

Article

Narrative Disjunction, Artful Occlusion, and Cryptic Commentary in Joshua 1–12

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Abstract: The book of Joshua is a book-length crux interpretum. Its cultivation of two concurrent narratives that contradict one another has fascinated commentators since antiquity. This is only one of its hermeneutically challenging features. Most modern commentaries attribute these features to an uneven process of redaction. Focusing on chapters 1–12, this essay argues that incongruity, ambiguity, and disjunction are essential elements of a rhetorical strategy in which form and content are imaginatively correlated, and that the text contains many cryptic clues that are necessary to elucidate its meaning. It contends that Joshua is the product of a bold literary innovation that is motivated by a sustained and uncompromising determination to unsettle facile assumptions about YHWH and Israel's history. It concludes that the book challenges us to re-evaluate not only the answers we thought it gave, but even the questions we ask of it.

Keywords: wordplay; anagram; reverse writing; form follows content; Rahab; Achan; Gibeonites; Peor; Eden

1. Introduction

In a recent essay, John Goldingay (2023) lamented the tendency of biblical scholars to impose meaning on Hebrew text that is consonant with the scholar's preconceptions, rather than their allowing the text to expand and reshape their horizons. To substantiate his claim, he adduces interpretations that commentators from antiquity to the present day have imposed on the Rahab tale in Joshua. Notwithstanding the vast differences in perspective, they share a determination, Goldingay argues, to enlist the story to "reinforce the views" that the biblicist in question already held.

I take something else from Goldingay's evidence. The Rahab account offers no unequivocal answers to the fundamental questions it poses, namely the definition of Israel (Rowlett 1992, p. 15), the nature and limits of YHWH's חסד "faithful care," and the meaning of the "charged term" חרם (Sternberg 1985, p. 497; Hawk 1991, p. 37; Hess 1996, p. 133; Van der Meer 2004, p. 447; Knauf 2008, pp. 28, 46; Dozeman 2015, p. 54–59; Versluis 2016; Toczyski 2018, pp. 11, 109; De Vos 2020). The story does not explain why a Canaanite sex worker, her family, and "all she had" were exempted from the destruction that YHWH commanded should befall every being and every item in Jericho, bar certain metals (Josh 6:19, 25) (Nelson 1997, p. 82; Glick 2007, pp. 155–63). Yes, the spies swore an oath to YHWH concerning Rahab, but it only confirmed the feebleness of the warriors' faith, whom, disconcertingly, Joshua hand-picked for the mission (McKinlay 1999, p. 47; Sherwood 2006, pp. 48–49; Sharp 2019, pp. 103, 119, 162). Their first reported words are "our life for yours" (2:14). To cower on a brothel roof disguised as drying flax hardly advertised confidence in YHWH's omnipotence, despite Rahab's eloquence to them on precisely that subject (2:9–11) (Polzin 1980, p. 86; Hawk 1991, p. 96; Younger 2003, p. 176; Gunn and Fewell 1993, p. 160). Rahab's remarkable grasp of the Pentateuch is equally incongruous in the context (Wellhausen 1899, p. 117; Krause 2014, pp. 159–71; De Vos 2020, p. 171). Why did Joshua accept the oath's provisions and make their fulfillment a priority even in the thick of battle (6:22)



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(Gunn 1989, p. 108; Culley 1984, p. 33; Hawk 1991, pp. 61–68; Frymer-Kensky 1997, p. 66; Rowlett 1996, p. 179; Seeman 2004, p. 29; McConville 2017, pp. 31–32, 59; De Vos 2020, p. 163)? Why did he not wonder whether the rout at Ai stemmed from exempting Rahab from חרם (7:6–9)? More prosaically, why was an urban sex worker drying flax stalks?¹ As the story unfolds, it exposes each character as being anomalous since each is at odds with and inverts their expected type (Douglas 1966, p. 38; Hawk 1992, p. 92). It is no wonder, then, that the tale has prompted exegetes for more than two millennia to wrestle and wring from the text what meaning they can (Firth 2017).

Analogous questions are raised by the episodes generally considered thematically and theologically connected with the Rahab tale, namely, the accounts of Achan (Chapter 7) and the Gibeonites (Chapter 9) (McConville 2017, p. 59; Polzin 1980, pp. 113–14; Rowlett 1992, pp. 20–21; Albertz 1992, pp. 402–3; Nelson 1997, p. 13; Younger 2003, p. 175; Glick 2007, pp. 139–73; Krause 2014, pp. 182–83; Robinson 2009, pp. 270–72; Creanga 2015; Sharp 2019, pp. 38–39, 207; Wazana 2019, pp. 42–43, 54–55). There is similarly little agreement on what the answers that they provide are (Hawk 1991, p. 24).

If one believes that biblical authors sought to make the meaning of their work immediately accessible and thus, for example, that the intertextual allusions they introduced “should be visible to the naked eye” (Krause 2015, p. 426; Meek 2014), these major episodes in Joshua 1–12 patently fall short.² The ambiguities and anomalies peppered with contradictions that the naked eye spies in them individually and collectively have been largely attributed to the composite nature of the text (Sharp 2019, pp. 121, 162, 210–11; Hawk 2000, p. xviii; Davis 2019, p. 133; Boling 1992, p. 1003; Nelson 1997, p. 41). Disparate sources were spliced, often seemingly clumsily (Robinson 2009, p. 260; Wazana 2013, p. 56). Consequently, both intra- and inter-episodically, the final stage of the composition betrays editorial incompetence (albeit rarely characterized so bluntly) that obscures the meanings the episodes were intended to convey.

Joshua’s recension history is undoubtedly complex (Soggin 1980, p. 171; Culley 1984, p. 26; Nelson 1997, p. 5; Hawk 2000, p. xxiii; Knauf 2008, p. 16; Wazana 2013, p. 297; Sharp 2019, p. 25). What this essay challenges is the conclusion that it was by maladroitness rather than intricate design that Joshua’s final editor(s) produced a composition whose meaning is frequently obscure or ambiguous and whose rhetorical architecture is not seamless. The work’s concern with concealment (Achan’s plunder, Israelite forces at Ai, kings in the cave at Makkedah) and disguise (spies in Jericho, Gibeonites) may intimate that occlusion informs its rhetorical approach, that form follows content (Coggins 1991, p. 62; Noegel and Nichols 2021, p. 492; Rendsburg 2019, pp. 539–49; 2021). As we shall see, form and content are symbiotically correlated in this work.

While artfully exploiting anomaly, the final editor(s) eschewed anarchy. The evidence we will examine suggests that they adhered to a guiding principle, but that principle, paradoxically, compounds the work’s exegetical challenges. The principle was that content that reveals the divine should be elaborately woven into the text, not merely displayed on its surface (Noegel 2021, pp. 143–44). This approach served three purposes. The first was to set the conceptual essence of the text—discussion of YHWH—apart from profane or frivolous gaze. As the seventh-century Assyrian scribe Ašaredu the Younger pithily asserted, “Scribal art is not a subject for the marketplace.”³ Furthermore, for an essentially aniconic religion whose devotees were physically remote from the site of its liturgical rituals, the word assumed an especially intense numinous character (Weinfeld 1972, p. 21; Levine 1997, p. 257; Douglas 1999, p. 58; Fishbane 2003, pp. 35–36; Knauf 2008, p. 182). It provided the single constant interface between God’s people and the divine sphere. Accordingly, the scribal tradition that shaped Joshua “regarded the alphabet not as a conventional medium of communication but as a divine gift. ... letters are things in themselves on which meanings can be projected” (Douglas 1999, p. 57; Hurowitz 2002, p. 332; Kalimi 2018, p. 29). The scene in which Joshua builds a stone altar to YHWH on Mount Ebal and writes the law of Moses upon it, as Moses had instructed, underscores the sacred status of the word (8:30–32; Deut 27:1–8) (Feldman 2014, p. 16; Sharp 2019, pp. 38, 198–200). The al-

tar in all its flinty physicality was enveloped in the metaphysics of the word. Furthermore, if, to protect human beings from trespassing upon the deity's sanctity, the normative vehicle for conveying YHWH's essence verbally was the חֵידָה "dark saying" (Num 12:8; Ps 78:2), we should not be surprised that the Joshua text is apt to be "enigmatic and disjunct" (Douglas 1999, p. 123).

