

JOSHUA

Lesson 25 - Chapter 24

Last time we read and studied Joshua chapter 23, Joshua's farewell address to Israel. He was nearing 110 years of age, knew his time was near, and in the motif of all great leaders realized that his legacy must be told and the people reminded of how they (as a people of God) had arrived at their present glorious circumstance.

Joshua's message was quite basic: he will die and leadership will change hands, but God never changes. The blessings that Yehoveh promised to Israel are certain, but so are the curses for disobedience. Sometimes the punishment for disobedience was that the blessings would cease, rather than bad things happening to them. They were to be especially on guard against mixing with their pagan neighbors. And understand: ALL their neighbors were pagan. The Canaanites still living in the Promised Land were a danger as were the other nations living on, or just beyond, their borders. The primary danger was that Israel might slide into idolatry and the death penalty was essentially the consequence of such folly. The death they would experience on a national basis as a national judgment would be the loss of their land, the loss of their rest, and the loss of many of their lives.

What we are about to read in chapter 24 takes place at an undetermined time AFTER the farewell address of chapter 23; it is a separate event. This chapter is called one of the theologically richest in the entire Old Testament. Some scholars have spent many years of their careers simply investigating this single chapter. As we're at the end of our study of the book of Joshua and now I think we have sufficient background what with our study of the Torah, we'll delve quite deeply into it and take our time as we examine some of the hidden gems contained in these paragraphs. I think the time spent will be worth as a lot of connections will be made for you; and because some review of Israel's history is contained in this account it will be healthy for us to see a bigger and more complete picture emerge. So in some ways we're going to summarize what we've learned over the long haul.

OK. Recall that at the beginning of Joshua I told you that until Joshua took over and brought the people of Israel into the Promised Land that the Law as given to Moses on Mt. Sinai was but lofty ideals. Much of it had no effect until they entered Canaan and possessed it. Much of it couldn't even be practiced until the land was won.

So as we moved out of the Torah and into the book of Joshua we also moved from theory to practice. It is so much like the walk of the new Believer; we learn that there is a new and divine way to follow and next we are taught some principles to lead the way; but then we soon find out that doing is much harder than merely knowing God's will.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 24 all

In chapter 24 Joshua now gathers Israel together for a purpose that is a little different than the farewell address of chapter 23. This meeting is in the form of making a covenant according to some; however to my way of thinking this is more about making a covenant **renewal** than it is about the creation of new covenant or announcing the next in a series of covenants. We won't ever hear about a Covenant of Joshua for this very reason.

Israel was quite spread out at this time, and was by no means a sovereign nation. It was a loose confederation of 12 tribes plus Levi, under what was essentially centralized military rule for a common military purpose: subduing Canaan. With the imminent death of Joshua this loose confederation of tribes was about to become a whole lot looser.

Since Israel was so spread out there was no practical way that all the citizens of Israel (every man, woman and child) could come to one place to meet and hear what Joshua had to say; so as usual it was primarily the tribal leaders who attended. Often these meetings (when we're told that "all Israel" was present) were of either the tribal princes or only the tribal elders, but only occasionally was it both. This time it was not only for the princes and the elders, but the judges and the officers were also present. The idea is that every sort of leader representing every phase of the Israelite community was present. I'm sure we're talking about ten's of thousands of men.

I'll not go into depth in describing what each of these leadership positions entailed as we've examined them before; but we do need to recall that these were not at all just different terms for essentially the same leadership job. Princes (or chiefs) were the genetic descendants of the tribes' founders. They were members of that tribe who belonged to a particular bloodline that, coupled with birthright, automatically entitled them to be the leader of their tribe. Elders were men chosen for their wisdom, or courage, or demonstrated leadership abilities. The Elders were the common man's representatives among Israel.

The term Officers in this case likely meant military officers although we should not draw a perfect parallel to an officer in a modern army who is (often as not) a career serviceman. Israel did not have a standing army; it was simply that all men between the ages of 20 and 50 were obligated to fight when called upon. The Officers were men who displayed outstanding fighting ability, or loyalty to Joshua, or leadership skills and thus were appointed to be military leaders when Israel was going to battle. Otherwise, after a battle, these officers went back to doing whatever their trade or profession called for, and to being husbands and fathers and family providers.

