To Inherit or to Receive? יְנַחֵל in the Book of Joshua Should be Read within the Context of Mosaic Covenant

Tuck Seon Chung\textsuperscript{1,2)}

\textsuperscript{1) Sabah Theological Seminary, Malaysia
\textsuperscript{2) Corresponding author: noestc@gmail.com

Received: 28 December 2023/Accepted: 01 March 2024/Published: 30 April 2024


Abstract
The verb יְנַחֵל has been translated interchangeably as “inherit” or “receive” in English translations. However, this paper suggests יְנַחֵל, particularly in the Book of Joshua, should be interpreted as “receive” under the context of the Mosaic Covenant instead of “inherit” under the background of the Abrahamic Covenant. This is because the expression of יְנַחֵל is closely associated with the Mosaic Covenant and the term is to convey the message that the Israelites are to keep their covenantal obligation as to continue to inhabit in the land. Surveys on the usage of יְנַחֵל will be conducted to justify that this alternate interpretation of יְנַחֵל as “receive” is plausible. This semantic understanding under the context of the Mosaic Covenant allows for a reanalysis of its meaning and its theological implications towards the expectation and obligation of the Israelite. Eventually, every generation of Israel should have acknowledged the language used was actually under such covenantal context and that the possession of the land was conditional which was founded on a mutual responsibility established by God.

Keywords: inheritance, Mosaic Covenant, possession, receive, semantic

Abstrak
Kata kerja יְנַחֵל telah diterjemahkan secara bergantian sebagai “mewarisi” atau “menerima” dalam terjemahan bahasa Inggris. Namun, tulisan ini menyarankan kata kerja יְנַחֵל khususnya dalam Kitab Yosua, harus diterjemahkan sebagai “menerima” dalam konteks Perjanjian Musa dan bukan “mewarisi” dalam latar belakang Perjanjian Abraham. Hal ini karena ungkapan יְנַחֵל berhubungan erat dengan Perjanjian Musa dan istilah tersebut dimaksudkan untuk menyampaikan pesan bahwa bangsa Israel harus menepati kewajiban perjanjian mereka untuk terus mendiami tanah tersebut. Survei mengenai penggunaan kata kerja יְנַחֵל akan dilakukan untuk membenarkan bahwa interpretasi alternatif יְנַחֵל sebagai
“menerima” adalah masuk akal. Pemahaman semantik dalam konteks Perjanjian Musa ini memungkinkan dilakukannya analisis ulang terhadap makna dan implikasi teologisnya terhadap harapan dan kewajiban umat Israel. Pada akhirnya, setiap generasi Israel harus mengakui bahwa bahasa yang digunakan sebenarnya berada di bawah konteks perjanjian dan bahwa kepemilikan tanah itu bersyarat yang didasarkan pada tanggung jawab bersama yang ditetapkan oleh Allah.

Kata-kata Kunci: kepemilikan, Perjanjian Musa, warisan, menerima, semantik

Introduction

How should נחל in the Book of Joshua be translated? The verb נחל appears in the Old Testament with all its derivatives a total of 59 times in 57 verses, and according to William D. Mounce, the meaning of נחל can be translated as “to inherit, to possess, take into possession.” At first glance, either “inherit” or “possess” would mean the same, but there are nuances between the two. The prevailing translation for נחל as “inherit” is unsatisfactory in several ways. First, the current understanding of “inherit” normally ties with getting an item from the deceased parents and the inheritance will be then been seen as a form of memory of the dead.

Translating נחל as “inherit” would imply that someone has died, and thus in the context of Joshua this individual would be the Lord since He is the originator of this possession. Secondly, the action to possess the lands

---

1 This data is taken from Accordance Bible Software. The noun נחל is not included in this paper’s discussion since there is not much dispute on its meaning as “wadi.” Whereas the verbal form נחל appears 30 times in qal, 4 times in piel, 17 times in hiphil, 1 time in hophal, and 7 times in hithpael (G. Wanke, Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament: Volume 2, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, trans. Mark E. Biddle [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997], 731), with a total of 9 times occurring in Joshua within 8 verses.


3 The basic meaning of the verb נחל was unanimously presented as “take” or “receive” by lexicons. BDB presents the meaning as “take possession, inherit,” “have or
which were taken from the Canaanites during the conquest and given by the Lord to the Israelites is not supposed to be called “inherit” since the lands were not “inherited” from the Canaanites nor the Lord but “received.” Interpreting as “inherit” is inadequate in reflecting the effort needed in taking the land and the purpose of purging the land according to the viewpoint of the Bible. Thirdly, if נחל is to be translated consistently as “inherit,” as will be illustrated in this paper, sometimes is unsuitable and totally out of context. Fourthly, and most importantly, as this paper will argue, to inherit the land does not only imply that Israel will automatically possess the land and seemingly will take it for granted but also dismiss the weight of response required by the covenant.

As a recent scholar has put it, Lipinski translates נחל as “to possess,” but also notes that synonyms of נחל could be “give” and “gift” which avoids the traditional translations of “inherit.” 4 Some ancient literature in Akkadian and Arabic have also translated נachel as “to possess” with a wider meaning of “to hand over” and “to present” a possession. 5 Other meanings of נחל include “to take,” “to maintain,” “to apportion” and “to leave” as inheritance. 6 Therefore, translating the meaning of the verb נחל is not as straightforward as it would seem because נחל is used literally and metaphorically. That being so, the semantic of נחל in Joshua could be determined by comparing the range of usage in Pentateuch, Joshua and the rest of the Hebrew Bible.

