



Texts in Context

A Call to Confession: Joshua 24:1–28

FREDERICK J. GAISER

“**O**nce to every man [*sic*] and nation comes the moment to decide”—at least according to James Russell Lowell’s 1845 poem that was a protest against American involvement in the Mexican-American war. Intriguingly, one website containing the lyrics to Lowell’s poem is topped by a moving banner endlessly trumpeting the words of Josh 24:15: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”¹ Apparently, the designer of the website saw Lowell’s poem as a then contemporary version of Joshua’s much earlier courageous announcement. To oppose the Mexican-American war was to “serve the Lord.”

Despite the inclusion of the poem in several hymnals, it is more a call to political resistance than a Christian hymn. To be sure, there are a few explicitly biblical references, but they hardly characterize the poem as a whole. It is a clarion call to action, not unlike those of Martin Luther King Jr. or, more recently, Black Lives Matter. It’s time to take a stand!

Some suggest that we need just such a call in our own tumultuous days. But, of course, there will be differing opinions about the nature and direction of the stand. Hopefully, however, all readers of *Word & World* will agree with Joshua’s cry that above all we are called to serve the Lord, not some political agenda or ideology.

¹See <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/o/n/c/oncetoev.htm> (accessed April 19, 2017).

The role of the preacher is, if viewed properly, a daunting and difficult task indeed. A preacher must do justice to the original text while still making the text itself understandable and accessible to those who would hear the sermon. How should one preach a text like Josh 24?

THE GENRE OF JOSHUA 24

How then should we characterize Josh 24? Theological confession? Prophetic call? Political war cry? In some German Bibles and commentaries, the text is called the “*Landtag zu Sichem*”—in German usage a *Landtag* (or State Diet) being a representative assembly (parliament) with legislative authority and competence over a federated state (Land).² This is undoubtedly too formal a designation for Joshua’s gathering of the tribes in Josh 24, but still that conclave is certainly more than a casual get-together (“Let’s all meet at Starbucks for coffee”). Perhaps a better term might be “*Thing*” (pronounced “ting”)—the governing assembly of a Germanic society generally held outdoors, much like the Icelandic *Althing*, which still functions as the governing body of that country. In any case, Joshua called the tribes together at Shechem for a particular theological purpose—to pledge allegiance or renew their covenant with YHWH as Israel’s proper God rather than the “other gods” served by their ancestors (24:2).

In many lectionaries, classes, and sermons, the text jumps from the first two or three sentences to the call to service beginning with verse fourteen: “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.” That move is problematic on its face, since there is no immediate antecedent to the “therefore.” Behind this grammatical issue, however, there is a huge theological problem, one that leads to confusion and legalism. With this reading the text calls to service without rationale—that is, law without gospel.

There is no justification for omitting verses three through thirteen, except perhaps the problem of time, which too often trumps other considerations in the planning of worship in Western churches. Consider, for example, the grammar: In the NRSV translation, there are seventeen “I’s” (plus one “he”) as the subject of sentences (all referring to YHWH) before calling “you” to respond in verse fourteen. God’s redeeming work provides the basis and the motivation for Israel’s response.

THE CONTENT OF THE LAW

Of course, there is law in the text. Law is what a parliament does. But good law serves life as we see in a similar covenantal text in Deuteronomy: “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants” (Deut 30:19).

Joshua’s reiteration of Deuteronomic law is no accident, since scholars have long recognized Joshua as a part of the Deuteronomic history. This means that “[we] should read Joshua, knowing that its primary concern is not with historical dates and events, but with telling the story of how God fulfills God’s promises,

²At <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landtag> (accessed April 19, 2017).

both to Joshua's generation and to each subsequent generation of the book's readers."³

So, the preacher's primary concern in citing this passage is to recognize and proclaim it as a theological confession rather than an objective historical recital. What's at stake here is the frequently repeated Deuteronomic call to worship God and God alone. The worship of YHWH is a matter of life and death. Since only YHWH brings life, turning to other gods brings death. The Isaiah of the exilic period got it right, filling out the Deuteronomic proclamation with "from the rising of the sun and from the west...there is no one besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other" (Isa 45:6)—this Isaianic text, by the way, being perhaps the fullest declaration of monotheism to be found anywhere in the Bible.

