Chapter I: Introduction to the Former Prophets

Ch. 1: The Former Prophets and the Later Prophets

The Old Testament does not occur in the actual text in the Bible. Sometimes the series of books we call the Old Testament are referred to in Scripture simply as “the Law.” On other occasions Scripture speaks of “the Law and the Prophets,” and on still other occasions of “the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms” (see Genesis, Ch. 1).

In this series of books, we will use the third of these divisions as we study the Scriptures. As we saw earlier, the third approach does the most justice to the structure of the Bible as it was rounded off in the days of Christ and His apostles (Genesis, 1-2).

The first volumes in this series of books dealt with the Law (i.e. what we must know, the Torah, the teaching). Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were discussed one by one. Now we turn to the second section of Scripture—the prophets.

This second section of Scripture is made up of a good many books—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the book of the twelve minor prophets (Hosea—Malachi). And each one of these books is of considerable length.

There is a good deal to be said for dealing with Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings separately, before taking up Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Minor Prophets. Moreover, this procedure is in line with a division of “the Prophets” that dates from antiquity, namely, the division into the “Former Prophets” and the “Latter Prophets.” The Former Prophets were made up of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, while the Latter Prophets included Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and twelve Minor Prophets.

Both these groups of books fall under the heading “Prophets.” This is not an arbitrary decision reached by scholars; the Holy Spirit Himself leads the way here. We should follow His example confidently.

Unfortunately, there are many people today who view prophets as soothsayers, fortune-tellers. Prophecy is prediction, and the prophet is a mysterious figure who somehow divines the future and tells what is going to happen.

We must not be led astray by this mistaken understanding of prophecy. The people referred to in Scripture as “prophets” did not deal exclusively with the future. The same can be said of the books called “the Prophets.” Some of them did point to future events, but not all of them. However, it can indeed be said of all of them that they made their point of departure in the past, especially in the Torah. They pointed back to what other Bible books revealed about the great deeds of Yahweh (See Josh. 24; Judges 2:7; 6:7-10; I Sam. 12:7; Hos. 11:1).
Ch. 2: Spotlight on Covenant History

While there are many similarities between the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets, there are also differences. Yet similarities outweigh differences.

Both these groups of books, as we saw, are rooted in the past, in the covenant that God made with Israel at Horeb and renewed forty years later on the plains of Moab. Actually, the prophets go still farther back: they go all the way back to God’s covenant with Abraham.

In this regard they follow the example set by Moses himself. When the Horeb covenant was renewed, Moses was thinking ahead. He said to Israel: “If, despite all my warnings, you do come to break the Horeb covenant as time goes on and are severely punished for it, do not despair but see to it that the first thing you do is to return quietly to Yahweh. Even if you have broken His Horeb covenant, He will still remember the covenant on which it rests—the covenant He made with Jacob. He will go back still farther to the covenant He made with Isaac, and even farther to the covenant He made with Abraham.” According to Moses in Deuteronomy 30, Yahweh would always be so gracious as to take “the way back,” that is, the way that leads from the Horeb covenant back to the covenant with Jacob, with Isaac and with Abraham (see Deuteronomy, Ch. 119).

Much deeper than the Horeb covenant was God’s promise and intention to bless all the families of the earth by way of Abraham (Gen. 12:3; Eph. 1:3-14; 3:10; II Tim. 1:9). The Horeb covenant was provisional in character, but not the covenant with Abraham.

When we look at our own situation today, we see that God has not departed from His intentions when He gave Abraham that glorious promise. He has kept His covenant with Abraham and continues to keep it.

God keeps His covenant despite Israel—or perhaps through Israel anyway. It was in Israel that the Son of God was born according to the flesh. Through the Spirit which the Son sent and poured out over us, we are cleansed by the gospel (Eph. 5:26) and incorporated into the (Israelite) congregation of God’s people. That community was severely punished when it went into exile, but the children of this decimated Israel, it now turns out, are even more numerous than the children of “her that is married” (Is. 54:1; Rom. 11:17; Gal. 4:27).

What the Former Prophets had in common with the Latter Prophets, then, is that they focus attention on the two covenants. Indeed, that’s why they were given a place in the canon; without this spotlight on covenant history, they would not even belong in the Bible.

We must accept these books in the form in which they have come down to us, just as Christ and His apostles accepted them in their time. When we read in Mathew 5:18 that “Not an iota, not a dot” will pass from the law, we see that the people of Jesus’ time already possessed the Old Testament in Manuscripts that included tiny dots and symbols to indicate vowel sounds. (The earliest Hebrew script included consonants only.)
If Jesus accepted the Former Prophets as they existed in His time, it is not for us to pull them apart and rearrange them. Therefore we should not place them before the Pentateuch. That would be to turn Scripture inside out (see Deuteronomy, Ch. 1). After all, who would be so foolish as to place the slide behind the projector rather than the projector behind the slide?

The light of the Pentateuch gives meaning to the books called the Prophets—all the way down to the time of the exile and beyond. The Pentateuch is the basis for understanding the work of Christ and even for understanding our time.

As we read the Former Prophets, then, let’s not be guided by aims foreign to what the Spirit of God has awakened in our hearts. We must not look for something that’s simply not there.

When the Holy Spirit gave us “the Prophets,” He did not expect us to treat these writings as a complete record of God’s knowledge of Himself and of His works of creation and redemption. We must be on guard against an eagerness to build a system that can stand its own against human reason. We must free ourselves of our proud desire to know everything and so be content with a fragmentary knowledge of God and His works. Since we know only in part, we must be sure not to disdain what God is good enough to bend down and reveal to us. We should not try to poke holes in it or raise questions in a tone of voice no child should use toward his father. Can we ever permit ourselves an attitude of condescension toward our Father?

We must be on guard, then, against the dangers of unhealthy fantasizing, and also the danger of making up problems about God where no real problems exist. The best medicine to ward off such dangers is an immersion in the history described for us in the Pentateuch and the Prophets.

The Former and Latter Prophets are alike in that both sets of books tell us a great deal about the God of the covenant. In fact, we can speak of a striking similarity in this respect. At bottom, the Prophets are one.

All the books that together make up “the Prophets” deal with the history of the relationship between Yahweh and the people He chose as His own so long ago. In other words, they deal with covenant history.

The difference between the two sets of prophetic books is that the Former Prophets look back, while the Latter Prophets look ahead. Yet we must be careful not to regard this as too much of a clear cut difference, as we often do when classifying. The difference between the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets is really a difference in degree rather than in kind.

In the Former Prophets, the spotlight usually falls on the past—but not because of a love of the past as such. The purpose is to impress upon the Israelites of the present and the future the importance of obedience. Israel must be shown that her God is the God of the covenant, the God who both blesses His people and punishes them. Because of this emphasis, reading the Former Prophets is excellent preparation for reading and understanding the Latter Prophets.
In the books that make up the Latter Prophets, we hear such men as Isaiah and Jeremiah speaking to us. We listen to them as they preach. We find ourselves carried off to the time in which they lived—for they, too, give us some historical material and we hear what they have to say about Israel’s future, as well as Israel’s past.

The prophets take the past as their starting point as they speak of what is to come. Their indictment, their complaint, their ultimatum is always rooted in the past. Sometimes we shrink back, trembling, as we listen to the thunderous warnings against Israel’s unfaithfulness to God’s ancient covenant. But there are also times when we savor the loving words of comfort addressed to the remnant of Israel, the remnant which God will watch over in mercy far into the future.

What a remarkable contrast! Yet it doesn’t really strike us as strange, provided we remember what Moses taught about God’s unfailing faithfulness.

The framework within which we are to place the work of these latter prophets and the writings through which we learn about their prophecies—that framework is provided by the Former Prophets, by Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings.
Chapter 2: God’s Promises Fulfilled

Ch. 3: Joshua and the Book of Joshua

Why would the first book of the Former Prophets bear the name Joshua? No doubt because that was an obvious name for it.

It is not called Joshua because it presents itself to us as written by Joshua in the way that Deuteronomy presents itself as written by Moses. The fact that Deuteronomy 34 tells the story of Moses’ death and that Deuteronomy speaks of Moses in the third person at various points does not prevent us from regarding Deuteronomy as coming mainly from Moses’ hand (see Deuteronomy, Ch. 9).

In the case of the book of Joshua, however, we must think along different lines. It is not clear that Joshua was the author. Joshua’s authorship is not excluded by the fact that the book mentions his death and burial (Ch. 24). After all, the mention of Moses’ death does not prevent us from attributing Deuteronomy mainly to Moses.

Joshua’s authorship is ruled out by other features of this book. This we see from various passages that talk about Joshua. They are not scattered here and there, as passages about Moses are inserted into Deuteronomy, (see, for example, 4:41-9). No, the passages about Joshua make up a substantial proportion of the book. This is what makes it clear that the book of Joshua was not written by Joshua himself.

To argue that Joshua is not the author is not to say that the person who wrote the book made no use of written material left behind by Joshua and his contemporaries (see 24:26). In all likelihood, the author did use such sources. But there has never been any solid reason for concluding that Joshua himself wrote the book that bears his name.

The only reason why the book would be named after Joshua, then, is that Joshua played a very important role in its events. The book does not present us with an “idealization” of Joshua as a person; the many references throughout the book to the covenant of Deuteronomy rule out this possibility. Attention is focused on the promises made in Deuteronomy: “Joshua—he is the one who will lead you across, as Yahweh has said” (Deut. 31:3; see also Num. 27:12-23).

Moreover, we must remember that God’s vassal covenant with Israel in the plains of Moab, of which the book of Deuteronomy gives us the text, was at the same time a succession covenant or dynastic covenant, for it made provision for Joshua to become the lawful successor of Moses (see Deut. 31-34). Thus a certain emphasis on Joshua is unavoidable in the book of Joshua.

Yet the central character in the book of Joshua is Yahweh, and the central issue is the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promise that Joshua would lead the people of Israel into Canaan. Joshua was just as faithful in the discharge of his duties as had been forty years before, when he returned to Kadesh with the other spies. The pessimism of the majority of the spies had led almost the entire people to rebel against
Moses and Aaron and to disbelieve God’s promises. The people wanted to go back to Egypt. At that point Joshua stepped forward and appealed to the people to put their trust in God. Are we supposed to read this story, which is recorded in Numbers 14, as an “idealization” of Joshua as a person? No one would argue for such an interpretation.

Well then, what about the book of Joshua? That same faithful heart spoke up when Joshua realized that the end was near for him. The same Joshua stepped forward and preached to the people, appealing for trust in God’s sure promises.

Joshua himself was willing to stand entirely in the shadow of those promises. He drew the people’s attention to the promises God had made in the past and the deeds He was performing in the present. The people had indeed entered the Promised Land and divided it among themselves. “Just look around,” Joshua declared. “God’s promises have been fulfilled. Think of all that Yahweh your God promised and look—it has all come to pass” (23:14).

Don’t you see that Joshua is just the right name to give this book, which shows us how God’s promises were fulfilled? It seems only fitting that this book, which describes the initial fulfillment of Go’s promises about Canaan through events in which Joshua played a key role, should bear the name of the young spy who became the aged leader of the people as they took possession of their inheritance.

Neither the author of the book of Joshua nor the one who gave this book its name can be reproached for failing to live by the spirit of Psalm 44, where we read:

To put them in the land you disposed the nations, you harried the peoples to make room for them; it was not by their swords they won the land, it was not by their arms they gained the victory: it was Your right hand, Your arm and the light of Your face—because You loved them (vs. 2-3 JB).

The book of Joshua in no way conflicts with this praise of God; its characterization of Joshua is also a praise of God.

The description of how Joshua carried out his task accords with the beautiful name that Moses gave him (see Num. 3:16). That name (Joshua) means: Yahweh sends help, deliverance.

Moses’ successor bore this name honorably. Yet he spoke about the help provided by Yahweh in very practical terms. Repeatedly we hear Joshua appealing to the people around him to take up the work that needs doing, to tackle the challenge. But when he does so, he is not pushing God aside. He took God’s covenant with himself and with Israel in dead earnest and pleaded continually with his people to take their side of the covenant as seriously as God took His.

There was nothing new about these pleas. Joshua had talked the same language long before as a returning spy, forty years before Israel finally entered Canaan. He was still raising the same plea when he felt that the end was near. Believe—and get to work! He was a good instrument in the hand of the
God whose covenants do not lead people to sit back complacently but activate them and gets them to work.

**Ch. 4: Three Main Divisions in the Book of Joshua**

The book that comes to us bearing Joshua’s name is a clear unity, but it can easily be divided into sections. Some divide the book into two main parts. Chapters 1-12 tell us about Israel’s entry into the Promised Land, while chapters 13-24 show us how the Promised Land was divided up and assigned to the various tribes.

It seems to me that the second half of the book should also be divided into two parts. Chapter 13-22 do indeed tell us how the land was divided up, but chapters 23 and 24 present something somewhat different: Joshua’s appeal to Israel to be faithful to the service of Yahweh while living in the Promised Land.

There are three main sections in the book of Joshua, then, and they will be dealt with successively in this book. In chapters 1-12 we are shown how Israel was allowed to enter her inheritance (Chapter 3). In Joshua 13-22 we see how Israel was permitted to divide the inheritance (Chapter 4). In the last two chapters of Joshua, we see how Israel is instructed to preserve the inheritance (Chapter 5).

**Ch. 5 Jesus and Joshua**

The name Joshua occurs elsewhere in Scripture: it is borne by our Savior. The New Testament calls Him Jesus, (Greek: Iesous). This name is used in the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, for Joshua.

The fact that Jesus and Joshua bear the same name has long led Bible readers to compare the work of Joshua to Jesus’ work. There is nothing inherently wrong with such comparisons. We, too, look forward to a new land and to rest.

Yet it would be wrong to put the work of Joshua on the same level as Jesus’ work. The resemblance should not lead us to equate Joshua with Jesus, as though Joshua were an Old Testament equivalent of Jesus.

The land to which Joshua led the Israelites is repeatedly called an “inheritance,” in the New Testament as well as the Old (see Acts 7; Heb. 11). The new earth, the land of the future to which Christ will one day lead His own, is also called an inheritance. Yet there is a significant difference. Our Savior is really the only Heir; we are co-heirs with Him. Moreover, Christ and His people will receive not just one land (Palestine) but the entire cosmos, all things (Rom. 4:13; 8:17, 32; Heb. 1:2). Yes, our Savior Himself
is really our inheritance above (Col. 3:4; I Pet. 1:4). No one could ever say this of Joshua. Let us be careful in our comparisons, then, so that we do not put Jesus and Joshua on the same level.

The person who wrote the book of Joshua wanted to tell about the great deeds which Yahweh had performed in order to give the Israelites the land He had promised to their fathers. His entire book can be viewed as a monument to the great deeds God performed for Israel’s sake; it is a memorial to God’s faithfulness.

That unknown author acquitted himself of a task that rested on all the Israelites, namely, the task of speaking to each other and to coming generations about the wonderful way in which Yahweh had led His people into their inheritance.

Time and again the Israelites were reminded of that task. As they moved around Canaan, they were reminded of it repeatedly, for it was God’s will that the land of Canaan be sown, as it were, with reminders.

One could make a strong case for characterizing the book of Joshua as “a book about God’s concern for memorials.” We have read about memorials in the story of the crossing of the Jordan (2 X 2 stones) and in the story of the conquest of Ai, which was to remain an everlasting heap of ruins.

Ch. 6: Etiological Interpretation

The etiological school of our time goes about its work backwards and turns Scripture inside out. We saw earlier that God, in His concern to help His people remember how He faithfully fulfilled His promises with regard to the promised land of Canaan, saw to it that memorials were established to remind them of His great deeds, The etiological school turns these memorials into the causes of the story instead of regarding them as reminders that come after the fact.

How does this work in practice? A given memorial, such as a heap of stones, is made the kernel of the saga, a legend, a folk-tale in which Yahweh and Joshua and Israel and her enemies are allowed to play a role. The sign becomes the cause of the event for which it is a sign!

This method of Scriptural interpretation is not totally new; in the nineteenth century, it was maintained, for example, that the name of the “well-known” Valley of Achor gave rise to the “saga” about Achan. Such interpreters ignored the fact that the Valley of Achor is mentioned by the prophets because of the Achan story (see Is. 65:10; Hos. 2:14), while Scripture says nothing further about the location of the Valley of Achor.

In our century, etiological fantasies have won such widespread acceptance that there is little left of the historicity of the events described in the book of Joshua. Many people simply do not believe that these events actually happened.
Take Joshua 10 as an example, where we read about the five kings who took refuge in the cave at Makkedah. They were imprisoned in the cave at Joshua’s command with large stones that sealed the opening, and were later put to death by Joshua, who then saw to it that their bodies were hung from five trees. The etiological school provides the following interpretation of this story. At Makkedah there was a cave whose entrance was blocked by large stones. There were five trees near the cave. Some of the people who lived in the vicinity began to circulate a story about people trapped in the cave who had died of hunger. Others told a story about five kings who had been hanged in the trees. The two stories were eventually fused to form the story recorded in Joshua 10.

Now read carefully through Joshua 10. It doesn’t talk about five trees near a cave, nor does it say anything about hunger. What does this say for etiological interpretation of the Bible?

No doubt many serious Bible readers would like to turn their backs on etiological interpretation, but they will not escape it so simply. The etiological reading of many of the stories recorded in Scripture has gained ground very rapidly in our time. It is proclaimed to adults in churches and cathedrals, and children run across it in schoolbooks.

The book of Joshua, we are told, is a prime candidate for etiological interpretation. Yet this is the book in which we find faithful Joshua saying at the end of his life: “Of all the promises God made us, not one has failed” (23:14). If the etiological interpretation is correct, what are we to make of Joshua’s assurance?

Joshua is a book that comes to us in narrative form. If you read it carefully and think as you read, you will see that the story has not been dressed up or embellished. The style, for one thing, is exceedingly simple; it comes closer to spoken words than to written words. The narrator tells his story so spontaneously that he often has to come back to a point of departure. He starts out enthusiastically, is sometimes sidetracked for a chapter of two, and then has to backtrack to pick up the story he was starting to tell. Here and there he sheds a little further light on an earlier story or adds a few details.

In short, whether the author of Joshua composed his book orally or in written form, he did not go about it as someone whose primary concern was to create an immortal literary work. Instead we see that his motivation is his excitement about what he is allowed to tell coming generations about the great deeds of Yahweh. Moreover, he is fully convinced of the truth of what he is presenting and therefore he expresses himself boldly in a simple, unaffected manner. There is no pretention in the tome he strikes: he is straightforward and honest. Sometimes you can tell from how a person approaches you and addresses you that he is not offering you fables. The narrator who speaks to us in the book of Joshua is such a person.

It’s no wonder that this book, which describes what Yahweh has actually done for His people, is such a thorn in Satan’s side. If people believe what it reports as fact, they will start believing in the creator of heaven and earth, whose mighty hand has done so much for His chosen people. The book of Joshua presents the actual deeds of a God who exists today, a God who is still capable of such mighty works, and a God who lives and watches over His people and has mercy on them. But the God of Joshua can also become angry and is quite capable of striking Christendom with Judgment.
The father of lies would be delighted, of course, if people all shrugged their shoulders and shook their heads at the stories told in the book of Joshua. As long as people turn their backs on the one true God who performed the deeds related in Joshua, they are free to fantasize all they like about a mystical supreme being in the universe. Let them pass off their ponderings and speculations as gnosis, knowledge, science—whatever name they choose. They can even call it “religion,” as far as Satan is concerned.

Satan has been all too successful, as we see from all the self-styled prophets and religious leaders with their fantasies and speculation. The best defense against the dangers of this false knowledge is not argument but exposure to the truth.

When a little girl is upset by a nightmare, we wake her up completely and then tell her a good story. The story gets her mind off the nightmare. We should approach the people of our time in the same way as we seek to dispel their confusion. We must seize every opportunity to tell them about the great deeds of God recorded in the Bible. We must tell them what God did for His people in the wilderness, at the Jordan, at Jericho, Gibeon, and the waters of Merom. That’s the weapon that God’s Spirit wants us to use as we do battle with the spirits that have arisen from the pit.

The lie must be combated with the truth. The truth will set people free from their bondage to deception—if this is God’s will for our time. The patience of the lifeless god of gnosis and mysterious knowledge may be inexhaustible, but the patience of God who acts in history is not inexhaustible.
Chapter 3: Entering the Inheritance

Ch. 7: Bible Books Linked Together in a Chain

When we study the book of Joshua, we cannot help but be struck by a certain phenomenon on which we have commented earlier: the books that make up the Pentateuch, as well as the books called the Former Prophets, are linked together in a remarkable way. The end of one book announces a theme that the next book will carry farther.

At the end of the book of Exodus, we read that the tabernacle was set up in the midst of the Israelites. Leviticus then tells us that within a month’s time, Yahweh, speaking from the tabernacle, gave Moses a whole series of laws for the people to live by when they entered the Promised Land.

The end of Leviticus and the beginning of Numbers again take up closely related subjects. Both concern themselves with the measures the people would have to take in order to make it possible for Yahweh to continue living in the midst of Israel as the God of life among a people of life.

At the end of the book of Numbers we are told how Israel was prepared to enter the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. The book of Deuteronomy is then mainly composed of the text of the treaty which Moses, in the name of Yahweh, have to Israel and to Joshua with an eye to living in the land.

At the end of the book of Deuteronomy, we are told about Moses’ death and the succession of Joshua. The book of Joshua begins with the same subject. Indeed, Joshua 1:1-9 is swarming with elements that remind us of Deuteronomy. As for the content of the rest of the book, what it really boils down to is a report of how Moses’ successor faithfully carried out the task that fell on his shoulders because of the Deuteronomy covenant.

We find the same phenomenon among the books that make up the Former Prophets: the books are linked together in a chain. Judges 1:1 refers directly to the history related in Joshua. This pattern continues all the way through Kings.

This phenomenon has led some scholars to wonder whether all the Bible books from Deuteronomy through Kings should not perhaps be regarded as one continuous book describing Israel’s history from the entry into Canaan to the fall of Jerusalem. But given the links between the books with which the Bible opens, we could just as well speak of a great history book which includes all the books from Genesis through Kings.

Who knows what rules and procedures may have been in effect at the time when all these books—or at least Joshua through Kings—were put in their final form. It has been observed that it was
probably a custom of the time that each book would work out a point with which the previous book had ended.

More light may eventually be shed on this linking phenomenon by the study of other ancient Semitic literature. But for us this phenomenon points in a powerful way to the unity of the Bible, and it helps us to see the canonical position of these books the whole of in Scripture.

Ch. 8: Plan and Execution

Earlier we saw that the book of Joshua should be divided into 3 main sections (Ch. 4). The first section tells us how Israel entered the Promised Land (Ch. 1-12). In the second section we are shown how the land was divided (Ch. 13-22). The emphasis in the last section falls on the necessity of preserving the Promised Land (Ch. 23-24).

Each of these sections can in turn be divided into two parts, for all three have the same structure. First we are told what the plan is, and then we are told about the execution of the plan.

In this chapter, we shall see how Israel entered the Promised Land. First we will look at the plan: in Joshua 1:1-9, we are told how Joshua was commanded to carry out the work to which he was called by Moses (Ch. 9). Then we will turn to the execution: in Joshua 1:10-12:24, we see how Joshua went about the work (Ch. 10-37).

Ch. 9: God’s Instructions to Joshua (1:1-9)

Joshua 1:1-9 not only ties in with the conclusions of Deuteronomy, it is full of phrases and references that remind us of the last book of the Pentateuch. This is more than a matter of parallels, and similarities: the same words are used in a number of instances, as the following list shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deuteronomy</th>
<th>Joshua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>34:5</td>
<td>Death of Moses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:7, 23</td>
<td>Joshua is to be Moses’ successor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>And will lead Israel into the Promised Land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:24</td>
<td>What Moses first promised the Israelites in the name of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Yahweh is now promised to Joshua and his people by Yahweh. Description of the boundaries of the Promised Land

7:24; 11:25; No one will be able to hold out 1:5
31:6, 8 against you. I will no more forsake you, Joshua, than I
Forsook Moses 1:5
1:38; 3:28; You, Joshua, will cause Israel to inherit the land 1:6
31:7, 23 You must learn the torah of 1:7-8
5:29; 11:18-19; Moses thoroughly and observe it 17:11, 19;
28:14; 29:8 scrupulously. Then you will prosper in all you undertake 31:6-7, 23
31:6-7, 23 Do not be afraid, for Yahweh is with you. 1:9

What is the purpose of this periscope with which the book of Joshua opens? Is it intended to tell us about something that actually happened? Did God really speak such words to Joshua when Joshua was called to undertake the task of leading Israel?

Many scholars have answered these questions with a no, although some are more emphatic than others. It has been said, for example, that this periscope was made up later by someone who composed the book of Joshua. The author did have materials to draw on that had been handed down to him, but he felt impelled to add a preface to the book, namely, Joshua 1:1-9, which he made up himself.

Other scholars are more guarded in their conclusions. They argue that the author of this periscope did have some knowledge of what Yahweh said to Joshua and based the periscope on that knowledge. Yet 1:1-9 is not a literal account of what Yahweh said. The author, drawing extensively on material from the documents that were eventually incorporated in Deuteronomy, construes what Yahweh probably said to Joshua. In other words, he puts words in Yahweh’s mouth.

These two answers to the question are not acceptable. From the very beginning, this periscope does not strike us as a fabrication. It is written in the style of an account of just how something happened.

In the very first verse we read: “It came to pass” (all one word in Hebrew). Many other stories in the Bible begin that way, with that same Hebrew word, including stories in the books that unquestionably record actual events. Immediately after this word follows a temporal reference: “after the death of Moses.” What are we to do with this phrase except take it seriously? It is a given that we
cannot simply erase from the record. Yahweh spoke to Joshua, and we are told when—after the death of Moses. Does this periscope give us a “literal” transcript of the words that Yahweh spoke to Joshua on this occasion? Before I answer this question, I would point out that it is essentially a small-minded question.

I’ll try to explain myself by way of an example. After proclaiming the Ten Words, God gave Moses a commentary on them. Moses prepared a written account of this commentary and read it to the elders of Israel (Ex. 24:4, 7). We find this written account in the so-called Book of the Covenant (Ex. 21023). The elders and all the people of Israel believed that the report Moses presented was a faithful rendering of what God had told him. They did not think to ask whether it was a “literal” account. Why should they? Is a repot only reliable if it consists of a word-by-word transcription of what was said? If so, what are we to make of the book of Leviticus? God spoke to Moses for a month, and Leviticus presents us with a report of what was said. Leviticus is not a word-by-word transcription either.

Now, it is true that the Bible says nothing about Joshua himself writing down the words that God spoke to him on this occasion. This does not, however, mean that Joshua did not do so. But even if he did not write those words down himself, couldn’t they have been recorded in the following manner?

First, Joshua, at Moses’ request, was designated by God as the future leader in the war against the Canaanites (Num. 27:12-23). Next, his appointment as Moses’ successor was made official in the treaty that has come down to us in the book of Deuteronomy.

Is it so strange that God should let Joshua know when to begin the work he was assigned to do? Doesn’t this fit in perfectly with God’s earnestness, which we have already noted on various occasions, and with the importance of the work that Joshua was to do?

Three times God told Joshua to “be strong and of good courage” (1:6, 7, 9). Joshua must have received these words of encouragement with great joy. No doubt he made them known to others as well—more than once. Thus the story must have been passed on from mouth to mouth, eventually assuming a fixed form that made it much easier to remember and pass on to subsequent generation.

Let’s not forget that the task referred to in 1:2 fell on the shoulders of all the people. Israel stood facing a task that has looked so fearsome to the previous generation 40 years earlier at Kadesh that it had pulled back in fear. But apparently the new generation was cut of different cloth and willing to cling to God’s promise.

As for Joshua himself wouldn’t he regard the words God addressed to him as a renewal of the covenant? I would not go so far as to argue that this periscope gives us the text of a formal covenant or treaty. Yet it does contain certain terms that lead us to think of covenant renewal.

In verse 2 we read the word now then or now therefore (Hebrew: we attah), which often occurs after an introduction. In the same verse we find an emphatic pronoun I (see also Deut. 4:1a). This pronoun comes from the mouth of Yahweh, who speaks here in just the way that a great king would speak to his vassals. Note verse 3: “I have given . . . “a declarative sentence in the perfect tense. Such
language is used in treaties for the purpose of assurance: “I have given you . . . and herewith I give you . . . .”

In verse 9 we find a switch from first-person discourse (Yahweh speaking) to third-person references to Yahweh (“Yahweh your God is with you”). This sudden switch is also reminiscent of the language in which treaties are written. Couldn’t we then take this periscope as an occasion on which God is emphatically repeating His covenant promises to strengthen Joshua? Is this the sort of thing one would make up to add to the story as a preface?

Of course not! Given all these elements clearly visible in our periscope, I would raise another question instead: how could anyone seriously believe that such earnest language of the greatest import could have been made up by anyone in Israel? Anyone aware of the deep respect that the people of the ancient Near East always showed for covenants and treaties would be extremely hesitant to conclude that an Israelite who lived much later and wrote the book of Joshua would have been bold enough to make up some covenant language and lay it in the mouth of Yahweh.

To me it’s out of the question. I am convinced that Joshua 1:1-9 is fact-not fiction.

Joshua had found out for himself earlier how seriously God meant His promises. Moses was the one who told him about it. Moses had asked God to relent and to allow him to enter the land of Canaan after all. His request was denied; it was out of the question. Why? To grant Moses’ request would have meant taking away from Joshua the commission he had already been given. Not even the pleading of Moses would make Yahweh consider such a thing. An agreement was an agreement. God had given Joshua His word, and He meant to keep it (Deut. 3:21-9).

I believe that something similar happened in the case of Joshua 1:1-9. I don’t regard it as speculation of fantasy to suppose that this periscope was a prized spiritual treasure that Israel was allowed to take along into the Promised Land, under Joshua as her leader. This story, like the story of Moses’ request, was worth savoring and repeating because of what it revealed about God.

Now, we have no way of knowing whether God’s words of encouragement to Joshua were passed on in oral or written form. I don’t propose to speculate about this matter. Suffice it to say that it is possible that a written record was made at once.

Gradually we have learned to respect the ancient world and not to assume that things were always done in a primitive way. We know that the people of the ancient Near East attached a very high value to covenant documents. Moreover, we should remember that Joshua was already about 80 years old at the time of the crossing of the Jordan. Thus he would have had good reasons for seeing to it that the Word of God that came to him was written down, so that the people could cling to it as a precious spiritual treasure after he was gone (see 24:26).

The person who wrote the book of Joshua included this periscope, which was in circulation in either oral or written form, as an introduction to his book. This testifies to his simple wisdom. The entire program of the book is summed up in this periscope in words that came from God’s own mouth. The
author would never have been able to write a better introduction himself. When we look at Joshua 24, we will note a similar use of an existing covenant document.

We could also ask about the form in which the periscope came to Joshua. We have no way of knowing for sure. The answer is not recorded in Scripture. We don’t know whether Yahweh spoke to him or within him, that is, whether He came to him externally or internally.

This was not the first time that Yahweh spoke to Joshua. If He came to him in one of these two manners, couldn’t we conclude that He spoke to him in the same way as in Numbers 12 and 27?

We don’t know for sure. God was free to speak to Joshua in any way He chose—perhaps in an even more glorious way than He promised. The promise of trustworthy prophecy was also given to faithful Israel (Deut. 18:15).

As far as Numbers 12 is concerned, we read there (and elsewhere) that Moses was allowed to simply go to God and ask questions, confident of receiving answers. But the revelation to Joshua recorded in our periscope does not arise from any question. The initiative came not from Joshua but from God (see vs. 1). Yahweh did not hold a conversation with Joshua, as He used to do with Moses; he addressed Joshua. We do not read that Joshua said anything to him in reply.

As for Numbers 27:12-23, we saw there that Joshua was allowed to make use of the services of the high priest, the bearer of the Urim and Thummim, i.e., the twelve stones on the high priest’s clothing that God could be consulted for advice when there was a legal case (mishpat) involving all of Israel.

