

A Contextual Exegesis of the Synodal Implication of Joshua 24:1-28, the Assembly in Shechem

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Abstract

A synod from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament could be described as an assembly (*qahal*) convoked by the Lord every time he renews his covenant with Israel (Exod 19-24; Num 11-12; Deut 27-28; Joshua 8:30-35; 2 Kings 23 and Nehemiah 8, 10). It is a religious exercise long rooted in the tradition of the Church and remains her essential dimension. It is a path (*hodos*) along which the people of God as exemplified in the narrative of Joshua 24:1-28 are invited to walk and commune together (*sunodos*). Adapting a literary-historical, contextual approaches, this work exegetically and theologically examines the central concern of Joshua 24, the assembly in Shechem, within the contexts of not only Tertrateauh, DH but also of the OT as a whole. It further pays close attention to the warnings against the apostasy and idolatry of the ancient Israelites. It further challenges the naivety of some of the assembly (synod) members in Shechem that one can serve both YHWH (the Lord) and other “gods,” simultaneously, with impunity (vv.14-15). In its theological *coda*, faithfulness, unity of purpose, appreciation of history, call for repentance, obedience, steadfastness, covenant renewal of services, loyalty and reverence to God (vv.16-28) are among the identifiable implications and lessons drawn from this study for the pilgrim and synodic church in Africa and beyond.

Key words: *Covenant, idolatry, Shechem-renewal, synod, witnesses*

1. Introduction

The concern in this study is to discuss a synod from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament which could be described as an assembly (*qahal*) convoked by the Lord every time he renews his covenant with Israel (Gen 12; Exod 19-24; Num 11-12; Deut 27-28; Joshua 8:30-35; 2 Kings 23 and Nehemiah 8,

10). It is a biblical-religious exercise that foregrounds the Church’s long traditions and remains till today her essential dimension, and a path (*hodos*) along which the people of God as exemplified in Joshua 24:1-28, are invited to walk and commune together (*sunodos*).⁴⁷

According to the 2018 publications, *Synodality in the Life of the and Mission of the*

⁴⁷ For recent and relevant church’ s documents on synod see, Pope Francis, Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio* of the Holy Father Francis on the Synod of Bishops(Rome: 15 Sept, 2018); *Synodus Episcoparum*, “For a synodal Church: Communion,” XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops(Rome: April 24, 2021); International

Theological Commission(ITC), *Synodality In the Life and Mission of the Church* (Rome: March 2, 2014); ITC, *Sensus Fidei In the Life of the Church* (Rome: ITC, 2014); Ikot Ekpene Diocese, *Reconciliation and Renewal of Services in the Church; Lineamenta for the First Synod, Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene* (Uyo: Trinity Press, 2002).

Church, by the International Theological Commission, “synod” or “synodus” is described as an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest revelation.⁴⁸

It composes of two Greek words, *συν* (with) and *οδος* (path, way) and indicates the path along which the people of God walk together (*συνοδος*). It is rooted in Scripture of which Joshua 24 forms a part. It is also rooted in Tradition and History. It is witnessed by the Fathers, since in the hearts of God’s plan of salvation the entire human race is called to be in union with God, incarnated in Christ and brought about through the ministry of the Church.⁴⁹

Even though Joshua 24 has been a focus of great scholarly and methodological debates in the past, my focus in this present study, from the perspective of a synod, adapts a literary-historical and contextual approaches to this renewed investigation of Joshua 24:1-28.⁵⁰ In exegetically doing so, this work also theologically examines the central concern of Joshua 24:1-28, the assembly in Shechem,

within the contexts of Tetrateuch, Deuteronomy, Deuteronomistic History and of the OT as a whole. In addition, a brief methodological attention is given to the overall passage, its textual critical issues, compositional history, delimitation, its setting, structure followed by a detailed contextual exegesis of the texts. Methodologically, I will start with the settings (vv. 1), historical summary (vv. 2-13), the dialogue (vv. 14-24), the ceremony in Shechem (vv.25-28) and then stress the warnings against the apostasy and idolatry of the ancient Israelites inherent in the text. Our discussion challenges the naivety of some of the assembly (synod) members in Shechem that presumed one can serve both YHWH (the Lord) and other “gods,” simultaneously, with impunity (vv.14-15). In other words, this study confronts us with relevant concerns regarding the manner in which the message of this passage (Josh 24:1-28) ought to be conveyed to God’s people, especially the synodal church today, at various levels, as a reassertion of the necessity for communal and individual pledging of fidelity to our one true God.

⁴⁸ ITC, *Synodality*, 3.

⁴⁹ ITC, *Synodality*, 11-41.

⁵⁰ For a long history of interpretation of Joshua 24:1-28, beginning at least with Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918), to G. E. Wright, Van Saters, D. J. McCarthy,

Koopmans and others, covering, source, literary and form criticisms, see, William T. Koopmans, *Joshua 24 As Poetic Narrative*, JSOT 93 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 1-95; Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 1997), 265

In its theological conclusions qualities and virtues such as; faithfulness, unity of purpose, appreciation of history, call and readiness for repentance, obedience, steadfastness, covenant renewal of services, loyalty and reverence to God (vv.16-28) are among the identifiable implications and lessons drawn from this study for the pilgrim and synodic church today (in Africa and beyond). No doubts, Joshua 24:1-28 provides us an important background for the

instructions of Jesus regarding true worship (John 4:20-26). Moreover, as long as believers seek to worship God in Spirit and truth Joshua 24:1-28 will continue to challenge God's synodal Church and people to the renewal of their services and commitment with the refrain "*ênû gam- 'ānaḥnû na 'ābōd 'eth- ādōnay kî-hû' 'ēlōhênû*" (We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God, v.18,). This brings us to a general overview of the text of Joshua 24:1-28.

