



## The Spirit in Joshua and the Laying on of Hands by Moses

Walter Vogels

Volume 38, numéro 1, 1982

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/705897ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/705897ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculté de philosophie, Université Laval

ISSN

0023-9054 (imprimé)

1703-8804 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Vogels, W. (1982). The Spirit in Joshua and the Laying on of Hands by Moses. *Laval théologique et philosophique*, 38(1), 3–7. <https://doi.org/10.7202/705897ar>

## THE SPIRIT IN JOSHUA AND THE LAYING ON OF HANDS BY MOSES

Num 27: 18-23 — Deut 34: 9

Walter VOGELS

**T**WO PASSAGES in the Bible relate the imminent death of Moses and the appointment of Joshua as his successor to be the leader of Israel (Num 27: 12-23; Deut 34)<sup>1</sup>. The text in Numbers has more details, for instance the presence of Eleazar the priest and the rite of the Urim, but both passages have several elements in common: the presence of *ruah* in Joshua, a laying on of hands by Moses, an acceptance by the whole community, and a statement that all this is done according to Yahweh's orders. In most translations the link between these common elements of the two texts is very different. As a typical example we can take RSV, which reads:

And the Lord said to Moses: "Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand upon him... that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey... and Moses did as the Lord commanded him... (Num 27: 18-23).

And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, for Moses had laid his hands upon him: so the people of Israel obeyed him, and did as the Lord had commanded Moses (Deut 34: 9).

The difference is rather remarkable. In the first case (Num 27: 18) Joshua already has *ruah*: then follows the laying on of hands by Moses and finally the acceptance by the people: spirit → laying on of hands → acceptance. While in the second text (Deut 34: 9) the gift of the spirit to Joshua is the result of the laying on of hands by Moses: laying on of hands → spirit → acceptance. This discrepancy makes the meaning and the importance of the laying on of hands significantly different. Though exegetes make cross-references from one text to the other, some do

---

1. G.W. COATS, "Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," *CBQ* 39 (1977) 34-44.

not seem to notice the important difference<sup>2</sup>, others point to the difference<sup>3</sup>, but rare are those who try to explain the disparity<sup>4</sup>.

Since the two texts belong to the Pentateuch, one might be inclined to think that the different order can be explained by the theory of the four traditions (J–E–D–P). When the *ruah* is already present before the laying on of hands, and thus appears to be a direct gift of Yahweh, the text seems more prophetic and charismatic. One would be inclined to attribute it to E or even to D while a text, in which the gift of the spirit depends upon a ritual, would probably belong to the priestly tradition, P.

But such an explanation does not seem satisfactory in this case. Exegetes generally agree that the two texts belong to P<sup>5</sup>. Deut 34 is considered a combination of several traditions. Since it is the last chapter of the whole Pentateuch, all traditions come to their conclusion there. All exegetes consider v. 9 as P<sup>6</sup>. The passage in Num 27: 18–23 is also attributed to P<sup>7</sup>. Some exegetes think that it is from a later period, but still from the priestly tradition<sup>8</sup>. Which of these texts is the earlier is still under discussion.

#### *The laying on of hands by Moses*

There is a minor difference in the description of the laying on of hands in the two texts. Deut 34: 9 has a plural “his hands”. Numbers, on the contrary, has a singular “your hand” (v. 18), but a few verses later in the same text the plural is used, “his hands” (v. 23). Several manuscripts attest different readings, which suggest the possibility of textual error<sup>9</sup>. But whatever the textual problem, the ritual of the laying