Now the judges spoken of are a different matter and it is not at all clear what their precise function was during the time of Joshua was still living and ruling. The Hebrew word for judge is **shofet**, and of course the word lends its name as the title of the book that follows Joshua in our bibles. When we begin the book of Judges we'll get more in depth analysis on just what constituted an Israelite being a judge and what that title entailed. But as for what a judge, a **shofet**, meant just prior to Joshua's death it is a bit hazy. Generally speaking it is likely that

these men helped Joshua rule, very probably hearing complaints and resolving issues of a more minor or common nature among the people.

We probably have as good a definition as we're likely going to get for what a judge did in Deuteronomy 25.

CJB Deuteronomy 25:1 *"If people have a dispute, seek its resolution in court, and the judges render a decision in favor of the righteous one and condemning the wicked one; 2 then, if the wicked one deserves to be flogged, the judge is to have him lie down and be flogged in his presence. The number of strokes is to be proportionate to his offense;*

Without doubt the position of judge was now in a transition phase and they functioned a bit differently than in Moses' day. Very likely during the years leading up to Joshua's death, after the land had been conquered and the territories allotted, their function evolved so that it was more extensive than what we read in Deuteronomy. In fact a few short years after this covenant renewal ceremony the meaning of the term and the purpose of the judges, the **shofetim**, became radically different and had nothing to do with settling disputes or trying legal cases.

Verse 1 tells us these representatives of all Israel met at a place that in some ways surprises us: Shechem. Yet in other ways it was perhaps the most appropriate of locations for this ceremony. Shechem was a place of tremendous religious and historical significance for Israel. It was there that the Lord promised Abraham that THIS would be land that would eventually be possessed by his descendants. It was there that the great promises that everyone who counts themselves as Believers in the God of Israel (and including those who trust in the Messiah Yeshua) holds so dear as it is the beginning of the physical process of a spiritual redemption for mankind, that would eventually produce the Messiah.

When Israel first crossed the Jordan River they gathered at Shechem that is in an area that lay between the two mountains of Ebal and Gerizim; and it was there that the blessings and curses of the Law were pronounced and monuments erected to memorialize Israel's triumphal entry into the Promised Land.

It was at Shechem that Jacob purchased some land from the King of Shechem, and there that he had hoped to settle down until his sons went on a raid of revenge for the rape of Israel's daughter, Dinah, by the King's son.

But on the other hand, it was Shiloh that was the current place of rest for the Wilderness Tabernacle and served as the seat of government for Joshua. The priesthood was centered in Shiloh, the Ark of the Covenant and therefore the presence of God was at Shiloh. What would have been a better place of covenant renewal "before the Lord" than at His sanctuary in Shiloh?

There has been much thought and scholarship on this matter of the ceremony's location and it can probably be summed up best in this way: by meeting at Shechem instead of at Shiloh it was made clear that a covenant between Israel and God was more than a religious matter for

the priests to administrate; it was inseparable from the secular life of the community. The Covenant of Moses was not to be practiced only during the sacred appointed times, Biblical Feasts, Sabbaths, New Moons, ritual purifications and sacrifices, all under the supervision and auspices of the Levites; it was to be the basis for the everyday life of God's people.

At the same time an era was coming to a close. What had begun at Shechem perhaps 600-700 years earlier at a simple stone altar next to a Terebinth tree at a site that held no city and likely not even a village yet, came full circle. His promise of land had been kept by the Lord. With Joshua as the leader, Israel was now firmly entrenched in the Promised Land, territories allotted to the 12 tribes, the enemy subdued, a semi-permanent location for the Sanctuary had been established and God's people were at rest. In fact this was a time like no other in Israel's history. Their obedience and dedication to the Lord was at its peak, and thus were their blessings. Sadly this state of affairs would be very short lived.

