

EVERY
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contesting
plots
in
joshua

L. DANIEL HAWK

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To Linda

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PREFACE

The writing of this book has been enhanced and supported by many who have played important roles in my own story. My thanks go first to David Gunn, whose insight has so shaped my own and whose enthusiasm I found to be a constant source of refreshment. I also acknowledge my indebtedness to Joel and Sandy Downing, whose support, both material and spiritual, has been constant and selfless. Special thanks are due as well to Gene Tucker and Robert Detweiler for many helpful comments and suggestions.

To my parents, Lewis and Barbara Hawk, I express my deep appreciation for their continual encouragement and unwavering support. Most of all, I am grateful for the patience and love unselfishly given me by my wife Linda and affectionately dedicate this book to her.

—L. DANIEL HAWK

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INTRODUCTION

The story of Joshua is at once a story of endings and beginnings. It tells how the people of Israel came to possess the land promised to their ancestors, thus bringing to a conclusion the promises and expectations propelling Israel's story from early in Genesis. Yet by relating the nation's first experiences in the land the book also signals a new trajectory that will take the larger story beyond Joshua into Judges, Samuel and Kings. Between the book's own beginning and end an important transformation takes place. Wandering Israel outside the land becomes settled Israel at rest within it.

The extent of this transformation and rest is, however, less than settled. Much of the story depicts a *blitzkrieg* in which the repeatedly victorious Israelites conquer the entire land of Canaan (10:28-42; 11:12-23; 12:7-24; 21:43-45; 23:9-10; 24:11-13). Elsewhere, in contrast, Israel's failure to exterminate the indigenous inhabitants is related (9:14-27; 11:19, 22; 15:63; 16:10; 17:11-12; 19:47). Likewise, the reader meets an Israel eager to obey the commands of Yahweh given through Moses (1:16-18; 4:10; 8:30-35; 24:16-18, 21) but also an Israel slow to respond to Yahweh's directives (18:1-10) and unwilling or unable to execute them (2:1-21; 7:1; 9:1-27; 24:19-20). Taken as a whole, the text's repeated juxtaposition of contrary reports and assertions can be baffling. How much of the land does Israel actually take? Does Israel respond appropriately to Yahweh's commandments?

Historical-critical scholars have generally understood the book's incoherence as a consequence of a complex history of

composition; conflicting accounts of Israel's entry into Canaan are to be attributed to different sources and perspectives. The historical-critical consensus holds that diverse materials were assembled, revised, and incorporated into an expansive deuteronomistic program.¹ In the hands of the editor(s) the source materials were "largely rewritten in such a way that they present the relation between Israel and Joshua, between Joshua and Yahweh, in exemplary and idealistic terms" (Boling 1982: 150). The product of this process is a document which depicts "a golden epoch in which the Israelites worship Jahweh and therefore win brilliant victories within the area of conquest" (Weinfeld 1967:113). Joshua therefore provides narrative confirmation of the deuteronomistic agenda. As Wenham (1971:41) writes,

The message of the book of Joshua seems to be that Israel was careful by and large to fulfill its covenant obligations and that this is why it enjoyed the blessings conditional on obedience and was able to conquer the promised land.

From a compositional perspective, then, the contradictions in Joshua arise from a clash between deuteronomistic assertions and the unedited claims of original sources or additional materials. If one reads Joshua as a unit, however, this interpretation is problematic. The "golden epoch" reading addresses but one aspect of the book and must dispense with significant portions of the text. The so-called deuteronomistic elements are privileged and the tensions presented by contrary perspectives glossed.²

Literary analysis of Joshua is still in the initial phase. The few studies undertaken, such as the structuralist interpretation of Polzin (1980) and the more recent readings of Gunn (1987a) and Eslinger (1989),³ have demonstrated rich potential. Our reading also adopts a literary approach but with a different focus. As already noted, the book's tensions and contradictions arise either because contrary events are juxtaposed or because the events narrated and the narrator's evaluation of these events are inconsistent. In other words, the reader's sense of textual incongruity is a result of the way the story's events are organized and interpreted; it is a circumstance of the story's

plot. By confining our reading to matters of plot, we may see more clearly how the configuring of the story gives rise to its tensions and thus develop a strategy for understanding them.

