

## PARALLEL GUIDE 18

### The Conquest of Canaan

**Summary:** The Book of Joshua recounts the last leg of Israel's wanderings, her long-awaited conquest of the promised land, and the apportioning of the land. In the course of our discussion of Joshua, we pause to introduce the Deuteronomist's theology, to look at the significance of circumcision, and to discuss the debate about the conquest and gradual settlement of Canaan.

#### Learning Objectives

- Read **Joshua 1-24**
- State **the probable reasons the D editor wishes to depict the conquest as rapid and total in the book of Joshua**
- State the meaning of **syncretism**
- State the purpose of the **"cities of refuge"**
- State the Deuteronomist's theology of rewards and punishments
- State the purpose of the "covenant renewal" ceremonies

#### Assignments to Deepen Your Understanding

1. State three probable reasons why the D editor depicted the conquest as rapid and total in the Book of Joshua.
2. State the Deuteronomist's theology of rewards and punishments.
3. State four events in the career of Joshua which parallel similar ones in Moses' career.
4. Trace the events of the conquest of Canaan on a map and note the important turning points.

#### Preparing for Your Seminar

What are examples of syncretism that you see in the world around you? How have other traditions impacted on your faith and religious practice? What elements of various traditions have been brought together? Is this an example of syncretism in the twentieth century?

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*No reference books are given. An oversight?*

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## THE CONQUEST OF CANAAN

With the exception of a few scattered verses from D, only J, E, and P have appeared in Genesis through Numbers. The Book of Deuteronomy, as the name indicates, is the major work of the D writer. It played such an important role in the history of the kingdom of Judah in the seventh century that we have postponed studying it in detail until we arrive at that point in the story. The D writer's work extends beyond the Book of Deuteronomy, however; D's is the major hand at work in the narrative from the Book of Joshua through II Kings.

While the older traditions of J and E make up much of the material from Genesis through Numbers, it was the Priestly hand that arranged and edited them, inserting additional material from time to time. We can make out the particular interests of J and E, for the Priestly editor faithfully reproduced these documents even to the point of allowing duplications and contradictions to remain. **The framework upon which the stories have been erected is the theology of the Priestly circle of about the fifth century BCE.** The P creation story tells us that the life of the little nation of Israel is set against the background of the whole universe, and that the God of Israel is the creator of it all. The JE myths, the sagas about the patriarchs, and the narrative of the Exodus/Sinai event all show the work of God in calling a particular people to be God's own nation. Above all, the Priestly framework shows the establishment of the temple cult, by which the relationship between YHWH and the people is maintained.

The rest of the Old Testament history—from the moment when the Israelite forces are poised ready to strike across the Jordan River into Canaan until, centuries later, Judah falls to the Babylonians—is built in the framework of the Deuteronomist's theology of history. In this chapter we introduce this Deuteronomistic point of view. There is considerable debate among Old Testament scholars about the composition of the Book of Joshua. Some, regarding **Deuteronomy** through II Kings as one literary unit, deny that J, E, or P material is to be found in it. Others maintain that Joshua is the last of the books in which these sources are used, and therefore suggest that the first six books of the Bible, Genesis through Joshua, should be seen as a Hexateuch ("six books"). The majority of scholars take a middle road: they see J, E, and P material in Joshua—in agreement with those who would speak of a Hexateuch—but also recognize the Deuteronomistic influence in Deuteronomy through II Kings. It is this majority view which we follow here.

The first twelve chapters of Joshua are largely JE, with Deuteronomistic passages providing the distinctive interpretation of the events; chapters 13-22 are largely P, with the main concern being the division of the land among the twelve tribes; chapters 23-24 are usually considered to have been written by the Deuteronomist, perhaps with a summary of the E tradition in 24:2-15.

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The book as a whole gives the impression that the conquest of Canaan was accomplished suddenly and totally by a three-pronged attack under the leadership of Joshua. The D editor, working centuries after the events described in the available sources, is responsible for this outlook. Following the usual biblical practice of faithfully reproducing the sources even when they contradict the editor's viewpoint, D has retained many pieces of evidence within the stories which show that the conquest was not as rapid or complete as D would like to maintain. **The Book of Judges, with its many stories of conflicts long after the death of Joshua, bears out the assumption that Israelites and Canaanites lived side by side in the land for a long time, sometimes with the Canaanites in control.**<sup>top</sup>

Why did the Deuteronomist say that Canaan was totally conquered under Joshua? Three primary reasons seem to have been at work.

a) *National pride*. Most peoples tend to view their history through lenses which show them at their best.