Related to the first purpose was the second, namely, in Lee Magness's elegant formulation, extending to the reader "the pleasure in deciphering," for "the act of finding is an act of faith" (Magness 1986, pp. 16–17). It is, after all, "the glory of God to make secret a matter and the honor of kings to seek out a matter" (Prov 25:2). In Moses' homily that concerned constructing and plastering the altar, he declared, "The concealed things belong to YHWH our God, but those that are revealed belong to us and our children forever" (Deut 29:28, E. 29). From this comes the third purpose, which was rhetorical. Concealing meaning emphasized the meaning's importance since it demanded the reader's investment in discovering it (Schneidau 1976, p. 268; Douglas 2001, p. 101).⁴ The combined result in Joshua conforms by and large to Robert Alter's characterization of narrative prose in the Hebrew Bible: "[It] cultivates certain profound and haunting enigmas, delights in leaving its audiences guessing about motives and connections, and, above all, loves to set ambiguities of word choice and image against one another in an endless interplay that resists neat resolution" (Alter 1996, p. xi). Joshua goes further, though. It manipulates plot, words, and even letters to fashion an esoteric commentary on its narratives. Moreover, it inserts clues into the text to aid interpretation. The result is a work of conspicuous originality (Davis 2019).

Most commentators ignore the book's scribal dexterity. Generally, they limit their remarks on paronomasia and polysemy to the play between Achan's name and Achor, the site of his execution (7:24–26) (Soggin 1972, p. 94; Garsiel 1991a, p. 20; Auld 1998, pp. 113–14; Pressler 1992, p. 56; Japhet 1993, p. 75; Hess 1994, p. 94; Hubbard 2001, pp. 16, 18; McEntire 2021, p. 28), the connotations of the name Rahab (Hawk 1991, p. 62; Frymer-Kensky 1997, p. 66; Sherwood 2006, p. 50; Robinson 2009, p. 264; Wazana 2019, p. 41; Davis 2019, p. 135; Kovlova 2020), the homonymic paronomasia of תְּקוּהָה "hope, cord" in Josh 2:18, 21 (Hawk 1991, p. 70; Nelson 1997, p. 52; Younger 2003, p. 176; Sherwood 2006, p. 57; Robinson 2009, p. 270), and the polysemy of עֵבֶר, which assumes a prominent role in the narrative (Polzin 1980, pp. 100, 137–38; Hawk 2000, p. 82; Hess 1996, pp. 99, 107, 132, 148–49; Nelson 1997, pp. 59, 94; McConville 2017, pp. 32–33). Yet conspicuous references to the scribal art frame the first half of Joshua. Chapter 1 commences with YHWH emphasizing its supreme expression; that is, the "book of the teaching" (1:8). Chapter 12 ends with an exhaustive list arranged in columns, the hallmark product of ancient Near Eastern scribal endeavor (Van der Toorn 2000, p. 100; Taylor 2007, p. 437; Noegel 2021, pp. 312–13).

This framing device begins to suggest that there may be more to Joshua than a gripping and seemingly chaotic account of bloodshed, deceit, miracles, and land management. The material for my topic—artful occlusion and cryptic commentary in the book—is in fact abundant. To do it justice in an article, my investigation focuses on chapters 1–12 and chiefly on the accounts of Rahab, Achan, and the Gibeonites. Although the rhetorical techniques and cryptic devices I discuss are not restricted to these sections, they contain particularly illuminating examples. To probe them, I will analyze the three stories' relationships with each other and with the three Pentateuchal narratives to which they allude—the deceiving of Isaac (Gen 27), the iniquity at Peor (Num 25), and the sin in Eden (Gen 3). Commentators regularly note the parallels between Number 25 and pericopes in Joshua. Indeed, the book of Joshua itself makes the connection explicit (22:17; 13:22). The relationship between Joshua and the two Genesis stories has attracted less commentary, although the correlations are equally rich and illuminating.

Most scholars agree that the present form of the text of Joshua appeared in the exilic/postexilic period (Miller and Tucker 1974, pp. 11, 387; Soggin 1972, pp. 19–21; Boling 1992, pp. 1003, 1011; Albertz 1992, pp. 402–3; Auld 1998, p. 75; Rowlett 1996, pp. 11, 42;

Hawk 1991, p. 130; Hess 1996, p. 33; Nelson 1997, p. 16; Garbini 1988, p. 132; Clements 2000, pp. 123–24; Knauf 2008, pp. 17, 65, 349; Creangă 2015, p. 172; Dozeman 2015, pp. 5, 300, 354, 445–48; Taggar-Cohen 2015, p. 555; Sharp 2019, pp. 11–12; De Vos 2020, p. 173). The tragedy of exile raised existential questions for biblical writers/editors. To comprehend why it occurred, they had to make sense of what preceded it. Joshua resulted from that quest (Tucker 1993, p. 387). The questions it presents are those that confronted the exiles: the character and limits of YHWH's *חסד*, the geographical and theological definition of Israel (Sharp 2019, p. 356), how to respond to pagans and their cultures, the origin and nature of sin, and what causes defilement. It is a product of exile in another sense too. The final editor(s) exploited literary techniques developed in Mesopotamia.

2. Discussion

Joshua begins with YHWH's speech to its eponymous hero following Moses' death. In commissioning Joshua to realize the next phase of the *Heilsgeschichte*, YHWH instructs him not only to be courageous and resolute, but also to take care not to depart from the words of the teaching "to the right or to the left." The next verse repeats the prescription of v. 7 but with considerable embellishment. The doublet "day and night" replaces "to the right or to the left." YHWH's injunction to observe the teaching, which in v. 7 concerns performance (*עשה*), develops in v. 8 in two directions. The teaching becomes "the book of the teaching," and YHWH enjoins Joshua to speak it and "meditate" (*הגה*) on it unceasingly (Davis 2019, p. 134). The purpose of this behavior also stresses the literary dimension: "that you observe to do all that is written in it".

Joshua 1:7–8 is the key to what is to come in the book. The verses occur in the passage that introduces the work, and how it introduces the work is by recording YHWH's voice. Of the Bible's first nine/(eleven) books, only Joshua, Judges, Numbers, Leviticus, and supremely Genesis are initiated by the divine voice. The claim that Joshua makes with such a beginning is weighty: God has called it into being (*pace* Cooley 2019, p. 207). Its mimicking of Genesis in another respect emphasizes this idea. YHWH's words to Joshua in 1:4 describe the sweeping magnitude of the *ארץ* "land, earth" created by YHWH which is gifted to YHWH's people (Alter 1996, p. 306; McConville 2017, p. 33), thus echoing Genesis 1–2. Its bounds are imperial, even cosmic (Wazana 2013, pp. 106, 118–21).⁵ Moreover, the description of this territory restates YHWH's covenantal promise to Abrah[am] in Genesis (15:18–21). The book's concluding scene, with its discussion of Joseph's remains (Josh 24:32), resolves the final verses of Genesis (50:24–26) (Hawk 2000, p. 266; Creangă 2015, p. 169). This tying of the work ab initio to YHWH's word and the emphatic association with Genesis that it asserts indicate that Joshua's final editor(s) expected it to be taken seriously in its entirety as God's word.