2. General Overview of the Text of Joshua 24:1-28

The first twenty-eight verses of Joshua 24 begin narratively as follows:

My Transliteration from MT	Working Translation
v.1a. Wayyes' esōf yəhōšū'a 'eth-kol- shibəṭ ē yîsrā' ēl šəkemâ v.1b. Wayyiqrā' ləziqnê yîsrā' ēl ûlārā' š aiw ûləšopətaiw ûləšotətaiw v.1.c. wayyitəyaššəbû lîphnê hā' 'ēlōhîm...	v.1a. And Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem, v.1.b. And he called the elders, and the heads and the judges and the officers of Israel, v.1.c. And they presented themselves before God... (v..27)

This verse is followed by a long review of salvation history, or of historical synthesise of God's journeying with them(vv.2-13). After this is Joshua's lengthy persuasive dialogue and covenant renewal of his contemporary(vv.14-27), and finally in verse 28, the people are asked to go home in the following words,

My Translation from MT	Working Translation
v.28. " <i>wayəshallaḥ yəhōshua' 'eth -hā'am 'îsh lənaḥălātô</i> "	v.28. Then Joshua dismissed the people, each to his inheritance

These first twenty-eight verses in Joshua 24 (textual issues, history of composition, the limits, relationship with others in the OT, settings, structure, exegesis, theology and pastoral or synodal implications) as mentioned earlier, have been subjects of great scholarly investigations and theological debates. Let us take the textual issues first.

2.1. Textual Analysis

One of the major noticeable textual issues in Joshua 24:1-28 has been the question of the relationship between its MT and LXX traditions and variants.⁵¹ In verses 1 and 25 the LXX locates the assembly (ancient synod) in Shiloh (*Shîlôh/Zêlô*) instead of the MT's Shechem (*šakemâ*), perhaps in order to harmonize with Joshua 18:1 that says, "...the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled in Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there." In LXX Joshua of 22:12 the presence of the tabernacle is found as well in Shiloh (*Shîlôh/Zêlô*) in collaboration with verse 25. Scholars, as affirm by Koopmans "almost unequivocally prefer reading Shechem (in MT vss,1,25) to Shiloh of the LXX."⁵² Furthermore, in verse 4b the LXX tradition follows the language of Deuteronomy 26:5ff: "a wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and live there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous" According to Nelson it is possible that the LXX, as usual, simply expanded on Deuteronomy.⁵³ If this is the case, Koopmans argues, that it is possible "to demonstrates that

a certain variants in the LXX tradition were influenced by other established texts, whether at the time of translation or already prior to that in a Hebrew tradition divergent from the preserved MT, one must be cautious about making generalizations concerning the priority of the often alleged Vorlage of the LXX when compared to the MT where the latter has pluses.⁵⁴ In Joshua 24:7 we also find variations in LXX and MT reading. In the reading, "wayyîš'ăqû 'el- ădônay/YHWH wayyăšem mă'ăpêl bēnêkem ūbên hammîšrayîm" (but when they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians), the MT uses mă'ăpêl for darkness, while the LXX read in it place, "*nephelēn kai gnophon*" (cloud and darkness). Nelson notes that mă'ăpêl is not common in the Hebrew Bible and may have been as a result of dittography, the more reason LXX uses the conflate doublet "cloud and darkness."⁵⁵ This has prompted Nelson's suggestions that the Greek is "certainly not a translation of the MT's mă'ăpêl but more probably represents the *he'ănān wahaḥōshek* (cloud and with the darkness) from Exodus 14:20, where it is said, "it came between the army of Egypt and the

⁵¹ For extensive textual criticism on this text see, Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 98-103 and Nelson, *Joshua*, 262-64.

⁵² Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 101.

⁵³ Nelson, *Joshua*, 264.

⁵⁴ See Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 101-102.

⁵⁵ Nelson, *Joshua*, 264.

army of Israel. And so, the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.”⁵⁶

In Koopmans’ view, there has to be an explanation why the LXX’s “*nephelēn kai gnophon*” was not translated as *skotos kai gnophos*. If the Hebrew text had *hōshek* (darkness) the LXX could simply have had *skotos* (darkness in Greek).⁵⁷ Of course, as earlier observed, the Hebrew word, *mā’āpēl* is a *hapax legomenon*, but the employment of *gnophos* as a translation of *mā’āpēl* is attested in few other places in the OT (cf. Exodus 10:22; Job 23:17; Prov 7:9; Amos 5:10; Joel 2:2; Zech 1:15; Jer 23:12). As observed by Tov, cases are also known where the LXX adds a word or two to clarify a Hebrew reading.⁵⁸ Koopmans like Nelson agrees concludes that it is possible that the decision here to translate *mā’āpēl* with double nouns was influenced by the known parallel in Exodus 14:20.⁵⁹

In verse 22 where we read “wayyo’mer *yāhōshua’* ‘el- *hā’am* ‘ēdīm ‘attem *bākem* *kī-’attem* *bāharttem* *lākem* ‘eth- *ādōnay/YHWH* *la’ābōd* ‘ōtō wayyō’mrū ‘ēdēm” (And Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him." And they said, "We are witnesses.") the clause, *wayyō’mrū* ‘ēdēm” (we are witnesses) is lacking the in the LXX and have often been suspected of been a late gloss. Others have suggested that the MT expansion is probably based on the similar, but traditional language found in Deuteronomy 6:22 and 7:19.⁶⁰

However, commentators have also argued that the expression “*wayyō’mrū* ‘ēdēm” (we are witnesses) should be comparatively read with the texts of Ruth 4:9-11, a poetic narrative, and 1 Sam 12:5 which demonstrates the unlikelihood that the gloss is a later addition to Joshua 24.⁶¹ The following comparative table illustrates these suggestions and comments.

