

The Divine Call

Plural or Singular Addresses to Israel in Judges and Joshua

[We have examined how the use of the plural and singular terms in Deuteronomy 6 carries simple but profound implications.](#) To examine this phenomenon further, Joshua and Judges are examined to ascertain whether there is a pattern to the number by which God addresses His people, either directly or through His appointed leaders. I anticipate there will be deeper and broader lessons to learn by reapplying these observations back to the Torah. Here for reasons that will become clearer, the waters are shallower and patterns easier to trace.

In Joshua, whenever Joshua himself addresses Israel he uses the plural, usually in the AV *ye* or *you*. As we have seen, this forms a striking contrast with Moses, where the number is not constant. It also strikes a contrast with God's direct words to Israel, in the same volume, so it is not a stylistic matter, but a deliberate theological indicator.

In 1.3-4, God addresses as plural, 'Every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given unto you, as I said unto Moses.'

In v.5 God charges Joshua personally, 'There shall not any man be able to stand before thee all the days of thy life..' The charge continues to him till v.9, however there is a hint of Joshua standing as the representative head of the Nation, 'Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou go.'

Then the plural address returns, as Joshua commissions the people to prepare and the two and a half tribes are especially readied for combat away from home, v.11-15.

In chapter 3, as Joshua is magnified by God before Israel, his first longer address stays in the plural, as are all his messages to them throughout the book. For example, v.5, 'Sanctify yourselves: for to morrow the LORD will do wonders among you.'

In chapter 4, both Joshua's commands and God's commands to him to Israel are all plural, including instructions to future children, which in Ex.13.14, Deut.6.20, by contrast are phrased in the singular.

In chapter 5.2, Joshua is commanded in the singular by YHVH, in the form of the Angel, to prepare knives for the circumcision of the new generation. 'Make thee sharp knives, and circumcise again the children of Israel..' He is acting as the leader of the whole nation. The distinction between head and nation is maintained in 6.2-3, but Joshua's actions are, like the knives, not merely personal ones, but those of the nation. 'The LORD said unto Joshua, See, I have given into **thine** hand Jericho, and the king thereof, and the mighty men of valour. 3 And **ye** shall compass the city, all **ye** men of war, and go round about the city once. Thus shall **thou** do six days.'

In chapter 7.13, Achan rebels, and the challenge of God to Israel is singular, 'There is an accursed thing in the midst of **thee**, O Israel: **thou** can not stand before **thine** enemies', before reverting to the plural, 'until ye take away the accursed thing from among you.' The words are reiterated by Joshua, but spoken

directly to Israel, and dictated through him.

In chapter 8, God commissions Joshua in the singular, but it is clear from the contents that the whole army, and by implication the whole nation is involved, 'the LORD said unto Joshua, Fear not, neither be thou dismayed: take all the people of war with thee, and arise, go up to Ai: see, I have given into **thy** hand the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land. 2 And **thou** shalt do to Ai and her king as **thou** did unto Jericho and her king: only the spoil thereof, and the cattle thereof, shall **ye** take for a prey unto **yourselves**: lay **thee** an ambush for the city behind it.' Again there is an interweaving of national plural and singular leader pronouns.

In chapter 10.8, at Gilgal, Joshua is commanded not to fear, 'for I have delivered them into thine hand'. It being evident Joshua is addressed as a representative of the whole army, as with Moses before, Jos.13.12. When Joshua address the nation, after a dramatic cosmological intervention outweighed only by creation, he tells the people, 'stay ye not, pursue after them.. for YHVH your God has delivered them into your hand' (v.19) and when the kings are brought out in defeat, 'fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and a good courage: for thus shall YHVH do to all your enemies against whom ye fight' (v.25) (all 7 instances plural). The military commander represents the whole, but when he addresses the nation he does so in the plural.

At Joshua 13.6-7, as he ages, the head of Israel is commanded to effect the division of the land, as Moses' delegate, 14.5, even though the conquest is still incomplete (13.2-6). The work of apportioning Israel's inheritance is Joshua's so he is addressed in the singular, the effect is national and tribal, whose people are addressed always as plural (see 13.32, 14.1,3,4,5; 15.1,4; 17.4 etc.), with one notable and instructive exception, which we'll pursue later.

However, almost every time, scores of times¹, Joshua charges Israel, right up to his death, it is the plural he chooses, with that famous conclusion, 'Choose **ye** this day, Whom **ye** will serve' Jos.24.15.

Jos.24.12-13 is the curious exception to this rule. As so often, the anomaly highlights an important principle. The context is the fleeing of the Amorites before hornets, the statement is all negative, 'not by **thy** sword, nor with **thy** bow. And I have given **you** [sic] a land for which **thou** [Heb.] did not labour'. This one occasion when Joshua names the nation as one, not many is all passive. It is all connected with what Israel has *not* done, but the Lord has done for her. Her own labour is excluded, the land is given. This is telling.

