

Part 1: An Overview of the Redemptive-Historical Story of the Old Testament

B. From Slavery to Freedom

6. Early Life in the Promised Land

Towards the end of Israel's 40 years in the wilderness, Moses gathered the people to give them his parting blessing and words of wisdom. He reminded them of all the Lord had done for them to this point and reiterated the conditions under they could prosper in the land into which the Lord was about to bring them. He also outlined the blessings and curses that would follow their conduct. Afterwards, since he himself had been disqualified from entering the land, he appointed Joshua as his successor and, before he died, was granted an overview of Canaan from the top of nearby Mt. Nebo.

That brings us to the final installment of Israel's journey from slavery to freedom, their entrance into the Promised Land and early life there. The book that describes this is titled *Joshua*, but Israel's leader is not its primary character. That is, the title does not so much proclaim the man as it does the meaning of his name. The name Joshua means, "The Lord saves; the Lord God is the one who gives the victory." That's why the author begins by showing where Joshua's instructions came from and who should get the credit for all that is to follow.

Among Moses' concluding words to Israel had been these from Deut. 31:6: *Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.*" Moses repeated this to Joshua in the presence of the people: *"Be strong and courageous... The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged."*

It is noteworthy that, as recounted in the first few verses of Joshua, the Lord repeats these very words to Israel's new leader three more times right after he takes over from Moses. The reason that Joshua can be strong and courageous is that the upcoming campaign to secure the land as an inheritance for Israel is not his or Israel's campaign; it is the Lord's.

That is reinforced by an encounter Joshua had a little later, as he contemplated the fortifications of Jericho, the first barrier to the conquest of Canaan. All of a sudden Joshua saw a man in front of him with a sword in his hand, a man who identified himself as commander of the Lord's army (Josh 5:13-15). He told Joshua the same thing Moses had been told 80 years before at the burning bush: *"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy."*

The early Christian church speculated that this mysterious man was the second person of the Trinity: Jesus, before his incarnation. We cannot know. But this was important business, important enough that the Lord himself would attend to it. You see, the land of Canaan (Palestine) was really much more than a certain piece of real estate. It did have physical dimensions, but the land carried with it many spiritual implications. This was the place chosen by God to be "a new garden of Eden with a new Adam and Eve, Israel. The installation of Israel in the Promised Land was to be a model, and a new beginning for God's redemption of the whole world.

Joshua prepared for the conquest of Canaan by sending two spies to Jericho. They sneaked into the city and found lodging in the ancient equivalent of a motel: the house of Rahab the prostitute. It was the best place to avoid arousing suspicion.

Even so, their arrival did not pass unnoticed and it was only by Rahab's intervention that they avoided capture. The reason she risked her own life in this was clear in her explanation to the spies (Josh. 2:9-11). She spoke of the great fear of Israel that she and her fellow citizens shared.

To be sure, Israel was a big horde to be so close, even if the flooding Jordan River still separated them from Jericho. But what multiplied the fear of the Canaanites, as Rahab told the spies, was two reports they had received: (1) the news of how the God of the Israelites had delivered them from Egypt's army by making a path through the Red Sea, and (2) the news of how God had helped Israel defeat the armies of the Amorites.

Jericho's forces were small compared to the Amorite territories, and built to stand against the attacks of other city-kingdoms, not the attacks of armies capable of defeating such people as the Amorites with their vast resources and territories. But in the minds of the Canaan's inhabitants, the miracle at the Red Sea was more frightening. In their religious mythology, Baal ruled the land because he had overcome the powerful god of the sea. But, when the God of Israel overcame the sea, making a path through it to save his people, he, thereby proved himself to be the God of all gods, more powerful even than Baal of the Canaanites.

Naturally, the future opponents of Israel were afraid. And they had to make a choice; there was no possibility for neutrality. Would they submit to the God who had proved his sovereignty so dramatically, or would they resist?

Most decided to resist. But Rahab's actions to save the spies of Israel gave evidence not only of her faith that the Lord would be victorious, but also of her willingness to change her allegiance and serve the true God of land and sea.

Rahab's testimony and actions on behalf of the spies had an impact on their morale as well; they took it as God's sign that Israel's victory was certain. And that's just how Joshua and Israel took it too when they got the report of what had happened in Jericho. And they were glad too of the eventual opportunity to preserve Rahab and her family and welcome them into the community of God's people.

After the spies' report, Israel was ready to follow God's next instructions. The next day the priests carrying the ark of the covenant walked into the flooding Jordan River, whereupon its waters stopped flowing and all of Israel crossed over into Canaanite territory.

With that, the terror of which Rahab had spoken to the spies had to have increased even more. And the faith of Israel was simultaneously strengthened. Before they had fought a single battle, it seemed that the entire land was theirs for the taking. Such a miracle deserved a memorial, which is exactly what God commanded to be built. Like all memorials, this one was meant to help keep the story alive. For although the eyewitnesses to this miracle would not soon forget what God had done, it would be a different matter for future generations unless the story of God's miracle were told and retold.

In this brief period of calm before the storm of war, the Israelites were reminded of the terms of their covenant with God and he instructed that all of their men and boys be circumcised. This mark of the covenant had not been used during Israel's wilderness years. But now that God's people had crossed over into their own land, a land of freedom and life, they could properly honor the Lord their God.

As God told them, the rolling away of the foreskin in circumcision marked the rolling away of the shame the Lord's people had endured as slaves of the unclean and uncircumcised Egyptians. Here, in this land of the promise, above all places, the laws of God had to be properly observed and the covenant had to be maintained and honored. If things were not as they should be here, then what would be the point of all of God's activity on behalf of Israel?