⁵⁶ E. Nielson, *Shechem: A Traditio-Historical Investigation* (Copenhagen, 1955), 89

⁵⁷ Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 102; see also E. Hatch, H. A. Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint* (Oxford: 1897; reprint edition, Grand Rapids, 1983), 1276. There is only one unequivocal example of the LXX *gnophos* as a translation of *hōshek*, namely Job 17:13, where *gnophos* is used instead of *skotos* because the latter is already employed for translation of *hōshek* in the preceding verse and was therefore considered unavailable to the translator. Exodus 14:20, is ambiguous, but the most probable conclusion

here is that *he ‘anān wəhāhōshek* is translated the LXX in the reverse order, with *gnophos* as a translation of ‘*anān* (cf. Deut 4:11; Isa 44:22; Job 3:5)

⁵⁸ E. Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (Jerusalem: 1981), 83.

⁵⁹ Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 102.

⁶⁰ Nelson, *Joshua*, 265.

⁶¹ See some of these comments in Nelson, *Joshua*, 265; Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 99 and J C. de Moor, “The Poetry of the Book of Ruth,” *Or* 53 (1984): 262-283.

Jos 24:22	wayyō' mer yəhōshua' 'el- hā'am 'ēdīm 'attem bākem kī-'attem bəḥarttem lākem 'eth- ād ōnay/YHWH la'ābōd 'ōtō wayyō' mrū 'ēdīm.	And Joshua said to the people, " You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen for yourselves the LORD, to serve Him." And they said, " We are witnesses. "
Ruth 4:9ff	Wayyō' mer bō'az lazzəqēnīm wəkōl-hā'am 'ēdīm 'attem hayyôm kī qānītī 'eth-kōl-'āsher le 'ēlīmelek wə'ēth kōl-'āsher ləkiləiōn miyyad nā'āmī	Then Boaz said to the elders and all the people, " You are witnesses today that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon.
1 Sam 12:5	Wayyō' mrū 'ālēhem 'ēd ādōnay/YHWH bākem wə'ēd məshīḥō hayyôm hazzeh kī lō' məṣā' tem bəyādī mē' ūmāh wayyō' mer 'ēd	And he said to them, "The LORD is witness against you, and His anointed is witness this day that you have found nothing in my hand." And they said, " He is witness. "

Koopmans, for instance, who sees Joshua 24:1-28 as a poetic narrative concludes that, the close parallel detectable between the verses juxtaposed above, and charged for the witnessing with a *kī* clause, to which the response with 'ēdīm (witnesses) is expected makes it impossible to just agree that Joshua 24:22b is simply a gloss or late text in the MT. For him, in order to avoid a rush conclusion, as

to which text is more reliable, MT or LXX, there might still be room for a further study of the variants to ascertain a better relationship between the MT and the Greek traditions of Joshua 24:1-28.⁶²

⁶² Koopmans, Poetic Narrative, 101.

2.2. Compositional History, Delimitation, Settings and Structure

In terms of its compositional history, time of origin or possibility of relating Joshua 24 to the Tetrateuch (Gen-Num), DH (Josh-2 Kings) and other OT texts of the cultic life of Israel, opinions are divided.⁶³ Similar divided opinions are found when we take on the issues of settings and its structure. Some have assigned these verses to E source, while others attribute it to J source.⁶⁴ Others, still, have generally acknowledged the text's relationship with chapter 23 (as complementary conclusions to the entire book of Joshua), as well as Deuteronomistic editing in the material, while further contradictory proposals continue to show up here and there in scholarship.⁶⁵ Commentators have also pointed out the influence of the ancient Near Eastern covenant treaty forms on Joshua 24:1-28.⁶⁶ These 28 verses have commonly been thought to have

grown out of some sort of Shechem-centered culture associated with Deuteronomy 11:29-32; 27:1-26; and Joshua 8:30-35 involving the elimination of strange gods reflected in Genesis 35:2-6.⁶⁷ In other words, Its language among other things reflects that of Genesis-Numbers, but expressions also occur which are at least consistent with that of the Deuteronomistic usage.⁶⁸

For example, we find DH languages and theology so to say, in the leadership catalog: "the elders", "heads," "judges," and "the officers of Israel," in verse 1; as well as in the following expressions: "and your own eye saw what I did in Egypt," in verse 7; "and you took possession of their land," in verse 8. Others are: the nation list (Amorite, Perizzite, Canaanite, Hittite, Girgashite, Hivite and Jebusite) in verse 11; the giving of the land in verse 13; "the fearing and serving of the Lord"

⁶³ Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 1-96; J. Floss, *Jahwe dienen- Göttern dienen*, BBB 45 (Bonn: 1975), 334-40; S. Kreutzer, *Die Frühgeschichte Israel in Bekenntnis und Verkündigung des Alten testaments*, BZAW 178 (Berlin: 1989), 183-92.

⁶⁴ J. Van Seters, "Joshua 24 and the Problem of Tradition in the Old Testament," in *the Shelter of Elyon*, ed. W. Barrick and J. Spencer, JSOTSup 31 (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1984), 139-58.

⁶⁵ J. L' Hour, "L' Alliance de Sichem," *RB* 69 (1962):5-36,161-84,350-58; S. D Sperling, "Joshua 24 Re-examined," *HUCA* 58 (1987): 119-36.

⁶⁶ See K. Baltzer, *Das Bundesformular, sein Ursprung und seine Verwendung im Alten Testament* (WMANT4)

Neukirchen, 1960 (= *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish and Early Christian Writings* (Oxford: 1971), 19-27 as well as in D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*, 2nd ed., AnBib 21A (Rome: 1978), 221-42, 279-84.

⁶⁷ Cf. Nelson, Joshua, 266; H.J. Kraus, *Gottesdienst in Israel: Grundriss einer Geschichte des alttestamentlichen Gottesdienstes*. (Beiträge zur evangelische Theologie 19) München, 1954 (= *Worship in Israel*, Oxford: 1966), 136-41.

⁶⁸ For some of these arguments see Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 104-41 and Sperling, "Joshua 24 RE-examined," 123-33.

in verse 14; the rejection or “forsaking the Lord to serve other gods,” in verses 16-20 as well as the Deuteronomistic call to covenant of obedience in verses 25-28. Joshua 24 also seems to reflect traditions not even found in the Pentateuch or elsewhere in Joshua, namely the ancestors’ worship of alien gods beyond the Euphrates and Egypt (vv.2, 14-15) and battle in Jericho (v.11).