Ancient Egyptian records, for example, do not even mention that the Hyksos ever invaded Egypt, much less that they ruled a large portion of it for about two centuries. With the disillusionment brought on by the Vietnam war, combined with the rediscovery by minorities of their own history, citizens of the United States only slowly began to recognize how thoroughly the habit of casting the story of one's nation in a favorable light had affected its own writing of history. It is not surprising, then, that Israel chose to remember its entry into Canaan as having been a glorious conquest brought about by the mighty arm of YHWH working through the chosen leader, Joshua.

b) *Deuteronomic theology*. In looking back over the history of the nation from the standpoint of the seventh century, the Deuteronomist saw that the greatest danger to Yahwism, and therefore to Israel, had from the earliest times been syncretism. **Syncretism** is the practice of blending many different things together into a mixture; in this case, it refers to the blending of YHWH worship with local Canaanite agricultural religions. As D saw it, Israel had been purged in the wilderness and shaped into a fitting instrument for YHWH's purposes, but once in Canaan she allowed herself to be led into the worship of the Baals.<sup>top</sup> This infidelity to YHWH was the cause of all her difficulties. Out of these ideas comes D's view of history: Israel began its national life with a glorious conquest. YHWH had been faithful to the promises and had given Israel the land free and clear. But then Israel forgot YHWH—"Then the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and **worshiped the Baals**; and they abandoned the LORD, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other Gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the LORD to anger" (Judges 2:11-12). When this happened, YHWH gave them over to their enemies until they repented; then YHWH raised up a leader to restore them to peace and prosperity. This is the progression that recurs throughout the Deuteronomic history: blessing from YHWH—fall into sin—repentance—restoration. It is described programmatically in Judges 2 and shapes the editing of the entire history. The Book of Joshua provides the springboard for this history: YHWH blessed Israel with complete victory in Canaan, and it was from this height that Israel fell.

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c) *Joshua, the hero*. Moses was the hero of Israel par excellence, YHWH's servant by whom Israel was delivered from bondage. But Joshua is the hero of Israel's entrance into the land of promise. Again and again he is shown as the suitable successor to Moses. Many times he presides at an event which is quite obviously a repetition of a significant event in the career of Moses. **So it must be under Joshua that the land was conquered, even though other evidence within the stories shows that his conquests were not as sweeping as the D history remembers them.**

## **The Land of Canaan**

Canaan, modern Israel, is a small land of markedly varying geography. Along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea stretches a plain, but there are no coves or bays to provide harbors until one gets to the north. The Canaanites who lived along the northern coast became the seafarers the Greeks called Phoenicians. The Philistines, a group from among the "sea peoples" whom ancient records show migrating from southern Europe and spreading out through the sea lanes, settled along the southern coastal plain. They held five city-states: Gaza, Ashkelon, Ashdod, Gath, and Ekron.

Moving eastward, we find another north-south strip of land, not so level as the coastal plain but still open and reasonably fertile, and held by strongly fortified Canaanite cities. The Canaanites had developed no central government; they were organized as city-states, each fortified city having a chieftain (called a king in the biblical stories). Normally, smaller communities nearby relied on the city for their commerce and protection.

A central mountain range forms the next strip, east of the plains areas and reaching just to the sharp depression through which the Jordan River flows. The Canaanites had built cities here as well, especially in the valleys and passes between the mountains, but they were not so numerous as those on the plains to the

west. A major pass through the mountain range was the valley of Jezreel through which caravans regularly traveled from the coastal plain inland to Damascus and other centers to the north.

Given this kind of terrain, an invasion from across the Jordan into the central hill country made a great deal of sense. The Canaanites employed chariots, which could only be maneuvered in fairly large open expanses; the Israelites were foot soldiers. The mountainous territory of the central hills reduced the effectiveness of the Canaanites' chariots. Also, a large percentage of this land lay outside the immediate control of the Canaanite city-states, and the Israelites could encamp among the hills relatively free from detection. If we accept the assumption that conquest was gradual, we can see how it was possible for the Israelites to build their own cities in these uncontrolled areas and live side by side with the Canaanites with no one very much the poorer for it.

Canaanite society was organized with a ruling lord, or king, at the head of each city-state. A landholding aristocracy governed with or sometimes under the ruler, and the rest of the population was virtually enslaved as farm workers. The contrast between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, was extreme. All this

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was quite foreign to the incoming Israelites. They too were organized under leaders, patriarchal heads of clans and families, but conditions of life were very much the same for everyone. Leadership rested not on wealth or power but on family relationships. Above all, YHWH alone was supreme and all Israel was subject to God's law. Many of the sexual practices of the Canaanites were involved with the worship of their gods, which caused Israel to denounce Canaanite ways with especial fervor, all the while finding some of the practices quite tempting. Gen. 9:20-27—the story of Noah's drunkenness and the [sexual?] offense committed by "Canaan"—was probably meant to represent the Canaanites as a whole as completely shameless. Gen. 18:16-19:29, Sodom and Gomorrah, and Gen. 26:7-11, Isaac's claim that Rebekah was his sister before the Canaanite king Abimelech, show the Israelite appraisal of the dangers of entering a Canaanite city with what they assumed were its promiscuity and perversity.

Yet, Israel found it all too easy to adjust to Canaanite ways. The God of the desert remained the primary deity, the one who gave Israel her identity. But as the Israelites settled onto the land, it was virtually inevitable that they should look to the Canaanites for guidance in the ways of agriculture; the Baals of Canaan were the gods of agriculture. Central to these Canaanite ways were the fertility cults. The land was made fertile by appealing to the "lords" of the land, the Baals. By **sympathetic magic**—acts which mimic the results desired—sexual intercourse with a cultic prostitute would induce the fertility of the land. The stern morality of the covenant in the wilderness eroded under temptations which seemed economically and religiously justified. But, the Deuteronomist tells Israel, this was not how it all began, and it is not the way Israel should be.