The second reason the two verses are key is the complex parallelism by which v. 8 "synthetically overlays" v. 7 (Timmer 2015, p. 14). The repetition with variation illustrates and underscores the process by which reception of the word evolves centripetally from performance to habitual speaking—"not allowing the word to depart from your mouth"—and then to continual contemplation expressed by the instruction, "*וְהָיָה* upon it day and night" (Alter 1981, pp. 91, 176; Arnold 1993, pp. 479–81; Noegel 2021, pp. 303–6; Dalley 1989, pp. xvii–xviii). Joshua 1:8 furnishes the sole occurrence of *√hgh* in the Enneateuch. It epitomizes contemplative spirituality (Soggin 1972, p. 27; Garbini 1988, p. 30). This final stage confirms its unalloyed absorption into the heart (Van der Toorn 2007, p. 12).

This rhetorically sophisticated passage guides the reader as well as Joshua in how to engage efficaciously with YHWH's teaching. Correct interpretation will not be immediate or easy. It requires deep and sustained contemplation. Is it fanciful, then, to infer from the book's opening sentences a prescription for approaching its text, which is itself a midrash on the teaching; that only by carefully sifting its words will one acquire a valid understanding and, therefore, that the obvious answers may not be correct answers?

YHWH spoke to Joshua in 1:1–9 in preparation for Israel's imminent crossing to Canaan. YHWH accompanied Israel in the crossing, parting the Jordan to effect it. Upon reaching

Gilgal, God briefly addresses Joshua and instructs him to circumcise “the sons of Israel” (5:2, 9). Nowhere in Josh 1:1–5:9 is YHWH visually present, except symbolically in the ark of the covenant (Nelson 1997, p. 94; Hubbard 2001, p. 5; Pitkänen 2010, pp. 65, 133; Fleming 1998, p. 218; Dozeman 2015, p. 286). This changes dramatically after Israel celebrates Passover and prepares to invade Jericho. In the composition’s most mystical pericope (5:13–15), Joshua is “in Jericho” on the eve of battle. He looks up and, seeing a man with a drawn sword, approaches him and asks, “Are you for us or for our foes?” The figure replies disjunctively, “No. I am the commander of YHWH’s host. Now have I come.” Joshua prostrates himself in worship and prays, “What does my lord say to his servant?” Then, we read, “‘Remove your sandal from your foot for the place on which you stand is holy.’ And Joshua did so.” The next verse states, “But Jericho was completely shut up before the Israelites. None went out, none came in” (6:1a–b).

This pericope has, understandably, perplexed commentators. It comprises non sequiturs and seems misplaced (Hawk 1991, pp. 21–24, 41–42; Knauf 2008, p. 67; Krause 2014, pp. 375–88). Its “stunted, cryptic” aberrancy either points to an editorial misadventure or flags that the information it conveys is critical (Nelson 1997, pp. 80–81). In other words, its aberrant form may be a focusing device (cf. Noegel 2021, p. 46; Noegel and Nichols 2021). I believe the latter holds since the passage offers cryptic commentary on other pericopes in Joshua and illuminates the book’s *Sitz im Leben*.

Its allusion to the burning bush episode in Exodus 3 is plain (Younger 2003, p. 178; Pitkänen 2010, p. 110; Sharp 2019, p. 37). The encounter with the commander occurs a few verses after the book’s only reference to “a land flowing with milk and honey” (5:6). In fact, it constitutes the phrase’s final mention in the Enneateuch. It first occurs at the burning bush (Exod 3:8). The commander repeated to Joshua YHWH’s command to Moses to remove his sandals because of the sanctity of the place on which he was standing (5:15; Exod 3:5) (Taggar-Cohen 2015, p. 550). His command is not quite a verbatim quotation (*pace* Krause 2014, p. 375); it diverges in two respects. First, the place on which Moses stood was declared אֲדָמַת־קֹדֶשׁ “ground of holiness” (Exod 3:5); Josh 5:15 does not apply the substantive אֲדָמַת to Jericho, but then Horeb was the “mountain of God” (Exod 3:1). The second variation is that, in the standard Masoretic text of Exod 3:5, YHWH commanded Moses to “remove your sandals from your feet,” whereas Joshua was told to “remove your sandal from your foot.” Several manuscripts, though, employ singular forms in Exod 3:5 (BHS 89). One cannot know if this reflects the Vorlage or back-influence from Josh 5:15. What is clear is that Joshua’s singular forms are original since few manuscripts evince plurals.

The imperative clause in Josh 5:15 reads שֶׁל־נַעֲלֶיךָ מֵעַל רִגְלֶךָ. The hyphenated word-pair “remove your sandal” is an anagram of שָׁלַל עֵקֶן “Achan’s booty.” שָׁלַל is at the heart of Achan’s iniquity—“I saw in the booty a mantle of Shinar [etc.]” (7:21)—and anagrams occur elsewhere in Joshua (Hawk 2000, pp. 66, 120). But this is not all. The next word in the command is מֵעַל. Its surface meaning here is the compound preposition “from off.” But its orthographic twin is a *figura etymologica* that defines Israel’s sacrilege at Jericho—וַיִּמְעַלּוּ בְּחֶרֶם הַלֹּא עֵקֶן בֶּן־זֶרַח מֵעַל בְּחֶרֶם (22:20) (Kloppenborg 1981, pp. 352–53; Nelson 1997, pp. 99, 252; Pitkänen 2010, p. 371; Dozeman 2015, pp. 58–59). The clause’s final component רִגְלֶךָ “your foot” is an anagram of the reflexive imperative גֵּר לָךְ (from גֹּר “be afraid”; cf. Job 19:29).⁶ Together they produce the string “Achan’s booty is [the] sacrilege, you yourself be afraid!” The first encrypted phrase concerns the manifestation of Israel’s sacrilege; מֵעַל the second forewarns of its consequences. As in the two undisguised summaries of Israel’s sacrilege in 7:1 and 22:20, מֵעַל is the fulcrum on which the plot pivots—here literally so since it conjoins and contextualizes the encoded cause-and-effect commentary.

Scott Noegel (2021, p. 280) remarks that anagrams are a complicated form of paronomasia since they involve the reconfiguration of all three radicals of the Semitic root. He adds that they are seemingly “performative in function enacting reversals, inversions, over-turnings, ... through the transposing of ... consonants” (see also Kalimi 2018, pp. 56–57, 72). The transposed consonants in Josh 5:15 mirror and prefigure the storyline’s inversion

that will result from Achan's deed, with Israel's assured victory at Ai inverted into ignominious defeat. This is the first of the examples I will advance in which the letters of a word or word-string in Joshua not only convey literal meaning but, through transposition, function also as meta-text. Like the chorus in Greek drama, they do not engage directly with the characters in the unfolding plot but provide commentary on the moral and theological issues their words and deeds engender. In contrast to the Greek exemplar, however, this metatext in Joshua is cryptic, accessible only to those immersed in the word who sift each letter, since they "are things in themselves on which meanings can be projected".