- 
2. For instance G. BERNINI, *Il libro dei Numeri* (La Sacra Bibbia 6; Torino: Marietti, 1972) 274, pretends that even in the text of Num Joshua receives the spirit of Moses “mediante l'imposizione delle sue mani”.
  3. J. DE VAULX, *Les Nombres* (SB; Paris: Gabalda, 1972) 324, comments on Num 27: 18: “Aucun lien n'est donc fait ici entre cette possession de l'Esprit et l'imposition des mains. Ce lien sera fait par Deut 34: 9...”.
  4. W.H. GISPEN, *Het Boek Numeri II* (Hfst 20: 14–36: 16) (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1964) 190. In his commentary on the passage of Num he writes: “We moeten er op letten, dat deze geest in Jozua aanwezig is vóór he handoplegging door Mozes. In Deut 34: 9 wordt gezegd, dat Jozua vol was van de geest der wijsheid, omdat Mozes zijn handen op hem gelegd had. Dus die handoplegging vermeerderd Jozua's bekwaamheid, vervult hem met wijsheid”. In other words, Joshua already had “spirit”, a spiritual capability to become a leader. After the laying on of hands this spirit increases and he is now filled with the spirit of wisdom.
  5. C.A. SIMPSON, *The Early Traditions of Israel*, a critical analysis of the pre-deuteronomic narrative of the Hexateuch (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1948) 279; O. EISSFELDT, *Hexateuch-Synopse* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962) 105, 191 \*-192 \*, 279 \*-280 \*.
  6. S.R. DRIVER, *Deuteronomy* (ICC 3; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906) 417; G.E. WRIGHT, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (IB II; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953) 535; G. VON RAD, *Deuteronomy* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966) 209; J. WIJNGAARDS, *Deuteronomium uit de grondtekst vertaald en uitgelegd* (Roermond: J.J. Romen, 1971) 360.
  7. G.B. GRAY, *Numbers* (ICC 2; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903) 399; J. MARSH, *The Book of Numbers* (IB II; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953) 272.
  8. M. NOTH, *Numbers* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1968) 213; J. DE VAULX, *Les Nombres* 321; J. STURDY, *Numbers* (The Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) 196.
  9. On this question: G.B. GRAY, *Numbers*, 402; G. BERNINI, *Il libro dei Numeri* 275.

on by one or two hands appears elsewhere and the difference of number does not seem to indicate a difference of meaning<sup>10</sup>.

Hands are laid on animals for holocausts (Lev 1: 4), for communion sacrifices (Lev 3: 2, 8, 13) and for sacrifices for sin (Lev 4: 4, 15, 24, 29, 33; Num 8: 12). This gesture appears in ordination rites, but it still refers to the laying of hands upon animals (Exod 29: 10, 15, 19; Lev 8: 14, 18, 22). There are different interpretations of the meaning of this ritual. De Vaux believes that the ritual does not suggest that the animal is a substitute for the human person. By this gesture the worshipper merely expresses that this victim is his, and that it will be offered in his name<sup>11</sup>. Hands are also laid on the scapegoat (Lev 16: 21) which is charged with the guilt of the people.

Other than the case of Joshua, there are only two texts where hands are laid upon a human person. When someone is found guilty of blasphemy all the witnesses have to lay their hands upon his head before stoning him (Lev 24: 14). The meaning seems very clear. The witnesses indicate through this gesture that this person is the one who is guilty. The other case refers to the people laying their hands upon the Levites (Num 8: 10-11). This does not seem to be an investiture, but a gesture of offering. The Levites are offered to God as substitutes for the first-born<sup>12</sup>.

The case of Joshua is therefore the only text where the laying of hands upon a person is in the context of some kind of investiture. But the question is: What does this rite accomplish? Does Moses, as in several of the preceding cases, simply indicate through this gesture that this person is the one who will be his successor? Is it in other words a certain rite of identification (as could be the case in Num)? Or does this rite bring about the gift of the spirit (which could be the meaning in Deut)?

### *The spirit in Joshua*

The allusion to the spirit in Joshua is another element which is not exactly identical in the two texts. Joshua is called "a man in whom is *spirit*" (Num 27: 18), or "full of the *spirit of wisdom*" (Deut 34: 9).