## **Joshua 1-12**

### **The Conquest**

Before continuing with this text, read Joshua 1-12.

### **Joshua Successor to Moses**

YHWH promises that nothing will be able to stand in the way of the forces of Israel under Joshua's command, because YHWH will give them victory. One thing only is required to ensure this: the "law that Moses my servant commanded you" (1:7) must be obeyed. To obey the law results in good success (1:7) and makes "your way prosperous" (1:8). This is the characteristic viewpoint of the Deuteronomist. And just as to obey is to prosper, to disobey will result in failure and bad times. The "book of the Law" mentioned in v. 8

refers to the Deuteronomic Code.

Joshua receives from YHWH the commission to lead the people into the promised land. YHWH promises that “as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (1:5). We see a series of events in the story of Joshua that parallels similar events in the career of Moses; here, Joshua receives his authenticating call just as Moses received his at the burning bush.

In Num. 32, the tribes of Reuben and Gad had asked Moses to allow them to settle in the land to the east of the Jordan, land already taken by the Israelites. At first Moses rebuked them, thinking that their request was motivated by a desire to avoid the dangers of further conflict in the invasion of Canaan proper. The two tribes promised

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to assist in the invasion, but they asked again for the land east of the Jordan as their inheritance. Moses granted the request, and added the “half-tribe of Manasseh” to the group which would settle in the east.

Joshua 1:13 shows these tribes being held to account for their pledge to Moses. They may leave their families and herds in Trans-Jordan (“across the Jordan,” from the standpoint of Israelites settled in Canaan; Cis-Jordan, from the same standpoint, is the land on “this” side of the river). “All the men of valor,” however, are to accompany Joshua and the rest of the Israelites across the river. The leaders promise to follow Joshua as they had followed Moses (1:16-17). There are indications late in the story (Joshua 22) that these two and one-half tribes in Trans-Jordan would come to experience strained relationships with the Cis-Jordan tribes, perhaps succumbing more readily to the temptations of Baal worship. A hint of this is to be found in the fact that they refer to YHWH as “your God” instead of “our God,” or it may be that they are simply indicating a special relationship between YHWH and Joshua comparable to that between YHWH and Moses.

This story is a literary unity, well told with suitable dramatic effects. Two spies are sent by Joshua to Jericho. They go to “the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab” (2:1). The word used for “prostitute” is the one that most usually refers to a cult prostitute. There is no indication in the story, however, that Rahab’s activities centered in the cultus, and the assumption we are asked to make is that the visit of the men to her house would arouse no particular suspicions.

Rahab’s speech to the two men (2:9-11) is an addition expressing D’s own theology (compare Josh. 2:11 with Deut. 4:39). It may very well have been the case that the inhabitants of Jericho had heard of the Israelite successes in Trans-Jordan; it may also be that the defenses of Jericho were not so strong as the D history would have us believe and that Rahab sensed that the city was near defeat. But is it possible that such a fully developed Yahwism would come from the lips of **Rahab the Canaanite harlot?**

The spies return to Joshua and report the Canaanites’ fears and Rahab’s assistance as signs that “truly the LORD has given all the land into our hands” (2:24).

### **Crossing the Jordan**

This account is very confusing since it is pieced together from at least two different sources—presumably J and E, though there is no way of telling which is which. Into these two versions D has inserted a few theological passages, and there is also an occasional P passage.

The Deuteronomist expresses the main point of the story in 3:7: “And the LORD said to Joshua, ‘This day I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel, so that they may know that I will be with you as I was with Moses.’” The passage through the Jordan is to be like the passage through the Reed Sea. The priests are to take the ark and lead the way to the river. A safe distance—two thousand cubits, or about three thousand feet

—is to be kept between the ark and

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the people (3:4). As soon as the priests arrive with the ark, God will hold back the waters so the people can cross over on dry ground. Twelve men are to be selected to represent the twelve tribes, and each is to take up a stone from the river. From these stones a monument is to be erected as a memorial of God's mighty act.

These are the main points of the story, but the repetitions and discrepancies caused by combining the different traditions create some confusion. "Twelve men" are to be selected from among the twelve tribes: this is commanded in 3:12 with no instructions concerning what they are to do. The command is given again in 4:2ff.,<sup>3</sup> and they are told to take up twelve stones and lay them down at the site of their evening camp, on the west bank of the Jordan; this they do in 4:8. But in 4:9 Joshua sets the stones up "in the middle of the Jordan" where they are "to this day." Then, in 4:20 Joshua sets up the stones in Gilgal "on the east border of Jericho." They must remain there also "to this day," since the people are to explain to their children in time to come what they mean. (Instruction of the children in the traditions of Israel is another D characteristic.)

Similar confusion can be seen regarding the location of the priests with the ark and the sequence of the people's crossing. The whole nation has finished crossing in 3:17, but in 4:11 they are still crossing. In 4:11, the priests cross as soon as the people have finished, while in 4:15-16 YHWH tells Joshua to command them to come up out of the Jordan. (4:16 can be recognized as P by the use of the expression "ark of the testimony"; D characteristically calls it the "ark of the covenant.")

These discrepancies do not prevent the meaning of the story from coming through: God has once more led the people through a water barrier in order to fulfill God's purposes.