In our periscope there is no mention of any such weighty matter awaiting resolution. The entire people were involved in the question of the work that Joshua was to do, but the guarantee of God’s help was meant primarily for Joshua himself. As God saw it, the day had come to show that Moses, acting in His name, had made a vassal covenant with Israel (recorded in the book of Deuteronomy). In the special provisions about Joshua, that covenant included dynastic elements. When Yahweh spoke to Joshua, therefore, He used various words that are strongly reminiscent of the succession covenant (Deuteronomy) and addressed Himself specifically and exclusively to Joshua.

As we read this periscope, we are left with the definite impression that it is a completely reliable historical account. We also note that it is somewhat personal in nature.

In verse 1 we find the phrase “it came to pass,” with which so many historical accounts begin. The time, as we saw, was “after the death of Moses.”

We should pay attention in this first verse to the different titles given to Moses and Joshua respectively. The author of the book (vs. 1) and God Himself (vs. 2) both speak of Moses as the “servant (ebed) of Yahweh.” This is a title that usually points to a high, divine calling. At the same time it is a reminder of Moses’ special position as God’s confidant (Num. 12:7). The same title was ascribed to our Savior (Is. 42:1, Matt. 12:18).
This exalted title is not given to Joshua. Not until the end of the book is he called the “servant of Yahweh” (24:29). Here, at the outset he is only called the “servant of Moses,” that is, someone who helped Moses in his work.

In verse 2 we also encounter a very concrete style of speech and action: “Moses, my servant, is dead. Now therefore, arise, cross over this Jordan (or: cross over the Jordan here), you and all this people.” This is the language of someone who uses his hands to make himself clear; we almost see a finger pointing across the Jordan.

Our text, then, is specific not only in person and time but also in place. We get the impression that the revelation described in out periscope came to Joshua at about the same place from where Moses had been allowed to look at the land of promise (Deut. 42:1). Even contemporary tourists extol the panoramic view of Palestine available from the heights of Moab.

We must not forget that the Jordan was a rushing torrent of water during that season of the year. The first thing God demanded of Joshua was faith.

Verse 3 tells us how God, in a more or less official way, guaranteed to Joshua and his people the land that he had often promised to Moses. Both the people and their leader are mentioned. “Every place that the sole of your (plural) foot shall tread upon I have given to you (singular),” we read.

Verse 4 tells us more about the land and how Yahweh regarded it. We are shown the “ideal” borders: the land stretches all the way to the Euphrates! Thus the full content of the promise is passed on. Israel held those borders for only a brief time, but that was the result of her lack of faith: she did not boldly take possession of what was promised her.

God does not treat people like inanimate objects. His covenant calls for response, action. God’s promises invite us to boldness. Furthermore, Yahweh describes the promised inheritance as though pointing it out with His finger: “From the wilderness and that Lebanon over there.” In Deuteronomy 11:24, Moses had used roughly the same words to sketch the boundaries of the Promised Land—except that he did not talk about Lebanon “over there.” God added these words when He was talking to Joshua. This, too, points to the historicity of this event.

Verses 5 and 6 contain various words of encouragement which God speaks to Joshua: “I will be with you just as I was with Moses. I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and of good courage, for you (emphatic singular) shall cause this people (again the index finger) to inherit the land, which I swore to their fathers to give them.”

No, we dare not assume that someone had placed these words in God’s mouth.

Verses 7 and 8 point back clearly to the provisions for succession included in the Deuteronomy covenant (Deut. 31:3-8). Joshua had been presented to the entire people as God’s successor. Should it surprise us, then, that on the day that Joshua took up the burdens of his office, God told him once more what that covenant meant for him?
God introduces His reminder about the promise He made with a strong word—only (raq). What He means to say is this: “This is all good and well, but there is a condition, a sine qua non. If you do not live up to the condition, I want nothing more to do with you.”

What did God mean by the word torah here? Because of the obvious allusions to the succession covenant, God must have meant the covenant documents contained in the book of Deuteronomy. What we read in verse 8 confirms this.

Another question: Why is it necessary for Joshua to “be of good courage and stand firm” in order to live up to this covenant? The answer is simple. The Deuteronomy covenant went directly against the grain of the customs and practices of the time, directly against the idolatrous desires that had played such havoc with Israel’s life. Under no condition, then, was Joshua to make peace with the heathendom against which Yahweh’s servant Moses had warned in such urgent tones. Hold on to the preaching and teaching and covenant stipulations given by Moses! Verse 8 underscores this condition once more, which shows us that it was imperative, essential to Israel’s survival. “The book of this torah must not depart from your mouth, but you must recite its provisions day and night, so that you will act fully in accordance with all that is written in it. Then you will carry out your intentions and succeed in what you do.” The “book of this torah,” then, is the book that appears in our Bibles as Deuteronomy. Consider the following grounds for this conclusion. First of all, God’s words her have a personal tone about them. They apply first of all to Joshua, who was expressly mentioned in Deuteronomy as the one who would have to follow in Moses’ footsteps and lead the people on. Secondly, God’s words in this periscope remind us repeatedly of what we read in Deuteronomy, especially with regard to Joshua’s succession. Thirdly, Yahweh speaks of “this book,” which points to an existing book that the Israelites must have had in their possession. Such a book is mentioned in Deuteronomy 31:24. It was entrusted to the Levites, who were to preserve it in the Ark of the Covenant.

We must read 1:8, then, as referring to the book of Deuteronomy. At that time Deuteronomy may well have been without the historical notes that a later hand added to make it suitable for periodical public reading.

Verse 9 begins with a question: “Have I not commanded you to be of good courage and to stand firm?” The intention in this question, of course, is not to call into question what came before. On the contrary, what we face here is a typical Israelite manner of underscoring an assertion, i.e. by means of a rhetorical question (see I Sam. 10:1; 19:17; 20:9; 24:20). No answer is expected in response to such a question. The purpose comes out in the final admonition. “Do not tremble and do not be frightened, for Yahweh your God is with you wherever you go.”

These are words full of authority. Like verse 7, they remind us of Deuteronomy 31:6, where Joshua was addressed by Moses in almost the very same words. The fact that they are repeated here should not be ascribed to an author’s imagination. They are repeated because it was God’s heartfelt desire to strengthen Joshua by directly confirming the covenant bond which He had earlier established with him indirectly through Moses.

What an eloquent canonical place these verses have been assigned!
Ch. 10: Preparing to Cross the Jordan (1:10-11)

Any summary of the story told in the book of Joshua would have to make heavy use of Joshua’s own name: Joshua did this, and Joshua did that. His name crops up everywhere; this does not at all detract from the praise which Scripture gives to God for Israel’s conquest and possession of Canaan. Yahweh went ahead of His people and led them. The Angel of Yahweh appeared to Joshua as the Commander of God’s battle forces. Yet it remains true that Yahweh made use of faithful Joshua. If the Holy Spirit leads the way in honoring a man like Joshua, we need not be afraid to follow His example and accord to Joshua a place of honor.

For Joshua, believing and obeying was the same thing. After he received God’s command about his future task, he took three measures. The first, recorded in 1:10-11, had a bearing on all the people, all the tribes (Ch. 10). The second (1:12-18) applied only to Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh (Ch. 11). The third measure (2:1-24) was directed toward the two spies he sent out (Ch. 12).

This is the order in which the three measures are introduced. Joshua did not necessarily take measures in that order. In fact, it seems highly likely that he followed a different order.

No doubt the first thing he did was to send out the spies, probably in secret. They were gone for four or five days.

After the spies departed, Joshua talked to the two and a half tribes about their military responsibilities in the coming campaign. He also issued a command that the officers of the people were to see to it that the people were ready “within three days” to cross the Jordan.

Why is this third measure (the command to get the people ready) mentioned first? Clearly the person who wrote the book of Joshua did not want to follow the order we favor, namely, the chronological. He must have preferred a quantitative order, moving from the largest to the smallest. He began by mentioning something that applied to the entire people of Israel. Then he passed over to something that applied only to the two and a half tribes. Finally he took up Joshua’s order issued only to two men—the spies. We will follow his order in our discussion of this passage.

We begin, then, with the “officers” of the people. “Then Joshua gave the officers of the people the following command, ‘Go through the camp, and command the people as follows: Make sure you have provisions on hand, for within three days you (plural) will be the ones who cross the Jordan here to take possession of the land that Yahweh your God will give you to possess’” (1:10-11).

Who are these “officers,” these “shoterim”? We came across the word shoterim many times in the Pentateuch. The place of these officers” within Israel shows us how the community operated under Moses and Joshua, which is instructive for our time too.

Those who wish to impose on God’s congregation forms of organization borrowed from medieval feudalism or the so-called democratic equalitarian ideals of recent centuries (e.g. the sovereignty of the majority, the rights of man, the liberation of woman and youth) will not find much support in the torah. Rarely does it speak of an assembly of the congregation which included everyone.
On the few rare occasions when there were gatherings at which all were present, this is noted expressly, as we see, for example, in Deuteronomy 9:10-11: “You stand this day all of you before the LORD your God; the heads of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and the sojourner who is in your camp, both he who hews your wood and he who draws your water” (R.S.V.). Clearly this was an unusual meeting.

On other occasions, “the congregation” that assembled did not include all the people, as we would have it in our time, but a much smaller number made up of the older men, the “ziqenim.” On such occasions as the ceremony of entering the Horeb covenant and the installation of Aaron and his sons as priests, the assembly of these old men is referred to as “the people,” “the congregation,” “the assembly” (Ex. 19:7-8; 20:18-2; Lev. 8:3; Deut. 5:23; 31:28,30). The same way of speaking carries over into the book of Joshua, as we shall see when we examine Joshua 18:1; 23:2; 24:1-2a; and Judges 20:1-2.

This council of the people made up of the elders was summoned by Joshua. They did not make decisions by numerical majority. No, they considered the matter in the light of the wisdom they had acquired, discussed it together, and reached a decision. They sought agreement but did not try to silence anyone by voting him down. Sometimes the decision was made by casting lots.

There were no women or young men present at their elders. If they spoke at all, it was after the older men had had their say (see Lev. 19:32; Job 32:6-7).

The officials needed for the various tasks to be performed among the people were appointed by these elders (Deut. 1:13). They were not chosen in an election in which everyone voted—men and women and young people. The older men were responsible for these appointments.

When the elders chose people for these tasks, they sometimes restricted themselves to their own circle, for example, when they appointed judges. But there were also cases when they called on the younger men to serve, for example, to look after military matters. Think of the system of registering and mobilizing men to serve in the army (Num. 1; Deut. 20). Think also of the methods used to enforce the rulings made by the judges (Deut. 1:15; 16:18; 20:5, 8-9; 31:28).

The ones responsible for putting the rulings into effect were the “shoterim,” the officers of the people. These “shoterim” were often mentioned in one breath with the elders, which is understandable. Some of them were elders themselves, and they had all been called to their work by the elders. On other occasions they are mentioned together with the judges, which should not surprise us either, for they were often called to serve as assistants to the judges.

When we come across a text that mentions elders and “shoterim” and judges, we must not assume that three entirely separate categories or groups of persons are meant. There was considerable overlap between the three groups. Some elders, because of their advanced age, were not able to do the work of the judges and “shoterim.” Others might have the strength to serve as both elders and “shoterim.” Still others might already serve as “shoterim” when they were too young to be elders.
The organization of community life in Israel was complicated. Yet the basic patterns seem obvious enough, and they worked out well in practice. Even though we live thousands of years later, we can easily grasp the reasons for such a pattern of organization—provided that we do not presuppose the idea of popular sovereignty or the sovereignty of the majority as the norm.

The key to understanding Israel’s pattern of organization is the rule that God gives wisdom to the elders. When the torah speaks of “the people” or “the congregation” or “the assembly,” it does not mean all the men and women and children of Israel but only the council of the elders, those to whom God had given wisdom. The responsibility for all sorts of functions rested with this council, for example, the work of the judges and the shoterim. Because this pattern of organization was so obvious and so well established and familiar from the Old Testament, the early Christians took it over—as much of it as they needed. The work of judging was handled a little differently. But when we read in the writings of the apostles that someone was appointed for this or that task by “the congregation,” we should not assume that all the men, women and children were included (II Cor. 8:19). Among the first Christians, too, the leadership rested with the older men, the “presbuteroi” (Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2ff; 20:17; I Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:5).

These older men or elders in the earliest Christian churches exercised the responsibility of appointing the “episkopoi” (A word equivalent to the “officers” or “shoterim” of the Old Testament.) These “episkopoi” were men—not women. (See I Thessalonians 5:12, where the Greek word for “those who are over you” refers to men only; see also Romans 5:12).

The older men or elders apparently also made it a custom to look to the men in their own circle when choosing “episkopoi” or officers. That’s why one and the same man could be referred to as a “presbuteros” (elder) in one passage and an “episkopos” (officer) in another (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7). Yet there were also elders who had become too old and weak to do the work of the offices or “episkopoi.” This did not mean that they were put on the sidelines or out to pasture, as we do with old people in our day. No, these elders continued to participate in the deliberations. Their ideas and insights were still valuable. All the same, the tiring work was left to the younger men.

Thus there were some men who were elders in the church but not officers. The reverse was also possible: some of the younger men served as officers without being elders. It worked the same way among the people of Israel.

Later, unfortunately, the simplicity of this pattern was abandoned. The “episkopoi” or officers, who had once been appointed by the council of the elders (the “presbuterio”), were elevated to exalted roles. They became princes in the church and took over the responsibilities that had earlier belonged to the elders. The order was reversed.

Christianity has not always been ruled in a feudal manner “from the top down”—first by popes and councils and later by their successors, the various levels of ecclesiastical assemblies that have tried to pass themselves off as church councils. It is a shame that the “presbuterio,” the elders, were stripped of their beautiful office, and that they let this happen to them. In the Roman Catholic Church, these
elders became priests. In Protestant circles things have gone so far that people are elected to the office of elder at meetings of church members including the young men and sometimes even the women.

I will say nothing at this point about the lack of Biblical warrant for such practices. That men are elected to the office of elder is foolish in itself. After all, one doesn’t become an old man, an elder, by a decree or by the outcome of an election—not even if the voters are all elders themselves. A man becomes an elder only through the hand of God, which guides and controls all things, including the length of our lives. It does not make sense to elect elders, although officers can indeed be elected.

There is not much left of the simple, obvious rule we find in the Bible, namely, leadership by the elders, that is, the old men. The elders, after considering matters in the light of the wisdom God has given them, are supposed to call and appoint men to do the heavier work as officers, the work of seeing to it that the decisions made are actually carried out. The elders are likewise charged with the responsibility of appointing men and women to the office of deacon, to do the work of caring for needy Christians.

The officers to whom Joshua gave the command to prepare the people for the crossing of the Jordan were men charged with a military responsibility. That’s why Joshua called on them for help; it was the obvious thing to do. The moment was approaching when Israel would begin the battle with the inhabitants of Canaan. This was the war to which Israel was called. The Hebrew word used here for provision has military overtones, as we see in Judges 7:8, 20:10; and I Sam. 22:10.

The message that the officers were to pass on was not just a command. They were to add: “... for within three days you will be the ones who cross the Jordan here to take possession of the land that Yahweh your God will give you to possess.” This was the reason backing up the command.

Here we see again how God, in a remarkable way, gives future gifts by way of His promise. What Joshua said in literal terms was that God was already busy giving the land of Canaan to the Israelites. The promised was an old one (Gen. 12:7; 28:4), but now at last it was about to be fulfilled. Joshua put the emphasis on the personal pronoun you. The privilege of receiving the inheritance would fall to the generation he was addressing.

Note his strange manner of speaking—“to take possession of the land that Yahweh your God will give you to possess.” In this simple manner, believing Joshua placed God’s giving of the land next to the Israelites appropriation of it. He made no paradox out of it whatsoever. He simply gave a commend to have the people prepared to receive salvation (for those days)>

Joshua commanded the Israelites to believe. He did so despite the fact that the people could see for themselves that the river level was at its highest. Preachers of the gospel should follow his example. Then their preaching will give rise not to doubters but to a believing generation that takes God’s gospel Word as seriously as God means it.

We are commanded to take possession of our salvation. Anyone who neglects this task grieves the Holy Spirit.
We should not spend much time wondering what kind of provisions the people were supposed to prepare. Manna was out of the question, some scholars argue, because it spoils quickly. This may be, but the Israelites had many opportunities in the wilderness to trade with other people. From the Edomites they had bought food and drink. The booty they seized in the war with Sihon and Og must have included some food. Surely the women prepared for the journey by making some “chalab” from the milk of their own herd. This was the beverage that Jael later gave to Sisera to drink—“curds in a lordly bowl” (Judges 4:19; 5:25). Sisera found it a refreshing, relaxing beverage.

Our faith determines not only our relationship to God (vertical) but also our relationship to God’s people (horizontal). We now turn to the horizontal relationship.

The first measure Joshua took (the command to prepare to cross the Jordan) applied to all the tribes. But Joshua had a few extra words for Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh. He brought the important message personally, and in the text the message occupies seven verses. Something crucial must have been at stake.

In Numbers 32 we read what wish these tribes made known: they wanted to remain in the land east of the Jordan and settle down there rather than cross the Jordan with the other Israelites to inherit the land of Canaan as such. When Moses first heard this request, he was shocked. Was the grumbling and murmuring of the Israelites at Kadesh to be repeated at the very gates of Canaan?

When the heads of the two and a half tribes promised that they would do everything possible to help the other tribes in the conquest of Canaan, Moses was content. The matter was handled in a good spirit. The elders were consulted. When the time came, Eleazar and Joshua would see to it that the two and a half tribes kept their promise.

Thus Joshua had a specific obligation to take care of. He did what was expected of him; no doubt remembering how seriously Moses had taken this request from the two and a half tribes. God’s promise about the inheritance in Canaan was at stake. Yahweh had a right to expect Israel to treasure that promise, and He certainly did not want part of Israel to ignore the promise.

Like Moses before him, Joshua apparently sensed in this situation the danger of a lack of respect for God’s promise. Just imagine what would happen if Christians took such an attitude toward the promise of Christ’s return and a new earth by shrugging their shoulders and declaring that life in the present was good enough for them. We would have to call that desertion.

Fortunately, when Joshua reminded the two and a half tribes of their holy obligation, they received his words in the same fraternal spirit in which he spoke them. Loyally the men pledged their support to Joshua, as Moses’ successor. They used some earnest language: anyone who did not obey Joshua would be put to death. Was that going too far? Remember the great struggle the Israelites were about to being. They did not want Joshua to reproach them for doubts of the sort that had held back their fathers at Kadesh.
There is one more comment to be made about this passage. When Joshua talks in verse 14 about “all the warriors” in Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh coming along across the Jordan, we must not read too much into that little word all. We don’t do so when we read in Genesis 50:7 that all the servants of Pharaoh went along to Canaan to bring father Jacob. Of course there were many who stayed behind in Egypt!

In Joshua 4:13 we read that about 40 elaphim (plural of eloph) of the warriors of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh came along across the Jordan. But from Numbers 26 we learn that these tribes had a total of 43 elaphim (Reuben) plus 40 elaphim (Gad) plus 26 elaphim (half of Manasseh), which makes a total of 109 elaphim. The 40 elaphim that went along across the Jordan must have consisted of the very best troops. The 69 remaining elaphim stayed behind in the land east of the Jordan to protect the women, children and cattle. The territory there had just been conquered and was not yet free of enemies.

We must be sure to read Scripture in the proper frame of mind, particularly when we come across the enthusiasm of faith that leads an author to use the word all.

The book of Joshua will draw our attention more often to these two and a half tribes (12:6; 13:8-33; 14:2), for it emphasizes the unity of the whole congregation of Israel.

Ch. 12: Rahab and the Spies (Ch. 2)

Joshua 2 is not the first place in Scripture where we come across the name Jericho. After the Israelites put an end to the rule of the kings Sihon and Og, we are told, they camped “in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan at Jericho.” When God gave Moses a look at the Promised Land before his death, He showed him “the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees, as far as Zoar” (Deut. 34:3).

Kathleen M. Kenyon has written in important book about Jericho under the title. This woman has excellent work learning the history of ancient Jericho by studying archeological data.

According to Kenyon, Jericho is not only further below sea level than any other city in the ancient world but is also the oldest of all cities, as far as we know. Thanks to extensive archeological work, she has constructed what she believes is an accurate chronological overview of Jericho’s history beginning with the founding of the first city on the site. The city had access to a spring connected to an underground reservoir which was in turn fed by the rains falling in the hill country of Judah. Her survey includes the periods when Jericho was not inhabited and extends until the coming of the Israelites.

Kenyon’s authoritative conclusions are taken very seriously. One of the things she has discovered is that there is nothing left of the walls that surrounded Jericho when the Israelites marched into Canaan. She ascribes this to erosion. During the long period between Jericho’s destruction and the
rebuilding of its walls, the rain and the wind gradually eliminated all traces of the walls, to Kenyon’s disappointment.

We should be very cautious about assuming a conflict between Scripture and archeological results. In this case, whatever data remain is negative (i.e. the absence of remnants of the wall). What can one make of such data?

To what extent can we pinpoint the time of Joshua 2? The Israelites entered Canaan 40 years after they left Egypt. How many years before Christ was that?

To figure it out, scholars often proceed from I Kings 6:1, which tells us that King Solomon built the temple in the 480th year after the exodus from Egypt, which was the fourth year of his rule. The years of Solomon’s rule were 972-932 B.C. This gives us a date of 1487 B.C. for the exodus and 1407 B.C. for the entry into Canaan.

This chronological reckoning has been criticized by some scholars. We would do better to adopt the simple system that starts counting years at the exodus. Even then we will not be able to compile a chronology complete from the entry into Canaan all the way to the exile.

In Joshua 4:19 we read that the Israelites crossed the Jordan on the tenth day of the first month. On the fourteenth day of that month they celebrated the first Passover in Canaan (5:10).

If we work back from that date, which falls in the forty-first year after the exile, we can construct the following chronology.

Fourth day of the first month: The two spies are sent out (2:1).

Fourth and fifth days: They spend the night at the house of Rahab (2:1).

Seventh day: The officers command the people to get ready to cross the Jordan within three days (1:11).

Eighth day: The spies return to the camp (2:24; 3:1).

Ninth day: a) The march to Shittim (3:1).

b) The officers command the people to follow the Ark of the Covenant (3:2)

c) Joshua tells the people to sanctify themselves in preparation for crossing the Jordan the following day (3:5).

Ninth and tenth days: Israel spends the night at Shittim (3:1)

Tenth day: Israel crosses the Jordan (4:19).

So much for the time. What about the place where the events of Joshua 2 occurred?

If we were living in Joshua’s time and could stand in the middle of the Jordan River with our faces toward the north, we would see the city of Jericho on the left-hand side about ten kilometers
away, about a two-hour walk. We would see Shittim about the same distance away on the right-hand side.

We are already familiar with Shittim form Numbers 25:1. The full name was Abel-shittim (Num. 33:49). This name stood for a region through which a wadi (abel) streamed during the rainy season, with the result that acacia trees (shittim) grew there. It was there that Israel assembled after camping in the fields of Moab. From Shittim the people went on to cross the Jordan, following the miraculous path to which God later referred in the accusation “from Shittim to Gilgal” (Mic. 6:5).

There was nothing sinful about Joshua’s decision to send out men to spy out Jericho and the surrounding territory. Moses had also sent out spies, with God’s approval (Num. 13:1; 21:32; Deut. 1:22).

Joshua had no way of knowing that God would not allow the Israelites to pull down the walls of Jericho but would destroy them Himself. Joshua must have assumed that the walls would have to be stormed, and his wanted to do so in such a way as to lose as few of his men as possible.

God put these expectations of Joshua to shame in an amazing way, as awe see later in the book of Joshua. God used the two spies for a purpose of his own: He wanted to strengthen His people’s faith in His promise. The two men returned with a report that the fear of Yahweh had already hamstrung the inhabitants of Canaan. This was a fulfillment of what God had promised (Ex. 23:27; Deut. 11:25).

The two men easily covered the distance between the camp in the fields of Moab and the city of Jericho on the first day. It probably took them no longer than four or five hours. They were young men (6:23), and crossing the Jordan was not as dangerous for them as it would be for women and children.

We should not be surprised that they went to the house of Rahab, who was a prostitute, and spent the night there. As spies they had to do their utmost to act normal and keep from being noticed. Apparently it was customary for strangers passing through town to seek lodging at such addresses. Where else could they go?

Women like Rahab, who were innkeepers as well as prostitutes, are mentioned often in the Code of Hammurabi. Apparently Rahab offered the possibility of sexual intercourse to all the men who sought overnight lodging in her home. Her “profession” was no secret. It was natural that the two spies were directed to her home for lodging. It is entirely possible that the king of Jericho was referring to Rahab’s prostitution when he had his soldiers say to her: “Bring us the men who went in to you” (vs. 3). Apparently he did not mean that they went into Rahab’s house, for this is mentioned separately—“who went in to you and entered your house.”

No, the soldiers must have been referring to Rahab’s immoral way of life, which would have been known to all the inhabitants of Jericho, which was only a small city by our standards. Judging by the ruins, Jericho seems to have occupied an area no bigger than two hectares.
When Flavius Josephus deals with this story, he assures us that the two spies went to Rahab’s house to eat a meal. There is no need to add to the story in this way, although they may well have eaten there. What Scripture tells us is that the two spies “lodged” at Rahab’s house (2:1).

The Hebrew word used here could refer either to lying down to sleep or to sexual activity. There is no reason to assume that the men had sex with Rahab. We can rest assured that Joshua did not choose just anyone for the important assignment of looking Jericho over. The two he sent were indeed young men (necarim), but they were not so young that they did not know enough to avoid any sexual involvement with a non-Israelite (see Num. 31:15-18; Deut. 21:10-14). As Israelites, the two young men belonged to the people of life, and they knew that the conduct of a prostitute, even if such a lamentable creature engaged in prostitution only to support herself, led to death rather than life. The two spies were able to promise Rahab a place within Israel, but when the time came for her to assume that place, the two young men, at Joshua’s command, saw to it that she lived outside the camp at first (6:22-3).

Rahab was able to understand the language of the spies, and we may assume that other people in Jericho also talked with them. Yet by their speech the spies betrayed their identity. That’s why the soldiers appeared at Rahab’s door.

Joshua 2 involves three conversations between Rahab and the spies, although there may have been more. The first took place before the king’s men came to the door, the second when they were at the door, and the third just before the two spies left Jericho. We are not told of a conversation when the two spies arrived at Rahab’s house, but it is safe to assume one. From that conversation Rahab must have realized that the two men were Israelites. Otherwise she would not have been so quick to find them a hiding place up on the roof of her house under the stalks of flax lying there to dry. It was the evening of the fourth day of the month Nisan, but Jericho lay in a deep, warm oasis, which is why the flax and grain could be harvested a little earlier there. On the 14th of Nisan, after the Israelites crossed the Jordan and celebrated the Passover at Gilgal, they ate unleavened bread baked from the harvest of the land (5:19-11).

In the second conversation, after nightfall, Rahab explained to the spies why she had treated them as she did. The reason was not in herself—in her love or sympathy one or both of the men. The reason was the Word of God.

We must be careful not to underestimate Rahab’s knowledge of God. A lot of traffic passed through Jericho and she had heard what God had done in the last 40 years in Egypt and the wilderness—“Yahweh—God in heaven above and on earth beneath” (2:11). There had been cosmic catastrophes that were known not only locally (Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:8-9).

Although Rahab had picked up all her knowledge of Yahweh and His great deeds for Israel from hearsay (vs. 10), she exemplifies the rule that faith comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). Scripture assures us that Rachel acted out of faith (Heb. 11:31; James 2:25). Through the path of faith she which Israel was to apply to all the Canaanites—men, women and children (Deut. 7:2).
Remember that God was not only omnipotent but also free and sovereign in the dispensation of His grace; He could show grace to people who were already condemned to death. When our Savior was on earth, He abided by the rule of God’s ban over the Canaanites. That’s why He did not respond at first to the pleas of the Canaanite Syrophoenician woman. Only when it became unmistakably clear that she had faith did He respond. Her faith made it clear to Him that the Father allowed Him to have mercy on this woman. Otherwise it would not have been allowed (Deut. 7:2; Matt. 15:21-8; Mark 7:24-30).

We should not equate God’s mercy on these two Canaanite women with God’s mercy shown since the outpouring of the Spirit (Acts 2), the mercy that touched such pagans as our Gentile forefathers. Canaan was under the ban! For Canaan there were no promises of God awaiting fulfillment, but there were indeed promises for the other nations (Gen. 12:3; Gal. 3:8-9). If ever we read of God’s free grace in Scripture, it is here.

Some people accuse Rahab of treason because she helped the two spies from Israel. This accusation betrays a pitifully small-minded outlook. It’s the kind of conclusion people come to when they fail to ask what God was up to in the history related to Joshua 2.

God wanted to show the Israelites how well things would go for them if they would only believe His promise, the promise that Israel would inherit Canaan. He was willing to do anything to make this clear—including a partial suspension of His ban on all the Canaanites. He was the Almighty, who could go out before the Israelites and make the hearts of the Canaanites tremble in advance in fear of Him. He was the sovereign God, who could even made the heart of a Canaanite prostitute choose for Israel’s side before she laid eyes on a single Israelite.

We should not judge the so-called lies of Rahab according to the criteria of the flesh. We should measure them in Spiritual terms. Our starting point should be her relationship to Yahweh and the people of Yahweh, the people from whom the Christ was to be born, as we know in the light of the New Testament.

We should not ascribe “primitive” faith to Rahab either. According to James, she was justified by her works, that is to say, out of a full-grown faith that not only justified her but also sanctified her (see Lord’s Days 23 and 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism). From Rahab’s conduct toward the spies and the servants of the king it is apparent that her faith was that kind of faith, a faith that bears the fruit of the Spirit, a faith that works through love (Gal. 5:6).

We should be careful about the conclusions we draw, then. Without a faith like Rahab’s faith, no one will be able to stand before the Lord Christ (Heb. 12:14). A faith without works of the kind that Rahab performed is condemned in James 2 as a dead faith. Rahab’s course of action, which was rooted in her trust in God, is placed before us as an example. Without that faith she would never have welcomed the spies and protected them. The Bible tells us that those who have faith will surely receive the appropriate reward (Matt. 10:42).

Rahab made a covenant with the spies. She pointed out to them that she had treated them as one treats allies or covenant partners. She had shown them solidarity, loyalty, “chesed” (2:12).
What she wanted from them was a promise that they would treat her and her family in the same spirit of loyalty. The two spies gave her this promise. They were in dead earnest, and they promised under oath. They also imposed some conditions. Rahab would have to keep the whole matter a secret, for the enemy would be twice as difficult to defeat if he knew what was going on. On the day when Jericho was stormed, Rahab’s family members would all have to assemble in her house without once setting foot outside. If they did venture out, their blood would not be on the hands of the spies.

This was the promise, the oath that the two men swore to Rahab. Since she asked for a “sure sign” (2:12), the two Israelites agreed that Rahab was to hang from her window the cord made of red thread, the same cord that they were to use to climb down the wall outside her window and flee from the city. By that cord, the Israelites who stormed the city would recognize her house. That red cord already hung from one of the windows of Rahab’s house, for they pointed to it as they talked—“this cord” (2:18). The sight of the cord would be nothing unusual for the people of Jericho. An unusual sign, of course, would have aroused suspicion.

The only change was that the cord would now hang from a window on the city wall rather than from a window that faced the street. It is even possible that Rahab had used the cord as a signal to passerby that she was a prostitute. The color of the cord is indicated by the same word we came across in Exodus 25 (shani), a word that means blood red. It was customary among the pagans to use that color to paint images of the gods of immorality (see Ezek. 23:14; see also the Book of Wisdom 13:14).