The term *ruah* is very rich and complex<sup>13</sup>. Joshua in the first text is "a man in whom is *ruah*." (Num 27: 18), which in theory could simply mean that Joshua is a man full of life. The word *ruah* can indeed refer to that aspect alone (cf. Ps 31: 6).

- 
10. D. DAUBE, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: University of London, 1956) "The Laying on of Hands" 224-246; E. FERGUSON, "Jewish and Christian Ordination. Some Observations," *HTR* 56 (1963) 13-19; J.K. PARRATT, "The Laying on of Hands in the New Testament. A Re-examination in the Light of the Hebrew Terminology," *Exp Tim* 80 (1968/69) 210-214; C. CHAVASSE, "The Laying on of Hands," *Exp Tim* 81 (1969/70) 150.
  11. R. DE VAUX, *Ancient Israel, its life and institutions* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1968, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) 416, 441 "...the Israelite custom of laying one's hands on the victim did not mean that the victim was a substitute for the person offering the sacrifice".
  12. R. DE VAUX, *Ancient Israel*, 347.
  13. D. LYS, *Rûach, le souffle dans l'Ancien Testament, enquête anthropologique à travers l'histoire théologique d'Israël* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962); G. AUZOU, *La force de l'Esprit, étude du livre des Juges* (Connaissance de la Bible 5; Paris: Orante, 1966) "Le mystère de l'Esprit" 74-128.

But if one looks at the context it is evident that this is not the meaning here. Moses asks Yahweh to appoint a leader for the community: "May Yahweh, God of the spirits..." (Num 27: 15). Yahweh in reply says to Moses: "Take Joshua, the son of Nun, a man in whom is spirit" (v. 18). This response indicates that Joshua has the "spirit of Yahweh". Joshua has more than simply life. Like other charismatic leaders, he has the "spirit of Yahweh"<sup>14</sup>. This is more clearly expressed and further explained in the parallel text: where Joshua is said to be "full of the spirit of wisdom" (Deut 34: 9).

There is a great variety of gifts from the spirit of Yahweh, but the spirit always comes directly from God upon the person. The Judges have the special gift to fight and to deliver Israel: "the spirit of Yahweh came on him..." (Judg 3: 10; 6: 34; 11: 29; 13: 25; 14: 6, 19; 15: 14). The spirit comes upon some persons to make them prophets (Num 24: 2; 1 Sam 10: 10; 1 Kgs 22: 21-24). He also comes upon kings (1 Sam 11: 6; 16: 13). The "spirit of wisdom" is a quality of leadership. It is the gift requested by Solomon (1 Kgs 3: 4-15, 28), and characteristic of the future messiah (Isa 9: 5-6; 11: 2). Nowhere is there any indication of a ritual by which that spirit of Yahweh is communicated.

There are a few instances of transmission of authority in the Bible, but even in these cases God himself gives his spirit. This is clearly so for the seventy elders who participate in the spirit of Moses: "Yahweh... took some of the spirit that was on him (Moses) and put it on the seventy elders. When the spirit came on them they prophesied, but not again" (Num 11: 25). The same applies to the transmission of the spirit from Elijah to Elisha (2 Kgs 2: 9, 15)<sup>15</sup>. David's anointing by Samuel could constitute an exception. "Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him where he stood with his brothers; and the spirit of Yahweh seized on David and stayed with him from that day on" (1 Sam 16: 13). This text could suggest a link between the anointing and the gift of the spirit. But in all other cases of the anointing of kings no reference is made to a gift of the spirit. We may note that in David's case the text still says that the spirit "seized on" David and also that Yahweh had already chosen him before the anointing (v. 12). One could therefore say that the spirit came upon David on the occasion of the anointing rather than because of it. This text may well mean anointing *and* gift of the spirit, rather than gift of the spirit *because* of the anointing.

### *The function of kî*

We are left therefore with only one clear case in which several translators make a causal link between a ritual and the gift of the spirit. "Joshua was full of the spirit of wisdom *because* (kî) Moses had laid his hands upon him" (Deut 34: 9).

