

JOSHUA – the book of the wars of canaan

It is difficult to step into the shoes of a great man. Joshua, desperately lonely as he took charge of the nation, was encouraged, first by God Himself, and then by the people, to be strong and press on. His first task was to cross the River Jordan and advance into the heartland of the Canaanites. The ancient city of Jericho barred the way. Sensibly, he sent two spies to reconnoitre, and they reported the morale of the inhabitants was at rock bottom.

How was Joshua to get the whole nation across the Jordan, which at this time of year was in full flood? The instructions came from his angelic Advisor. After three days, the priests were to lead the way, carrying the Ark into the centre of the river.

Miraculously, as their feet came to the bank of the Jordan, the water dried up, and it became possible to cross dry-foot. Hours later, with everyone safe on the western side, the floodwaters resumed their course. There was a rich symbolism in this incident. The water, says the record, was cut off (perhaps by a landslide) further north at a place called Adam. As the ark, a potent symbol of Jesus, held back the flood that would have swept Adam's descendants down to the Dead Sea, so salty that nothing can live, the people crossed over into the Promised Land. In the allegory, they had entered the Kingdom of God.

Jericho was the first Canaanite city to be conquered by Joshua. Once again, the angel, "captain of the Lord's host" as he is styled, issued his commands. God was going to drive home an important lesson for the Israelites and their enemies alike – the victory would not be by man's military genius, but by the power of Israel's God. For six days running the army tramped in silence round the walled city, to the amusement of the inhabitants. On the seventh day they completed seven circuits.

On the very last circuit the walls of Jericho fell outwards (probably by an earthquake), so that the city lay wide open to the sword and fire. It was a great victory.

Joshua chose to advance up into the central mountain range to capture the south of the country. He was aided by the decision of the Canaanite kings or chieftains to band together and attack Gibeon. This important city had tricked Joshua early in his campaign into signing a treaty of peace. He now felt obliged to honour his pact with them. Actually, a battle in the open field was just what he needed – attacking walled cities one by one would have taken months, even years. Ascending from the main camp at Gilgal near Jericho by night, a climb of 3000 feet (900 m), he took the enemy by surprise in the morning light, and defeated them roundly. It was a long day, in which God sent a devastating hailstorm that mowed down the fleeing troops, and gave Joshua extended daylight to complete the rout.

The second phase was in the north of the land, where again the chieftains decided to join forces to combat the Israelite threat. This battle took place by a small lake north of the Sea of Galilee. Joshua's victory was followed by the systematic destruction of the capital city of Hazor. Excavations by the Israeli Yigael Yadin in the 1970's found traces of the fire with which Joshua burned Hazor, and stone idols beheaded by his soldiers as they threw down the pagan shrines. This confirmed the statement that

"... Joshua turned back at that time and captured Hazor and struck its king with the sword, for Hazor formerly was the head of all those kingdoms.
And they struck with the sword all who were in it, devoting them to destruction;

there was none left that breathed. And he burned Hazor with fire. Joshua 11:10, 1.1

“So Joshua took the whole land,” continues the record, “according to all that the LORD had spoken to Moses. And Joshua gave it for an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal allotments. And the land had rest from war”. v23

This initial breaking of the military power of the Canaanites was essential. With the armed forces subdued, the Israelites could begin the takeover of the land that God had promised them. This was effected by drawing up detailed maps. Mountains, the River Jordan and the seas were used to define boundaries, and then the countryside was divided into family-sized inheritances. These were then apportioned to the people on the fairest possible basis by drawing lots. This exercise is described in Joshua 14:2 through to chapter 19.

Critics of the Bible often question the morality of the Israelites killing the Canaanites and taking over their lands. In today’s culture, it would be counted as ‘genocide’. However the Bible makes it plain that God is the ultimate owner of all lands. He decides who will live in a country and for how long. The prophet Amos has a revealing statement –

“Behold, the eyes of the Lord GOD are upon the sinful kingdom, and I will destroy it from the surface of the ground, except that I will not utterly destroy the house of Jacob,” declares the LORD.” Amos 9:8

God’s eyes had been upon the Canaanites for centuries. He had told Abraham that his descendants –

“...shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” Genesis 15:16

“The Amorites” is a general term for the peoples inhabiting the land of Canaan (Israel). God waited patiently. He permitted four more generations of Amorites to consider the evils their fathers had committed, and repent, but to no effect. Now the time had come for them to be replaced by the Israelites, the descendants of Abraham. This matches what Moses had told his people -

“Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart are you going in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is driving them out from before you, and that He may confirm the word that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.” Deuteronomy 9:5

The corollary of this is that when civilizations such as ours reach the same depths of depravity as that of the Canaanites, where violence, homosexuality and oppression abounded, a day of judgment will inevitably fall. That is an essential part of the Christian gospel. We are responsible to God the Creator, and He is going to send His son Jesus to judge the world in righteousness (see Acts 17:31).

The last task of Joshua, described in chapters 20 to 21, was to provide accommodation for the tribe of Levi, who were to be full-time priests, teaching and administering the law. To ensure justice was readily available to the population, they were apportioned 48 towns, scattered evenly through the twelve tribes. Of these, six were set aside as special ‘cities of refuge’. If you accidentally slew someone, for example when the head flew off your axe, the kinsmen of the dead man might assume you had murdered him. This could easily lead to a hasty revenge killing, and even start a blood feud between families. By running to the nearest city of refuge, you could take sanctuary until your case could be heard in a

court of law, and the facts examined in a proper trial. If you were found not guilty of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, you were required to remain in the city of refuge until the death of the High Priest. After that you could go free. This ruling emphasized that even an accidental killing was still the taking of a precious life, which belonged by rights to God.

Now the work of subduing the Canaanites was complete, the soldiers from the two and a half tribes who had chosen to have their inheritance on the east of the river Jordan were allowed to return to their families. The book of Joshua concludes with a description of a great national assembly called by their aged leader, in which he warned them to hold fast to their promise to serve the Lord their God, erecting a stone monument to remind them of their solemn covenant. He died at the great age of 110 years, and was mourned by all the people.

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