From the very beginnings of church history, there have been people who have wanted to see Rahab’s red cord as pointing to Christ’s redeeming blood. I can well imagine that many Christians today shudder at the thought. I certainly don’t propose to urge such symbolism on you—not at all. On the other hand, we must not be too quick to dismiss such biblical symbolism of color. Such symbolism played a much greater role in the ancient world than it does among us. (See the discussion of the tabernacle in the volume on Exodus).

Remember that the two Israelites were the ones who told Rahab to use the cord made of woven red threads as a “sure sign.” They mentioned the color explicitly—the same color (shani) that Yahweh had used when He instructed Israel about life, redemption and purification. Let’s also remember that Rahab expressly declared her willingness to accept that condition—“So be it” (2:21). Then we are told that she kept her word and left the red cord hanging from the window at the back of her house.

The very fact that these things are mentioned in Joshua 2 indicates that both the spies’ deed (their choice of the red cord as a sign) was regarded by Rahab and the spies as very significant in those hours of great tension. As far as the spies are concerned, they must have taken the red cord as a symbol of their oath. They had sworn to put their lives (nephesh) on the line for her, promising to be faithful to Rahab and her family when Jericho was captured (2:14). As for Rahab, when she took that relatively inconspicuous step of moving the red cord from the one side of her house to the other, she was giving to two Israelites—indeed, to the entire people of Yahweh—a sign to confirm the earnestness of her faith in Israel’s God. The cord symbolized her conversion from a life of paganism, immorality and death.
We should compare this deed of Rahab's with what the Israelite women did at Horeb with their bronze Isis mirrors. They surrendered those mirrors so that the bronze could be used to make the laver of bronze. With that deed the women clearly broke with their sinful past in Egypt. (Ex. 38:8).

Rahab also had a sinful past in Jericho. She broke with that past in real terms, by putting her life on the line for the two Israelites, but especially in symbolic terms, by surrendering the symbol of her former un-chastity, her service of sin and death, to the service of Yahweh and His people. That conversion meant deliverance and life for her and her family.

We read in 6:25 that Rahab lived among the people of Israel “to this day.” This phrase could better be translated “definitely” (Deut. 3:14). What the text means, then, is that Rahab received an abiding place in Israel. This fits in with Matthew 1:5, where we read that Rahab married Salmon, and that Boaz was among her descendants (see Ruth 4:20-2; I Chron. 2:12). Thus her line of descent led to David and ultimately to our Savior Jesus Christ!

When the spies returned to the camp on the eighth day of the month Nisan and reported that Yahweh was giving the whole land to Israel, to the extent that the Canaanites were already trembling in fear, it became clear what God's primary purpose was in the events related in Joshua 2. God wanted to strengthen Israel’s faith in His promise. The emphasis falls on the word strengthen, for the faith was already there.

The previous day, the seventh of Nisan, the officers had carried out Joshua’s orders by commanding the people to get ready to cross the Jordan within three days. The faith already evident then was greatly bolstered the next day when the spies returned and presented their report.

Why had the spies come back so quickly? What they heard in Jericho from the mouth of Rahab had made any further spying in and around Jericho unnecessary. Their relatively short visit to the city was enough, for that visit had shown them that Yahweh “has given all of the land into our hands” (2:24).

Ch. 13: Yahweh Leads the Way

The purpose of the miracle recorded in Joshua 3 and 4 is no mystery; it was intended to drive home the same lesson as the story of the two spies in Joshua 2. More than once, the purpose is spelled out (3:10; 4:7, 23-4). “Israel, Yahweh is going to give you proof that He will be with you in the battle against Canaan’s mighty people.”

Notice how often the ark is mentioned in these chapters. Each time it is described as the ark of Yahweh, the God of the entire earth, or the ark of the covenant, or the ark of the testimony. God was about to show the Israelites how seriously He took His covenant with them. He was willing to use His great power for this purpose.
In the story of Israel crossing the Jordan He went a step further than He did in the story of the two spies in Jericho. The crossing of the Jordan represented a beginning of the fulfillment of His promise to give the land of Canaan to the Israelites. After the crossing, the people of Israel stood on Canaanite soil.

Let’s not forget the figure of Joshua as we examine chapters 3 and 4. As we saw earlier, there were dynastic elements in the Deuteronomy covenant. Joshua was to succeed Moses under the terms of that covenant. Yahweh Himself had guaranteed this (Deut. 31:21-9; 34:2-12; Josh. 1:5). Israel’s wondrous crossing of the Jordan underlined this promise made to Joshua (3:7; 4:14).

The story related in Joshua 3 and 4 can be discussed in definite parts. The two chapter’s together deal with the miracle of the crossing. In 3:1-13 we are told how this miracle was announced (Ch. 14). In 3:14—4:18 the miraculous event itself is described (Ch. 15). The rest of chapter 4 (vs. 19-24) drives home the lesson, the message God taught His people through this miracle (Ch. 16).

The author of the book of Joshua did not regard these three subdivisions of the story as separate compartments. His narrative style was far too animated for any such dry approach. In the first section, which announces the miracle, he mentions “twelve men from the tribes of Israel” (3:12), but it is not until the second section that we find out what these twelve men were called to do (4:5).

The crossing of the priests is actually mentioned three times, each time in a somewhat different context (3:7; 4:11, 15).

Such a narrative style is very useful for teaching, for emphasizing certain points and driving them home. But it often goes beyond the boundaries of the three subdivisions mentioned above. Bearing that restriction in mind, we will now take up the three sections one by one.

**Ch. 14: The Miraculous Crossing Is Announced (3:1-13)**

The distance between Shittim and the Jordan, which was not great, was apparently covered by Israel in one day. That journey must have been made on the ninth day of the month Nisan. The Israelites spent the night before crossing the Jordan (3:1; 4:19), which they did on the tenth.

We should not assume that the Israelite camp stood a few meters away from the riverbed. That was impossible. The Jordan is a river that flows through two “valleys” at once, one within the other. In other words, the riverbed is a valley within the valley. But the valley through which the riverbed passes is fairly deep itself and is often flooded. That’s why there is such luxurious plant growth in the Jordan Valley, the growth referred to in Scripture as “the jungle of the Jordan” (Jer. 12:5; 49:19; 50:44; Zech. 11:3). In Biblical times there were lions living near the Jordan.
The Arabs call the deeper “valley” the Zoor, while they call the broader valley the Ghoor. The Ghoor is 40 to 50 feet higher than the riverbed. The Israelites must have spent the night at the edge of el Ghor, for the Jordan had overflowed its banks (3:15) and much of the broader valley was flooded.

It must have been on the evening of the day of their arrival (the ninth day of Nisan) that the officers (shoterim) went around to all the people again with a message from Joshua. On the seventh the Israelites had been given three days to prepare for the crossing of the Jordan. Those three days were now over, we are told—“The three days in question were over” (3:2).

The people were told what to watch for the next day: they were to pay careful attention to what happened with the ark. The ark was expressly described as “the ark of the covenant of Yahweh your God.” When you see the ark being picked up by the priests,” they were told, “then you (plural) are to break camp and follow it.” No matter how strange and wondrous the path taken by the priests carrying the ark, the people were to follow.

The ark, then, was to lead the way; it would head the procession. We know that the ark did not lead the parade when the Israelites were on the march. It went right in the middle of all the Israelites, after the camps of Judah and Reuben but before the camps of Ephraim and Dan (Num. 2). This time, however, the ark would go first.

There was one other time when this happened. It was after the Israelites left Horeb, where they had stayed for almost a year. There they had built the tabernacle and entered into a covenant with God. At that time Yahweh had given a clear indication of his willingness to bring Israel into the land of promise in the shortest possible time. He went forth ahead of His people and led them down the shortest route from Horeb to Canaan, namely, through the dreary Wilderness of Paran. That was God’s first journey with His covenant people. To prove that He Himself was leading the Israelites down the shortest route to Canaan form Sinai, He let the ark lead the way, as a guarantee of His faithfulness (Num. 10:11-36). Now, 40 years later, He did so again.

There was another remarkable detail that deserves our attention. To prove His faithfulness and His unreserved willingness to give Israel the land He had promised her, God not only let the ark lead the way but allowed it to be carried by priests. This, too, was contrary to the established procedures. Normally the ark was carried by Levites—and not just any Levites. Only the Kohathites were allowed to carry the ark, and even then the ark first had to be wrapped carefully by the priests in cloths designated for that purpose, so that the Levites would not die from their contact with the ark (Num. 4:15-16).

Here, too, an exception was made for the amazing crossing of the Jordan. It appears that on this occasion the ark was not wrapped before it was carried. That wouldn’t be necessary, for this time it would be carried by priests. Note how these priests are called by their full title—“Levitical priests” (3:3; see also Deut. 17:9). Moreover, the officers had promised the people that they would see the ark.

It appears, then, that the ark led the way uncovered. How that golden ark must have shone in the Eastern sun!
After that the Israelites were to follow the path taken by the ark, however strange and unusual it might be. It was a path that they had not followed before (3:4). But they would have to keep a certain distance between themselves and the ark—about 2000 cubits.

Why that distance? Because of the great holiness of the ark? That may well be the reason, but Scripture does not say so. We’ll come back to this point a little later.

I suspect that the command to keep a certain distance was to make sure that the people would see the ark and the path they would follow. The people passed by the ark at a distance of about 2000 cubits, that is, about 2000 cubits south of the point where the priests stood in the middle of the Jordan’s riverbed. Because of this distance, the field of vision was greater, and everyone could take a long look at the ark. Even the smallest children could see it clearly. That way the point God wanted to make was driven home to all the people.

How great was the distance in our terms? Since the Israelites were not a tall people, their cubit was probably shorter than ours. While our cubit is 68 centimeters, theirs was likely only 44.4 centimeters. When we multiply that figure by 2000, we see that the distance was about 900 meters, which is a little less than a kilometer. Thus the Israelites passed within a kilometer of the ark as they crossed the Jordan.

Now we turn to the question of “sanctification.” Joshua issued a command that the Israelites were to “sanctify” themselves (3:5). But the reason for this is not the holiness of the ark—although this secondary motif should not be disregarded—but the fact that Yahweh was to do “wonders” in the midst of the Israelites.

When the Hebrew word nipha’oth (wonders) occurs in Scripture, it usually refers to an incomprehensible power of the Creator which He often manifested as He stood by His people. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, He already promised to do such wonders as He delivered His people from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 3:20). Later, on Mount Horeb, He announced more such wonders when He averted His wrath in response to Moses’ prayer after the episode of the golden calf (Ex. 34:10). When Gideon made his complaint about Yahweh at the time of his calling, he pointed to the wonders God has done in Israel’s history (Judges 6:13). The psalms also make frequent mention of such wonders (e.g. Ps. 9:2; 26:7; 40:6; 71:17; 72:18). When we sing the Psalms, then, one of the wondrous events we must bear in mind is Israel’s crossing of the Jordan (3:5). God’s wonders (nipha’oth) were recounted and praised in song when sacrifices were offered.

That’s why Joshua told the people to “sanctify themselves.” This term also occurs in other passages, as we will see from a few examples.

At Mount Horeb, as we know, God made His covenant with Israel after an impressive display of His great power as the Creator of heaven and earth (Ex. 19:16). When Moses announced in advance what God was about to do, he also called on the people to “sanctify themselves” (Ex. 19:14-15). What this meant was that the people were to wash their clothes and abstain from sexual intercourse. Because the Israelites were at the point of being accepted publicly as the people of the God of life, the
approaching revelation of the wondrous power of their God in the ceremony of making the covenant called for a period of preparation in which anything—whether real or symbolic—that came too close to the borderline between death and life was to be avoided. (For further light on this subject, study what the Bible has to say in Leviticus 4 and 5 about the sin offering that Israel had to bring when it came too close to the edge of the covenant base on which it had been placed at the “foundation of the world” at Horeb. See also God’s warnings about defilement through death in Leviticus 11, which deals with unclean and dead animals and people and also unclean objects; in Leviticus 12, which deals with the sin offering of a woman after childbirth; in Leviticus 13 and 14, which deals with the sin offering for a leper who had been healed; and in Leviticus 15, which deals with an impurity of men and women because of secretions.)

Let me give you another example. The Israelites were also ordered to sanctify themselves on the day before the wonder of the quails (Num. 11:18), not the occasion before Horeb or the one after.

We must read the command to the Israelites on the day before the crossing of the Jordan (i.e. that they were to “sanctify themselves”) in the light of the instruction they had received through the Torah about Yahweh as the God of life, who loathed everything that tended to lead His people in the direction of heathendom and death. We will then recognize the intention behind this command, which was to focus Israel’s attention on Yahweh, who was to show the next day how serious He was about keeping the promise of the covenant He had made with Israel. In a wondrous way He would lead His people through the gateway into Canaan and give them the inheritance of the pagan Canaanites, just as He had promised. He would prove that He was the “living God” (3:10). Therefore the Israelites could go through the gateway only as His pure people, as the people of life, who were obliged to stay far away from everything with which the Canaanites heathendom beyond the gateway was defiled—in short, everything that smelled of death. In that way Israel was again reminded of her holy isolation and noble descent.

The next verses speak of the day of the crossing of the Jordan rather than the day before. Apparently the following things happened in the morning of that day.

(1) Joshua commanded the priests to pick up the ark and take the lead in crossing the Jordan. Think about that for a moment. We saw what the situation was in es Zor. The Jordan Valley was flooded. It may be that a few spirited young men had already waded through the valley and swum across the river, but this would be impossible for a group of men carrying the ark.

The priests did not disobey; they did just as they were told. They showed what great confidence they had in Joshua as the instrument through whom Yahweh would surely do a great wonder. In view of the situation, we can see that the author of the book of Joshua was not explaining the obvious when he declared explicitly: “Then they picked up the Ark of the Covenant and went forth before the people” (3:6b).

We can see the honor accorded Joshua among God’s people. The scene that unfolded so smoothly would have been a fiasco if God’s revelation to Joshua, the substance of Joshua 1, had been a
mere figment of someone’s imagination. The priests would then have refused to obey his strange commands.

(2) The next thing that happened was also tied to the special position of leadership God gave Joshua. In Joshua 1, God had repeated the promise that He would be with Joshua as He had been with Moses, which meant that Joshua would hold the same place of honor in Israel that Moses had held.

We are told that after the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, they believed in Yahweh and in Moses (Ex. 14:31). The Israelites were supposed to develop the same deep, wholehearted trust in Joshua—a trust that would not fade away. The priests appeared to have such faith in him, for they obeyed his remarkable command without argument.

In the crossing of the Jordan, God would make it clear to all the people that Joshua was the legitimate successor to Moses.

God had told Joshua that the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant should stand still in the middle of the Jordan. We may take it that Joshua let the priests know what would happen when they reached the water: then the people would pass by the ark.

When the priest got to the water, the water would make way for their feet (3:13). Joshua probably told this to the priests at the outset too, although verse 6 does not say that he did.

(3) In any case, Joshua had the people come to him so that he could pass on to them what Yahweh had told him (3:9). The Israelites would soon be given visible proof of how seriously Yahweh meant the promise that He would give Canaan to His people. They would see with their own eyes that Yahweh was not a dead idol like the gods of the pagans but a living God who would be able to drive out the peoples of Canaan (3:9-10). Note that the seven peoples mentioned are the same here as in Deuteronomy 7:1.

To show that He Himself went ahead of them across the Jordan into the land of Canaan, Yahweh would let the ark, which was the guarantee of His covenant with Israel; lead the way into the Jordan. Yahweh was powerful enough to undertake this because He was the only God, the living God, the Master and Lord (adon) of the entire earth (3:11).

It would have to be an unforgettable day for Israel. Therefore Joshua included in his report to the people the command that one man was to be chosen from each of the tribes (3:12). Why? We find out in 4:5. Twelve stones were to be taken along from the Jordan to build a memorial.

Finally Joshua let the men around him know what was going to happen; he let them know what sight they would be able to see unfolding below as they watched from their vantage point at the edge of the Gohr. As soon as the priests, the ones who would carry “the ark of Yahweh, the Lord (adon) of the entire earth,” touched the water with their feet, the water of the Jordan would stop flowing. It would stand still as though held back by a dam. (Note that Yahweh is twice described as “the Lord of the entire earth”—vs. 11 and 13).
This, then, is the wonder that Yahweh was about to perform. It was announced in advance—to Joshua, to the priests, and to the people.

**Ch. 15: What Happened at the Jordan (3:14—4:18)**

The man who wrote Joshua 3:14-16, in which the outcome of Joshua’s announcement is described, must have been an eyewitness. This comes through clearly from his writing style. The irregularities he permits himself in these verses, probably because of the tension in the situation, has created a number of problems for the Hebrew scholars. He goes into detail as he tells the whole story, explaining that the priests led the way with the Ark of the Covenant. As he describes what happened when they stepped into the water, the reader sees the miracle just as though he were an eyewitness himself (3:14).

The story is interrupted at one point by a few words about the water level in the Jordan. We are told that the water in the Jordan was high at the time because it was harvest time. In other words, the miracle took place in the month that later came to be known as the month of Nisan but was originally known as the month of Abib, which means *ear of grain*. It was on the fourteenth day of this month that Israel slaughtered the Passover lamb. On the tenth of the month Israel crossed the Jordan.

In the summertime one can easily wade across the Jordan at certain spots, but when it is spring and the snow begins to melt on the Lebanon Mountains (where the Jordan has its source), crossing the river can be a dangerous undertaking. In I Chronicles 12:15 it is reported as quite a feat when eleven of David’s soldiers manage it. Just how dangerous it is, of course, depends on the amount of precipitation during the winter months. In the year of Israel’s crossing, the water level was apparently high enough to be worthy of comment.

Finally the narrator reaches the moment when the water suddenly stopped flowing toward the Dead Sea (also called the Salt Sea and the Sea of the Arabah). He tells us how that happened, which he must have found out sometime after the fact himself. From the place where Israel crossed (opposite Jericho), it was impossible to see the city of Adam, where the water was made to stand still. Adam was close to Zarethan; the distance from Adam to Jericho was about 30 kilometers. Both Adam and Zarethan were east of the Jordan. Adam was south of the point where the Jabbok flowed into the Jordan, while Zarethan was probably north of it. In that region, for more than 30 kilometers, the Jordan stood still. The water to the south of the wall of water continued to flow to the Dead Sea. The riverbed before the Israelites quickly dried up, and the people could easily cross the River.

Writers in our time and others long ago suggest that such natural occurrences have taken place more often in that area. Apparently such a thing happened in 1267, and again in 1927, caused both times, as far as we know, by the shifting of the ground after an earthquake. God could well have made
use of such a natural phenomenon in the history related in Joshua 3 and 4. In any case, Yahweh speaks and it comes to be (Ps. 33:9).

On the other occasions when the Jordan dried up, it remained dry for about ten hours, or perhaps a 24-hour day. When the Israelites crossed the Jordan, it took no longer than a day (4:19). The Jordan remained dry long enough for the following things to happen.

(1) The priests stood in the Jordan—and not just for a few minutes. They were there for quite a while. They stood firm and unafraid.

(2) They were there long enough for all the people to cross the river. It appears that Israel had about 30,000 men of fighting age, but we must not forget about the women and the children and the livestock. Hence the procession had to move slowly—“according to the pace of the cattle and the children” (Gen. 33:14). Therefore we should read Joshua 4:10 as meaning that it was a smooth crossing rather than a hasty crossing. A miracle had occurred, and nothing stood in the way of the Israelites as they marched into Canaan.

(3) Joshua, at God’s command, issued orders to the twelve men who had been chosen, one from each tribe (3:12). They were to return from the west bank, where they had already gone with the rest of the people (4:1), to the spot in the riverbed where the priests stood. There they were each to pick up a stone and carry it to the west bank, The stones would remind future generations what God had done that day, for Joshua was to make a monument of them (4:20).

(4) Joshua was in no hurry to get out of the dangerous riverbed himself. His conduct was an eloquent testimony to the firmness of his faith in God, for he was almost the last man to leave the riverbed. Before he left, he piled up twelve stones at the spot where the priests had stood. The stones were intended to remind people, not of his own cool courage, but of God’s faithfulness, on which Joshua had been able to stake his life (4:9). Whenever the water level of the Jordan was low, people would be able to see these stones. Then they would know just where the ark had stood. When the author of the narrative tells us that these stones are there “to this day,” he seems to be assuring us that he has seen them himself. Yet it is also possible that this expression has a somewhat broader meaning: it may be an amen—an indication that it is definitely so and will remain so.

Now we are running a little ahead of the story. The priests did not leave their place in the riverbed until Joshua told them to. And Joshua, in turn, was following God’s orders.

What happened next was just as miraculous as what happened when the priests first stepped into the water. When they stepped in, the water fled from their feet. Now the water returned. Once the priests carrying the Ark of the Covenant reached dry land, the miraculous natural phenomenon had performed the service for which Yahweh had chosen to use it. Then the Jordan could resume its ancient course.
Finally the narrator reaches the point where he can look back on Israel’s amazing crossing in the Jordan. To what does he direct the reader’s attention? To the fact that the crossing took place on the tenth day of the first month (4:19a).

It was a remarkable day and a remarkable month. In this month Israel left Egypt. Ever after, the months of the year were to be counted beginning with that special month. In the month the ears of barley began to take shape, and even the wilderness (the steppes) began to bloom. It is striking that God had the various high points in the history of Israel’s redemption Fall in the spring, when all nature shouts a message of life. The exodus from Egypt, the departure from Horeb (the second month), and the crossing of the Jordan (4:19) all took place in the spring, with its glorious display of flowers. At those special times God let His chosen people walk through a park where the anemones, hyacinths and many other gorgeous flowers were in bloom.

The tenth day of the first month was especially memorable because it was on that day that Israel first had to choose a Passover lamb from the flock in Egypt. Through the blood of the lamb, Israel was protected from God’s punishing hand when it struck down so many in Egypt.

I am convinced that the Old Testament Passover lamb was an atoning sacrifice. It’s true that the Passover lamb was only a shadow fulfilled by Christ’s suffering and death, but it was a shadow with a definite sacramental function. Like all atoning sacrifices, the Passover lamb sealed the promise of the gospel, the promise to which Israel, too, had to cling as its most precious possession, the promise that made it possible for Israel’s sins to be forgiven. So surely did the Passover lamb seal this promise that the Holy Spirit, after Christ’s suffering and death, could say that the Lamb of God (Christ) had already been known and slaughtered before the foundation of the world, that is to say, before the congregation of Israel was placed on the footing of the Sinai covenant at Horeb. Those who understand the positive covenant language of the Bible, the language of the God who makes promises and gives good gifts, will not be surprised at this way of speaking. Thanks to God’s faithfulness, Christ already stood there through the ages as slaughtered in His eyes. How could the patriarchs and Israel before and after Horeb have received atonement except through the Lord Jesus Christ? (Acts 4:12)

The second joyful fact, to which the narrator points are that Israel, after the crossing, camped “at Gilgal, by the eastern border of Jericho” (4:19b). This name Gilgal deserves our attention. We already heard Moses use the word Gilgal. He used it when he told Israel to give expression to the blessing and the curse of the covenant on the mountains known as Gerizim and Ebal. Moses explained the location of the two mountains by saying that they were “opposite the circle of stones near the diviner’s oaks” (Deut. 11:30b). The Hebrew word for circle of stones was haggilgal. Whenever the word Gilgal is used to refer to a place, it is always preceded by the definite article (ha), which is directly joined to it. No doubt this name was often used for Canaanite holy places.
We must bear in mind Moses’ purpose when he issued his command about Gilgal. His purpose was polemical. Directly opposite a Canaanite holy place, Israel would confess Yahweh and His covenant.

Most likely Moses had the same antithetical purpose in mind as Joshua 4:19b, which draws our attention to the place where Israel pitched her camp immediately after entering the Promised Land. What place was that? It was Gilgal, at the ancient Gilgal (circle of stones) that the Canaanites had erected there.

This Gilgal was at the eastern border of Jericho’s territory. It stood between the city and the river. No doubt it was a place where travelers who had just crossed the Jordan or were about to cross it could pray and offer sacrifices. Naturally the site was deserted when the Israelites arrived there. The Canaanites knew that Israel was on the march! What did the Israelites then do? They stopped to rest—at a holy place of the Canaanites. Israel was as calm and confident as a lion or lioness stalking its prey, as Balaam had foreseen (Num. 23:24).

The supposition that the narrator had a polemical purpose in mind when he reported the fact that Israel pitched her camp between Jericho and the Jordan by the circle of stones that had long been held in honor there is supported by what we read in 4:20. In this text, the polemical purpose is obvious. Joshua expressly chose the Gilgal or circle of stones as the site for a monument that would use stones in a different way, that is, to honor Yahweh and His covenant. This was in line with Moses’ command in Deuteronomy 11:29-32.

When Joshua used the twelve stones taken from the Jordan to erect a monument at Gilgal, he was issuing a challenge to Canaan and its gods. Stones stood opposite stones. When we have the Almighty on our side, there is no need to back down.

So much for the place where the monument was erected. Now we focus on the person responsible for the deed.

Who was it? Joshua, the man whom the Israelites revered, especially now since the amazing crossing of the Jordan.

There was nothing wrong with their awe and respect for Joshua. Creating such respect was one of God’s purposes when He performed this miracle (see 3:7; 4:14). The dynastic elements in the Deuteronomy covenant must not be forgotten as we consider Joshua’s role. Yahweh faithfully honored the dynastic provisions by elevating Joshua in the eyes of the people. Just think of all the occasions on which Yahweh addressed Joshua.

Joshua, for his part, ascribed all honor directly to God. He acted just as he had some 40 years earlier when he had joined Caleb in remaining faithful and refusing to bow to the majority. When Yahweh sent the complaining, murmuring people back into the wilderness from Kadesh, Joshua and Caleb did not cry out, as so many Christians often do, “Weobjet! We don’t deserve such punishment.” No, Joshua and Caleb bowed before God’s judgment. In His own time, God would elevate them (Num. 14:24; 30; Deut. 1:35; Josh. 1:5; 3:7; 4:14; 14:6-15; 19:49-51; 1 Pet. 5:5-6).
Joshua conducted himself in the very same way at the Jordan. As for building monuments, he had already erected one during the crossing. When the priests finally left their position in the riverbed, Joshua personally set up a monument of twelve stones at the spot. And when the miracle was over and all the Israelites stood on the western bank, Joshua established a second monument. This time he used the twelve stones that the twelve chosen men had carried from the riverbed and laid down on the bank (3:12; 4:2-8). Joshua also gave the Israelites instructions for using the monument. In the future the monument would help fathers instruct their children about what God had done there for His people. The fathers could explain that Yahweh had performed just as great a miracle there as when He led Israel through the Red Sea. At the Red Sea no monument had been established—for obvious reasons. If things went according to plan, Israel would never see Egypt again (Deut. 17:16). But Israel would live along the Jordan permanently. That’s why it made sense to erect a monument there. The monument would remind the people of two events—the crossing of the Red Sea and the crossing of the Jordan. Through both of these miracles, God had started to fulfill His ancient promise, namely, that Abraham’s fourth generation would inherit the land of Canaan (Gen 15:16). It was an honest, open, powerful, public beginning. All the nations could see what was happening. Our enemies can judge for themselves, Moses had said (Deut. 32:31).

Through these monuments, Joshua drew the attention of friends and enemies, of his contemporaries and the coming generation away from himself as a person and fixed it on the great deeds of Yahweh. This is an example we should all strive to follow. Never make too much of anyone. That’s forbidden (see Matt. 23:8-11).

Finally we should examine the words Joshua spoke on this occasion (4:21-4). Those words can be explained in either of two ways.

First, we could take it that Joshua was giving the Israelites of the future the answer they would have to give to their children when asked about the meaning of the twelve stones. “Yahweh dried up the Jordan for you until you could walk across it, just as he did with the Red Sea, which He dried up for us until we could walk across it.”

Those who favor this interpretation, who assume that Joshua’s mind was on the future and that he was letting future Israelites speak, believe that Joshua said these words to emphasize the unity of the people. Benne Holwerda comments as follows on these words of Joshua: “The parents must testify to the facts so that the children believe and live on the basis of those facts. They must say: This happened to you. It remains a miracle for subsequent generations. The Bible knows of only one Church, with which God is busy in all ages, even if the generations succeed each other in time. Think of the prayers of Nehemiah and Daniel, who know they were one with people of all ages, and the second commandment (Acts 7:51; Matt. 23:34-5; Heb. 2:9). The entire church of our time has been engrafted into the tree that is Israel. Thus we are also crucified with Christ, the entire Church included, but not in a mystical way. The point is that the redemptive fact governs the following generation.”

This is a lesson worthy taking to heart. Moses thought along the same lines (Deut. 1:6-8). Wouldn’t God be fully justifies in speaking words of reproach to the nominally Christian West? Through
the gospel, My Spirit removed you from the darkness of Satan’s power and made you children of light (see Acts 26:18).

A second interpretation is also worth careful consideration. According to this interpretation, the only words that Joshua placed in the mouths of future Israelites as answer to the question raise by their children about the meaning of the stones are: “Here Israel walked across the dry bed of the Jordan” (4:22). The words that follow are simply Joshua’s words his hearers. “For Yahweh your God dried up (the water of) the Jordan for you (plural) until you (plural) reached the other side” (vs. 23a). Joshua then goes on to speak about the Red Sea “which He dried up for us until we reached the other side” (vs. 23b). According to the second interpretation, Joshua used the pronouns we and us in verse 23b rather than the pronoun you because his hearers, with a few exceptions, had not participated in the crossing of the Red Sea, as Joshua himself had.

This interpretation is appealing because of its simplicity. But there is no reason for making the phrases for us and we apply to only those few people who were surviving witnesses of the crossing of the Red Sea.

An ancient misunderstanding suggests that Joshua and Caleb were virtually the only living witnesses of that event. But it is clear that when Joshua spoke his unforgettable words as the twelve stones were set up as a monument, he and Caleb were not in fact the only surviving witnesses of the Red Sea crossing. Not all the Israelites who experienced the drama at Kadesh died in the wilderness; only those who were registered for military duty. There were three groups in Israel not condemned to such punishment: (1) the boys who were still too young to be registered for military duty, (2) all who belonged to the tribe of Levi, and (3) the women and girls. We have no reason to suppose that most of the people who fell into these categories had died during the 40 years.

Thus Joshua could use such words as for you and we in an ordinary way when speaking of the crossing of the Red Sea, including many living Israelites. This makes the second interpretation even more attractive.

Of course the monument at the Jordan would also speak to God’s people in the future about God’s faithfulness and His promises to Israel. Joshua used twelve stones to build this monument, and few Israelites would fail to realize the symbolic significance of this number.

Ch. 17: Yahweh Removes Israel’s Shame (5:1-12)

The primary purpose of this passage of Scripture is easy to understand. Yet it is difficult to answer various questions that arise when we reflect on it.
The passage after it describes Joshua’s encounter with the Prince of the hosts of Yahweh (5:13-15). What is described in the passage at hand was a preparation for that encounter. After all, what must an army do when it is preparing for battle? It must prepare to be inspected by superior officers.

Something of this sort happened in Israel’s case. Before Israel was allowed to take part in God’s struggle against Canaan, she would have to prove that she was fully worthy to be an ally of Yahweh. But Israel was no yet worthy, for the army, or part of it, at least, was not yet circumcised.

Yahweh did not wish to make use of uncircumcised soldiers. The issue in the first part of this story is the presence of the uncircumcised in Israel’s ranks (5:7). The uncircumcised make it impossible for Yahweh to use Israel’s army at all. That’s why God ordered Joshua to see to it that every male Israelite was circumcised.

A number of questions arise at this point. At what point in Israel’s past did the neglect of circumcision begin? We read in verses 4-6 that all who were born in the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt were uncircumcised. However, the passage speaks in global terms. Earlier we saw that the time of Israel’s punishment because of the sin at Kadesh, which is spoken of as a period of 40 years (Num. 14:34) lasted only 38 years, strictly speaking (Deut. 2:14). If we add the year that Israel spent traveling from Kadesh to the Jordan, we get a total of 39 years. Those 39 years were preceded by a year that cannot be regarded as a time of punishment, as we saw when we dealt with the establishment of the Feast of Tabernacles, which came even before the events at Horeb and thus before Kadesh. When the Israelites celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, they were to think not of the 39 years of punishment in the wilderness but of the very first year, the time of first love! (Hos. 2:13).