The uniqueness of this text and the way in which it differs from its parallel text (Num 27: 18-23), where the laying on of hands seems only a rite of identification,

14. F.L. MORIARTY, *Numbers* (JBC; Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, 1968) 97; A. CLARKE, *The Holy Bible* containing the Old and New Testaments, The Old Testament I (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975) 709; J. STURDY, *Numbers*, 197.

15. R.A. CARLSON, "Élisée — Le suceseur d'Élie," *VT* 20 (1970) 385-405.

certainly raises questions. We have shown that the minor differences of hand/hands ; spirit/spirit of wisdom do not involve any difference of meaning. The only detail which causes the whole difference is the particle *kî*.

This *kî* has been understood by all translators as causative in relation to the statement of the previous clause. NAB translates "since" and JB, RSV, NEB "for". But the frequently used *kî* has a variety of nuances of meaning and functions in the sentence in the Bible<sup>16</sup>. Just to quote a few, this *kî* may be emphatic<sup>17</sup>, recitative<sup>18</sup>, interrogative<sup>19</sup>. Far from always introducing a dependent causative clause, it often introduces a strong emphatic statement<sup>20</sup>. We therefore suggest that the whole issue is a question of punctuation in the sentence under consideration. And we translate:

And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom. When (or Since) Moses had laid his hands upon him, the people of Israel obeyed him, and did as Yahweh had commanded Mose (Deut 34: 9).

Such an explanation eliminates the discrepancy between the two texts (Num 27: 18-23 and Deut 34: 9). They now say exactly the same thing. God has given Joshua a special spirit: he is a charismatic leader. Through the laying on of hands Moses appoints him as his successor and substitute. Joshua is now clearly identified as such and, consequently, the people are ready to obey him. This solution also puts the case of Joshua in harmony with the other biblical texts. Only God himself gives his spirit. Human ritual indicates in the eyes of the people who this charismatic person is, but it does not give the spirit.

This short note is limited to the Old Testament. It could be said to shed some light on the New Testament too. One sees the significance of the tremendous change when the risen Lord Jesus himself gives the spirit to his disciples. "Then he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit...'" (John 20: 22).

- 
16. J. MUILENBURG, "The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle *kî* in the Old Testament," *HUCA XXXII* (1961) 135-160; T.C. VRIEZEN, "Einige Notizen zur Übersetzung des Bindewortes *kî*," *Von Ugarit nach Qumran*, ed. J. HEMPEL; L. ROST, *BZAW 77* (1961) 266-273. T. FRANKFORT, "Le *kî* de Joel 1: 12," *VT 10* (1960) 445-448 is an interesting study which shows how the interpretation given to *kî* can change the meaning of a text. She discusses the causal, emphatic or adversative meaning.
17. The emphatic *kî*: "surely", "indeed": M. DAHOOD, "Hebrew-Ugaritic Lexicography III," *Bib 46* (1965) 327; T.F. MCDANIEL, "Philological Studies in Lamentations II," *Bib 49* (1968) 210-213.
18. The recitative *kî* not frequent but possible: F. ZORELL, "Gibt es im Hebräischen ein 'kî recitativum'?" *Bib 14* (1933) 465-469 "ja, eben, halt," "denn".
19. The interrogative *kî*: M. DAHOOD, "Interrogative *kî* in Psalm 90: 11; Isaiah 36: 19 and Hosea 13: 9," *Bib 60* (1979) 573-574.
20. J. MUILENBURG, *HUCA XXXII* (1961) 136 "All the lexicons point to its original demonstrative character. It is designed to give emphasis, to give force to a statement... But *kî* is more than a demonstrative; it is also a deictic word; that is, it points or shows the way forward. "It may mean that something is now coming to which we must pay attention", J. PEDERSEN, (*Israel: Its Life and Culture* I - II [1926] 118)."