Verse two begins with Joshua saying to the representatives of all Israel, "thus says Yehoveh the *elohim* of Israel..." This statement invoking God's name also brings us full circle and brings the present era to a close because whereas the Covenant of Abraham was made with *El Shaddai*, this covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem that both honors the completion of the Abrahamic Covenant promise of a land for Abraham's countless descendants as well as reaffirming the Mosaic Covenant, was made in the name of Yehoveh. Let's talk about that for a minute.

The first 4 verses of chapter 24 deals with the Patriarchs of Israel: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And in the book of Exodus we find this simple but important statement:

CJB Exodus 6:3 *I appeared to Avraham, Yitz'chak and Ya'akov as El Shaddai, although I did not make myself known to them by my name, Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh [ADONAI].*

This is not a throwaway or incidental pronouncement of God; it explains something that (when properly understood) can help us greatly in our correct interpretation of Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob knew of God as ONLY El Shaddai. El Shaddai has for centuries been translated as "God Almighty" and that is incorrect. Shaddai is an obsolete Hebrew word that meant mountain. So the meaning is "God of the Mountain".

Here's the thing: El is a Canaanite word, not a Hebrew word. The Hebrews merely incorporated it in their language as a loan word. El was the common name for the Canaanite's highest God. El was the actual NAME for the head of the Canaanite pantheon of gods who was the father of both all the other gods and of human beings. But being the father did not mean he was necessarily the most powerful of the gods; in fact it was the Canaanite god Ba'al that was considered the mightiest of all the gods even though El was his father. In Abraham's day, while there was some minor variation in the gods' names and hierarchy, in general it worked this way: El was the Father god and his wife was Asherah, who was the mother of all the gods and of humanity. Therefore the gods were "born" so to speak, and their mother was Asherah.

Ba'al, considered the most powerful god, was the god of storms and of fertility. Astarte, or

Ashtoreth (which is entirely different than the goddess Asherah), was closely associated with Ba'al. Astarte (from whom we get the name and many of the modern day rites associated with the Christian holy day of Easter) was the goddess of fertility, the goddess of love and war, and was Ba'al's consort.

I could go on, but these 4 names of El, Asherah, Ba'al and Astarte or Ashtoreth are all prominently mentioned in the bible and most of the lesser gods and goddess are not.

My point is that we must grasp, no matter how distasteful it might be for us, that indeed when the term El is used in the bible, it is with the picture of the Canaanite god El in mind (at least in the minds of those who lived in that day and perhaps to a lesser degree the writer or editor of the actual Holy Scripture). And this makes all kinds of sense when we realize that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were more associated with Mesopotamia beyond the Euphrates than they were with lands to the south. Mesopotamia was the mother lode of the Mystery Babylon god system that was the basis of the Canaanite god system. For all practical purposes they were one in the same using largely the same god and goddess names with only variances in language accounting for the somewhat different names that we find for them among the ancient cultures.

When we recount the story of Abraham coming into the Land of Canaan, and stopping at Shechem to both build a simple altar (obviously upon which to sacrifice) and to hear God's promise to him, we remember that God was intent that Abraham had to leave the land of his own ancestors (Mesopotamia) to go to a new place that God would show him. Part of the reason this was necessary was that Abraham was raised up in the pantheon of El, Asherah, Ba'al and Astarte. His own father, Terach, carved and sold images of these gods and goddesses presumably as his means of making a living. Few Christian or Jewish scholars would argue any longer that while Abraham may have done little more than tolerate his father's, his family's, and his culture's dedication to these gods, they were certainly the only gods he knew. So by all accounts Abraham counted as what we would today call a pagan.

So the first step the Lord God took to de-paganize Abraham was to remove him from his land. To get him away from the god system that was embedded there. Now, you say, but this same system was also in play in Canaan, where he went. Yes, but Abraham probably knew little about that and didn't entirely know what to expect. Here's what Abraham (and every other human alive in the Middle East) knew about gods: they were territorial and there were a lot of them. This was not something one questioned; it was common knowledge that certain gods occupied and ruled over specific territories and thus nations. This is not a thing that the Lord God could ever have simply explained to Abraham that would have changed his perspective. It would have done no good to set Abraham down and say, "Abraham, here's the deal. Forget everything you know, and everything you see everyone else doing. There is only one god, and it's me. And I'm not even the god that all these folks have been worshipping. So get over it."

