

# **A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT**

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## **SESSION FOUR CONQUEST**

### **1. Crossing the Jordan**

*Reading: Joshua 1:1-9; 2:1-7, 15-21; 3:7-8, 14-17; 5:10-15*

### **2. Capturing Jericho**

*Reading: Joshua 6:1-17*

### **3. Conquering Canaan**

*Reading: Joshua 10:1-28; 11:19-23*

### **4. Complete Dominion**

*Reading: Joshua 14:1-5; 24:1-27*

#### **Discussion questions:**

How might Joshua have felt following Moses?

How important is the way in which Jericho was captured?

# 1. Crossing the Jordan

Reading: Joshua 1:1-9; 2:1-7, 15-21; 3:7-8, 14-17; 5:10-15

Many Old Testament books end with a death and the death of Moses brings the book of Deuteronomy and the five books of Moses (the Pentateuch) to a close. For forty years, Moses was the leader of Israel and was given the prestigious title 'servant of the LORD', an honour shared only with Abraham, David, the suffering servant in Isaiah and Moses' designated successor Joshua, who was accorded this honour at the end of his life (Joshua 24:29). After the death of Moses, leadership of the Israelites passed to Joshua but although he is regularly called 'son of Nun' nothing is known of his father.

For many years, Joshua had worked closely with Moses and had been one of the twelve spies that Moses sent to spy out the land before the rebellion at Kadesh Barnea. Joshua was one of the two spies who believed that the land could be conquered over against the ten who did not but the will of the majority prevailed. The fateful decision at Kadesh Barnea was followed by the years of wandering in the wilderness. God renewed his command to Joshua that Israel should cross the River Jordan and enter the land promised to Abraham hundreds of years earlier (Genesis 12:6-7). Joshua was probably intimidated by the enormity of the task but repeatedly exhorted to be 'strong and courageous' (Joshua 1:6) and to know that these things were ultimately in God's hands. God promised to bless his people when they were obedient to his will, something revealed in the Book of the Law, on which they were to meditate day and night (Joshua 1:8).

It seems strange that the Bible says that Joshua sent two spies 'secretly' (Joshua 2:1). Spies are obviously unknown to the enemy so perhaps it means that the Israelites did not know either, which would have been an understandable plan after all that happened at Kadesh Barnea forty years earlier. The spies were protected by Rahab who by hiding the spies was involved in an act of treason. In order to be saved, Rahab would need to express faith and obedience (Hebrews 11:31; James 2:25), by tying a scarlet cord in her window. In the New Testament, Rahab is one of three women mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5).

On the banks of the River Jordan, Joshua received God's promise to be with him as he had been with Moses but there was still no indication as to how the people would get across, especially as the Jordan was in flood. Nevertheless, the people had been told to expect amazing things (Joshua 3:5) and an amazing thing happened for as the priests leading the ceremonial procession and bearing the ark of the covenant set foot in the Jordan the waters were cut off. The vicinity of Adam (the city mentioned) was famous for landslides damming the Jordan and, in July 1927, the Jordan was blocked for 21 hours by a landslide. This does not explain away the miracle - for it needed to happen when it did - but it is a point to note.

Although Passover had been celebrated at Sinai (Numbers 9:1-5), during the years of wandering the Passover had been neglected not least because the people had been living on manna and quail. Consequently the celebration of Passover at Gilgal (Joshua 5:10) in the Promised Land was an even more poignant reminder of the faithfulness of God who had delivered his people from the land of slavery as the people ate some of the produce of the land of Canaan (Joshua 5:11). When it was no longer needed the manna stopped, showing that such extraordinary provision is only intended to be temporary. Perhaps a similar lesson needs to be applied today to the miraculous signs (e.g. Feeding the Five Thousand, John 6) of the New Testament.

The night before Israel's attack on Jericho Joshua looked up and to his surprise saw 'a man'. Joshua asked the 'man of God' the wrong question. It is not whether God is on our side but whether we are on God's side.

## 2. Capturing Jericho

### Reading: Joshua 6:1-17

Canaan was a land of fortified cities and the imposing fortress of Jericho stood at the eastern gateway to the Promised Land. To conquer a walled city represented a major challenge, not least to the Israelites who had been wandering in the wilderness for many years and were hardly equipped for such a task. The fall of Jericho was a decisive victory but it was hardly a military victory. The command to 'march around the city once' each day for six days seems senseless and, therefore, required an element of faith in God's purposes. Whether or not these six days represent the grace of God and an opportunity for the people of Jericho to surrender is difficult to say. What we can say with more certainty is that the size of the procession around the city would have given the people of Jericho the sense of being totally overwhelmed.

