

Joshua's Journey of Discipleship¹

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the dimensions of Joshua's journey of discipleship. The thesis of the paper is that such a journey begins with Joshua's movement from the shadow of Moses to the shadow of the Lord. And that means that Joshua is not only a person who follows in the footsteps of Moses, but he also advances uniquely towards fulfilling the call of God. And that is seen secondly, in the way he continues his journey, in a movement from the generation of Exodus that became the generation of failure, to which he belongs, by age, to the generation born in the wilderness that became the generation of entering the Promised Land. Joshua became part of that generation, through a continual advance, characterized by a constant submission, in obedience to the will of God. This continual advance in faithfulness, enables Joshua, as it is argued in the third part of the paper, not only to create a generation of obedience but also to become an inspirational model for future leaders and generations in the history of the people of God. Therefore, the exploration of the beginning, continuation, and fruit of Joshua's journey of discipleship, reveals the necessary ingredients of any journey of discipleship, beginning with the departure from human models and patterns, and continuing with a constant alignment with the patterns of the will of God. Only as such, a journey of discipleship could have as its fruit a relevant legacy, whose helpful illustration is Joshua and his life.

Keywords: *discipleship, journey, beginning, obedience, faithfulness*

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Introduction

Discipleship is an important subject of the spiritual life. In his article, titled, “Evangelism and Discipleship: The God Who Calls, the God Who Sends,” Walter Brueggemann, defines discipleship as: “... to follow God’s presence and purpose and promise with the disciplines necessary to the project” (Brueggemann 2004, 122). Yet, it is regularly connected with the theology of the New Testament. In this context, the argument of this article is rooted in the conviction that one could find in the stories of the Old Testament many illustrations of the subject of discipleship, for example, “Moses and Joshua; Elijah and Elisha; sons of the prophets; sages; Israel as YHWH’s disciple” (Măcelaru 2011, 11). In this context, Joshua’s experience is a great model for the growth in spiritual maturity, a reality that is obligatory for any person who is engaged in ministry, and for the Christian communities in every generation.

Moreover, Joshua’s story is a helpful reminder of the fact that discipleship is a journey of transformation. In this regard, Joshua’s journey of discipleship, is also an informative one, regarding the necessary ingredients for such a journey to be a transformative one. When someone compares the beginning and the end of the book of Joshua, one will realize that the entire book is in one sense the revelation of the way Joshua sojourns from the condition of being the assistant of Moses (Josh 1:1) to the status of becoming the servant of the Lord (Josh 24:29). And this is for Joshua a lifelong journey.

However, for the embarkment on this spiritual journey of transformation, from the starting point of God’s call addressed to Joshua (Josh 1:1-3), some vital movements needed to become reality. One is the move from being part of a generation of disobedience to God, to a generation of obedience to God. Yet, this move is not automatic, rather it takes a consistent embrace and internalization of the will of God that leads to being animated by God’s perspective of reality (Num 14:6-9). In addition, the embarkment on this journey of transformation has as its fruit, the growth in spiritual maturity, that replaces the naivety of an immature assistant (Exod 32:15-18), with the discernment of an experienced servant (Josh 24:19-2).

1. The Beginning of Joshua’s Journey of Discipleship

An attentive reader of the Old Testament will observe that in all the appearances of Joshua in the Pentateuch, he is under the authority of Moses. If in Exodus 17:8-13, he is portrayed as one of the warriors fighting under Moses’ authority, in Exodus 24:13, he is portrayed as Moses’ assistant, joining Moses in the unique ascension to the mountain of God (McConville & Williams 2010, 13). The next appearance in the book of Exodus, joining Moses, is in the context of the urgently required return from the mountain in the context of Israel’s idolatrous deviation (Exod 32).

With this occasion Joshua positions himself outside the devastating circle of Israel's sin of idolatry, making the tent of meeting his refugee place: "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent" (Exod 33:11). He positions himself as a loyal assistant in Numbers 11:28 and travels the road towards becoming Moses's successor. There are two instances in the narrative of the Pentateuch that are important for this evolution. One is the sending of the spies in Numbers 13, where "we learn for the first time that Moses renamed Hoshea from the tribe of Ephraim as Joshua (Num 13:16; also, in Deut 32:44)" (Hess 1996, 22). Hess' comment about the significance of this act for Joshua's future role, as Moses' successor, is very relevant. He compares Moses' act with the act of God in renaming Abraham and Jacob, a naming that symbolizes the future role of that person (Hess 1996, 22). Hess continues:

Joshua is commissioned to succeed Moses in Numbers 27:18–23. There he is referred to as someone in whom is the spirit. The public commissioning involves Moses' laying of his hands upon Joshua and commissioning him (Heb. *wayēšawwēhū*, v. 23). The public transfer of Moses' authority (Heb. *hōd*) is partial, as Moses will continue to lead the people for a time. As part of his responsibilities, Joshua will stand before Eleazar the priest who will discern God's will through the Urim. Joshua is to command the people (Hess 1996, 22).