The conventional notion of plot can be traced to Aristotle's definition in *The Poetics*. He described plot as "the imitation of an action . . . the arrangement of the incidents" (1986:27). Working from the tragic and epic genres of his time, he conceived of plot as a singular pattern which unites events into an apprehensible whole. This concept of plot, expanded by subsequent generations of critics and applied to all forms of narrative, continues to undergird the concept of plot as the "outline of events" (Scholes and Kellogg 1966:12).⁴

Biblical critics have used this classical notion of plot to identify compositional units within the biblical text. Claus Westermann (1984), for example, has suggested that narratives create a *Geschehensbogen*, an arc of tension that moves from a beginning through an apex to a resolution (approximating Aristotle's assertion that plot organizes events into a beginning, middle, and end), and uses this scheme to determine the original narrative units in the Genesis stories.⁵ Aristotle's influence can also be detected in Gunkel (1901), who describes the storytellers' technique in terms of the Aristotelian values of singularity, unity, verisimilitude, and priority of action.

Recent interest in narrative poetics has encouraged the notion of plot as an aspect of the text's surface structure. Structuralism in particular reduces plot to paradigms of "functions" or patterns of sequences which are defined by the conventions of a specific linguistic system. From this perspective, plot is viewed as the structuring operation by which events are organized according to a particular code. Narrative critics have generally been concerned with the logic and pattern by which plot links events into structures, and with the techniques by which narrative exploits the human experience of temporality.⁶

For the most part, literary critics of biblical narrative have assumed a similar notion of plot, although discussion of plot *per se* has been limited. The narrative studies of Alter (1981), Sternberg (1985), and Bar-Efrat (1989) each discuss aspects of plot to a different extent. Alter's discussion of the literary de-

vices employed in biblical narrative includes many of those characteristic of plot (such as narrative tempo and repetition). Sternberg alludes to plot more frequently and operates from a more explicitly Aristotelian framework. His concept of plot includes Aristotle's assertion of the two lines of dramatic change effected by plot: from happiness to unhappiness and from ignorance to knowledge.⁷ Bar-Efrat discusses plot at some length, with numerous illustrations from the biblical text. His concise definition (1989:93) articulates the formalist notions held by many literary critics:

The plot serves to organize events in such a way as to arouse the reader's interest and emotional involvement, while at the same time imbuing the events with meaning.

Aristotle's concept of plot as a singular unifying pattern has provided the basic framework for contemporary definitions of plot. Yet, the wholesale application of the Aristotelian paradigm to all forms of narrative is open to question. *The Poetics* is concerned with an analysis of Greek tragedy and (to a lesser extent) epic, narrative forms that incorporated particular cultural conventions of homogeneity, cohesion, and singularity. By expanding Aristotle's analysis to address all kinds of narrative, literary critics have essentially worked against Aristotle's deductive program; a general understanding of all narrative has been induced from that applied to a few specific forms.

The formalist notion of plot works well when used to analyze narrative forms that exhibit conventions of singularity and coherence (such as folk tales or 19th-century novels). But what of narratives that do not display coherence and simple linear development? What about more complex narratives—those which exhibit several major plot lines or which present the reader with a series of seeming contradictions? How is one to deal with narratives that, for one reason or another, run counter to conventional expectations of completeness or closure?⁸

Many current approaches to literature challenge the assumption that meaning is simply inherent in the text. They point instead to the reader's role in the production of meaning (as in reader-response criticism), the human perceptions and experi-

ences which underlie the text (as in phenomenological criticism), and the transactional dynamic which occurs between text and reader (as in psychoanalytic criticism).⁹ These approaches have enabled critics to rethink traditional concepts of plot, so that attention may be given to the configuring processes by which human beings construct coherent structures of meaning. This leads to more questions. What lies behind the impulse to organize reality into definite and concordant wholes? Why do “our minds inveterately seek structure” in a presentation of events, even if we must provide it ourselves (Chatman 1978:45)? What is the relationship between the constructs which the text presents and those which the reader forms?

Such questions suggest the possibility of speaking about plot on a number of different levels. At the surface level, plot may refer to the framework of a story. A more detailed analysis, however, may understand plot as the arrangement of incidents and patterns as they relate to each other. A more abstract notion of plot, moreover, may refer to plot as “an underlying structure which is to be understood less in terms of the incidents or elements it organizes and more in terms of the mind that does the organizing” (Egan 1978:455).

It will be important to keep all three of these levels of plot in mind as we trace the plot(s) of Joshua. In the most general sense, a plot is easy to discern. The book tells the story of Israel as the people shifted from landless existence outside Canaan to settlement and possession of the land. Yet once the reader moves beyond this level of observation, it becomes a more difficult matter to determine a single thread of coherence. What is the book about? Israel’s successful possession of Canaan? Its privileged relationship with Yahweh? Is it about Israel’s failure to take the land, or its reckless disregard for the commandments of Yahweh? And what of the jarring inconsistencies one encounters throughout the book?

This reading of Joshua will explore the patterns rendered by the story, as well as the agendas which underlie them. To start, the next chapter summarizes various concepts of plot and introduces the method for analyzing plot in Joshua. The third chapter focuses on two summary texts as paradigms of how plot