Seven, the number of divine perfection or completeness, is repeatedly used. The presence of the ceremonial trumpets, the priests and the ark of the covenant all indicate that this has nothing to do with military strategy and everything to do with God giving his people the land that he had promised. At the battle shout the walls collapsed. This need not mean that the whole structure of all the walls fell but that breaks in all the walls enabled the Israelites to enter the city on every side.

There has been much debate about the falling of the walls of Jericho including the attractive theory that so many inhabitants of Jericho gathered on the thick mud-built walls of the city to watch the activities of the Israelites that the walls could stand the weight no longer. (But as with science so with archaeology - we do not look for the findings of archaeology to prove or disprove the Bible, neither getting too troubled by the unresolved contradictions or too excited by the apparent confirmations.) The writer to the Hebrews (11:30) again points out that the key to the proper understanding of these events is faith. Jericho was destroyed but Rahab was saved.

The interweaving of the deliverance of Rahab with the command to devote the entire city to destruction gives greater prominence to her deliverance, which is a major concern of the writer. The themes of judgment and salvation often appear side by side in Scripture, for example the salvation of Noah from the judgment of the Flood (Genesis 6-8) and the salvation of Lot from the destruction of Sodom (Genesis 19:1-29; see also John 3:16-21).

Slaughter in Old Testament is very difficult to understand. To say that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and judgment and the God of the New Testament is a God of love and peace is to over-simplify for there is much teaching of love and peace in the Old Testament and plenty of wrath and judgment in the New Testament. The idea that the Israelites were mistaken is difficult to accept when the command is said to come from God himself. If passages give a faulty idea about God how do we know which are the faulty passages? The removal of the Canaanites from the Promised Land was clearly not an arbitrary thing. Long before the Israelites reached Canaan, God had told Abraham that his descendants would have to wait to take over the land because 'the sin of the Amorites (the largest Canaanite tribe and therefore representative of the whole group) had not yet reached its full measure' (Genesis 15:16).

One of the persistent themes of the Old Testament is that the sin of an individual has consequences for the family and the community (for example the sin of Achan, Joshua 7:1-26). The destruction of Jericho is a solemn reminder that those who will not separate from their sin by repentance will be destroyed by their sin but that does not sweep away all the difficulties. The slaughter of children is more or less impossible to explain. Someday God will give a full explanation, which is something that only he can do.

For many Christians Canaan depicts heaven, as if the river represents death and heaven (Canaan) is on the other side (as in the hymn, Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah). For others, the Promised Land is not heaven but holiness (as Wesley, 'enter into the promised rest, the Canaan of thy perfect love').

### 3. Conquering Canaan

Reading: Joshua 10:1-28; 11:19-23

One of the kings in the land of Canaan was Adoni-Zedek (Lord of Righteousness), King of Jerusalem, formerly called Jebus (Judges 19:10), a stronghold of the Jebusites. The alliance of the Gibeonites with Israel was a cause of great concern to the Canaanite kings who decided to attack them. When the Gibeonites appealed to Joshua for help, Joshua raised an army at Gilgal and, under the cover of darkness, marched 20 miles to Gibeon, with encouragement from the LORD and the promise of victory. The enemy were caught by surprise and thrown into confusion but as they tried to escape they were deluged with large hailstones. While we should not miss the combination of human endeavour and divine intervention, it was clearly the Lord who won the victory.

The Canaanites were an agricultural people and worshipped nature deities. The Canaanite gods were the Baalim (singular Baal, meaning 'master lord' – in a sense 'god' with a small 'g', causing some confusion then as now). Baal was worshipped in many forms, under various names, including Hadad and Dagon, in different local communities in the belief that this would bring benefit and increase to family, flocks and herds. Baal-Shemaim (Lord of Heaven) was worshipped as the sun god who brought light and warmth to his worshippers as well as the fierce heat of the summer. There is some evidence that to appease Baal's anger in times of trouble, the first-born of the worshipper was burned alive.

Baal was also worshipped in a fertility rite with his consort Ashtaroth (or Astarte). The fertility rites included male and female prostitution and homosexuality, the theory being that sexual activity between humans would stimulate a similar response from the gods bringing fertility and growth. Outdoors, the worship of the fertility cult took place around a wooden pole (Asherah pole), which was often sited on top of a hill (high-place). The licentious character of Baal worship always had an attraction for the austere Israelites who were bound to serve a holy God under a rigorous moral code.