The catastrophe of chapter 7 is trailed overtly in 6:18, and 7:1 reveals the sacrilege's causes and perpetrator while Joshua and the Israelites remain ignorant of them (Culley 1984, p. 38; Firth 2017, p. 422; Sharp 2019, p. 182). The cryptography of 5:15 confirms that YHWH knew in advance how Israel would respond to Jericho's plunder and what Achan would do. This explains the divine figure's brusqueness toward Joshua (Krause 2014, p. 375). The oracle of impending transgression characteristically contained a warning. Moreover, this statement of God's omniscience suggests that the final editor(s) of Joshua shared the theology of Deutero-Isaiah on this aspect of the divine character (Isa 46:10; 55:8–9) (Machinist 2003, p. 241; Berlin 2009).

The passage is enlightening in other respects too. It highlights the dissonance between the human and divine perspectives that we first glimpsed in 1:7–8. The non sequiturs demonstrate that even Joshua, an individual "full of the spirit of wisdom" (Deut 34:9), could not gauge the divine mind. He perceived the impending attack on Jericho in human terms: either with us or with our foes. But his premise was flawed. What concerned YHWH's hypostasis was divine identity—"I am"—and divine mission—"Now I have come"—not "you" and "them." As the episode that follows the Jericho conquest (the Ai rout/Achan's sin) shows, when that identity is disrespected and that mission corrupted, YHWH abandons Israel, which then suffers the divine wrath and curse (7:12; 22:20) (Hubbard 2001, p. 15; Dozeman 2015, p. 54; Sharp 2019, pp. 181–204). It is "our foes" who win, not "us." Thus, the passage succinctly states the theodicy of exile.

Sandals appear again in 9:5, 13. The Gibeonites wished to evade the חרם Israel had brought upon Jericho and Ai (9:3). Since they were Hivites (Josh 9:7; 11:19) occupying four cities in central Canaan (9:17) and evidently conversant with the Hebrew interpretation of חרם, they understood what would befall them when Israel attacked (3:10). Their only chance to escape was to follow Rahab in persuading Israel to swear an oath in their favor (McConville 2017, p. 31). Since they lacked her leverage, they calculated that survival depended on the Israelites' perceiving them to be something other than who they were. Their aim was to persuade Joshua and his people that they were not natives of Canaan long enough to swear an oath "by YHWH God of Israel" (9:19–20). To achieve the aim, they hatched a plan of make-believe. It resembled the scheme Rebekah devised to deceive Isaac. It is instructive to compare the stories. References to the misery that Esau's two indigenous brides brought Rebekah bracket the episode (Gen 26:34–35; 27:46) (Arnold 2009, p. 241). In some traditions, his second bride was a Hivite, like the Gibeonites (Gen 36:2; BHS Gen 26:35 *ad loc*). Her joining the family seems to have triggered Rebekah's plot to deceive her husband.

Rebekah's goal was to divert the blessing that derived from YHWH's covenant with Abraham to her second son (27:1–40). The Gibeonite goal was, at whatever remove, to share in that blessing since, as their emissaries declared, "your servants have come because of the name of YHWH your God" (9:9). Both schemes relied on props of clothing, food, and wine. Whereas Rebekah supplied fresh, cooked food and "desirable garments," the Gibeonites brought the opposite in order to deceive Israel that they had traveled a great distance: "They behaved craftily They took old sacks to load on their donkeys, and wineskins, which were old, split and bound up, old and patched sandals on their feet, old clothes to wear, and the bread of their provisions was dry and moldy" (9:4–5).⁷

Isaac's misapprehension is understandable: he was visually impaired and did not expect his wife and son to deceive him. Nonetheless, he showed more wariness toward

Jacob posing as Esau than Joshua exhibited toward the foreign delegation from a hostile territory who arrived at Gilgal. Joshua accepted the strangers' word and recklessly brought them into the camp (9:6) (Dozeman 2015, p. 419; Douglas 1966, p. 52). Isaac used the senses he retained, speech, touch, smell, and hearing, to seek the truth (Alter 1996, p. 137). He asked three searching questions, "Who are you, my son? How did you kill and prepare the meal so quickly? ... Are you my son Esau?" (Gen 27:18–20, 24). Joshua's interrogation of the Gibeonites was perfunctory: "Who are you and from where have you come?" (9:8). On subsequently discovering that they had duped him, Joshua responded by asking why they had lied and cursing their people with perpetual bondage (9:22–27). His reaction bears no comparison with Isaac's for raw emotional intensity: "Isaac trembled extremely violently" ויחרד יצחק חרדה גדולה עד-מאד (27:33). Moreover, since the Gibeonites were in their cities as chapter 10 begins, how much servitude they suffered is moot (10:1–6). Even if the curse was realized, it seems to have been misdirected. It resulted in their metamorphosis from חרם to חקדש servants of the altar and "the house of my God" (9:23, 27) (Gunn 1989, p. 108).

Whereas Isaac was visually impaired, Joshua had all his faculties and decades of experience with Moses on which to draw. Most recently, he knew from the Rahab case that some indigenous peoples desperately wished to sue for peace with Israel against the divine commandment. He knew from the book of the teaching, which he had been enjoined to contemplate continually, the fatal perils that association with them posed (Hawk 1992, pp. 94–96). He knew from the Achan incident that without YHWH's instruction, he too could be unsighted.

The Gibeonite tale paints in luminous colors what is implicit in 1:7–8 and 5:13–15. Facile judgments are wrong judgments. Authenticity lies beneath the surface. To comprehend it demands painstaking reflection. From the evidence we have considered it seems that, in this respect, the Joshua character acts as a proxy for and a warning to the reader. Joshua read only the surface evidence of old wineskins badly stitched together and dry and moldy bread and accepted the explanation for them at face-value. Consequently, he reached the wrong conclusion. Apprehending this book in that way will produce the same result. It requires a different hermeneutic.

Perhaps its final editor(s) went further and composed the Gibeon tale as a parable on the book itself being something other than what it appears. It is striking that they created a work that, *mutatis mutandis*, uncannily resembles Gibeonite props. It comprises old material, which appears to be inexpertly sewn together (Nelson 1997, pp. 1–11). That is certainly how Gene Tucker (1993, p. 385) views it: "Although the book of Joshua is a narrative work, it does not have a carefully developed plot [...]. The book is a composition made up of a great many individual and diverse elements." That Joshua contains old and diverse elements is undeniable (Boling 1992, p. 1003). Joshua 10:13 confirms this claim. The work's many allusions to Pentateuchal texts as well as its references to Judges are exemplary (Dozeman 2015, pp. 445–48). It borrowed material from Hosea's oracle of the valley of Achor and the תקוה, which the prophet contextualized in Israel's metaphorical prostitution, to develop and intermesh the Rahab and Achan narratives (Hos 2:17, E. 2:15) (Garsiel 1991a, pp. 141–42; Bird 1993; Neef 1984, pp. 99–100, 104; Pressler 1992, p. 56; Wazana 2019, p. 42; Hamborg 2023, pp. 58–59). Perhaps, then, the Gibeonite pericope is a conceit for a rhetorical strategy of artful obfuscation, a strategy that summons the reader to mark Joshua's error and accept nothing at face-value.

I explored above how the book exploits allusion and its own exemplary tales didactically. The aspect on which I focused is how *not* to approach the composition. But we also witnessed examples of unobtrusive rhetorical interventions that yield constructive meaning. In the remainder of the essay, I will analyze a major form of these interventions; that is, the manipulation of words and letters. In Joshua this primarily functions, as I noted, to explicate and mimic the surface narrative.

