

# Sides

## Joshua 5:13-15

### Dr. Pierre Cannings, Ph.D.

However, 5:13–15 easily stands alone as God’s final encouragement—through his emissary—to Joshua. The enigmatic nature of his reply to Joshua and the seemingly incomplete reply only heighten the mystery and focus our attention on the divine nature of this emissary and on the holiness of the occasion. Just as the earlier episodes of the chapter focus on proper preparation in the spiritual realm before doing battle at Jericho, this episode does as well. Joshua was reminded here of the important lesson that God—the holy God, to whom Joshua owed all allegiance—would fight for him. In this case, the more important lesson was about God’s holiness, not about the coming conflicts.

At the end of the first main section of the Book of Joshua, the Israelites stand well-prepared for their first major encounter with the Canaanites whose land they were to inherit. They were well prepared because (1) God was very much with them, (2) because he had given them a leader who was already in process of becoming a worthy successor to Moses, (3) because the entire nation was taking care to obey God’s commands to the letter (from Joshua and the priests on down to the people), and (4) because they were careful to sanctify themselves properly before engaging the Canaanites.

#### **I. What Side v.13**

- a. Joshua
  - i. Jericho
- b. Adversary
  - i. Looked and Behold
    - 1. A literal translation of his acts of perception is “and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, a man was standing opposite him.” The word “behold” here indicates a change in perspective, from the narrator’s all-knowing perspective to Joshua’s more limited perspective, and it captures some of his surprise at seeing this threatening sight.
  - ii. A man opposite of Him
    - 1. Sword Drawn
    - 2. He was surprised by seeing a man standing before him “with a drawn sword in his hand.” This was a threatening sight, and Joshua’s question about the man’s loyalties should not surprise us.

3. The exact language here—“with a drawn sword in his hand”—is found again only twice in the Old Testament, referring to the angel of the Lord: (1) in Num 22:23, 31, where the angel of the Lord stood before Balaam, barring his way, and (2) in 1 Chr 21:16, where the angel of the Lord stood before David, threatening Israel because of David’s sin
- c. Adversary - political and military **enemy** of Israel or Judah
  - i. The Bible consistently pictures Joshua as a rather brash young man asking questions and giving opinions in the most unlikely circumstances (Exod 32:17; Num 11:28). Here he boldly confronts the visitor and demands proper identification before permitting him to enter the camp.
  - ii. Joshua’s question of this man reflects a natural human concern with the immediate: he was concerned with the battles ahead and whether or not he could count on this man.

## II. Lord’s Side v.14

- a. Host of the Lord
  - i. Come as
    1. The stranger did not answer Joshua’s question directly. With his no he was stating that his interest was not the same as Joshua’s, which was to know if this man was for him or against him. Instead, he asserted something far more important: he was the commander of the army of the Lord.
  - ii. Captain meaning a higher being, a guardian angel
    1. Our passage is more closely akin to the figure of the messenger of Yahweh who appears fifty-eight times in the OT, with eleven further occurrences of “messenger of God.” Such a messenger commissions Gideon (Judg 6:11) and even appears briefly in the narrative of Moses’ commissioning (Exod 3:2). Another brief appearance comes in the deliverance at the sea (Exod 14:19; cf. Num 20:16).
    2. Seeing the messenger can be equated with seeing God (Judg 13:22). As a military figure, the messenger destroys God’s enemies (Num 22:23; 2 Sam 24:16–17; 2 Kgs 19:35).
    3. In each of these cases, the commander was the supreme military authority, but he was subordinate to someone else, the king. In almost every case, the commander’s name is found only along with the king’s name, not by itself. Thus, the designation here—“the commander of the army of the LORD”—indicates an authority

figure, yet one whose superior is the king, who in this case is God himself.

4. In this passage, the likelihood is that it was Yahweh's heavenly army, poised to fight on Israel's behalf. There is no indication that the man Joshua met was taking personal command of Israel's army, displacing Joshua, and the language of v. 15 (concerning holy ground) strongly suggests that this is a divine being representing God and his hosts. Even the syntax of v. 14 highlights the commander: a literal translation of his response is "No. For I, I am the commander of the army of the LORD." The focus on himself points to a divine being with a divine mission
- iii. Host of the lord
  1. the host of heaven: —a. **heavenly bodies**, esp. the stars
- b. Joshua
  - i. Fell on His Face
  - ii. Bowed Down
    1. In either case, however, he clearly knew that he was in the presence of an extraordinary superior being because he did bow down, and he did not pursue his question about the man's loyalties any further. Rather, he humbly asked, "What message does my [lord] have for his servant?" In this response, Joshua displayed three attitudes: (1) a humble, expectant, obedient attitude, indicated by the question itself; (2) a recognition of the man's superior (and God-sent) position, indicated by the term "my lord"; and (3) a recognition of his own inferior position and a readiness to serve, indicated by his use of the term "his servant" to refer to himself.
  - iii. What has the lord to say to his servant
    1. Servant - the position of men in relation to God
    2. The scene thus pictures Joshua as the totally obedient servant doing precisely what the divine messenger requires. He needs no further commission. Chapter 1 has given that. What he does need is a) personal confrontation with deity that confirms his commission and b) personal devotion to deity which confirms his readiness for the task ahead. These are provided here.