There were a couple of other significant things that also happened at this time; together they marked the end of Israel's wilderness experience. One was the first celebration of the Passover since Israel's deliverance from Egypt. And this coincided with the beginning of the barley harvest in Canaan so that the Israelites could now also begin to eat of the produce of the land God was giving them. This also meant that God could stop sending the daily manna.

The religious rituals of circumcision and Passover were Israel's testimony to the true faith. There were times when the people had doubted; there would be future times when they would falter. But now, in this new land, they saw with the eyes of faith. And they ate and drank and celebrated in the shadow of Jericho's walls.

The story of Jericho's subsequent fall is well-known. As instructed by the commander of the Lord's army, Israel's role at first was merely to march around the city for seven days in succession and then blow their trumpets and shout at the appropriate time. Only then, after God brought the walls down, would they be released to destroy every living thing in Jericho.

The first battle was important not only for strategic reasons. It was also to be the model for all of Israel's battles. It was not a model for battle techniques; not every city would have its walls supernaturally demolished. But it was a model in that it showed that the Lord alone was the get the credit for every success. To be sure, Israel would have to fight to secure their inheritance, but they were not ever to make the mistake of thinking that they had done it in their own strength.

There was a further instruction from the Lord that was particularly important in this first and precedent-setting battle. It was that every living creature and everything connected with the city be subjected to "the ban," i.e. be completely destroyed, except for those articles of gold, silver, bronze, and iron, which were to be brought into the Lord's treasury. That command was a repetition of what God had told his people on several prior occasions, eg. Deut 20:17-18: *Completely destroy them-... Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God.*

Under the rules of the ban there were only two alternatives. Everything and everyone was to serve the Lord or be totally destroyed. The Canaanites had made their choice. For many years they had flaunted their worship of false gods instead of giving God the allegiance he demanded. Now was the Day of Judgment, in which they would reap the reward for their sin.

With the benefit of hindsight, we today can see that what was to happen in Jericho was to be a preview of God's final judgment when everyone who has persisted in their rebellion against One True God will be subject to eternal destruction.

Afterwards it seemed that everything had been done precisely as God had instructed. And Israel was eager to press the war against the other cities and nations of Canaan. But they were shocked by a resounding defeat by what looked like an easy target—Ai.

What was soon revealed was that God's strict command against seizing any of the spoils of the battle with Jericho had been violated by an Israelite—Aachen. And not until he and his family had themselves been subjected to God's punishment could Israel continue. In this way it was driven home to God's people that they needed to be very scrupulous about obeying the Lord in every particular.

After that, Israel's advance through Canaan went better. The tribes of Israel fought together to take over large chunks of the land. The conclusion of the entire series of battles to do that is given in the final verse of ch. 11. *So Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions. Then the land had rest from war.*

That rest was not perfect and complete since each tribe had further work to do to ensure its safety. Indeed, Joshua later scolded the leaders of the various tribes with this question (18:3): *How long will you wait before you begin to take possession of the land that the lord, the God of your fathers has given you?* That is, even after each tribe had received its inheritance, the people were not to be lax in dealing with the opposition that remained in each territory.

However, enough work was done so that each tribe could be assigned a portion of the land. That distribution is described in chapters 13-21 of Joshua. Here there are long lists of cities, descriptions of boundaries, and names of people that mean very little to most readers today. But there are some important themes in this section which have to do with the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to give Israel an inheritance.

Until the land was divided, and all of Israel's tribes came into possession of their own piece of land, the promise remained incomplete and unfulfilled. That's why every tribe and every family was allotted a piece of the land as their inheritance. Furthermore, special provisions were enacted so that the inheritance of each family would continue down through the generations.

- Among these, described in Joshua 17, was an exception to the usual practice of distributing the inheritance through the males of Israel. Here, the inheritance due a man of Manasseh named Zelophehad was given to his daughters because he had no sons.
- Another provision was that any land that a family in hardship had to sell, would be returned to that family in the Year of Jubilee (which happened once every fifty years), because an Israelite without land could not experience the full benefits of the Abrahamic blessings.
- Special provisions were also made for the Levites. As the tribe of Israel's priests, their function was to serve all of the other tribes scattered throughout Israel. As a result, their inheritance was the gift of towns with pasturelands in each of the tribal territories.
- Finally, although this is not singled out for special mention in Joshua, foreigners, such as the Egyptians who threw their lot in with Israel when they left Egypt, and Rahab, the Canaanite saved from the destruction of Jericho, could also participate in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant by marrying into an Israelite family.

God had gone to a lot of trouble to give Israel a home. He'd begun hundreds of years earlier and just now finished the job. That's the meaning of these final words of ch. 21:44-45 *The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.*

These words are reminiscent of God's verdict after he had finished creating the universe (Gen 1:21): *God saw all that he had made and it was very good.* Here again, God saw all that he had done in this new Paradise, and it was good. The Lord had done his work well; all the enemies vanquished, and all the promises fulfilled. That had very serious implications for the relationships that Israel would form with other nations; that had to be done very carefully so as not to compromise the nation's loyalty to God.

Here's how Joshua put it in a speech to Israel's leaders toward the end of his life (23:6-13): *"Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them. But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now. "The LORD has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. One of you routs a thousand, because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised. So be very careful to love the LORD your God. "But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.*

Joshua's final admonition to Israel, given shortly before his death at the age of 110, included this challenge and testimony: (Josh 24:14-15): *"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD."*

The people responded in the affirmative: "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him." And they sealed their promise by reaffirming the conditions of the covenant they had with God.

After Joshua's death he was buried in the territory of his own inheritance. Also Joseph's bones were reburied in his family plot, as he had requested long before. Things were good for now. But in the years to come Israel would fail to drive out the Canaanites completely and as a result the false gods and misplaced loyalties of these nations would pose ongoing problems for the tribes of Israel.