The preacher must be careful here. It might be possible in the present world to proclaim that Christianity is the only right religion and that all others are "deadly" wrong, a view that itself would violate the Deuteronomic announcement to Israel:

It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut 9:5)

True, in Deut 9 there is still the problematic issue of God's "dispossessing" the nations, but this has to do with their own "wickedness" rather than Israel's superiority (or our own). Now too there are "wicked" elements in human religions (all of them, Christianity included) that promote the rejection or even death of "nonbelievers," but we learn from countless other biblical texts, Old Testament and New, of a more welcoming understanding of God. You and most of your people know these words, of course, but a reminder—or even a fuller explanation—can't hurt. Possible examples, chosen actually at random, include:

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:19)

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Heb 13:2)

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (Matt 25:40)

So, the content of the divine law to which Israel is called to pledge allegiance at that early parliamentary gathering of the tribes—in front of witnesses, no less—is just this: a call to life and love. For those familiar with TV's *Big Bang Theory*, this is God's "roommate agreement" with Israel. The agreement (or covenant) is binding, and the witnesses are the people of Israel, witnessing against themselves lest they go astray.

³Kathryn Schifferdecker, "Joshua," in *Enter the Bible*, online at <https://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=26> (accessed April 19, 2017).

There is, however, a happy difference between God’s covenant with Israel and the roommate agreement imposed by Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory*—or many other binding contracts, for that matter. Such “agreements” try to cover every eventuality that might conceivably arise, now or in the future, whereas the divine covenant is much less restrictive. Only two of the “ten words” of the Decalogue are positive, the others are various forms of “thou shalt not.” Whereas the “thou shalt nots” get a bad rap, describing, some say, a religion of negatives, the negative commandments are actually much less restrictive. Positive law has to cover and command everything, whereas the negative laws of the Decalogue simply prohibit just a very small number of things—albeit things of singular importance—leaving the rest of life a “free playground” for the exercise of human creative activity and responsible adventure. “Go play,” says God in effect, “just remain within the playground”—a playground that is, however, as wide as the earth itself and equally as exciting. As our text puts it, “I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive yards that you did not plant” (Josh 24:13).

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The big one remains, however, the sole allegiance to YHWH, the heart and soul of Deuteronomic (and biblical) law, that from which everything flows: “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD” (Josh 24:14). This command is set in stone (Josh 24:26–27).

To this Israel quickly agrees, perhaps too quickly. There is no cheap grace here—nor is there cheap law! “But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins’” (Josh 24:19). This rejoinder functions something like the “objection” common to the call narratives in the biblical narrative, except here it is God’s objection (the caller rather than the one called)—again, God says that you are free to play here, but remember that you are playing with fire (or holiness), so should you act carelessly you might well get burned. Perhaps Joshua’s response (“God will not forgive”) is based on God’s recognition that Israel’s response is not yet sincere or at least based on insufficient understanding of the divine nature.

Finally, Israel gets back on course with a more considered confession: “The people said to Joshua, ‘The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey’” (Josh 24:24). Notice how the text has moved from Joshua’s pledge that “as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord” (24:15) to a much broader “we” in 24:24, namely, the whole people. The torch has been passed to a new generation. “It is no longer a time for a great leader; it is time for Israel to enter into its own

destiny of becoming in reality a people of Yahweh, forming a society framed by the Torah in its core.”⁴

COVENANT: LAW OR GIFT

“So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem” (Josh 24:25). Though this covenant involves “statutes and ordinances,” the tone of these verses remains altogether positive. God cares enough to not let God’s children hurt themselves. The sense of the decrees is simply, “Don’t play in traffic!”

This covenant renewal at Shechem closely echoes the one at Horeb in Deut 5, no doubt deliberately. In Deuteronomy, too, the tribes are gathered to hear the divine “statutes and ordinances,” and the positive purpose of this is made clear: follow God’s law “so that you may live, and that it may go well with you, and that you may live long in the land that you are to possess” (Deut 5:33). And made even clearer in Deuteronomy is the present reality of the covenant. It is about now, not once upon a time: “Not with our ancestors did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today” (Deut 5:3). The ancestors might have been quite surprised to hear this (“But we thought it *was* about us!”), yet Moses the preacher (a term used here advisedly) wants to direct his sermon to the present audience. A preacher’s word is for now. He or she reads an ancient Josh 24, but the preacher’s job is to bring it home so the hearer knows it is “for me.”⁵

In Deuteronomy, Moses does this brilliantly: “Deuteronomy erases seven centuries of disobedience and thoughtless ingratitude, places Israel once more in the desert before God, and lets Israel hear again the gracious election to be the people of God.”⁶

Today’s preacher is called to precisely such an audacious task, to preach God’s word so it is heard as a present reality.⁷

THE TRUE MEANING OF CHOICE

But be careful what you preach. This text is often read and preached as though “choose this day whom you will serve” is an imperative for that time or this. It is not. Choice enters the picture only for those who “are unwilling to serve the LORD” (24:15). The logic of the text is this: God has chosen you, rescued you, guided you, protected you, brought you through grave danger, given you a land

⁴J. Gordon McConville, in J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) 92.