Now, it is inconceivable that circumcision was not practiced by Israel during that first, beautiful year. This is clear from Numbers 9 where we read that Moses was reminded by Yahweh Himself that the Passover was to be celebrated. This Passover fell on the fourteenth day of the first month of the second year.

We know that the uncircumcised were never allowed to take part in the Passover meal (Ex. 12:48). Is it likely that God would remind Moses at Horeb that the time for the Passover had come while there were still uncircumcised boys among the Israelites? God had decreed the death penalty for the neglect of circumcision (Gen. 17:14). And hadn’t Moses found out for himself how seriously God took the circumcision command? (See Exodus 4:24-6, where Yahweh made it perfectly clear that He did not want to make use of a man who left his own son uncircumcised when it was time to deliver His oppressed people from bondage in Egypt.)

For these reasons I cannot accept the view that the Israelites dropped the custom of circumcising their sons as soon they left Egypt. For what reason would they have done so? Because it was inconvenient for them while they were on the move? But Israel was not always on the move. The people stayed camped for almost a year at Horeb. And think of all the places along the way where they stopped to rest (Num. 33).
On the basis of these considerations, I am convinced that we must not read Joshua 5:4-6, which tells us that the boys were left uncircumcised after Egypt, in too precise a sense. The author is here speaking in global terms.

When did the practice of circumcision end? The answer is clear in verse 6. The narrator expressly reminds us of the drama that took place at Kadesh (Num. 13-14). There the people became guilty of the grave transgression of putting credence in the doubting report of the ten spies who had gone wrong of Joshua and Caleb, who strongly rejected doubts about God’s promise concerning Canaan, a promise sworn to Abraham. The doubt of the ten spies was unbelief, and unbelief was rebellion. But the people listened to the majority, to the ten. They despised God’s promise and thereby the content of the promise, namely, the land of Canaan, the beautiful land “overflowing with milk and honey.” Yahweh was so offended by this contempt for His promise (and thereby for the beautiful land) that he took away from all those who were registered for military service the promise that they would enter the land. This decision He confirmed with an oath.

The author of Joshua 5 had these events at Kadesh in mind when he talked about disobedient men of war who had to die in the wilderness as punishment (vs. 6). He points to this event to explain the fact that so many young men those days were uncircumcised (vs. 4:5). That lamentable fact was a consequence of the sin at Kadesh.

To be precise about it, then, the neglect of circumcision during the wilderness years did not begin directly after Israel left Egypt. It began a year later, after the events at Kadesh.

Once this is established, the next question becomes somewhat simpler: Did Israel drop the practice of circumcision on its own or by Yahweh’s command?

We have no positive Scriptural givens on which to base our answer to this question—neither in the Pentateuch nor outside it. We do know that Israel’s conduct in the wilderness fell short in other respects as well.

There are basically two possibilities. The first is that after Kadesh Israel neglected circumcision of its own accord. The second is that Yahweh issued an order to that effect.

The first possibility must be ruled out, it seems to me. Whatever may have been neglected during the 38 years of wandering through the wilderness, in part because of the temporary decentralization of the ten tribes (Ezek. 20:13-17), Joshua 5 gives us no reason to suppose that some tribes kept up the custom of circumcision while others let it slip. Joshua 5 presents the neglect of circumcision as a general phenomenon, which already makes us think of a command from above. Moreover, we must think back to the story recorded in Exodus 4:24-6, where God made it clear that He could make no use of Moses if Moses did not bother circumcising his own son. Given this lesson that Moses learned, is it conceivable that Moses would not have protested and done something if the people had freely, wantonly, and in their own desire broken with the practice of circumcising their sons?
That leaves only the second possibility. Since Kadesh, then, the Israelites failed to circumcise their sons not because they didn’t want to but because they weren’t allowed to. Yahweh Himself had forbidden it.

One might object to this conclusion by arguing that we read nothing about any such divine prohibition in the Pentateuch. While this cannot be denied, the mere fact of its absence in the text is no proof that it never occurred. A number of things happened in the wilderness that is not reported immediately, in the context where we would expect to find out about them. From Numbers 35, for example, we find out that God had already spoken to Moses about the cities of refuge, although there is no earlier record of this. And in Deuteronomy Moses mentions certain things that we do not learn in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers (Deut. 3:25; 9:20; 10:6; see also Josh. 14:12 and Deut. 25:18). Something similar may have happened in the case of circumcision, namely, that God no longer permitted it after Kadesh, although we first hear something about this matter in Joshua 5—and then only a little. What we learn about this matter in Joshua must be pieced together from a careful comparison of the relevant Scripture passages.

And now a final question: if we take it that it was God Himself who, since the events at Kadesh, refused to allow the Israelites to have their newly born sons circumcised what could His reason have been?

We cannot very well argue that God temporarily forbade circumcision because it was a seal of the covenant, the Horeb covenant, which was temporarily suspended as punishment for Israel’s unbelief. The first problem with this line of reasoning is that circumcision is not the seal of the Horeb covenant but of God’s covenant with Abraham. Those two covenants are not to be confused with each other (Lev. 26:40-2; Deut. 30:20). The second problem is that God never really suspended the Horeb covenant—not after the sin with the golden calf and not after the events at Kadesh. During the entire period of punishment after Kadesh, God kept His part of the covenant faithfully, as we see, for example, from the continuing service rendered by the tribe of Levi (Deut. 10:6: 33:8-11; see also Neh. 9:17-21). Indeed, in the fields of Moab, when He made the Deuteronomy covenant with Israel through the service of Moses, He even strengthened His covenant bonds with His people.

The following solution seems a better possibility. For purposes of comparison, think back to Israel’s sin with the golden calf. God was angry about what had happened, and the Israelites mourned. We are told that “no man put on his ornaments.” And Yahweh didn’t want to see any ornaments on His people: “Take off your ornaments, and then I will see what I should do with you” (Ex. 33:4-6).

Something like this must have happened after Kadesh too. Circumcision was an ornament. It was a seal upon God’s promise that Abraham’s descendants would inherit the land of Canaan (Gen. 15, 17). But when those descendants were redeemed from Egypt by God in a miraculous way and brought right to the gates of Canaan (Kadesh), they still did not believe that God was mighty enough to live up to His promise fully. The men of war, those who were registered for military duty, apparently led the way in their unbelief—as though God needed their masculine power to fulfill His promise to Abraham!
The ten unbelieving spies were the first ones to be punished. They died immediately (Num. 14:36-7). In the course of the next 38 years, the men of war were punished. They died out gradually and were buried outside Canaan, in the wilderness (Num. 26:64-5; Deut. 2:14).

As for the people as a whole, not every group was punished with equal severity. Surely not all the women and girls from the time of Kadesh died. Not all the Levites die either. The young men under twenty, under the age of military registration, did not have to die either. But when baby boys were born after the events at Kadesh, God did not want to see them circumcised—at least, not for the present. This part of Israel would have to do without circumcision as a seal on His promise to give the land of Canaan to His people.

This was a cause of shame for the entire people of Israel. Faithful men like Joshua and Caleb must have suffered tremendously under it, even while recognizing that God was justified in withholding this seal on His promise.

At the same time, God probably had another reason for calling a halt to the circumcision of the Israelite boys. Circumcision makes us think not only of God, who thereby placed His seal on His covenant with Abraham, but also of the other party to the covenant, namely, Abraham and his descendants. For God’s covenant partners, circumcision was a symbolic deed through which they promised to keep God’s covenant faithfully on pain of being cursed, of being cut out of the land of the living. But hadn’t Israel’s men completely cast aside the right to strike such a note as they circumcised their sons? It was entirely understandable that God would not want to hear such a ground note from His people during the period of punishment. He no longer wanted to hear Israel call down curses upon it in case she should fail to keep the covenant.

This prohibition did not bring any honor upon Israel. In fact, it was a source of shame, even for the best of them. Hence the statement that Yahweh made to Joshua when the circumcisions were finally performed: “Today I have rolled away Egypt’s reproach from you” (5:9).

The words Egypt’s reproach might make us think of the many times we read about the scorn and reproach Egyptians and other peoples could utter about Yahweh, who managed to lead His people out of Egypt but could not bring them into the promised land, who in impotence would leave them to die out in the wilderness (Num. 14:13; Deut. 9:28). But this view is not correct; it overlooks the exact wording. What God said expressly at Gilgal—be sure to read it again for yourself—is that Egypt’s reproach was rolled away from Israel, from all the Israelites (“from you”—plural). He did not say that He was rolling Egypt’s reproach away from Himself. This view also fails to take into account the global intent of the reference to Egypt, which is really a reference to the time period in which the circumcision of baby Israelite boys was dropped. That was 40 years earlier, around the time of the exodus from Egypt.

In 5:9 and elsewhere, then, the word Egypt is used as a temporal reference. The Hebrew phrase Cherpah mitsraim does not mean “the reproach that rests upon you through Egypt.” It means “the reproach referred to here was not laid upon Yahweh by Egypt—or by the Egyptians, as we would be more inclined to say today. It was laid upon Israel by Yahweh. And that reproach had rested upon Israel
for a long time—roughly since the days of Egypt. To be more precise about it, it covered the famous “40 year” period, and thus went back almost 39 years.

Now, at Gilgal, God put an end to this reproach. The one who wounded Israel also healed her.

Pay careful attention to the time and place. When did God remove the reproach? When He led Israel across the Jordan in a truly miraculous way and brought her into the promised previous generation (see Num. 14:31). The masculine strength of the men registered for military duty was ignored by Yahweh during the 40-year period (Num. 14:32-5). Their sons, for whom they had felt so sorry, had now taken their place (5:7). Now scorned as out of reach, they could finally be circumcised. Indeed, now they had to be circumcised. It was the right psychological moment—“this day” (vs. 9).

Where did God catch up on all the circumcisions that had not been performed, thereby taking away the years of shame that He had allowed to rest on all of Israel? At Gilgal.

We saw earlier what Joshua had done at Gilgal. Opposite an ancient heathen circle of stones he erected a stone monument in honor of Yahweh. Now then, God chose a similar course of action.

Verse 9b can be translated as follows: “Therefore He (Yahweh) called that place a gilgal to this day.” There is no definite article before gilgal.

Earlier we saw that whenever the Hebrew word gilgal is used as the name of the place, it is always preceded by a definite article (haggilgal instead of gilgal). When God spoke of “a gilgal,” He was alluding of course, to the ancient Canaanite name. But He left out the definite article. By doing so, He have that ancient word a new meaning. Now the word would no longer make people think of the ancient holy place of the Canaanites but of a great deed of Yahweh. It was at Gilgal, after all, that He had dropped His long-standing criticism of Israel, which had been a source of great shame to Israel. He had simply rolled Israel’s shame aside. The root consonants for the Hebrew verb for roll are g-l-l. Immediately we sense a connection with the word gilgal (g-l-g-l). There is a play on words here.

Earlier I pointed out that verse (b can e translated as: “And He Yahweh called that place. . .” But the Hebrew permits another translation: “and people called that place. . .” It may well be that the author deliberately expressed himself in a somewhat ambiguous manner here, as we see from the phrase he adds—“to this day,” which means from then on. The new meaning was the only valid meaning for Israel, the definitive meaning. From then on the name Gilgal would remind people how Yahweh had rolled aside the shame of His people. It was at Gilgal that things were finally made right between God and Israel again.

Our passage concludes with two more reports. One concerns the first Passover the Israelites celebrated setting foot in the Promised Land. After what we learned about the connection between circumcision and the Passover, it hardly needs to be said that the Israelites did not celebrate the Passover in the wilderness after the events at Kadesh. After Kadesh Israel still had plenty of men who bore the seal of circumcision—think of Joshua and Caleb and all the Levites—but the shame of the uncircumcised rested on the entire people. Hence the celebration of the Passover on the fourteenth day
of the first month of the year 41 must have been the first time in 39 years. Yahweh had just opened the way to such a celebration. That’s why the author tells us the following three things in the following order in Joshua 5:1-12.

(1) First he tells us about the great fear that had come over the Canaanites. That fear was even greater than the words of Rahab had suggested (2:9). Apparently it had been increased by Israel’s amazing crossing of the Jordan.

The fear of the Canaanites is what the author begins with in Chapter 5. There are some interpreters who see 5:1 as an extension of chapter 4, arguing that it tells us about the consequences of the crossing of the Jordan. There are others who insist on putting it with chapter 5, arguing that the author was using it to turn aside an objection that might be raised. It might be argued that Joshua would never have dared to risk circumcising so many men at the same time. He must have known that this would render a good part of his army useless in case of an attack. And they were camped near the Canaanite city of Jericho!

It’s true that the immediate result of circumcision is that the one who has undergone it is unable to fight for a while. Think of how Simeon and Levi murdered the men of Shechem (Gen. 34). But Joshua was simply carrying out God’s orders. Apparently Yahweh even decreed that this mass circumcision was to be performed in a ceremonial manner—with knives were to be used even though the Israelites knew how to work with bronze, as we know from the metals used in the tabernacle.

God was probably going back to an ancient, honorable custom when He insisted on knives of stone. The circumcisions performed at Gilgal were to be especially impressive. After all, it was a historic moment.

In any event, Joshua cannot be accused of recklessness here. Perhaps we can best understand 5:1 as a transitional verse through which the author wanted to say: “The fear felt by the inhabitants of Canaan grew so much as a result of the miraculous crossing of the Jordan that not one of them dared to reach out and strike Israel when Israel lay partially without defense at Gilgal.” The inhabitants referred to include the Canaanites and the Amorites, the people who lived in the plains and the hill country (Num. 13:29). This fear had preceded Israel into Canaan as a fulfillment of God’s promise (Ex. 23:27; Deut. 2:25; 11:25). The inhabitants of Canaan must have understood that some power transcending the earth was in the process of taking their land away from them and giving it to others.

(2) The author turns next to the circumcisions performed at Gilgal (5:2-9). We have said enough about this.

(3) Then comes the report that Israel celebrated the Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month of the year 41 (vs. 10).

Are we supposed to accept this order as chronological? Did the circumcision of the man take place between the tenth and fourteenth days?
I am inclined to answer these questions in the affirmative. Otherwise, what would be the point of reporting these three events in the series discussed above?

Such strong objections have been raised against this interpretation that some scholars have raised the possibility that the circumcision took place before the crossing of the Jordan. This suggestion seems indefensible to me. The premise used to support it is that circumcision (the cutting away of the foreskin of the penis, which is a painful operation) would leave the men in question so weak and sick that it would be impossible for them to take part in the Passover.

Even if we agreed that someone who was circumcised on the tenth or eleventh would not be able to join in the Passover on the evening of the fourteenth—which does not seem unreasonable, given what we read in Genesis 34:25—this objection is not to the point. We do not know whether the newly circumcised men took part in the Passover; the Bible doesn’t tell us anything about this matter. We do know that in later days, the Passover was not always celebrated by all the Israelites; the absence of some did not hold back the celebration. There is also the possibility that a second Passover was celebrated a little later (see Num. 9). But we do know that the Passover was celebrated by the people, by Israel. The Passover was possible and permitted again, for Israel no longer had uncircumcised men in her midst. The shame which all the Israelites, including the most faithful, had long suffered had now been removed by the same had that had placed that shame on Israel in the first place, that is, by the hand of God.

Thus the three things reported in 5:1-12 follow in a logical order. There could be no Passover without circumcision, just as we do not offer communion or the Lord’s Supper to those who have never been baptized. Since there is a logical order, it is likely that it also represents a chronological order.

The author reports that the Israelites celebrated the Passover very soon after entering the land of Canaan, but he does not expand on this matter. The reason why he kept his report short would be apparent to any Israelite reader. The celebration came as no surprise. Yahweh had decreed: “When you enter the land that Yahweh gives you, just as He said He would, you shall maintain this service” (Ex. 12:25).

For Joshua and the people, the celebration of that first Passover in Canaan in the year 41 was simply an act of obedience to a long-standing command, a command that they could now obey again to their heart’s content since God had removed the obstacle. Moreover, had they ever before experienced things that cried out so much for a Passover celebration? That first celebration in Canaan would be a date to remember.

If ever the promises of God and the faith of men fit together smoothly, it was then. Israel had arrived in the land of promise. Her unbelief had been shown for what it was.

Now we come to the last report in our passage. To deal with it properly, we should first refresh our memories about the regulations laid down in Leviticus 23:4-14 with regard to the celebration of the Passover.
The celebration was to take place by the sanctuary. Therefore we should not create a problem about whether the Israelites at Gilgal smeared blood on their doorframes—which would have been impossible since they had no doors. This need not be a problem at all (Ex. 23:14-17; 34:23-4). The command about blood on the doorframe applied to Israel only in Egypt.

Later the Passover lamb was to be slaughtered by the sanctuary—not at home (Deut. 16:5-8). We may take it that the sanctuary—or at least an altar—was first set up properly at Gilgal.

To celebrate the Passover meal was to celebrate a peace offering meal. As you consider the first Passover celebrated by Israel on Canaan’s soil, think especially of the circumcisions that had been performed and of the blood that flowed because of the Passover sacrifice. Things had been set right again between Yahweh and His people. At the peace offering meal (which is like the Lord’s Supper), Israel received a paradisal foretaste of what was to come. Even Canaan was only a down payment on the eventual inheritance of the entire cosmos (Rom. 4:13) by Christ, Abraham’s Son, and by all who believe in Him and in God’s promise (Matt. 28:18; John 5:27; Heb. 1:2; 10:13; Rev. 21:1).

The slaughter of the Passover lamb and the celebration of the Passover meal must have taken place on the evening of the fourteenth of the month Abid (or Nisan). The next day, the fifteenth, was the beginning of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Moreover, it was a full Sabbath. The day after that, the sixteenth, the first fruits of the new harvest must have been presented to Yahweh (Lev. 23:10-11). Until that day, Israel was not allowed to eat any bread or roasted or dry grain form the new harvest (Lev. 23:14).

Those were the rules laid down at Horeb. Israel, under the leadership of Joshua and Eliazar, would have observed those rules scrupulously.

What did Israel do on those successive days? As we have said, on the fourteenth of Nisan the Passover meal was held. The fifteenth was a day of Sabbath rest. On the sixteenth the first fruits of the harvest were presented to the Yahweh. On the seventeenth—and no sooner—the Israelites ate for the first time of the fruits of the land. What they ate was unleavened bread and roasted grain, for it was the week of unleavened bread.

If someone should ask what grain the Israelites used for their unleavened bread, which must have been eaten at the Passover meal too, we can answer only with a guess. It may be that the Israelites still possessed supplies of grain that they had bought during the journey from Kadesh to the Jordan (Deut. 2:6). It is also possible that they took grain for the Amorites east of the Jordan (Sihon and Og) as spoils of war. It could even be that the unleavened bread was made of the manna that God still faithfully provided.

With this the author of Joshua arrives at the last point to be reported in our passage. It almost seems that the whole story leads up to it. “And the manna stopped falling by day after they had eaten of the produce of the land. After that there was no more manna for the Israelites. In that year they ate of the produce of the land of Canaan” (5:12).
On the eighteenth of Nisan, then, God put an end to the shower of manna which He had so faithfully sent to Israel during all the years of her stay in the wilderness, even when the people seized the occasional opportunity to eat food of some other kind (Ex. 16:4-36; Deut. 8:3). From God’s own hand, Israel now ate the grain of the land God had promised her for so long.

As the congregation of the new covenant, we can learn from this passage how pleased God is when we follow the path of His Spirit, that is, the path of faith in His gospel Word, which He seals with baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Let it never become necessary for Him to say to us: “You don’t like My promise? Then I won’t give you My seals either. You don’t want them? I won’t even let you have them.”

But those who walk the way of the Spirit may be sure that three privileges are theirs: God’s almighty protection (5:1), His generous rehabilitation (vs. 2-9), and His royal blessing (vs. 10-12).

Ch. 18: The Coming of the Commander (5:13-15)

In 5:13-6:27 we read about the beginning of the battle that Israel had to fight against the Canaanites. God Himself had opened the war against them when He destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboim (Gen. 18:19; Deut. 29:23). After waiting for the measure of the unrighteousness of Canaan’s inhabitants to become full (Gen. 15:16), God laid on Israel the task of fully exterminating these disobedient people. Israel was to carry out the ban over them (Deut. 7:2) because of their godlessness (Num. 33:50-6; Deut. 9:5). And Israel was never to relent in this work—not even for a moment. There would have to be an absolute division between Israel and the disobedient Canaanites (Lev. 18:3; 20:25; Heb. 11:31). As a warning against future contact with the population of Canaan, God had said to Israel repeatedly at Horeb: “Be holy, for I am holy.”

The holiness of Yahweh was now going to consume the inhabitants of Canaan like a fire. God’s war against Canaan was about to begin.

Even though Israel was to be a willing sword in the hand of Yahweh, it would be Yahweh Himself who would make war on Canaan. Yes, Yahweh Himself was the warrior, the Commander. He was the one who would make the battle plan and decide on the weapons to be used in the assault.

The story of Yahweh’s war and the capture of Jericho can be divided into four parts. In 5:13-15 we are told about the coming of the Commander. In 6:1-5 the battle plan is made known (Ch. 19). In 6:6-25, the battle plan is carried out as Jericho is captured (Ch. 20). At the end of Joshua 6, a decree is issued about the ruins of Jericho, which are to be left untouched as an abiding warning (Ch. 21).

“It happened when Joshua was at Jericho” (5:13). That’s literally what the text says. Joshua was at Jericho, or in Jericho.
From this literal reading we need not assume that these verses tell us about a vision Joshua had, in which he found himself within Jericho’s walls. We know that the Israelite camp was at Gilgal.

On a certain day Joshua left the camp and started walking toward Jericho. He did not stop until he found himself within the territory that belonged to the city of Jericho. That’s what verse 13 means when it says that he was at Jericho or in Jericho. We should not assume that he was actually standing on that small bit of land enclosed within Jericho’s city walls. Later, when Jericho no longer had city walls, it was still said of people that they were “at” Jericho (see II Sam. 10:5).

We are not told why Joshua went from Gilgal to Jericho. The most likely explanation is that he was struggling to understand how the walled city was to be captured by the Israelites. Where would be the best point to attack the walls? We saw earlier that the two spies who ended up at Rahab’s house were busy with the same question.

While Joshua was busy thinking up a battle plan for the coming campaign, the Angel of Yahweh appeared to him. This led to major changes in his strategy.

I use the term Angel of Yahweh deliberately. In our discussion of Genesis, we saw why the appearance to Joshua at Jericho must be accepted as an appearance of the Angel of Yahweh. It’s true that the Man whom Joshua saw is not given this title. But His drawn sword makes us think of the Angle of Yahweh who stood up for Israel against Balaam with a drawn sword in his hand (Num. 22:23). Judges 2:1-5 points back to this appearance of the Angel to Joshua when the Angel complains about Israel’s unfaithfulness to her promise never to get involved with the Canaanites. That agreement had already been made at Horeb (see the book of the covenant—Ex. 23:20-33), but it was confirmed in a powerful way by the figure that appeared to Joshua in the shadow of Jericho’s walls.

Through this encounter, Israel was definitively placed alongside Yahweh and over against the Canaanites. When Joshua asked the Man with the drawn sword whether He was one of the Israelites or one of their enemies, He answered by saying: “No, but I am the ruler of the army of Yahweh. Now I have come.”

By these words the man might have meant to say that He was the ruler of the angels of Yahweh. Sometimes the Israelites are called the “hosts (plural) of Yahweh (Ex. 7:4; 12:41), but not the “host (singular) of Yahweh.” The army of God’s angels, however, is sometimes referred to as the “host of Yahweh” (Ps. Singular (tsaba) and the plural (tseba’ oth), then we see that the angels are not the only ones included. There are also the stars (Deut. 17:3). Think of the use that God made of the heavenly bodies to help Israel in the struggle against the Canaanites (Josh 10:11). In the 40 years preceding the entry to Canaan, He also used the heavenly bodies as part of His “host.”

Very deliberately the Man said to Joshua: “Now I have come.” The emphasis falls on the word now. Just what the Man meant by this word we are not told expressly. If we take its meaning somewhat broadly, it could refer to the time of Israel’s entry into Canaan. If we look for a more specific, limited meaning, we find it in the shame that Yahweh removed from Israel when the mass circumcision took
place at Gilgal. Israel had now become a warrior whom Yahweh could accept as His ally in the battle against the Canaanites.

Yes, we can speak of Yahweh here. After making the usual deep bow, Joshua threw himself to the ground before the Man, as people in the ancient Near East customarily did when they met someone of special distinction. The Commander of the army of the Lord then let Joshua know with whom he was dealing. He did so by issuing a command: “Take your shoes from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy.” These are almost the very same words that Yahweh spoke to Moses when he stood before the burning bush at Horeb (Ex. 3:5).

The Man Joshua faced was the ruler of the army of Yahweh and at the same time Yahweh Himself, just as our Lord Jesus Christ was sent by God but at the same time was God Himself. The Malak (Angel) of Yahweh did not only speak in the name of Yahweh as His adjutant by also as Yahweh Himself.

Only in bare feet were the priests allowed to go about their work in Yahweh’s sanctuary. Therefore when the Man ordered Joshua to remove his shoes, it must have been clear to him at once who the Man standing before him really was. It was Yahweh Himself. He appeared to Joshua not in the tabernacle but within sight of Jericho, the first city inside the land of Canaan, to which His own hand had led Israel. Jericho, the gateway to the land of the Canaanites, was an eloquent place to put in an appearance.

God had some scores to settle with the disobedient Canaanites. He wanted to throw them out of the land that was now overflowing with their iniquities. And He wanted to turn the land over to Israel as a pure, clean land.

Joshua had experienced an encounter with God Himself, with the Son of God (as we know from later revelation), with the Angel of Yahweh, whose coming to the earth was to be announced by John the Baptist, according to Malachi 3 and 4. The Word was to become flesh. But how different that coming of God’s Son would be.

When God’s Son appeared to Joshua, it was for purposes of judgment—judgment against Canaan! Within a few days He would make the earth shake (the walls of Jericho), and after that He would move heaven and earth (in the battles of Gibeon and Megiddo) to carry out His purposes. And these deeds would be no more than a sample of what God’s Son would do on the last day when He appeared as Christ Triumphant.

Things have not yet reached that point in our time. Christ is still in the interim period. This same powerful Angel of Yahweh, this Son of God, later appeared on earth as the Servant of Yahweh. He took on our flesh and blood to lie as a baby in a crib and to die as a man on the cross. He emptied Himself, writes Paul (Phil. 2:7). Because of His obedience, our Mediator was elevated to His throne in heaven, but He must still put up with much humiliation for the sake of His Body, the Church, which is still on earth. The idea of a Christ who already rules over the kings of the earth, which has been embraced by both Protestants and Roman Catholics, is unbiblical and is in flagrant conflict with the suffering of Christians.
of all ages. We are still living in the time of Christ the Savior. But this is only an interim period. Soon God’s Son will appear as Christ Triumphant to cleanse and purify not just one land but the entire earth.

Ch. 19: The Battle Plan Is Made Known (6:1-5)

We should not let the division of the Bible into chapters play tricks on us as we consider the story of Jericho. The narrator simply continues with the same story after reporting on Yahweh’s appearance to Joshua. When we read in 6:2 that Yahweh spoke to Joshua, we are told words addressed to Joshua during that appearance. We do not know how Yahweh communicated with Joshua on other occasions, but in this case we do know. God appeared to Joshua in the form of a man and talked to him about the conquest of Jericho.

By now we know enough about the narrative style of the book of Joshua not to be thrown off course by the fact that a new piece of information (6:1) appears in the middle of this report. The information clarifies what follows.

What 6:1 tells us is that Jericho was completely closed. Why? We could better ask: Against whom? Against the Israelites, of course. Naturally the inhabitants of Jericho thought that the Israelites would try to undermine their walls in order to storm the city. The two spies and Joshua himself had indeed been thinking in those terms.

But Yahweh had another plan. He was going to use an entirely different strategy. The city would indeed be stormed by the Israelites, which would mean a battle (see 24:11), but the victory was already assured, for Yahweh would take care of the walls personally. It is significant that the ten doubting spies had made so much of those walls, both literally and figuratively, 40 years before (Deut. 1:28).

God’s strategy was an unusual one: He started at the end, with the victory. “Behold, I give Jericho and her king into your (singular) hand. Strong heroes!” (6:2). This was a sure promise addressed to Joshua personally. Here again we see how God gives gifts to His people through His promise.

Yahweh went on, and the narrator kept the report brief. He could afford to do so because some of the details would come through later in the account of the capture of Jericho. We will look ahead to this account (see Ch. 20) as we deal with the battle plan as explained to Joshua.

For six days in succession, Israel’s soldiers were to march around the city once. They were to be followed by seven priests blowing on seven ram’s horns, who would in turn be followed by the ark. Behind the ark would come the rear-guard. All the people in the procession were to remain silent—no talking or shouting. On the seventh day the procession would circle the city seven times. When that was done, Joshua would issue an order that the entire people could rejoice. Then, with continual trumpet blasts from the priests and shouts from the people, the city walls of Jericho would collapse. The soldiers
would then stream into the city across the fallen walls, each one entering form wherever he happened to be when the wall collapsed.

As you can see, then, God began and ended with the victory. Thus the Israelites could be sure of the outcome. It was theirs from the outset by virtue of the promise, even though they would have to ask for the victory and even fight for it. Today God’s promises to us are fulfilled in the same way: we must work and pray for the fulfillment.

The priests would ask and pray for the fulfillment of the promise by blowing on their ram’s horns. We read about this practice in Numbers 10:1-10. In normal circumstances the priests would make use of two silver trumpets. Sometimes the trumpet blasts symbolized God addressing man, and sometimes addressing God. In the latter case, the trumpet blasts of the priests would serve to make God think of Israel.

When it came to the conquest of Jericho, God did not have the priest blow on the two silver trumpets. That was out of the question, for He had other plans. He was going to have the ark carried around the city as a clear guarantee of Israel’s faith that God was in the midst of His people and that the conquest of Jericho would be mainly His work.

By bringing in the ark, God was also speaking the symbolic language bound up with the number seven. He wanted to give the Israelites the assurance the He would personally bring about the fall of Jericho.

In ancient times and in an international pattern of the association of ideas, the number seven brought covenant making to mind, which always included swearing by the gods. Now, the number seven was supposed to make the Israelites think of Yahweh alone because He was the only true God, the only one by whom Israel was allowed to swear. It was not without reason that seven was the key number in the law of the Sabbaths, with its seventh day, seven weeks, seventh month, seventh year, and forty-ninth year (Lev. 23-25). At Horeb God had already imprinted His divine signature on the number seven in the Ten Words, which included the commandment about the weekly Sabbath. Therefore the symbolic meaning of the seven priests, the seven ram’s horns, the seven days, and the seven circling of the city on the seventh day would be clear at once to every Israelite. Yahweh will surely hear our prayer and keep His promise.

Unfortunately, not all interpreters of Scripture have caught this meaning. There are some who think of the seven trumpets (of judgment) in Revelation 8:2. In taking this approach, they neglect to ask themselves what the blowing of the seven trumpets could have meant for the Israelites of Joshua’s day, who had no knowledge of the book of Revelation. Yet these Israelites did know about the institution of the blowing of trumpets as recorded in Numbers 10:1-10. They also knew about the significance of ram’s horns. This they learned from the teaching about the Sabbaths. On the first day of the seventh month, for example, a memorial (zikkaron teruah) or a day of rejoicing (yom teruah) would be proclaimed by blowing the ram’s horn as a trumpet. Thereby the people would ask God’s blessing over all that was to happen at the sanctuary during the seventh month (Lev. 23:23-5).
Some interpreters have raised questions about the priests’ role in the procession. Four were needed to carry the ark, and seven more blew the trumpets, for a total of eleven priests. Wasn’t that more priests than Aaron’s line could have produced?