This would not compute for Abraham. It's not about believing, it's about comprehending. Abraham believed God, and it counted for him as his righteousness before God. But he comprehended God in the context of his life and of the world as it currently existed. The concept of one god would have been beyond crazy. One God? For the whole world? Right.

Modern evangelical teaching speaks often about the concept of Progressive Revelation. It is essentially a notion that the Lord is taking man on a journey and that it has a very definite path, with explicit milestones along the way at which point new information is given. There is no skipping of milestones and there is no fast forwarding. Man MUST go through a progression of gaining knowledge in a certain way, in a certain order, at a certain speed so that man can apprehend and comprehend what it is that God is doing and just who He is. Progressive Revelation doesn't reflect God's nature, it's because the nature of man requires it. It would take centuries of baby-steps for Abraham and then his descendants to get to a point where the concept of there being one God in all existence, who was not at all a part of the universally accepted god system men had created, could be internalized.

Thus as we have seen in numerous cases in our studies and will in numerous more, God uses what is already in existence for His purposes. He'll use existing customs and traditions borne by existing cultures and societies and give them a new meaning. He did exactly that when He introduced Himself to all the Patriarchs as El Shaddai. He allowed these earliest generations of Hebrews to go ahead and retain a sort of mental picture of Him in the same light as the well-understood El of the Canaanites. Plus it made sense to the Patriarchs that since they were in Canaan, it is obvious that the highest god is El; the Canaanites had always claimed that and so when God introduced Himself as El Shaddai, El of the Mountain, it was easily grasped. But over hundreds of years, things progressed until the Lord finally made a very bold move and told Moses His real name. And His name was not El, it was Yehoveh. This was the beginning of a whole new dynamic. Since Israel had long been out of Canaan anyway (living down in Egypt) it made sense to their minds that the El they knew from their days in the land of Canaan wasn't in Egypt; the Egyptian gods were in Egypt.

When Israel left Egypt they really had little problem with the experience of encountering a new god at Mt. Sinai (which wasn't in Canaan OR Egypt) who had a name they had never heard of before; after all they were in an entirely different territory than they had ever been before. So when the Lord God told them His name, YHWH, it was to the Hebrews' way of thinking that they had only found out the name of the god who was the supreme ruler over the territory they had journeyed to when they left Egypt. The only real problem they had was grasping that this god of Mt. Sinai was the same as the one who had worked such powerful miracles in Egypt! I mean, that broke all the known rules concerning how gods did (or even could) operate. Thus we find the Lord over and over in His Torah saying, "I am the God who led you out of Egypt". He was emphasizing that even though it went against everything they thought they knew about gods, in fact He operated without territorial boundaries, limitations, or restrictions.

Back to Joshua at Shechem. Abraham knew God as El. Isaac knew God as El. Jacob knew God as El. But Joshua (and Moses before him) knew God as Yehoveh. The generation who left Egypt, and especially the one who survived the Wilderness journey, knew God as Yehoveh. No longer was there any tie of God's identification to the old Canaanite god system, with El as the father and chief god. In fact the warnings from Yehoveh against Israel involving themselves in any way with these Mystery Babylon gods increased (where before such an association was tolerated to a degree), and the threats if they ignored His demands also increased. The new Hebrew residents hadn't moved into Canaan where the Canaanite god El ruled; these new residents moved into a land ruled by Yehoveh and He despised the

Canaanite gods. Progressive Revelation. The people of Israel were that generation that had reached the next milestone along the extended journey of God's plan of salvation, and so they could now better understand just who God was; and just as important, who He was NOT. He was, without doubt, not a Canaanite or Babylon Mystery religion god!

We must always keep in mind the biblical definition of the word "name" (**shem** in Hebrew), as opposed to what it means commonly to us today. Today the word "name" simply means a simplistic way of identifying a person as apart from someone else. But a person or a god's "name" in the bible era referred specifically to that god's or person's character, attributes, and reputation. So when God no longer identified Himself as El, He also was distancing Himself from the characteristics of the Canaanite god system and the attributes of the El of the Mystery Babylon religions.