This paper suggests the semantic meaning of נחל has not changed or expanded its meaning over time. The word is distinguished from “inherit” and has a subtler way which concerns the covenantal promise between Yahweh and the Israelites—not of the Abrahamic nor the patriarchs but tied to the Mosaic Covenant—in regard to the possession of the land. The author of Joshua first introduces the verb נחל in Josh 1:6, and the remaining...
usage of this verb (13:32; 14:1; 16:4; 17:6; 19:9, 49, 51) refers to receiving of the land as an allotment. The author chooses נָחַל in particular, as this word was first introduced in Exod 23:30 for the covenant confirmation at Mount Sinai. As in contrast, the author did not use ירָשׁ to link the promise of land that goes back to the covenantal promise of Abraham (Gen 15:7) which implies the Israelites will automatically receive the land regardless of their obedience requirement. Under such understanding, this paper seeks to set out the use of נָחַל in the Book of Joshua to be translated as “receive”—not a right by birth to possess but bound to obligations in receiving the land. All occurrences of נָחַל will then be scrutinized, especially the Book of Joshua, within the literary context to justify such possibility. This new semantic understanding in turn allows for a better grasp on its meaning under the context of the Mosaic Covenant and furnishes its theological implications towards the Israelite community.

The Meaning of Verbal Form of נָחַל in Pentateuch

This paper will suggest to distinguish the usage of נָחַל (receive) from ירָשׁ (inherit) and to understand נָחַל from the context of the Mosaic Covenant. Table 1 below provides a comparison to illustrate the difference between the use of נָחַל and ירָשׁ in Pentateuch.

Table 1. The use of נָחַל and ירָשׁ in Pentateuch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pentateuch</th>
<th>נָחַל Occurrence</th>
<th>ירָשׁ Occurrence</th>
<th>Denotes Mosaic covenantal relationship</th>
<th>Humanity as inheritance</th>
<th>Imply the land is to be given “to Abraham”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gen</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15:7; 28:4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exod</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>23:30; 32:13</td>
<td>34:9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lev</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18:20, 23, 24</td>
<td>25:46</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>1:38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deut</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>1:38</td>
<td>2:1; 4:1; 6:18; 8:1; 9:5; 10:11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The verb נָחַל occurs 25 times in the Pentateuch out of 59 total occurrences in the Old Testament.7 Other occurrences are scattered in

---

7 Exod 23:30; 32:13; 34:9; Lev 25:46; Num 18:20, 23, 24; 26:55; 32:18, 19; 33:54 (2x); 34:13, 17, 18, 29; 38:8; Deut 1:38; 3:28; 12:10; 19:3, 14; 21:16; 31:7; 32:8.
different books with 9 times in Joshua, 6 times in Proverbs, 3 times each in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Psalm, 2 times in Zechariah, and 1 time each in Judges, 1 Samuel, Zephaniah, Job, and 1 Chronicles. In other words, the Pentateuch and Joshua alone constitute 34 of the total 59 occurrences of נחל in the Old Testament.

Interestingly, all the occurrences of נחל in the Pentateuch and Joshua have to do with the possession of the land in Canaan except in Exod 34:9, where it involves Israelites as Yahweh’s possession, and Lev 25:46, which deals with the transfer of acquired slaves to one’s descendants as inheritance. These two occurrences would be the first indication that נחל is not suitably translated as “to inherit” as they would be treating humanity as inheritance. On one hand, Israelites being the possession of God is to be passed down from generation to generation. But God, as the owner of this possession, would not die and is not required to pass it down to the next owner. Therefore, “to inherit” is not justified as the right meaning of נחל. On the other hand, Israelites, who possess the slaves do die. So “inherit” is not the right meaning because the Israelites do not actually own the slaves, God does. In contrast, it was mentioned in the same passage that Israelites belong to God as God’s slaves (Lev 25:55). Presumably then, God as the ultimate master or owner in ancient Israel is the real master of these foreign slaves. The point is that “inherit” may imply the concept that the real master and the ultimate owner of the land had to die and thus is not suitable for such interpretation.

Second, whenever the word נחל appears in the Pentateuch it is under the context of the Mosaic Covenant (Table 1). For example, when נחל first appear in Exod 23:30, it is in relation to the laws and conditions given to the Israelites prior to the confirmation of the Mosaic Covenant in chapter

---

8 Josh 1:6; 13:32; 14:1 (2x); 16:4; 17:6; 19:9, 49, 51; Prov 3:35; 8:21; 11:29; 13:22; 14:18; 28:10; Isa 14:2; 49:8; 57:13; Jer 3:18; 12:14; 16:19; Ezek 46:18; 47:13, 14; Ps 69:36; 82:8; 119:111; Zech 2:16; 8:12; Judg 11:2; 1 Sam 2:8; Zeph 2:9; Job 7:3; 1 Chr 28:8.


10 In Exod 34:9 the verb נחל is more suitably translated as “receive us as Your own possession” instead of “inherit us as Your own inheritance.” The same in Deuteronomy 32:9 when referring to Israel as the Lord’s possession (נחלות), where God can never inherit any “inheritance” from a predecessor. A synonymous parallel of כי חלוק מעלה הוא ישוע חלך חלך could be read as “for the Lord’s portion (נחלות) is His people, Jacob (Israel) is the allotment of His possession (נחלות)” (the translation is mine).
24. In addition, when Moses cites God’s promise to Abraham of Genesis 15:5-7 “to give you this land to inherit” but in Exod 32:13 “I will give to your descendants (all this land) and they shall receive it forever,” he did not use the original word רשת but replaced the word with נחל. Obviously, there is some intentional motive behind these word choices. Moses is likely seeking God’s favor for his “bargain” with God (Exod 32:11) in order to dismiss God’s punishment towards the Israelites in the golden calf incident by stressing the Mosaic Covenant that God had just confirmed with the Israelites.\(^\text{11}\)

Third, רשת is frequently used in Deuteronomy. Often the context of רשת "inherit the land" is followed by the mentioning of “ancestors,” or the naming of “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” (e.g., Deut 1:8, 21; 4:1; 6:18). It is worth noting that, נחל (1:38) and רשת (1:8, 21) were used within the same narrative of Moses in Deuteronomy 1. I do not suggest the two are interchangeable since the frequency of using רשת is higher than נחל. I would suggest, however, that the switching of the word and the use of נחל in 1:38 highlights the seriousness of violating the Mosaic Covenant. Moses was forbidden to enter the land because he did not honor God as holy (Num 20:12) and violated God’s command to trust him (Exod 20:3, 24).

