“HOLY LAND” IN JOSHUA 18:1–10*

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1. Introduction

The second part of the book of Joshua, chapters 13–21, which deals with the distribution of the land, belongs to a late phase in the literary history of the Hebrew Bible. God no longer plays an active role, as he had done in larger parts of the Pentateuch. He is rather perceived to be present in the land. This implied presence of God makes the land implicitly holy. I will illustrate this by a closer look at the text and the history of Josh 18:1–10.

2. Joshua 18:1–10 as the Centre of the Land Division

Joshua 18:1–10 forms the core of the chapters about the distribution of the land. It is the compositional, geographical, ritual, and theological centre.1

The chapters about the distribution of the land begin with an incitement to take into possession the remaining land and with a statement that the Transjordanian tribes had already received their land directly from Moses (Joshua 13; a recapitulation of Numbers 32). After having dealt with the area of the Transjordanian tribes, chapter 14 reintroduces the land division, now for the Cisjordanian tribes (14:1–5). After a story about Kaleb (14:6–15), in chapters 15 through 17, the first parts of the Cisjordanian land are allotted: first to the tribe of Judah (ch. 15), and then to the house of Joseph, consisting of the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (chs. 16–17).

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* I am happy to dedicate this article to Ed Noort, “Doktorvater” for a couple of years, but a friend before, during, and after this period. Ad multos annos!—A draft of this article was read at the Groningen congress of the Society of Biblical Literature, July 28, 2004 under the title “God Playing a Backstage Role in the Book of Joshua.”

1 See for detailed analyses for the following exposition: J.C. de Vos, Das Los Judas: Über Entstehung und Ziele der Landbeschreibung in Josua 15 (VTSup 95; Leiden 2003),
With Josh 18:1–10, there is a break after this first distribution. Preparations are made for the distribution of the land to the seven remaining tribes: The tent of meeting is pitched in Shiloh, a commission of three men per tribe inspects the remaining land, and Joshua casts lots to determine which part of land goes to which tribe. After this break, in 18:11 until the end of chapter 19, the remaining land is distributed by lots to the seven remaining tribes.

Joshua 18:1–10 thus appears in the centre of the narrative about the distribution of the Cisjordanian land, distinguishing the more important tribes of Judah and Joseph from the seven less important remaining tribes. However, it is also central in another way. By allotting a first part of land, a geographical centre is created: approximately between the area of Judah and Joseph, in Shiloh. As will be outlined, it is irrelevant that this centre is not exactly in the middle between the areas of Judah and Joseph. It is a cognitive geographical centre, a centre in a mental map. And here applies the famous slogan of Jonathan Z. Smith: “map is not territory.”

This textual and mental map centre can furthermore be understood ritually: the text notes that, “the whole assembly of the Israelites,” a phrase with ritual connotations and well known from the Priestly writer, gets together in Shiloh, where the tent of meeting is pitched, and the ritual lots are cast.

3. Naming “God” in Joshua 18:1–10

Joshua 18:1–10 is also a theological centre. Contrary to most of Joshua 13–19, where God is hardly ever mentioned, in Josh 18:1–10 יְהֹוָה, “Yhwh,” occurs six times. In verse 3 “the Lord, the God of your fathers,”

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2 It is obvious that the tribe of Judah is the most important one within Joshua 14–19, the part about the Cisjordanian tribes. The description of its area is the first and most extensive of all subsequent descriptions. The area of Joseph comes directly after the one of Judah. It is less extensive than the one of Judah and comparable with the description of the area of Benjamin, whose tribe, on its turn, is the most important tribe of the remaining seven. More arguments are offered in the course of this article.


4 Cf. Exod 12:3, 6; 16:1, 2, 9, 10 inter alia.

5 Josh 18:3, 6, 7 (2x), 8, 10. In the remaining corpus of Joshua 13–19, יְהֹוָה occurs only in 13:1, 8, 14, 33; 14:2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 (2x), 12 (3x), 14; 15:13; 17:4 (2x), 14; 19:50, 51.