

JOSHUA – PART TWO

The Conquest Continues

Chapters 7-24

CHAPTER 7: Sin of Achan and defeat of Ai

In this article, we will look at:

- Conquest of Canaan
- Allotment of the land
- Joshua's farewell address to the Israelites

The focus of chapters 7 and 8 is the sin of Achan and the battle for Ai. Chapter 7 opens with interplay between individual and communal responsibility.

It is stated that the *Israelites* (the whole community) broke faith with God by violating the ban. Then verse 1 specifically names Achan as the culprit, as the one who took some goods for his household that should have been devoted to the Lord. This violation of the ban causes God to be mad with the whole Israelite community. One man's sin has consequences for the whole community. In this case, the Lord's anger could be compared to the outrage a spouse would feel on discovering that his/her partner had been unfaithful.

Verses 2-5 recount a failed attempt to take the city of Ai. We note in these verses that the initiative for the battle was taken by Israel rather than by the Lord.

Verses 6-15 describe an interchange between God and Joshua. When Joshua addresses God, he assumes that they have lost the battle because the soldiers have lost their confidence in God (v.5). Then God tells him the real reason why Israel has lost the battle. "*Israel has sinned.*" Again, note how the sin of one person can have implications for the whole community.

Even though Israel, as a whole, was held responsible for the violation of the ban, the nation would be spared if the one directly responsible for the breach of the covenant was removed. When Achan is discovered as the guilty one, he and his whole family and possessions receive the death sentence. In his commentary on Numbers, Jerome Creach draws a parallel between Achan's sin and Rahab's good deed in that Rahab's good deed in harboring the spies preserved not only her life but also her family, while Achan's sin of disobedience and greed doomed not only himself but his whole family (ibid. pp 72-73). Seeking to connect the Achan story to our lives, Creach writes: "*Achan was lured by the prospect of*

material gain, and he was willing to risk his soul to obtain this world's pleasures. The story is about the choice between the values of two worlds, the choice between holiness in covenant with God and prosperity obtained by secular greed. The preacher or teacher who deals with this text must admit the distance at which the contemporary audience stands from the story of Achan and the strangeness of the ban to the church today. Nevertheless, Joshua 7 has potential to speak powerfully to a dilemma all people of faith face, namely, how to be devoted to God while turning from the temptation to profit at the expense of faith. Achan is a primary illustration of one who could not come to terms with this choice (compare Acts 5:1-11)." (p.75)

Pause: What speaks to you in the above quote from Jerome Creach?

CHAPTER 8: Capture of Ai

"I have delivered the king of Ai into your power, with his people, city and land" (v.2).

There is a clear contrast between chapters 7 and 8. In the first encounter between the Israelites, Joshua is the one calling the shots. In the second encounter, God is clearly the one in charge. Because the Lord himself is leading Israel into battle, there is no need to be afraid. "*I have delivered the king of Ai into your power with your people, city and land"* (v. 2). In this case, the ban only applied to the people.

In contrast to chapter 7, chapter 8 shows how Israel, when she fights under the leadership of the Lord and does the Lord's will, can be victorious. The message for the exiles is clear: while sin leads to disaster, obedience leads to victory.

Verses 30-35 report the fulfillment of the commands of Moses (see Dt. 27:1-8) concerning what was to happen when the people had entered the land.

CHAPTER 9: Saved by trickery

"We have heard reports of all that God did in Egypt" (v.9).

The reports of Israel's victories quickly spread throughout the land of Canaan. As a result, several of the kings join together in an alliance to fight the Israelites. In contrast, the Gibeonites, rather than fight Israel, devise a way to fool them into entering into a covenant with them. They let on that they live outside the territories that come under the ban. They persuade Joshua that they are from a faraway place. Declaring to Joshua that they have heard reports of the Lord's mighty deeds against all who opposed Israel, they ask to enter into a covenant with Israel and her God. The deception works and the covenant is made. When Joshua later discovers that these are not foreigners, but actually inhabitants of Canaan, he is unable to do anything because the covenant is irrevocable. A solemn vow is like an arrow that, after being fired from a bow, cannot be retracted.

Some scholars compare the Gibeonites to Jacob who used trickery to get something he would otherwise be denied. In the context of the conquest story of Canaan, the Gibeonites resemble Rahab who tricked her way into escaping the ban. Both the Gibeonites and Rahab should have been destroyed according to the stipulations of the ban (Dt 20:10-20).

