

JOSHUA'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE COMMANDER OF  
YHWH'S ARMY (JOSH 5:13–15):  
LITERARY CONSTRUCTION OR REFLECTION  
OF A ROYAL RITUAL?

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1. INTRODUCTION:  
THE BOOK OF JOSHUA AND ASSYRIAN WARFARE PROPAGANDA

It has often been observed that Assyrians were masters in warfare and also in warfare propaganda, using texts and images to their advantage. Within the biblical text of 2 Kgs 18–20, which combines different accounts of the aborted siege of Jerusalem in 701 B.C.E., a passage recalls how high officers of the Assyrian army were sent by the king to Jerusalem. In front of the wall of the city one of these officers utters a speech (in the Judean language!), inviting the inhabitants of the city to surrender and to accept the Assyrian king as their friend:

Then the Rabshakeh stood and called out in a loud voice in the language of Judah, "Hear the word of the great king, the king of Assyria! ... Do not let Hezekiah make you rely on Yhwh by saying, Yhwh will surely deliver us, and this city will not be given into the hand of the king of Assyria. ... Make your peace with me and come out to me; then every one of you will eat from your own vine and your own fig tree, and drink water from your own cistern.... Has any of the gods of the nations ever delivered its land out of the hand of the king of Assyria? ... Who among all the gods of the countries have delivered their countries out of my hand, that Yhwh should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand?" (2 Kgs 18:28–35)

This scene is probably not just an invention of the author of the biblical narrative. It is likely based on a concrete ritual of propaganda that would

take place during the siege of a city. A relief from the palace of Sargon II<sup>1</sup> illustrates the attack on the city of Pazashi, otherwise unknown. It can be identified with the city of Panzish, since the inscription locates it in the land of Manna in front of the pass leading to the land of Zikirtu<sup>2</sup>. A battering ram, which approaches the city, figures in the representation of the siege of the city. In the turret one can distinguish a man apparently holding an open scroll from which he is reading. This may indeed be a propaganda text written in the language of the besieged city inviting the population to surrender. This psychological warfare, which is still used somewhat differently in modern wars (for example, distribution of pamphlets encouraging desertion in the Persian Gulf War), is part of a broader Assyrian agenda of “rituals” that aim at demonstrating the superiority of the Assyrian king, his gods and his army.

This demonstration can also be made by oracles given to the king before the campaign, by royal inscriptions or by letters to the gods. In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Joshua resembles this kind of warfare propaganda and may also be warfare rituals. As shown especially by K. Lawson Younger and John Van Seters,<sup>3</sup> the book of Joshua contains an important number of parallels to Neo-Assyrian and other warfare accounts and ideology. In Josh 10:8, Yhwh delivers an oracle for Joshua at the cusp of a decisive battle: “Fear not, for I have handed them over to you; not one of them shall stand before you” (see also Josh 1:3–6; 11:6). This oracle very closely parallels numerous oracles given to Esarhaddon by prophets of the goddess Ishtar, assuring him of future victory, as in the following example (SAA 9 1.1): “Esarhaddon, king of the lands, fear not ... I am Ishtar of Arbela, I will flay your enemies and deliver them up to you. I am Ishtar of Arbela. I go before you and behind you”.<sup>4</sup> There is also an interesting parallel between a “Letter to the God” written on behalf of Sargon II and an episode from Josh 10:10–11. Sargon’s “Letter” relates the victory of the Assyrian

1. An image of this relief can be found in Yigael Yadin, *The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands in the Light of Archaeological Study*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 320.

2. I owe this information to Lionel Marti, CNRS, Paris.

3. K. Lawson Younger Jr., *Ancient Conquest Accounts: A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing* (JSOTSup 98; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); John Van Seters, “Joshua’s Campaign of Canaan and Near Eastern Historiography,” *SJOT* 2 (1990): 1–12.

