

Joshua 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Joshua chapter 24 And made his offspring many.

I gave him Isaac, and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau, and I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess. But Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. And I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in the midst of it, and afterward I brought you out.

Then I brought your fathers out of Egypt, and you came to the sea. And the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. And when they cried to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them.

And your eyes saw what I did in Egypt. And you lived in the wilderness a long time. Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan. They fought with you, and I gave them into your hand, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and fought against Israel. And he sent and invited Balaam the son of Beor to curse you. But I would not listen to Balaam. Indeed, he blessed you.

[1 : 3 2] So I delivered you out of his hand. And you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho. And the leaders of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

And I gave them into your hand. And I sent the hornet before you, which drove them out before you, the two kings of the Amorites. It was not by your sword or by your bow.

I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and cities that you had not built, and you dwell in them. You eat the fruit of vineyards and olive orchards that you did not plant. Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness.

Put away the gods that your father served beyond the river and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your father served in the region beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. Then the people answered, Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods. For it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed.

[2 : 5 2] And the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God. But Joshua said to the people, You are not able to serve the Lord, for he is a holy God, he is a jealous God, he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins.

If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good. And the people said to Joshua, No, but we will serve the Lord.

Then Joshua said to the people, You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. He said, Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel.

And the people said to Joshua, The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey. So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and put in place statutes and rules for them at Shechem.

And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God, and he took a large stone and set it up there under the terebinth that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said to all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us.

[4 : 09] Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God. So Joshua sent the people away, every man to his inheritance. After these things Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being one hundred and ten years old, and they buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-serah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash.

Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel. As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. And Eliezer the son of Aaron died, and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of Phinehas his son, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim.

In Joshua chapter 24, the book ends with a covenant renewal ceremony. Joshua is nearing death, and summons the people to Shechem. Joshua was described as a young man in Exodus chapter 33 verse 11, and as the assistant to Moses from his youth in Numbers chapter 11 verse 28.

Yet he was old enough to lead the fight against the Amalekites in Exodus chapter 17. If he was in his early to mid-twenties at that time, he would probably have been 60 to 65 years old when they entered into the land, and around 70 at the end of the main campaign.

[5 : 39] These events would be around 40 years later then. Much as Moses led Israel in entering the covenant at Sinai, and then renewed the covenant on the plains of Moab 40 years later, before he died.

So Joshua led Israel in a covenant ceremony in Joshua chapter 8, and now, about 40 years later, he is about to die, and leads them in a renewal ceremony. Shechem was a significant site. It was near Shechem that they had performed the covenant ceremony involving Mount Ebal and Gerizim, in Joshua chapter 8 verses 30 to 35. At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones upon which no man has wielded an iron tool, and the Arphodonic burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings.

And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim, and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the first to bless the people of Israel.

And afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

[7 : 16] Now Joshua returns Israel to Shechem for a renewal of the covenant. Shechem was also an important place in Israel's earlier history. Shechem was a site of decision for Jacob and his family earlier on in Genesis chapter 35 verses 1 to 4.

God said to Jacob, Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau. So Jacob said to his household and to all who were with him, Put away the foreign gods that are among you, and purify yourselves and change your garments.

Then let us arise and go up to Bethel, so that I may make there an altar to the God who answers me in the day of my distress, and has been with me wherever I have gone. So they gave to Jacob all the foreign gods that they had, and the rings that were in their ears.

Jacob hid them under the terebinth tree that was near Shechem. This significant site of covenant remembrance was marked by a particular terebinth tree, beneath which the foreign gods and the rings of the people of Jacob were buried.

Now the terebinth tree is mentioned for a second time, as Joshua will erect a witness stone beneath it, testifying to Israel's decision to serve the Lord, much as Jacob buried the false gods of his people beneath that tree.

[8 : 30] That tree functioned as a landmark of national commitment, and in the same place where the false gods of Israel were abandoned, the true worship of the Lord seems to have been established.