⁵Trent C. Butler: “Josh 24 is atemporal. It sets itself up as an occasion that has validity for all Israel throughout time.” In his *Joshua 13–24*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 331.

⁶Gerhard von Rad, “Ancient Word and Living Word,” *Interpretation* 15/1 (1961) 8.

⁷Though deeply appreciative of von Rad’s work, Bernard M. Levinson and Douglas Dance are not entirely convinced of his positive reading of Deuteronomy. See their essay “The Metamorphosis of Law into Gospel: Gerhard von Rad’s Attempt to Reclaim the Old Testament for the Church,” in *Recht und Ethik im Alten Testament*, ed. Bernard M. Levinson and Eckart Otto (Münster/London: LIT Verlag, 2004) 83–110.

you don't deserve—so then, “serve the LORD.” If you won't do that, well then, heck, take your choice, “choose this day whom you will serve.” It really doesn't matter. Go with any of the gods—who really aren't gods at all—and see where that will take you. You'll get right back to verse two—back on the wrong side of the river, prior to God's election, wandering with no purpose or protection, with really nowhere to go. Don't do that! Stake your claim with Joshua. Join his confession: “As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (24:15). That's not so much a choice as a surrender. Though the words are not used, it is the equivalent of the response of so many of the faithful throughout the Bible, from Abraham to Mary: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Gen 22:1; Luke 1:38; and often).

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There are only two texts in Deuteronomy and Joshua that call upon Israel to “choose,” this one in Josh 24, which as we have seen is not a real choice, and another in Deut 30:19–20. There, in a similar call to make a confessional “choice” in the presence of “witnesses,” the issue is not to choose God but to “choose life.”

I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. (Deut 30:19–20)

Here the issue is life, just like the admonition “Don't play in traffic” that we have seen above.

WHAT SHALL WE PREACH

Specific directions for a sermon will vary of course, depending on the needs of a congregation at a particular time in its life and with particular issues to face in the surrounding culture. This is why pastors are called to ministries in particular rather than mandates to preach in general. This is why sermons stolen from the internet will always be less than adequate, probably not rightly called sermons at all. It is also why preachers need to be regularly among their people, sometimes speaking, but always listening—listening carefully to the text as well. Listening can sometimes take time, but it is essential. Rudolf Bohren, a professor of homiletics in Heidelberg during my student days, put it this way: “[After reading and rereading a text], a light went on for me, an ‘Aha’ experience. With that came the desire to preach on this text. I could say to students, ‘If you discover something new in a

text, then you can preach on it. Read a text until you find in it an “Aha” experience.”⁸

Like the other German theologians cited in the paragraphs below, Rudolf Bohren lived through the challenges of the Third Reich. That was most certainly a time to take a stand. The several readings were among those put together by me for a course in Biblical Preaching in the latter days of my teaching career. The authors of these comments were compelled to think carefully about their work because of the church’s apostasy in their own lifetimes. They determined that part of this failure was due to the lack of proper attention to the Bible, and they knew that they and their people needed to return to this central task. For that reason, their words remain relevant in any time of crisis, which occurs more or less in every age, including perhaps especially our own. In a time of sharp divisions among us, what will it mean to “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (Luke 4:8)? If nothing else, this will require listening carefully to the biblical texts.

But *listen* to texts? Do texts actually speak? A good question, one that Konrad Schmidt addressed early in this century, trying to reclaim this earlier language for a church that now speaks differently about the nature of Scripture.

To let the texts speak may sound hermeneutically naive in our present understanding. For it is generally accepted that the readers fully cooperate in the reading....But it is only a matter of cooperation. Of course, texts themselves remain mute until they are read. But the interaction with them must be learned, if that reading is to provide something new and not just confirm what I already know. One of the most essential characteristics of the Bible is that its texts do not present their concerns with force but desire only to be heard.⁹

This call to listen attentively to the scriptural texts is of utmost importance for the preacher, as noted for example by Karl Barth:

1. In proper sermon preparation the word of scripture has spoken to preachers in such a way that they primarily come before their congregations as themselves hearers....
2. Then there must be the courage to say to others what is now there for *me*. Exegesis and meditation must become speech to others: address, my own speech. I myself am now called upon to be a witness who will remain biblical but will not be stuck fast in exegesis.¹⁰

Speaking to the same theme, here is Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

This meditation is not a mere gathering of our thoughts; it involves the assimilation of the text word-for-word... It is a matter of retaining these words, as Mary did as she ‘pondered them in her heart’ (Luke 2:19). These words should be read as if they were completely new, sent personally to us. They do not ap-

⁸Rudolf Bohren, “Dreimal heilig: Predigt am 16.11.1986 in Flehingen über Jesaja 6,” in *Wider den Ungeist: Predigten* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1989) 105–109 (my translation).