4. Quoted from Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (SBLWAW 12; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 102.

ian army thanks to an intervention of the storm god Adad. The Assyrian and the biblical texts relate a great slaughter of enemies on the descent or ascent of a mountain, and then both episodes are followed by divine military intervention: “The rest of the people, who had fled to save their lives ... Adad, the violent, the son of Anu, the valiant, uttered his loud cry against them; and with flood cloud and stones of heaven, he totally annihilated the remainder.”<sup>5</sup> In a similar way, Josh 10:11 reports: “As they fled before Israel, while they were going down the slope of Beth-Horon, Yhwh threw down huge stones from heaven on them as far as Azekah, and they died; there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword.” Other examples could be added in order to show how deeply the first part of the book of Joshua is influenced by ancient Near Eastern and especially Neo-Assyrian warfare ideology. The question one may ask at this stage is whether these parallels are purely literary imitations or whether they also reflect concrete rituals of warfare.

The Assyrian divine oracles forecasting the king's victory against his enemies are delivered by male or female prophets who are mostly associated with the sanctuary of Ishtar. In the book of Joshua, Yhwh speaks directly to Joshua without any intermediary. This phenomenon may be understood as a literary transformation of a concrete practice that is attested elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, as for instance in 1 Kgs 22:6: “Go up; Yhwh will give it (Ramoth-Gilead) into the hand of the king”; or in Jer 27:17–20, where a negative oracle is given to the king by the prophet Jeremiah. The direct communication between Yhwh and Joshua is therefore based on a prophetic oracular practice, but this oracular practice has been altered either to show that Joshua is indeed as much a prophet as he is a military leader or in order to present him as a second Moses who has the privilege of a direct communication with Yhwh.

The book of Joshua must therefore be understood primarily as a literary and ideological construction in which the invention of the conquest of the land serves the theological agenda of the Deuteronomists.<sup>6</sup> On the

5. Younger, *Ancient Conquest Accounts*, 210.

6. See Nadav Na'aman, “The ‘Conquest of Canaan’ in the Book of Joshua and in History,” in *From Nomadism to Monarchy: Archaeological and Historical Aspects of Early Israel* (ed. Israel Finkelstein and Nadav Na'aman; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society; Washington, D.C.: Biblical Archaeological Society, 1994), 218–81; and Erhard Blum, “Überlegungen zur Kompositionsgeschichte des Josuabuches,” in *The Book of Joshua* (ed. Ed Noort; BETL 250; Leuven: Peeters, 2012), 137–57.

other hand, by including motifs and symbols from ancient Near Eastern warfare discourses, some texts may also allow to uncover reflections of older practices and rituals, beyond their actual function. This point can be illustrated with a short and enigmatic text: Joshua's encounter with the chief of Yhwh's army.

## 2. JOSHUA 5:13–15 IN ITS PRESENT LITERARY CONTEXT

Joshua 5, as it now stands, insures the transition from the crossing of the Jordan in Josh 3:1–5:1 to the divine destruction of Jericho in Josh 6. One can distinguish three units that at first glance appear quite unrelated: the circumcision of the second generation born in the wilderness by Joshua at Gilgal (5:2–9); the first celebration of the Passover in Gilgal combined with the cessation of the manna (5:10–12); and, finally, Joshua's encounter with the chief of Yhwh's army (5:13–15<sup>7</sup>):

When Joshua was in Jericho,<sup>8</sup> he looked up, and saw: and behold a man standing over against him, his sword drawn in his hand. Joshua went to him and said to him: are you for us or for our adversaries? He said: No, I am the chief of Yhwh's army. Now I have come. Joshua fell on his face to the earth. [He bowed down]<sup>9</sup> and said to him: What does my lord say to his servant? The chief of Yhwh's army said to Joshua: Take off your sandal from your foot. Indeed, the place where you are standing is holy. [And Joshua did so.]<sup>10</sup>

7. For questions of textual criticism, see Klaus Bieberstein, *Josua-Jordan-Jericho: Archäologie, Geschichte und Theologie der Landnahmeerzählungen Josua 1–6* (OBO 143; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 226–29; and Blažej Štrba, *Take Off Your Sandals from Your Feet! An Exegetical Study of Josh 5, 13–15* (ÖBS 32; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2008), 81–91.

