that they cannot serve the LORD. Hess notes that Joshua’s reasoning here is structured as an A-B-B¹-A¹ chiasm, which is as follows:²⁴

- A – He is a holy God; he is a jealous God.
- B – He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.
- B¹ – If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods.
- A¹ – He will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you.

So what is going on in these verses? Pitkänen is helpful at this point, stating,

²¹ Boling, *Joshua*, 538.

²² Pitkänen, *Joshua*, 396.

²³ Nelson, *Joshua*, 270.

Joshua's rhetoric now moves from supplication to charge. He states that the people will actually not be able to serve Yahweh and that Yahweh, as the holy and jealous God, will not tolerate such behavior. Joshua's charge here should be seen here as a rhetorical accusation. With this, he tests the resolve of the people. Even with these threats, do they really want to serve Yahweh and commit themselves to him? Will they accept future punishment for any possible failings?²⁵

Joshua's response to the people reveals that obedience to Yahweh cannot be rooted in a utilitarian idea of blessing. A "what's in it for me" mentality cannot be sustained in a relationship with the LORD. Instead, the inherent worthiness of Yahweh should motivate the Israelite people to be loyal to him. To embrace Yahweh is not simply to embrace his blessing, but to embrace his being, which while being loving and compassionate, is also just and holy.

The rhetorical attempt to dissuade Israel from lightly agreeing to serve the LORD is met by an equally resolved answer of commitment from the Israelites in verse 21. This leads Joshua, as recorded in verse 22, to "heighten the people's responsibility" by making "themselves witnesses" to their "decision to serve Yahweh."²⁶ On this point, Nelson writes, "The people's role as witnesses, prepared to accuse themselves in case of transgression (V.22), underscores both the reality of their commitment and its potential dangers."²⁷

Having responded rightly to Joshua's initial challenge to commit to serve the LORD, the great leader goes on to reveal to them the "immediate consequence of their unambiguous choice

²⁴ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries v. 6; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 337.

²⁵ Pitkänen, *Joshua*, 396.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 396–97.

²⁷ Nelson, *Joshua*, 270.

for Yahweh.”²⁸ Verse 23 records the consequence as Joshua commands the people to “turn aside from the foreign gods that are in your midst and stretch out your heart to the LORD God of Israel.” At this point, commentators disagree as to whether Israel was actually involved in idolatry during this time or whether this was another example of rhetorical accusation.²⁹

Woudstra offers the best approach to handling this difficult question, saying

Nothing is said about the execution of the demand to remove the idols. Some would hold that the idolatry meant here is only an inward one. Others believe that the putting away of idols refers not to those still found among Israel, but to those of the nations in whose midst Israel now lived. On the other hand, one need not insist on an explicit account of how this demand was actually put into effect.³⁰

The point, then, here in verses 23-24 is not to identify how they carried out this command, but rather, that they were committed to doing whatever it took to “serve and obey their LORD.” It might also be worth noting that Joshua’s command to “turn away from foreign gods” could serve as another example of the passage’s atemporal features for future generations to consider in their respective context.

In verse 25, Joshua is found solemnizing the people’s promise to serve the LORD by way of a covenant. The author uses the phrase *כרת ברית* to capture the action of this event. This is the culmination of the structural elements (historical prologue, stipulations, implied blessing and cursings) that have already been mentioned above. The phrase, *כרת ברית*, is loaded with a theological significance that cannot be adequately expounded upon in a paper of this nature. Therefore, instead of exploring the theological import of the phrase, this paper will consider its

²⁸ Ibid., 271.

²⁹ See Nelson, Boling and Wright, and Hawk as examples of scholars who believe that idolatry is actually present in the Israelites community at the time of this covenant renewal

³⁰ Woudstra, *The Book of Joshua*, 355.

function in the recorded event and its significance for shaping how future generations were to relate to former covenant agreements. On this matter of function, Peter Gentry's soon-to-be published article, entitled "The Relationship of Deuteronomy to the Covenant at Sinai," clearly demonstrates how the action described by the phrase, כַּרַת בְּרִית, functions to allow previously established covenant agreements to be appropriated by subsequent generations through a process of historical expansion and contextualization. In other words, subsequent generations of Israelites could כַּרַת בְּרִית with Yahweh that would expand the historical details of the past up until the point of renewal with the principle-based stipulations being dynamically established in light of the people's new historical context. Covenant renewal, then, was actually "the people making a covenant (כַּרַת בְּרִית) to keep the Covenant at Sinai."³¹ On the use of כַּרַת בְּרִית,

