

SESSION TWENTY-THREE

THE ALLOTMENT OF THE LAND

Joshua 13:1–24:33

I. INTRODUCTION

Whereas the first half of the book dealt with the taking of the land of promise by holy war, most of the second half concerns the allotment of the land to the various tribes. The book concludes with the tribes gathering at Shechem to formalize a covenant with Yahweh in which they obligate themselves to serve the Lord and obey His voice (ch 24). The central motif of chapters 13–21 is the gaining of the inheritance.

II. POSSESSING THE LAND

A. Harmonization of the Statements

A few comments are needed in regard to the extent to which Israel possessed the land, for in actuality the task remained unfinished. I shall quote Dr. Waltke at length on this:

While the book asserts that the promises made to the fathers were fulfilled in Joshua's conquest (11:23; cf. 21:43), the historical reality is that the land promised was only partially given. Y. Kaufmann noted that the relationship between the promise pertaining to the dimensions of the land and its historical fulfillment can be divided into three categories: (1) a portion of this land was conquered and allotted; (2) another was allotted but not conquered - all the coastal strip (13:2-4), all the Emeq (17:11f.), almost all the portion of Dan (19:47), Jerusalem, Gezer, and other cities (15:63; 16:10); and (3) another was neither allotted nor conquered - from Baal-gad in the valley of the Lebanon to the Gateway to Hamath (Nu. 34:7f.; Josh. 1:4) (*Biblical Account*, p. 52).

The harmonization of these apparently contradictory statements lies in a correct understanding of "took (*lāqah*) the whole land." The writer probably understood the taking of the land to mean the gaining of control without eliminating all opposition

Both the Book of War (chs. 10–11) and the Book of Distribution (chs. 13–21) recognize that the task of driving out the Canaanite was unfinished But the back of the Canaanite was broken, king after king was dead (ch. 12), and apart from an uprising by the Canaanites recorded in Jgs. 4–5 and the resistance of the Jebusites (2 S. 5:6-10), Israel's enemies from then on would not be the Canaanites but the Philistines, and others from outside the land (cf. the book of Judges)."¹

¹Bruce K. Waltke, *ISBE*, 2:1135.

B. The Climax of the Book

Joshua 21:43-45 forms the climax to the book, describing what Yahweh gave the nation:

- (1) *"all the land which He had sworn to give to their fathers"* - see the notes above for resolving the apparent contradiction.
- (2) *"rest on every side . . . all their enemies into their hand"*. In effect, Israel had broken the backbone of Canaan. They had killed 31 kings (Jos 12).
- (3) *"Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass."*

The point is not that God was finally able to achieve His promises; rather Israel finally obeyed the LORD which allowed Him to bless them with the promises. When does a promise fail? When one places faith in it and acts upon it, but God does not keep His end of the bargain.

C. Limits in the Land Possessed

Obviously, all the land that God was intending for Israel was not possessed nor was it even gained quickly. First, they gained the dominance of the land; then they had to progressively carry out the occupation of the land. Yet this was God's intention all along: *"And the LORD your God will clear away these nations before you little by little; you will not be able to put an end to them quickly, lest the wild beasts grow too numerous for you"* (Deut 7:22; cf. 7:1-5). They only knew to carry out the destruction and that God would deliver up the enemy. The matter of "when" remained elusive, forcing them to continue relying upon Yahweh. So, the limitation of the land possessed was not a failure to believe (Jos 15:63; 16:10; 17:12-13), but a purpose of Yahweh. On one hand, He wants them to possess all the title deed, but on the other hand not until they are ready to possess it. This is a principle: God gives us as much as we are ready to take!

The doctrine of the land remaining to be possessed was spelled out in Joshua 13:1-7. The limitation was governed by two factors:

- (1) the limitation was in accordance with their present needs.
- (2) Yahweh held out the promise that He himself would drive out the remaining enemies (Jos 13:6).