### III. Holy Side v.15

- a. Remove your Sandals
- b. Place your standing is Holy
  - i. Holy - something with which holiness is associated, which is to be treated carefully, something holy

- ii. God's presence with his people was further revealed through Joshua's encounter with the commander of the Lord's army (5:13–15). The holiness of the ground where Joshua stood revealed to him and to Israel that God was present and that he would be with them just as he had been with Moses (Exodus 3) and that the task upon which they were about to embark was essentially spiritual in nature.
- c. Joshua Did so
  - i. It appears to have been to teach Joshua a lesson about priorities. God had already promised Joshua that he would be with him just as he was with Moses (1:5), so Joshua needed not worry. The lessons Joshua needed here were to be able to recognize when he was in God's presence and when to trust in him. The man's instructions to Joshua about removing his sandals because he was standing on holy ground obviously recalled God's words to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:5). In yet another way, Joshua was now being affirmed as Moses' successor and God's presence was being promised to him.

## Background

The more general term “commander of the army” refers most commonly in the Old Testament (thirty-five times) to a human, military commander such as Phicol, the Philistine commander (Gen 21:22, 32; 26:26), Sisera, the Canaanite commander (Judg 4:2, 7; 1 Sam 12:9), Abner, Saul’s commander (1 Sam 14:50; 17:55; etc.), Shobach, the Syrian commander (2 Sam 10:16, 18); Joab, David’s commander (1 Kgs 1:19, 25; 2:5), Omri, the Israelite commander (1 Kgs 16:16), or Naaman, the Syrian commander (2 Kgs 5:1).

Whether this was an act of true worship of God or a more general gesture of respect for a superior (since both can be signified by the verb used here) has been debated. However, Joshua called him “my lord,” using the generic term *’ădōnî* rather than “my Lord,” using God’s name *’ădōnāy*, which suggests that he may still have been unclear as to whether or not he was speaking with God himself

First and foremost, the God whom Israel was to follow identified himself clearly to Israel. In general terms, he did so by his charge to Joshua in 1:1–9. More specifically, he did so by his promises to be with Joshua in 1:5, 9. In the process, it was clear that this God was the same one who had been with earlier generations and that he would be with Joshua and Israel in the same way. Furthermore, the important symbolism of the ark of the covenant in chap. 3 demonstrated to Israel that this God was very much in their midst. The different ways in which the ark is spoken of in this chapter reinforce the close identity of the physical box with the transcendent—but also very much immanent—God.

## Word Studies

Adversaries - political and military **enemy** of Israel or Judah<sup>1</sup>

Captain - meaning a higher being, a guardian angel<sup>2</sup>

Host- the host of heaven: —a. **heavenly bodies**, esp. the stars<sup>3</sup>

Servant- the position of men in relation to God (H. Vorländer *Mein Gott* AOA<sup>4</sup>T 23<sup>5</sup>

Holy- something with which holiness is associated, which is to be treated carefully, something holy<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., [\*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament\*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1052.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., [\*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament\*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1352.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., [\*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament\*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 995.

<sup>4</sup> AOAT Alter Orient und Altes Testament: Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte des alten Orients und des Alten Testaments, Neukirchen-Vluyn

<sup>5</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., [\*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament\*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 775.

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Koehler et al., [\*The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament\*](#) (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000), 1076.

## Commentary Studies

<sup>13</sup> The Bible consistently pictures Joshua as a rather brash young man asking questions and giving opinions in the most unlikely circumstances (Exod 32:17; Num 11:28). Here he boldly confronts the visitor and demands proper identification before permitting him to enter the camp. The camp is located “in Jericho” if one takes the most natural reading of the text. This ties in both to the previous location “in the plains of Jericho” and to the site of the following chapter, though it is unlikely that the present context means to place Joshua inside the walls of the city. Unlike the previous sections (9b, 10a), no attempt is made to tie the material here to Gilgal.