The preparation of Joshua, as Moses's successor is signaled further by Moses' confession in front of the entire nation of Israel. This confession contains not only a recapitulation of the past experiences with God (Deut 1:1-33, but also of God's judgment of Israel for disobedience, a judgment that includes Moses (Deut 1:33-37). It also includes God's validation of Joshua in the commands given to Moses, regarding him (Deut 1:38). God's validation is enhanced by God's direct address to Joshua (Deut 31:23). Hess' comment is again helpful:

As the end of Moses' time on earth approaches, God assures Joshua that his role will include leadership of the people as they enter the Promised Land. Deuteronomy 32:44 describes how "Moses came with Joshua son of Nun" to teach the people the song of that chapter. However, Joshua's name is spelled "Hoshea," like his original name (Num. 13:16)...The intention of these events in Deuteronomy is to demonstrate that Joshua's leadership is based upon God's instructions, through Moses, to appoint him (Hess 1996, 23).

The entire evolution of Joshua presented in the Pentateuch, happens in the shadow of Moses. And this is signaled in the beginning of the book of Joshua where the death of Moses is connected with the address of God (Josh 1:1).

However, in the book of Joshua, he is the main character, "named about 205 times in the Old Testament, 148 times in this book...twice in the New Testament..." (Gangel 2002, 10). And in the way Joshua is presented, signals the

road he embarked, from the shadow of Moses (Kissling 1996, 69; Hawk 2000, 3), to the shadow of the Lord (Ps 91:1). It is another of “God’s ‘Now’... a turning point in history... The old age has passed... The news is about to begin...” (Hamlin 1983, 4). Goldingay (2011, 2) states this move when observes the fact that “Joshua takes up the story from the end of Deuteronomy,” succeeding Moses “as the person designated by God to take the Israelites into the land.”

Yet, Joshua demonstrates along the narrative of the book that he fully embraces this transformation under the guidance of the Lord. And for the narrator, this journey from the description of Joshua as Moses’ assistant (Josh 1:1) to the description of Joshua as the servant of the Lord (Josh 24:29), seems to be an important theme, with important connotations for the understanding of discipleship as a journey with and under God’s guidance. Kissling (1996, 87) underlines that:

We have seen that a pattern emerges in the portrayal of Joshua. Joshua begins by being the recipient of encouragement from others (1:6, 7, 9, 18; 2:9–11, 24; 8:1; 10:8; 11:6) and develops into a character who gives encouragement to others (10:25; 17:14–18; 18:3; 23:6). The pattern is not a simplistic one of continual upward progress, for Joshua receives encouragement from Yahweh on one occasion even after he had stopped the sun. But the pattern is, nevertheless, clear.

2. The Continuation of Joshua’s Journey of Discipleship

If Joshua’s spiritual journey of discipleship starts with the road from the condition of being Moses’ servant to the status of being God’s servant (Josh 1:1; 24:29), it continues with the road from being part of a generation characterized by disobedience as a way of living, that leads to failure, to becoming part of a generation that makes obedience a way of living, that leads to success (Josh 1:2-4; Num 14; Judg 2:7). Joshua was, by age, part of the generation that was judged by God because their constant hardness, that became their way of living. Martin Noth (1968, 101) notices that the cause for their attitude was the “lack of trust in the powerful guidance of their God” and this is punished by God’s decision that the present generation of Israelites should not enter the land.

The writer of the epistle to Hebrew underlines this reality as a warning for the recipient community of his address:

do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years. Therefore, I was angry with that generation, and I said, “They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways” (Heb 3:8-11).

Joshua witnessed not only the spiritual deviation of his generation, the Exodus generation, but he witnessed also the fulfillment of God's judgment against them (Num 14:28-38). And this judgment is a consequence of their unbelief expressed in the acceptance of the spies' report that described the entrance into the Promised Land as an impossible task (Num 13:31-33). This report triggered not only people's old desire to return to Egypt (Num 14:1-4) but also endangered Joshua and Caleb, whose report was different, yet expressing their trust in the Lord (Num 14:6-10). In this regard, Matties is right when notices the distinction of Joshua, seen in his decision to continue to rely on God and His promise: "Major characters in biblical texts are often portrayed as ambiguous and complex figures. Joshua proves to be an exception. Based on the choices he makes, and the motives attributed to him, the narrator depicts him as relying completely on God and trusting God's capacity to do what God intends" (Matties 2012, 394).