Gentry writes

Scholars have confused the matter by attempting to correlate the expression *karat berit* (to cut a covenant) and *heqim berit* (to uphold a covenant) with covenant making and covenant renewal. This is not how these expressions are used. The expression *karat berit* is normally used for covenant making and in a few instances, for renewing a covenant. The reason why *karat berit* is used for covenant renewals is that humans tend to lag in their loyalty over time. Then they realize that they have lost something of their original commitment and devotion and make a covenant, a promise, a vow, or simply a statement, that they intend to keep the original covenant. This is not the same thing as a person who has never lagged in their commitment or obligation. The expression *heqim berit* is used for this stepping into the situation to fulfill a commitment and is never used for a covenant renewal in scripture.³²

Gentry continues stating that he finds "something else noteworthy in Joshua 24:26" in that

The words of this agreement to renew commitment in terms of exclusive and total loyalty to the original covenant are written in the book of the law of God. If I am correctly

³¹ Quoted with permission from Dr. Peter Gentry from his forthcoming article, Peter Gentry, "The Relationship of Deuteronomy to the Covenant at Sinai," *South. Baptist J. Theol.* 18/3 (2014).

³² Ibid.

grasping the meaning of the text, it seems that the renewed commitment becomes part of the instruction in the original covenant, like a codicil added to a will.

It is precisely Gentry's last statement that this paper is arguing for from the analysis given about Joshua 24. The way that the event of covenant renewal was recorded strongly suggest that the practice was intended to become a paradigm for the people in maintaining their relationship with Yahweh. As the times and contexts changed for the people of Israel, they were obligated to renew their commitment to the Sinaitic covenant by making a covenant that would supplement the original covenant with an expansion of its historical prologue, a clarification of its stipulations in their particular context, all complete with the blessings and curses of Yahweh acknowledged before witnesses. The result is a contextualized version of the original covenant commitment that helps the people understand the stipulations of the covenant in their respective context and motivates them to be turn from idolatry and be loyal to Yahweh.

As the ceremony comes to a close, verses 27-28 reveal to the reader that Joshua "continued the tradition of using stones for memorial."³³ As such, the "stone served as a lasting memorial that would remind future generations of the covenant made at Shechem"³⁴ and of its intended function in their life as a paradigm for regularly renewing their relationship with Yahweh when faced with a time for generational commissioning, an assembly for worship, or a time of repentance.³⁵ Joshua had done what he could to secure the people's future in the land by motivating and exhorting the people to be loyal to Yahweh. The book of Joshua concludes with the generation that Joshua led remaining faithful to Yahweh after his death. (V.31). Sadly, though, according to Judges 2:10, when that generation passed away, another generation of

³³ Hess, *Joshua*, 339.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Israelites arose in their place that “did not know the LORD or the work that he had done for Israel.” At this point, one cannot help but wonder how different things would have been for the generations that followed the one that Joshua led if only the practice of faithful covenant renewal would have been exercised as it was intended and outlined in Joshua 24:1-18. While the people of Joshua’s day may have fulfilled their personal commitment to serve Yahweh, they failed in their corporate commitment to teach the next generation the mighty acts of the LORD. And they were without excuse, for just as they had been commissioned and led by Joshua to serve the LORD, they themselves were obligated to commission and lead others. Their one time example at Shechem was not enough, and hence, their children and grandchildren did what was right in their own eyes.

CONCLUSION

This paper began by stating that it aimed to demonstrate “at least one way that the covenant concept was intended to function in the life of the people of Israel.” After briefly defining the concept of a covenant and a covenant renewal, the paper focused on analyzing Joshua 24:1-28. In summary, that analysis revealed an authorial intent to record the event at Shechem in such a way that subsequent audiences would adopt and expand the practice of covenant renewal as a means of maintaining their covenant relationship with Yahweh. From the location where the event was held to the leader who organized the event to the very words of the LORD uttered by his prophet, the covenant renewal recorded in Joshua 24 served to reinforce the sovereign faithfulness of the LORD in the fulfillment of his promises. As such, the account was intended to instruct and exhort subsequent generations. By gathering in a sacred place before the LORD to recount his mighty acts of salvation and renew their commitment to the Sinaitic covenant, the people of Israel would be motivated and empowered to remember the LORD and serve him only. Even the manner, in which the event is recorded, with atemporal forms, repetition, confessional formulas, and parallelisms, suggests that this is no mere story, but instead, a dynamic pattern of historical and literary elements intended to be appropriated by future generations of Israelites. Both story and form, suggest that the concept of covenant renewal was to become paradigmatic for maintaining the Israelite people’s relationship with Yahweh. As such, the author intended for his audiences to understand the concept of covenant to function not only as a way to define the relationship between Yahweh and his people, but also as a way to maintain faithfulness to the original covenant established at Sinai. Here is where one