\(^{11}\) Moses uses the hiphil of עלה (bringing) in verse 7 but uses יצא (bring out) in verse 11. The reason for the change of verb is because the hiphil of יצא can be used only with God (Victor P. Hamilton, Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 536). In this sense, it is to indicate that God is the subject of the verb and God’s bringing Israel from Egypt is with a purpose, which in this case will be Israel’s obligations under the Mosaic Covenant that is yet to be carried out. Basically, Moses offers three reasons for his bargain. His first appeal is why save Israel and then destroy them when they have yet to fulfill their responsibility? (v. 11); the second appeal is why give the Egyptians an opportunity to gloat? (v. 12); only then is the last appeal for God’s mercy linked back to the Abrahamic Covenant (v. 13). Ibid., 538.

It is worth mentioning here that the reference to Exod 32:13 does not undermine the use of נחל as “to receive” even though it may seem reminiscent of the Abrahamic Covenant. This is because, besides as a way of pleading for God’s mercy, the mention of the patriarchal promise is actually also as a way of entailing God’s relationship with Israel. As Joel S. Baden highlights, because this is a clear case of patriarchal conflation where no author attributes the same divine speech to any of the three patriarchs before, the reference back to the promise to the patriarchs—quoting Yahweh’s words back to Himself—is associated for the promise of divine guidance and divine providence (The Promise to the Patriarchs (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2, 11-13, 94). I would argue that if נחל is intended to tie back to the Abrahamic covenant, there would be no reason for God to destroy the Israelites in the first place (v. 10) since the covenant is unconditional and the Israelite’s obedience is not required.
Thus, נַחַל would serve as a reminder to the Israelites to keep the Mosaic covenant in mind.

In brief, the use of שִׁיר and נַחַל in Pentateuch carries different connotations. שִׁיר connotes the idea of inheriting the land in regards to the Abrahamic promise and נַחַל connotes more of the idea of receiving the land through a mutual relationship and responsibility that abides in the Mosaic covenant. Whereas שִׁיר could be directly linked to the Abrahamic promise of inheriting the land with no clear demand to observe God’s law, נַחַל is the opposite. In this case, the word נַחַל is more suitably translated as “to receive” for both possession of the land and humanity. Or in other words, to “inherit” denotes the unconditional promise of God that requires no obligation from the people, but to “receive” elucidates the expectation of obedience that demands submission to God.

The Meaning of Verbal Form of נַחַל in Joshua

As mentioned earlier, נַחַל occurs only nine times in Joshua. Also, the first occurrence of נַחַל in Josh 1:6 did not connect the audience back to Genesis 15:7 but to Exodus 23:30. It is Joshua who will cause these people to “receive” the land under the Mosaic Covenant. This first occurrence is in the prologue in the context of how the land of Canaan will be divided to the people of Israel under the leadership of Joshua. The author did not use שִׁיר as the pattern in Numbers and Deuteronomy (Table 1) nor the pattern of his own.

The identical word-pair “be strong and courageous” from Deuteronomy 31:6, 7, 23 that begins the speech to encourage Joshua are different when it repeated in chapter 1 (v. 6, 7, 9). Besides the impression as a reinforcement of encouragement to Joshua on personal level, the word used is new and different. As shown in Table 2, new word נַחַל was used whereby Josh 1:6 begins with נַחַל and not שִׁיר. The verb שִׁיר should be used if the author was following the pattern of “which I swore to their fathers to give them” in v. 6 with the consistency of word choice in v. 11 and v. 15. Instead, נַחַל was selected.
Table 2. The use of יִרְשָׁ (נחל) and יִרְשׁיּ in Joshua

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Joshua</th>
<th>יִרְשָׁ (9x)</th>
<th>יִרְשׁיּ (29x)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1:6 hiphil</td>
<td>1:11(2x), 15 (2x) qal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3:10 hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8:7 hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>12:1 qal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>13:32 piel</td>
<td>13:1, 6, 12, 13 qal, hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>14:1 (2x) qal, piel</td>
<td>14:12 hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15:14, 63 hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>16:4 qal</td>
<td>16:10 hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>17:6 qal</td>
<td>17:12, 13, 18 hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>18:3 qal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>19:9, 49, 51 qal, piel</td>
<td>19:47 qal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21:43 qal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>23:5 (2x), 9, 13 qal, hiphil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>24:4, 8 qal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Comparison between Deuterononly 31:23 and Josh 1:6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deut 31:23</th>
<th>Josh 1:6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>אל־הארץ אַשְׁרֵי־נשׁבעתי להם</td>
<td>אל־הארץ אַשְׁרֵי־נשׁבעתי להם הבנים או Abel נִמְשַׁבְּטִית לְהוּ אֵלְהִי אֲדֹנֵי־אָשֶׁר־אֲדֹנִים</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הבנים או Abel נִמְשַׁבְּטִית לְהוּ אֵלְהִי אֲדֹנֵי־אָשֶׁר־אֲדֹנִים</td>
<td>הבנים או Abel נִמְשַׁבְּטִית לְהוּ אֵלְהִי אֲדֹנֵי־אָשֶׁר־אֲדֹנִים</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הבנים או Abel נִמְשַׁבְּטִית לְהוּ אֵלְהִי אֲדֹנֵי־אָשֶׁר־אֲדֹנִים</td>
<td>הבנים או Abel נִמְשַׁבְּטִית לְהוּ אֵלְהִי אֲדֹנֵי־אָשֶׁר־אֲדֹנִים</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More strikingly, the author also did not choose to use בָּא “to bring” when quoting Deuteronomy 31:23, a recapitulation of the report of Joshua’s appointment as illustrated above was used differently (Table 3). Even though both verbs are in the hiphil form, the author chooses to use a totally different word (נחל) to convey his message. This word choice shows that the author might have an intended meaning apart from taking it as an encouragement and that he does not wish his audience to understand the Israelites’ possessing of the land in a straightforward literary sense without any binding obligations. If the latter, then the audience would take from this verse not just that the Lord would be no less with Joshua than with Moses but pointing forward to the role of
Joshua as the ‘divider’ of the land—a land that needs to be captured, divided into portions and received by casting lots.\(^\text{12}\) David G. Firth sees this part of Yahweh’s speech as an emphasis on human response.\(^\text{13}\) For Joshua to lead in action and the Israelites to obey in receiving—both acts are the pattern of Deuteronomy particularly pertaining to the Mosaic Covenant. Considering יִרְשָׁ is associated with the patriarchal promise and נָחַל is speaking from the east of the Jordan, נָחַל is now tied to the Mosaic Covenant and speaking to the audience who is getting ready to go into the land is well-attested in expressing the anticipation of God towards His people.