Again, in addition to Joshua 24’s connection or relationship with a wide contextual variety of other texts in the OT (Exod 23:20-33; Deut 7:12-26; Shechem /covenant texts- Deut 11:29-32; 27:1-26; Josh 8:30-35; Judg 2:1-5; 6:8-10; 10:10-16; 1 Sam 7:3-4 and 10:17-25), as affirmed by Robert E. Coote and Vincent Branick, the common and noticeable issue will continue to be, even for modern synodal assemblies; commitment to Law, a challenge to faithfulness, given to the “whole assembly” (*qahal*) of Israel, as they exemplarily walk, pray together and listen to the reading of the book of the Law (8:35; Neh 8:1).⁶⁹

2.2.1 Joshua 24: A Shechem-Centered Text

Detailed explication of the Israelites’ traditions concerning Shechem, the setting of Joshua 24, in connection with other texts already mentioned above, is complex and beyond the scope of this work.⁷⁰ In this context, and for the purpose of this study, it would be enough to mention that Shechem was a major center in the hills of Ephraim about thirty miles north of Jerusalem. The J tradition describes Shechem as a sacred place already at the time of Abram, the place where YHWH appeared to the patriarch and first promised him that land, and a place where Abram built an altar to the LORD (Gen 12:6-7). Thereafter, Shechem appears in our text, Joshua 24 as an Israelite center during the time of Joshua as the scene of the assembly when Joshua imposed the covenant and invited them to make a choice whether to worship and serve the God of Israel, YHWH or other foreign gods. This account Shechem echoes the account in Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8:30-35, and others, where Gerizim and Ebal, mountains that flanked Shechem are rather mentioned as scene of the

⁶⁹ Vincent P. Branick, *Understanding the Historical Books of the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 20; Robert E. Coote, “The Book of Joshua: introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary*, vol II, edited

by Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 128.

⁷⁰ For details see, John L. McKenzie, “Shechem” in *Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 797-98.

festival of the covenant renewal.⁷¹ In the postexilic period on into the New Testament era, Shechem was the religious center of the Samaritans.⁷²

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts have been made to archaeologically associate Shechem with tell *balâṭah* of north of Jerusalem mentioned above but this has its limitation.⁷³ Of course, even though nothing is said about the conquest of Shechem in Joshua, many scholars believe there dwelt in the region of around Shechem relatives of the Israelites who remained in Canaan (cf. Gen 34) when their brethren under Jacob went down to Egypt, then it is not unlikely that these people welcomed the invading Israelites. If this hypothesis is accepted, the Shechem renewal ceremony suggests the narrative describes a peaceful amalgamation of friendly Canaanites into the covenant federation, as the Israelites extended the covenant to new tribesmen. In the present text, however, the renewal ceremony in

Joshua 24:1-28 involves all Israel and its purpose is not just to narrate history, but include highlighting land and kingship motifs, as well as lay theological emphasize on faithfulness and worship of YHWH alone.⁷⁴

2.2.2. Structure of Joshua 24:1-28

Joshua as the sixth book in the Hebrew Bible and first of the former prophets of the OT, picks up the actions from where Deuteronomy, the fifth book leaves off. Structurally, there different divisions as there many commentators and exegetes on the text of Joshua. The first part of this sixth book describes Israel's violent entry into the land (chaps. 1-12), while the second part narrates the distribution of the conquered land to various tribes as well as Joshua's parting words to the Israelites (chaps. 13-24).⁷⁵

Branick locates Joshua 24 in the third section of his overall appraisal of the book of Joshua.⁷⁶

⁷¹ See Coote, Joshua, 78-80, for extensive commentary on "Joshua 8:30-35, An Altar on Mt. Ebal." And again, what lies beyond Joshua 24:1-28, older traditions or genre, of Joshua 8:30-35 etc., is not the primary focus of this paper, but the soon to be developed contextual exegesis of the synodal implication of Joshua 24: 1-28, which include; lessons learned from the rejection of the apostacy and idolatry of the ancient Israelites and their naively assumption that they can worship true God as well as false God at the same time. Cf. Genesis 35:4 for the P account, and Judges 8:33; 9:4, 46 etc., for additional stories in connection with Shechem.

⁷² Branick, *Historical Books*, 20

⁷³ See McKenzie, "Shechem," 798; Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 91,154, for archeological approaches to Joshua 24 and its limitations.

⁷⁴ For Joshua and his peoples' gathering in Shechem, setting and goal see, Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 418-423.

⁷⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Introducing the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 41.

⁷⁶ See some of them in Coote, *Joshua*, 128-128 and Branick, *Historical Books*, 14 where Joshua is broadly structured as: the conquest (Josh 1-12); the division of the promised land (Josh 13-21) and the return of the

While Robert G. Boiling locates it in the sixth section of his six parts division of the book, as follows:

- (a) theological mobilization and entrance into the land (1:1-5:12)
- (b) the warfare in Canaan (5:13-11:23)
- (c) the inheritance (12:1-19:51)
- (d) provisions for keeping the peace and the teaching (20:1-21:45)
- (e) threat of civil war and how to avoid it (22:1-34)
- (f) end of the era (23:1-24:33)

Boiling further divides the sixth section into two: (a) the Shechem covenant (24:1-28) and (b) various burial notices (24:29-33). Similarly, Nelson structures the former (Josh 24:1-18) into unit of dialogue framed by narrative. The narrative is scant and uncompleted, comprising: the gathering/setting (v.1), four ceremonial actions by Joshua: “made/cut a covenant,” “wrote the words,” “took a large stone,” (vv. 25-26); and “dismissed the people,” (v.28). In the dialogue portion, the indicative of YHWH’s action (vv.2-13, 17-18) serves as the foundation (“now,” v. 14) for Joshua imperative

challenges (vv.14-15) and the people commitments (vv.16-18). The Lord’s speech provides the data upon which their decision is made. Repetition drives home the reality of their choice for YHWH.⁷⁷ This leads us to the remaining exegetical details in Joshua 24.