8. *בְּיַרְיְחוֹ* is often translated “by Jericho” or “next to Jericho” because it does not seem logical that Joshua finds himself already in Jericho. As we will see, one should maintain the grammatical meaning and translate “in Jericho.”

9. *וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה* is missing in LXX. The verb may have been added in order to emphasize Joshua's “pious” behavior.

10. The final notice of accomplishment is lacking in LXX; it may be a later addition in order to underline Joshua's obedience.

This episode has often been considered to be somewhat out of place, a fragment of an older conquest account, or an etiological narrative legitimizing the existence of a sanctuary next to Jericho.<sup>11</sup>

On the literary level, the text is not so “out of order” as many commentators claim. There is no doubt that verse 15 seeks to establish a parallel between Joshua and Moses:

שֶׁל־נִעְלָדְךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו קֹדֶשׁ הוּא  
Take off your sandal from your foot. Indeed, the place where you are standing is holy. (Josh 5:15)

שֶׁל־נִעְלָדְךָ מֵעַל רַגְלֶיךָ כִּי הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה עוֹמֵד עָלָיו אֲדַמְת־קֹדֶשׁ הוּא  
Take off your sandals from your feet. Indeed, the place where you are standing is holy ground. (Exod 3:5)

It is not clear which text depends on the other, but it is clear that through these verses Joshua appears as a new Moses. Interestingly the whole chapter of Josh 5 points back almost in a concentric way to the beginning of the Moses story:<sup>12</sup>

- A Divine revelation to Moses (Exod 3)
- B Passover (Exod 12:1–28)
  - C Circumcision for the Passover (Exod 12:43–50; see also 4:24–26)
  - D Crossing of the Sea (Exod 14)
    - Sinai and wilderness
    - D' Crossing of the Jordan (Josh 3–4)
    - C' Circumcision before the Passover (Josh 5:2–9)
    - B' Passover (Josh 5:10–12)
    - A' Divine revelation to Joshua (Josh 5:13–15)

It is possible that the episodes relating the circumcision and the Passover are post-Dtr texts, which could belong to a “Hexateuchal redaction.”<sup>13</sup> In

11. See, for instance, Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT I/7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953), 23.

12. See also Bieberstein, *Josua-Jordan-Jericho*, 418.

13. For the theory of a competition between a Hexateuchal and a Pentateuchal redaction see Eckhart Otto, *Das Deuteronomium im Pentateuch und Hexateuch: Studien zur Literaturgeschichte von Pentateuch und Hexateuch im Lichte des Deuterono-*

this context the apparition of the divine warrior in Josh 5:13 can be understood as accomplishing the promise made in Exod 23:20: “I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.” Its aim is to connect the book of Joshua as narrowly as possible to the foregoing Pentateuch and thus to *de facto* create a Hexateuch. To that purpose, the redactors also make use of an older tradition, which includes the apparition of a divine warrior.

In the Hebrew Bible, this motif has parallels in Num 22:31 (see v. 23) and 1 Chr 21:16.

Num 22:31: וַיֵּרָא אֶת־מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה נֹצֵב בְּדֶרֶךְ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְיָדוֹ  
 1 Chr 21:16: וַיֵּרָא אֶת־מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה עֹמֵד ... וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְיָדוֹ  
 Josh 5:13: וַיֵּרָא וְהָנָה־אִישׁ עֹמֵד לְנֶגְדוֹ וַחֲרָבוֹ שְׁלֹפָה בְיָדוֹ

All three texts concur in the description of the drawn sword; whereas Numbers and Chronicles use the term *מִלְאָךְ יְהוָה*, the author of Josh 5:13 uses the more neutral *אִישׁ* because the identity of the mysterious person will be revealed later. It is therefore plausible that, in the Hebrew Bible, Josh 5:13–14 is the oldest of the three texts.