The second occurrence of נָחַל is at the last of chapter 13 whereby verse 32 is a summary statement of the allotment of the land east of the Jordan in that chapter. Following the suggestion of this paper, the clause נָחַלָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן מֹשֶׁה could be translated as “these are (the land) which Moses had received” (NIV translated this phrase as “Moses had given,” and NASB translated it as “Moses apportioned”). The following verse provides the clue for this explanation. Verse 33 explains again the reason why the Levites were assigned no territory which repeats verse 14 (Table 4), only this time, Moses as the subject has been added. It is to be noted that the subject in verse 14 could be Moses or Yahweh.

Table 4. The Meaning of נָחַל with Moses as the Subject in Its Context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>נחלה</th>
<th>לא נתן</th>
<th>Josh 13:14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>נחלה</td>
<td>משה נתן</td>
<td>Josh 13:33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The passage could be read with Yahweh as the ultimate land giver, who gives no land to the Levites in verse 14. Then Moses as God’s intermediator received these lands from God (v. 32), and as in the summary, Moses followed God’s commands to give all these lands east of the Jordan to Manasseh, the Reubenites, and the Gadites, but not the Levites (v. 33). This arrangement of using נָחַל has a two-fold meaning. The first is for the

\(^{12}\) The emphasis in this verse is to highlight Joshua’s role as the cause for the people to receive (נחל) the land. Should Joshua be considered as the sole player to lead the people to “inherit” the land or should more appropriately נָחַל be interpreted as to “receive” the land? LXX take a different approach on this ambiguous verb. A. Graeme Auld notes that the Greek verb used for נָחַל that is translated as ‘divide’ (ἀποδιαστελεῖν) is used only here in LXX and not used elsewhere. (Joshua: Jesus Son of Naue in Codex Vaticanus, Septuagint Commentary Series [Leiden: Brill, 2005], 89). The land was surveyed and finally finished dividing (Josh 18:4, 8 and 19:51) by Joshua as a fulfillment of Josh 1:6.

author to highlight that Yahweh was the ultimate land giver, and the second is for the audience to read the text under the context of the Mosaic covenant. In addition to the recalling of the covenantal memory, Levites are subjected to no land entitlements only under the Mosaic covenant but not the Abrahamic covenant.

The third and fourth occurrence of נחל are in Josh 14:1 (Table 2). Continuing from the previous chapter on the division of the east Jordan, Josh 14:1 serves as the introduction of how the land west of Canaan will be divided among the people of Israel. “Now these are (the possession) which the sons of Israel received in the land of Canaan, which (Eleazer the priest...) received for them,” נחלו אלעזרSONEBאברהםベンאשֶׁר הכהן בן אברהםamediוכְּלָל גַּם אֵשׁ מִצְרָיִם. Compared to the traditional reading that argues that the Israelites inherited the land and Eleazer apportioned the land to them as an inheritance, this paper suggests that the lands were given to the Israelites as a gift from Yahweh and now were distributed by Eleazer, Joshua, and the heads of the tribes. The proposed reading is likely more appropriate to reflect the allotment situation because, 1) the lands never belonged to their ancestors in reality, nor inherited and passed down as an inheritance; 2) the lands belong to Yahweh and His servants could only receive them and carry out their distribution.

There is no dispute in translating נחל as “to receive” for the fifth, and sixth occurrence (16:4; 17:6) in Joshua.14 The question is why such words appear along with שישר within the same chapter and disrupts the consistency of word usage (Table 2). Interestingly, the word שישר was used in 16:10; 17:12, 13, 18 in a negative sense denoting that the Israelites could not drive out the Canaanites. Therefore, choosing נחל as a contrast, serves not only as a general reminder in keeping the Mosaic covenant, but also may suggest a positive attitude towards “receiving” the land through faith since Yahweh was the ultimate owner.

The seventh occurrence of נחל in 19:9 should be taken as “to receive,” although some translated it as “to obtain.”15 “So the sons of Simeon received their possession in the midst of their (Judah) possession” נחלו בני שמעון ליבֵּן שמעון, since Judah’s portion was too large for them. The initial right

---

14 NASB, NRSV, NIV, ESV, HCSB translate נחל as “receive” except NKJV translates it as “take” in 16:4 but remains as “receive” in 17:6.
15 NRSV, ESV translate it as “to obtain.” NASB, NIV, and HCSB translate it as “to receive.”
to claim these lands belongs to Judah. But because Judah’s portion was larger than was needed, part of its territory was given to the tribe of Simeon. It is worth considering the reason why the author did not use רְשֵׁי, but נַחֲלָה, even though רְשֵׁי is used in 19:47. From this case, we can see that translating נַחֲלָה as “to inherit” is not appropriate because in the first place the initial right to these lands was not Judah’s. Second, the tribe of Judah did not become extinct for Simeon “to inherit” its inheritance. The tribe of Judah was still in existence.

The eighth and ninth occurrence happen in the same chapter, and it is the final assignment of the land (19:49, 51). The account of the division of the territory for all the tribes ends here. The verse can be translated as “when they had finished receiving the land by its borders, the sons of Israel gave Joshua son of Nun a possession among them.” Again, if the land is to be inherited, they can never give it away. Also, it is noted that the pronoun in verse 49 is reversed in the Hebrew order as the pronoun “they” is before the noun phrase “the sons of Israel” underscoring the significance of this occasion. This is to emphasize the importance of “from whom” Joshua has received his possession. At the conclusion of the allotment, Joshua received his land from “the sons of Israel” as a form of recognition from all the people of his faithfulness.

The last occurrence of נַחֲלָה in verse 51 could be translated as “these are the possession which Eleazar the priest, Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of the fathers’ households of the tribes of the sons of Israel received by lot in Shiloh before the Lord at the doorway of the tent of meeting. So, they finished dividing the land.” Translating נַחֲלָה here as “inherited” by lot would not be appropriate.