The name Gilgal means "a circle," and it probably refers to a circle of stones. Joshua 21:32 and 15:7 refer to two other different sites bearing this same name. (Although the NRSV uses "Galilee" in 21:32, the Hebrew does have "Gilgal.") A recent book, *Vanished Civilizations of the Ancient World*, E. Bacon, ed., chapter 13, "Migration of Megaliths" by Gale Sierveking, discusses the custom practiced by many ancient cultures of erecting large stones ("megaliths") in circular patterns. From what is now Turkey, the practice apparently moved across the Mediterranean basin through Spain and France to England, but perhaps it also moved down into Palestine. The formation at Stonehenge in England is the best known of these megaliths. The arrangement of stones there seems to have been dictated by astronomical concerns, especially the rising of the sun.

The precise location of the Gilgal near Jericho is not known, though various sites have been suggested. No stone formation corresponding to the one mentioned in Joshua has been found to date.

## **Joshua 5**

### **Circumcision**

A series of stories are told in Joshua 5, all of which tell of events parallel to events in the career of Moses. The Israelites were circumcised as a precondition for participating in the first Passover under Moses' leadership (Exod. 12:48), and Moses was

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granted an extraordinary vision of YHWH which empowered him for his mission. In these stories Joshua participates in similar events.

YHWH commands that the people be circumcised “a second time” (v. 2). Verses 4-7 attempt to explain why this was necessary: the males who had been circumcised at the time of the Exodus all died during the years in the wilderness, and the children born during that time were not circumcised. Why weren’t they? This is not explained. Circumcision was practiced by most of the Semitic peoples, and perhaps also by the Egyptians. Probably, for symbolic reasons, it served as puberty rites, ceremonies marking the stage of life when children enter adulthood. The rite took on greater significance for Israel during the Babylonian exile when it became necessary to stress the identity of the worshipers of YHWH, the people of the covenant, over against the Babylonians. There was the constant danger that the Jews—in this case “represented” by the people of Judah, the tribe involved in the Exile—would forget their God and be absorbed into the mainstream of Babylonian life. Circumcision, the keeping of the Sabbath, and the special laws regarding diet were the three main disciplines which helped the Jews retain their identity.

We have seen earlier that the P writer, with the concerns of the period of exile in mind, pushed the beginnings of the connection between circumcision and the covenant back to the time of Abraham (Gen. 17). Its necessity was asserted again in the legal directions given in Exod. 12:48. Now, under the change in leadership, as Joshua takes over, circumcision is once again asserted to be important to the identity of Israel as the people of YHWH. This seems to be the reason for the story of the circumcision of the Israelites at Gilgal; it is a theological reason, intended to fix firmly in the tradition the association between circumcision and the covenant rite of Passover—and the association of both with the taking of the land. At the same time, the story reaffirms the status of Joshua as the successor to Moses.

The derivation of the name Gilgal given in v. 9—that it is related to the verb *galal* “to roll”—is not very convincing, even though it is linguistically possible. There are, as we have noticed, many cities with that name, and the connection with stone formations is more probable. The name of Gibeath-haaraloth (v. 3), however, may well imply that this site was used for puberty rites in connection with a shrine at Gilgal.

### **Passover**

The statement in vv. 11-12 that the people ate the produce of the land and that the manna ceased may imply that during the years of the wilderness wanderings, except for the “anniversary” occasion mentioned in Num. 9, Israel did not observe the Passover. If this is the meaning we are supposed to infer, it would be a further emphasis of the new beginning which the Gilgal ceremonies signify. At any rate, from this time on the people are to eat from the produce which the land of promise provides and no longer be dependent on the supernatural food which YHWH provided before.

### **The "Commander of Yahweh's Army"**

The use of such circumlocutions (words used to get around direct speech) for YHWH grew increasingly common in later Israel. The “commander”—“prince” is probably a better translation—is to be seen as YHWH himself, and thus Joshua is given a vision of YHWH similar to that afforded Moses at Sinai. Joshua asks what “my lord” wants him to do. (“Lord” in this phrase does not stand for the name YHWH; the NRSV English text writes it “LORD” when this is the case.) Instead of answering Joshua’s question, the “commander” tells him to remove his shoes because he is standing on holy ground. The parallel with Moses is obvious—possibly too much so for a later editor, so that the rest of the story was omitted. Even though Joshua is to be raised in status, he is not to reach quite the elevation of Moses!

### **The Capture of Jericho**

The description of the siege of Jericho is different from the accounts of the taking of other cities in Canaan. In the others Joshua leads the forces of Israel into battle; here the city falls miraculously. The magic number

seven occurs repeatedly. Solely by the power of YHWH the walls collapse at the sound of the trumpets on the seventh day. The peculiar nature of this story has led many scholars to doubt that it was part of the original conquest tradition.

The entire city is to be “devoted to the LORD for destruction” (6:17). This is the *cherem*, the “ban.” Part of the concept of “holy war,” *cherem* refers to the designation of people and property as “devoted to YHWH” and therefore subject to confiscation and destruction. *Cherem* is only one aspect of holy war and might even be ordered by priestly authority outside the context of war. Here v. 18 warns against breaking the law of the *cherem*, lest Israel herself should be “devoted to destruction,” and this comment sets the stage for the story of the “sin of Achan” in chapter 7.