Joshua was part of the Exodus generation, a generation that received great promises from God, yet it became the generation of failure. By contrast, Joshua demonstrates that even surrounded by people that make unbelief in God a lifestyle, is possible to be different. Joshua's life became a path to be followed by an entire generation, the generation of those born in the wilderness. He creates actually through his life (together with Caleb and Phineas) the premises for the formation of a generation that will experience the fulfillment of God's promise regarding the land of Canaan. He becomes "a paradigmatic Israelite who receives the gifts of God's active presence and who responds in faithful obedience..." (Matties 2012, 394).

The contrast between the two generations, the generation of the Exodus that became the generation of failure, and the generation of wilderness that became the generation of fulfillment, is one of the themes that seem important for the editor of the Pentateuch, for "God has preserved his holiness (in judgment), and his faithfulness to his promises (their children will inherit the Promised Land)" (Pakula 2006, 70).

This contrast constitutes not only a warning from the past, with an explanation for the fact that failure in obedience that becomes a way of living, is judged by a righteous God but also an encouragement that the generation of obedience transcends the age limits (Joshua, Caleb, and Phineas were by age part of the generation that perished in the wilderness). Moreover, this generation will always be characterized by a journey towards obedience as a way of living. And this is illustrated by Joshua's journey from being part of a generation disqualified by their spiritual deviations, to becoming part of a generation that experiences the fulfillment of God's promises for His people. The coordinates of God's promise's complex manifestation, as related in the book of Numbers, are summarized accurately, by Dennis T. Olson (1996, 85):

The birth and promise of a new generation of God's people will rise phoenix-like out of the ruins of this old rebellious generation. The children of the old generation whom the rebels used as an excuse for not entering the land (14:3) will become the new inheritors of God's promise (14:31). The new census list in Numbers 26 is a sign of the final death of the wilderness generation (vv. 63-65). But at the same time, the new census list is tangible evidence that God's promises will be kept. A new generation of Israelites will indeed enter the long-awaited land of Canaan.

The entire book of Joshua demonstrates that Joshua is not the only exception, being accompanied by Caleb and Phineas. This evolution leads to a great legacy of Joshua and his companions.

3. The Fruit of Joshua's Journey of Discipleship

I argued at the beginning of this article that Joshua's journey of discipleship starts with the road from the shadow of Moses to the shadow of the Lord. Then, I argued that this journey continues with Joshua's separation from the generation of disobedience and his constant effort to be part of the generation of obedience. Now, I argue that Joshua's journey of discipleship ends with the road from the naivety of an immature assistant of Moses to the discernment of an experienced servant of the Lord. Joshua is acting as naive in a great crisis of the people of God, brought by their idolatrous deviation. At the urgent return, from the mountain where he was joined by Moses, Joshua thought that the noise from the camp was due to their preparation to fight the war of the Lord (Exod 32:17), and he needed to be corrected by Moses (Exod 32:18).

Towards the end of his life, Joshua demonstrates that he traveled a long way to achieving a mature spiritual discernment. And this is the first fruit of Joshua's journey of discipleship that constitutes his perennial legacy: the demonstration that only under the shadow of the Lord, one could develop the required spiritual maturity. One episode is relevant in this regard. It is the last assembly of the people under the leadership of Joshua, narrated in Joshua 24. He is facing the so often seen, confession of the people that they will obey God (Josh 24:16-18), and warns them that this will be impossible for them. His warning demonstrates a profound knowledge of their limits and propensity to failure seen in the Book of Judges 1:27-33, called by Serge Frolov, "A Litany of Failures" (Frolov 2013, 57). It is also a demonstration of Joshua's profound knowledge of God's character (Josh 24:19).

Gordon Matties (2012, 394) sees in this episode the fact that Joshua "takes up Moses' mantle and becomes the servant of the Lord (24:25-26)." David G. Firth (2021, 70), argues that the expression God's "servant," used to describe Moses, associates him "with David and the enigmatic servant in the book of Isaiah," yet, is used also regarding Joshua in the end of the book, provide a clarification that

Joshua continues “the pattern Moses laid down.” For Matties (2012, 394), Joshua is a “prototype of the ideal royal leader,” yet, more a “prophetic/royal figure who models faithfulness to the Lord and his Torah and who exhorts the people to do the same” (Matties 2012, 394).