Rahab, the first person the Israelites meet in the Promised Land, effervesces with faith in YHWH as universal God. Echoing Moses (Deut 4:39), she exults, "YHWH your God, he

is God in heaven above and on earth below!” (2:11b) (Wazana 2019, pp. 39, 45; Krause 2014, pp. 175–77; Davis 2019, p. 136). This is a climactic moment in this story and in the book: Yahwists exist among the accursed peoples! (Wazana 2019, pp. 57–58). Rahab follows this profession with two requests pursuant to saving herself and her family from death. The first is that the spies swear on YHWH that they will repay her חסד with חסד (Sharp 2019, p. 113). The second is that they give her a “sign of faithfulness” אֹתֹת אֱמֶת (2:12). The remainder of the dialogue comprises a negotiation of the first request (2:13–21). The spies do not respond to the second request; nor does Rahab return to it (Robinson 2009, pp. 268–69).

The locution אֹתֹת אֱמֶת, ostensibly orphaned by the developing plot, is not superfluous. Both words begin with *‘āleph* and end with *tāw*, the alphabet’s first and final letters. While this produces a pleasing alliteration, poetic fancy did not decide its inclusion. Rahab had just professed that YHWH’s sway is all-encompassing (Krause 2014, p. 177). Both words encompass the alphabet and therefore express orthographically the same concept of totality.⁸ They symbolize YHWH’s omnipresence and omnipotence since no word, and hence nothing, exists outside their scope. אֱמֶת is especially freighted in this respect since its second radical is conventionally considered to be the alphabet’s midpoint (Hurowitz 2002, p. 332; Van der Heide 2005, p. 141). It therefore reinforces the idea of YHWH’s omnipresence by adding the alphabetic center. Consistent with this, the phrase comes at the midpoint of the Rahab chapter (in v. 12c of twenty-four verses; cf. Watson 1981, p. 102). These two seemingly redundant words reify Rahab’s theological assertion by their orthographic make-up.⁹ Form follows content.

Scholars identify a correspondence between Rahab’s name, which means “broad, wide,” and the characterization of the Promised Land at the burning bush as אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרוּחָבָה (Exod 3:8), “a land good and wide” (Wazana 2019, p. 41; Kovlova 2020). The book leaves no doubt that her name is rhetorically loaded. Apart from Joshua, Achan, and YHWH, she is the only character the book names until chapter 10. Her existence presses the question “Can the Promised Land really be isolated from its autochthonous peoples?” (McKinlay 1999). What are the implications of her Yahwistic confession for the doctrine of חֵרֶם, whose first mention in Joshua is from her mouth (2:10c)? She confronts the spies with the challenge, am I really who YHWH envisaged in the חֵרֶם command (Rowlett 1992, p. 17)?¹⁰ The dissonance between חֵרֶם and the hospitality and protection that she offered them and they accepted highlights this conundrum, which faced Joshua and continues to challenge the book’s readers of all persuasions (Davis 2019, pp. 129–31).

In Hebrew culture, as in Babylonian and Egyptian, name giving was perceived as a predictive-cum-performative act. Names were held to embody the essence and fix the destiny of their bearers (Bottéro 1977, pp. 15, 26; Guillaume 1964; Garsiel 1991a, pp. 224–25; Greenstein 1993, p. 71; Arnold 2000, pp. 243–45). “The name is the person, and to give a name to another is to grant him the attributes of which the name speaks” (Lambert 2013, p. 456). “Rahab,” the first name to appear de novo in Joshua, conforms with what Herbert Marks (1995, p. 28) calls a “cryptonym.” Marks concludes from names in Genesis and Exodus that “The text is given first; the author then articulates a network of nominal echoes, or ... plants a unifying cryptonym, so as to bring about a shift in the inherited matrix.”¹¹ “Rahab” initiates a dialectic that imperils the matrix inherited from Deuteronomy concerning how to interpret and apply חֵרֶם (Frymer-Kensky 1997, pp. 65–66). Her name’s letters animate the dialectic (Davis 2019, p. 135; Kalimi 2018, p. 50).¹²

At the simplest level, these letters do in fact encapsulate Rahab’s destiny. Anagrammatically, they produce בָּרַח “flee” and חֶרֶב “sword”: בָּרַחַה רָחַב (מִ)חֶרֶב “Rahab fled the sword” (cf. Job 20:24: יִבְרַח מִנֶּשֶׁק).¹³ Rahab’s escape from the sword was an audacious inversion/ overturning of the expected fate of a Canaanite in Jericho, which the anagrammatic paronomasia amplifies. But at what cost to Israel’s integrity? Was the act of exempting her and her family from destruction the impetus for Achan’s transgression? The account gives no overt indication of this. Neither YHWH (7:10–15) nor Achan (7:20–21) impugn the decision. What the narrator and YHWH underscore, however, is that the perpetrator

of the sacrilege was not Achan as a lone agent, but “(the sons of) Israel” (7:1; 7:11) (Berman 2014, p. 129; Sharp 2019, p. 187).¹⁴ How so? Israel colluded in the exemption of Rahab’s family since every warrior was evidently briefed to spare the inhabitants of the house with the red cord (2:19). Besides, there was more than a week between the spies’ return and Jericho’s fall—sufficient time for news of the exemption to spread through the camp. The Israelites’ acceptance of the arrangement with Rahab contrasts with their unease over the comparable Gibeonite deal (9:18–19).

Could it be that Achan opportunistically took the proscribed items because he inferred from the oath with Rahab that חרם was flexible? The answer is perhaps cryptically encoded in the summary statements concerning the sacrilege quoted above (7:1; 22:20). Both end with the prepositional phrase בחרם “in the matter of חרם.” If this phrase is read in reverse—a device known in Mesopotamian scribal tradition as “turning upside down” (Baker 2018, pp. 367–69)—it yields מרחב “from/due to Rahab” (cf. Garsiel 1991b, pp. 382–83).¹⁵ Thus, Josh 22:20 states:

הלוז עכן בן-זרח מעל מעל מרחב “Did not Achan ben-Zerah commit sacrilege due to Rahab?”

This reading resolves the issue of why all Israel was indicted for one person’s infraction in violation of biblical precepts and why “innocent” Israelites died as a consequence, a problem that has rightly exercised commentators (Soggin 1972, p. 105; Clements 2000; Younger 2003, pp. 179–80; Feldman 2014, p. 38; McEntire 2021, p. 28). If correct, form mirrors content once more: “the [Rahab] story,” Phyllis Bird (1989, pp. 130–31) avers, “builds on a reversal of expectations,” a reversal that the reverse-writing both mimics and enacts.

The unresolved tension engendered by the two interpretations is merely another example of the ambiguity and ambivalence that the work cultivates. Again, an anagram elucidates the dialectic: חרם and רחם “compassion” have identical radicals (Noegel 2021, pp. 115–16). As the editor(s) attempted to fathom Israel’s history in the wake of exile, evidence of God’s judgment tightly interleaved with mercy continually confronted them. Moreover, the anagram captures YHWH’s (self-) characterization in Exod 34:6–7: “merciful (רחום) and gracious, slow to anger ... but by no means acquitting the guilty.”