As with all things that are totally outside our own experience and that appear never to have happened before or since, the miracle sometimes called 'Joshua's long day' is difficult to interpret. The verse seems to mean that the sun stood still (i.e. the earth stopped revolving) but many interpreters have simply seen this as poetic hyperbole. Attempts to resolve this account with modern science have given rise to astronomical theories and elaborate stories (e.g. that NASA computers had found a missing day) but 'NASA and Joshua's long day' is commonly considered to be a hoax. However, there are traditions from various parts of the world, including China, India and Mexico, of a long day (or night, or evening) at about the same time that Joshua lived. What we must conclude is that something very spectacular occurred that day showing that Israel was not winning the land in its own strength but that God was giving it to them.

The grim account of the humiliation and execution of the Canaanite kings brings this particular passage to a close. Following the conquest of the southern cities, Joshua continued to lead the Israelites in their conquest of the northern kings. Though the narrative style creates the impression of a lightning-quick campaign there is no doubt that in reality it was a slow process including many battles that are not mentioned. Sometimes the Bible speaks of God hardening people's hearts (Joshua 11:20). We should normally understand this not as God preventing people from repenting but ultimately confirming their choice once they have decided on their course of action.

There are times when individuals, such as Rahab, and groups, such as the Gibeonites turn to God and are saved but as in the case of Pharaoh in Egypt, God may be said to harden the hearts of those who harden their own (see Exodus 8:32 and 9:12). While there is still hope of repentance God is patient but when the sin of the Amorites had reached its full measure then it was time for God's judgment. This offends the modern mind but we have to trust in the ultimate justice of God.

## 4. Complete Dominion

Reading: Joshua 14:1-5; 24:1-27

The second part of the book of Joshua devotes considerable space to the territory allotted to each of the tribes in order of importance. The priestly tribe, the Levites, received no land but the tribe of Joseph was split into two half-tribes, Manasseh and Ephraim. The tribe of Judah, the great royal tribe, from which David, Solomon and their successors would come, is considered first. The two half-tribes of Joseph are considered as is the tribe of Benjamin, from which Saul (and much later the Apostle Paul) would come.

Only territory west of the Jordan was called the land of Canaan. The crossing of the Jordan was as much Israel's march into the land of promise as the crossing of the Red Sea had marked Israel's escape from the land of slavery. Deciding things by sacred lot is different from our approach to lottery. We tend to choose lots so that man cannot influence the outcome; Israel chose lots so that God could influence the outcome.

Shechem, in the hill country of Ephraim, was the place where the Lord first promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:6-7), and it was here that Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to present themselves before God in a ceremony of covenant renewal. The whole narrative that follows accentuates God's sovereign action in salvation history. Joshua speaks in a way that shows that all Israel had participated in every crucial event in their national history, whether individual Israelites had actually been there or not. This is not a unique example. Forty years after God had made the covenant at Sinai, Moses said to the people, 'It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us' (Deuteronomy 5:3). Throughout the account it is made clear that Israel's efforts alone did not count for any victory – victory was a gift from God.

The first commandment given to Israel was 'you shall have no other gods before me' (Deuteronomy 5:7) and this shows that worshipping the Lord cannot be combined with idolatry. Therefore, Joshua called the people to give God their undivided loyalty as the only way to experience his presence and blessing. Syncretism (i.e. the mixing up of elements from different religions) was a very real problem and a lot of the laws given to Israel were to do with keeping the religion of the Israelite nation pure from the corruption of pagan religions and superstition.

The fertility cult of the Amorites with its many corrupt and immoral practices held a special appeal to the Israelites, who were settling down to agricultural life after so many years of wandering. This cult continued to be a strong temptation for many years. Our individualistic approach to salvation must be modified by the fact that here (and in Acts 16:31) individuals are challenged to involve their entire households. Joshua presented the people with a stark alternative, to choose God or choose idolatry, for it clearly was not possible to have both. Joshua is clear, 'As for me and my household, we will serve the LORD' (Joshua 24:15).

The book of Joshua is not simply history but 'a former prophet', with something to say to us about God, his faithfulness and the 'now and not yet' of his promises. This is particularly relevant with regard to our understanding of Canaan. For Israel, Canaan was the Promised Land but that only prefigures heaven in which there is no fighting. For the Christian the Promised Land is both heaven (but not yet) and holiness (now). Therefore, Canaan gives a picture of the battles that the Christian must face with regard to holy living and victory over sin:

O that I now, from sin released,  
Thy word may to the utmost prove,  
Enter into the promised rest,  
The Canaan of thy perfect love!

(C. Wesley)

# LAND ALLOCATED TO THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL

