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Bible Review's Supporting Roles by Elie Wiesel Elie Wiesel February 13, 2025 23 Comments 159232 views Read Elie Wiesel's essay on Joshua in the Bible as it originally appeared in Bible Review, December 1998. The article was first republished in Bible History Daily in 2013.—Ed. Ever modest, Joshua hangs back as Moses leads him by the hand in this 15th-century stained-glass panel from the Church of St. Lawrence in Nuremberg, Germany. For Elie Wiesel, Joshua is a sad, troubled character despite his successes in battle and his unflinching devotion to Moses and God. Lacking experience in war, Joshua is sent by Moses to fight the Amalekites; when Joshua succeeds Moses, he leads the bloody conquest of Canaan. Yet this reluctant warrior retires to live out his days with only lonely memories, and when he dies, he is buried without the pomp and circumstance usually afforded a hero. Wiesel notes an immense sadness about Joshua in the Bible, a sadness caused perhaps by the noise and fury of Joshua's life. Image: Sonia Halliday. Joshua, the perfect disciple. Obedient and humble. The man whose devotion to his master can serve as an example to all. God's chosen, just as Moses had been. The servant-become leader, whom God and Moses do not cease to encourage—so much so that we wonder why he had such a need. Is it because, in his humility, Joshua felt so inferior to Moses that he believed himself inadequate, unqualified and even unworthy to complete a task that only his master was capable of completing satisfactorily? Joshua will inherit political and religious authority from Moses but not his prophetic style. God accomplished miracles for Joshua. He went so far as to upset the laws of nature by ordering the sun to stand still, but Joshua's speech lacks the magic that emanates from the words of the prophets. A great melancholy emerges from his life story, a sadness that stays with him to the end of his days. Is it because his life unfolds in the midst of noise and fury? In truth, Joshua makes me afraid. His personality is too dark, involved in too many battles, too many confrontations. The man of blood and glory, he is the one sought out when someone is needed to throw himself into the fray, to push back or attack the enemy. To read his book is to move forward into the ashes, among disfigured corpses. In the Scriptures, his position is assured. The image he projects is always without fault. Admirable is his devotion to Moses. Always stationed at the entrance to his tent, Joshua is the guardian of the door. He is at Moses' side only when he is called. Never would he disturb Moses in his solitude. Only one incident could, without surprising us, have a negative connotation: Joshua learns that two young men, Eldad and Medad, are walking around the encampment, prophesizing to the people. Annoyed by their lack of respect, Joshua hastens to inform Moses and suggests that he imprison them. But Moses, more humane and more generous than ever, rebukes him: "Are you so concerned about my honor that you think you need to protect me? May all the people become prophets!" (Numbers 11:29). That said, Moses always has confidence in Joshua, and we do too. He carries out the missions entrusted to him scrupulously, with efficiency and devotion—that is certain. Are they dangerous? Joshua knows neither fear nor doubt. When Moses names him military commander and sends him to fight against the Amalekites, he goes. What has he done to learn how to command? No matter. He confronts the enemy, and he wins the battle. When Moses orders him to join the spies sent to cross the Canaanite frontier and bring back a precise account of the military and economic capacities of the land promised to the people of Israel, he goes. The questionnaire the scouts receive from Moses reads like an espionage document. The commander in chief wants to know "whether the population is strong or weak, few in number or many, if the country is good or bad, if the towns are open or fortified, the land fertile or barren, if there are trees or not" (Numbers 13:18-20). The expedition takes 40 days. The text gives us the opinion of the majority and that of the minority: ten against two. Who are the ten? Eminent heads of the tribes of Israel. Their accounts are desperate and hopeless: They say the country runs with milk and honey, but the people who live there are powerful. They are stronger than we are, the towns are large and fortified, the people are gigantic. In their eyes, and in ours, we are no more than grasshoppers. The ten make up an overwhelming majority, but it is the minority of two who carry the day. Joshua, head of the tribe of Ephraim, and Caleb, head of the tribe of Judah, see things differently. Their report is optimistic. Reflecting God's design, their view prevails—but at a price. Terrified, the people rise up with cries and lamentations against Moses and Aaron: "If only we had died in the land of Egypt..." In vain, Joshua and Caleb try to reason with and to encourage the demoralized Israelites. The more enraged among them attack the two and are ready to stone them. That overwhelming, depressing day will remain marked in the collective memory of Israel by the punishment imposed: It is the moment when God decides that of all those who came out of Egypt, only Joshua and Caleb shall enter the Promised Land. The ten skeptical scouts will die soon after, and the others rescued from slavery in Egypt will perish in the desert. FREE ebook: Ancient Israel in Egypt and the Exodus. In the book that bears his name, Joshua impresses us with his harshness: it depicts a violence, even a thirst for violence, that is found nowhere else. The conquest of the land of Canaan occurs with fire and blood. Too much destruction at every turn. The only moment of tenderness in this account is the story of Rahab in Jericho. The brave and generous prostitute saves Joshua's spies. In exchange, legend gives her Joshua as bridegroom. This story is not in his official biography, which, moreover, is very meager. It is only in the midrashic literature that there is interest in Joshua's private life. His father was a just man, but childless. Nun passed his days praying to God for a son, and his prayer was answered. Moses was still alive, but very old, when Joshua was teaching the Law to the people. One day, Moses came to listen. He remained standing with the crowd. Joshua saw him and, overcome by remorse, cried out in distress. Then a celestial voice was heard: The time has come for the people to receive the teaching of Joshua. Brokenhearted, Joshua submitted. It is because he respected and venerated his Master; he loved him. Of all his qualities, it is his attachment to Moses that moves us the most. According to the legend, Joshua was then married. He had children: only girls. Having fulfilled the mission that God and Moses had entrusted to him, Joshua retired and lived in the isolation of memory. He was old, the text tells us, and the country rested from the wars. FREE ebook: Recipes from the BAR Test Kitchen Make your own food from biblical times. Download now. He died alone and was buried in a place called Har gaash—a kind of angry mountain, a sort of volcano. The Talmud comments that this illustrates the ingratitude of the people toward their leader. Why was the mountain angry? Because God, in his wrath, was ready to punish his people. Why the rage? Because no one took the trouble to come to Joshua's funeral. Everyone was too busy. Some were cultivating their gardens, others their vineyards, still others watched over their fires. Unbelievable, but how true: In war, Joshua had been their leader. Afterwards, the people no longer needed him, to the point that no one came to pay him their final respects, to which all mortal men are entitled, whoever they might be. How can one not feel sadness when reading Joshua's story? Translated by Anne Renner. The Book of Joshua presents the destruction of the city of Hazor. Read more about the destruction in "Hazor Excavations" Amnon Ben-Tor Reveals Who Conquered Biblical Canaanites" and "Scorched Wheat May Provide Answers on the Destruction of Canaanite Tel Hazor." Elie Wiesel The author of more than 30 novels, plays and profiles of Biblical figures, Elie Wiesel received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. This online publication is adapted from Wiesel's article "Supporting Roles: Joshua," which was published in Bible Review in December 1998. The article was first republished in Bible History Daily on August 9, 2013. At the inception of Wiesel's Supporting Roles series in Bible Review, BAS editors wrote: We are pleased—and honored—to present our readers with the first of a series of insightful essays by Elie Wiesel, the world-renowned author and human rights advocate. Wiesel is best known for his numerous books on the Holocaust and for his profiles of Biblical figures and Hasidic masters. In 1986, he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. His occasional series for BR will focus on characters in the Bible that do not occupy center stage—those who play supporting roles. Read an interview BAR Editor Hershel Shanks conducted with Elie Wiesel and Biblical scholar Frank Moore Cross, republished from BAR, July/August 2004 >> More by Elie Wiesel in Bible History Daily Cain and Abel in the Bible Seth in the Bible Jethro in the Bible All-Access members, read more in the BAS Library Joshua Hazor and the Battle of Joshua—Is Joshua 11 Wrong? Peter. How a Flawed Disciple Became Jesus' Successor on Earth Moses Not a BAS Library or All-Access Member yet? Join today. Become a BAS All-Access Member Now! Read Biblical Archaeology Review online, explore 50 years of BAR, watch videos, attend talks, and more A High Priest and Leader of Early Israel Robin Gallaher Branch April 12, 2025 0 Comments 30602 views Moses and Eleazar reveal the bronze serpent to the people afflicted with snakebites (Numbers 21:5-9). Lithograph by A. Blanco after P.P. Rubens. Wellcome Collection gallery, CC BY 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons. Eleazar, Aaron's son and successor as high priest, witnessed some of the most dramatic events in Israel's early history. Mentioned more than 60 times in the books of Exodus through Joshua, Eleazar carried out the second census with Moses and administered the division of the land of Canaan with Joshua, the military hero and Moses's successor. Eleazar, whose name means "God has helped," comes from a remarkable Levite family. His uncle and aunt—Moses and Miriam—are commended with Aaron as the three sent by the Lord in connection with Israel's deliverance from Egypt (Micah 6:4). His mother Elisheba and the couple's other sons—Nadab, Abihu, and Ithamar—likewise are named (Exodus 6:23). Specific naming is a singular honor in the Bible. No doubt these events shaped Eleazar's youth: The ten plagues in Egypt (blood, frogs, gnats, flies, livestock pestilence, boils, hail, locusts, darkness, and death of the firstborn) (Exodus 7:14-12:32) The parting of the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14) The giving of the law and Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai—accompanied by lightning, thunder, trumpets, and the shaking and smoking of the mountain (Exodus 19-20) The Lord's protective cloud by day and pillar of fire by night (Numbers 9:16-17) The sending of 12 spies into the land of Canaan; ten reported a people of "great size" who "are stronger than we are" (Numbers 13:1-29, 31-33) Become a BAS All-Access Member Now! Read Biblical Archaeology Review online, explore 50 years of BAR, watch videos, attend talks, and more Eleazar in the Bible: Aspects of His Priesthood Eleazar came to prominence because of the deaths of his brothers, Nadab and Abihu. They presented an unsolicited offering to the Lord, what the Bible calls "unholy fire" (Leviticus 10:1). Judgment on their action was immediate and final: "And fire came out of the presence of the Lord and consumed them" (v. 2). Afterward, Eleazar and his brother Ithamar assumed priestly duties; these included offering sacrifices for the people and interceding to God on their behalf. Later, Eleazar was named chief over the leaders of the Levites (Numbers 3:32). The Bible most frequently mentions Eleazar indirectly with variations of this formula: The Lord speaks to Moses and tells Moses to tell Aaron and Aaron's sons such and such (see Numbers 6:22-23). Notably, Eleazar received mentoring for decades from Aaron and Moses, two of Israel's greatest leaders. Eleazar also figured in the purification of the censers after the revolt of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16). The Lord commanded Moses to tell Aaron to tell Eleazar to get the holy censers from the blaze (v. 37). He was to hammer them into plates that would cover the altar. They were holy and would remind the Israelites not to become like Korah (vv. 38-40). FREE ebook: Who Was Jesus? Exploring the History of Jesus' Life. Examine fundamental questions about Jesus of Nazareth. Death marked much of Eleazar's recorded life. With his priestly father and brother, he oversaw the deaths of thousands of Israelites during their 40-year wilderness wanderings. Because they had claimed against the Lord, they perished and did not enter the promised land (Numbers 14:27-30). Mountaintops appear frequently in the Bible as sites of death, burial, and divine encounters. The Lord told Moses that Aaron was about to die and that he, Aaron, and Eleazar were to go up to Hor, a mountain on Edom's border (Numbers 20:23). Aaron was to be dressed in his priestly vestments. At the top, Moses was to remove them and dress Eleazar. Once Eleazar was clothed, Aaron would be "gathered to his people," a phrase meaning death. Three ascended the mountain, but only two came down. The Bible records no emotions, but there must have been many, for "Israel mourned Aaron for thirty days" (vv. 23-29). After Aaron's death, the Lord spoke to Moses and Eleazar, telling them to speak to the Israelites about the upcoming second census (Numbers 26:3-4). This census, conducted for military purposes, paralleled an earlier one in the first chapter of the book. A new generation readied itself to leave the wilderness and take possession of Canaan, the promised land. Eleazar also addressed troops returning from a battle against Midian with much loot (Numbers 31:21-24). The metals taken had to be purified by fire and cleansed by water. The booty was inventoried and allotted to the warriors and then the people; portions also went to the Lord and the Levites (vv. 23-31). The Lord directed Moses regarding leadership succession (Numbers 27:12-23). Moses was to take Joshua, have him stand before Eleazar and the whole assembly, lay hands upon him, and commission him. Joshua would receive a portion of Moses's authority. Eleazar would obtain decisions from the Lord for Joshua "by inquiring of the Urim before the Lord" (v. 21). Shortly thereafter, Moses died near Mt. Nebo in the "land of Moab" in Transjordan (Deuteronomy 34:1-5). The Lord re-confirmed Joshua as Moses's successor (Joshua 1:1-5) and commanded Joshua to be strong and courageous and meditate daily on the book of the law (vv. 6-9). Our website, blog and email newsletter are a crucial part of Biblical Archaeology Society's nonprofit educational mission This costs substantial money and resources, but we don't charge a cent to you to cover any of those expenses. If you'd like to help make it possible for us to continue Bible History Daily, BiblicalArchaeology.org, and our email newsletter please donate. Even \$5 helps: Eleazar: A Leader Alongside