The exception to Joshua's addressing the tribes as plural is when he charges his **own** tribe, the tribe of Joseph, both Ephraim and especially the older Manasseh, in 17.15-18, 'If **thou** be a great people, then get **thee** up to the wood country, and cut down for **thysself** there in the land of the Perizzites and of the giants, if mount Ephraim be too narrow for **thee**.' Here the tribe is perhaps now still represented by Hanniel, the son of Ephod, for Manasseh and Kemuel, the son of Shiphtan, for Ephraim (Num.34.23-4). So the tribes themselves, even the tribe of the one who addresses them, Joshua, are represented as an

¹ Ye and you are used 145 times in the AV, many of these are from Joshua's addresses. This is only a portion of the other instances where the plural is used in these addresses, suffixes, verb forms etc accounting for the rest.

individual, perhaps as the named individual leader. Here national headship acknowledges tribal headship, an area of delegated authority is recognised.

Judges

How does this pattern apply in Judges? Remarkably, whenever God addresses the nation, outside of an address to an individual leader or a tribal patriarch as representative (even if deceased, as if he lives in his progeny), it is again **always** plural. The narrative too usually follows this pattern.

For example, when the angel of God comes to Israel to reproach them with their complacency and compromise, all his appeals are addressed in the plural, 2.1-5. In 6.8-10, the prophet sent in response to Israel's cries about the Midianites answers them in the plural, 12 times .

Once in 7.7, a word to Gideon may be applied as representative of the whole nation, 'will I save **you** and deliver the Midianites into **thine** hand'.

The fractious Ephraimites are addressed in the plural by Gideon, 8.2-3.

Israel's appeal in 10.10 is rebuffed in 10.11-14, with another 12 only plural forms.

When Ephraim chafes Jephthah, after his conquest, he rebuts them only in the plural, 12.2-3. So does Samson with the pusillanimous soldiers of Judah 15.12.

In 11.12, when Jephthah appeals to Ammon's King, he appeals as the head of one nation to another, 'What has **thou** to do with **me**, that **thou** are come against **me** in **my** land?' The monarch of Ammon's reply is also all singular (despite the AV), 'Israel took **my** land when **he** came up from Egypt..now restore (s) them peaceably' (13). In the detailed appeal that follows down to v.27, most of it addresses Ammon and Israel in the singular, though some plurals are intermingled (for example v.24).

The other exceptions to the plural address are illuminating, and always occur with a singular head or associated closely with a patriarch's name.

Judah is addressed in the singular in Judg.1.2, who then addresses Simeon similarly 1.3. In the narrative that follows, Judah is sometimes plural and sometimes singular 1.4,10,17-9² but only singular in close apposition to the name of their head. It is as natural and direct as if Judah lived, for he does, in his children. It is as natural and direct as when Joshua had addressed Caleb, Jos.14.13, though no doubt he did too not fight alone in driving out the Anakim, Jos.15.14-7. Manasseh, Ephraim and the other tribes in chapter 1, when the narrative is apposed to the name of their head, are also usually singular³, Judg.1.27,28,29,30,32⁴,33,35.

² Some MSS have 'they could not drive out', interesting that the inflexion comes at the point of weakness, presumably because of unbelief or disobedience.

³ Again in each instance there is some failure to effect God's command.

⁴ The plural verb is used for dispossess.

In Deborah's Divinely inspired song, 5.16, Reuben's dilatory response is reproved as though he is one man and Benjamin praised as one, 5.14. Gilead, Manasseh's grandson, Dan, and Asher are upbraided in the singular 5.17.

In chapter 20, during the furious national reaction to Benjamin's defence of the rapists of Gibeah, three times it is stated the whole nation acted 'as one man', v.1,8,11. In v.20 'the men of Israel went out' is literally 'the man Israel went (s.) out', and although the word Aish for man has a collective sense⁵, the intention to convey one body in action is unmistakable. Yet the narrative describes Israel in the plural⁶.

Then Phinehas following two huge failures to defeat Benjamin and the loss of 40,000 men, stands before God and asks as the Divine Representative before the Ark of the Covenant, 'shall I yet go out to battle against the children of Benjamin **my** brother or shall I cease?'. God's answer is unique and special, 'Go up (s) for tomorrow I will deliver them into **thine** hand' (v.28).

What may we learn from this?

In Joshua and Judges, God sees His people as one united whole, only when one appointed head or representative stands on their behalf, even if he is a deceased patriarch. [What implications can we draw from this for the Torah?](#)

⁵ 11 times in this chapter alone the expression 'man Israel' occurs, sometimes using a plural verb, sometimes a singular, v.17, 11, respectively for example.

⁶ With the exception of the use of the man of Israel expression, which for example, during the victorious twist in the final battle is used with a singular verb v.42 and 48.