⁹Konrad Schmid, “Die Bibel spricht für sich,” *zeitzeichen*, October 2001, 16.

¹⁰Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Donald E. Daniels (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991) 82.

proach us at an objective distance, but rather as words that come to us from the person of Jesus and are therefore burning issues for us (Kierkegaard: ‘Read them like a love letter’). After the right kind of meditation, the words we have meditated upon come to us ever and again of themselves; they come to us without any conscious mental effort on our part.... With this kind of repeated questioning and rereading, the text begins to take shape. We begin to ‘see’ it, and it arranges itself in manifold thoughts and pictures. When we have ‘seen,’ then we can speak freely. The effort required to achieve this result must be expended without question. But it rewards us with joy when we begin to see. Then the center of the text becomes visible.¹¹

Listening to the text will produce a variety of answers, sometimes this, sometimes that. Again, this is why it is dangerous for preachers to dip even into their own files and come up with a sermon—even a splendid one—from years ago. The text is the same, but the people and the situation have changed. Sing to the Lord a new song! (Isa 42:10).

I admit that when preaching I did not always follow my own counsel here, though happily (for me) I never “stole” another person’s sermon, nor should you! But with too many pressures, too many tragedies, too many deaths, too much of everything, I was sometimes overwhelmed. Still, preachers should never apologize for spending hours in the office (well, unless they are playing video games). To be sure, preachers read and study for themselves but also for their congregations. Without a pastor who reads, a congregation will be trapped with the pastor in a same old same old swamp.

Helmut Thielicke has this sharp warning against such preaching:

When the Word becomes flesh again, that is to say, when it enters into our own time, wearing the dress of the present, ... it becomes apparent that this Word is a divider of spirits and a hammer which breaks the rock in pieces....

Actually, the unfaithful witness is the one who simply transmits the conventional and familiar, unchanged and undigested. He [*sic*] is unfaithful, in the first place, because he is lazy.¹² For the labor of interpretation and contemporization, the work of ‘translation’ is grueling work and is never done without abortive trials and breath-taking risks.... He who simply repeats the old phrases takes no risks; it is easy to remain orthodox and hew to the old line.... *Only he who risks heresies can gain the truth.*

But the conventional preacher is unfaithful, in the second place, because he gives his hearers stones instead of bread.... The safest advice to give to the [preacher] who wants to get through unscathed is to tell him to stick to conventional preaching. Boredom paralyzes people, but it does not make them angry. And finally even the demons fall asleep.... Nobody is ever shocked

¹¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*, ed. and trans. Clyde E. Fant, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 119–120.

¹²Coming from an earlier time, these authors (and translators) quite naturally used masculine pronouns and nouns where we would no longer do so. Rather than using and reusing “*sic*,” I ask that the readers themselves make this correction.

by lukewarm drip from the pulpit, but that temperature may make him sick enough to retch.”¹³

So, what did I hear in Josh 24? What would I want to pass on to the reader? Several things, but at least these:

1. The sermon is based on the text, of course, otherwise it is not a sermon. Still, the words belong to you and your congregation. Listen for the “Aha” and then preach what you have heard. This “Aha” should be subject to test, however. Is your insight merely your own notion or is it consistent with the heart of biblical theology? Check yourself. Thielicke (above) has said that the preacher should *risk* heresy, but that does not mean you should preach heresy unchecked.
2. There is a call in this text, an imperative, there is time to confess, to take a stand. But our confessions, our acts, can only follow God’s actions for us—but daring confessions they must be, as Helmut Thielicke notes above.
3. We are called to pledge allegiance to God, to proclaim and demonstrate our loyalty. This is sometimes hard and sometimes dangerous, but it is always audacious. We are called by the text to take a stand, but faithfulness to the gospel requires us also to be humble.
4. We are called to name and confront false gods, but here too we must do so in humility. That means no self-righteousness, no despising the other, no cheap shots. Beware of hubris; it’s not about us, but about God.
5. There is law in this text, but no legalism. Law is for life, law is gift.
6. Above all, proclaim one God! “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone” (Deut 6:4). This is the primary message of Deuteronomic theology and of this text. It also means, contrary to the spirit of our age, that God is God and we are not. Remember that the most dangerous and seductive of the gods is ourselves. True, humans and their choices matter; we are not ciphers but children of God in the image of God. But again, whatever good we do is in response to what God has done.
7. Then, when all is said and done, surrender to God’s call.

This is obviously more than any preacher can address in one sermon, so find what fits—what speaks—in one given day, in one congregation, and go from there. ⊕

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¹³Helmut Thielicke, *The Trouble with the Church: A Call for Renewal* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 40–41.