3. Contextual Exegesis of Joshua 24:1-28 for a Synodal Church

The following contextual exegesis will proceed under the following sub-headings: settings (v.1); the historical summary (vv.2-13); dialogue (vv.14-24) and the ceremony in Shechem (vv.25-28), as well as underline its implication for the synodal church today in Africa and beyond.

3.1. The settings (v.1)

In verse 1 the narrative begins with *wayyes’esōp*, a *Qal* consecutive imperfect 3rd person masculine singular of *’āsap* (gather) with emphasis on Joshua gathering all the tribes of Israel in Shechem (*yāhōšu ‘a ’eth-kol-shibāṭē yîsrā’ēl šākemâ*), Israel’s ancient worshiping center, as already discussed(Gen

Transjordan tribes, Joshua’s farewell address, covenant in Shechem and death (Josh 22-24)

⁷⁷ Nelson, Joshua, 267; J. Muilenburg, “The Form and Structure of the Covenantal Formulation,” VT 9

(1959): 357-69. See also C. Gibling, “Structural Patterns in Joshua 24:1-25: CBQ (1964): 50-69 and Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 165-270 for other views on the structure of Joshua 24.

35:2-4; Deut 27:4-26; Josh 8:30-35; Judges 8:33; 9:4, 49). This gathering was a formal assembly like the ongoing synod and its preparations in our various diocesan, cathedrals and other central worship centers. Significantly, no one among Israel tribes is discriminated from this liturgical and covenantal gathering in Shechem. All the tribes of Israel (*'eth-kol- shibāṭê yîsrā'ēl*) are walking together. In this text, the adjective (*kol*) is said to demonstrates among other things, the unity, oneness and of a national character as well.⁷⁸ It is also noteworthy, according to Koopmans that, *kol- shibāṭê yîsrā'ēl* is found in Joshua 24:1 with the verb *'āsap*. The only other place in Deuteronomy where the verb *'āsap*, but in the *hithpael* infinitive construct form (*bəhith'assēp*), “gathered themselves,” is found is in the Deuteronomy 33:5.⁷⁹ Interestingly, like, Joshua 24:1 it also appears in the context of “heads of the people” and “the tribes of Israel.”⁸⁰ In Numbers 11:16 the seventy elders are assembled before the Tent of Meeting to be consecrated for special service. Similarly, in

Deuteronomy 31:14 Moses and Joshua are gathered to the Tent of Meeting for Joshua's commissioning in connections with Moses' impending death. In Judges 20:2 the chiefs and the tribes of Israel are assembled to settle matters of national and tribal concern. Also, highly significant are two texts in the context of an enthronement ritual (1 Sam 10:19; 12:7), where the people are ordered to present themselves before the Lord.

It is also important to take a closer look at the list of the four leaders:

- (a) the elders of Israel (*ləzīqnê yîsrā'ēl*), and the heads (*ûlārā'saiw*), and the judges (*ûlāšopətaiw*) and the officers (*ûlāšoṭətaiw*) mentioned in Joshua 24:1. Like in the leadership of the church today, the elders of Israel (*zīqnê yîsrā'ēl*) are frequently mentioned in some of the text listed already (Exod 3:16; 4:29; 12:21; 16:6) as playing prominent role in the leadership of Israel. They function along Moses and Aaron in what appears to be a covenant setting as well (Exod 24:19). The elders of Israel (*zīqnê yîsrā'ēl*) here, refers to those elders who functioned in the assemblies where matters of collective importance were handled.
- (b) Following the “elders” (*zāqonim*) are the “heads” (*ro'shim*). Their roles as

⁷⁸ See the treatment of *kol- yîsrā'ēl* in T. Ishida, “Royal Succession in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah with Special Reference to the People under Ars as a Determining Factor in the Struggle for the Throne,” in J. A. Emerson, ed., Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986, SVT 40 (Leiden: 1988), 96-106, esp.

98-105ff.

⁷⁹ See Koopmans, *Poetic Narrative*, 288.

⁸⁰ Other OT comparable texts where the verb *'āsap* occurs in the context of assembly include; Exod 3:16; 4:29; Numb 11:24; Judg. 9:6; 2 Kings 23:1; Neh 8:13; 9:1 etc.

seers, were very important as well. In Exodus 18:25, the “heads” were seen as leaders of respective groups (Judges 10:18; 11:8; 9:11). It is quite appropriate that Joshua places them next to “elders of Israel.”

- (c) Third were the “judges” (*shāpətim*)
- (d) followed by the “officers/record keepers” (*shōtērim*) all “before the God,” (*līphnē hā’ēlōhīm*), stressing the importance of what is about to take place.

Segal has argued that the historical narratives in the OT demonstrates an unequivocal preference for *līphnē yhwē* (before the LORD) rather than *līphnē hā’ēlōhīm* (Josh 24:1; Judges 21:2; Gen 6:11; Exod 18:12 and 1 Chro 13:8), which must have been as a result of shifting back and forth to the pre-monarchical usage as well as the influence of Israel’s neighbors.⁸¹ Even though *līphnē hā’ēlōhīm* never occur in the Deuteronomy, *līphnē yhwē* occurs hundreds of times in OT.⁸²

In fact, by implications to modern synods in the church today, the settings of the assembly in Shechem, the leadership of Joshua, the present of the people as well as all the tribes of Israel, the elders, the heads and the officers, plus the use of the adjective (*kol*), in gathering before the Lord, reminds us of Pope Francis’ Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops. Francis in that address, in my own evaluation, echoes, indirectly, Joshua 24:1, by

saying “It is precisely this path of the synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium (a renewed Israel) Journeying together- the laity, pastors, the Bishop of Rome.”⁸³