The nature of the promise should be considered. Just when is a promise fulfilled? As an illustration, consider the following promise: "I promise to pay all your tuition for seminary!" When the next semester begins, you come to me and I pay the tuition for that semester. Now, is the promise fulfilled? Yes, but there remains a future expectation . . . the scope of the promise has not been exhausted. The land promise to Israel works in a similar manner: the scope of the promise was large enough to give them hope for future possession.

Each tribe is allotted a certain area of land for an inheritance, but they must appropriate the occupation of that land. Only in proportion to the readiness of each tribe to act in faith does the land that remains become part of their inheritance.²

III. THE COVENANT AT SHECHEM

During the conquest phase of the land of Canaan, the Israelites used Gilgal (near the Jordan) as a base camp. Apparently, the conquest of Canaan (from the time they crossed the Jordan to the first distribution of land) was about 6 1/2 years (based upon Caleb's age; Jos 14:7,10). Once the tribes began to occupy the land, the Israelites established the tabernacle and altar at Shiloh, about 21 miles north of Jerusalem in the hill country of Ephraim. Shiloh continued to function as the religious center throughout the period of the judges and even until the time of Samuel (1 Sam 1:3).

Shortly before his death, Joshua called all the tribes of Israel to gather once more at Shechem (between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim). The whole purpose was to reconstitute the covenant between Yahweh and the nation.³ This underscored the fact that the covenant was not only appropriate for gaining the land, but it was appropriate for retaining the land. A choice had to be made to serve Yahweh and obey Him throughout their generations. Shechem was an appropriate site for the nation to confirm this decision. Irving Jensen states:

Here God first promised Canaan to Abram (Gen 12:6-7); here Jacob built an altar (Gen 33:20); here Joshua built an altar and renewed Israel's covenant relationship with God (Joshua 8:30-35). Joshua's appeal to Israel was to rest its destiny on the foundation of the covenant.⁴

Joshua's message basically falls into two parts: (1) a review of Israel's previous history and (2) a challenge to make a decision for their future. The recounting of Israel's history focuses upon Yahweh's faithfulness rather than upon Israel's rebelliousness. The point is plain: Yahweh had been faithful to them, but will they be faithful to Yahweh? The challenge (24:14ff) was not to be taken lightly, and the option was clear: "*Choose for yourselves today whom you will serve*" . . . either Yahweh or the gods. As a faithful leader, Joshua held himself out as an example (vs 15). When the nation responded positively, Joshua pressed them to make sure their decision was absolutely genuine, carefully deliberated, and sincere (vv 19-20). The people insisted that they were sincere: "*No, but we will serve the LORD!*" (vs 21). The decision was sealed by covenant (vs 25). This episode is significant, for it serves as a warning and a prelude to the events recorded in the book of Judges. As Joshua ends, we see a people determined to serve and obey Yahweh; but as the period of the Judges transpires, we see the nation failing in this commitment!

IV. SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONQUEST

Many a pastor has sought to uncover the spiritual significance of the book of Joshua for his New Testament believers. After all, what does conquering the land and dividing it up into portions have to do with us? I think we should recognize that the primary role of the book is to establish Yahweh's faithfulness in carrying out the promises of the divine program established with the Abrahamic covenant.

²For an identification of the boundaries of each tribal allotment, see Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 129-36.

³Merrill suggests that it had been about 30 years since the previous ceremony, and hence many of the Israelites had not participated personally in covenant renewal (*Kingdom of Priests*, 138).

⁴Irving Jensen, *Joshua: Rest-Land Won* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1966), 122.

Yet, there does seem to be a valid use of the motifs in Numbers and Joshua in the formation of New Testament theology. For this, one is dependent upon Hebrews 3:1–4:16 and the theme of "rest".