In its present context this episode can well be related to the foregoing stories. The exclamation of Yhwh’s commander-in-chief, “Now I have come,” can be read as a response to the circumcision and the Passover. Now that the people, who in fact constitute Joshua’s army, have accomplished both rituals, the conquest, which the previous generation was unable to accomplish (Num 13–14), can start. There may also be a reference to the theophany in the circumcision episode in Josh 5:2–9.<sup>14</sup> The use of *אֲנֹשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה* in 5:4 prepares the military vision of Joshua and the expression *חֲרָבוֹת צְרִימִים* (“flint knives”) in 5:2–3 describing the tool of the circumcision (see *צוֹר* in Exod 4:24–26) may allude to the importance of the sword in 5:13. However, despite these links to the preceding episodes, in its present form, Josh 5:13–15 remains an awkward text.

*miumsrahmen* (FAT 30; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) and Thomas C. Römer and Marc Z. Brettler, “Deuteronomy 34 and the Case for a Persian Hexateuch,” *JBL* 119 (2000): 401–19.

14. Erhard Blum, “Beschneidung und Passa in Kanaan. Beobachtungen und Mutmaßungen zu Jos 5” in *Freiheit und Recht: Festschrift für Frank Crüsemann zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Christof Hardmeier, Rainer Kessler and Andreas Ruwe; Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 292–322, 309–10.

As already mentioned, the order of the divine commander-in-chief for Joshua to take off his sandals and Joshua's execution of this order do not make much sense, if it were not for the fact that they establish a parallel between Joshua and Moses. One may therefore assume that verse 15 did not constitute the original ending of the encounter.<sup>15</sup> The continuation to 5:14 must be found elsewhere.

### 3. JOSHUA 5:13–15 IN ITS ORIGINAL LITERARY CONTEXT

In his commentary on Joshua, Richard Nelson suggests that the original ending of Josh 5:13–15 was “cut out as offensive for theological sensibilities.”<sup>16</sup> There is, however, an easier solution, namely to consider Josh 6:2 and following as the continuation of Joshua's encounter in 5:13–15. Indeed, it has sometimes been suspected that 6:1 is a later insertion which aims to emphasize that the city was totally shut up and could therefore be attacked (Deut 20:11–12 stipulates that when a city “opens” [פתח] itself, it shall not be destroyed);<sup>17</sup>

He said: No, I am the chief of Yhwh's army. Now I have come. Joshua fell on his face to the earth. [He bowed down] and said to him: What does my lord say to his servant? (5:14)

Yhwh said to Joshua; See I have given into your hand Jericho, [along with its king and his soldiers]. (6:2)<sup>18</sup>

15. See also Cuthbert A. Simpson, *The Early Traditions of Israel: A Critical Analysis of the Pre-Deuteronomiac Narrative of the Hexateuch* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1948), 287–88. See similarly Volkmar Fritz, *Das Buch Josua* (HAT I/7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1994), 63.

16. Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 82.

17. Edmond Jacob, “Une théophanie mystérieuse: Josué 5, 13–15,” in *Ce Dieu qui vient: Etudes sur l'Ancien et le Nouveau Testament offertes au Professeur Bernard Renaud à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire* (ed. Raymond Kuntzmann; LeDiv 159; Paris: Cerf, 1995), 131–35; Jacques Briend, “Les sources de l'histoire deutéronomique: Recherches sur Jos1–12” in *Israël construit son histoire: L'historiographie deutéronomique à la lumière des recherches récentes* (ed. Albert de Pury, Thomas Römer and Jean-Daniel Macchi; MdB 34; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1996), 343–74, 353.

18. The king and the soldiers do not play a major role in the following story. The king of Jericho appears however in Josh 2. They may either reflect an older account of the conquest of Jericho, or constitute later additions.