Rahab is said to dwell in Israel to this day (6:25), one of the many etiological comments made throughout the Book of Joshua. What this passage means is not entirely clear; while there are no further references to Rahab in the Old Testament, it may be important to the writer to shift away from the matter of the battle to return to the matter of Rahab. Though Rahab is a pagan Canaanite, Joshua does keep covenant with her, and her family becomes assimilated into Israel.

## **Joshua 7**

### **The Sin of Achan**

The curse which Joshua lays on the inhabitants of the city (6:26)—unique in the Old Testament—is almost certainly a late addition, since its fulfillment is described in I Kings 16:34 as occurring during the reign of King Ahab.

The sin of Achan seems to be breaking the law of the *cherem* by taking some of the devoted things for himself (7:1). But note that he confesses only to having stolen from the “spoil” (v. 21), the compensation for the soldiers. The core of the story seems to be earlier than the idea of *cherem*. Indeed that idea seems to be inserted into the story to explain the defeat at Ai, perhaps to absolve Joshua from blame for that defeat. If YHWH had been with Israel at Ai, this defeat could not have happened. Therefore something must have occurred which brought the wrath of YHWH upon Israel. Such was the reasoning and such the theology of the Deuteronomist.

The sin of Achan is discovered by casting the sacred lots later mentioned explicitly in the definition of tribal territories (14:2; 18:6). The process of elimination is based

on the three concentric circles within which the individual Israelite was identified: tribe, clan, and house. The casting of the lots to discover the guilt of Jonathan in his (unknowing) violation of Saul’s oath to fast until he was avenged on the Philistines (I Sam. 14:24-46) suggests that the procedure was used “to evoke a confession of guilt, but not to determine guilt without interrogation” (Boling and Wright, Joshua, p. 226).

The stoning and burning of Achan and his family purifies Israel from his sin. In a twofold manner this story demonstrates the idea of corporate guilt: Achan’s sin affects all Israel, causing her defeat at the hands of Ai; Achan’s entire family shares his guilt and must be destroyed with him. Much later in the Old Testament the idea of individual responsibility will be asserted. Never, however, would individual responsibility assume for Israel the extreme form which it has assumed for us today. We find it difficult to associate ourselves with faults in our community or nation with which we have not been directly involved. For the Israelite, as for most peoples until our modern era, the individual was so much a part of the community that he or she could not dissociate him or herself from it.

Achan is destroyed at the Valley of Achor (7:25) and the heap of stones under which he is buried “remains to

this day,” accounting for the name, Achor (v. 26). This bit of etiology is built up from the play on words in v. 25: achor means “trouble”; it sounds like Achan, and the trouble that Achan brought on Israel is repaid with trouble from YHWH—Achan’s death.

## **Joshua 8**

### **The Capture of Ai**

Archaeological evidence shows that the city of Ai was destroyed and unoccupied from 2200 to 1000 BCE. If the evidence is correct, it would have been impossible for the Israelites to have taken this city since it was already in ruins when they arrived in Canaan. The word Ai, in fact, means “ruin” and would hardly be the name of a city in the full bloom of its life. In spite of the etiological interests of the early writers, it seems improbable to assume that the story was made up to account for the ruins. More likely, a battle at Bethel, only a mile and a half away to the west, became associated with the nearby ruins. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that Bethel was destroyed at a date which fits with the time usually assigned to the Israelite invasion. The fact that Bethel continued to be occupied throughout Israelite times while Ai stood in ruins would support the idea of such a transfer.

The plan of battle, with the main force in full view of Ai and an ambush force concealed west of the city, is clearly described in vv. 3-17. The plan is first narrated as a command from Joshua in vv. 3-9 and then as executed in vv. 10-17. The Arabah mentioned in v. 14 is a deep chasm formed by the geological fault running north and south through which the Jordan River flows toward the Dead Sea. The inhabitants of Ai (and Bethel—see v. 17) come out of the city to attack the Israelites. They hold an advantage since they are charging downhill against the Israelites. The ascent is very steep—Ai is about 2600 feet above sea level and Gilgal, where the Israelite camp stands, 900 feet below sea level. The temptation to attack must have been too great to resist.

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Verses 18-29 tell of the success of the ambush. Joshua lifts his javelin to signal the hidden ambush party to attack the city (v. 18). As v. 26 shows, this is not merely a signal but an act with miraculous power such as that performed by Moses against the Amalekites (Exod. 17:8-16). The city, including its king, is devoted to destruction.

### **The Altar on Mt. Ebal**

This is a Deuteronomic passage which seems to describe an event narrated again in Josh. 24. Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (v. 33) are the two mountains between which the city of Shechem is situated. Shechem was an ancient Canaanite shrine, and here the covenant was renewed. The renewal ceremony is more fully described in Josh. 24. Deuteronomy 11:29-30 and 27:2-8, 11-14 command that as soon as they have entered the land, the people are to set up the altar at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim and inscribe the law on stones. The D writer wanted to say that YHWH took over the central shrine of the Canaanites from the very outset; the insertion of the account of this ceremony into chapter 8, even before the Shechem area was to be taken by the Israelites, shows that the command in Deuteronomy has been obeyed.

The covenant renewal ceremony, which we examine more closely when it appears again in chapter 24, was most probably an extension of the YHWH covenant to the kindred tribes who had not been in Egypt.

