

PART II

KINSHIP AND COMMANDMENT: THE TRANSJORDANIAN TRIBES AND THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

The conquest of the Promised Land is not a historical event but a work of scribal imagination, evolving over centuries. We know today that the manner in which Israel occupied its homeland was not only less bellicose but also more protracted and complex than the united invasion portrayed in biblical accounts. The populations that the Bible embraces under the name Israel were, by and large, *indigenous* inhabitants of the Cisjordan and Transjordan. In a very real sense, the Israelites were Canaanites.

The biblical scribes were working at a far remove from the historical events, however, and even if they had knowledge of them, the actual political negotiations and cultural processes by which Israel became Israel were not relevant to their interests. As a project of peoplehood, the Bible owes its existence to the collaborative efforts of visionaries, working over generations to construct a new and more resilient collective identity that could unite communities ravished by imperial armies. This identity was a national one and, in keeping with the construction of national identities in various times and places, it was negotiated by appeal to pivotal military conflicts in the past, both real and imagined.

More than any other military conflict commemorated in the biblical corpus, the campaign that scribes from Israel and Judah imagined their ancestors to have conducted when they took possession of the Promised Land became the foundational event in the nation's collective past. As it evolved into a grand war monument in narrative form, it came to serve as a battleground itself, offering an expansive framework in which generations of scribes would contend with each other over fundamental matters pertaining to membership and status in the national community.

One of the most contentious issues treated in this framework was the presence in the Transjordan of communities that had long affiliated with Israel. Positive and negative attitudes toward these communities stand side by side in the narrative, and the amount of attention scribes devoted to the issue makes it an especially instructive case for our study of war commemoration and the formation of a nation.

Much of the Pentateuch identifies the Promised Land with Canaan – that is, the territory west of the Jordan (the “Cisjordan”). Likewise, the book of Joshua presents the conquest of the Promised Land as beginning when the nation crosses the Jordan from the east and invades Canaan. If this is the case, what about the territories on the eastern side of the Jordan (the “Transjordan”)? The region had long been home to communities and personalities that had played an important part in the nation’s history. In fact, none other than the great prophet of Yhwh, Elijah, hailed from this eastern region. So, what about the Transjordanian communities that identify with Israel? Are they equal members of the nation?

In Part I, we examined the way in which the biblical scribes used war commemoration to negotiate relations between Israel and the kingdoms on its borders. These borders posed a more basic problem, and in addressing it the biblical scribes once again resorted to sophisticated forms of war commemoration, as we shall see now in Part II. We begin our investigation in Chapter 3 by comparing the different ways the narrative in Exodus-Joshua maps the Promised Land and portrays the wars of conquest. This survey will demonstrate the centrality of an account from the book of Numbers that we study in Chapter 4. The account depicts two of Israel’s twelve tribes petitioning Moses to occupy territories on the eastern side of the Jordan; their petition incenses Moses and, in responding to his outrage, the tribes affirm the bipartite basis of their filiation with the nation: kinship and commandment. We continue our investigation in Chapter 5 with the texts in Deuteronomy and Joshua that document these tribes’ wartime service, culminating in a dramatic turn of events in which Israel comes close to waging war against them. To conclude our investigation, Chapter 6 reflects on the relationship between kinship, narrative, and law, both in these texts and in the biblical corpus more broadly.