3.2. Historical Summary (vv.2-13)

Additionally, as the ceremony begins, Joshua recites in the words of God a historical summary that evidences a remarkably ancient character (vv.2-13). Like verse 1, verse 2 begins with *wayyo’mer yəhōshu’a* (and Joshua said) using, the consecutive Qal imperfect 3rd person masculine singular of *’āmar* (said), Of course, the tone of Joshua’s discourse is set by the phrase, *kōh-’āmar ādōnay/YHWH ’ēlōhē yīsrā’ēl*. It is a typical OT formula that occurs about thirty-two times.⁸⁴ In the Pentateuch we hear it from the mouth of Moses and Aaron (Exod 9:1, 13; 10:30 and in Joshua for himself. The single occurrence in Judges (Judg 6:7-10) is with an unknown prophet. Thereafter in Samuel- Kings it is used in connection with Samuel, Nathan, Ahijah, Elijah, a young prophet sent by Elisha to anoint Jehu, Isaiah “YHWH’s servants the prophets” and the prophetess Huldah. In the prophets it is used in connection with Isaiah and Jeremiah. The final clause of verse 2, *wayya’abdū ’ēlōhīm ’āhērīm* (and they served other gods) rejects Israel’s allegiance to foreign gods.

In fact, this review of history of what God has done for Israel in the past. It covers

⁸¹ M. H. Segal, *The Pentateuch, its composition and Authorship, and other Biblical Studies* (Jerusalem: 1967), 118; “The Composition of the Pentateuch: A Fresh Approach,” in Rabin ed., *Studies in the Bible*, 83 with additional examples of texts in which Chronicles substitutes Elohim for YHWH.

⁸² See M. D. Fowler, “The Meaning of *līphnē YHWH* in the Old Testament,” *ZAW* 99(1987) 384-390, who notes that the expression occurs 236 times in the OT.

⁸³ Pope Francis, “Address of His Holiness, Pope Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops,” Rome, 17 October, 2015.

⁸⁴ This exact formula occurs in Exodus 5:1; 32:27; Joshua 7:13; 24:2; Judges 6:8; 1 Sam 10:18; 2 Sam 12:7; 1 Kings 11:31; 14:7; 17:14; 2 Kings 9:6; 19:20; 21:12; 22:15, 18 (=Chro 34:23,26); Isa 37:21; Jere 11:3; 13:12; 21:4; 23:2; 24:5; 25:15; 30:2; 32:36; 33:4; 34:2, 13; 37:7; 42:9; 45:2.

the time of the patriarchs (vv.2-4), the events of the exodus (vv.5-7a), the wilderness experiences (v.7b), and the conquest (vv.8-13). The patriarchal traditions that involve Terah, Nahor, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau remind us of Genesis 11 and 12-36, the travels of Abraham and the multiplication of his seeds. Perhaps, the reason, the first journey of Abraham took him to Shechem where Joshua gathered the Israelite tribes, elders, heads, and officers in verse 1.

Nelson has suggested that the entire historical summary or review, is not just for summary's sake, but is designed to remind the people, the readers and everyone of the decision of the Lord and his sovereignty.

As evident in the beginning of the dialogue section (vv. 14-15), each of Israel's alternate options for apostasy, Mesopotamian, Egyptians, or Amorite gods, are prepared for and dismissed as useless. Abraham was taken (wā'eqqah *'eth- 'abikem 'eth- 'abrāhām*) from the territory of the gods beyond the Euphrates (vv.2-3). The Egyptians were humiliated and defeated by the events of the exodus, especially when the Lord put darkness (*mă'ăpēl bēnēkem ūbēn hammīṣrayīm*) between them and the Egyptians (vv.4-7). In verses 8-13 the Amorites were also destroyed, Balaam was co-opted, the masters of Jericho and the seven nations (Amorites, Perizzite, Canaanites, Hittite, Girgashite, Hivite, and the Jebusite) were defeated (v.11).

This summary reminds us, contemporary synod members, that, in contrast to the false and ineffective gods, YHWH has been consistent, faithful, merciful in controlling the events of Israel life by graciously leading, walking with them, increasing, defending, prevailing and providing their needs (vv.2-4,5-13).

By implications Joshua 24, especially the historical summary of verses 2-13, a saving history, also provides the church an opportunity to reexamine herself in terms of faithfulness, running away of idolatries. Verses

2-13 challenges us today to foreswear allegiance, disunity, faithlessness, greed, corruption violence, injustices, gossiping and other forms of false gods in our midst. Joshua's historical review challenges the church today to relearn and appreciate the importance of history, the church fathers and mothers. In the light Joshua 24:2-13, synod is a time we also count our blessings, reflect on where we came from, the shields the fog and darkness (*mă'ăpēl*) that the Lord has, covered the enemies of the church with, by ironically blessing the Church with courage, divine graces, spirit of resilience and fortitude to preserve in the face of difficulties. In other words, this historical review invites us to appreciate more and more what the Lord has done for the Church, thus far. In verse 13, in particular, the Lord says, *wā'ttēn lākem 'ereṣ 'āsher l'ō-yāga ttā bāh wə'ārīm 'āsher l'ō-bānitem wattēshbū bāhem kārāmim wazētīm 'āsher l'ō nāta ttem 'attem 'okālīm* (And I gave you a land on which you had not labored, and cities which you had not built, and you have lived in them; you are eating of vineyards and olive groves which you did not plant). In this statement, the good Lord continues to protect the Church in Africa against all odds and adversities—corruption, poor leadership, climate change or abuse of the planet, religious conflicts, violent, fundamentalism, and other forms of religious extremists. As a church walking together in Africa and beyond, there is need to be thankful for the blessing of good land, and ecology, creation, sea, the fish and animals God has given us in this part of the world, the green, he fruits, the vegetation, rich soil and nice warm climate that others in different parts of the world may be starving of.