Personally, I think a lot of confusion has been thrown in the picture that muddles our thinking. The following views represent different ways of understanding the application of this material:

- 1) A great deal of Christian hymnody and devotional literature has taken a view that Canaan is typical of our heavenly glory. Note the stanza of the following hymn:

When I tread the verge of Jordan,
Bid my anxious fears subside;
Death of death, and hell's destruction,
Land me safe on Canaan's side.
- 2) Others may see the conquest of Canaan ("*every place on which the sole of your foot treads, I have given it to you*" Jos 1:3) as a picture of the church fulfilling the great commission and taking the whole earth.⁵
- 3) Yet again, there are those who try to incorporate the literature of Hebrews 3–4 to see Joshua as a picture of the believer entering into the faith-rest life. They would say that the Israelites under Joshua picture Christians who have entered the "victorious life" and are "resting" from their works and anxieties, discovering the secret of "letting the Lord work."
- 4) A variation of this would be to say that the wilderness and Canaan picture the contrast between the believer who is out-of-fellowship with the one who is in fellowship, or the contrast between being carnal and being Spirit-filled.

This sort of allegorizing should be resisted! Such spiritual schemes fail to do justice to the biblical data available to us from the book of Hebrews with its emphases on endurance, discipline, faithfulness, inheritance and eschatological kingdom expectations. Although a full treatment of the interpretation of Hebrews 3–4 is beyond the scope of these notes, a few factors should be pointed out. The author is concerned about God's people of old, some of whom hardened their hearts and turned away in unbelief from the LORD (i.e., the wilderness generation). The whole point seems to underscore the fact that they missed the inheritance they could have had (not that they lost salvation). There is a promise of rest that can be entered (Heb 4:1), and faith is the way of entering (4:3). But the "rest" is not salvation, for the author goes on to argue "There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God." Obviously, the works in view (4:10) are not "bad works" or "works of the flesh" (i.e., self-effort), for they are compared to God's works, and God's works are certainly not evil, fleshly, or carnal. To cease from our works (4:10) looks at the time we enter into our "rest" and no longer have to work. In the meantime, we have to be diligent to enter that "rest", i.e., we work now to rest later. These are the good works that the believer should be doing in this life (cf. Eph 2:10; Col 1:29; Titus 3:8). In keeping with the theology of Hebrews, we should endure

⁵Dillard and Longman hint at this when they write, "after redemption from Egypt in the Exodus, Israel began the conquest of her inheritance; after the redemptive work of Jesus at the cross, his people move forward to conquer the world in his name. Israel enjoyed an earthly inheritance and an earthly kingdom, but the kingdom of which the church is a part is spiritual and heavenly" (Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 117.

with Christ, remain loyal to Him and engage in good works of service and worship! That's the message, and we see it summed up in 10:36, "*For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.*" We must do "the will of God" (including our good works), or we might not receive what was promised. Disobedience can cause us to fail to enter the "rest" in which we inherit the promises (4:6)!

All of this is bound up in the concept of inheritance which is available to us in our "eschatological salvation" (see Heb 1:14). As I see the concept of "rest" developed in Scripture, I take it that it looks at the period when Messiah Jesus shall establish His kingdom rule over the earth upon His return. Our inheritance and future in that reign are contingent upon what we do in this life. The motifs of this expectation are bound up in the account of Joshua. Basically, the book of Joshua looks at the gaining of the inheritance! But the inheritance is not guaranteed. It can only be gained by faith and obedience to the Lord (in contrast to the wilderness generation who rebelled in unbelief). Obedience to the Word (Jos 1:7-8) is crucial; so is endurance . . . we must finish our work . . . complete the task . . . not turn back. Furthermore, we must be willing to face opposition from enemies, but unlike Joshua our enemies are spiritual ("we wrestle not with flesh and blood", Eph 6:10ff). Canaan is not a "victorious life" where we have no anxieties; it is a battlefield! Yet, I am not suggesting that we war in the energy of the flesh. The Israelites fought, but yet God was the One fighting for them (Jos 23:3). The Apostle Paul sets the example for us (Col 1:29). I would relate the book of Joshua to Christians in this way:

The book of Joshua pictures our engagement and uncompromising warfare of spiritual enemies in the present life as we follow Christ, our Joshua, obeying His Word and serving Him faithfully that we might gain an eternal inheritance when the Lord brings in the true "age of rest".

The challenge is seen in the charge to the tribes (22:5), and Caleb is a great example for us to emulate (14:9).