<sup>15</sup> “The prince of the host of Yahweh” appears only here and Dan 8:11, where the reference is to God himself. Our passage is more closely akin to the figure of the messenger of Yahweh who appears fifty-eight times in the OT, with eleven further occurrences of “messenger of God.” Such a messenger commissions Gideon (Judg 6:11) and even appears briefly in the narrative of Moses’ commissioning (Exod 3:2). Another brief appearance comes in the deliverance at the sea (Exod 14:19; cf. Num 20:16). Seeing the messenger can be equated with seeing God (Judg 13:22). As a military figure, the messenger destroys God’s enemies (Num 22:23; 2 Sam 24:16–17; 2 Kgs 19:35). O. Keel (*Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 85–88) argues on the basis of Near Eastern art that the scene here is one of commissioning in which the messenger hands the javelin in his hand to Joshua, noting the javelin in his hand in 8:18, 26, as well as the “rod” of Moses in Exod 4:17; 17:9. Whatever the scene imagined here, the present narrative has drastically altered it. The prince is never given opportunity to commission Joshua or hand over anything to him. Joshua continues talking and acting. The scene thus pictures Joshua as the totally obedient servant doing precisely what the divine messenger requires. He needs no further commission. Chapter 1 has given that. What he does need is a) personal confrontation with deity that confirms his commission and b) personal devotion to deity which confirms his readiness for the task ahead. These are provided here.

<sup>15</sup> The messenger’s words may have their ultimate origin in the stories of the founding of sanctuaries (Noth), but the present literary function is distinct. The words are borrowed from the experience of Moses to attest once more the dependence of Joshua upon Moses. Even his

“call experience” with the divine messenger is simply a replica of the Mosaic one. Wherever he turns, Joshua cannot escape the Mosaic shadow.

### ***Explanation***

A theological depth funds this, as most biblical passages. The first level comprises three isolated incidents. The example of Joshua’s generation stands as testimony that people of God undergo even the pain and inconvenience of ritual, perhaps enduring gentle ridicule from their friends, to demonstrate their loyalty to their God. Celebration of Passover provides opportunity to enjoy the fruits of the land and look in anticipation to the fuller bounty God will provide. Experience of the prince of God’s armies assures the leader of his role in leading God’s people into battle.

Set into a literary context the materials charge one another theologically. Circumcision is proper preparation for the observance of Passover. God’s people show themselves to be responsible in their preparations to celebrate what God has done. In turn the act of circumcision testifies that their God is active among them, rolling away their reproach and shame and establishing them as at least equals in the councils of the nations. The action also provides a name and a basis of authenticity for the sanctuary where Israel’s history of worship in the land began. Passover is the end of the story of God’s saving history with his people, an end which repeats the beginning of that story. History has come full circle. The people who escaped the deadly visit of God in Egypt through observance of the Passover, now observe the Passover to celebrate the bountiful gifts of God’s presence in the new land. The miracle of manna is replaced by the miracle of fertility provided by God in the as yet unconquered land. The land will be conquered, however, for the prince of the divine host has appeared to the commander of the host of Israel, and the human commander has proved himself worthy of the task given him.

For the exiles reading the history of the Deuteronomistic editors, the story takes on still new meaning. Circumcision was not unique in Canaan, but it is in the land of captivity. In Babylon the ritual of circumcision is certainly cause for ridicule and physical suffering. Passover is once more celebrated in hope rather than celebration of a gift already given. The prince of the heavenly host appears to be the only hope, unless God might send him to the king in exile (cf. 2 Kgs 25:27–30). The story can be read as a call for obedient worship on the part of the king.

After the return from exile, the narrative continues to speak to the people of God. Their own cultic celebration is now undergirded. To be circumcised again may be a call to portions of the community who had, like the wilderness generation, neglected the rituals of their people in a foreign land or under persecution and hopelessness. It is certainly a prerequisite for participation in the new rituals of the new temple. The Passover at God’s chosen sanctuary on the proper date followed by eating unleavened bread on the day after Passover is an example for the second temple community to celebrate again God’s gift of the land, this time the return to the land after a journey across a different wilderness. Such celebration for the second temple community would involve both the Feast of Passover and of Unleavened Bread. After such proper worship, Israel could expect renewed opportunity to enjoy the fruits of the land. Perhaps then the prince of the heavenly hosts would again appear, this time even to a new Joshua (cf. Hag 1:1, 12; 2:2, 4; Zech 3; etc.).