Regarding the plausibility of reverse-writing בחרם, I note the examples of reverse-writing and anagrammatic treatment of names discussed by Marks (1995); Isaac Kalimi (2018, pp. 30–50); Moshe Garsiel (1991a, pp. 101, 171, 207–9); and Jack Sasson (1975). These cases also serve to comment on the surface narrative. Moreover, Joshua evinces an incontrovertible instance of reverse-writing per se. Joshua’s personal land allotment was Timnath-serah (19:50; 24:30). The placename was actually Timnath-heres, the form given in Judg 2:9 and in some Septuagint Joshua manuscripts (BHS, 388; Brooke and McClean 1917, p. 760). Alberto Soggin (1987, p. 39) asserts, “heres and serah are the same word, the first time read forwards, the second time read backwards.” Most commentators attribute the reverse-writing to a desire to expunge “a name of heathenish sound,” that is, “Portion of the Sun/Horus” (Moore 1895, p. 66; Kalimi 2018, pp. 47–48). The compendious list of toponyms in Joshua, however, betrays no squeamishness over heathenish-sounding names. It contains *inter alia* “Kiriath-Baal, namely, Kiriath-jearim” (15:60; 18:14); Baalah “city of Baal” (15:9–11); and Baal-gad (11:17; 12:7; 13:5) (Toews 1993, p. 19).

Before embracing the commentaries’ explanation for the reverse-written toponym, we should consider what \sqrt{srh} means. In fact, it signifies overrunning limits and breaching boundaries (BDB), hanging over, spilling out, proliferating (HALAT 3). This is not fortuitous: “Joshua is a book about boundaries,” Daniel Hawk insists (2000: xi). The use of the root’s partial synonym \sqrt{cbr} in the accounts of the Jordan crossing, he argues, “can also signify a darker crossing—the ‘transgression’ of the covenant of Yahweh (Josh 7:11, 13; 23:16). Its repetition, therefore, is a subliminal reminder that the threatening tensions released in the previous episode concerning Rahab have yet to be resolved” (Hawk 1991, p. 72; Hess 1996, p. 176). The stories of Rahab, Achan, and the Gibeonites possess a common theme, namely, crossing the boundaries of YHWH’s injunctions on חרם (Hertzberg 1969, p. 49; Rowlett 1996, p. 179; Younger 2003, p. 179; McConville 2017, p. 32). Consequently, each received *timnath-serah*, “a portion of/from breached boundaries”.

Israel's iniquity at Peor, which occurred shortly before the Jordan crossing, haunts the book of Joshua. Its specter emerges from the shadows in the extraordinary statement of the Cisjordanian delegation led by Phinehas, YHWH's hero at Peor (Num 25:10–13), "Do you think the iniquity of Peor, from which we are not yet cleansed even though a plague struck YHWH's congregation, was trifling for us?" (22.17). Their accusation associates that catastrophe with Achan's sacrilege. As we turn to the Achan pericope, let us rehearse the Peor episode.

To satisfy the king of Moab, the prophet Balaam devised a scheme to jeopardize Israel's relationship with YHWH. Accordingly, Moabite women enticed the Israelites to an orgiastic cultic event (Lutzky 1997; Sivan 2001, p. 72; Grossman 2007, pp. 59, 73–74; McEntire 2021, pp. 24–25; *pace* Blenkinsopp 2012). The report begins, "Israel dwelt at Shittim, and the people began to 'whore after' the daughters of Moab, who invited them to sacrifices for their gods. The people ate and they worshiped their gods. Thus, Israel adhered to Baal of Peor and YHWH's wrath blazed against Israel" (Num 25:1–3). The Israelites' egregious transgression of YHWH's commandments culminated in the following:

An Israelite man came and brought a Midianite woman to his family in the full sight of Moses and the entire congregation of Israel as they wept before the entrance to the tent of meeting. Phinehas ben-Eleazar ben-Aaron the priest saw it and got up from the congregation. In his hand he took a spear and came into the tent after the Israelite. He speared them both, the Israelite and the woman, right through her belly. And so the plague was stopped. ... The name of the slain man ... was Zimri ben-Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. And the name of the slain Midianite woman was Cozbi, the daughter of Zur; he was the head of a Midianite clan (25:6–8, 14–15).

Numbers 31:16; Deut 4:3; Hos 9:10; and Ps 106:28 also cite the sin at Peor. The composite picture suggests that it involved ritual sexual congress together with feasting on offerings made for the dead in veneration of Baal of Peor (Lewis 1989, pp. 167–68; Spronk 1999, p. 147).

Commentators correlate these events with the Rahab narrative (Frymer-Kensky 1997, p. 66; Hawk 1991, p. 61; Sherwood 2006, p. 50; Robinson 2009, p. 264; Dozeman 2015, p. 242; Krause 2015, p. 424; Wazana 2019, pp. 40, 57; De Vos 2020, pp. 166–67, 171). The primary parallels are that the spies embarked on their mission from Shittim; prostitution is a motif in both stories; and the Israelite's paramour is foreign. Cozbi, whose name denotes "deception, falsity," emblemizes the dangers foreign women posed to the settled piety of Israel (Garsiel 1991a, pp. 119–20; Lutzky 1997, p. 547; Sivan 2001, p. 70; McEntire 2021, p. 25).

The parallels with the Achan episode are less evident (though see now McEntire 2021). Peor was a collective public transgression of the cult and twenty-four thousand Israelites died as a result. Achan's infraction was ostensibly the secret act of an individual who lusted after material goods, although thirty-six perished in its aftermath. None of the seven roots that characterize Israel/Achan's sacrilege, namely, עבר, חטא, מעל, נגב, כחש, חרם, עכר (Josh 7:1, 11, 15, 20, 25) are present in Num 25. Only the descriptions of YHWH's reaction to the respective abominations share terminology: ויחר-אף יהוה (Josh 7:1; Num 25:3); וישב יהוה מחרון אפו (Josh 7:26)/וישב חרון אף יהוה (Num 25:4) (Glick 2007, pp. 80–83). Joshua 7 makes no apparent reference to feasting, sacrifice, or sexual activity.¹⁶ Achan has sons and daughters but no wife (complementing Rahab who has no husband, but a father, mother, brothers, and sisters). Nevertheless, the book links the two episodes and, using paronomasia, deeply embeds the connection between them.

The first arresting feature of the Achan pericope is how lavishly charted Achan's genealogy is. Three times in just eighteen verses, it traces him to Judah over four generations, once forward (7:16–17) and twice in reverse (7:1, 18). In Joshua "no figure is introduced with such a detailed family background" (Hess 1994, p. 89). Plainly, the list burnishes Achan's Israelite credentials and, ironically, identifies a man whose own name, together with his progeny and possessions, will be obliterated (Nelson 1997, p. 103; Rowlett 1996,

p. 167; Glick 2007, pp. 66–74; Hess 1994, p. 154; Kitz 2014, pp. 205–7). Even by the generous conventions of emphasis by repetition in biblical Hebrew, however, the treatment seems excessive. The meanings of the names in the genealogy do not explain the recapitulations since, with the possible exception of Carmi, they do not elucidate the episode (Garsiel 1991a, p. 142; Wazana 2019, p. 42; Hess 1994).