### **The Gibeonite’s Trick**

The Deuteronomist was writing from the standpoint of the seventh century. At that time, the foundations of Yahwism were being threatened by the attractions of Baal worship, and the Deuteronomist was intent on rooting out all forms of the Canaanite cult. Hence D has Moses instruct Israel to destroy the Canaanite

culture completely and immediately. In Deut. 20:15-18, we find that the Israelites make no peace with the inhabitants of Canaan; only people in cities which are far away from the promised land are to be spared from the *cherem*. In D's theological view of history, it is disobedience to this demand which becomes the cause of the later decay and downfall of the Israelite nation.

Gibeon lies to the southwest of Bethel and Ai. The people of the region of Gibeon— here also called Hivites—being fearful of the Israelites, make themselves up as travel-weary pilgrims who have traveled from afar to make a covenant with Israel because of the wonderful things that they have heard about YHWH's deeds for them. The ruse works. Through Joshua the leaders of the congregation make a covenant with the Gibeonites—a pact by which the two peoples agree to live in peace with each other. But the Israelites do so, it seems, without asking direction from YHWH (9:14). And when the deception is discovered, three days later (v. 16), they cannot go back on their covenant with Gibeon. Even though the covenant is against YHWH's instructions and is made without asking direction, it has been made in YHWH's name and cannot be broken.

The etiological purpose for the telling of this story is clear. At the time the Deuteronomist was writing, the Gibeonites were temple servants: “hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the LORD . . . in the place that he should choose” (9:27). The “place” refers to Jerusalem, the Jebusite city

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eventually taken by King David and made his capital and the place where the temple would be built by King Solomon. The Gibeonites were Canaanites, but they were attached to the temple cult and so were not marked as followers of Baalism. This story accounts for that.

## **Joshua 10**

### **The Campaign in the South**

The city-states of Canaan were each ruled by a chieftain. But the more important of these cities, during the time when the Egyptians held control of Palestine, were designated by Egypt as “royal cities,” as if they were ruled by a king. The five kings named in 10:3, faced with the fact that Gibeon—“a great city, like one of the royal cities” (10:2)—has made peace with the Israelites, band together to strike at Gibeon. They seem to be trying to stop what might become an epidemic of city-states' giving way to the apparently irresistible power of Israel. They make very clear the punishment that befalls such foolishness.

Gibeon has made a pact with Israel, as we have seen. She now calls upon Israel to honor that pact by coming to her defense. Still camped at Gilgal, Joshua's troops make a forced march of some twenty miles up a difficult mountainous road to defend Gibeon (10:6-8). This was standard political procedure: an ally called upon its protector. The outcome of this battle will determine whether other cities should side with Israel or resist in fear of the wrath of the newly formed league of Canaanite cities.

The English translation of v. 10 is unable to show it, but the verbs “threw them into a panic . . . inflicted slaughter . . . chased them . . . and struck them down . . .” are all in the singular: it is YHWH who does all these things, not the Israelite army. In v. 11 in particular, it is YHWH who throws the hailstones which, in the imagery of the ancient world, are stored up in the “deep” which is above the vault of the firmament, and “there were more who died because of the hailstones than the Israelites killed with the sword” (v. 11). This is the theological view of the Deuteronomist: **all the victories by which Israel gains control of the promised land must be YHWH's victories. God's power, not the military might of Israel, gives them the land.**

The well-known “miracle” in which the sun stands still at the request of Joshua is related twice in vv. 12-14. The first form of the story is the poem in vv. 12-13. The Book of Jasher is one of the many sources referred to in the D history (Deuteronomy through II Kings) which are now lost. Verses 13b-14 literalize the poetic

imagery. The song, in a manner common to songs of military triumph, sees the victory as so complete that one normal day could not be sufficient for it—even the sun must have prolonged its journey so that Israel’s time of glory could be extended. The prosaic form turns this poetic exaggeration into a miraculous event. It should be noted, however, that there is more than poetic exaggeration involved in this account. The sun and moon act just as Joshua does in the story of the Israelite victory at Ai (8:18). They “stand still and flash the sign of YHWH’s sovereignty” (Boling and Wright, *Joshua*, p. 287). They are as much servants of the living God as Joshua is.

Verse 15 should be ignored: it has somehow been inserted into the text. The remaining story makes it clear that Joshua’s force continues the attack rather than returning to the camp at Gilgal. The humiliation heaped upon the five captured kings (vv. 22-27)

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is typical of ancient warfare. Egyptian carvings show the pharaoh with his foot on the necks of captured enemies.

The remainder of chapter 10 lists the battles in which Joshua sweeps through the south of Canaan. As mentioned earlier, the conquest of the land was never so complete as described here. Continuous battles are mentioned in the Book of Judges.

Gaza (v. 41) was one of the Philistine cities on the coastal plain. As late as the time of David, the Philistines were still in unquestioned control of the entire coastline. Nonetheless, archaeological research has shown that many of the cities named were in fact destroyed at the time indicated by the Joshua story. Scholars differ about how much credit should be given to Joshua as conqueror. He was probably something less than the total victor described in this book, yet considerably more than an insignificant leader whose exploits have been blown up beyond recognition.