3.3. A Dialogue of Ramification (vv.14-24)

These unite of dialogue precedes the historical summary and begins significantly with verse

14: wə'attāh yər'û 'eth- ădônay/YHWH
wə'ibdû 'ôthô bətamīm ūbe'ēmeth wəhasîrû
'eth- 'ēlōhîm 'āsher 'ābdû 'ăbhôtêkem bə'ēber
hannāhār ūbemiṣrayîm wə'ibdû 'eth-
ădônay/YHWH.

("Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the LORD). With "now therefore" (wə'attāh) there is a change in speaker (v.14) from saving historical review to a ramification for the assembled people if they do not change to faithfulness. Just like in modern synodal assembly, the text seems to be a text of admonition that invites members of the assembly, synod (*qahal*) to religious options. Joshua in verse 15 seems to be giving the people a choice of gods, when he says, "baḥārû lākem hayyôm 'eth-mî ta 'ăbōdûn 'im" (choose for yourselves today whom you will serve). His invitation leads to a dramatic dialogue (vv.14-24).

In Nelson's view, the seeming option to choose is really no option at all. The way Joshua frames the situation shrewdly advances the choice for YHWH, for to use the word *bāḥar*, "choose" (v. 15) reminds us of YHWH's use of the same verb to elect Israel (Deut 7:6, 7; 10:15; 14:2; 1 Kings 3:8). Of course, the idea of choosing one God to the exclusion of others (monolatry?) is in itself distinctive YHWH alone theology or ideology. In fact, that such a choice is necessary is implicitly to make a choice of YHWH.⁸⁵ As for Joshua and his household they will serve the Lord!

The three verbs and language of choice in Joshua 24:14-15 in particular, which invite the synodal church to day (both within and outside Africa), to the choice of loyalty and faithfulness to the Lord include:

- "fear" (*yāra* ' meaning respect, and obey the Lord),
- "serve" (*ābad*, meaning worship the Lord, listen to him, walk with him, mission with him, love him)
- and "put aside" (*sûr*, meaning "reject" and "abhor" the worship of other gods, which could come to us in different forms and disguise in Africa and beyond).

By implications regarding the modern Church's synod, these verbs and verses invite us to rethink how best to love God, show fidelity to him and to the teachings of the Church. In Africa, it causes us to rethink how best we can inculcate our African values in the Church's liturgical worship without watering down the Christian faith or practicing syncretism. Making a choice in our Christian lives or being disposed to God's choice and love for us is equally important, especially in the society today where there are many voices and distractions in terms of materialism, secularisms, subjectivism and inordinate anthropocentrism and abuse of the planet and other lower creatures.

In verses 16-18 the people show the skills of their answering rhetoric typical of Deuteronomistic culture by saying "far be it from us that we should forsake YHWH" (*hālîlāh lānû mē'ăzōb 'eth- ădônay/YHWH*,

⁸⁵ See Nelson, *Joshua*, 270.

la'ābōd 'ēlohîm 'āḥērim). The assembly members in Shechem recognizes that the choice of YHWH is obvious, based on YHWH's past benevolent to them, including the gift of the land as illustrated in the historical summary(vv.2-13). Verses 17-18 are enveloped by a short confessional formula that sum this unit up, "we also will serve the Lord for, He is our God," (*ēnû gam-'ānaḥnû na'ābōd 'eth-ādōnay/YHWH kî-hû' 'ēlōhēnû*). Furthermore, by implication members of the synodal church today, in the local, national and intercontinental levels are invited, in the light of this text, to renew their commitments for the service of the Lord, the Church and society (v.16). This church, synod assembly also watches out for signs and be able to recognize the ever presence Christ in their in the sacraments, words, one another and the Holy Spirit (v.17). In doing this, the church is constantly reassured of God's gift of the land and of the Holy Spirit which assists the church in making right and faithful choices (v.18).

The dialogue continues in verses 19-20. In these verses Joshua insists that the choice made in verse 18 will not be possible to live out if the people do not abandon idolatry and worship of other gods (v.19). For Joshua it is also not so much of Israel's lack of consistency in worship of YHWH that make their choice shaky, but the inherent nature of God, namely, a holy and

jealous God (*kî-'ēlōhîm qədōshîm hû' 'ēl-qannō'*). Of course, to speak of a "holy God" (cf. Num 4:19-20; 2 Sam 6:6-7; Isa 8:13-14) is to say that YHWH is not compatible with the worship of other gods (Exod 15:11; 1 Sam 2:2). Idolatry "profaned" YHWH's name (Lev 18:21; 20:3; Ezek 20:39). YHWH's traditional name *'ēl-qannō'* "jealous God" (Exod 34:14) also relates and calls for an exclusive worship of YHWH that informs the call to "choose." This traditional name is connected to reminding us that illicit worship of other gods attracts punishment (Exod 20:5; Deut 4:24; 6:14-15). The Lord will not forgive "transgression" (*pesha'*) of worshipping other gods (v.19; Exod 23:21) because such rebellion violets YHWH's nature as s holy God and jealous for exclusive worship. In sum, verses 19-20 reminds us of the DH theology that the exile, the defeat and the humiliating deportation were as a result of the idolatry (2 Kings 17:7-20). Equally and by implications, members of the church and synod today in Africa and beyond are reminded of the cost of true missionary and prophetic discipleship as well as the need for religious loyalty to our church's teachings.

The dialogue continues and intensifies in verses 21-24. In this passage members of the Assembly in Shechem reaffirmed their decision to serve the Lord (v.21). They are not

ready to risk God's judgment or the negative consequence of not worship the Lord or making wrong choices. They are also prepared to serve as witnesses (v.22) and said, "we are witnesses" (wayyō'mrû 'ēdēm). By this the ascertain their commitment to the Lord. Of course, virtues and qualities expected even of synod members of today's synod both at local and international levels. Just as they were asking to put away foreign Gods "wə'attāh hāsîrû 'eth-'ēlōhê hnnēkār" (vv.23-24), Africans as well as members of synod beyond African shore must put away all kinds of ideologies and foreign gods contrary to the Gospel values and renew their covenant with the Lord (cf. vv. 14, 24). This brings us, chiastically, as we saw in verse 1, to the ceremony in Shechem (vv.25-28).