Joshua 5 thus stood through many generations as a testimony to God's greatness in enduring the unfaithfulness of one generation of Israelites and stirring new hopes in a new generation. It stood as a call to each generation to cultic faithfulness even when the result might be shame, reproach, or suffering. It stood as a call to remember God's gift of fertility, a gift given to a faithful people. It stood as a promise of divine appearance and divine protection for a leader ready to worship and obey.<sup>7</sup>

**5:13** By subject matter and syntax, a new episode begins here. The stage is set with Joshua near Jericho.<sup>2881</sup> He was surprised by seeing a man standing before him "with a drawn sword in his hand." This was a threatening sight, and Joshua's question about the man's loyalties should not surprise us.<sup>2892</sup> The exact language here—"with a drawn sword in his hand"—is found again only twice in the Old Testament, referring to the angel of the Lord: (1) in Num 22:23, 31, where the angel of the Lord stood before Balaam, barring his way, and (2) in 1 Chr 21:16, where the

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<sup>7</sup> Trent C. Butler, *Joshua*, vol. 7, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 61–63.

<sup>8281</sup> The preposition here is *בְּ*, commonly translated "in." This has occasioned some unnecessary exegetical gymnastics, such as Keil's statement that Joshua was "inside [Jericho] in thought, meditating upon the conquest of it" (*Joshua*, 62). But the preposition also frequently means "at" (*HALOT* 104), and "at Jericho" fits the scenario easily: Joshua was somewhere near it, not within its walls (cf. 6:1, which says that Jericho was tightly shut up because of the Israelites).

<sup>9282</sup> Hawk reads far too much into the threatening aspect of the encounter, stating that the commander's "menacing appearance, his evasive answer to Joshua's initial question, and the episode's abrupt ending all lend an uncanny and ominous tone to the encounter" (*Every Promise Fulfilled*, 23). He ignores the fact that, despite God's representative's unwillingness to answer Joshua directly, God himself gives detailed assurances and instructions to Joshua just a few verses later, in 6:2–5. The point in 5:13–15 is to emphasize proper priorities for Joshua: faith in God's power and authority (see below, on v. 15).

angel of the Lord stood before David, threatening Israel because of David's sin.<sup>28103</sup> Joshua apparently did not initially recognize the man as a divine messenger. A literal translation of his acts of perception is "and he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, a man was standing opposite him." The word "behold" here indicates a change in perspective, from the narrator's all-knowing perspective to Joshua's more limited perspective, and it captures some of his surprise at seeing this threatening sight. We might paraphrase here by saying, "He looked, and what do you know! A man was standing opposite him."<sup>28114</sup> Joshua's question of this man reflects a natural human concern with the immediate: he was concerned with the battles ahead and whether or not he could count on this man.

**5:14** The stranger did not answer Joshua's question directly. With his no he was stating that his interest was not the same as Joshua's, which was to know if this man was for him or against him.<sup>28125</sup> Instead, he asserted something far more important: he was the commander of the army of the Lord. The more general term "commander of the army" refers most commonly in the Old Testament (thirty-five times) to a human, military commander such as Phicol, the Philistine commander (Gen 21:22, 32; 26:26), Sisera, the Canaanite commander (Judg 4:2, 7; 1 Sam 12:9), Abner, Saul's commander (1 Sam 14:50; 17:55; etc.), Shobach, the Syrian commander (2 Sam 10:16, 18); Joab, David's commander (1 Kgs 1:19, 25; 2:5), Omri, the Israelite commander (1 Kgs 16:16), or Naaman, the Syrian commander (2 Kgs 5:1). In each of these cases, the commander was the supreme military authority, but he was subordinate to someone else, the king. In almost every case, the commander's name is found only along with the king's name, not by itself. Thus, the designation here—"the commander of the army of the LORD"—indicates an authority figure, yet one whose superior is the king, who in this case is God himself.<sup>28136</sup>

<sup>10283</sup> The clause is וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְּיָדוֹ, "and his sword was drawn in his hand."

<sup>11284</sup> On the function of *hinnēh*, "behold," to mark a change in viewpoint to a character's more limited perspective, see Andersen, *Sentence*, 94–95; A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 62–63; S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, JSOTSup 70 (Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 35–36.

<sup>12285</sup> We should read לֹא "no" ("And he said, 'No. For I am the commander ...'") at the beginning of the verse, with the MT and most text traditions, rather than לוֹ, "to him" ("And he said to him, 'For I am the commander ...'"), which is found in some Hb. manuscripts and the Gk. and Syr. text traditions. The NIV's "neither" implies that the man was telling Joshua that he was not on anyone's side, yet surely he was indeed on Israel's side. The point here is that Joshua was asking the wrong question.

<sup>13286</sup> In one case, Dan 8:11, the term שַׂר־הַצֶּבָא, "the commander of the army" (NIV has "the Prince of the host" here) refers to a divine being similar to the figure mentioned in Joshua 5. Most commentators rightly see the figure in Dan 8:11 as God himself. See, e.g., J. E. Goldingay, *Daniel*, WBC 30 (Dallas: Word, 1989), 210–11; S. R. Miller, *Daniel*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1991), 226–27.