Hawk (2000, p. 120) observed that Achan's name, "along with its root 'kn, constitutes an anagram of k'n, the root from which the name "Canaan" is constructed; 'ākān represents the presence of kēna'an within Israel, a cryptic presence which must be identified, uncovered, and excised." Like father(s), like son: Achan's genealogy forms a complex anagram on an equally malignant cryptic presence: Zimri and Cozbi, whose names comprise eight letters. All eight are "borrowed" in the names of Achan's forefathers:

Z	M	R	Ġ	C	Z	B	Ġ
Zerah	Carmî	Carmî	Zabdî	Carmî	Zabdî	Zabdî	Carmî

The composite Zimri–Cozbi generates the name Carmi, Achan's father, who probably witnessed, and perhaps participated in, Peor. Carmi takes its first and last letters from Cozbi and the two medial ones from Zimri.¹⁷ The other two names each contain one letter not found in Zimri–Cozbi, namely /d/ and /h/. Since the ancestor names comprise eleven letters, three letters are not borrowed from Zimri–Cozbi. They are *hṛd*. They form the lemma "tremble from strong emotion, often terror" that we encountered with Isaac. It also signifies "rout in battle" (Judg 8:12) (BDB, 353; Baker 2018, p. 357), and occurs in Deuteronomy in the curse section of the covenant ceremony that Joshua was to perform at Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. In this curse, Israel will flee before their foes (Deut 28:25–26). This is exactly the scenario that is enacted at Ai because of Achan's sacrilege (7:4–9).

The cryptic message embedded in the name list, then, is that the sin of Peor, "from which we remain uncleansed to this day," was in Achan's DNA. Spiritually, he was the fruit of Zimri–Cozbi's pernicious union. On the surface, his lineage was irreproachable; underneath, his was the tainted seed of apostasy. His progeny's extermination becomes more comprehensible in this light (Hess 1996, p. 154; Sivan 2001, p. 79). Similar thoughts perhaps occurred to the Chronicler since he refers to Zabdi as Zimri in his Judah genealogy (1 Chr 2:6–7).

Israel's miraculous arrival in the Promised Land heralded a new creation in an ordered universe liberated from the chaos of the wilderness (Thompson 1981; Hess 1996, p. 78; Dozeman 2015, pp. 289, 294–95; McConville 2017, pp. 48–49, 61). The fact that the event took place in the first month of the year burnishes the creation motif. The arrival possessed an Edenic quality: "they ate from the fruit of the land of Canaan in that year" (5:12c). Although they celebrated Passover, there is no mention of slaughtering the paschal lamb (5:10), despite their traveling with their flocks (1:14). The feast seems prelapsarian in character. The seven-day encirclement of Jericho recalls the seven days of Creation, likewise symbolizing the inception of a new, ordered cosmos (Younger 2003, p. 179; McConville 2017, p. 33). Again, Joshua recasts Genesis.

On the seventh day of Creation, as reflected in the Jericho rituals, however, a sin was committed; the first by Israel in the Promised Land. In numerous respects, Achan's fatal desire for the forbidden mantle from Shinar (Clements 2000, p. 117; Knauf 2008, p. 80; pace Stec 1991), which he purloined in the City of Palm Trees (Deut 34:3; Judg 1:16; 3:13), recalls humanity's first sin, committed in a tree garden on the seventh day. It also sprang from a desire for a Mesopotamian product, that is, Eden's forbidden fruit (Gen 2:8–14). The use of *tōb* "good, fine" to describe the object's visual attraction and the deployment of three identical verbs occurring in the same sequence, $\sqrt{r'h}$ "see" (Hess 1996, pp. 151–52), \sqrt{hmd} "desire," and \sqrt{lqh} "take," in the two accounts cement the correlation (Gen 3:6; Josh 7:21). The sins, in H.W. Hertzberg's formulation, are not "moral," but "theological" (Hertzberg 1969, p. 54). Both involve taking something that God forbade, that belonged to God (Gen 3:22). Both plots include concealment, YHWH's direct agency in exposing the transgres-

sion, and the perpetrators' confession. Clothing is a motif in both, and both result in punishment involving banishment, fire, and death.

Notwithstanding the many and close parallels between the two narratives, a central motif of Genesis 3 is evidently absent in the Achan account: eating. It is by eating that the Woman and the Man convert desire into sin (Gen 2:17c) (Alter 1996, p. 11; Bühner 2015, p. 372). Achan's temptations did not concern food. The three items he stole, though, produce a peculiar list: a mantle אֲדָרֶת, silver כֶּסֶף, and a "bar of gold" לֶשׁוֹן זָהָב (7:21). The restated list (v. 24), which the Septuagint lacks, repeats the nouns with other details removed and definite articles added: לֶשׁוֹן זָהָב, אֲדָרֶת, כֶּסֶף. Since לֶשׁוֹן functions as an attributive adjective (Williams 1976, §43; GKC §128 k, o.), the list's keywords are אֲדָרֶת, כֶּסֶף, and לֶשׁוֹן. What the three nouns share is that each bears a second meaning quite different from the one Joshua 7 conveys. They are respectively "magnificence" (Stec 1991, p. 357), "desire," and "tongue," which is *lāšōn*'s primary meaning.¹⁸ These two facts, namely the peculiar nature of the list and the alternative definitions of each lexeme may signal that they possess an additional layer of meaning, as Qumran sectarian and Christian exegetes in antiquity, as well as rabbinic and Samaritan scribes, concluded (Feldman 2014, p. 39; Brownlee 1951, pp. 61–62; Crane 1890, pp. 52–53; Midrash Tanhuma, Vayeshev 2.8; Friedlander 1916, pp. 296–97; Origen 2002, p. 83; Davis 2019, p. 141). In fact, the keywords serve as *notarikon* in reverse: their initial consonants produce the lemma אָכַל "eat".¹⁹ Thus, the Genesis 3 motif seemingly missing from the Achan narrative is there after all. Like the pilfered items themselves, it is concealed.

Joshua follows the Achan pericope with further oblique references to the primordial sin. Gibeon's inhabitants are חַיִּי "sons of Eve."²⁰ Like the serpent who beguiled her, they acted "cunningly" (9:4) (עָרִם) (Dozeman 2015, p. 402). They also used food to beguile God's people, who "took" it but did "not enquire of YHWH" (9:14). This implies that, although Achan was executed and his line extinguished, the "original" sin was not expunged from Israel.

Achan committed his transgression within two weeks of Israel's arrival in Canaan (4:19; 5:10). Its position in the center of the occupation section portends its significance for Israel's subsequent history in the occupied land. Israel may have miraculously crossed over to a new existence divorced from the chaos of wilderness and may have observed Passover in celebration; every male Israelite may have been circumcised in obedience to YHWH's command and the "reproach of Egypt," the burden of their enslaved and iniquitous past, "rolled away" (5:1–12), but Israel's sinfulness persisted. The propensity to sin, which we rarely glimpse in Joshua, erupts in Judges and plagues Israel until their story culminates in their being swept from the land in the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations.

3. Conclusions

The experience of exile generated febrile debates among Jews of the exilic/postexilic period on the topics the book explores: Israel's identity and the character and demands of its ancestral god. The final version of Joshua reflected those debates and its editor(s) innovatively and thought-provokingly treated the issues raised in them. Its surface narrative portrays Israel unitedly adhering to YHWH's law and Joshua's leadership. Consequently, they are stupendously successful. Joshua 21:43–45 majestically summarizes this narrative: "YHWH gave Israel all the land he swore to give to their fathers, and they possessed it and settled in it ... YHWH gave all their enemies into their hands. Not one word of all the good words that YHWH spoke to the house of Israel failed; everything came to pass." This narrative is, however, frequently and jarringly disrupted by an alternative, bleaker version. It insists that Israel did not possess and settle the entire land, enemies were not removed or even wholly subdued, and Joshua erred repeatedly (Wazana 2013, pp. 207–8, 297–98; Wénin 2016, pp. 617–19; Davis 2019, pp. 131–34; Sherwood 2006; Sharp 2019, pp. 43–44, 162, 184–86, 367). Indeed, Israel did not even abandon idolatry (24:14b). In consequence, many of YHWH's words remained unfulfilled. From the perspective of exile, both narratives were valid: the what-might-have-been reality of Israel's glorious potential fulfilled,

which Nili Wazana (2013, p. 236) dubs “the dogmatic ideal,” and “the historical reality,” the reality of potential tragically choked and disfigured.