Richard Nelson adds to the characterization of Joshua as a model, an important dimension. Nelson (1997, 21) notices first, the fact that “the plot of Joshua stretches out between the death of Moses and the death of Joshua, who begins as the servant of Moses (‘attendant,’ 1:1), but at the end is called ‘servant of Yahweh’ (24:29).” Then he notices that Joshua is portrayed as “a royal figure, one who particularly resembles Josiah.” Furthermore, Nelson (1997, 22) writes:

This becomes evident when one compares:
 1:6–9 to Deut. 17:18–20 and 1 Kings 2:1–4, the royal standard of courage and obedience
 1:7 and 23:6 to 2 Kings 22:2, the royal standard of undeviating integrity
 5:10–12 to 2 Kings 23:21–23, royal sponsorship of a correct Passover
 8:30–35 to 2 Kings 23:2–3, royal leadership in pledging loyalty to the law.
 In the context of Deuteronomy through 2 Kings, the figure of Joshua serves as a forerunner for the ideological role played by later kings, and especially for the expansionistic and reforming policies of Josiah. As his name seems to signify (Sir. 46:1), Joshua was the ideal “savior,” who not only won battles and secured possession of the land but was able to hold the people to perfect loyalty his whole life (24:31).

The legacy of Joshua as a model for a mature, faithful servant of the Lord, is underlined also by the editor of the book of Judges. What becomes clear in the beginning of the book of Judges, is that Joshua is not only “a foil for the Israelites of the judges’ era” (Webb 1987, 120), but also that Joshua creates a generation of obedience and faithfulness (Brensinger 1999, 40), a people that distinguish by serving God (Smith and Bloch-Smith 2021, 158–159; Wilcock 1992, 28). John Hamlin (1990, 59) rightly states: “Joshua’s generation had ‘served the Lord’ (2:7) and ‘obeyed the commandments of the Lord’ (v. 17). The listening community may have been reminded of the good kings, Hezekiah (715–687) and Josiah (640–609), who ‘did what was right in the eyes of the Lord’ (2 Kgs. 18:3; 22:2). This was ‘the generation of the upright’ (Ps. 112:2) ‘who seek’ the Lord (24:6).”

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore the dimensions of Joshua’s journey of discipleship. First, the exploration focused on the beginning of this journey, a transformative one, as he departs the shadow of Moses and enters more and more under the shadow of the Lord. The fact that this movement is a reality in Joshua’s life, was seen, in the second focus of the exploration of Joshua’s journey of discipleship,

namely, his departure from the patterns of his generation, a generation of failure in embarking on a path where to benefit of God's promises, through obedience.

Joshua's life constantly contrasts the life of his generation, and his obedience, transformed in a way of being, qualifies him to be not only the successor of Moses but also to become a prototype for future leaders of the people of God, in history. Yet, in the end, was observed the fact, that the uniqueness of Joshua, is rooted not only in these spiritual movements that were decisive for his formation as a faithful servant of the Lord but also that his transformation became the key to the formation of an entire generation characterized by service of the Lord, in obedience and faithfulness.

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Jošuiino putovanje učeništva

Sažetak

Ovaj članak nastoji istražiti dimenzije Jošuiina putovanja učeništva i pritom postavlja tezu da takvo putovanje započinje Jošuinim izlaskom iz Mojsijeve sjene i ulaskom u Gospodinovu sjenu. To znači da Jošua nije samo osoba koja ide Mojsijevim stopama, nego da jedinstveno napreduje prema ispunjenju Božjega poziva. Drugo, to se vidi u načinu na koji Jošua nastavlja svoje putovanje, krećući se od naraštaja Izlaska koji je postao naraštaj neuspjeha, kojemu i sâm pripada, prema naraštaju rođenom u pustinji koji je postao naraštaj ulaska u Obećanu zemlju. Jošua je postao dio tog naraštaja stalno napredujući pokoravanjem u poslušnosti

volji Božjoj. To kontinuirano napredovanje u vjernosti omogućuje Jošui, kako se tvrdi u trećemu dijelu članka, ne samo da stvori naraštaj poslušnosti, nego i da postane nadahnućem budućim vođama i naraštajima u povijesti Božjega naroda. Stoga istraživanje početka, nastavka i ploda Jošua putovanja učenitva otkriva nužne sastojke bilo kojega putovanja učenitva, počinjući napuštanjem ljudskih modela i obrazaca te nastavljajući stalnim prilagođavanjem obrascima Božje volje. Samo takvo putovanje učenitva može kao plod ostaviti relevantnu baštinu, a Jošua i njegov život u tome nam služe kao korisna ilustracija.