The identity of the “army” (*šābā*) of the Lord has been the subject of much discussion. Was it the army of Israel, acting on God’s behalf as it fought, or was it a celestial army, fighting for Israel? A first possibility is that this man whom Joshua encountered might have been saying that *he* was the commander of the Israelite army that Joshua had heretofore commanded, that is, that Israel’s army was in view here. The exact phrase “the army of the LORD” is found only in this passage (vv. 14–15), but it is found once more, in the plural, in Exod 12:41: “all the armies of the LORD,”<sup>28147</sup> referring to the ranks of Israelites as they left Egypt. In keeping with this latter usage, we find Israel’s armies designated as God’s armies in several places. For example, in Exod 7:4, God said to Moses, “I will bring out my divisions [*šābā*], my people the Israelites,” and in 1 Sam 17:45, David responded to Goliath’s taunts by saying he came against him “in the name of the LORD Almighty [*šābā*], the God of the armies of Israel.” These examples would suggest that Israel’s army may have been in view here.

However, an equally common usage of *šābā* (“army”) refers to the realm of the heavenlies, referring to God’s armies. A common designation of God is “the LORD of hosts,” which occurs more than 250 times in the Old Testament (NIV renders this as “the LORD Almighty” in most instances). The stars (or, more generally, all the heavenly bodies) are in view in many of these uses of *šābā*. Note, for example, Gen 2:1, where the heavens and the earth and “all their vast array” (*šābā*) were completed, or Isa 40:26, where God told his people to contemplate the “starry host” (*šābā*) that he created and named. Alternatively, the angels of heaven sometimes are in view, as in 1 Kgs 22:19, where Micaiah saw “the LORD sitting on his throne with all the host [*šābā*] of heaven standing around him,” or Ps 103:19–21, where God’s “heavenly hosts” (*šābā*) are equated with his mighty angels. Thus, it is also possible that the man whom Joshua encountered was saying that he was the commander of the heavenly army that would fight for Israel.

In this passage, the likelihood is that it was Yahweh’s heavenly army, poised to fight on Israel’s behalf. There is no indication that the man Joshua met was taking personal command of Israel’s army, displacing Joshua, and the language of v. 15 (concerning holy ground) strongly suggests that this is a divine being representing God and his hosts. Even the syntax of v. 14 highlights the commander: a literal translation of his response is “No. For I, I am the commander of the army of the LORD.” The focus on himself points to a divine being with a divine mission.<sup>28158</sup>

Joshua recognized this man’s authority, and he prostrated himself on the ground and “worshiped” him.<sup>28169</sup> Whether this was an act of true worship of God or a more general gesture

<sup>14287</sup> The NIV has “all the LORD’s divisions” in Exod 12:41.

<sup>15288</sup> On the “hosts” or “armies” (*šābā*) of the Lord, see C. J. H. Wright, “God, Names of,” *ISBE* 2:507; T. Longman III, “צבא,” *NIDOTTE* 3:733–35; T. Fretheim, “Yahweh,” *NIDOTTE* 4:1297–98.

<sup>16289</sup> The NIV has “in reverence” for the verb *ḥwh* (חווה), which is usually translated “bow down, worship.” See *HALOT*, 295–96, and BDB, 1005 (BDB identifies the verb’s root as *šḥh* [חשח], reflecting an older scholarly consensus as to this word’s root). The language

of respect for a superior (since both can be signified by the verb used here) has been debated. However, Joshua called him “my lord,” using the generic term *’ădōnî*<sup>29170</sup> rather than “my Lord,” using God’s name *’ădōnāy*, which suggests that he may still have been unclear as to whether or not he was speaking with God himself.<sup>29181</sup> In either case, however, he clearly knew that he was in the presence of an extraordinary superior being because he did bow down, and he did not pursue his question about the man’s loyalties any further. Rather, he humbly asked, “What message does my [lord] have for his servant?” In this response, Joshua displayed three attitudes: (1) a humble, expectant, obedient attitude, indicated by the question itself; (2) a recognition of the man’s superior (and God-sent) position, indicated by the term “my lord”; and (3) a recognition of his own inferior position and a readiness to serve, indicated by his use of the term “his servant” to refer to himself.

**5:15** Even though the man refused to answer Joshua’s question, it is clear that he would be “for” Israel, not “against” it. Why, then, did he not speak more forthrightly with Joshua and tell him that he was indeed for Israel? It appears to have been to teach Joshua a lesson about priorities. God had already promised Joshua that he would be with him just as he was with Moses (1:5), so Joshua needed not worry. The lessons Joshua needed here were to be able to recognize when he was in God’s presence and when to trust in him. The man’s instructions to Joshua about removing his sandals because he was standing on holy ground obviously recalled God’s words to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:5).<sup>29192</sup> In yet another way, Joshua was now being affirmed as Moses’ successor and God’s presence was being promised to him.