Joshua retells the entire story of Israel to this point, from Terah the father of Abraham onwards. The book of Joshua ends the Hexateuch, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua. And now we see all of the story of the Hexateuch to this point recounted by the Lord, as we, with Joshua and the Israelites, look back upon the path that the Lord has taken Israel upon.

The story is told as the story of the work of the Lord. The Lord is the great actor in the story, and the concern for Israel will be whether they will commit themselves to the Lord in their proper response. For instance, rather than reading about the actions of Moses and Aaron, they are presented as expressions of the actions of the Lord. The Lord sent them. Sinai is not mentioned, because it is the work of the Lord that is being emphasised, not the reciprocity of the covenant that we see at places like Sinai.

[9 : 34] God is the one who has been graciously driving forward the history of Israel throughout. The fact that Israel didn't accomplish their deliverance themselves, and now enjoys blessings which they never worked for nor merited, is emphasised.

The Lord sent the hornet, an obscure expression, before them to drive out their enemies, and now they enjoy the cities of their enemies, houses, crops, and fruits of a land that has largely been given into their hands with little labour on their own part.

Reference to the hornet is also found in Exodus chapter 23 verse 28, And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you.

And then again, in Deuteronomy chapter 7 verse 20, Moreover the Lord your God will send hornets among them, until those who are left and hide themselves from you are destroyed. This might refer to fear, or it might refer to literal plagues of hornets, which drove people from the land.

The stings of hornets could be exceedingly painful, and fatal in some cases. Especially striking is the way that Joshua foregrounds geography, and a geographical itinerary in his speech.

[10 : 44] Israel's covenant identity is one that is geographically articulated. They're taken from beyond the river, they're led through the land of Canaan, in promissory anticipation of their possession of it.

They're distinguished from the dwelling place of their brother Esau, they're brought down into Egypt, they're delivered from bondage and brought into covenant through the Red Sea. They pass through the Jordan and into the land of the Canaanites, given into their possession.

This itinerary is a spiritual passage towards their current identity. It's a movement from idolatry to knowledge of the Lord. From Abram's promissory pilgrimage around the land, from the bondage and renewed idolatry of Egypt, this is the first time that it's made explicit that Israel were idolaters in Egypt.

They're led through the testing of the wilderness, and into the reception of the Lord's promise.

Telling their history in this sort of way, Joshua presents Israel's situatedness in the land of Canaan to be a consequence of their journey into the knowledge of the Lord, and consequently dependent upon their continued faithfulness to him.

On the far sides of the river Euphrates and the Red Sea, idolatry still beckons. If they are unfaithful, the Canaanite nations could still rise up and choke the seed of Israel that the Lord has planted in the land.

[11 : 59] Neighbouring and ancestrally related nations of Edom and Moab, who do not enjoy Israel's covenant relationship with the Lord, also alert Israel to the contingency of their present status.

Water crossings play an especially important part in Joshua's theological geography. The river Euphrates is referenced four times, the Jordan is mentioned twice, and two verses are devoted to recounting the crossing of the Red Sea, verses 6-7.

The prominence of these rivers and bodies of water in Joshua's account is noteworthy. Throughout scripture, the crossings of such water bodies represent transitions from one realm to another, and from one existence or identity to another.

The river is a liminal realm, a place through which passage can be made from something old into something new. The river or the sea is a boundary or threshold. It's an enduring testament also to a historical passage into Israel's current identity that has occurred.

Israel's entrance into Canaan through a series of water crossings was something of which they were always to be reminded, as they regarded the bodies of water bordering and running throughout their land.

[13:11] The Lord's presence in dealing with Israel at the water crossings underlines this fact. He called them from the other side of the river Euphrates. He wrestled with their father Jacob and gave the people their name, Israel, at the Jabbok.