Besides that, the similarity between the first clause of v. 49 and the last clause of v. 51 should be noted. The similarity of phrase “they finished receiving” (וַיְכַלּוּ לַנחֲלָה, v. 49) and “they finished dividing” (וַיְכַלּוּ מְכַלְּכֵּל, v. 51) suggests both words connote the same meaning. This is because the receiving of the land is through dividing of lot (Num 26:55). If the pronoun in verses 49 and 51 refers to the same group of people, then “the sons of Israel” in verse 49 would surely include Eleazar, Joshua and the heads of the tribes in reference to verse 51. Given this interpretation, verses 49 to 51 are to be translated as a unit and verse 50 could be rendered as direct discourse of Yahweh: ‘The Lord had commanded (the sons of Israel): ‘give him the city that he asks, Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim.’
So, he built the city and settled in it.”\textsuperscript{16} From this direct discourse and taking verses 49 to 51 as a unit, this pericope is to be understood as God’s sovereignty in giving the land and His faithfulness in keeping the Mosaic Covenant. He is the ultimate owner that rules over the land and He upholds His promise to the people that He has a covenant with. A proposed interpretation as the following:

“When they had finished \textit{receiving} the land by its borders, the sons of Israel gave a possession among them to Joshua son of Nun. The Lord had commanded them: ‘give him the city that he asks, Timnath-serah in the hill country of Ephraim.’ So, he built the city and settled in it. These are the possessions which Eleazer the priest, Joshua son of Nun and the heads of the tribes of the sons of Israel \textit{received} by lot at Shiloh before the Lord at the doorway of the tent of meeting. So, they finished dividing the land.”

The dividing of the land is assigned by lot determined by using the Urim and Thummim (14:2). It is the Lord’s will in this matter. In other words, it is more proper to translate נחל as “receive” than “inherit” since the division of territory is not by “succeeding possession” but by \textit{receiving} the will of God.

In sum, I would suggest to translate נחל as “receive” instead of “inherit” in order to reflect the meaning and its significance more precisely which would bring the readers back to the theme of the book that is to obey God’s command to continue possessing the land. This is also in line with the overarching theme of the book. Walter Brueggemann is correct when he commented that the broad outlines of God’s character in Joshua is about the One “who will \textit{keep promises and give gifts}, and who will \textit{issue commands and be obeyed.”}\textsuperscript{17} He points out that the verb “give” is pervasive in the beginning of the book (1:2, 3, 6, 11, 14, 14, 15; 2:9, 14) and in the culmination (23:13-16; 24:4, 8, 11, 13).\textsuperscript{18} God is the sole and the ultimate giver. The gift that God will give is the land of Canaan, in which it is not necessary for the Israelite to “receive” this gift without any obligation or without demand from God. The land is subject to condition for inhabitation and according to Lev 18:25-28, those who defiled the land


\textsuperscript{17} Italics in the original. Walter Brueggemann, “The God of Joshua... Give or Take the Land,” \textit{Interpretation} 66.2 (2012), 164.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
will be purged, Israelites included. After all, the land was previously given to the Canaanites and God allows them to stay in the land for another four hundred years until their sin that defiled the land reached its full measure (Gen 15:13-16). Also, sometimes the land will “be given over” into the hands of enemies and God allowed those nations to remain as to test Israel (Josh 23:12f; Judg 2:22-23). Contrarily, it is very much different if the Israelites are to “inherit” this gift. Rather, there would be no occupying by other nations once they “inherited” the land since the possession is not transferable, nor purging out from the land when the Israelites following the footsteps of the Canaanite since they are no prerequisites under the Abrahamic Covenant.

But taking a step back, if this is the case, why is the occurrence of שׁיר higher than נחל then (Table 2)? This is because sometimes שׁיר also carries the meaning of “to dispossess” with the implication of causing others to possess by driving out the previous tenants. Especially when שׁיר is in hiphil form (16 times in Joshua), it is to cause one to possess by destroying or bringing others to ruin. The most obvious example is in Josh 3:10 whereby “God will surely cause to dispossess (שׁורשׁיירישׁ) before you the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Hivite, the Perizzite, the Girgashite, the Amorite, and the Jebusite.” Therefore, the use of שׁיר in Joshua is in conjunction with the theme on emphasizing God is a faithful God that keeps His promise.

The Meaning of Verbal Form of נחל after Joshua

The recognition of נחל as meaning “receive” under the context of Mosaic Covenant can be further attested in the rest of Scripture after the

---

19 The verb שׁיר means to inherit/possess but at the same time it can also mean to disinherit/dispossess, and particularly in the conquest of the land it was primarily connected to acquiring possession from the Canaanites (Josh 19:47). Refer Christopher J. H. Wright, “שׁיר,” in NIDOT, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (UK: Paternoster, 1997), 547; R. Laird Harris, ed., “שׁיר” (1980; 12th print, Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1992), 409. Also as suggested by Frankfurt am Main Lohfink, the most plausible translation of שׁיר should be as “destroy” in light of the occupation of the land in Joshua (“שׁורשׁייר”), TDOT VI, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1990], 374, 382).

Book of Joshua. There is a total of 24 occurrences as shown in the following table (Table 5):\textsuperscript{21}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Books after Joshua</th>
<th>נחל</th>
<th>Occurrence</th>
<th>Relates to Mosaic covenantal blessing</th>
<th>Relates to Abrahamic promise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judg</td>
<td>11:2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sam</td>
<td>2:8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa</td>
<td>14:2; 49:8; 57:13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jer</td>
<td>3:18; 12:14; 16:19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezek</td>
<td>46:18; 47:13; 14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zeph</td>
<td>2:9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zech</td>
<td>2:12; 8:12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ps</td>
<td>69:36; 82:8; 119:111</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prov</td>
<td>3:35; 8:21; 11:29; 13:22; 14:18; 28:10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chr</td>
<td>28:8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Null</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, נחל is not associated with the Abrahamic Covenant in all the occurrences as listed in the table. For instance, the point in Judg 11:2 is that Jephthah, the son of a prostitute and an outcast from his family, cannot “receive” any land under his father’s house which is in accordance to Mosaic law in Deut 23:2 that a child who is conceived out of wedlock was illegitimate and unworthy of Israelite membership for ten generations.\textsuperscript{22} The same for נחל in 1 Sam 2:8 that explains how the Israelites are to “receive” honor from the Lord if they keep all His commandments as described in Deut 26:19 because God can raise the poor, lift the needy, and make adjustments of prestige to those who are faithful to Him.\textsuperscript{23} It has to be noted that an honor cannot be “inherited,” it has to

\textsuperscript{21} Job was excluded since Job was considered Abraham’s contemporary. But even if Job 7:3 is included, נחל could still mean “receive” because it could not be “inherited” the months of vanity, and certainly is not related to the Abrahamic promise.