It is not unusual that a text switches from the “chief of Yhwh’s army” to Yhwh himself; such passages are frequent in the Hebrew Bible (see for instance Exod 3:2–4 or Judg 6:12–14). If we accept this reconstruction of the original narrative, we are also able to understand why the episode opens with a statement indicating that Joshua is in Jericho. The “in” would then indicate that the context of the encounter is that of a vision. This theory can be strengthened by a comparison with an Assyrian text, the report of Assurbanipal’s campaign against Elam. This campaign is preceded by a vision in which a prophet sees the goddess Ishtar armed and standing in front of the king telling him that she will fight for him in his war against the Elamites:

Ištar heard my desperate sighs and said to me: “Fear not!” She made my heart confident, saying: “Because of the prayer you said with your hand lifted up, your eyes being filled with tears, I have compassion with you.” The very same night as I implored her, a visionary (šabrû) lay down and had a dream. When he woke up, he reported to me the nocturnal vision shown to him by Ištar: “Ištar who dwells in Arbela entered, having quivers hanging from her right and left and holding a bow in her hand. She had drawn a sharp-pointed sword, ready for battle. You stood before her and she spoke to you like a mother who gave birth to you. Ištar, the highest of the gods, called you and gave you the following order: ‘You are prepared for war, and I am ready to carry out my plans.’ You said to her: ‘Wherever you go, I will go with you!’ But the Lady of Ladies answered you: ‘You stay here in your place ... until I go accomplish that task.’”<sup>19</sup>

This Assyrian document from the seventh century B.C.E. contains several parallels to Josh 5: the king who prepares for war receives through a vision of a seer an oracle of victory given by the goddess Ishtar, who appears with a drawn sword and ready to engage in battle. This very much resembles the depiction of the commander of Yhwh’s army. Joshua’s bowing down precedes the divine announcement of the handing over of Jericho and matches Assurbanipal’s prayer which precedes the vision of the specialist who then sees Ishtar apparently already standing in the battlefield. It is, therefore, quite plausible to argue that the author of Josh 5:13–14 has taken over such an account, which may, however, itself also reflect the ritual of preparation for a king before waging war. The Assyrian text suggests the existence of a practice where a specialist is put in a condition to have a vision in which

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19. Quoted from Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 147–48.



a divine warrior appears and promises divine assistance for the coming battle. The description of the drawn sword and the imminence of the battle are very similar in both texts. We should therefore take our investigation one step further and ask whether the motif of the drawn sword has any relation to a warfare ritual.

#### 4. JOSHUA 5:13–15 AND THE QUESTION OF A RITUAL BACKGROUND

It has become clear that the military nuance of the theophany introduces the following conquest stories and gives Joshua a royal status. Is the emphasis on the drawn sword of the divine warrior proper only to ancient Near Eastern iconography of the warrior god, or can we also detect behind this motif the recollection of a royal ritual? Othmar Keel has pointed out Egyptian texts and images reflecting the idea that a deity hands his weapons over to the king in order to guarantee his victory against his enemies.<sup>20</sup> An inscription from Karnak relates a dream of Merenptah, which comes quite close to Josh 5:13–15. He sees in his dream something “like a statue of Ptah,” who speaks to the king and gives him his sword in order to strengthen his heart: “Then his majesty saw in a dream as if a statue of Ptah were standing before Pharaoh.... He spoke to him: ‘Take thou (it),’ while he extended to him the sword, ‘and banish thou the fearful heart from thee.’”<sup>21</sup> The handing over of divine arms to the Pharaoh is apparently a common iconographic motif. A stele from Beth-Shean shows Ramses II stretching out his right hand in order to receive the divine sword from Amon-Re. The inscription reads: “I am giving thee the victory.... I am giving you the boundaries as far as you desirest.... Accept for yourself a sword against all foreign countries.”<sup>22</sup> In the so-called Israel stele there is a double picture of Merenptah receiving a sword from Amon-Re. In this inscription, Amon-Re tells him: “Take for yourself your sword for valour, in every foreign country.”<sup>23</sup> A similar scenario occurs for Ramses III in

20. Othmar Keel, *Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen im Alten Testament: ikonographische Studien zu Jos 8,12–26; Ex 17,8–13; 2 Kön 13,4–19 und 1 Kön 22,11* (OBO 5; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1974), 82–88.

21. James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Records of Egypt: Historical Documents From the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1962), 245 §582.