This line of reasoning is not to the point. For one thing, we know from the story of Hophni and Phinehas that the ark could be carried by two priests (I Sam. 4:4). Moreover, Eleazar and Ithamar were old by then and must have had a fair number of sons and grandsons between them. When the covenant was made at Horeb (during year 1), their brothers Nadad and Abihu were already elders (Ex. 24:1, 9). If Eleazar and Ithamar were both around 40 at the time and both had two sons around fifteen years of age, these four priests, if they all had two sons each, would have had eight full-grown sons between them by the year 41. That would have made a total of twelve priests, plus Ithamar, plus the high priest Eleazar. The march around Jericho took only nine priests—two to carry the ark and seven to blow the trumpets.

We also have good reason to assume that many who were not part of Israel’s army, such as the men of Levi (see Num. 1:49-54), came along on the marches around Jericho. The narrator tells us first that at God’s command all the “men of war” were to march around the city (6:3). Later he says that the “armed men” were to march before the priests and the ark (vs. 7, 9). Finally he adds that the “rearguard” were to follow behind the priests and the ark (vs. 9, 13). If we assume that the “men of war” are the “armed men” who were to march before the priests and the ark, that leaves only priests, Levites, and men either too young or too old for military service to make up the rearguard.

Properly viewed, then, the march around the walls of Jericho was the work of all Israel, of all the people. This fits in with 6:7, where Joshua says to the people: “go forward and march around the city with the armed men ahead of the ark.” Thus those who were not armed were also allowed to march around the city, but they had to follow the ark in the procession. This also fits in with verse 10, where Joshua tells the people to make no sound during the march around Jericho. The people were not even to speak to each other, just as we do not speak during public prayer.

“The people” in Joshua 6 are made up only of male Israelites. Naturally there were no women and children marching around Jericho. They were not present either for the storming of the city on the seventh day, when each one was to enter the city from wherever he found himself when the walls collapsed.

All Israel, then, marched around Jericho—old and young men armed and unarmed. All who were able came along, thereby joining in the prayer. The people trusted in what Yahweh had promised to Joshua. That’s what faith is all about. It was by faith that the walls of Jericho were breached (Heb. 11:30). It would not have come about if the people had not pleaded with God for the realization of the promise made to Joshua.

On the very day the Yahweh appeared to Joshua on territory belonging to the city of Jericho, the first march around the city took place, We may take it that this first march was not made in the early morning hours.

The second was different in this respect. The next day the Israelites rose early in the morning (6:12). Even though Joshua was a careful man and understood that a commander must undertake careful preparations, we can learn from his example that believers are not to move ahead at a snail’s pace as they serve God.

On the seventh day the Israelites rose especially early—“at dawn” (vs. 15). That day they were to march around the city seven times, which would take a lot of time.

All the same, the instructions given by God were followed scrupulously. In effect the priests blowing the trumpets were leading Israel in public prayer. Only afterward, after the thirteenth circling of the city, did Joshua have the priests make a long, drawn-out sound with the ram’s horns—not a series of short blasts but a continuing blast. The broken, pleading, pressing “toot, toot, toot, toot” was replaced by a calm, continual, triumphant “too-oo-oo-oo-oot,” for the promised victory was now at hand. The moment had come when the Israelites could break their respectful silence. Now they were to raise their voices with loud rejoicing (vs. 5, 16). Jericho’s city wall collapsed under the shaking of God’s hand.

Right after the report of these events we read what Joshua said to the Israelites about the ban which was to be carried out against Jericho (6:17-19). We should not assume that Joshua actually gave these instructions at the last moment, between the time when the “toot, toot, toot” ended and the “too-oo-oo-oo-oot” began. In the course of the seven days, Joshua had plenty of opportunity to speak to Israel about the ban. But the narrator, because of his practical approach to storytelling, inserts these instructions at the point in the story when they take effect. His rather short report on what God said to Joshua (6:2-5) is supplemented by other remarks about the rearguard and about the importance of the people’s silence. He does the same thing here in the case of the ban. Another example of the same phenomenon appears later when the narrator tells us what Joshua said to the two spies about Rahab and her family. The instruction to the spies, of course, was not given at the last minute either. We could just as well translate 6:22a: “Now Joshua had said to the two men who had spied out the land. . . .”

We should give further attention to the ban as applied to Jericho. Jericho was to suffer the same punishment as the rest of Canaan, that is to say, no one was to be spared (Gen. 15:16; Deut. 7:2; 9:5). But this would not be enough in the case of Jericho. In the case of the rest of Canaan, the people were to be put to death, but their possessions could be spared (see Lev. 27:28-9). In Jericho’s case, however, even the animals were to be killed. As for the metal tools and implements, they were not to be taken by the Israelites for their own use. Instead they were to be collected and added to the treasure belonging to Yahweh in the tabernacle (see Num. 31:54). In 6:24 we read that the Israelites set the entire city on
fire. In the case of a complete ban, no one and nothing was to be spared. The fire would be allowed the last word (Deut. 13:15-18).

Whether Joshua extended the complete ban to Jericho on his own initiative we do not know. It could be that the Angel of Yahweh told him to do so. We read no such thing in the Bible, however the Bible does not record everything that God said and did.

The story of Jericho’s fall is a familiar one. After the seventh circling of the city on the seventh day, after the constant “toot, toot, toot, toot” by the seven priests, the moment finally arrived to which Yahweh had pointed when He appeared to Joshua. When the people heard the special sound of the horns, they were to rejoice loudly. The city wall would then collapse and they could climb over the rubble, each entering the city from wherever he found himself.

Joshua awaited this moment conscientiously, and the people with him. When it came, he was allowed to say to the people: “Rejoice, for Yahweh has given you the city.” Some scholars translate this text: “Rejoice, for Yahweh gives you the city.” They use the present tense instead of the past. The Hebrew text allows either translation. The emphasis falls not on the time but on the fact, on God’s deed.

God kept the promise given in 6:2, and the city walls collapsed. He heard the continuous prayers which the Israelites had raised for seven days. He did not put them to shame in their believing appeal to His covenant, nor did He leave Joshua looking foolish. He did what He had promised to do, for Israel took Him at His word. It was by this route—God’s promise and Israel’s response in faith fit together; they form a unity. Hebrews 11:30 mentions part of the encompassing whole when it says simply: “Through faith the walls of Jericho fell, after being circled for seven days.”

Earlier, when we dealt with the story of the two spies at Jericho (Ch. 12), we saw what eventually became of Rahab and her family. Just how Rahab and the members of her family, who were all in her house with her escaped injury when the city wall on which the house stood collapsed (2:15) we don’t know. The red cord no doubt enabled the two spies to keep an eye on Rahab’s house and to find it quickly when the battle began.

At Joshua’s command, Rahab and the members of her family were not brought into the Israelite camp at once (6:23). The reasons are obvious. There were to be no Israelite lepers within the camp of the saints, for lepers were symbolically dead (Num. 5:1-4). There were to be many measures taken before a young woman captured in wartime could be taken by an Israelite as his wife (Deut. 21:10-14). Moreover, we don’t know whether the male members of Rahab’s family were circumcised. If not, that would have to be taken care of first. It is also possible that Rahab and her family had been besmirched with blood during the bloodbath that took place around them, or that they came into contact with the bodies of the dead. We know that such people were not allowed at once into the Israelite camp; they first had to be purified with purification water, even if they were Israelite soldiers (Num. 19; 31:19). The “quarantine” imposed on Rahab and her family must have been shared by the Israelite soldiers who had executed the ban over Jericho.
Ch. 21: The Warning of the Ruins (6:26-27)

After Jericho’s fall, Joshua showed what a worthy successor to Moses he was: “Then Joshua had the people swear this oath: ‘Cursed be Yahweh who undertakes to rebuild this city of Jericho. He shall lay the foundation at the cost of his oldest son, and shall set up its gates at the cost of his youngest son.’”

W also read such language in the book of Deuteronomy. When the Israelites entered Canaan and arrived at the mountains Ebal and Gerizim, they were to pronounce a curse on anyone who transgressed the torah of Moses by committing this or that sin. The entire people were to respond by saying “Amen,” that is, “Agreed” (Deut. 27:11-16).

Joshua held a ceremony of this sort after the destruction of Jericho, even though Israel had not yet reached the mountains Ebal and Gerizim. But the first promising steps had already been taken down that road. The first Canaanite city had fallen to Israel.

We should not say that the Israelites, by applying the ban to this city, were giving it to Yahweh as an “offering of first fruits.” As far as we know, such offerings were made in Israel only from the livestock and what the fields and orchards yielded.

This type of sacrifice is not to be equated with what Yahweh Himself did in Jericho’s case. In a miraculous manner He made Jericho subject to Israel and thereby made the city a clear sign of His divine guarantee which Israel could depend on as long as she was obedient to the covenant. That divine decree was now answered by Joshua, who showed that he understood God’s intention by having the people swear an oath that they would never rebuild the walls and the city gates of Jericho. Jericho was to remain a monument testifying eloquently to God’s power and faithfulness. It was to be a warning against all Canaanitism—now and forever.

Pay careful attention to what the oath says. Joshua did not declare that Jericho was to lie there forever as a heap of ruins: Moses had declared that such punishment was to be meted out to any Israelite city guilty of idolatry (Deut. 13:16), but this did not extend to Canaanite cities (see 11:13).

Neither did Joshua say that no one was to build a house where Jericho had stood and live in it. Some Israelites did in fact take up residence there, with no objections from Joshua. Joshua himself later assigned Jericho to the Benjaminites as part of their inheritance (18:21). Jericho could be rebuilt—but on one condition. There were to be no city walls and no city gates. Jericho would be an open village. That’s what Joshua asked the people to promise, with a curse to follow breaking the promise.

In I Kings 16:34 we read that a certain Hiel who was from the notorious city of Bethel defied Joshua’s curse. He paid the price: it cost him his oldest and youngest sons. The text then points to the words Yahweh had spoken through Joshua.
We may take it that Joshua was acting fully in accord with God’s will when he asked the people to swear under oath that Jericho, which had just been conquered in an amazing manner, would never be rebuilt as a city. By swearing this oath, Joshua and Israel were acting on the covenant responsibilities they had assumed when Moses, acting in the name of Yahweh, made the Deuteronomy covenant with them in the fields of Moab, a covenant that forbade any contact with the Canaanites. The oath they swore would be binding for later generations. At Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, that commitment would be renewed and expanded. The oath concerning Jericho was only a beginning—but a good beginning. It came at an appropriate time, for the first city in the Promised Land had fallen.

The author of Joshua 6 tells us that this deed of Joshua’s met with God’s approval, and that God let that approval be felt in Joshua’s life. The chapter concluded by saying: “Yahweh was with Joshua, and his fame went through all the land.” In this way God further fulfilled the promise He made to Joshua after Moses’ death. “As I was with Moses, I will be with you. I will not leave you or forsake you” (1:5).

Ch. 22: Israel Commits “Maal” against Yahweh (Ch. 7)

Joshua 7 opens as follows: “But the Israelites committed maal with regard to the ban. Achan, the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some things that fell under the ban. That awakened the anger of Yahweh against the Israelites.”

I have deliberately left the word maal un-translated. We came across this word earlier. We read, for example, that Moses and Aaron committed maal against Yahweh at the water of Kadesh in the year 40 (Deut. 32:51). They acted in a high-handed way toward the congregation of Israel and failed to honor Yahweh before His people, making Him look like the kind of tyrant that the pagans pictured in their minds when they thought of their idols. They had failed to give Yahweh His due, and therefore they simply had to be punished. Not long after this sin, both Moses and Aaron were dead; they both died in the year 40. Achan, of course died even more quickly after committing his sin.

To understand properly just what sin, what maal, Achan had committed we must go back to Horeb and focus our attention on the teaching about guilt offerings. This means that we must also look briefly at the teaching about sin offerings (Lev. 4:1—5:13).

These offerings were to remind Israel of the “foundation of the world.” Israel had been placed by God on the elevated foundation of His Horeb covenant. If she departed from that basis, she would tumble into the depths of heathendom, corruption and death. She even had to be careful not to get too close to the edge of this way of life with Yahweh, just as it is dangerous for a child to walk close to the edge of the sidewalk adjacent to the road. That’s why it was necessary for a healed leper, for example, to make a sin offering. Leprosy, after all, symbolizes death. A woman who had just given birth also had to make a sin offering. Even someone who had unintentionally or only symbolically crossed the holy boundary and stepped outside the covenant zone was obliged to make a sin offering.

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But for someone who had really and actually left the force field of the Horeb covenant there was no possibility of atonement. For idolatry and worship of idols, for giving offense to Yahweh and His good name, for violating the weekly Sabbath, for grave disobedience to one’s father and mother, for murder, for adultery, for assault, and for kidnapping there was no sin offering possible. Those who committed such sins were to be put to death. (Why, then, are so many Christians in favor of abolishing the death penalty?)

For other wrongs that were done, atonement was still possible. Guilt offerings had been instituted for this purpose (Lev. 5:14—6:7). If someone did not meet his obligations to Yahweh or to his neighbor, that is, if he committed maal, he could make a guilt offering. Even if someone had deliberately done his neighbor an injustice—thus, for example, is always deliberate—a guilt offering was possible. Even if someone unintentionally held back something of the harvest of the land that he owed to Yahweh, that is, a “holy offering” (Lev. 5:14-15; Num. 18:9-18), a guilt offering could be made. Thus, not all maal against Yahweh or one’s neighbor called for the death penalty.

We need not look in the Horeb torah for an atoning offering that could be offered by committing such sins as the ones mentioned above (idolatry and so forth). No such offering was possible. Not even a guilt offering would do any good. If the transgression was an unintentional violation of the rights of Yahweh, a guilt offering could be made, but when it came to the holiest things of all, they were reserved irrevocably for Yahweh. This included the fields that had freely been given to Yahweh (Lev. 27:28-9). These fields were forever under a (voluntary) ban. But there could also be cases where the ban was compulsory. Moses had commanded that if an Israelite city became guilty of idolatry, it was to be completely burned—people and animals and possessions (Deut. 13:12-18). Nothing was to be spared, and no one was to take anything for himself. Such a city would remain in ruins forever (Deut. 13:17).

The sin committed by Achan must be viewed in the light of these provisions of the law.

That a sin had been committed first became apparent when the party sent by Joshua to capture Ai suffered a defeat. We should not argue that this defeat was caused in part by recklessness on Joshua’s part. Joshua did not assume that Israel could capture Ai on her own strength without God’s help. That was not why he sent spies to Ai. Neither should we accuse the spies of false pride for reporting that Israel would not need its entire army to capture the town. The men were simply speaking the truth; Ai was not a major city. The city’s name closely resembles the Hebrew word for ruin. It appears that the city of Ai as it existed in Joshua’s day covered only a small part of the land once occupied by a much larger city. The name of the earlier city is not known.

The city that Israel set out to capture had a population of only twelve elaphim (8:25), including men, women, and children. The question arises here whether the term eleph (plural: elaphim) must be understood as 1000 or a much smaller group. The latter, it seems to me, for a city of 12,000 would not have been regarded as a small town in ancient times. Moreover, when the term eleph is used in the rest of Joshua 7 and 8, it does not mean 1000. When we are told that Joshua hid five elaphim of soldiers to set up an ambush (8:12), we can hardly think of 5000 men. A group that large cannot so easily be
hidden. When we understand the word eleph in Joshua 7 and 8 to mean a group considerably less than 1000, the whole story becomes much easier to understand and explain.

The men Joshua sent out suffered a stunning defeat at the hands of this small population, whose location we cannot even pinpoint today. About three elaphim of men set out for Ai. Thirty-six of them were killed in the battle. This number of causalities made a tremendous impression on the Israelites. This, too, suggests that the three elaphim were three groups whose total strength was far below 3000. In a much smaller assault force, 36 dead is a much more striking total.

When we then hear Joshua complaining to God that Israel could better have stayed east of the Jordan than to be exterminated west of the Jordan by the inhabitants of Canaan, we must not suspect this faithful believer of using the same insolent language of unbelief as the murmuring Israelites used forty years before at Kadesh (Num. 13-14). Even if his starting point was wrong—I'll say more about that later—he drew from it only the obvious. Israel was indeed small in number when compared to the population of Canaan (Deut. 7:2, 7). Moreover, Joshua spoke as an upright believer when he complained about the shame that would rest on God’s great name if Israel was wiped out. Moses had prayed the same sort of prayer (Ex. 32:12; Num. 14:13-16; Deut. 9:26-9), and God had not taken it ill of Moses.

Yet, this time Yahweh did respond with a reprimand. He said: “Arise. What are you (singular) doing there, lying on the ground?” (7:10) the emphasis falls on the word you.

Yahweh must have expected something different from such a man as Joshua. After all, hadn’t He expressly enjoined Joshua always to abide by the teaching of Moses? Then Joshua would surely succeed in whatever he undertook (1:7). But now Joshua had not succeeded at all. What other conclusion could he draw from this than that he had sinned against the torah of Moses? And since he could declare with a clear conscience that he was not personally guilty of any such transgression, he would have to conclude that someone else had acted contrary to the torah of Moses. What promise had Moses given when he acted for Yahweh in renewing the Horeb covenant in the fields of Moab? It was a promise that looked ahead to Israel’s wars, namely that if Israel remained faithful to God’s covenant, she would succeed in putting her enemies to flight (Deut. 28:7). But if Israel was unfaithful, it would be just the other way around: Israel would do the fleeing (Deut. 28:5). Now the Israelites had fled before the men of Ai, and a number of Israelites lay dead on the ground unburied (see Deut. 28:26). Joshua should have been able to draw the conclusion that God’s covenant had been transgressed by someone or other.

This, then, was Joshua’s mistake. But let’s not call it a full-fledged sin. At most it was the sin of thoughtlessness. Perhaps Joshua was the type of person who reacts very quickly. Such people often forget to think things over before taking action; another example of thoughtlessness in Joshua’s life was his response to the Gibeonites (Ch. 9).

Finally, as we assess Joshua’s response, we should not overlook the painful circumstances. Some 36 men had been lost out of a small force of a few hundred or less. What if the other inhabitants of Canaan should hear about this humiliating defeat? Didn’t Israel’s position look precarious?
This explanation of Joshua’s response is confirmed by what Yahweh went on to say to Joshua. Israel had sinned—and in a big way. It was not just a matter of failing to give someone his due—whether it is man or God and the holy things reserved for Him. If that had been the problem, a guilt offering to atone for the sin would have been possible. No, Israel had gone much further. She had despised God’s covenant, just as an idolater does, or one who violates the Sabbath, or one who assaults others—all sinners for whom God did not permit an atoning offering (7:11a).

Just what sin had Israel committed? God spelled it out. Israel had stolen. It was not a minor theft, leaving open the possibility of a guilt offering. Israel had stolen things that were extremely holy, things that had been devoted to Yahweh through the ban over Jericho. Joshua had forbidden any such thing when he said: “But all of you, keep yourselves from all that falls under the ban and do not take any of it away, thereby bringing Israel’s camp under the ban and plunging Israel into misery” (6:18). Despite Joshua’s words, it had happened. Someone had taken something devoted to Yahweh and secretly brought it to his tent (7:11b). That was the reason for Israel’s defeat (vs. 12). A “foolishness in Israel” has been committed, Yahweh explained (vs. 15). The word used for “foolishness” here (nebalah) is often used to refer to sexual misconduct (see Gen. 34:7; Deut. 22:21). It does not just mean stupidity but points to an evil through which the foundation of Israel’s existence was undermined. The love relationship between Yahweh and Israel had been affected by it.

The nature of the sin committed by Achan becomes clearer when we look at the punishment it leads to, a punishment commanded by God Himself (7:15). The Israelites stoned him. They also stoned his sons and daughters. Then the whole family together with their tent, their animals and all their possessions were burned (7:25).

We should not assume that this punishment conflict with Deuteronomy 24:16, where we read that children are not to be put to death for the sins of their fathers, but that people are to be put to death for their own sins. In this passage Moses is speaking about the ninth commandment, which deals with relationships between people. In the case of such transgressions, parents were not to be punished for the sins of their children—or for children for the sins of their parents. But the issue in Achan’s case is a direct sin against God. The goods Achan had taken (gold, silver and a Babylonian mantle) were later placed “before the face of Yahweh” (7:23), in front of or in the tabernacle. Maal had been committed, not against a man but against God, in fact, directly against Yahweh. Moreover, the transgression was not unintentional—for then a guilt offering would have been possible—but intentional, deliberate. At issue was the covenant made at Horeb. Israel, Yahweh’s vassal, had in principle made common cause with the Canaanite enemy, the enemy that Yahweh had just called her to exterminate in the war of conquest. Yahweh’s covenant partner was guilty of treason, covenant breaking. That’s why Yahweh was so angry, and that’s why He issued a command that the guilty party, along with everything that belonged to him, was to be burned.

Some scholars have pointed out that Achan’s wife was not mentioned in the list of those who were executed. It has therefore been suggested that Achan was a widower, which was entirely possible. The fact that no wife of Achan is mentioned in Joshua 7 among those who were punished must be due to the very careful use that the author of the book made of the data at his disposal (vs. 24). Yet we
should also leave open the possibility that the author regarded the inclusion of Achan’s wife in the sentence as too obvious to require separate mention. There is precedent for such a thing in written records in the ancient Near East.

The sons and daughters of Achan, however, are mentioned explicitly. Some scholars, however, argue that they were dragged to the place of execution only to witness their father’s death—not to be put to death themselves. This view is defended by an appeal to the Septuagint and other early translation of the Bible. In the Hebrew Bible we read that Achan’s children were stoned, burned, and buried under a heap of stones (7:25). The Septuagint, on the other hand, says that Achan was taken to the Valley of Achor “and his sons, his daughters, his cattle, his tent, and all his possession.” The place the Septuagint gives to Achan’s sons and daughters in the middle of this series should give us reason to think; it does not say specifically that they were executed. That piece of information was somehow left out. If it was done because the execution of Achan’s children seems offensive, we can understand the motive, but we should not approve the altered reading. The Septuagint reading is justified only if it is based on a different Hebrew text than the one that has come down to us as the oldest and most reliable. If the Septuagint reading is a deliberate alteration motivated by feeling, the Septuagint translators did not fully take to heart the instruction contained in the torah of Moses but let themselves be misled by a mistaken (probably Greek) spirit.

We saw that according to the doctrine of the sin offering, there is no reconciliation possible for sins that destroy the covenant basis, the basis on which Israel was placed at the “foundation of the world” at Horeb.

The Torah also teaches that the punishment of such sins is not limited to those who commit the sin but also extends to their children and grandchildren. Even the fourth generation is mentioned in the second commandment. Dothan and Abiram, along with their wives and children were swallowed up by the earth (Num. 16:27, 32-3). And Moses instructed Israel that if an Israelite city became guilty of Idolatry and the worship of idols, it was to be placed under the ban. Not one of its inhabitants was to be spared (Deut. 13:15).

We can rest assured that Joshua and his contemporaries did not shudder at the thought of executing Achan along with his children in quite the way that later generations have. When a sovereign ruler in ancient times made a covenant with his vassal, the vassal had to swear an oath of (conditional) curse over himself and his people. In the covenant between the Hittite king Mursilis II and Duppi-Tessub-Amurru we read the following covenant threat: “As for the words of this covenant and the oath inscribed in this tablet. . . . if Duppi-Tessub does not honor the words of this covenant, then may the gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub, together with his person, his wife, his son, and his grandson, his house, his land, and all he possesses.”

Such language, which recognizes the solidarity of the generations, is more Biblical than the individualism that sees each human being as essentially unconnected to any other. On a number of occasions, Moses and Joshua spoke such language to their contemporaries.
Both the story of Jericho’s conquest (Ch. 6) and the sorry aftereffects (Ch. 7) taught Israel a grave lesson about God’s covenant and the strict loyalty required of the people of Yahweh.

In the conquest of Canaan, Israel was following where Yahweh led. Thus her task was secondary (Ps. 44:1-9). Israel was assigned the task of a subordinate ally, a vassal who had to obey the decrees issued by the sovereign or suzerain. There was to be no thought of desertion, of sabotage, of betrayal, of joining with the Canaanites in their accursed religion, culture, social-economic life, sexual practices, and so forth. Yet the story of Achan’s transgression right after the amazing collapse of Jericho’s walls shows that the Israelites did move in this accursed direction. That’s what Joshua 7 tells us.

We must pay careful attention to the place this chapter occupies in the Bible. It comes up early in that section of Scripture called “the Prophets.” All too often we hear the complaint in “the Prophets” that Israel did not take the Torah’s warnings against Canaanitism to heart but made common cause with God’s enemies and adopted their practices. Israel did so despite the ancient heap of stones in the valley of Achor (the name later given to the valley in which Achan was stoned. The valley was named after the man who had plunged Israel into misery. The Hebrew name of the valley means destroyer or cause of trouble.)

In later days, when Hosea and Isaiah talked about the time of Israel’s restoration, they looked back to Israel’s very first days in Canaan. Israel’s conduct in the promised land had not gotten off to a very good start, as we see form the story of Achan and his execution in the Valley of Achor. But Israel’s future would be just as beautiful as her beginning had been horrible (Is. 65:10; Hos. 2:14), thanks to the unfathomable mercy of God.

For us there is no other hope.

Joshua 7 warned Israel again not to ally itself with the abominable Canaanite world with its idolatry and moral degeneracy. If she did, she would feel God’s covenant wrath for generations.

The warning applies just as much to today’s Christians—if not more. As soon as someone trifled with Moses’ torah (through Canaanite immorality, injustice or lovelessness), he was heavily punished and found out how horrible it is to fall in the hands of the living God. Think how much more heavily we will be punished if we show contempt for the Son of God and scorn the Spirit of grace. That’s the language that Hebrews 10 addresses to Christians. The apostle Jude even warned his fellow Christians in his letter about the garment spotted by the flesh (vs. 22). This is an image with much to say to us. If only we had been on guard against the alluring “Babylonian garment”—heathen, Gnostic, seemingly profound language about God and His creation; and also against the false gold and silver of moralistic Judaism without grace, which is in essence just as heathen.

We begin speaking about God in a Canaanite manner, and our conduct also follows the Canaanite example. We start talking about going over to the other side, about making common cause with the other side. Then we slip into unfaithfulness, lying, adultery, covenant breaking—maal.
Countries that used to be called Christian now reek of sins that cry out to heaven like the blood of defenseless infants. People there shudder as they face the future—for good reason.

“There has been poured over us the curse sworn with an oath, which is written in the torah of Moses, the servant of God, for we have sinned” (Dan. 9:11). Yet there is still blessing awaiting us, according to Hebrews 10—provided we base our prayers to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ not on our righteousness but exclusively on His great mercy (Dan. 9:18).

Is there still hope for Achan? The final judgment is not ours to make. Even Joshua’s condemnation of Achan was only an earthly punishment. The final judgment belongs to Joshua’s great namesake, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Achan committed maal. But Moses and Aaron also committed maal. They did not speak rightly of God before His congregation. Is there anyone who dares to doubt the eternal destiny of Moses?
Ch. 23: A Strategy for Ai (8:1-9)

Joshua 8 can be divided into two parts. In verses 1-9 we are told about God’s instructions to Joshua in preparation for capturing Ai. In the rest of the chapter we are told how Joshua carried out those orders (chapter 24).

This division, like others in the book of Joshua, is not watertight. We must bear in mind the practical approach of the narrator. Here and there he jumps ahead: while dealing with God’s instructions to Joshua he may go on to say something about how Joshua carried out his orders. On the other hand, when dealing with the execution of the plan, he throws in a few further details about the instructions Joshua was given.

Yahweh’s threat to remove His protecting hand from Israel had been withdrawn. God said to Joshua: “Fear not and be not afraid” (8:1).

These are familiar words, words we have heard earlier. (1) Yahweh spoke literally the same words at Horeb, in the second year after the exodus (Deut. 1:21). Israel could have entered Canaan then. (2) Moses said the same thing at the end of the year 40, in the land of Moab. He addressed such language both to Israel (Deut. 7:18; 31:6) and to Joshua in particular (Deut. 31:8). (3) Yahweh addressed Joshua with these words after the death of Moses (1:9).

Now we hear the same words again. Yahweh is starting over once more. He approached Joshua in a hearty way, ready to forgive. “Fear not and be not afraid. Take all the men of war with you. Arise and march against Ai. Behold, into your hand I give (or: I have given) the king of Ai, his people, his city, and his land.” (8:1).

The little word all in this command (“Take all the men of war”) should not be interpreted to mean that not one of the soldiers could be left behind in the camp. (The word all is only used to mean many in 1:14).

Here we hear God alluding to the advice of the spies, who told Joshua not to use “all” the people against Ai. In opposition to this earlier advice, God now tells Joshua not to take too small a force with him. Why? The purpose of this command becomes clear when God promises the victory in advance (8:2a), just as He had done at Jericho, but makes it clear that Ai is to fall into Israel’s hands in a much different way than Jericho. Joshua is to capture Jericho by a trick, making use of the Ai’s success in the previous battle against the Israelites.

Joshua was to place some of his men in hiding behind the city (vs. 2b). Just what is meant is not clear from this text by itself; it becomes clear only later in the story. The side from which Joshua was to approach the city was the “front,” the opposite side the “rear.” The attention of the men of Ai would be drawn to Joshua’s band of men, which they could see marching toward the city (vs. 4-9).
By this point we have already gone fairly far into the event itself, but the narrator hasn’t. In verse 3a he goes back to the moment when Joshua began to carry out God’s instructions. This verse reads: “Joshua arose, and so did all the men of war, in order to march against Ai. Joshua chose 30 elaphim of Men—strong heroes.”

For the whole expedition, then, Joshua used many more soldiers than the spies originally advised. The spies had suggested that two or three groups or companies would suffice. Joshua chose to use 30 companies, and even then he made a point of selecting the bravest, most suitable men. In this way the author tells us how Joshua took to heart God’s command not to march on Ai with too small an army.

This we learn from verse 3a. But God also gave Joshua another command, about which we learn in verse 3b and the verses that follow it. God told Joshua to keep a group of soldiers in hiding. Therefore the narrator tells us: “Those soldiers, too, he sent out by night. He gave them this command: “Behold, all of you (emphatic), lie in ambush against the city, behind it. Don’t venture too far from the city. Be ready. But I and all the people with me—we shall approach the city. When they march out to meet us as they did the first time, we will flee before them.”

In the verses that follow, Joshua explains his battle plan further. The narrator tells us again that Joshua sent out the soldiers who were to hide behind the city. He also tells us just where they hid, namely, at a spot west of Ai between Bethal and Ai (vs. 9a). The soldiers went out that same night. Joshua spent that night among the people (vs. 9b). He must have remained in the camp.

From verses 1-9, then, we have learned to distinguish between (a) the whole people of Israel in the camp, (2) the 30 companies of men chosen for the battle, and (3) the men assigned to hide behind Ai. Only the last group set out that same night. The idea, of course, was that they could travel unseen under cover of darkness.

Ch. 24: The Capture of Ai (8:10-29)

Scholars in our time are not agreed on the exact site of Ai. According to Kathleen Kenyon, Ai was up in the central hill country. This fits with the frequent use in Joshua 8 of the verb go up (Hebrew: alah). Joshua and his men were to go up on high against Ai.

Ai was apparently a distance of some 30 kilometers from Jericho. Therefore the men who were told to hide behind the city must have needed an entire night to march over to Ai and then circle around the city. All the next day and the next night, they had to stay in hiding. This part of Joshua’s assault force could not have been very large—certainly not the 30 elaphim mentioned in 8:3. Whatever numerical strength we might assign to an eleph, an army of 30 elaphim would be too big to keep in hiding for a whole day and two nights. Therefore we must reject the view that the 30 elaphim referred to in 8:3a
were the men in hiding; when we do, an alleged contradiction between this verse and verse 12, which
speaks of five elaphim being sent out by Joshua, disappears.