finds the relationship between the function of covenant and covenant renewal clearly demonstrated. For, according to Joshua 24:25, it was through the making of a covenant that solemnized their commitment to be loyal to Yahweh that a new generation of Israelites established historical, ethical, and religious continuity with previous generations of Israelites in their commitment to the Sinaitic covenant. Without the practice of covenant renewal, which can now be defined as “the making of a covenant that solemnizes a people’s commitment to adhere to a contextually appropriate version of a previous covenant,” a new generation of people would lose continuity with the past and thus assimilate into the societal context in which they existed. Sadly, the generations that followed the Joshua 24 generation demonstrate this to be true.

As a result of neglecting covenant renewal, the people lost historical, ethical, and religious continuity with their past and became like the world around them. This reveals, thus, that the practices promoted by Yahweh were not pointless. They were not exercises in futility, but were intended to preserve a people who were prone to forget the God who brought them out of Egypt into a land for which they did not labor. It is this dark comparison of generations and their respective practices that vividly demonstrates one way that the covenant concept was intended to function in the life of the Israelites. Covenant was to be an instrument of renewal and recommitment.

APPENDIX

A Translation of Joshua 24

Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and called the elders, the leaders, the judges, and the officers of Israel to stand before God.

And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'Many years ago, your fathers, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nabor, dwelt beyond the river and served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from beyond the river and led him into the land of Canaan and added to his descendants, and gave him Isaac. And I gave to Isaac, Jacob and Esau. And I gave Esau the mountain of Seir as a possession, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt. And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I struck Egypt in their midst and I brought them out afterwards.

And I brought your fathers from Egypt and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. And they cried out to the LORD and He put a covering of darkness between you and the Egyptians and brought the sea upon them and covered them, and you saw with your own eyes that which I did to the Egyptians. And you dwelled in the wilderness for many days. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who dwelt beyond the Jordan and they fought with you, and I gave them into your hand and you took possession of their land as I destroyed them before you. And Balak, the son of Zippor, the king of Moab, rose up and fought against Israel. And he sent to Balaam, son of Beor, to curse you, but I was not willing to hear Balaam. He blessed you with blessing and I delivered you from out of his hand. And you passed through the Jordan and came to Jericho and there they fought against you, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. And I gave them into your hand. And I sent hornets before you and drove out the two kings of the Amorites from before you. It was not because of your sword, nor was it because of your bow. For I gave you a land that you did not work for and a city that you did not build and you dwell in a vineyard that you did not plant.

Now, fear the LORD and serve him in blamelessness and truth. Turn away from other gods, which your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day who you will serve, if the gods who your father served in the land beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites which are in the land of your dwelling, but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

And the people answered and said, "Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods, because the LORD our God, it is He who has brought us out of the house of Egypt and who does great signs before our eyes and keeps watch over us in all the ways that we go, even among all the people who are in our midst. And the LORD drove out all the people of the Amorites who were in the land before us, so we will serve the LORD, because He is our God.

But Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD, because God is a holy and jealous God. He will not lift the burden of your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the

LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring evil upon you and totally bring you to nothing, even after having done good for you.”

And the people said to Joshua, "No, we will serve the LORD."

Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves, because you have chosen the LORD, to serve him."

And they said, "Witnesses we will be."

"And now, turn aside from the foreign gods that are in your midst and stretch out your heart to the LORD God of Israel."

And the people said to Joshua, "The LORD our God we will serve, and we will hear his voice."

And so Joshua cut a covenant with the people that day, putting the statutes and judgments at Shechem. And Joshua wrote the words in the book of the law of God and he took a great stone and set it there under the oak tree, which was in the sanctuary of the LORD. And Joshua said to all the people, "See! This stone will be a witness, because it heard all the words of the LORD, which he spoke to us and it will be a witness, lest you deceive God. And Joshua sent the people to take hold of their possession.

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