## **Joshua 11**

### **The Campaign in the North**

Another federation of Canaanite kings was formed in the north. These kings possessed chariots, which Israel did not have. In the D version of the battles, YHWH overcomes this military advantage and Israel is able not only to stand against the fearsomeness of the chariots, but also to burn them. The terrain of the north probably helped this: chariots need vast open plains on which to maneuver, and the hill country of the north did not provide this. The chariots, elsewhere referred to as “chariots of iron,” had iron hubs for the wheels. The rest of the vehicle was made of wood. In the Middle East the Iron Age was begun with the Hittites from the north; the Israelites had not learned how to use the metal. They were limited to bronze, the softer alloy of copper and tin. Lacking the skill to make use of the chariots they capture, they simply burn them.

An apparent contradiction occurs between vv. 12 and 13. *Cherem* is carried out on all the cities according to v. 12, but only Hazor is completely destroyed according to v. 13. The latter is closer to the truth. Evidence shows that Hazor was in fact destroyed, but the D comment in v. 13 that “the cities that stood on mounds” were kept intact is consistent with the notion that Israel has been given the land to inhabit. The cities, vineyards, fields, and crops—these represent Israel’s inheritance; they are for her use.

Verses 16-23 summarize the D version of the conquest: it was total. **Israel begins her life in Canaan with the land purified of Baalite contaminants.** That she will later give in to the temptation to forsake YHWH for the Baals is to be her own act of sin. (The Anakim mentioned in v. 21 were a race of giants, according to Numbers 13:33. We are not certain what that means—how literally we can take the description—but it is interesting that only in Gaza, Gath, and Ashdod—Philistine cities—do any remain exempt from the destruction Israel has brought to the southern area. And Goliath, the giant against whom David will fight,

comes from Gath.)

## **Joshua 13-22**

### **The Division of the Land**

The P writer was interested in tracing not only family genealogies but also hereditary rights to land. Most of the material in chapters 13-22 describing the division of the land among the Israelite tribes is not of great interest today. Some comments should

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be made, however, about the cities of refuge and the cities of the Levites, also about the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh. Please read Joshua 20-22 before continuing with this text.

### **Cities of Refuge and the Cities of the Levites**

The law of blood revenge, by which a family, clan, or tribe was expected to inflict massive punishment upon the family, clan, or tribe of anyone who injured one of its members, had been tempered—in principle, at least—by the *lex talionis*, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” one for one. Enforcement of this law was difficult, however, and at the time and place of an offense the passions seeking vengeance often made justice hard to come by. The cities of refuge were set up to provide access to such justice. If a person killed someone in an unpremeditated act, that person could flee to one of these cities, receive a hearing from the elders, and—if the elders were convinced of innocence—be protected within the city against vengeance so long as the incumbent high priest was alive. At the high priest’s death, apparently a time for general amnesty, the offender could return home. No doubt, too, tempers would have cooled with the passage of time.<sup>top</sup>

The cities of refuge were probably established under King David, though some scholars think that they came earlier. Whenever they came, they represent a serious attempt by the people of Israel to structure the administration of their inheritance with respect to YHWH. There is in the establishment of the cities of refuge concern for the rights of the individual and God’s justice. The office of the high priest is quite late. By the time of the final D redaction, the high priest had, for all purposes, become the civil authority, and this state of affairs is read back into the time of Joshua. The levitical towns seem to be a phenomenon of the eighth century. Archaeological evidence indicates that the forty-eight or forty-nine towns listed in 21:11-39 could not have been part of a single system before then. Moreover, conditions under the long reigns of Uzziah (c. 783-742) in the south and Jeroboam II (c. 786-746) in the north are of just the sort under which such a system might flourish. Add to this the increasing recognition among scholars that the great prophets of the eighth century seem to have had close connections to levitical circles, and the picture that emerges of the towns is not so much one of cultic centers—as has often been thought—as of teaching centers. Here levitical families may have tended shrines, but more significantly they taught what was involved in living under the covenant of YHWH. They provided “a basis for understanding prophetic critique when it erupted. On this view it was the continuing Yahwist movement”—with its roots in the faith of Moses—“that created the system of Levitical towns; it had no sponsorship other than the word of YHWH” (Boling and Wright, Joshua, p. 496).

The land has been allotted. Institutions for justice and for teaching the ethic of the covenant have been set up. What will the reaction be? We shall find out, but only after an important rehearsal of YHWH’s faithfulness to the promise (21:43-45). YHWH has brought Israel into the land promised to them. He has vanquished all their enemies, and there is peace on every side. “Not one of all the good promises which the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass” (v. 45).

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## Joshua 22

### The Trans-Jordan Tribes

The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, who had promised to join with the other tribes in the conquest of Canaan, return to their lands in TransJordan. A strong hint of later tensions between the Trans-Jordan tribes and those within Canaan proper can be seen in the account of the setting up of the altar by the Jordan (22:10). There could be no objection to this at the time, since there were still shrines throughout the land—the cult had not yet been centralized at Jerusalem. But the possibility comes to mind that some god other than YHWH is being worshiped by these tribes. This possibility is made explicit in v. 16—the altar is set up “in rebellion against the LORD.” The Trans-Jordan tribes persuade the rest of Israel that the altar has not been set up for sacrifice, but only as a memorial to YHWH and to be “a witness between us and you” (v. 28). The Deuteronomist is reading back into this period the later state of affairs in which only Jerusalem had an altar of sacrifice, but the story itself may reflect a state of affairs in which the Trans-Jordan tribes were less than fully committed to the twelve-tribe confederation.