The confusion can be dispelled as follows. In verses 1-9, the narrator, in his typical way of
looking ahead, reports the command God had given to Joshua. To carry out that command, Joshua
chose 30 elaphim of men. God had also commanded Joshua to place some men in hiding around the
city. Joshua responded to this command by sending some men out that same night.

In verse 10 the narrator calmly proceeds with the details of how Joshua carried out the plan. In
the morning Joshua mobilized the men that he had allowed to register for the campaign against Ai. He
put Israel’s elders at the front, “before the face of the people.” The elders involved were no doubt
officers (shoterim), for the task of these men was to register men for military duty. They must have been
involved in selecting the best men for this venture, and now they were eager to lead these men
personally. In verse 11 we are told where Joshua and his men caped, namely, north of Ai, “so that there
was a ravine between themselves and Ai.” That way the men of Ai could see that they were not in
danger of imminent attack.

The narrator feels called to say something further about the men in hiding (vs. 12). He tells us
how many there were (about five elaphim) and where they were hidden, namely, between Bethel and
Ai, to the west of the city. He already told us that they were west of the city when he wrote his
introduction about God’s command to Joshua (vs. 1-9). But now that he is actually describing how
Joshua put the plan into operation, he repeats himself about how Joshua sent out the men to hide
behind Ai, this time saying how many there were (five elaphim). It appears, then, that Joshua chose 30
elaphim for the expedition, and then sent about five elaphim to hide behind the city while the rest
stayed back.

Verse 12 is sometimes translated: “He had taken about five elaphim of men.” This use of the
past perfect tense makes things a little easier for Bible readers, but the fact of the matter is that the
Hebrew uses a simple perfect tense—“He took.” The first Hebrew readers were gracious enough not to
stumble over this apparent discrepancy. Apparently they were not as fond of a strict chronological order
as we are.

In verse 13 the narrator gives us a summary of the developments. The summary might seem
superfluous—but only if we fail to recognize the character of verses 1-9. Those verses are an
introduction intended mainly to describe God’s command to Joshua. The narrator does that in his own
manner without sharply distinguishing between the command and its execution.

Yet there is more to verse 13 than summary. The first part of the verse reads as follows: “They
(the Israelites) arranged the people as follows: The whole army north of the city, and the rearguard west
of the city.” That rearguard is none other than the group of men in hiding. This follows form the place
assigned to it (west of the city), which is the place were some five elaphim of Joshua’s men were in
hiding. We should note in passing that this rearguard, this group in hiding, was part of Joshua’s army
(machaneh) picked for this expedition. In other words, the 30 elaphim included the five elaphim in
hiding.
What verse 13b tells us is something new: “Joshua nevertheless marched right through the valley during the night.” The context of the story makes it clear which night is meant. It was not the night when the men told to hide behind Ai left the camp, for on the morning after that night Joshua took up his position to the north of the city. That movement must have cost him a whole day. He then pitched his camp on the opposite side of a valley or ravine that lay between him and the city.

Verse 13b tells us that during the night (the second night) Joshua changed his position. He moved through the middle of the valley. The next morning he and his men stood before the city. This called forth a reaction from the men of Ai, which is described in verse 14. Ai’s soldiers set forth early that morning to do battle with Joshua and his men. The morning referred to could not possibly be the same morning when Joshua left the place where the people of Israel were camped.

Still drunk with joy over their first victory, the men of Ai were so bold and reckless as to pursue Joshua and his men when they pretended to be afraid and fled. The men of Ai went after them in such numbers that they left their city unprotected. They even left the city gate open. All the men of the city poured out. Even the men of the nearby city of Bethel rushed out to help the men of Ai (8:14-17).

This reckless pride led to Ai’s fall. Yet it was Yahweh Himself who picked the moment when Joshua raised his spear in the direction of Ai. It was God who commanded him to do so, saying: “For I deliver it (i.e.) the city into your hand.”

When Joshua gave this sign, the men who were in hiding raced to Ai’s open city gate, entered the city, and set it aflame. We do not know how these men managed to recognize Joshua’s raised spear form a distance. Perhaps Joshua attached something especially shiny to the spear. Remember that distances in the hill country were much greater for the foot than for the eye. Between Bethel and Ai, for example, there was only one high point (Gen. 12:8; Josh. 8:16; 12:9). In any case, it had to be possible for Joshua to continue to give this signal for a long time: he did not lower his spear until all of Ai had been placed under the ban.

When the men of Ai looked behind them, they saw the shock of their city in flames. Running at them from the burning city was the Israelites, their enemies. Just them the Israelites who had been fleeing before them, who had looked so frightened, turned around. Now they were coming at them too.

Not one of the men of Ai managed to escape. Even their king was captured alive by the Israelites. When the whole population left in Ai was put to death, he was executed too. Then was hanged from a wooden pole (or a tree). Originally this was an Assyrian punishment. The Assyrians would impale a man who was still alive on the pointed end of a pole. But Joshua probably put Ai’s king to death before hanging him from the pole (see 10:26). In the passage in Deuteronomy where this punishment is discussed, it is presupposed that the condemned person would first be put to death (Deut. 21:22). By carrying out the ban over Ai and its people and by hanging Ai’s king from a pole, Israel distantiated herself completely from the unrighteousness by which the Canaanites had brought God’s complete wrath down upon themselves. In accordance with Moses’ command (Deut. 21:22), the king’s body was taken down in the evening. Just as the city remained a heap of ruins, the body of the king was covered.
with a heap of stones—two memorials of God’s wrath at Canaan’s unrighteousness. Those memorials were a warning to Israel.

There are still a few comments to be made about this episode in conclusion.

(1) I have explicated Joshua 8 at considerable length. I have done so because this chapter is often accused of harboring internal contradictions. A careful reading reveals no ground for such complaints.

(2) The chapter itself if fairly lengthy. Scripture devotes a lot of attention to the capture of Ai. No doubt this can be explained by the prelude to this episode—Achan’s sin. The story of Achan showed how willing Yahweh was to forgive. He immediately gave Israel His blessing. The victory over Ai was His doing.

(3) At the same time God gave Israel the freedom to deal with Ai differently than Jericho. The inhabitants of this little city were also to be put to death and subjected to the ban, but the Israelites were not required to burn their possessions. In fact, they were allowed to take them for themselves (8:2, 27). This reminds us of Deuteronomy 7 and 8. Israel was not to allow anything or anyone to entice her away from the service of Yahweh—not the inhabitants of the land, who were not to be spared (Deut. 7), nor the possessions of the people, which they were always to regard as gifts received from God’s hand (Deut. 8).

(4) One might raise the question why Joshua should turn from the fall of Jericho straight to such a little place as the city of Ai. The answer to this question is in the conclusion of Joshua 8 (vs. 30-5). The narrator ties this periscope in with the story of the conquest of Ai by expressly using the little word then (אז) in verse 30.

Jericho had to fall into Israel’s hands first. Otherwise Israel would have no foothold in the promises land and could not proceed. But once Jericho had fallen, Joshua immediately thought of the obligation laid upon him by Moses in virtue of the Deuteronomy covenant, namely, that as soon as the Israelites got to Canaan, they were to go to the mountains Ebal and Gerizim to confirm there with an oath the Deuteronomy covenant (Deut. 11:29-32; 27).

To get to these mountains, Israel would have to pass through the central hill country, which in turn required controlling the little town of Ai. That’s why Israel turned her attention to Ai immediately after the fall of Jericho. Joshua yearned deeply to go to the mountains Ebal and Gerizim to confirm the covenant made with Yahweh. Now that the Israelites had shown in the Achan affair that they wanted to be strictly loyal to the covenant, God opened the way for them. He Himself removed the major obstacle form their path—the city of Ai.
The Pentateuch is the foundation of the entire edifice of Scripture. Therefore knowledge of “the Law” is indispensable for understanding “the Prophets.” Think of the central significance of the law of the offerings (burnt offerings, meal offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings) as taught in Leviticus 1-6. Without an understanding of the offerings, the gospel of Christ’s cross can hardly be understood.

When we read the book of Joshua, we are often reminded of the Pentateuch, especially the book of Deuteronomy. We read that Joshua must act in accordance with the torah of Moses (1:7-8). Rahab declared that Canaan’s population lived in terror of the Israelites (2:9; see also Ex. 23:27; Deut. 11:25). Think of the circumcisions performed at Gilgal and the Passover celebrated there (5:1-12). Finally, the sin committed by Achan must be understood in terms of the Pentateuch (7:1).

The end of Joshua 8 gives us an even stronger reminder of the Pentateuch. In verses 30-35 we are told how Joshua carried out Moses’ instructions that as soon as the people got to Canaan, they were to go to the mountains Ebal and Gerizim to renew the covenant made in the plains of Moab (and described in the book of Deuteronomy), thereby taking responsibility for their obligations under that covenant.

Moses had actually given Joshua this command twice. The first time was when he talked about the first of the Ten Words (Deut. 11:29-32). The second time came after he had discussed the Ten Words and was dealing in broader terms with the sanctions of the covenant, that is, its provisions for blessing and cursing (Deut. 27-30).

Let’s not forget that this command did not lie very far back in Israel’s past. When Moses gave this command, he could easily have pointed to those two high mountains, Ebal and Gerizim (938 and 968 meters respectively), on the western horizon. For all we know, he did point them out. Their peaks were only four kilometers apart.

To understand the events at Ebal and Gerizim, we must go back to Deuteronomy 11 and 27-30. A review of those passages will show that Moses gave Israel a threefold command. The end of Joshua 8 reveals that Joshua carried out that threefold command punctually. Together with the entire people he did the following. In verses 30-1 we learn that he praised God’s deeds in gratitude (Ch. 26). In verse 32 we are told that he wrote down God’s law in public (Ch. 27). And in the last three verses of the chapter God’s covenant is confirmed by all the people (Ch. 28).
These verses can be translated as follows: “Then Joshua built an altar for Yahweh, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, as Moses, the servant of Yahweh, had commanded the Israelites, as it is written in the book of the torah of Moses. It was an altar of uncut stones, never touched by iron. On this altar they brought Yahweh burnt offerings. They also slaughtered peace offerings.”

The words with which these verses open is then. Because of the emphasis that word receives, we should understand the sentence as follows: As soon as Joshua, because of the fall of Jericho and Ai, saw a chance to carry out Moses’ command (Deut. 11 and 27-30), he did so.” The word then means that is happened soon.

In the nineteenth century, various objections were raised against such an interpretation. It was argued that there must have been more conquests before the ceremony, for such a meeting in the very heart of Canaan would have been too dangerous, given the fact that the distance from Ai to Shechem is about 30 kilometers. Moreover, 8:35 tells us that strangers or sojourners took part in the ceremony at Shechem. This, it was argued, also points to a time long after the conquest of Ai.

The Question of how long it took to get from Ai to Shechem cannot be settled definitely. Yet I do not believe that it took Israel very long. First of all, the distance between Ai and Shechem is unknown because we do not know exactly where Ai was. Some say it was 30 kilometers; others say 35. But is that such a great distance? Some scholars argue that the journey could be made in seven to nine hours; others argue that it would have taken closer to twelve hours.

Secondly, the stranger or sojourner (ger) present at Shechem (8:35) is already mentioned in the account of the wilderness events (Ex. 12:38; Num. 114). Yet there was no talk of strangers or foreigners joining with Israel after the entry into Canaan—especially not in the first years, when Joshua was still alive. Taking in the Canaanites was out of the question; the Israelites were not even allowed to spare their lives. Rahab and her family were a special exception. (The Gibeonites, of course, were also spared).

Thirdly, we must not forget that the Canaanites lived in terror of Yahweh (Ex. 23:27; Deut. 11:25; Josh. 2:9). Thus they would not be so quick to attack the Israelites, even if they seemed vulnerable.

Fourthly, the courage born of faith is a factor in this situation. We saw this courage at work earlier, when the Israelites boldly performed all those circumcisions at Gilgal.

Finally, we must remember that Moses had pressed the Israelites to take care of this matter as quickly as possible (Deut. 27:2-3). As soon as they were safely across the Jordan, they were to proceed to Ebal and Gerizim.

Therefore I see no reason not to accept what the text seems to be saying, namely, that Joshua gave a demonstration of the obedience of faith by marching on to Ebal and Gerizim right after the fall of
Ai. Of course this meant moving the entire nation from the camp set up at the Gilgal near Jericho to a new camp by the Gilgal in the vicinity of Shechem. That was to be Israel’s camp from then on. That’s where the Gibeonites would come to call on them (9:6).

We are already familiar with this (second) Gilgal from Deuteronomy 11:30b: “opposite the circle of stones (haggilgal) by the soothsayer’s oaks.” It was probably an explicitly anti-Canaanite demand on Moses’ part that the people were to confess the name of Yahweh directly opposite this famous old heathen holy place. The choice of this Gilgal had a polemical meaning.

This explanation of Joshua’s haste to get to Shechem fits right I with what we read about his first deed there. Following Moses’ command, Joshua (1) set up an altar, then (2) offered burnt offerings on the altar, and finally (3) offered some peace offerings. Through these deeds it became clear that it was Joshua’s desire to live with Yahweh in (1) obedience, (2) consecration, and (3) peace.

(1)As for the altar, Joshua was fully justified in erecting it. He was not showing contempt for the altar of burnt offering in the outer court of the tabernacle (Deut. 12). He was not acting on his own whim; on the contrary, he was following the command of “Moses, the servant of Yahweh” (8:31a), which is made know to us in Deuteronomy 27:5. Moses had commanded the Israelites to use only stones that had never been cut by iron when they erected that altar (Deut. 27:6). It does not suffice to argue that Moses gave such a command so that everything would be as simple as possible, thereby enabling the service of God to take on a spiritual character. This explanation is too weak. It does not take into account the givens that Scripture places at our disposal. We must remember that when Moses gave this command, he did not ignore what God had told him right after the Ten Words were spoken. What God said to him at the time was recorded in the well-known Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20:22—23:33). Especially important is what God said at the beginning (Ex. 20:22-6), when He was commenting on the first and second commandments. Moses was referring to those comments on the second commandment (Ex. 20:24-6) when he issued his command to use uncut stones only for the altar to be built on Mount Ebal (Deut. 27:6). Joshua obeyed this command when he got to Mount Ebal, and the author of the book of Joshua pointed back to it in 8:31a. Joshua’s erection of the altar on Mount Ebal was a deed of strict obedience to Yahweh, who had sternly forbidden anything that even tended toward the Canaanite spirit and way of life.

(2)The Israelites offered two kinds of offerings on the altar. They began with burnt offerings, which was the natural thing to do. (See the torah’s provision about offerings in Leviticus 1). In both the literal and the figurative sense, burnt offerings were fundamental. Every other kind of offering was to be preceded by a burnt offering.

What burnt offerings brought to expression was complete consecration to Yahweh on the part of the person bringing the offering. Only unblemished male animals were used for burnt offerings. They were burned completely—including the skin. For God, nothing but the best—and all of it!

Thus the Israelites on Mount Ebal expressed their wholehearted praise and thanks to Yahweh, “the God of Israel,” who had led them into the new land. What deeds He had performed! Centuries before, Abraham had come from Haran and had reached this same ancient holy place, the “soothsayer’s
oak (maqom) of Shechem” (Gen. 12:6). For those days, that was the clearest geographical specification possible. That was where Yahweh appeared to Abraham and promised him: “To your seed I will give this land.” He then built an altar there to the God who had appeared to him (Gen. 12:7). No doubt Moses was thinking of this episode when he made use of the same geographical designation while Israel was on the plains of Moab. When Israel got to that same spot, He declared, an altar was to be built to Yahweh (Deut. 11:29-32; 27:5-7). Not much later, under Joshua as leader, Israel was allowed to seed the beginning of the fulfillment of this promise. Jericho had fallen, as well as Ai, the town by which the people had to pass to get to Shechem. Now Israel was camped peacefully, like a lion or lioness after eating its prey (just as Balaam had prophesied in Numbers 23:24), in the heart of the Promised Land, just as if there were no enemies to worry about.

(3) The Israelites also offered peace offerings. These were the only offerings in which the “laity”—the word could still be used in that context—were allowed to partake. In fact, they were invited to join in joyfully. By then the Israelites must have been enjoying Canaan’s exquisite wine as well, for Canaan was renowned for its vineyards. Israel was under an obligation to honor Yahweh with joy; otherwise she would make Him angry (Deut. 28:27).

A beginning was therefore made on Mount Ebal, in a thanksgiving feast to the honor of Yahweh and the joy of His people. Israel was not even much concerned about the fact that the land was still full of enemies. If God is for us, who can be against us? God’s promise to Abraham had already reached its initial stage of fulfillment. The peace offering gave the people an excellent opportunity to rejoice in this fulfillment. The peace offering in Israel, like our celebration of the Lord’s Supper, was a foretaste of Paradise, of the new earth on which God and His people (or peoples) well live in peace (Rev. 21:3).

Ch. 27: God’s Law Is Inscribed in Stone (8:32)

Although the next action taken also flowed from Moses’ command to Israel in Moab, it was of an entirely different nature. Therefore it’s a shame that some translations mislead us by suggesting that Joshua had the torah of Moses inscribed on the sides of the altar—“He wrote upon the stones. . . .” The Bible reader naturally thinks of those stones of which the altar was built, which were mentioned in the previous verse. But the Hebrew text does not require us to speak of “the stones.” We could just as well say: “He wrote upon stones. . . .” Given what we read in Deuteronomy 27, this is the only proper translation, for there Moses definitely does not identify the stones to be used for building the altar and the stones on which the torah was to be inscribed. Therefore we translate 8:32 as follows: “There, furthermore, in the presence of the Israelites, he had a copy made in stone of the torah of Moses, which Moses had written.”

What we are told here, then, is that Joshua carried out the command of Moses of which we read in Deuteronomy 27:2-4, and 8.
The technique Joshua used, it is sometimes said, was an Egyptian one. First the stones were plastered smooth. Then they could be written on with a kind of ink make black ivory or bone.

Exactly what was written on those stones? I don’t believe it was the Ten Words. It was more likely the torah, that is, the teaching which Moses gave about the Ten Words, which has come down to us in Deuteronomy 5-26. In that teaching Moses had placed the covenant provisions before Israel. That’s what the words in our text apparently mean when they speak of “the torah of Moses, which Moses had written.” We know that Moses put this Torah together in a book and gave it to the priests for safekeeping (Deut. 31:24-6). Drawing on this book, Joshua apparently had someone inscribe in stone were big enough for this; Deuteronomy 27:2 speaks of “large stones.” And Moses had also ordered that the writing was to be clear, easy to read (Deut. 27:8). This is not doubt what is meant by saying that Joshua had a copy made “there, in the presence of the Israelites.” “There” means on Mount Ebal, at the same place where the altar was erected (8:30-1), the place that Moses had designated (Deut. 27:4). And the words “in the presence of the Israelites” prepare us for what is to follow, for the ratification of the covenant by the whole congregation (8:33-5). Now all the people could know what they were saying amen to, and what the blessing and curse of the covenant would depend on.

We already encountered the word copy in Deuteronomy 17:18. There Moses gave a command that when Israel appointed a king, he was to have a copy made of the torah of Moses. What was meant at that point was probably the entire book of Deuteronomy. But that was not the case in Joshua 8. Later we read that Joshua read aloud “the blessing and the curse.” This must be a reference to Deuteronomy 27-30. What was written on stones would then be the part of Deuteronomy that precedes it, namely, the covenant stipulations of chapters 5-26, which were Moses’ commentary on the Ten Words.

When was this copy made? Here, in Joshua 8, we read first about the erection of the altar and the bringing of burnt offerings and peace offerings. Yet in Deuteronomy 27:1-8 Moses spoke first about writing the torah on stones (vs. 1-4), then about an altar with offerings (vs. 5-7), and finally about writing on stones again (vs. 8). On the basis of various factors, I would argue that the feast of gratitude around the altar and the copying of Moses’ torah about the Ten Words took place wholly or partly at the same time. The later project, the copying of the torah, must have taken quite some time. And the feast, of course, must have lasted a fair amount of time as well.

What a beautiful promise the Israelites made at this point, in the hearing of God and all the people. In this land, which was given to their father in a promise and was now given to them in actuality, no god was to be served but Yahweh. If any other god was served, the stones would speak out in protest.

Ch. 28: God’s Covenant Is Confirmed by All (8:33-35)
Now comes the most important part of all. That’s why Moses, following his custom of putting
the most important thing first, focused attention on it near the beginning of his comments on the Ten
Words, right after the first commandment (see Deut. 11:29-32). This was appropriate because the first
commandment was the substance of the covenant.

Then already Moses had said: “Make sure to express the blessing and curse of the covenant at
Mount Ebal and Gerizim.” The Israelites understood what he meant. To express the blessing and curse
of the covenant meant accepting the covenant in question; it meant ratifying it, confirming it, saying
amen to it.

Later Moses came back to this matter in more detail, after commenting on all the Ten Words,
that is, after Deuteronomy 26. Deuteronomy 27-30 is the section of the covenant document in which he
dealt with the sanction. There is no need to review all these sanctions here, but I would remind you that
Moses had the renewal of the Horeb covenant through the covenant of Moab take place in two stages.
There was nothing unusual about this. When a great king sensed that he was about to die, he would
summon his vassals and ask them to swear an oath that they would be faithful to his son as his
designated successor. Once the old king was dead, the new king expected the vassals to confirm their
ties to him once more by swearing an oath. In the same manner, Moses had Israel renew the Horeb
covenant while she was still east of the Jordan. See Deuteronomy 29:12, where Moses tells all who are
present, from high to low, from old to young (including even the unborn), that they are gathered
together “in order (literally) to pass through the covenant of Yahweh your God, and through the curse
that Yahweh your God is busy cutting for you.” “The curse” can here be regarded as a part standing for a
whole. By way of a conditional oath calling a curse upon her, then, Israel had already accepted the
Deuteronomy covenant in the plains of Moab.

That was the first step in the covenant renewal. Joshua took care of the second step, as Moses’
successor. Joshua 8 tells us this story, especially verses 33-5. Because these verses were already
discussed in the volume on Deuteronomy (especially in connection with Deuteronomy 27:9-26), I will
not deal with them at length here.

Verse 33 reads as follows: “Then Israel—her elders, officers and judges—stood on both sides of
the ark, opposite the Levitical priests, the bearers of the ark of the covenant of Yahweh, yes, all of them,
the sojourner as well as the born Israelite, the one half before Mount Gerizim and the other half before
Mount Ebal, just as Moses, the servant of Yahweh, had commanded in order to bless the people of Israel
immediately.”

What does the text say, and what does it not say? We do not read that Joshua began with a
covenant offering and sprinkled the people who were present with the blood, as Moses had done when
the Horeb covenant was first made (Ex. 24:6-8). When Israel entered the Deuteronomy covenant in
Moab, this was apparently left out too; at least, we read nothing about it in Deuteronomy. Strictly
speaking, of course, what happened in Moab was a renewal of the covenant. Israel was not entering a
new covenant. In fact, it was the first stage of covenant renewal. In the second stage of the covenant
renewal we don’t read anything about such a ceremony either. Israel was already joined with God in the
(Horeb) covenant. That’s why no covenant offering was needed to inaugurate the covenant and no blood was sprinkled.

So much for what was left out of the ceremony. What we do read is that Joshua abided by Moses’ command that the people of Israel were to be blessed by Mounts Gerizim and Ebal as soon as possible after their arrival in the Promised Land.

The Hebrew word that suggests that this was done immediately could conceivably be translated a bit differently: “...just as Moses, the servant of Yahweh, had commanded earlier in order to bless the people.” Yet this translation can be opposed on technical linguistic grounds. Moreover, it is not necessary, for we can just as well take the verse to mean that Moses had commanded that the blessing of the people was not to be delayed. As soon as Joshua brought the people into Canaan, he was to proceed at once, immediately, to bless them; this reading fits in very nicely with what we discovered about verse 30 above, namely, that Joshua attacked Ai right after Jericho in order to get to Mounts Ebal and Gerizim quickly.

What was supposed to happen once the people got there? The people were to be blessed. Apparently the single word bless is once again a part standing for the whole. It was equivalent to Israel’s confirming the covenant; Israel’s placing herself under the blessing and curse of the covenant. We encountered a similar phenomenon in Deuteronomy 29:12, where the curse is the part standing for the whole. In 8:34 we find a more complete expression of the covenant, including both blessing and curse.

What verse 33 tells us, to be brief about it, is that Joshua zealously carried out Moses’ command, namely, that he was to carry out the second stage of covenant renewal at the proper place, by Mounts Ebal and Gerizim, and that he was to take care of this matter as quickly as possible. This verse shows us all Israel gathered by these two mountains. In the middle stands the Ark of the Covenant as a symbol of God’s (Horeb) covenant, a symbol that both teaches them and serves as a guarantee. The priests are present as representatives of Yahweh.

Then follow verses 34 and 35: “After this was taken care of, he read aloud all the words of the torah, the blessing and the curse, in accordance with all that is written in the book of the torah. There was no word in all that Moses had commanded that Joshua, standing before the whole assembly of Israel—including the women and children and even the foreigners who had come with them—did not read aloud.”

Who is the “he” in the first part of this passage? Although the Hebrew word could also be translated as an indefinite, relative pronoun—remember that reading the torah aloud was work that was usually done by the priests, as we see in Deuteronomy 31:9-13—it seems better to think of Joshua in this context. He is mentioned in the preceding verses, and he is mentioned again in the very next verse (vs. 25). Yet, it may be that Joshua also gave the order that the words of the torah were to be read aloud, and that the actual reading was to be done by priests.

What was it that Joshua read—or had the priests read? “All the words of the torah.” It seems obvious, just as in the case of Joshua 1:7-8, to think in terms of the instruction that Moses gave, which is
in effect the book of Deuteronomy. It is true that the Words of the torah” are summed up in verse 34 as “the blessing and the curse,” but Moses himself had summarized his torah or instruction in the very same way (Deut. 11:29). And Joshua had already seen to it that a good deal of Moses’ torah was inscribed in stone. But not everyone could read and reading went a lot faster than writing. Therefore I am inclined to think of these “words of the torah” as something more extensive. We should not forget that it had not been very long since Israel had heard the torah read aloud by Moses himself. Moreover, in the future the priests would have to read the torah to the people periodically, e.g. at the Feast of Tabernacles during the Sabbath year (Deut. 31:10-11; see also vs. 12, which speaks of “all the words of this torah”). Finally, that Joshua actually read aloud to the people all the instruction of Moses that we now possess in the book of Deuteronomy—or had it read aloud—is confirmed by what we read in verse 35: “There was no word in all that Moses had commanded. . . “

The reading of the torah took place in the presence of “the entire assembly of Israel.” From the Hebrew word use for assembly (qahal) it is apparent that the largest type of gathering was meant. In another kind of assembly, an “edah,” only certain qualified people were included (Num. 10:3). It was a very large assembly, for it included “the women and children and even the foreigners who had come with them.” In Deuteronomy 29:10-15 we also find a reference to one of these largest of gatherings, when the renewed covenant was accepted under Moses in the fields of Moab. There is yet another such gathering in Deuteronomy 31:12-13, when Moses issued a command that when the Feast of Tabernacles came during a Sabbath year, his torah (i.e. Deuteronomy) was to be read aloud to “men, women, children, and foreigners.”

And what did the people do in response? Nothing? We don’t know. It is entirely possible that an answer was given by the people but was not included by the author of this passage of Scripture. After all, Joshua 8:30-5 hardly looks like an extensive repot on the majestic ceremony that took place at Mounts Ebal and Gerizim. In my discussion of Deuteronomy 27:11-26, I raised the possibility that Moses had left Israel a certain amount of freedom as far as its response was concerned. He did give an illustration of how the people’s amen could be handled. But whether such an amen was spoken by Israel under Joshua’s leadership at Ebal and Gerizim, an amen of the sort that Moses demonstrated (Deut. 27:11-29), is unknown. There may have been some other sort of amen.

It is also possible that there was no audible amen and that Joshua simply let the matter stand—literally let it stand (vs. 33)—leaving Israel in two groups facing each other. The symbolism of the two groups facing each other would be clear to Israel. Israel understood that her conduct under the covenant she had once again ratified would lead to either blessing or curse.

Perhaps Joshua simply let the matter rest. Moses may well have done so too. In the first stage of the renewal of the Horeb covenant (the Deuteronomy covenant of the plains of Moab) we are not told that the people literally said amen. Thus we must leave this issue unresolved.

I observed earlier that this description of the renewal of the Horeb covenant at Mounts Ebal and Gerizim is hardly a detailed report. After all that had happened at Horeb and in the plains of Moab, there was no need to describe such a ceremony again. Yet the fact that this passage of Scripture is brief
does not mean that it is not of great importance. We must bear in mind that it occurs near the beginning of the book of Joshua, and thereby at the beginning of the books of “the Prophets.” Here we hear the Holy Spirit testifying: “This, O Israel, was an agreement that you made with God. In these specific ways, Yahweh made you a privileged people, a highly favored people—His people.” If we keep this passage of Scripture in mind as we later read about Israel’s deplorable attitude toward Yahweh, we can understand why Yahweh sometimes had to be so hard on His people. Israel was struck by the curse that she had brought upon herself.

We may not make such judgments about Israel from a position of pride. Since we are Christians who are privileged to enjoy the new covenant of which Jesus is our pledge, we may never draw such conclusions proudly. We must always remember the apostolic admonition: “Let anyone who thinks that he stands be careful, so that he does not fall” (I Cor. 10:12; see also Heb. 10:28-31).

Ch. 19: Gibeon Deceives Israel (9:1-15)

There is more to Joshua 9 than a story of deceit. The Gibeonites did indeed save their lives through a trick, but there is more to be said: they and their descendants were given an abiding place in Israel.

Scripture is not soon finished with the Gibeonites. They continued to play a role in Israel’s history all the way down to the time Ezra and Nehemiah. In the immediate future they became the reason why Israel was suddenly embroiled in a battle with a whole coalition of enemies.

Gibeon’s role in the immediate future is discussed in Joshua 10. To see what Gibeon’s role would be far into the future, we must look to the second part of Joshua 9, a chapter that is made up of two main divisions. The first fifteen verses tell us how the Gibeonites deceived the Israelites; the remainder of the chapter deals with the place reserved for them permanently in Israel (Ch. 30).

The next three chapters (Josh. 9-11) all begin with the same sort of introduction. Each time we are told that the peoples of Canaan, frightened about the events at Jericho and Ai, banded together in order to resist the approaching enemy.

The first such report comes in 9:1-2, which speaks expressly of kings. The kings and their people form three groups. The one group lived in the hill country that ran right through the land of Canaan, parallel to the coast but a certain distance from it. A second group lived in the southwest, in the foothill region known as the Shephelah. The third group lived to the north of the Carmel Range, the land along the seacoast into two parts.

The Canaanites thought to save their skins with united opposition (9:1-2). They all gave their word (literally, their mouth)—all but one. Gibeon refused to cooperate.
To this day archeologists are not able to agree about the location of this city. They are strongly inclined to identify Gibeon with the Arabic town of el-Jib. If this identification is correct, then it was nine kilometers north of Jerusalem. Excavations make it clear that it was a town of considerable size even early in history. Its wall was about four meters thick and 954 meters long. The city had a large water reservoir—probably the “pool of Gibeon” mentioned in II Samuel 2:13—and probably thrived on producing and trading wine. Apparently it was ruled not by a king but by elders (9:11). Perhaps the fact that Gibeon did not join the general Canaanite opposition had something to do with its form of government, which we might almost characterize as republican. Apparently Gibeon also exercised leadership over certain nearby towns, namely, Chephirah, Beeroth and Kiriath-jeirim (vs. 17).

Joshua 9:3-4 tells us that the people of Gibeon also used cunning. This points back to the trick Joshua had used to conquer Ai. The Hebrew word for trick does not always have negative associations/connotations. (Note how a form of this word is used in Genesis 3:1).