\textsuperscript{22} Membership in the community does not depend on birth but on allegiance to the Torah that is related to holiness (ESV Expository Commentary, Volume 2: Deuteronomy-Ruth [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021], EPUB). Yet, ironically, after Jephthah fled, he was able to live in the land of Tob (“good”)—which for Jephthah, means the outcast with no social status in fact now can reside in the land of good (Barry G. Webb, The Book of Judges, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012], 310).

\textsuperscript{23} V. Philips Long, 1 and 2 Samuel, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2020), 48-9.
be “received.” Therefore, translating חנָל as “receive” would be more appropriate. Similarly, in Isaiah חנָל describes that Israel will once again return to restore their own land, and will receive them in the land of Yahweh (14:2; 49:8) if they take refuge in God (57:13). Which all these assurances are linked back to the restoration promise in Deuteronomy 30:1-5.

It is worth noting that in an invitation to the covenant people to return where the land which Yahweh caused their fathers to receive (hiphil of חנָל) will be fruitful again as mentioned in Jer 3:18 is in fact recalling to mind the Mosaic covenant that the paradisiacal blessings which flow from obedience will return as in Deuteronomy 28.24 This restoration prediction is sometimes coupled with Israel’s judgment where God will uproot the wicked neighbors and the people of Judah from the allotment that He gave (hiphil of חנָל, Jer 12:14).25 Again, to the people of Judah, the land should not be taken away if it is to be understood as inherited under the Abrahamic Covenant. Mixed hope and judgment continue to flow in Jer 16:19 where Jeremiah speaks about the future, when the nations will acknowledge that the ancestors have received (qal of חנָל) nothing but falsehood. Interpreting חנָל as “inherit” here is not only inappropriate but also out of context. For falsehood or lie is worthless and cannot be inherited.

In his final vision, Ezekiel is taken to the dwelling place of Yahweh, and only at the end he learns that the name of the city is “the Lord is there” (48:35). This future restoration will once again allot the land to the people (47:13-14) and could be interpreted typologically according to the history of Israel.26 This would imply the circle of re-taking the land and allotment of the land will happen one more time, only this time the previous mistake will not be repeated, which includes the prince that will no longer oppress the people of Israel to possess the land (46:18). As this paper will argue

---

26 Deut 30:1-10 did describe that the renewal of the broken Mosaic Covenant is possible. The future restoration of the nation Israel is certain because God has promised an unconditional Abrahamic Covenant and the promise of the Seed (Gen 3:15) needs to be fulfilled despite what Israel has done. Therefore, the practice of allotment like Joshua for the future is possible.
below, נחל used in 47:13 and 47:14 is to be translated as “receive” because the following verse that mentions “I swore with uplifted hand to give it to your ancestors” (47:14) has clearly indicated that the oath to “ancestors” is not directed to the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), but the generation of Moses’s contemporary. 27 C. A. Strine has demonstrated that the “lifted hand” (נשׂא יד) formula found in Ezekiel occurs six times (20:5b, 6, 15, 23, 28 and 47:14) with the first five times appearing in chapter 20. 28 The “ancestors” (אבות) in chapter 20 are referring to the generation that came out of Egypt (20:5-20). Following this formula pattern, the remaining last case of נשׂא יד in 47:14 and the “ancestors” referred to would be that same entity. So Ezek 40:13-14 is indicating a tie to the generation of Moses and thus indirectly denoting the verb נחל is related to the context of Mosaic covenant. Consequently, Ezekiel does not suggest that Israel receiving the land as their allotment was the fulfillment of the land promised to the patriarchs but their ancestors who were under the Mosaic Covenant.

Another example of where נחל is best translated as “receive” is found in Zeph 2:9 whereby Yahweh declared “the land of Moab and the Ammonites will be plundered by the remnant of My people” and “their land will be received by the survivors of My nation.” The land of Moab and Ammonites was never given to the Israelites during the Canaan conquest because the Lord had given the land to these other people and the Israelites had been instructed not to take their land as their possession (Deut 2:9, 19). Now their land is plundered for Israel to receive. A land that does not belong to the Israelite originally and now become the possession of the people under God’s judgment should not be deemed as an “inheritance.”

In the same vein, at the time when God’s judgment is over and He once again accepts Judah where “Yahweh will receive Judah as His portion, and will again choose Jerusalem” (Zech 2:12), נחל is more appropriately translated as “receive” in this context. The punishment is over and now the Lord will embrace and receive Judah again (cannot be inherit). God’s

27 NASB, NIV and ESV all translate it as “divide”—“these are the boundaries of the land that you will divide among the twelve tribes” (v. 13, NIV); “you are to divide it equally” (v. 14, NIV).

rejection of Jerusalem under the Mosaic Covenant previously is reversed, as He will again choose Jerusalem echoing the previous chapter (1:16-17) which informs the post-exilic community that the Babylonian exile had not rendered God’s covenant with them null and void. In addition, the blessings of crops produces in Zech 8:12 also recall the gifts that connected with the covenant obedience (cf. Deut 28:11-12). What’s more, the land’s produce can only be received and not inherited. Therefore, the translation for נחל in regards to the context has to be “receive.”