3.4. The Ceremony in Shechem(vv.25-28)

Like previous verses, these verses, the ceremony in Shechem (vv.25-28) has commanded great attention as well throughout the history of interpretation of Joshua 24.⁸⁶ The enactment of the covenant and the prescription of laws for the people have been explained in radically divergent manners, and the conclusions which have been drawn are

disparate. Of course, in this unit, Israel formalized self-obligation is termed *bərîth*, a "covenant:(v.25). This has actually led to a debate as to the meaning of covenant in Israel. We may not need to recycle such debate due to the limited scope of our work.

But what is striking, generally in verses 25-28 are the actions of Joshua of which the people agreed, on the terms of the covenant. The three actions say;

- "And Joshua made/cut a covenant with/ or for the people that day" (*wayyikrōth yehōshua' bərîth lā'ām bayyôm hahû'*, v. 25),
- And: Joshua wrote these words in the book of the Law of God" (*wayyikttōb yehōshua' 'eth-haddəbārîm hā'ēlleh bəsēper tōrath 'ēlōhim*, v. 26)
- And Joshua erecting a witness stones in verse 27, saying "Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the LORD which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, lest you deny your God" (*hinnēh ha'eben hazz'ōt tihəyeh-bānû lə'ēdāh kî-hî' shām'āh 'eth kōl- 'imərē ādōnay/YHWH 'āsher*

⁸⁶ E. Nielson, *Shechem*,109

*dibber 'immanû wəhāyatāh bākem
lə'ēdāh pen-təkaḥāšhûn bē'lōhēkem).*

In the first action Joshua made or cut a covenant for the people (*wayyikrōth yehōshua 'bərîth lā'ām.*) Scholarship has focused much attention on the preposition in “*lā*” in this expression in v.25 “*bərîth lā'ām*” (covenant for or with the people).⁸⁷ Some, especially, J. Begrich argues that this preposition represents the older usage of the unilaterally imposed covenant, but was used in Joshua 24:25 to describe the newer bilateral arrangement.⁸⁸ While others proposes and obligation place on Israel by Joshua as representative of YHWH, while others still would rather appeal to 2 Kings 11:4 that sees the expression as “Joshua laid an obligation on the people.”⁸⁹ In this context, Nelson subscribes to taking the preposition in “*lā*” as an “ethical dative,” that is, the covenant was made ‘for’ or ‘on behalf of’ Israel(cf. Joshua 9:6).⁹⁰ Should YHWH be seen as partner in this covenant or not, has been the question? Is Perlitt’s position as earlier cited, that what is enacted here is not a

covenant in the sense of a two-sided pact or treaty, but rather Israel’s own formal validation of itself-imposed promise of allegiance to YHWH?⁹¹ Within the limit of this passage, what is call a covenant is a matter of Israel’s solemn self-obligation to serve and obey YHWH alone. This is commitment concretized by a “statute and ordinances” (Exod 15:25; 1 Sam 30:25), “written into a law,” (v.26) as the second action. In the third action, Joshua erected a large stone (*'eben gəḏōlāh*) there under the oak that was the sanctuary of the Lord (v..27). This stone Nelson says, “functions as a second and more objectives witness in addition to the witness role of the people (vv.22, 27).⁹² Finally, Joshua dismisses(*wayəšallah*) the people to their “inheritance” *lənəḥālātō* (cf. Judlg 2:6; 1 Sam 10:25; I kings 20:34b).

Conclusion

The preceding analysis has subjected Joshua 24:1-28 to an extensive examination of its overall background, compositional history, settings, textual issues and terminologies and theological implications to the synodal church

⁸⁷ Cf. Nelson, Joshua, 276;

⁸⁸ J. Begrich, “Berith” . *Ein Beitrag zur Erfassung einer alttestamentlichen Denkform*, : ZAW 60 (1944), 5,8.

⁸⁹ L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament*, (WMANT 36) Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969,260–62; Nelson, Joshua,c Narrative, 276.

⁹⁰ Nelson, Joshua, 277.

⁹¹ Cf. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie*, 260-70.

⁹² Nelson, Joshua,271, 277.

today. We also saw its relationship with other texts in the OT, structure and detailed contextual exegesis of its different components (v.1, 2-13, 14-24 and 25-28) for the synodal church today. This Church in the light of our examined text is re-invited to walk, commune and mission together. Again, such study was meant to confronts us with relevant concerns regarding the manner in which the message of this passage ought to be conveyed to God's people, especially the synodal church today, as a reassertion of the necessity for communal and individual pledging of fidelity and loyalty to our one true God.

Granted that the central concern of Joshua 24:1-28, as we saw throughout this study has been the apostasy and idolatry of the Israelites, and their assumed naivete that they could serve YHWH and other false gods simultaneously with impunity, this was proven wrong by reflecting and reappreciation God's historical roles in the life of Israel (vv.2-13) which through a dialogue process the people

obliged themselves to serve and remain loyal to the Lord.

By implications, this study challenges the synodal church today to rethink her faithfulness, unity of purpose and rejection of divisiveness, secularism, syncretic tendencies and inordinate anthropocentrism. She is also reminded of her need to continue to appreciate history, cultivate enduring sense of repentance, missionary spirit and prophetic courage of bearing witness; obedience to God and lawful authorities. Others are; steadfastness, covenant renewal of services, loyalty and reverence to God (vv.16-28). In addition, Joshua 24:1-28 provides us an important background for the instructions of Jesus regarding true worship (John 4:20-26). As long as believers seek to worship God in Spirit and truth, Joshua 24:1-28 will continue to challenge God's synodal Church and people to the renewal of their services and commitment with the refrain "*ênû gam- 'ănaḥnû na 'ăbōd 'eth- ădōnay kî-hû' 'ēlōhênû*" (We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God, vv.14-24).

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