Joshua Ancient Israel's Levite priests carry the Ark of the Covenant across the "dry" ground of the parted Jordan River (Joshua 3), as depicted in this cartoon by Dan McClellan. Image courtesy of the Biblical Archaeology Society. Joshua and Eleazar governed the Israelites together in this new era. One of their first actions was to cross the Jordan River and enter Canaan (Joshua 3). Following the Lord's instructions to Joshua, priests led the way while carrying the Ark of the Covenant. Presumably, Eleazar was among them. When the priests' feet touched the Jordan, the river receded and the ground became dry. The miracle resembled the one 40 years earlier when the Sea of Reeds had parted, allowing the Israelites to escape the Egyptians on the dry ground. The Lord stated his purpose to Joshua: "This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses" (v. 7). Chapters 4-12 tell some of the adventures, deceptions, strategies, and battles surrounding the conquest of the land; in these Joshua dominates. However, chapters 13-21 chronicle the distribution of the land to the tribes, an action shared by Eleazar and Joshua. Eleazar's name precedes Joshua's in many passages, a textual hint that at that time, he may have been the more prominent (Joshua 17:4; 19:51; 21:1). The Book of Joshua ends with the deaths and burials of these leaders. Joshua dies at age 110; the biblical text notes he was buried in the hill country of Ephraim (Joshua 24:29-30). Eleazar's death and burial at the Ephraimite town of Gibeah concludes the book (v. 33). Rabbinic discourse states that Joshua wrote much of the book bearing his name but that Eleazar and his son Phinehas finished it (Bava Batra 15a:7a). Eleazar's shadow stretches across the ages because his legacy of strong character extended to Phinehas. It seems Phinehas acted quickly to stem the Lord's anger because of an outbreak of religious apostasy and sexual sin among the Israelites (Numbers 25:1-3). Speaking to Moses, the Lord made a "covenant of peace" with Phinehas (vv. 4-12). The Lord commended "the son of Eleazar" for his zeal and gave him and his descendants "a covenant of perpetual priesthood" (v. 13). Eleazar's life is remarkable for the instances the Bible mentions but also for a silence. Unlike the leaders Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and later David, scripture records no rebuke of him. It seems that Eleazar learned a life-long lesson from the deaths of his brothers Nadab and Abihu—he learned obedience. Robin Gallaher Branch serves as an adjunct professor at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee, and in a research capacity at North-West University in Potchefstroom, South Africa, where she did her Fulbright Fellowship in 2002-2003. She holds a Ph.D. in Hebrew Studies from the University of Texas at Austin. She is the author of numerous academic articles and two books, Six Biblical Plays for Contemporary Audiences (Cascade 2016) and Jeroboam's Wife: The Enduring Contributions of the Old Testament's Least-Known Women (Wipf & Stock 2018). This article first appeared in Bible History Daily on June 15, 2022. More from Robin Gallaher Branch in Bible History Daily Who Is Jethro, Priest of Midian? 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While Gilgal is mentioned more than 40 times in the Hebrew Bible, scholars remain remarkably uncertain about the site's location or its history. Some even believe Gilgal was not a specific place, but rather simply a descriptive term for a specific type of settlement. Publishing in the journal Tel Aviv, archaeologist Nadav Naaman argues that Gilgal was in fact a single cultic site located just a few miles from Jericho. What Is a Gilgal Anyway? According to the biblical text, Gilgal was the campsite of the Israelites when they first crossed the Jordan River (Joshua 4-5). Having crossed the river, they erected 12 standing stones at the site, and many later biblical texts mention sacrifices that were performed at the same location (1 Samuel 10:8; Hosea 12:12; Amos 4:4). Indeed, alongside Bethel, Gilgal was one of ancient Israel's main cultic centers, lasting until the late monarchic period (c. seventh century BCE). 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This puts the important cultic site right along the road leading from ancient Israel to the land of Moab in Transjordan, which would explain why Ehud stopped there on his way to assassinate Eglon, the Moabite king (Judges 3). Nevertheless, as Naaman explains, "Scholars have suggested various identifications for biblical Gilgal, but the archaeological soundings of all the proposed sites have proven these identifications wrong." Thus, even if Gilgal was one single location, we are still left with the question, "Where Is Biblical Gilgal?" This article was first published in Bible History Daily on June 7, 2024. Related reading in Bible History Daily Jericho Named UNESCO World Heritage Site A Biblical Altar on Mt. Ebal and Other Israelite Footprints in the Jordan Valley' All-Access members, read more in the BAS Library Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence Could Mt. Ebal Be Deuteronomy's "Place of the Name"? 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