As for the usage of נחל in Psalm 69:36, the word is connected to a typical restoration theme where hope at the end signifies that God will rebuild Judah and the people will once again “receive” the land that previously allotted. As discussed earlier in this paper, there is a similar case of נחל in Psalm 82:8 where God will not inherit anything from a predecessor but give judgment to the earth and receive the nations as a Warrior after winning the battle. The same also goes with statutes (עונש) that was received (e.g., Exod 16:34; 25:16) from God that cannot be inherited (Ps 119:111). Here, the psalmist expresses his deep commitment to follow God’s law suggesting an echo to Psalm 1 (and throughout Proverbs) that the law will light up the path of life and thus avoid the snares that may trouble our lives (119:105).

The word נחל used in Proverbs serves as rhetoric referring to receive certain items in the form of the wisdom genre. All six occurrences (Table 5) are either receiving “honor” (3:35); “those who love wisdom” (8:21); “substantial possession—all they get is wind!” (11:29); “foolishness” (14:18); “good” (28:10); or cause to receive “the prosperity for future generations” (13:22). Which on one hand these references have no direct ties to the

---

29 The word again repeated four times in Zech 1:17 speaks of God’s intention to restore Jerusalem and an already existing bond between God and the people. Andrew E. Hill sees the term prosperity as an allusion to the blessings of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Deut 28:11) and Jeremiah’s promise of restoration; Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary, TOTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 137, 146.

30 Tremper Longman III suggests that the phrase rise up recalls the memory of God as Warrior as in Ps 7:6-9 (Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014], 306).

31 Longman, Psalms, 407.

land or allotment, on the other hand, it does not make sense for them to mean “inherit” in these contexts.

Turning to the last usage of נחלת after the book of Joshua, the word נחלת used in 1 Chr 28:8 is actually reaffirming its meaning as “receive” than “inherit.” When David speaks about the plan for the Temple to all of Israel’s officials that are assembled in Jerusalem (1 Chr 28:1), he also speaks about the need of obedience to all the commandments of the Lord (v. 8). To keep and seek all the laws given according to the Mosaic Covenant was the only condition for Israel to continue occupying the good land and for the next generation to continue receiving the land. To possess the land is not without condition, and therefore “inherit” is unsuitable semantically and theologically.

The Levites that Could Not Receive the Land

The last point for why נחלת should not be translated as “inherit” but as “receive” is the fact that there is one particular group of Israel that could not possess the land from the Lord. It should be noted that while all the “sons of Israel” and the two-and-a-half tribes had received their portion of land, the Levites did not. If נחלת is to be understood as “inherit” or interchangeable with שִׁיר, then the Levites should be able to claim their right under the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 15:7; 22:17; 28:4) to inherit the land unconditionally. However, the fact is that the Levites did not receive נחלת the land as possession נחלות because Moses did not give (e.g., Josh 14:3) the land to them as a gift from the Lord. In spite of that, the Levites did receive (not inherit) the land from the sons of Israel (not from God) that gave it to them (Josh 21:3) and the land was taken out from Israel’s “receipt” נחלות.

---

33 נחלות occurs 222 times (46 times in Numbers and 50 times in Joshua) but not a single one can relate to the Levites. “נחלות,” in HALOT, 687-8. The command of Levites not to receive the land was repeatedly mentioned. For examples, see Deut 10:9; 14:27; 18:1, 2; Josh 13:14, 33; 18:7.

34 Although the discussion of “possession” (nahălîh, נחלת) is out of the scope of this research paper, it is related to this discussion. Following the idea of this paper where נחלת is not “inherit” and therefore נחלות is not to be understood as “inheritance” but to be understood as “possession” or even better as “allotment.” It is interesting to find that even though “possession” (nahălîh, נחלת) and “portion” (ḥēleq, חלק) are interchangeable, particularly when these two words are side-by-side in the phrase חלק ונהל (e.g., Num 18:20; Deut 10:9; 14:27, 29; 18:1), when “possession” (נהלך) is referring to the land, it connotes more as an “allotment”—only for the Israelites and is never used for the Levites. The Levites can only receive possession as in עֲהֻזָּה (העָזָה), for example in Lev 25:32, 33 and Ezek 45:5 but never a nahălî (נחלה). On the contrary,
Even though possession (נחל) seems interchangeable with inheritance (ירוש) in Joshua and thus postulate נחל is also interchangeable with ירוש, it is not the case in fact because there was no mention of Levites when ירוש was used. Surprisingly even when ירוש was used in describing the land as a possession to the sons of Israel (nine-and-a-half tribes) and the two-and-a-half tribes, the Levites were not implied in the context. ירוש is directed to the Israelites not so much in the sense of inheritance but rather it is subtly shifted in tone as “allotment” since ירוש has already consisted the idea of excluding the Levites. Therefore, this significant discrepancy diminishes the interchangeability between נחל and ירוש since ירוש is to mean “allotment” and has no direct connection with ירוש. In this case, it is explainable why the usage of ירוש (with only three occurrences) was replaced and נחל was being used in the rest of the entire book.

With this last reasoning that the Levites could not receive the allotment (נחל) from God, it shows that נחל is not to be meant as “inherit” and not interchangeable with ירוש. To inherit (ירוש) doesn’t have any binding requirements to possess the land while the opposite, to receive (נחל) does demand certain requirements. The former reflects a privilege by birth grounding a warrant of inheritance, while the latter reflects that right as a divine decree subject to His governing conditions.

The Theological Implication

The choice of translation expresses the semantic significance of the Hebrew verb and the theological concerns it carries. In this case, translating נחל as “receive” expresses the basic idea that the land is a gift from God to His people and also implies an element of theological worldview that certain obligations in return were expected, especially in the background of ancient Near Eastern culture where reciprocal gift-giving is viewed as gift-exchange that served to consolidate relationship.36

the Israelites can receive the land both as נחל (e.g., Num 26:55; Josh 13:6-8; 14:2-3) and אחזה (e.g., Deut 32:49; Num 35:8).

35 Interestingly נחל appears 50 times in Joshua but ירוש only occurs 3 times (1:15; 12:6, 7). All three ירוש indicate clearly that the land was given to both the sons of Israel as well as the two-and-a-half tribes by the Lord but without relating to the Levites.