This ends the first section of the Book of Joshua. Some scholars maintain that this episode is incomplete and that some of it has been lost or else that the commander’s instructions are found in 6:2–5.<sup>29203</sup> However, 5:13–15 easily stands alone as God’s final encouragement—through his emissary—to Joshua. The enigmatic nature of his reply to Joshua and the seemingly incomplete reply only heighten the mystery and focus our attention on the divine nature of this emissary and on the holiness of the occasion. Just as the earlier episodes of the chapter focus on proper preparation in the spiritual realm before doing battle at Jericho,

here is somewhat repetitive, emphasizing Joshua’s prostration. Literally, it reads “and Joshua fell down upon his face to the ground and bowed down (or ‘worshiped’).”

<sup>17290</sup> Which is used to refer to human superiors. See, e.g., Num 36:2; Judg 4:18; 1 Sam 22:12.

<sup>18291</sup> The NIV renders יְדֹנִי here as “my Lord,” judging that this was a manifestation of God himself and thus capitalizing “Lord.” However, this goes against the morphological evidence and reads as if the word were יָדֹנִי.

<sup>19292</sup> The wording is identical in the two passages, except for one additional word in Exodus and insignificant spelling differences.

<sup>20293</sup> Nelson (*Joshua*, 81–82) is confident that the commander’s original concluding words are missing. Goslinga (*Joshua*, 67) sees 6:2 as the continuation of 5:15, as does Hess (*Joshua*, 128–29).

this episode does as well. Joshua was reminded here of the important lesson that God—the holy God, to whom Joshua owed all allegiance—would fight for him. In this case, the more important lesson was about God’s holiness, not about the coming conflicts.

#### EXCURSUS: THE IDENTITY OF THE COMMANDER OF THE LORD’S ARMY<sup>29214</sup>

The identity of the commander of the Lord’s army would appear to be similar to that of the “angel of the LORD,” which appeared numerous times to people in the Old Testament.<sup>29225</sup> Like the Lord’s angel, who brought messages from God, the commander brought a word from God to Joshua; and, to his credit, Joshua responded appropriately, prostrating himself and taking off his shoes. The commander’s appearance and words form a fitting prelude to God’s more specific words of instruction in 6:2–5. Thus, the distinction between Yahweh and his commander is not a sharp one.<sup>29236</sup>

Because of the close association of the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself in many passages of Scripture, many students have wondered about the precise identity of this angel. Essentially, there are three options.<sup>29247</sup> (1) It is simply an angel with a special commission. (2) It may be a momentary descent of God himself into visibility. (3) It may be the Logos himself (i.e., Christ) “a kind of temporary preincarnation of the second person of the trinity.”<sup>29258</sup> Because of the close relationship—even alternation—of the angel of the Lord and the Lord himself, it would seem that the first option is not adequate. The angel represents God himself in very real ways.

Exodus 23:20–23 is a key text in this regard, since it shows how this angel carries the Lord’s character and authority. Exodus 23:21 shows that the angel has the authority to forgive sins and that the Lord’s name is “in him”; vv. 21–22 both specify the angel’s authority to speak for God. On the other hand, in Exod 32:34–33:17 we see more of a distinction between the Lord and his angel: the Lord pledges to send his angel before Israel, despite their sin (32:24; 33:2), but he himself will not go with them (33:3). This seems to distinguish this “angel” from God himself. When the passage speaks in 33:14 of God’s presence with Israel, it does not refer to his “angel” but rather his “face” (*pānāy*: lit. “my face”) that goes with them.

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<sup>21294</sup> Two critical scholars who deal with the issue are W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2:23–29; G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1:285–89. Several evangelical treatments are represented in the following notes.

<sup>22295</sup> The term “angel of the LORD” (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה) occurs fifty-nine times, and “angel(s) of God” (מַלְאֲכֵי אֱלֹהִים) occurs twelve times. The Hb. term *mal’āk* can be translated either as “angel” or “messenger”; God’s angels were his messengers to humans in special cases.

<sup>23296</sup> See the following excursus, “The Identity of the Angel of the Lord.”

<sup>24297</sup> J. M. Wilson, *ISBE*, 1. s.v. “Angel,” 125.