The Gibeonites' crafty plan spared their lives. Henceforth, they became "*hewers of the wood and drawers of the water*" (v.21).

Pause: What is your reaction to this story? Are you sympathetic with the plight of the Gibeonites and glad to see them gain salvation, even by dishonest means? Or do you resent their preservation because we see them as undeserving and dishonest?

CHAPTER 10: Siege of Gibeon and conquest of southern Canaan

"The sun stood still and the moon stayed while the nation took vengeance on its foes" (v.13).

In this chapter, we see how God continues to give Israel the land he had promised them. Five kings form an alliance to lay siege on Gibeon who in turn seeks help from Joshua. Despite having been deceived by the Gibeonites, Joshua nevertheless comes to their aid. In fact, he is bound to do so because of the covenant he entered into with them. In a way, the alliance of the enemy kings works to Joshua's advantage. Because the five enemy kings have united to attack Gibeon, Joshua does not have to spend time and resources on five separate battles.

As Joshua goes into battle, God assures him of victory (v. 8). He helps the Israelites by working two natural miracles: powerful hailstones (v.11) and the sun standing still, thereby extending the day. The authors of Joshua write "*never before or since was there a day like this*" (v.16). We can view these two nature miracles as a poetic way of stating that God was with the Israelites in a powerful way. Or we can believe that on that day, God did extraordinary things to show Israel his mighty power.

Verse 10:24. Placing a foot on the neck of a captive was a common military practice in the ancient Near East. It symbolized the victor's domination over his captives. These proud kings had boasted of their power. Now, all Israel could see that God was superior to any earthly army.

Verses 28-39. Having defeated the coalition of five kings, Joshua follows up this victory with raids against six cities to the west and southwest of Jerusalem (vv 28-39). The descriptions of these raids follow a definite pattern that reported how a city was captured and its inhabitants put to the sword with no survivors. In this way, Joshua fulfilled the ban on each city according to the will of the Lord (Dr. 20:10-18). Israel was successful because the Lord delivered the cities into her power.

Pause: What is the greatest 'nature miracle' you can remember in your lifetime (e.g., a hurricane destined for a city is averted in the last minutes)?

CHAPTER 11: Joshua's conquest continues

"Do not fear them..." (v 6).

A new coalition of Canaanite kings is formed to fight the Israelites. Together, they seem to be a much superior force. They have "*an army numerous as the sand on the seashores, and with a multitude of horses and chariots*" (v.4). But Joshua is once again told "not to fear" this huge army for the Lord will give Israel another victory (vv 6 and 8).

Verse 15 tells of the obedience of Joshua to God's commands. This was the reason he was so successful in his battles—an important message for the exiles to hear as they wondered if God would ever restore them to their land.

Verses 18-19 state that "*Joshua waged war against all these kings for a long time. With the exception of Hivites, who lived in Gibeon, no city made peace with*

the Israelites.” This sounds as though the kings and their cities did not have to be destroyed. If they had acted like Rahab and the Gibeonites, perhaps their fate would have been different. Making a general comment on these chapters, Jerome Creach writes: “*When Joshua, chapters 10-12, is read as a theological narrative, it accentuates God’s graciousness to Israel and God’s desire to be compassionate to the Canaanites as well. But the Canaanite kings refused to acknowledge God’s authority and thereby missed their opportunity for God’s grace. The harsh treatment of Canaanite kings and their people should be understood as part of an ethic of revolution. Revolution often brings death and destruction for those whose outmoded or oppressive practices stand in the way of new visions for life and governance. Israel’s conquest is depicted as such a revolutionary movement, called for and informed by the torah of Moses*” (p.96).

Verse 20 states that “*it was the design of the Lord to encourage them to wage war against Israel, that they might be doomed to destruction and thus receive no mercy, but be exterminated, as the Lord commanded Moses.*” At face value, this verse presents us with a violent image of God delighting in the violent destruction of pagans.

In Exodus, we note several references to God “hardening the heart of Pharaoh.” We also note that the ancient Israelites did not make a distinction between primary and secondary causes. God caused everything. So if the kings of Canaan hardened their hearts against the Israelites, God caused that to happen. In the story of the Gibeonites, they decided to surrender to the Israelites albeit through trickery. As for the leaders of Jericho, it seems God did not harden their hearts for they offered no resistance to the Israelites. People then and now can choose to harden their hearts against the Lord or to listen to and follow his ways.