36 Gift exchange is common in the Bronze Age Mediterranean and is intrinsically linked to a code of honor. Louise Steel has pointed out that there are three obligations.
The causal relationship would demand the receiver “returning” the grace or favor from the giver (i.e., in Ps 105:45 the lands of the nations were given to them to take as a possession so that [תֵּבַע] they might keep God’s statutes). 37 In this sense, there is a direct relationship between the giver (God) and the receiver (the people) in receiving/possessing the land, and at the same time this direct relationship is continued to the following generations.

Along with this, translating נֵכַל as “receive” would mean it is by grace the receiver obtains this gift from the sole giver. Just as a guest accepting gifts with no work required, the Israelites require no works to receive the possession. However, after receiving, obligation is needed to remain in this possession—keeping the relationship with the giver, that is underlying the gift exchange: to give, to receive and to reciprocate. Most importantly, this gift exchange culture is totally embedded within social relations and creates ties between individuals that require the Israelites’ response to Yahweh’s gift (Materiality and Consumption in the Bronze Age Mediterranean [New York: Routledge, 2013], 92-6). In other words, the concept of reciprocity encompasses the response of the receiver and the expectation of the giver. Francesca Chelazzi, “From Self-Sufficiency to Interdependence: Changes in the Cypriot Socio-Economic Structure in the Light of Mobility during the Second Millennium BC,” in Making Journeys: Archaeologies of Movement, eds. Catriona D. Gibson, Kerri Cleary, and Catherine J. Frieman (Havertown, PA: Oxbow Books, 2021), 54.

37 This paper is not dwelling with whether the Mosaic Covenant should be categorised as a covenant of grace or a covenant of works. While some Reformed traditions hold that the Mosaic Covenant was a covenant of works, meaning it is a conditional covenant that operated upon the expansion of the Edenic Covenant with Adam (David VanDrunen, “Israel’s Recapitulation of Adam’s Probation under the Law of Moses,” WTJ 73 (2011): 303–24), this paper sees covenants as a form of relationship between the Israelites and God, and thus should not be seen as stands for “work” to maintain relationship. The blessing of land under the covenant that flows from obedience is a form of response to that covenantal relationship. As John Piper observed (“God’s Covenant Through Moses,” Desiring God, December 11, 1983, accessed on Feb 3, 2024, https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/gods-covenant-through-moses), much grace has been dispensed under the Mosaic Covenant. He sees the Mosaic Covenant founded on grace and offering forgiveness because (1) the covenant is renewed on the basis of grace and offers merciful forgiveness of sins (Exod 34:6-7); (2) God promises mercy to all who love Him (Exod 20:6); and (3) the root of Israel’s disobedience was her failure to trust God and therefore, the obedience required in the Mosaic Covenant is the obedience which comes from faith. Piper is right when he concludes that obedience to God’s word is not earning God’s grace but it is the evidence of love for God’s grace (emphasis in original). Interestingly, the Westminster Confession of Faith 7.5 also describes the Mosaic Covenant as an administration of the Covenant of Grace in the time of the law and thus does not suggest the covenant as a covenant of works (“Chapter 7, God’s Covenant with Man,” in The Westminster Confession of Faith: in Modern English, 3rd ed. [Orlando, FL: The Evangelical Presbyterian Church, 2010], 14).
by keeping God’s commands and staying faithful to Him. “Obedience” is the response expected to this “grace.” That is to say, by putting נלא in the context of the Mosaic Covenant, it changes the whole perspective on Israel’s possession of the land. After receiving the land, it does not mean the land would be permanently inherited. The land would be taken away if the Israelites did not obey God’s command that leads to defilement of the land (Lev 18:28).

Apart from that, translating נלא as “receive” would also imply the idea of theocracy. Every allotment is received from Yahweh directly and the possession must not be sold permanently. Yahweh, as the ultimate ruler of His people, can retrieve the possession if His people do not abide by His laws. Conversely, the concept of theocracy would be less regarded if translating נלא as “inherit” where retrieval of inheritance is uncommon.

Apparently, understanding נלא to mean “receive” is to remind the audience of the necessity of obedience, which is in line with the Mosaic Covenant stressing the importance of Israel’s obedience in order to continue possessing the land. A solution may lie in understanding receiving the land as a gift and not as an inheritance that may reflect a situation in which the Israelites had been displaced. Especially after returning from exile, נלא serves as both the reminder of the Mosaic’s covenantal blessing and a reminder of their forefather’s mistake that shall not be repeated again.

Conclusion

The word choice of נלא in Joshua is certainly for a reason and not arbitrary. This paper’s analysis has offered a demonstration of an alternative in a better way of reading the word נלא. While the semantic meaning of נלא seems ambiguous and most English Bible translate נלא as

---

38 This claim is consistent throughout the entire Bible because even Jesus points out the close connection between obedience and grace to enter the promise of God—“if (έὰν) you love Me, you will keep (τηρήσετε) My commandments” (John 14:15). Frederick Dale Bruner proposes to read έὰν as “when” not “if,” as the context shows since Jesus is not questioning His disciples’ love for Him, and as the following promise confirms—“you will be” (simple future tense, not a “you should be” imperative or subjunctive) able to keep these commands The Gospel of John: A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), EPUB. Worth noting, it is a promise and not a condition that Christians can now keep Jesus’s commands since Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the Mosaic Covenant, as contrast to the Israelites that cannot keep God’s commands.
“inherit,” the evidence presented in this paper has revealed unequivocally that חל ethernet is best translated as “receive.” The author of Joshua uses חל ethernet to imply a mutual relationship with God and remind the Israelites to abide in the Mosaic Covenant. All nine occurrences of חל ethernet in Joshua have suggested such a reading in the context is plausible. The Israelites receive the land as a gift that is not based on the promise to Abraham but because of the promise of the Mosaic Covenant. Thus, the understanding of חל ethernet now could be seen in a fresh look because חל ethernet serves not only as a reminder to the readers to be obedient but also as an expression of God’s faithfulness in keeping the Mosaic Covenant.

Bibliography


To Inherit or to Receive? ינָחָל in the Book of Joshua... (Tuck Seon Chung) 123