<sup>25298</sup> *Ibid.*

Some evangelical interpreters take these manifestations of the angel of the Lord to be pre-New Testament revelations of Christ.<sup>29269</sup> In support, the descriptions of an angelic-type being<sup>30270</sup> in Dan 10:6 and Ezek 1:26–28 are compared with John’s descriptions of Jesus (Rev 1:14, 16). Also it is noted that the angel of the Lord is not mentioned in the New Testament when Jesus is on earth. Furthermore, the fact that Jesus was “sent” to do his Father’s work (John 8:18) is compared to the angel’s also being sent by God. Thus, G. B. Funderburk concludes that “only the Logos, or some other manifest personification of God, would be able to [speak with authority as if he were God himself].”<sup>30281</sup>

However, we should note that the New Testament, which certainly is not loath to identify Jesus Christ with Old Testament figures (as King and Messiah, as Priest, as the “Word” of God Incarnate) *never* makes such an identification. Obviously, Jesus was the self-expression of God in the New Testament, but nothing in the Scriptures requires our understanding God’s self-expressions prior to Jesus’ birth to have been this self-same Person. T. McComiskey’s conclusion is a judicious one: “It is best to see the angel as a self-manifestation of Yahweh in a form that would communicate his immanence and direct concern to those to whom he ministered.”<sup>30292</sup> The exact nature or personality of this divine self-revelation are not known precisely because the Scriptures are silent on the question. This self-revelation of God certainly anticipated Christ in a typological way, even if it was not Christ himself. This may be analogous to the way in which “wisdom”—as it is described and personified in Job 28 and Proverbs 8—displays remarkable affinities with the Incarnate Word.<sup>30303</sup>

#### JOSHUA 1–5: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

At the end of the first main section of the Book of Joshua, the Israelites stand well-prepared for their first major encounter with the Canaanites whose land they were to inherit. They were

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<sup>26299</sup> E. g., J. B. Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 167–70; G. B. Funderburk, *ZPEB*, s.v. “Angel,” 1:162–63; W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1966), 98–100.

<sup>27300</sup> Although the term “angel” is not used in these passages.

<sup>28301</sup> Funderburk, *ZPEB*, s.v. “Angel,” 1:162–63.

<sup>29302</sup> T. E. McComiskey, *EDOT*, s.v. “Angel,” 1:48. See also M. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 443, who has a similar conclusion.

<sup>30303</sup> See H. Gese, “Wisdom, Son of Man’, and the Origins of Christology: The Consistent Development of Biblical Theology,” *HBT* 3:23–57.

well prepared because (1) God was very much with them, (2) because he had given them a leader who was already in process of becoming a worthy successor to Moses, (3) because the entire nation was taking care to obey God's commands to the letter (from Joshua and the priests on down to the people), and (4) because they were careful to sanctify themselves properly before engaging the Canaanites.

Several important notes are sounded in these chapters that set the stage for later developments. First and foremost, the God whom Israel was to follow identified himself clearly to Israel. In general terms, he did so by his charge to Joshua in 1:1–9. More specifically, he did so by his promises to be with Joshua in 1:5, 9. In the process, it was clear that this God was the same one who had been with earlier generations and that he would be with Joshua and Israel in the same way. Furthermore, the important symbolism of the ark of the covenant in chap. 3 demonstrated to Israel that this God was very much in their midst. The different ways in which the ark is spoken of in this chapter reinforce the close identity of the physical box with the transcendent—but also very much immanent—God.

God also demonstrated the awesomeness of his presence with Israel via the great miracle of stopping up of the waters of the Jordan River (chap. 3), a miracle on the order of the parting of the Red Sea in an earlier generation and one whose magnitude was seldom if ever seen again in Old Testament times. The awesomeness of this miracle is confirmed by the extended reflection on it in chap. 4. In this reflection, the Israelites were taught not only what God did, but also how they should respond to such mighty deeds: by keeping alive the memory of these deeds and teaching their children of their significance. The Israelites learned that this was for the dual purpose of announcing Yahweh's power to the nations at large and of stimulating Israel to revere him properly (4:24; 5:1).

God's presence with his people was further revealed through Joshua's encounter with the commander of the Lord's army (5:13–15). The holiness of the ground where Joshua stood revealed to him and to Israel that God was present and that he would be with them just as he had been with Moses (Exodus 3) and that the task upon which they were about to embark was essentially spiritual in nature.

The importance of the people's proper ritual preparation for the taking of the land of Canaan flowed out of God's own holy nature. Joshua found himself standing on holy ground because God was there and God was holy. The entire land and its people were to be "dedicated" to God, and some of its cities and all of its people were to be destroyed in order to rid the land of the uncleanness that had built up there for centuries (Gen 15:16; Deut 7:2; 20:16–18). For Israel to enter such a land, then, it needed to be properly prepared and in right relationship with God, just as the priests were to enter into their duties properly prepared, cleansed, and in right relationship with God. Indeed, Israel itself was to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:6), and the preparations for entering the land reinforce this. These preparations included, most obviously, the circumcision and the keeping of the Passover (5:2–12).<sup>30314</sup>

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<sup>31304</sup> And possibly the renewal of the covenant as well (see the introductory comments before 5:2).