Verse 23 tells us that “*Joshua captured the whole country, just as the Lord had foretold to Moses...and the land enjoyed peace.*” Scholars point out that this is an exaggerated picture designed to show the fulfillment of God’s promise to give the land to Israel. However, according to 13:14, a very large part of the land still remained to be conquered. So we may wonder what is going on here. The authors of *Walking with God* state: “*If we read carefully, we discover that after their military victories in Joshua 1-12, Israel usually returns to their camp at Gilgal. In Joshua 13-22, the complaint that the tribes are not*

taking possession of their inheritance means that Israel is failing to follow up their military victories with a physical occupation of the land of their defeated enemies. Of all the tribes, Judah is most successful in occupying the land allotted to them, but no tribe completes the task. The problem is acute, as Joshua realizes, for if Israel does not take possession of the land, a new generation of Canaanite leaders will arise, and the rest from fighting that has been granted to Israel will soon be squandered” (p.125).

Pause: What are your thoughts on the above verses that we have commented on?

PART TWO: DIVISION OF THE LAND (Chapters 12-21)

Concerning this section of Joshua, the Collegeville commentary states: “*These chapters contain elaborate geographical details about how the land was divided among the various tribes, and provide statistical information about persons, places, and tribes. Their purpose is to show how God has given the whole country to Israel as its heritage, just as the Lord had promised Moses (see 11:23). This was an important message for the original audience of this book. The exiles the Book of Joshua is promising above all that the Lord is faithful to the ancient promises made to the patriarchs*” (p.241).

In his introduction to these chapters, Jerome Creach writes: “*This section has a very important but seldom appreciated theological role in the book and in the Old Testament. Indeed, Joshua 13-22 has profound implications for Israel’s establishment of a just society, according the ideals of the Mosaic torah. The distribution of land emphasizes that Canaan is apportioned for the good of all Israel. Not just for a privileged few. In turn, this portrait of land distribution is formative for Israel’s self-understanding as a covenant community. Prophets like Isaiah and Micah express a concern for the maintenance of this self-understanding. They denounce capitalist-style profiteers who ‘covet fields, and seize them’ (Micah 2:2), joining ‘house to house’ (Is 5:8). What they rail against is precisely the practice of some wealthy citizens who seize property that, for the poor, represents membership in the covenant community*” (ibid. pp 97-98).

CHAPTER 20: Cities of asylum

Chapter 20 talks about the six asylum or refugee cities designated to protect persons who accidentally caused another's death, from the avenging relatives of their victims.

CHAPTER 21: Levitical cities

A second set of 48 towns is set aside for the Levites. The tribe of Levi receives no territory of its own because the men of that tribe serve as priests, who are to teach the Torah to Israel and offer sacrifice to the Lord (Dt 33:8-11). To fulfill these functions, the priests need to be available to the people; therefore, the cities where the Levites have residential and grazing rights are scattered throughout the country.

Joshua 21 has a glorious conclusion on the allotment of land and on how God has fulfilled his promises to Israel. It should be noted that the following verses are an idyllic picture of the current situation.

“And so the Lord gave Israel all the land he had sworn to their fathers he would give them. Once they had conquered and occupied it, the Lord gave them peace on every side, just as he had promised their fathers. Not one of their enemies could withstand them; the Lord brought all their enemies under their power. Not a single promise that the Lord made to the house of Israel was broken; everyone was fulfilled” (vv 43-45).

In speaking thus, the deuteronomist author is stressing the central premise of his theology, namely, that conformity to God's laws results in peace and prosperity. He presents the time of Joshua as a “golden age” during which the Israelites were obedient to God and, as a result, were blessed abundantly.

In the books after Joshua, the deuteronomist author will show that the reason bad things happened to Israel was because they abandoned their covenant with God.

CHAPTER 22: Threat of civil war

The Israelites, whose territory is situated east of the Jordan River, have joined in the battle to take control of the area west of the river. Since that battle is successful, Joshua allows them to return to their homes (vv 1-9). This is a prelude to a conflict between the Israelites east of the river and those on the west (vv 10-34). The tribes from the east side of the river

build an altar near the Jordan, and this offends the Israelites from the west. War is averted because Phineas, Eleazar's son, has succeeded in negotiating peace between the two groups of Israelites. “The precise nature of the offense is not obvious, though it may reflect the deuteronomic belief that there was to be only one place where sacrifices were to be offered. Apparently, the book of Joshua assumed that this place was Shiloh. When the easterners explained that they did not intend to offer sacrifices, this defused the problem” (The Catholic Bible-Personal Study Edition p. 98).

