

Joshua 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 June 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Joshua chapter 5 And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them.

All the males of the people who came out of Egypt, all the men of war, had died in the wilderness on the way after they had come out of Egypt. Though all the people who came out had been circumcised, yet all the people who were born on the way in the wilderness after they had come out of Egypt had not been circumcised.

For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, the men of war who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the Lord. The Lord swore to them that he would not let them see the land that the Lord had sworn to their fathers to give to us, a land flowing with milk and honey.

So it was their children, whom he raised up in their place, that Joshua circumcised, for they were uncircumcised, because they had not been circumcised on the way. When the circumcising of the whole nation was finished, they remained in their places in the camp until they were healed.

And the Lord said to Joshua, Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. And so the name of that place is called Gilgal to this day. While the people of Israel were encamped at Gilgal, they kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month, in the evening on the plains of Jericho.

[1 : 39] And the day after the Passover, on that very day, they ate of the produce of the land, unleavened cakes and parched grain. And the manna ceased the day after they ate of the produce of the land.

And there was no longer manna for the people of Israel, but they ate of the fruit of the land of Canaan that year. When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand.

And Joshua went to him and said to him, Are you for us or for our adversaries? And he said, No, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord. Now I have come.

And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshipped, and said to him, What does my Lord say to his servant? And the commander of the Lord's army said to Joshua, Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.

And Joshua did so. Joshua chapter 5 begins with the response of the rulers of the land to the crossing over of Israel into the promised land. The crossing was an event proving the Lord's power, his presence with Israel, and his intent to act on their behalf against the Canaanites.

[2 : 45] The miracle was a statement, not just a way to overcome the tricky logistical problem of getting the people across the River Jordan. We should note the parallels with the statement of Rahab a few chapters earlier, in chapter 2, verses 8 to 11.

Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you.

For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction.

And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you. For the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath.

We will see several more such responses as we go through the book. Just as Israel being brought out of Egypt was a demonstration of the Lord's power against the gods of Egypt and in the presence of the nations, so the entrance into the land serves a similar purpose.

[3 : 47] The reaction of the people here reflects upon the great miracle that the Lord has accomplished at the Jordan, but it also looks forward to what he is going to do as he enters into the

land with the people.

At this point, the Lord instructs Joshua to make flint knives and to circumcise the people a second time, as the Israelite males who had been born in the wilderness had not been circumcised. Israel's entry into the land has a pronounced liturgical character. This is something that will be seen in the following chapter. Much as the departure out of Egypt was a sort of liturgical event, so is the entry into the promised land.

The liturgical form of the Exodus and the entry into the land underline the fact that the Lord is orchestrating everything. He's going before his people. The liturgical form situates these events within frameworks of meaning, connecting them with other realities.

It highlights great symmetries, and it also serves the purpose of memorialisation. David Howard makes the observation that if we carefully follow the chronology of the book, the crossing of the Jordan occurred on the seventh day of a seven-day period.

[4 : 53] The Lord brings his people into the rest of the land on the seventh day. He is the one that sets the timing, and a similar seven-day pattern can be observed in the defeat of Jericho in the chapter that follows.

Being circumcised at this point made clear that they must enter into the land on the Lord's terms. Moses' son had to be circumcised in an emergency circumcision in Exodus chapter 4, not having been circumcised earlier.

Israel had to be circumcised before the Passover. It's possible that they had not celebrated the Passover for a few decades, since after they failed to enter into the land. A number of the great circumcision events occur just as the Lord is about to bring a great judgement upon a place. Abraham and his household are circumcised just before the Lord comes to defeat the cities of the plain. Israel is circumcised just before the Lord brings judgement upon Egypt at the Passover time. And then Israel is circumcised here just before Jericho is about to be judged. God is coming near to his people. He's coming near in judgement. He's going to destroy his enemies, the wicked. And so the people have to be prepared.

[6 : 00] They have to cut off the flesh at this point. Circumcision was the sign of the Abrahamic covenant given in Genesis chapter 17. It was a pruning of the flesh of the male sexual organ, setting the people apart for bearing good fruit.

It was also, in the more immediate context, the necessary preparation for the celebration of the Passover. The removal of the foreskin at this point is seen as a sort of cutting off of the principle of Egypt.

Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you. You can think that the Egyptians would have claimed that the Lord had brought Israel into the wilderness to perish. But now they have entered into the land and the Egyptians' mockery must cease.

We might also see this as akin to the cutting off of the leaven when they left Egypt. As the wild vines of the land are cut off, Israel is being placed within the land as a pruned and tamed vine, a planting of the Lord.

Israel crossed over the Jordan on the day when the Passover lamb would typically be chosen, and they celebrated the Passover on the 14th day. We should again note the symmetry. They leave with the Passover, and they arrive with the Passover.

[7 : 07] When they would celebrate the Passover in the future, they could recall both aspects of these events. See a similar thing in Christ's celebration of the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper looks back to the evening of the Last Supper, as Jesus is preparing for his death, and it connects with the theme of his death.

But it also looks back to the event of the resurrection, as Jesus broke bread and revealed himself in the breaking of bread to his disciples. Likewise then, the Passover looks back to the deliverance from Egypt and to the entrance into the land.

They first eat the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, and the manna ceases that very day. This recalls Leviticus chapter 23, verses 9 to 14. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, They are fulfilling this as well.

This celebration of firstfruits is associated with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The cutting off of the manna and the first eating of the fruit of the land is important. The manna gathered each day was an omer, and the first fruit offering was also an omer, translated here as sheaf.

They are starting a new diet. They are no longer being fed directly and immediately from the Lord. Rather, the Lord is providing them with rain, with the fertility of the ground, and other things, so that they can act as agriculturalists.

[9 : 08] This comes with new temptations. They can forget that all their food comes from the Lord. They can think that they are the ones that are providing their food, and the Lord isn't really active.

But yet, the Feast of Firstfruits is one of the ways to underline the fact that God is still providing for them. And the offering of an omer connects the fact that the fruit of the land is following the same fundamental principle as the omer that they received each day, the daily bread, of the manna.

This shifting to a new diet is also a sign of a raising in maturity. As they now have a much greater role in producing and preparing their food, they have risen to a new level of agency.

But as the book of Deuteronomy so often emphasises, as they enter into this new stage of life as a nation, they should not forget the lessons that came before. The chapter ends as Joshua encounters the commander of the army of the Lord, presumably the angel of the Lord.

This is reminiscent of Moses' account with the Lord at the burning bush in Exodus chapter 3 verses 2-8. And the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush.

[10 : 15] He looked, and behold, the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed. And Moses said, I will turn aside to see this great sight, why the bush is not burned. When the Lord saw that he turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, Moses, Moses.

And he said, Here I am. Then he said, Do not come near, take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground. And he said, I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God. Then the Lord said, I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters.

I know their sufferings. And I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land, to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

The angel of the Lord came to lead them out of the land of Egypt, and we see his action in a number of points. He presumably is the one described as the destroyer, who destroys the firstborn of the Egyptians.

[11 : 23] He is also present at the crossing of the Red Sea. Exodus chapter 23 verses 20 to 24 speaks of the mission of the angel. Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way, and to bring you to the place that I have prepared.

Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies, and an adversary to your adversaries.

When my angel goes before you, and brings you to the Amorites, and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow to their gods, nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them, and break their pillars in pieces.

The description of the commander of the army of the Lord is similar to that of the angel of the Lord in the story of Balaam and his ass, or the story of David's sin in calling the census in 1 Chronicles chapter 21.

Joshua asks whose side the angel is on. The angel fights the Lord's battles, but he isn't straightforwardly on any human side, even though he will clearly support Israel.

[12 : 33] I think this looks back to the statement of the Lord concerning the angel, that if Israel carefully obeys his voice and does what he says, then he will be an enemy to their enemies, an adversary to their adversaries.

The Lord comes in judgment, not as a servant to Israel, not as one who's committed to their side as such. Rather, Israel must be loyal to the Lord, and as they are loyal to him, he will give them victory over their adversaries.

Joshua recognises the authority of the angelic figure and bows down to him. This may be worship of God or submission to a higher being who represents God. However, I think it is the former.

As in the story of Moses in the burning bush, or the visitation of the angels to Abraham at the Oaks of Mamre, this is a theophanic appearance of the Lord. A question to consider.