The instructions to the Transjordan tribes about their responsibilities to the other tribes and the importance of unity within the nation (1:12–18) also were part of Israel's preparation for the taking of the land. This was not to be an every-man-for-himself rush to secure his own land at the expense of others, but very much a corporate exercise in which God's people functioned together in unity and as a unity received God's blessings.

God's charge to Joshua, with its emphasis on meditating on and keeping the law as the keys to his success, also demonstrates the importance of proper preparation. Joshua and Israel were to do something analogous to what Christ later told his disciples: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matt 6:33). They would have success to the degree they focused on seeking God and obeying him, not to the degree they employed superior military forces or strategies.

Proper preparations also are represented by the erecting of memorial stones and the extended reflections in chap. 4 about the significance of God's miracle. The taking of land was not so important that Israel did not have time to stop and reflect upon God's greatness and graciousness in performing such wonders on his people's behalf.

Proper leadership for the nation is an important topic addressed in the early chapters of the book. Moses, the servant of the Lord, like whom a prophet had not arisen since in Israel (Deut 34:10–12), was dead, and someone was needed to take his place. Joshua was his designated successor (Num 27:15–23; Deut 31:14, 23; 34:9; Josh 1:2–9). Just like the later kings, leaders whose success was to be measured in terms of their adherence to God's word (Deut 17:18–20) and *not* by their military prowess (Deut 17:16), so too Joshua's success was to be measured by the degree to which he adhered to God's word (Josh 1:7–8). God himself was going to fight for Israel, and Joshua's and the people's role was to be properly prepared, rooted in God's word, and to take the land according to his instructions.

Joshua's leadership was visible by the manner in which he gave commands to the Israelites throughout the first five chapters, and especially by the manner in which he spoke for God. He functioned in a manner analogous to a prophet, in that he passed on to the people the words that God had spoken to him. Unlike the prophets, however, the people obeyed him in everything he commanded (at least until Achan's sin in chap. 7). And God himself exalted Joshua before all Israel, just as he had Moses, as a sign of his presence with him (3:7; 4:14).

The importance of God's word is clear in the early chapters of the Book of Joshua. In a formal sense, this is indicated by the references to the Torah found in 1:7–8. Elsewhere this is indicated by the references to God's spoken words and commands, which were faithfully passed on by Joshua and executed by him and the people. Furthermore, the emphasis on things being in Joshua's day just as they were in Moses' day highlights the faithfulness of God's words and promises to his people.

A related idea to God's faithfulness is that of continuity with the past. Many of the commands or promises about the land and the people that are found in the Pentateuch are reiterated, often word-for-word, in Joshua 1–5. In addition, Moses, although dead, casts a long and important shadow across the entire Book of Joshua. In these chapters alone he is mentioned fifteen times.

The book's central message—that of Israel's possession of the promised land in fulfillment of God's promises—is found in every one of its aspects in the early chapters of the book. The land was God's gift to his people; he was its legal owner and could give it to whom he willed. He



was in process of giving it to the Israelites now (1:2), and yet he had already given it to them (1:3). The already-accomplished nature of the act emphasizes the connections with earlier times and that God had already given Israel legal title to the land (Gen 12:7; 15:18–20; Deut 1:8, 21; etc.). Despite the fact that the Israelites were receiving the land as God’s gift, however, they still had to enter into the land and take possession of it as their inheritance. The battles ahead are deemphasized—after all, the Lord would be giving Israel its victories—but Israel’s taking possession and inheriting the land is foreshadowed in the early chapters.

In these chapters, Israel actually entered the land (chap. 3), the importance of which can hardly be overstated. This event had been prophesied centuries earlier (Gen 15:13–16), and it is the event toward which the entire Pentateuch moves. Its importance is signaled by the extraordinary way in which the story is told in chap. 3 and reflected upon in chap. 4. And when Israel did enter the land, an important break with the previous forty years occurred: perhaps the most visible symbol of God’s providential care in the wilderness—the manna—stopped being provided, since the land itself would now provide for God’s people (5:11–12).

Finally, the significance of Rahab and the blessing on this foreigner are highlighted in chap. 2, showing one outworking of the promise of the Abrahamic covenant that God would bless those who blessed Abraham and that through him all families of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:2–3). Rahab, through her remarkable faith—demonstrated in both deed and word—secured the promise of a blessing for her family, which was fulfilled when Jericho was taken (chap. 6). Later Scripture shows that Rahab was an ancestor of Israel’s greatest king—David—and ultimately of Jesus Christ (Matt 1:5).<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> David M. Howard Jr., [\*Joshua\*](#), vol. 5, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 155–163.