22. J. Černý, “Stela of Ramesses II from Beisan,” *ErIsr* 5 (1958): 75\*–82\*, 76.

23. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical: 4, Merenptah and the Late 19th Dynasty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), IV/1, 10.

Medinet Habu: Ramses III receives a divine sword and in the next scene he is on a chair and a prince is holding the sword for him. This motif of the handing over of a sword given by a god is probably more than a literary and iconographical motif and may correspond to a ritual, in which, perhaps after a vision or a dream incubation, a sword is given to the king by a priest or another cultic person.

The theme of divine weapons given to the king is also attested in the Levant. Jean-Marie Durand has published letters relating to the storm god Addu of Aleppo, the “prototype of the Babylonian Marduk.”<sup>24</sup> These documents report that when the king of Mari was enthroned, Addu sent to the king of Mari the weapons with which he had defeated the Sea. A letter written perhaps by the governor of Terqa (A.1858) informs Zimri-Lim that Addu’s armaments have arrived from Aleppo and that he has placed them in the temple of Dagan while waiting for further instructions of the king.<sup>25</sup> Another letter (A.1858) provides further information: a prophet received the following oracle from Addu: “I have given the whole land to Yahdun-Lin [the father of Zimri-Lim], and because of my arms, no rival arose for him in battle.” Later, in the same letter Addu also addresses an oracle to the present king Zimri-Lin: “I have brought you to the throne of your father and I have given you the arms with which I fought against the Sea. I have anointed you with the oil of my invincibility and no one could stand in front of you.”<sup>26</sup> As Jean-Marie Durand rightly points out, these letters must reflect a royal ritual in which a king, either on the day of his enthronement or before waging a war, receives divine arms meant to confirm divine assistance and establish the king’s superiority. A similar case can be detected in the inscription of Yahdun-Lim, in which he claims: “Dagan proclaimed my kingship, gave me the powerful weapon that fells the kings, my enemies.”<sup>27</sup>

The so-called Broken Obelisk from the eleventh century B.C.E. may also refer to the handing over of a divine weapon, even if the interpretation is much discussed. On the picture a divine hand emerging from the

24. Jean-Marie Durand, *Le culte d'Addu d'Alep et l'affaire d'Alahthum* (Florilegium Marianum VII; Paris: Société pour l'étude du Proche-Orient Ancien, 2002), 1.

25. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

26. *Ibid.*, 134–37.

27. Quoted after Lluís Feliu, *The God Dagan in Bronze Age Syria* (CHANE 9; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 158. I thank Jack Sasson for pointing out this text to me.

winged disk in heaven is handing over a bow<sup>28</sup> to the Assyrian king, often identified with Aššur-bel-ka. The text, which apparently is a compilation from at least two different sources, opens with an introduction in which it is stated that the king acts with the support of the god Aššur (?). This could be related to a gift of divine arms to a king, but even if this evidence is not as clear as the foregoing ones there are enough extrabiblical indications that support the existence of a ritual during which the king was invested with divine arms.

Going back to the Hebrew Bible, such a handing over is also attested in Ezek 30:22–26. This passage, which is part of a larger oracle against Egypt in 30:20–26, is probably a reworking of the older oracle found in v. 20–21:<sup>29</sup>

Therefore thus says the Lord Yhwh: I am against Pharaoh king of Egypt, and will break his arms, [both the strong arm and the one that was broken]<sup>30</sup>; and I will make *the sword* fall from his hand.... I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, and put *my sword* in his hand; but I will break the arms of Pharaoh, and he will groan before him with the groans of one mortally wounded. I will strengthen the arms of the king of Babylon, but the arms of Pharaoh shall fall. And they shall know that I am Yhwh, when I put my sword into the hand of the king of Babylon. He shall stretch it out against the land of Egypt, and I will scatter the Egyptians among the nations and disperse them throughout the countries. Then they shall know that I am Yhwh.