He delivered them through the Red Sea. He brought them into the land through the Jordan. Through these water crossings, or washings, Israel was set apart to the Lord as a royal priesthood and a holy nation.

Although they were uniquely set apart as the Lord's own special possession and covenant people, Israel was also to recognize that the Lord had given lands to other nations. The descendants of Esau had been given the hill country of Seir as their possession.

In verse 4, Israel's peculiar calling was understood in terms of a broader appreciation that the Lord establishes the times and bounds of habitation for all peoples.

The dispossession of the peoples of Canaan was an act of judgment of the Lord upon their wickedness. And as we see elsewhere in scripture, the implicit threat is that the Lord would uproot Israel from the land too if they proved to be unfaithful.

[14:14] Israel is challenged, as Jacob once challenged his people at the exact same spot, to put away the gods of their fathers and the gods of the Amorites of the land and to serve the Lord exclusively.

This day is a day of decision, a day on which they must choose who they will serve. Joshua himself expresses his commitment that he and his house will serve the Lord.

And the people express their commitment to serve the Lord too. However, Joshua gives a surprising and perhaps a shocking response. He plays an adversarial and accusatory role, telling them that they are unable to serve the Lord.

The Lord is a jealous God and they will not be faithful to him. The result will be severe judgment falling upon them. Joshua's statement here underlines the faithful character of Israel's choice. He calls them witnesses against themselves in this matter, addressing them in terms of expected future unfaithfulness. He erects a memorial stone beneath the tree to witness against Israel.

[15:13] The book ends with the death of Joshua at the age of 110, when he is buried in his territory within the land. We might recall Joseph at this point, as the death of Joseph ends the first book of the Hexateuch, Genesis, and he also dies at the age of 110, Genesis chapter 50 verses 24 to 26.

And Joseph said to his brothers, I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here.

So Joseph died being 110 years old. They embalmed him and he was put in a coffin in Egypt. This is a curious detail and it's made all the more curious by the fact that immediately after the death of Joshua, we read of the burial of Joseph's bones.

Is anything going on here? First, we should recognise that Joseph's bones were an important part of the whole story from Genesis onwards. The story of the Exodus is, among other things, the story of the repatriation of Joseph, the lost son.

The promise concerning Joseph's bones is made in Genesis 50 and it's a promise that's seen as evidence of his faith in Hebrews chapter 11 verse 22. By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the Exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

[16:39] Joseph's bones appear again at the time of the Exodus in Exodus chapter 13 verse 19. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.

And then finally they're found in this chapter, in Joshua chapter 24 verse 32. As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for a hundred pieces of money.

It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph. Joseph then is buried in Shechem. This was the fateful location where Joseph went to seek out his brothers, which led to him being taken down to Egypt in the first place.

Telling the fate of Joseph's bones at this point seems strange perhaps. Did Israel wait 40 or 50 years after first reaching Shechem to bury Joseph's bones there? Probably not.

However, the burial of Joseph's bones completes a central underlying theme of the entire hexateuch. It also connects Joseph being laid to rest with the death of Joshua.

[17:49] Joshua, as we learn in Numbers chapter 13, was an Ephraimite, a descendant of Joseph himself. Joseph played the part of a spy, bringing back a bad report concerning his brothers.

Joshua was the descendant of Joseph, marked out by bringing a good report. And he was joined by Caleb, the descendant of Judah, who had once tried to persuade his brothers to sell Joseph into slavery.

Yet now Caleb joined Joshua in his good report, and tried to persuade his brothers to enter into the land. Joshua, the descendant of Joseph, with his comrade Caleb, the descendant of Judah, was setting something right that had gone wrong so many years before.

And now the memory of Joseph could properly be laid to rest. The lost son was now buried in the plot of land that had been given to him by his father back in Genesis. A question to consider.

Unlike in the context of the death of Moses, there is no account of succession here. How do the deaths of Joshua and of Eliezer the priest mark an existential transition for Israel?