“Alternative Altar or Visual Aid?”—the title Boling and Wright give to vv. 9-34 in their commentary on Joshua—captures some of the comedy of the squabble which is set against the great faithfulness of YHWH. It is not only that the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh have built an altar, they have built a conspicuously large one (v. 10). But the objections of the other tribes, whatever their cause, are overcome. The altar is no treachery against YHWH—it is not even a working altar. They have built a sign that the God they worship is “the LORD God of Gods!” (v. 22), the one who is truly God (v. 34).

## Joshua 23-24

### The Covenant Renewal

Both chapters describe covenant renewal ceremonies. They do not seem to be simple textual repetitions. Some scholars think, therefore, that they reflect separate ceremonies, one in the south and another in the north, in which the tribes resident in Israel—not having been a part of the exodus experience—were incorporated into the Exodus/Sinai covenant. By reciting the events of Exodus/Sinai the tribes were able to make them their own experience, just as the Passover liturgy did this for later generations.

The purpose of the ceremony is borne out because the tribes are asked to choose if they will worship their old gods or YHWH. The gods suggested by the patriarchal stories—El Shaddai, El Elyon, and the other names by which, according to the revelation to Moses at the burning bush, YHWH had been called—are to be rejected as alternate deities. YHWH alone is to be worshiped.

Chapter 23 takes the form of a farewell speech by Joshua. This is another way of suggesting his likeness to Moses, for whom the entire book of Deuteronomy is a farewell speech. The tradition of farewell speeches continues with Samuel (I Sam. 12:1-25) and David (I Kings 2:1-9). Joshua’s speech can only be described as negative. God is an old man who knows that the covenant will be broken. He must warn of the consequences (see especially vv. 11-13, 15-16). Finally, he says the initiative is with YHWH. God who made the promise, all of which has come true, has given the land and can take it away.

Inevitably this will happen. In 24:15, Joshua places a choice before the people (cf. Deut. 30:15-20), and in v. 16 they respond: they will serve YHWH. But in v. 19, Joshua insists that they will be unable to follow through with their choice. The people of Israel will not be faithful, and the result will be disaster. These verses (as do 23:14-16) reflect the Deuteronomist’s theology of history, which asserts always the importance of choice and consequence.

The covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem was more important than the one in the south. In Canaanite times a god called either Baal-berith or El-berith was worshiped at Shechem. Berith means “covenant,” so the god was “Baal (or El) of the covenant.” Thus Shechem was associated with a covenant religion even before Israelite times, and it remained the center of the Israelite amphictyony for some time. The pre-Israelite shrine at Shechem seems to have contained a large stone pillar, such as that described in 24:26. Probably it was thought that the deity resided within the stone, so that it really was a “witness” (24:27) to the faithfulness of the people’s adherence to the covenant.

Loose ends are tied up in the concluding verses. The tribes disperse to their territories (24:28). Joshua dies and is buried in Ephraim. Joseph’s bones, apparently carried ever since Israel left Egypt, are buried at the ancestral plot as had been promised (v. 32, cf. Gen. 50:25). Finally Eleazar, from whom the legitimate temple priesthood traced its descent, is buried. The book, particularly the form in the Septuagint, ends on an anticipatory note of tragedy. Israel has remained faithful during the time of Joshua (v. 31), but this does not last. Joshua ends with these words: “Then the people of Israel went away, each to his place and to his own town. The people of Israel worshiped Astarte and the Ashtaroth and the gods of their neighbors. Then the LORD delivered them into the hands of Eglon, the king of Moab, and he oppressed them for eighteen years.” (LXX)

## **Syncretism - infidelity**<sup>back</sup>

I believe that there's a Formula that causes religions to grow. Early Christianity had it. Some present-day Christian sects have it; others don't. Islam has it. Judaism didn't have it (possibly still doesn't), and had constantly to be defended from shrinking. If you have the Formula, then syncretism isn't a problem. Cf. Christmas.

What's the Formula? The Formula has to do with incentives to join the organization, and with incentives to get other people to join. Also it's important to be exclusive. Believe one religion only, don't tolerate multiple religions.

If you can ever find it, read "The Snowball Effect" (1952), by Katherine Maclean. A sociology professor, challenged to prove his theories of the dynamic growth of organizations, rewrites the rules of a smalltown sewing circle to have "more growth drive than the Roman Empire." He is far more successful than he ever anticipated. Originally in Galaxy Science Fiction (September, 1952). (from Wikipedia)

**It must be under Joshua...** [back](#)

So much for historical truth!



**Sympathetic magic**<sup>back</sup>

In other words, Baal-worship was lots of fun, while, to read the Old Testament, Judaism wasn't.

## **The Caananite harlot**<sup>back</sup>

Let's not be condemning her for her job. As far as the story shows, she was a respectable working girl (and an ancestor of Jesus, by the way). Far more problematic is her willingness to rat out her fellow-citizens of Jericho.



**Baal-free**<sup>back</sup>

Thoroughly unpleasant.