PART THREE: JOSHUA'S FINAL ADDRESS (Chapters 23-24)

“I am old and advanced in years. You have seen all that the Lord, your God, has done for you against all these nations; for it has been the Lord, your God, himself who fought for you” (vv 2-3).

In the final two chapters of this book, we have two addresses by Joshua to his people.

We note in the introduction to Joshua that this book and the next five books of the Bible are usually called by scholars ‘deuteronomist history’ because they have a central theme from the Book of Deuteronomy flowing through them, namely, that obedience to God's law will bring blessing and that disobedience will bring disaster.

In chapter 23, the deuteronomist writer creates a speech for his hero, Joshua, which could have come right out of the Book of Deuteronomy. Israel's continued presence in the land depends on its obedience to “all that is written in the book of the Law of Moses...” (v.6). Joshua reminds Israel to love God (v.11), the Torah's greatest command. But then Joshua issues a warning that any failure on Israel's part to remain completely and exclusively loyal to God will have the gravest of consequences (vv 15-16). While the land is a gift from God to Israel, the gift can be revoked.

The purpose of chapter 23 is to explain to its audience, the exiles living several hundred years later, why they had lost the land, which was because of their disloyalty to their covenant with God. But the deuteronomist adds that if they had returned to the Lord, he would have restored their land.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 23?

CHAPTER 24: Call to faithfulness

“Choose whom you will serve today.” (v.15)

This chapter can be subdivided into eight sections:

Verses 1. The tribes and their leaders are called to renew their commitment to the Lord. Scholars point out that in this chapter, Joshua laid aside his role of military leader and spoke as a *prophet* to the people. His address begins as follows: *“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel...”*—words frequently used by the prophets when addressing the people of Israel.

Verses 2-13. Joshua recounts God’s gracious acts toward Israel as a lead-in to his challenge to the people to dedicate themselves totally to the Lord. (These verses are a lot like Dt 26:5-9.) The punch line in this section is verse 13: *“I gave you a land you did not work for and cities you did not build and vineyards you did not plant.”* The people are reminded that the land they are living in is God’s gift to them. This verse could serve as a summary of the Church’s doctrine on grace. In the spiritual life, *all is gift*.

Verses 14-15. The *challenge* is for the people to make a decision for God and his ways. Joshua tells them: *“decide today whom you will serve”*—words very much like those spoken by Moses in Dt 30:15-20. This section contains one of the best known lines in all of scripture: *“As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord”* (v.15).

Verses 16-18. The people respond: *“Far be it from us to forsake the land..... We will serve the Lord, for he is our God.”* Again, these words of the exiled ancestors were intended to challenge them to make a similar commitment to the Lord.

Verses 19-20. It seems as if Joshua was saying to the Israelites: ‘Are you sure you want to do this? Choosing God will mean zero tolerance of all other gods, for the God of Israel is a jealous God.’ Jerome Creach writes: *“The fire of God that warms and comforts the chosen people can also burn them if they are unfaithful”* (ibid. p.129).

Verses 21-24. The people all affirm that they are up for the challenge. *“We will serve the Lord and obey his voice”* (v.24). With this commitment, the people become witnesses against themselves. Failure on their part means self-condemnation. The agreement between the people and God is then solidified formally in a covenant, which includes statutes and

ordinances which are written in “the book of the law of God.”

Verses 28. Joshua dismisses the assembled people.

Verses 29-33. After a long life of faithful service to the Lord and his people, Joshua dies and is buried. The bones of Joseph which had been carried out of Egypt are reburied in Shechem.

As the Book of Joshua ends, we notice that he has appointed no successor. Israel is a *nation* with its own *land*, but with no recognized leader or capital. Its only recognized sign of unity is the Ark of the Covenant. The lack of a leader to unify the nation sets the stage for many leaders. To this period in Israel’s history, we now turn to the Book of Judges.

Pause: What speaks to you most in chapter 24? What is the take-away message from this book of the Bible?

RESOURCES

- Colledgeville Commentary on Old Testament
- Interpretation Series – Joshua by Jerome Creach
- The Catholic Bible – Personal Study Edition
- *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* – S. Mark Heim. This is highly recommended resource on the subject of violence in the Bible.