The unbridgeable chasm between the narratives elevated to a macro level the book’s signature ambivalence. Indeed, it inspired it. Paradoxically, thematic disjunction unifies the work. As a result, Joshua resists the expectations placed on it as historiographic literature and denies succor to simplistic nostrums. Its answer to the question which narrative reflected the actual story is the numinous commander’s disjunctive “no.” We are asking the wrong question and, by asking it, we impose on the text a hermeneutic unequal to the task. By cultivating both narratives, the book compelled its readers to contemplate the space between, for there lay Israel’s postexilic predicament.

The approach that Joshua’s editor(s) took to the book’s hermeneutic was consistent with and reinforced the bivalence of its plot. In the hortatory passages urging contemplation of and adherence to the teaching in thought and deed, we meet their overt prescription for interpreting the composition. For them, the notion that the divine could be comprehended effortlessly was fallacious. Artful occlusion was their rhetorical response to ineffable divinity. Related to this was the second element of their approach, namely, the use of complex and arcane manipulations of words and letters. In their hands, anagrams, cryptonyms, and reverse-writing were more than displays of scribal ingenuity; they were mimetic commentaries on the plot and its characters that mirrored their reversals and inversions. This encrypted meta-text was accessible only to those who assiduously studied its text (Sasson 1976, p. 968). These elements combined to create a work of daring literary innovation that is indeed “gorgeously wrought” (Sharp 2019, pp. 7, 34). Though shaped by biblical writings and Mesopotamian scribal techniques, Joshua is remarkable for its sustained and uncompromising determination to unsettle facile assumptions about YHWH and Israel’s history. It challenges us to re-evaluate not only the answers we thought it gave, but even the questions we ask of it. It stands both as a text of profound theological enquiry and as a complex work of art, for “A work of art does not answer questions, it provokes them; and its essential meaning is in the tension between the contradictory answers” (Bernstein 2007, p. 141).

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Notes

- ¹ Whimsically explained by Bernard Robinson (2009, p. 261) as indicating the sex worker’s “day-job.” The tenth-century BC Gezer Calendar reveals that the “month of cutting flax” coincides with Adar-Nisan. Thus, Joshua 2 is temporally aligned with the wider occupation account (2:6; 4:19).
- ² Commentators agree that Joshua comprises two sections of approximately equal size, namely, 1:1–12:24, which recounts the occupation, and 13:1–24:33, which treats its aftermath (Nelson 1997, p. 1; McConville 2017, p. 5; Dozeman 2015; Sharp 2019, p. 35).
- ³ RMA 210 obv. 1.7-rev. 1.1: [t]up-šar-ru-ti i-na KILLAM ul iš-šem-mi (Hunger 1992, pp. 194, 338).
- ⁴ The first purpose is also evident in the Egyptian literary treatment of divinity. Mesopotamian literature exhibits all three (David 2002, pp. 52–53; Parpola 2014, pp. 470–71; Noegel 2013, p. 24; Noegel 2021, pp. 130–33; Jiménez 2016, p. 236).
- ⁵ On Josh 1:4’s debt to Assyrian royal inscriptions, see (Wazana 2013, pp. 123–25).
- ⁶ The timing of the introduction of internal *matres lectionis* in Hebrew orthography is a complex question (Cross 1995, p. 127 n. 3; Seow 2011).
- ⁷ However disgusting or inedible the bread was, the Israelites still sampled it: “the men partook of their provisions” (9:14). In Joshua’s espionage career, he too brought food samples from Canaan to the Israelite camp. When their ten companions com-

plained that Canaan is a land “that eats up its inhabitants” (Num 13:33), Joshua and Caleb retorted, “the people of the land are our bread” (Num 14:9). Joshua 9:14 was the ironic fulfillment.

- 8 אֹת is often written defectively as אָת in the MT, for instance, in Josh 24:17. The defective form possibly appeared in late editions of Josh 2:12 (cf. [Feldman 2014](#), pp. 148–49, 182–84).
- 9 For other examples of letter manipulation in Josh 1–12, see ([Hess 1996](#), p. 165; [Nelson 1997](#), p. 54).
- 10 If the exilic/postexilic editor(s) were familiar with Akkadian, Rahab’s ineluctable association with חָרָם is buttressed bilingually. The stock term for “female sex worker” in Akkadian is *ḫarīmtu*, which derives from *ḫarāmu* “to set apart” (CAD H, 89–90, 101–2), the cognate of חָרָם ([Malul 1999](#), p. 824).
- 11 For Mesopotamian examples, see ([Noegel 2021](#), pp. 103–4).
- 12 Some scholars suggest that Rahab’s name alludes to its near-homonym רָהַב, thereby associating her with YHWH’s primeval adversary, the sea monster of chaos (cf. Josh 2:10) ([Stek 2002](#), pp. 39–40; [Knauf 2008](#), p. 47).
- 13 The fact that בָּרָה is not found in Joshua does not invalidate the correlation. The corpus contains many analogous cases ([Garsiel 1991b](#), p. 380; [Noegel 2021](#), pp. 91, 95–97, 139–40).
- 14 When the Cisjordanian Israelites castigate their Transjordanian kin for constructing an altar, they cite Achan’s sacrilege (22:20) and the sin at Peor (22:17) as analogous transgressions. The passage reveals their “rewriting history” since they shift culpability for the sacrilege from Israel corporately to Achan alone.
- 15 On reverse-writing, see ([Watson 1981](#); [Sasson 1976](#), p. 969; [Garsiel 1991a](#), pp. 90–91; [Kalimi 2018](#), pp. 29–33; [Noegel 2021](#), pp. 225–26, 229, 277–78; [Beaulieu 1995](#)).
- 16 Thomas [Dozeman \(2015, p. 346\)](#) suspects נִבְלָה in 7:15 implies “illicit sexual activity.” I think it represents paronomasia on its homograph denoting “corpse, carcass,” foretoking Achan’s fate, whose corpse is burned and then stoned a second time. The word appears with this meaning in the tale’s Ai sequel (8:29; [Cogan 2000](#), pp. 371–72).
- 17 Cf. ([Garsiel 1991a](#), p. 129; [Rendsburg 2000](#), p. 141) on the encoding of the names Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Sam 2:36.
- 18 In no other biblical text does לָשׁוֹן signify “bar of precious metal, ingot.” In Akkadian, however, its cognate *lišānu* ‘tongue’, deployed in a construct relationship with “gold”, refers to an ingot in a string that parallels Josh 7:21 (CAD L, 215).
- 19 On *notariqon*, a literary technique of Mesopotamian origin, see ([Noegel 2021](#), pp. 215–17; [Gabbay 2012](#), p. 287; [Van der Heide 2005](#), pp. 140–41; [Frahm 2014](#), p. 329; [Cavigneaux 1987](#), p. 243).
- 20 ([Knauf 2008](#), p. 92); amplified by the paronomasia on חָיִי וְיָחִי “let them live and they will be ...” (9:21).

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