The broken arms of Pharaoh are opposed to the strong arms of the Babylonian king and the sword of Pharaoh, which—if we relate this oracle to the Egyptian texts and images discussed above—was given to him by the gods of Egypt is opposed to Yhwh's sword, which Yhwh will now give to the king of Babylon. This oracle clearly presupposes the idea of handing over a divine weapon to a king, but here the king is a foreign king, who becomes, like Cyrus in Second Isaiah, the tool of Yhwh's military intervention in favor of his people. Ezekiel 30 may, therefore, also present an appropriation of a royal ritual.

28. See, for instance, Tallay Ornan, "Who Is Holding the Lead Rope? The Relief of the Broken Obelisk," *Iraq* 69 (2007): 59–72, 60.

29. See, for instance, Walter Zimmerli, *Ezekiel* (BKAT 13/1–2; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969), 740–46.

30. This precision is added because the older oracle only spoke of one arm of Pharaoh that Yhwh announces to break.

In the light of these parallels we may indeed imagine that the short encounter of Joshua with the chief of Yhwh's army is composed with the practice of such a ritual in mind. Interestingly, in the conquest of Ai, Joshua is equipped with a sword. In 8:18 Yhwh says to him: "Stretch out the sword that is in your hand toward Ai (נָטָה בְּכִידוֹן אֶשֶׁר-בְּיָדְךָ אֶל-הָעִי), for I will give it into your hand'. And Joshua stretched out the sword that was in his hand toward the city." If we compare this passage with Josh 5:13–15, we find that the sword has now wandered from the divine commander to the earthly commander. As in 5:15, Joshua immediately obeys the divine order. Joshua's sword appears again in 8:26 in the final comment on Israel's victory: "Joshua did not draw back his hand, with which he stretched out the sword, until he had utterly destroyed all the inhabitants of Ai." In Josh 8, however the author uses the rarer word כִּידוֹן instead of חֶרֶב. This may be explained by the fact that Josh 8 is an older story written without knowledge of the scene of Josh 5:13–15.<sup>31</sup> The word חֶרֶב associated with Joshua appears in Josh 10:28 ("Joshua took Makkedah on that day, and struck it and its king with the edge of the sword") and similarly in 10:32, 27, 39, etc., and in Josh 11:10 ("Joshua took Hazor, and struck its king down with the sword"; compare also 11:12). Since the texts never explain how Joshua got his sword, the best hypothesis might indeed be to imagine that he received the divine sword after the encounter related in Josh 5:13–15.

## 5. SUMMARY

The book of Joshua appropriates several concepts and ideologies of Neo-Assyrian and other ancient Near Eastern warfare propaganda. Joshua's encounter with the commander of Yhwh's army can be related to Assyrian oracles in which the king receives the promise of divine assistance before the battle. In its present context, the scene follows the circumcision of the second wilderness generation and the celebration of the first Passover in the land. The divine warrior appears, therefore, after the accomplishment of rituals that highlight Israel's status as Yhwh's people. Originally, however, Josh 5:13–15 was conceived as the opening of the conquest story that begins in 6:2. In a vision Joshua sees the divine commander with a sword,

31. Keel (*Wirkmächtige Siegeszeichen*, 86–87) thinks that Josh 5:13–15 had originally כִּידוֹן, which later had been changed into חֶרֶב.

and through this commander, Yhwh ensures Joshua that he has given Jericho into his hands.

The importance of the sword can be related to iconographic and textual documents from Egypt, Mari and Assyria where a king receives divine weapons before battle or at the moment of his enthronement. This motif probably reflects a concrete ritual in which a divine sword or bow (or other weapons) were given to the king by a priest or another cultic person. Since Joshua, who is depicted as a royal figure, often appears after 5:13–15 with a sword, we can speculate that this sword was given to him by the divine messenger. The literary legitimization of Joshua may, therefore, be based on a royal ritual known to the author of 5:13–15. The theme of a god-given sword is not limited to the ancient Near East. Perseus receives a sword from Zeus to kill Medusa; in Japanese mythology the magical sword Kusanagi was given to the emperor by a goddess; and one may also think of King Arthur and so on. In this respect Josh 5:13–15 participates in an almost archetypical topic of royal legitimization.

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