One of the themes we see in chapter 24 is that God divides Israel's history into 4 major pieces: 1) the era of the Patriarchs when God was known to them as El (which we have just examined). 2) When they went down to Egypt and served Egypt's gods because obviously their god El was back up in Canaan where they came from (this is what we're about to study next in verses 4-7). 3) The conquering of the Trans-Jordan: that territory that lay on the eastern side of the Jordan River when they knew God as YHWH. And 4) is the crossing over of the Jordan into the actual Promised Land. Each one of these periods will present us with it's own set of theological principles due (once again) to the very nature of Progressive Revelation.

Beginning in verse 4; when Israel was in Egypt most Hebrews didn't believe their god was with them; that is one reason they lost hope. How could he possibly be with them when he rules over Canaan? Thus THEY had no god to help them when they were in Egypt, yet it was understood that, "when in Rome do as the Romans do". You're in Egypt, worship the Egyptian gods. They may not do a lot for you, but at the same time you don't want to arouse their anger against you. One of the reasons that Jacob hoped so fervently that he and his sons and their families could get back to Canaan, was so they could get back to their god, El Shaddai, who presided over Canaan.

CJB Genesis 48:1 *While later someone told Yosef that his father was ill. He took with him his two sons, M'nasheh and Efrayim. 2 Ya'akov was told, "Here comes your son Yosef." Isra'el gathered his strength and sat up in bed. 3 Ya'akov said to Yosef, "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Kena'an and blessed me, 4 saying to me, 'I will make you fruitful and numerous. I will make of you a group of peoples; and I will give this land to your descendants to possess forever.'*

Down in Egypt the God of the Patriarchs was still known only as El Shaddai, the God who lived in Canaan, as we see in this conversation between Jacob and his son Joseph. Perhaps this all starting to take hold in you; if so then you can understand that the Hebrews envisioned their God (El Shaddai) as unable to help them in Egypt because His power ended at the borders of Canaan. But now listen to Moses' conversation with God at the Burning Bush before he returned to Egypt to fetch God's people.

CJB Exodus 3:11 *Moshe said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and lead*

the people of Isra'el out of Egypt?" 12 He replied, "I will surely be with you. Your sign that I have sent you will be that when you have led the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." 13 Moshe said to God, "Look, when I appear before the people of Isra'el and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you'; and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what am I to tell them?" 14 God said to Moshe, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh [I am/will be what I am/will be]," and added, "Here is what to say to the people of Isra'el: 'Ehyeh [I Am or I Will Be] has sent me to you.'" 15 God said further to Moshe, "Say this to the people of Isra'el: 'Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh [ADONAI], the God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitz'chak and the God of Ya'akov, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever; this is how I am to be remembered generation after generation. 16 Go, gather the leaders of Isra'el together, and say to them, 'ADONAI, the God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, Yitz'chak and Ya'akov, has appeared to me and said, "I have been paying close attention to you and have seen what is being done to you in Egypt; 17 and I have said that I will lead you up out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Kena'ani, Hitti, Emori, P'rizi, Hivi and Y'vusi, to a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

The name of your god meant everything. It meant where he or she fit in the pecking order of gods. It meant WHERE they had power. It meant how much power they had. It meant what sorts of things in nature they had power to affect. The god's name explained the god's attributes. It was not unusual that a god was aware of what was going on outside of his or her own territory; so that part of God's message to the Israelites through Moses (that God knew of their plight) would not have been difficult to accept. What is so useful for us to see is that Israel would have a different view of just who this God of Moses is, God instructed Moses to go to the Hebrews with a different name (reputation, set of attributes) than the Patriarchs had known him. Because obviously the enslaved people of Israel only knew the characteristics (the name) of their god as taught to them by the Patriarchs. If Moses had said that this god's name was El Shaddai, the people would have laughed at Moses. Why? Because El Shaddai had no power in Egypt and could not help them.

Things were about to change. A new milestone along the journey had been reached. It was time for more information to be added because the people were ready for it. The new information began with a new name: YHWH. This is Progressive Revelation.

We'll continue with this next week.