Under the leadership of the elders, the people of Gibeon decided to send a delegation to the camp at Gilgal in order to try to win the friendship of Israel, the approaching enemy, through a covenant. This Gilgal must be the same Gilgal we discussed in connection with Joshua 8:30-5: the Deuteronomy covenant was confirmed “opposite the Gilgal (circle of stones) by the soothsayer’s oaks” in the neighborhood of Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. After all, why would Joshua give up such an excellent central position?

The Gibeonites sent to Gilgal would try to make Israel think that they had come from a far distant country, a country that lay beyond Canaan’s borders. That way they would not be taken for the enemies that Israel was supposed to destroy. They took some very old, crumbly bread with them. They also took along tattered wineskins and worn nose-bags for the donkeys on which they rode. On their feet they wore patched shoes. So equipped—or disguised—they made the relatively short journey to Gilgal and appeared before the man whose famous name already made all of Canaan tremble—Joshua (6:27).

Continuing in the style to which we have grown accustomed, the narrator gives us a piece of information in which plan and execution are one (9:6). Thus he gives us an overview of the event in advance: “They went to Joshua, to the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel: ‘We have come from a faraway land. Now then, make a covenant with us.’

By means of this verse, which both prepares us for what is to follow and summarizes it, the author gives us the following items of information. First, he identifies the purpose behind the strange disguise of the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites wanted to make the Israelites think that they were not residents of Canaan. Secondly, he tells us that the idea was to save the city of Gibeon from destruction through a covenant with the Israelites. Thirdly, he tells us that the Gibeonites delegates who arrived in the camp at Gilgal contacted not just with Joshua but also with a number of the other Israelites.

From 9:7 we learn that they encountered the Israelite men before they had a chance to talk with Joshua. And these Israelites did not receive the Gibeonites hospitably; they advanced on the Gibeonites as one man and stood together. But the Gibeonites let it be known at once that they had made a long
journey. (Here the narrator points out that they were really “Hivites,” i.e. a native Canaanite people.) They also made it clear that their purpose in coming was entirely peaceful: they wanted to make a covenant with the Israelites.

When all of this sank in, the Israelite scowls turned to smiles. Now the Gibeonites had the wind at their backs, so to speak. Still, the Israelites were suspicious: “Perhaps you (emphatic singular) live in the midst of us. How, then, shall I made a covenant with you (plural)?”

Note the sharp opposition in the use of the pronouns. It was a matter of people against people, me (singular) against you (singular).

Note also the resolute faith that shines through in these comments—“in the midst of us.” Here we sense the Israelites awareness that they already owned the land.

This was clearly a preliminary conversation. The Gibeonites were then led to Joshua, who was in the company of the twelve “heads” or leaders (9:15). They were pleasantly surprised when they laid eyes on Israel’s leader, the man before whom they bowed as a vassal bows before his king. “They said to Joshua: ‘We are your servants’” (vs. 8).

Usually people take these words of the Gibeonite emissaries as an expression of ancient Near Eastern courtesy. But given the outcome of this episode, I believe we could better view the language of the emissaries as an indication that they intended to make a parity covenant with Joshua (i.e. a covenant in which the two parties are on equal footing) rather than a suzertainty covenant in which the Gibeonites would be the vassal.

When Joshua asked the Gibeonites who they were and where they came from, they had a clever answer ready. They chose not to say very much about themselves and their land for the time being; instead they talked about the great deeds of Yahweh in the conflict with Egypt and later in the conflict with King Sihon of Heshbon and King Og of Bashan. Joshua and the leaders of Israel could not help but listen to the words of the Gibeonites with rapt attention. Joshua had shown his own deep love for God’s name in a prayer to Yahweh after Israel was defeated in battle during the first attempt to capture Ai. When the Gibeonites said little more about themselves than that they had come from a faraway land and then illustrated this by pointing to their worn-out clothes and dilapidated possessions, Joshua and his counselors must have been held back from asking further questions about their inner thankfulness and magnanimous modesty. Before they knew it, the Israelites had even eaten some of the crummy food the Gibeonites offered them. That deed was not without significance: in the ancient Near East it was tantamount to taking the first step toward friendly relations. By that point there was no way for Joshua to decline politely. After this decisive beginning a cunning move by the Gibeonites which ensured that the Israelites, touched by sympathy for these poor, beggarly people who also said so many beautiful things about Yahweh, would not want to turn back.

When the author describes this first step toward a covenant under the rules of covenant-making in effect in those days, he indicates that the Israelites did not consult “the mouth of Yahweh” (9:14). Through this critical comment, was the revealing of his own attitude and letting it be known that he was
someone from the tribe of Levi, or a priest, or even someone form the family of the high priest Eleazar? The high priest should have been consulted, for this is what God commanded at Joshua’s provisional installation as Moses’ successor (Num. 27:21). Remember that Joshua was chosen as leader with an eye to the conquest of Canaan. To hear the Gibeonites tell it, that conquest was not at issue here, for the dusty travelers claimed to come from a faraway land. The Israelites were permitted—in fact, commanded—to deal very differently with the people outside Canaan than with the people inside Canaan. Moses had told them so (Deut. 20:10). For all we know, there may have been considerable discussion among the Israelites during Joshua’s own time about that difficult matter of the shrewd Gibeonites. It is also striking that Joshua did not receive an immediate reprimand from God, as he did after the defeat at Ai (7:10).

The Gibeonites succeeded in their strategy, and the Israelites made a covenant with them. Their mission was accomplished: Joshua had made “peace” with them. This must have been a stage in the covenant ceremony, a stage that came after “eating together.” Then followed the formal ceremony; however, the covenant made was not a parity covenant, a covenant between equals. If it was a covenant of parity, the Gibeonite emissaries would never have allowed the condescending promise that if the Israelites ever expanded their borders to the faraway land of the Gibeonites, they would spare the lives of the Gibeonites.

The Gibeonites did indeed accept this assurance of mercy. The people who had sent them to the Israelites would now be satisfied. They may even have taken a written treaty back with them bearing Joshua’s seal. In any case, the covenant Joshua made with them was ratified under oath by the twelve Israelite heads of tribes who were present. The “heads of the congregation” (9:15) are no doubt the same sort of men that we encounter in Numbers 1:16—the leaders of the tribes of Israel.

Ch. 30: Israel’s Response to Gibeon’s Deceit (9:16-27)

Within three days the Israelites found out that they had been deceived. They had made a covenant with one of the peoples of Canaan, which was strictly forbidden by God (Ex. 34:12; Deut. 7:2). The Israelite men who had been the first to come into contact with the Gibeonites emissaries turned out to be right. The Gibeonites did indeed live in the midst of the Israelites, that is, in the land which God had given them the right to take as their lawful possession (9:16).

The narrator makes it clear that there was disharmony in Israel over this event. Three group are to be distinguished.

The first group was made up of Israelites who set out toward Gibeon and the cities with which Gibeon was on friendly terms. After two days they arrived at their destination. Because of the oath that had been sworn by their leaders, however, they did not dare to attack (vs. 17-18).
The second group was bigger. It consisted of the whole congregation minus the leaders of Israel. Joshua himself is not mentioned in this connection. Or did the narrator choose to ignore Joshua’s involvement? Joshua had made the covenant with the Gibeonites (vs. 15) and spoke to them later (vs. 22). Moreover, he must have spoken to the congregation about the necessity of sparing the Gibeonites (vs. 2b). In any event, we are told that the elders met together and complained about the leaders of Israel, the ones who had participated in the decision to make a covenant with the Gibeonites.

The third group, which was made up of the twelve heads of tribes, stood firm. They refused to permit an attack on the Gibeonites, reasoning as follows: “We (emphatic) have sworn to them by Yahweh, the God of Israel.” If that oath should be broken and God’s wrath erupted as a result, the Israelites would be the first ones to feel it. Therefore the leaders of the twelve tribes proposed to let the Gibeonites live. But the narrator goes on to tell us (in the style which we already saw him use earlier—putting the plan and its execution together) that they proposed that the Gibeonites were also to become the hewers of wood and drawers of water for the nation’s God.

We all know how the story turned out, thanks to this last piece of information given to us by the narrator, which runs far ahead of his story. Meanwhile, this does not keep him from giving us a rather extensive report on the execution of this decision made by an assembly (edah). We find this report in verses 22-27.

It was Joshua himself who communicated to the Gibeonites the decision made by the assembly. He went about it in a bold manner. To begin with, he did not go to them or send them a deputation. Instead he summoned them to appear before him. The Gibeonites reacted wisely—by letting Joshua give them orders. They sent emissaries to Joshua. Joshua’s reproach suggests that the emissaries were the same men who had appeared before him a few days earlier: “Why have you deceived us?” This reproach can well be read as applying to the emissaries personally.

Joshua cursed the Gibeonites and condemned them to perpetual servitude. Throughout all generations they were to continue to serve uninterruptedly as hewers of wood and drawers of water in connection with the worship of Yahweh. The Gibeonites responded to this sentence, too, in a sensible way. They know very well that the Israelites had been ordered to kill the entire population of Canaan. Now they threw themselves on the mercy of the Israelites, using a tactic that has left many a pleading soul save his life. A soft tongue will break a bone (Prov. 25:15), and a living dog is better than a dead lion (Eccl. 9:4). The Gibeonites attained their purpose by using wisdom. Joshua abided by an oath he had sworn. The narrator ends his report with this summary: “That was how he dealt with them. He saved them from the hands of the Israelites, so that they did not kill them. That day Joshua made them hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, that is, for Yahweh’s altar, permanently, in the place that He would choose.”

Literally the text says “to this day” rather than “permanently.” We encountered this phrase earlier and also the expression “the place that he would choose” (Deut. 12). Apparently the Hebrew word for place (maqom) has a cultic meaning here. The Gibeonites would carry out their task not before any altar anywhere but before the central sanctuary (Ex. 20:24).
Interpreters of Scripture have not been able to agree on whether Joshua was right to keep the oath he had sworn to the Gibeonites. Some argue that he should not have done so. They point to the deceit of the Gibeonites, and also to the entirely different approach taken later by the wise men from the East, who were acting on God’s orders (Matt. 2:12). Others, however, appeal to Psalm 15:4: “Even if He swears to His own hurt, He does not change.”

We read nothing about divine disapproval of Joshua’s conduct in the case of the Gibeonites. We must not lose sight of the circumstances in which he found himself. It was wartime. In such a time, a man who is surrounded by enemies will respond quickly to someone who approaches him in a friendly manner. We have also seen that Joshua seems to have been somewhat hasty by nature. God knows just what kind of creatures we are. Moreover, the later history of Gibeon and the Gibeonites shows us that God is the Almighty One, and that He is able to use even Joshua’s thoughtless mistake to show that He has the freedom and power to show mercy to all who seek refuge under His wings (Ruth 2:12), under His glorious name, which is a strong tower (Prov. 18:10), even if they are cursed as the Gibeonites were (9:23).

Looked at in retrospect, Joshua’s curse seems to have been a blessing. It is true that the Gibeonites were condemned to serve the congregation of God, but they did not have to do so as slaves of the Israelites in particular. We do not read expressly that they were “given” to the priests, as the Levites were (Num. 3:5-10) although this appears likely in the light of 9:27, which tells us that Joshua made or “appointed” them hewers of wood and drawers of water. We could also translate 9:27 to read that Joshua “gave them for this task. But however we translate the text, we are not left with the impression that the Gibeonites were punished by being driven from home and hearth to follow the tabernacle, wherever it might be erected. Their city was later counted as part of the territory assigned to the Benjaminites (18:25). Gibeon is even listed among the cities assigned to the Levites (21:17). But this does not mean that the Levites were the only ones who would be allowed to live in Gibeon (Num. 35).

The Gibeonites were under a perpetual obligation to serve when called, an obligation that they continued to honor all the way down to the days of Nehemiah. (Neh. 3:7). Still, they may well have instituted a rotation system that would allow them to go on living in Gibeon, their traditional residence. In fact, the tabernacle and the altar of burnt offering stood in Gibeon for a while (I Chron. 16:39; 21:29).

The curse imposed on the Gibeonites by Joshua must have turned out to be a blessing. Because of the service required of them, they became familiar with the worship of Yahweh as few in Israel ever would. They came to know the gospel of life as it was proclaimed to the congregation of shadows in words and deeds (tabernacle). In the long run this must have enlightened and superseded their heathen past in a powerful way.

It was not in vain, then that the Gibeonites presented a glowing testimony about God’s great deeds and hoped for escape under the shield of the name of Yahweh (9:9-11). Already clear in our brief sketch above, their long history is made even clearer by a certain dark page in the pages of Gibeon’s history. In II Samuel 21 we read that King Saul sought to demonstrate his zeal for God’s people by undertaking a campaign aimed at wiping out the Gibeonites—“although the people of Israel has sworn
that they would spare them.” Yahweh punished this affront to His name by way of three years of famine during David’s time.

What is the lesson of Joshua 9? First, it shows us how fully God kept His promise to the Israelites. The people of Canaan were so completely in the grip of the fear of Yahweh that the Gibeonites came to Joshua to beg for peace.

This chapter also functions as an introduction to Joshua 10 by telling us how it came to be that the Israelites were embroiled in a battle with the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, and so forth.

Joshua 9 also reminds us, especially when we read it in the light of the rest of the Bible, how concerned Yahweh is about His name and its honor.

Finally, this chapter leaves us in speechless amazement and respect for God’s sovereign grace in His dealings with mankind. Here His majesty is so elevated that He could calmly refrain from punishing Israel when His command about the Canaanites was abrogated, and could stand up for the rights of pagans in Israel by a strategy that can hardly be approved as legitimate.

God’s acquiescence and accommodation in the face of Joshua’s mistake could itself be a subject for a book. So often He has shown His majesty by bending down to man when someone in Israel ate unclean food such as meat of an animal that died out in the field (Lev. 11:39-40; 17:15-16), when someone in Israel divorced his wife (Deut. 24:1-5), or when the Israelites under Moses slaughtered animals for meat on heathen high places (Deut. 12:13-19). When it was not a question of a manifest violation of His covenant through idolatry, desecration of the Sabbath, murder, assault, or kidnapping, God tolerated a great deal in the days of shadows. He showed Himself to be very patient (Rom. 3:25).

It was this patience and tolerance that saved the Gibeonites. God had already issued an order that all the inhabitants of Canaan were to be wiped out. Yet, He acted directly contrary to that command in showing His grace to Rahab and her family. Yahweh could do so because He was the Great King; He could afford to take such a step.

Nor did he damage His glorious name in the case of the Gibeonites, when Joshua swore an oath in His name to the Gibeonites. On the contrary. In this case, too, it was not a question of idolatry. That danger had been largely neutralized by the congregation. The Israelites would take over nothing from the Gibeonites, but the Gibeonites would have to serve at the altar of Yahweh, that is, the altar of burnt offering in the outer court of the tabernacle. In this case Yahweh showed how powerful and magnanimous He was—a God elevated above His own laws (Deus legibus solutes).

Ch. 31: Victory at Gibeon (10:1-15)
Joshua 10 shows us what role the city of Gibeon immediately played in Israel’s history. This is made clear in the beginning of the chapter. In verses 1-15, the battle at Gibeon is described. In verses 16-27 we are told about the execution of five kings (Ch. 32). Verses 28-43 deal with the capture and destruction of six cities in the south (Ch. 33).

In some Bible translations, Joshua 9, 10 and 11 all begin with the same word—when, in the sense of as soon as. The Hebrew text does not require such a translation in each case, but in chapter 10 it is certainly justified. The king of Jerusalem must have heard the stories about Jericho and Ai and Gibeon quickly, for he lived nearby. It is likely that Gibeon was only about nine kilometers north of Jerusalem.

This is the first time that we come across the name Jerusalem in the Bible. The meaning of this name is not entirely clear. It is generally accepted that the first half of the word (jeru) means foundation or possession, while the second half (salem) means peace (see Gen. 14:18). In that case the name as a whole would mean city of peace. This interpretation is supported by Hebrews 7:2, where we read that Mechizedek was “king of Salem, that is, king of peace.”

The king of Jerusalem was especially disturbed by the fact that Gibeon had made a covenant with the Israelites. Even if Gibeon had no king, it was “like” the other cities that were independent enough to have a king of their own (10:2). Gibeon did not compare unfavorably with the other cities—certainly not in manpower. But now the strong city of Gibeon had chosen to go over to Israel’s side. For Jerusalem this meant a considerably larger danger looming on the horizon. That’s why Jerusalem’s king took the initiative in the attack on Gibeon, an attack in which he was joined by four of his colleagues. Together their armies marched forth and besieged the Gibeonites, who were traitors in their eyes.

Joshua’s faithfulness to the oath he had sworn was now put to the test again. The Gibeonites found a way to send a few emissaries to him. They asked the Israelites to help them in their struggle against their enemies.

This time, too, Joshua kept his word—and in a powerful way. We read in 10:7 that Joshua left Gilgal—“he and all the people of war with him and all the men of valor.” In this case the word and had an explanatory purpose; it means that is to say or including. That’s why some translations leave it out.

What the text tells us, then, is that Joshua used his very best troops to race to the aid of the Gibeonites. That’s right—race. In one night he and his men covered the distance from Gilgal (the same Gilgal that is mentioned in 9:6, i.e. the one near Shechem) to Gibeon. Then they made a surprise attack on the soldiers besieging the city. This attack must have been made in the early morning hours or even before. The distance from Shechem to Gibeon was a walk of about seven or eight hours.

For the rest, we should take note not just of Joshua’s faithfulness toward Gibeon but also of Yahweh’s faithfulness to Joshua and Israel. This would be the first time that there was a battle between the Israelites and the inhabitants of Canaan out in the open field. In other words, this would be the first regular battle. With an eye to this fact, God spoke to Joshua again to encourage him: “Fear not” (vs. 8). This made it clear to Joshua that he had followed the proper course when he strictly honored the
covenant he had made with the pagan Canaanites. This lesson in history was later overlooked by King Saul (II Sam. 21:1), blinded as he was by a zeal without understanding (see Rom. 10:2). Such a zeal that is directed against pagans may one day turn on God’s saints.

The narrator gives us an extensive report on the battle at Gibeon. His report is made up of the following parts: a synoptic introduction (vs. 10a), an elaboration on the introduction (vs. 10b), an initial supplementation (vs. 11), and a second supplementation (vs. 12-15).

Synoptic introduction (vs. 10a)

Verse 10a is sometimes translated as follows: “And Yahweh threw them into confusion before the face of Israel.” But if we understand this text properly, we will translate it a little differently.

Verse 10a must be viewed as an independent unit of meaning. The subject in 10a is Yahweh, while the rest of the verse talks about what Israel did. In the rest of the verse we read about a great slaughter and chasing and more fighting. The subject of this activity is not Yahweh but Joshua and Israel. One could even translate this text with an impersonal they: “...and they defeated them and chased them...”

Verse 10a tells us something about Yahweh. This little sentence is typical of the man who speaks to us in the book of Joshua. Just as someone whose heart is overflowing with good news gives a summary of his story and its outcome in his very first sentence, mixing things together, so the author of the book of Joshua puts this whole story into perspective for us and tells us how it came out. He takes the same approach we have seen in 9:6—introducing his story by anticipating what is to come and pointing ahead to it.

If we disregard the unique narrative style of the book of Joshua, we might well translate verse 10a as follows: “Yahweh threw them into confusion before the face of Israel.” But the true character of this little sentence comes out better if we translate it roughly as follows: “How Yahweh threw them into confusion before the face of Israel!” This makes it clear that verse 10a is to be regarded as an enthusiastic lead, a gripping introduction to verse 10 and the verses that follow it.

There is more to be said about this little sentence. Take a look at the verb, which we translated above as “threw (them) into confusion.” Older translations sometimes used “frightened” instead, and some scholars suggest “threw them into a panic.” This fits better with the passage than the tamer translation “threw (them) into confusion.”

The stronger translation also fits better with the meaning that the Hebrew verb (hamam) expresses elsewhere in Scripture. It occurs thirteen times in the Bible. On eight of those occasions (not including Joshua 10:10a), it is used in a way that suggests an extraordinary use of the forces of nature by God on behalf of His people (see Ex. 14:24; 23:27; Deut. 2:15; Judges 4:15; 5:20-1; I Sam. 7:10; II Sam. 22:15; Ps. 18:15; 144:6).

When we see that the narrator tells us not much later in Joshua about how God did in fact use natural forces on behalf of Israel and against her enemies, it appears all the more likely that verse 10a is
pointing ahead to this event. Thus I would like to see this sentence translated as follows: “Yahweh then threw them into a panic through an extraordinary natural phenomenon!” Don’t forget the exclamation mark.

Elaboration and specification (vs. 10b)

What the narrator tells us in the rest of verse 10 is somewhat broader, but is still has the character of a short summary. He writes: “They (or Israel, or Joshua) handed them a stinging defeat at Gibeon and pursued them along the route that leads to Beth-horon and continued to strike at them all the way to Azekah and Makkedah.”

I called this a short summary because it does not go into much detail about the nature of the divine help promised in verse 8 and referred to in 10a through the verb hamam. On these points we are given elaboration later. Without it we would be limited to the following two facts: (1) that (not how) God threw the Amorites into a panic at the battle of Gibeon, and (2) what military advantage the Israelites derived from this panic, that is, that they chased the enemy all the way to Makkedah. The narrator later picks up the story of what happened at Makkedah (see vs. 16 and 28).

But before he does so, he gives us more information about the remarkable way in which God made the enemies of Israel flee in a panic. He takes this matter up in two supplementary appendixes.

First appendix (vs. 11)

If we knew nothing else about the battle of Gibeon by did take account of the likely meaning of the Hebrew verb hamam (vs. 10a) (i.e. creating fear through the use of natural phenomena), we would have to limit our explanation to the fear which Yahweh threw into the Canaanites, of which we read earlier in the book of Joshua. Perhaps the author did have this fear in mind when he wrote verse 10a. If so, he was surely also thinking of something else, of which he tells us in verse 11: “It happened that when they fled before the face of Israel—they found themselves on the way to Beth-horon—Yahweh threw great stones down upon them from heaven, all the way to Azekah. The number of those who were killed by the stones of the barad is greater than the number that the Israelites killed with the sword.”

The Hebrew word barad is usually translated to hail. The word hail usually makes us think of frozen drops of water, and the word barad does indeed have this meaning in some passages of Scripture (e.g. Hag. 2:18) (Hebr. T. 17).

When we speak of rain, we usually mean falling drops of water, but a soldier sometimes says that it rained bullets. Likewise, when we come across the word barad in the Bible, we must not assume that it always means frozen hailstones. It might also refer to glowing stones or meteorites.

The word barad occurs 29 times in Scripture. Fourteen of those occurrences are in Exodus 9, which deals with the seventh plague. It is clear that on that occasion God visited Egypt with a “barad” that did consist of frozen drops of water or of fire. We read in Exodus 9:23: “Then Moses stretched out his hand to the heavens, and Yahweh caused thunderclaps and barad. Fire flashed down to the earth,
and Yahweh let barad rain down on the land of Egypt.” To this point one could think in terms of ordinary bad weather, i.e. lightning flashes accompanied by hailstones made of ice. But Exodus 9:23 is further clarified by what we read in verse 24: “There was a barad and a fire that flickered back and forth between the barad.” Flicker is the usual translation for the last verb in this verse, although other translations suggest that the fire came together in a ball. Whatever the truth of the matter, we know that hail falling through fire could not be composed of ice, like the hail we see in our climate. This hail must have been a shower of meteorites.

This interpretation is supported by what we read in Psalm 78:47-8 and Psalm 105:32. Pointing back to the events of Exodus 9, these two passages also speak of fire: “Yahweh brought a shower of barad down upon them, flaming fire in their land.” Other passages looking back at Israel’s past speak of a combination of barad and fire (Ps. 18:13-14; see also II Sam. 22; Ps. 148:8). In Isaiah 30:30 we read of barad and stones, just as in Joshua 10:11.

On the basis of this comparison of Scripture passages, it appears that the barad referred to here was not an ordinary hail made of bits of ice but a most unusual barad (see Is. 28:21, which deals expressly with the history related in Joshua 10), i.e. a barad made of meteorites. This interpretation is supported by God’s use of the firmament to advance His cause as reported in other passages of Scripture (e.g. Judges 5:20). Finally, it is supported by the outcome of this story (see 10:11-15). We read about a natural event that involved even the sun and the moon. Could it be that this latter event (the sun standing still) gives us an explanation of how the former event (the shower of meteorites) took place?

**Second appendix (vs. 12-15)**

The narrator is not yet finished with the battle of Gibeon. To tell us the rest, he uses a quotation:

Then, on the day that Yahweh delivered up the Amorites in the face of the Israelites, Joshua turned to Yahweh and said before the eyes of Israel:

Sun, you stand still at Gibeon, and Moon, you stand still in the valley of Aijalon.
Then the sun stood still, and the moon remained where it was until the people avenged themselves on their enemies.

Is this not written in the Book of the Upright? Thus the sun remained standing in the middle of the heavens and for a whole day was in no hurry to set. Such a day as this there had never been before and never was afterward, a day on which Yahweh listened (so much) to someone’s voice, for Yahweh fought for Israel. After this Joshua and all Israel with him turned and went back to the camp at Gilgal (Joshua 10:12-15).
What is going on here? The author of the book of Joshua interrupts the story he is telling to let someone else speak. Verse 11 had been enemies fleeing and verse 16 picks up this theme again and carries it further. Clearly verses 12 through 15 are an insertion drawn from another source.

Where do these verses come from? The narrator himself tells us in verse 13: Is this not written in the Book of the Upright? This piece of information comes to us as a question, but in Hebrew a question can be used to give expression to something that isn’t uncertain but highly certain (sees 1:9). “Have you eaten of the tree?” means “You certainly have eaten of the tree!” (Gen. 3:11). “Hasn’t Yahweh commanded?” means “Yahweh certainly has commanded you!” (Judges 4:6). In Joshua 10:13, then, the narrator wanted to say that this quotation from the Book of the Upright was known to all in his day and believed by everyone in Israel. “As you know, this is recorded in the Book of the Upright.”

In Numbers 21:14, we also find an example of such a quotation drawn from some other source, a source called the Book of the Wars of Yahweh. The book referred to here, i.e. the “Book (sepher) of the Upright (or Pious or Righteous)” is later mentioned in connection with David’s lamentation at the death of Saul and Jonathan (II Sam. 1:18). Therefore scholars believe that this book was a collection of songs. Could it be the very same book as the one referred to in Numbers 21:14 as the “Book of the Wars of Yahweh”? That book contained songs too.

How big was this book? The Hebrew word used (sepher) means that it did not have to be a thick book or long writing. Sometimes a “sepher” was no more than a letter (see Esther 9:25).

If the book referred to in 10:13 is something “composed during David’s time at the earliest and probably much later,” then the book of Joshua could not have taken on its final form until the early period of the kings. Can this be possible, or did the material in the Book of the Upright accumulate gradually? The latter seems more likely to me. It could even be that this “Book” was not a constant entity but changed over the course of time, some songs and stories being added while others fell away. Compare this question to the problem of the articles that together make up the Apostles’ Creed. For a long time this creed was far from fixed. For some Christian churches, the creed included more than for others.

Where does the quotation begin, and where does it end? It begins with the opening words of verse 12: “Then Joshua spoke to Yahweh.” The emphasis falls on the word then. This word points powerfully to a certain time. This would not be necessary if verse 12 were simply a continuation of what we read in verse 11. But as we have seen, that is not the case. Therefore the opening powerful indication of the time of the action must by borrowed from the Book of the Upright. On the same basis we can conclude that the next explanatory indication of time (“on the day that Yahweh delivered up the Amorites in the face of the Israelites”) must also be a quotation from this book. After all, the author had already told us who Joshua’s opponents in the battle of Gideon were. But this explanatory note about the time when the event took place was clearly not superfluous for the readers and singers of the song recorded in the book of the Upright.

The quotation ends with verse 15: “After this Joshua and all Israel with him turned and went back to the camp at Gilgal.” From the course of events that the writer goes on to describe, it is apparent
that verse 15 could not have been written by him but must have come from his quoted source. What we
are told by the narrator is that Joshua had the five kings imprisoned in the cave where they had sought
refuge so that he could deal with them later. Then he pursued the rest of the soldiers (vs. 16-22). After
that he had the five kings put to death (vs. 22-7) and they went on to conquer the cities of Makkedah,
Libnah, Lachish, Eglon, Hebron, and Debir (vs. 28-9). Only when all of this was done did “Joshua and all
Israel with him return to the camp at Gilgal” (vs. 43).

As you can see, verses 15 and 43 give us the same piece of information. This shows us that when
the narrator quoted form the Book of the Upright, he did not restrict himself to a few lines of verse (two
in Modern Hebrew editions of the Bible) along with a historical prologue, introducing the quotation with
the question about the Book of the Upright. No, he quoted generously, and the quotation includes verse
14 and 15. These verses quoted from the Book of the Upright point first to the special character of this
day (vs. 14) and then to the successful outcome of the battle (vs. 15). When the Book of the Upright
reports the outcome, it does not go into such details as the five kings in the cave and the conquest of
the six cities by Joshua. Thus the passage from the book (of songs) moved directly from the battle at
Gibeon to the news that Joshua returned safely to his base (the Gilgal near Shechem). Now the narrator
who speaks to us in the book of Joshua returns to pick up the details. He covers the same territory in
verses 6-39 and arrives at the same conclusion—Joshua’s return to Gilgal.

I can well imagine that the first readers of the book of Joshua were not at all bothered by this
typically Hebrew narrative style, since they were Hebrews themselves. Yet people who have lived in
different times and cultures have been disturbed by it. The solution usually suggested is to drop verse
15, which is the first repot of Joshua’s return to Gilgal.

This seems to me unnecessary, for there is really no problem here that needs solving. Moreover,
we impoverish ourselves needlessly through such a stroke of the pen, robbing ourselves of the joyous
conclusion of a piece of commentary that the Israelites had apparently long passed around orally about
the awesome help that God gave to Joshua and his men during the battle at Gibeon.

Of what did this help consist? In 10:10-15, the narrator gives us three bits of information in
answer to this question.

First, in verse 10a, he uses the word hamam, which is often used in Scripture to refer to divine
help that involves the forces of nature. Second, in verse 11 we are given reason to believe that there
was a shower of meteorites with which God struck the enemies of Israel. Third, in verses 12-15 the
narrator lets us know what people in his own day said and sang about the help God gave Joshua at
the battle of Gibeon. When Joshua called, Yahweh had listened to his voice. Joshua had been so sure that
God heard him that he ordered the sun above Gibeon and the moon above the Valley of Aijalon to slow
down in the course they usually took across the heavens. As a result, the sun went down about a day
later than usual. Thanks to this unheard of and unparalleled event in the realm of nature, Israel was able
to inflict a devastating defeat on her enemies.
Those are the three bits of information. A single purpose links them together. Scripture is telling us about the powerful help that God made available to Israel in her battle against her enemies, a kind of help that even involved the firmament.

The report we are given here is not completely unique. According to 10:14, however, the deed was certainly unique: never before had a day been doubled. But reports of how God uses even the movement of heaven and earth for the sake of His people are indeed found elsewhere in Scripture. In Deuteronomy 33:2-5, Moses spoke of the awesome natural phenomena that Israel witnessed at Horeb when she made a covenant with the Great King Yahweh. Deborah reminded Israel of these events in Judges 5:4-5 (see also Ps. 68). Think also of the panic that God created among Sisera’s troops during her days (Judges 4:15). Deborah explains this panic in her song, telling us that the stars joined in the battle against Sisera from their place in the heaves, while the River Kishon overflowed its banks (Judges 5:20-1).

Sometimes we say that someone moved heaven and earth to reach his goal—without meaning it literally. But we can indeed say of God that He moved heaven and earth on various occasions, sometimes to favor His people and sometimes to oppose them (Deut. 11:1-7). The story of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the wilderness and the Jordan, and the entry into Canaan are full of this sort of thing. It may well be that there were other occasions when the waters of a river were held back or when city walls collapsed because of an earthquake; however God allowed these particular calamities to occur at just the right time to help His people. It is no wonder that recollections of these mighty deeds of God come up again and again in the Prophets and the Psalms.

For us, too, such passages in Scripture are instructive. We get to know God through them, the same God who later made use of the same powerful means, for example, to draw attention to the birth of His Son (the star of Bethlehem—Matt. 2:2) as well as to His death and resurrection (Matt. 27:45, 51-2; 28:2; Mark 15:33, 38; Luke 23:44-5). This God will move heaven and earth again when Jesus returns (Heb. 12:26; see also Matt. 24:29; II Pet. 3:7, 10-13).

By now I have said enough about these verses to satisfy most Bible readers. Here, too, Scripture wants to teach us to believe in a God who is not only the mighty Creator and Sustainer of Heaven and earth but who is at the same time the mighty Preserver of the work of redemption, the work He already began in Paradise.

I do not mean to deny anyone the right to argue that this passage of Scripture also contains other lessons for us. For example, it casts a certain light on questions concerning the history of the universe, questions that in turn have a certain bearing on the history of our earth and the peoples that inhabit it. Such use of Scripture is not illegitimate. There is no good reason at all to argue: “The Bible is not a handbook for astronomy, geology, paleontology, and so forth, and therefore these sciences need not take Biblical givens into account.” Why should we take such poverty upon ourselves voluntarily? Although it is certainly true that the bible is not a handbook for any science in particular, this does not mean that what the Bible tells us about the deeds of God in heaven and earth is to be ignored or rejected as untrue. We cannot simply shrug our shoulders. It is certainly conceivable that traces of such
cataclysmic events are still to be found. Think of the consequences of the rebellion of Adam and Eve. The earth was cursed on account of them (Gen. 3:17-18; Rom. 8:20). The same could be said of the great flood in Noah’s time (Gen. 6-9), the destruction of Sodom and its surroundings (Gen. 19: Deut. 29:23), the plagues that struck Egypt (Ex. 7-12), the crossing of the Red Sea after a powerful wind created a dry path, which must refer to something like a hurricane (Ex. 14:21), God’s descent to Mount Sinai in the midst of terrifying natural phenomena (Ex. 19:16; Deut. 33:2-5), the blessings and punishments during the journey through the wilderness, such as the manna (Deut. 8:3), the swallowing up of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Deut. 11:6), the crossing of the Jordan, which may have been made possible by an earthquake (Josh. 3-4), the collapse of Jericho’s walls, which may also have resulted from an earthquake (Ch. 7), and the shower of meteorites, which may have had something to do with the extension of one day to the length of two at the battle of Gibeon (10:10-15). I could also mention certain calamities that came later in Biblical history, calamities which, according to the Bible, involved not just the earth but some of the heavenly bodies as well.

Now it is true that during the last century and a half, such Scriptural givens have not been taken very seriously by astronomers, geologists and paleontologists (investigators of fossils and the earth’s strata). This is due mainly to evolutionism, which has become dominant in virtually all areas of science, despite the fact that if proceeds from highly dubious presuppositions. For example, evolutionism presupposes the hypothesis that there has been a constant development in the universe from lower to higher. Evolutionism also assumes that life originated spontaneously from some sort of dark, mysterious primal event. Through the application of the so-called principle of uniformity (the course of geological and biological process has always been just as gradual as it is now), a chronology of the earth has been constructed that simply cannot be harmonized with what the Bible teaches. The inevitable result is that recent science cares very little about what Scripture has to say concerning the earth’s origin and destiny.

In earlier centuries, before the rise of evolutionism, there was great scientific interest in these matters. In those days people had some understanding of the meaning of catastrophes that took place on earth because of events in the world of the stars. Let’s take a single example. William Whiston (died 1752), who was Newton’s student, friend and successor at Cambridge, pointed to a heavenly body with a sharply elliptical orbit (a comet) as the cause of the great flood. He also believed that he could use other events that repeated themselves in the world of the stars to explain what the Bible tells us about the extra-long day of Joshua 10. The same occurrences, he argued, were the kernel of truth behind some of the mythological and historical stories that circulated among the Egyptian and Greek poets and historians.

Although this practice of taking into account the givens of Scripture and tradition has never fully disappeared from the scientific world, it has been held back as evolutionism conquered more and more territory. Evolutionism leaves no room for faith in a God who was not only able to let the history of mankind begin with the creation of Adam and Eve not as babies but as full-grown, fully functioning people right from the beginning, first the man and then the woman, but was also able to create a universe that was fully functional from the very start, a universe that impresses scientists more and more with its millions of stars of enormous size and its incredible speeds and unimaginable distances between heavenly bodies. This belief in God as the almighty Author of the creation, the God for whom
there can be no problem of the billions of years simply because God’s creative deeds cannot be understood in terms of our temporal categories or the regularities (“laws”) we have discovered—this faith, sad to say, is waning for many scientists.

But not for all. In our times, this faith is again beginning to come to expression in various books and scholarly journals. Criticism is rising not only of the dominant evolutionistic cosmological principles (i.e. principles about the origin and age of the universe and especially our solar system) but also of the chronology that, until recently, was accepted by scholars studying the history of the Near East, especially Egypt. The thesis has been argued that natural events of the kind that struck Egypt and vicinity over a period of half a century, according to the Bible, have left traces behind them in the literature and traditions in both the eastern and western hemispheres. One of those catastrophic natural events was the lengthening of the day described for us in Joshua 10. For those who lived on the other side of the globe, this event must have meant that their night was doubled in length. On the basis of a study of these givens, some scholars push back part of the widely accepted Egyptian chronology, which is based on a dubious source, some four or five centuries. More suggestions are being made by scholars. As for the question of whether the sun’s orbit around the earth (12:30=360 days, or more precisely, 365 days) may not have been lengthened during the course of human history, that is, the history of which we have some knowledge through the Scriptures, this question was already discussed heatedly in the days of Newton, Whiston, Halley, and Keill, who were all contemporaries of one another.

As we read Scripture, we must be aware of the consequences of what we are told. I have permitted myself this excursus only to make it clear that the evolutionist thesis about geological and biological uniformity and the gradual development of our earth is far from unassailable. A number of recent discoveries should cause people to question this evolutionist thesis. Think of the mammoths found in Siberia, animals that apparently froze to death so quickly that meat and tropical vegetation were found in their stomachs. Think of the mutilated remains found in the western hemisphere of animals that came from all parts of the world. Think of the immense crater in Arizona caused by a meteor. I could go on and mention many more, but I won’t.

Think of these considerations as you read Joshua 10. A change in the earth’s rotation which is clearly what this chapter reports, must have had clear consequences on stones and plants, animals and people.

Ch. 32: Five Kings Put to Death (10:16-27)

In various books about ancient Egypt we find a photograph of the throne of Pharaoh Tutankhamen, whose grave was found early in our century. Among the fabulous treasures buried with this Pharaoh was his throne. This throne was made of various costly types of wood and was overlaid with ivory and gold. Attached to the bottom of the throne was a footstool with inlaid figures of the nine traditional enemies of Egypt. When Egypt’s Pharaoh sat on his throne, then, he placed his feet on the
necks of his enemies. This was a significant gesture in a culture in which anything depicted artistically was regarded as a present reality. The people of the ancient Near East did not experience the enormous gulf between images and reality that we do.

The people of Israel had lived in that Egyptian world a long time. It must have made a deep impression on the Israelite commanders when Joshua allowed them to place their feet on the necks of the five captured kings.

Under the leadership of the king of Jerusalem, the five had besieged the city of Gibeon. But they were routed by Joshua in a surprise attack, and as they fled, their ranks were decimated more by the great stones that fell upon them from the sky than by the swords of the Israelites. If we can indeed regard those stones as meteorites, the Canaanites must have thought that Baal, their own god, had let his thunder fall upon them.

When a meteorite fell to earth, it made a tremendous noise. Sometimes a ball of fire would appear in the sky first. In a matter of seconds it would whiz down to the earth, sometimes splitting up into segments on the way down to disappear in a shower of sparks. After the ball of fire fell to the earth, the meteorite or group of meteorites would come crashing down, making a terrifying noise. A shower of meteorites could fall as thousands of separate pieces.

The shower of meteorites may well be the reason why the five kings sought refuge in the cave, just as people today take refuge in basements from bombs, gunfire, shrapnel, and flying debris. Yet there are a number of other occasions in the Bible that mentions when people took refuge in caves (Judges 6:2; 15:8; I Sam. 13:6; I Kings 18:4). The hill country of Palestine is rich in caves and caverns.

When Joshua was told that the five kings had taken refuge in a cave near Makkedah, he gave his men an order not to let this stop them from killing as many Canaanites as they could. For the present they could barricade the entrance to the cave with huge stones and place a guard there to see that they were not removed. There would be plenty of time later to deal with the five kings.

It’s not likely that the kings were disposed of before the next day. The entire lengthened day was spent chasing and killing fugitives. Only after the chase was finished could Joshua’s men report to their commander for their next assignment. Joshua had erected a temporary camp for his best troops at Makkedah. The great camp for the rest of the men as well as the women and the children remained at Gilgal. Makkedah lay more to the south. There the men all reported to Joshua unhurt. Because of the terror that had struck the Canaanites, no one had dared to resist them.

Only then did Joshua have the five kings put to death—but not before a gripping ceremony took place in the presence of all the men who had fought on Israel’s side. Joshua called the commanders forward and had them place their feet on the necks of the five defeated kings. Why? What did he hope to accomplish thereby?

It was a symbolic deed. It was not intended as an outlet for sadistic pleasure but as a deed whose purpose would be clearly understood by Asians and Egyptians (see I Kings 5:3; Is. 51:23; Ps.
110:1; I Cor. 15:25; Heb. 10:13). Joshua used that deed to teach his army commanders to put their trust wholly in the Lord, also in the future. This had been the first time that Israel did battle with the enemy in the open field, and how Yahweh had helped! He would also be sure to help in the future, as long as Israel believed in Him unconditionally and continued to serve Him.

Witness Joshua’s words on the occasion: “Then Joshua said to them: ‘Fear not and be not gripped by fear. Be strong and stand firm, for Yahweh will deal thus with all the enemies with whom you do battle.’”

Two things strike me about this verse. First of all, Joshua gives his commanders the very same encouragement that God had given him when Israel still stood before the Jordan. The words of this verse are the same words that we find in 1:9. The only difference is that the word order is a little different.

In the second place, Joshua puts the emphasis on the word you—“the enemies with whom you (plural) do battle.” Here Joshua was pointing to the task awaiting the commanders. He knew what God had predicted at Horeb about the tempo of Canaan’s conquest: if it went too quickly, the Israelites would run into problems with wild animals in a land suddenly bereft of its human population (Ex. 23:28). Moses later commented on this subject as well (Deut. 7:22). Once Joshua was dead and gone, the task of conquering the land and taking possession of it and holding it would still remain. (I will come back to this important point later.) When that time came, the Israelites were to remember what God had done on the day of the battle of Gibeon, when the kings of Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon were so frightened that they hid in a cave. Hence these words of Joshua: “Truly Yahweh will deal in the same way with all your enemies, the enemies with whom you in turn do battle.”

In an earlier volume I dealt with the accusation that Israel, through the battles involved in the conquest of Canaan, was guilty of cruelty and bloodthirstiness. It was from God that Israel had received the command to wipe out all the inhabitants of Canaan and to take possession of their land. That was Israel’s right and obligation. There was to be no thought of pardon for the Canaanites (Deut. 7:2; 20:16). But in case the Israelites should become involved in a struggle against people outside Canaan, they were to spare not only the inhabitants of the city but even the fruit trees around the city (Deut. 20:10-20). Sadism and vandalism were forbidden in the Torah—just as it was forbidden to spare the Canaanites.

Yet, a passage such as Joshua 11 may never be used as justification for spreading the gospel by force (crusades) or engaging in power politics. God’s church no longer has to conquer a land set aside as special. On the contrary, we are warned against any such thing. Joshua was appealing to his commanders to believe—to believe in God, who had just shown them His great power in an amazing way. This same God, who is now known to us as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, still rules heaven and earth, and He asks of us the same recognition that He received from Israel. We are to believe in Him without compromising and without falling into fleshly practices. Only such a faith will conquer the world and Satan’s hosts (Eph. 6:16; I John 5:4). Such faith subjects itself obediently to the commands of our Savior and relies on no other sword in its work for Him than “the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God” (Matt. 26:52; Eph. 6:17).
The five kings were put to death. Then their bodies were hung from poles (another possible translation: trees). Toward evening they were taken down (compare 8:29) and buried in the same cave (literally: thrown into the cave) in which the kings had sought refuge. Finally we are told that great stones were placed before the entry to the cave “to this very day.” Here we encounter this curious expression again. It means, “definitively, with no more to be said about the matter.”

The defenders of the etiological approach reason as follows when they come to such passages. There were large stones before the opening of this cave, and five trees nearby. A saga arose that connected the cave and the five trees with five kings who were then said to be buried in the cave, after their bodies were first hung from the five trees.

According to Scripture, it happened just the other way around. First we are told about the humiliation of the five kings when Israel’s commanders placed their feet upon their necks. Then the Israelites were reminded again of God’s power and goodness when the great stones were placed before the mouth of this cave in which the kings had hidden—“to this very day,” we are told. We have seen that this means not only “That’s still how it is today” but also “That’s how it must remain; this is definitive for all times to come.” Thus the story about the five kings is not just a simple historical account but also a prophetic message. It is an appeal to remain faithful to the God who has done such a thing to the five mighty Amorite kings.

The text does not say literally “to this day,” but something even stronger, like Deuteronomy 32:48, which talks about God’s announcement of Moses’ death—“on this very day.” That is, on precisely the same day. The word used here (etsem) is not easy to translate. It dots the “i’s” and nails the business down, making the usual expression “to this day” even more emphatic. But the word etsem does not introduce any principal change into the phrase. What the narrator wanted to say is that those stones are still there today and must remain there to all eternity as a lesson to Israel.

The Israelites would have to make sure that they never forgot the lesson that this story was intended to teach them.

The etiological approach robs us of the reliable Bible in which we are to believe, instead of opening our eyes to the Holy Spirit concern for monuments.

Ch. 33: Six Southern Cities under the Ban (10:28-43)

If someone in our day had to report on the events described in these verses, he would surely have gone about it in a different way. What we read is clearly not the work of a cultured member of our Western world, a writer committed to objectivity. A modern writer would surely have combined verses 28 through 39 roughly as follows: “After the battle of Gibeon and the execution of the five kings, Joshua placed the following cities under the ban in a single campaign: Makkedah, Libnah, Lachish, Eglon,
Hebron, and Debir. King Horam of Gezer made an attempt to rescue Lachish, but he suffered a devastating defeat."

Such an account would not have been appealing to the Israelites. The Hebrew sensibility was not at all offended by repetition—on the contrary. A striking example of the sort of repetition that would seem tiresome to us occurs in Numbers 7, where we are told what gifts the twelve heads of the tribes—each time the very same gifts—offered to Yahweh on twelve successive days for the newly established temple. Even after the same set of gifts was listed twelve times, the whole business was summed up once more.

We simply don’t have time for that sort of thing. But the Hebrew authors thought differently. And we must concede them their right to their own tastes.

There is more to be said about these verses. At the beginning of chapter 10 we are given the names of the five cities—and also of their kings—which together undertook an attack on Gibeon, The Canaanite city that had gone over to the enemy (from the Canaanite point of view). Therefore we would now expect a report on the action Joshua took against these five cities, but that’s not what we get. We hear nothing about Jerusalem and Jarmuth—although we do hear more about Lachish, Eglon and Hebron. Just as the narrator had a style of his own, Joshua had a distinctive style as a military strategist.

Among the six cities that Joshua defeated in a single campaign were three that had joined in the alliance of five cities against Gibeon—Lachish, Eglon and Hebron. The other three (Makkedah, Lebnah and Debir) were not mentioned in connection with the battle of Gibeon.

The point of departure for this campaign was the city where Joshua ended when he pursued the Canaanites as they fled to the south—Makkedah. Apparently he took this city by storm, in one day (vs. 28). Then he marched off to the west, to Libnah (vs. 29). After that he went farther south, to Lachish, which was about 50 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. According to excavations, Lachish had thick city walls of 2.7 to 3 meters from the earliest days. The conquest of this city took Joshua two days. The delay must have been due in part to the attempt King Horam of Gezer made to save the city. Then it was Eglon’s turn, a city that lay to the southwest of Lachish. After that Joshua suddenly turned to the northeast and took the city of Hebron. In addition he captured the cities around Hebron that were subject to it. That must have taken a little more time. All in all it took long enough for the people of Hebron to be able to crown a successor to the king whom Joshua had put a death at Makkedah (vs. 36-7). Finally Joshua headed south once more to capture Debir, which was also an important city to which other cities around it were subject (vs. 38-9).

This gives us an overview of the route Joshua followed in this campaign. In connection with each city, not omitting, the author of the book of Joshua mentions that in the city captured, Joshua left not a single inhabitant was left alive.

Interpreters of Scripture do not all agree whether Joshua killed all the animals at the same time. After all, an animal was also a “living being” or “nephesh” (see 10:28, 30, 32, 35, 37, and 39). It could
also be that the reference in verse 40 to all that breathes applies to people only, although the Hebrew word involved (neshamah) can indeed be applied to animals.

When Jericho was captured, not only the people but also the animals were put to death (6:21), but in Ai the animals were spared. The Israelites were allowed to keep the livestock. Did this become the rule for other conquests? Most likely it did (11:14; see also Deut. 3:7). But whatever happened to the livestock in the six cities captured by Joshua, the people were put to death—all of them. Joshua exterminated them, placing them under the ban. After the narrator draws our attention to this in the case of each city and finally gets to his conclusion in verses 40-3, he repeats it once more. Why?

No doubt the narrator wanted his report on the conquest of the six cities in southern Palestine to end with a confession that the success of the campaign was due to Yahweh. He did so in memorable words that stand out in our minds: “For Yahweh, the God of Israel fought for Israel. After this Joshua and all Israel with him returned to the camp at Gilgal” (42-43).

Almost the same words formed the conclusion of the quotation from the Book of the Upright. Did these words quickly become winged words in Israel? Note the enthusiastic identification of Yahweh as “the God of Israel.” In any case, glory for the victory is once again given to Yahweh. And in the preceding verses we see that Yahweh had no reason to leave Israel’s side, for Israel was faithfully carrying out the command to wipe out the Canaanites. The Israelites realized what the antithesis involved and took it seriously. That’s why they prospered (see II Chron. 15:2).

The lesson applies to us too. Let’s stay close to Christ, who has drawn us to Himself (Acts 11:23). Then the almighty Father will stand by us faithfully (Ex. 14:13). And the confession that there is no reason for us to boast fits in very well with the appeal: “Therefore, brothers, stand fast” (II Thess. 2:15).

When we are told in verses 40-43 that Joshua struck the entire land, we are not to assume that all of Canaan is meant. The geographical details make it clear that he took only the southern half of the country. (In Joshua 11 we read about the campaign in the northern part of the country.)

It appears that the Israelites did not leave soldiers behind to occupy the cities that were capture. The soldiers returned to the main camp at Gilgal in the middle of the land (vs. 43). Then some of the Canaanites who fled from the villages to seek refuge from the Israelites rebuilt some of the cities. Later the Israelites had to march on Hebron and Debir again (15:13-17). Thus the work of which we read at the end of Joshua 10 was only provisional. Yet it was a tremendous accomplishment. In one quick campaign Joshua broke the power of the Canaanites in the south (“at one time”—vs. 42). Exactly how long this campaign took we don’t know, but we are left with the impression that it was a “Blitzkrieg.”

Ch. 34: Victory over Hazor at Merom (11:1-9)
The first part of Joshua 11 bears much resemblance to the last part of Joshua 10. Again we have a rapid military operation; Joshua breaking the power of his enemies quickly. This time Joshua went north instead of south.

The one who precipitated this struggle was the King of Hazor, a Galilean city about fourteen kilometers north of Lake Gennesaret. The result was roughly the same as in the south: Joshua defeated a coalition of enemies at the battle of Merom (vs. 1-9) and then placed a number of cities under the ban (Ch. 35).

Excavations reveal that Hazor must have been an important city in northern Canaan when Israel appeared on the scene. It was situated on the major highway that led from Egypt to Damascus and Mesopotamia. That highway crossed the Jordan, at a certain point south of the Lake Huleh. Hazor was about five kilometers from this crossing point. Thus its location was of strategic importance. The highway remained an important route for centuries; it is the “way of the sea” referred to in Isaiah 9:1.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the king of this city took the initiative to a coalition to oppose Israel. His name is therefore mentioned—Jabin (vs. 1). But of the kings that he enlisted to join him as his allies, only one is mentioned by name—Jobab, the king of Madon, a city that must have been located somewhere west of Lake Gennesaret. Perhaps the narrator did not know the name of the other kings. Or, it could be that they were figures of little importance, vassals who simply had to obey when summoned to battle. The names of the other cities are not mentioned either, except for two—Shimron and Achshaph. The former, as far as we know, was located somewhere to the southwest of Madon, while the latter was some distance to the east of Hazor near the Mediterranean Sea. The other allies are referred to simply as being “in the north.” Thus we get the impression that Jabin was a powerful king who led a coalition that included many of his own vassals. That may be one reason why his city (Hazor) was made an example by Joshua when the battle was over.

From verse 3 we learn that there were many troops in this coalition army. The soldiers were a great host, like the sand on the seashore in number (11:4), an expression that must be taken in a figurative sense, of course. And if that was not enough to frighten the Israelites, that huge army had many horses and chariots at its command. The Israelites were already acquainted with the military capabilities of horses and chariots; the Egyptians had used them when they pursued the Israelites into the wilderness (Ex. 14:7). The people also knew what Yahweh had done with those Israelite horses and chariots: He destroyed them in the Red Sea (Ex. 14:28). Yet, in all the battles Joshua and his men had fought in the promised land, they had never faced an army that enjoyed such superiority over them in equipment and numbers.

This was no doubt why Joshua received special encouragement from Yahweh (vs. 6). As we shall see, enterprising Joshua had already set forth to meet the enemy, who had assembled the troops at “the waters of Merom” (vs. 5). It is generally assumed that this name refers to an area of brooks and streams northwest of Lake Gennesaret. Even though there was a lot of water in this area, it was high land. No doubt the enemy’s intention was to descend from these highlands to the south, where the land was much flatter and better suited to using horses and chariots. But it appears that Joshua did not leave
Jabin enough time to make his move. We read that Yahweh said to Joshua: “Tomorrow, at this time, I will be the one who gives them all to you, defeated” (vs. 6).

Now, the distance from Gilgal (near Shechem) to the place where the Canaanite army was camped (Merom) was much too great to be covered in a single day. Therefore we must assume that Joshua had already set out after the enemy on his own initiative and that he received this encouragement form Yahweh while he was unerway. Trust in God does not preclude quick action on the part of believers. On the contrary, Joshua knew what his task was. When he accepted that task anew by pressing ahead energetically, God approved and gave him some encouragment.

Let’s look carefully at those words of encouragement. Yahweh put an emphasis on the personal pronoun—“Tomorrow I will be the one...” This was not meant to leave no role for Israel; the point was simply that Israel would not succeed without God. Yahweh would give the victory, even over horses and chariots!

How Israel later sang of that victory! (See Psalm 20:8; 33:13-19; and 147:10-11). Today we can still sing those songs. If God is for us, who can be against us? (Rom. 8:31).

But there are two parts to the daily renewing of our lives. There is not only the resurrection of the new man; first comes the dying away of the old nature. Therefore the Israelites would not be allowed to keep the horses and chariots for their own use. They were ordered to cut through the tendons of the horses. Those strong animals would then lie on the ground helpless. Moreover, the Israelites were told to burn the chariots. Thus the chariots must have been made of wood, no doubt overlaid with iron here or there. Israel was to learn to fear God—but not the power of men, whatever powerful tools and weapons they might possess. Even by fearing man too much, the Israelites might awaken the jealousy of God. After all, man is dust. As for horses, they are flesh—not spirit (Is. 31:3; 51:12). Moses had already issued a warning against kings building up great collections of horses and then putting their trust in them (Deut. 17:16). David took this warning to heart (II Sam. 8:4), but not Solomon.

Joshua followed God’s command completely. To begin with, he left King Jabin no time to draw up his chariots to do battle on the plains but attacked him at Merom, which was more difficult terrain for horses and chariots. Yahweh was with Israel, and the enemy scattered in all directions. Because Joshua came at them from the south, they scattered partly to the west, toward Misrephoth-maim, and partly to the north, toward “Great Sidon,” a place that lay far beyond Tyre, and partly to the east toward the valley of Mizpeh. Mizpeh (or Mizpah), which means lookout tower, also comes up in Scripture as the name for other places, as does Hazor, which means hamlet or village. But this Mizpeh, according to 11:3 was “at the foot of Hermon.” Now, Mount Hermon belonged to Anti-Lebanon Range, as its southernmost extension. Thus it was opposite Mount Lebanon, which means that there was a valley between the two. Some of the soldiers then fled all the way to this valley. This Mizpeh was almost as far north as Sidon, but it lay a little farther to the east. Thus Israel’s enemies fled north, west and east (vs. 8a). Note that the author does not say that Joshua and his men pursued them all the way to these distant points; all he says is that those who escaped the slaughter fled there.
When verse 8b tells us that the Israelites inflicted such a defeat on their enemies that no one was left, we must interpret this statement in the context to the whole passage—and not assume that no one escaped the field of battle with his life. The refugees mentioned in verse 8a certainly did escape. Later the Israelites encountered remnants of the defeated army. What the text means to say is that the result of Joshua’s glorious victory was that there was no orderly army left.

So much for the soldiers. When it came to the horses, Joshua also carried out God’s orders. He did not capture the feared animals in order to use them himself later. That would have been much too dangerous. Then Israel would have placed her trust in “flesh” rather than Yahweh.

Lovers of animals may well bemoan the fate of the horses of Jabin and his allies. I can understand how this episode upsets people, and I am inclined to ask whether it would not have been better for these poor animals to be killed instantly instead of being lamed and then left to suffer. But God must have had His purpose in issuing this command—perhaps a polemical purpose. Remember what happened at the battle of Gibeon: the Canaanites worshiped the heavenly bodies, but God, to their shame, used the sun and moon in the battle against them. (In the ruins of Hazor, excavators have found “the circle containing the star,” which is the emblem of the Canaanite sun god.) Letting the horses lie there helpless on the ground without putting them out of their misery may have been God’s way of pointing a finger of scorn at the faith of the Canaanites. In that painful scene, groaning animals shared in God’s punishment for the sin of Canaan (see Rom. 8:20), a dramatic reproach aimed at the Canaanites and a warning aimed at Israel.

When Flavius Josephus takes up the battle of Merom, he writes that the Israelites killed the horses of their enemies because there were no people left to be put to death. This explanation betrays a lack of insight into Scripture, which forbids God’s people to make flesh their arm (see Jer. 17:5). God chose to belittle that flesh (in this case, horses).

Ch. 35: More Cities Placed under the Ban (11:10-15)

These verses tell us about the aftermath of the battle of Merom. They tie in directly with the verses before, for they begin: “At the time Joshua again swung into action. He did not sit still; again he fully exploited the victory he had won.”

He went about it as follows. All the cities that had sent troops into the battle of Merom were placed under the ban. We now know what that means: all the people in those cities were put to death. This punishment was inflicted on all the cities in the coalition.

Joshua made one important distinction: he treated Hazor differently from the other cities. The king was put to death (either Jabin, who may have escaped the field of battle alive, or his successor) along with all the rest of the people and even the animals. That the animals were killed is clear not so much form verse 11, which states that every “soul” (nephesh) in the city was killed and that nothing that
breathes (neshamah) was left, but from verse 14, where we discover that the livestock in the other cities was spared and seized as booty, just as in the case of Ai (8:2, 27). If this is indeed so, then Joshua applied the ban to Hazor in the way it was applied to Jericho, for in Jericho, too, even the animals were killed (6:21). Just as Jericho and Ai were burned (6:24; 8:28), Joshua had Hazor burned (11:11). But he went no farther. He did not forbid Israel ever to rebuild the walls and gates of the city, as he had done in Jericho’s case (6:26), nor did he decree that it was to remain as eternal heap of ruins, like Ai (8:28). Hazor was later made a fortress by King Solomon (I Kings 9L:15; see also II Chron. 15:29).

Joshua was less severe when it came to the other cities. He did have all the inhabitants put to death, but not the livestock (11:14). Furthermore, the cities that had already been burned down once in history and rebuilt on their ruins were not burned down again (vs. 13).

Literally verse 13 says that Joshua permitted this in the case of cities that stood “each on their own tel.” The Hebrew word tel (Arabic: tell) means ruins or heap of ruins.

From this we learn that Joshua did not treat these cities as though they were Israelite cities guilty of idolatry. What was to be done in the case of such cities we read in Deuteronomy 13:16, where Moses gives an illustration of the punishment to be meted out to those who transgressed the first of second of the Ten Words. What if a future Israelite city becomes guilty of idolatry? Well, such an Israelite city would have to be subjected to an unlimited ban. All people and animals would have to be burned along with the. The city would then have to lie there without being rebuilt as a “tel olam,” an eternal heap of ruins (Deut. 13:16).

Now, not all scholars are agreed on just how the words of 11:13 are to be interpreted. Some translate “the cities that stood on their heights,” others “the cities that stood on their ruins,” and still others “the cities that were erected on their heap of ruins.” But this much is clear, that Joshua did not allow any city that had already been burned earlier to be burned again, except for Hazor. Hazor was treated differently because it had been the leader in the uprising.

Thus we see that when Joshua applied the ban, he did so correctly, acting in accordance with the command of Moses. It was not all random vandalism on his part.

Hazor was burned, but it did not become an “eternal heap of ruins,” as Ai did and as any Israelite city would if it succumbed to adultery and idolatry. There was no reason why Hazor should not be rebuilt.

As for those other cities that had already been burned once and rebuilt on top of their ruins, they already bore the mark of God’s judgment and did into have to be burned again.

Joshua did the right thing, and he was careful not to go too far. He was undoubtedly right in what he did, for it is said not once but three times that Joshua abided by the covenant obligation that Moses had placed on Israel, namely, to put all the Canaanites to death (11:12, 15a and 15b).

It’s never good to get carried away, because then we tend to go too far. And obedience is not the same thing as a love of destruction. Israel could calmly take over the cities of the Canaanites, which
bore the stamp of God’s wrath because of their idolatry. The developments fit right in with the promise that had already been given to Israel by way of Moses—“cities that you did not build” (Deut. 6:10). As the end of his life, Joshua looked back in gratitude at the initial fulfillment of that promises (24:13).

Nowhere does Scripture forbid us to make use of the good things in this world. Neither does it suggest that we are to destroy them or abstain from them in a life of asceticism—not even the things that are created by godless hands. The important thing is to stay far away from idolatry and immorality.

Joshua wanted to warn his people against Canaanite godlessness as they began their new lives in the new land. He did so by demanding that any Canaanite city that had not been burned before was to be burned by the Israelites. Then it could be rebuilt on the heap of ruins, which would serve as an abiding sign of God’s judgment.

Ch. 36: Joshua Occupies All of Canaan (11:16-23)

“More exaggeration,” you may be inclined to say to yourself as you read this heading. You might go on to argue that not all parts of the land of Canaan were conquered during Joshua’s lifetime, and that Joshua himself was well aware of this when he spoke to the Israelites shortly before his death (23:5).

You’re right. Still, the heading is justified. That not all of Canaan would be conquered at once and occupied, that not all the inhabitants would immediately be put to death—all this Yahweh Himself had predicted at Horeb. If the conquest of the land and the extermination of the people proceeded too quickly, there would be problems with wild animals (Ex. 23:29-30; see also Deut. 7:22). Joshua 10 did not talk about a complete possession of the country either, but only about a raid, a quick campaign, a sweep through the south of the land to break the power of the Canaanites living there. Likewise, in Joshua 11, a complete possession is not in question.

No, we must try approaching this matter from a different angle. We should think of Abraham, to whom all of Canaan was “given” by God. Yet Abraham had to buy a piece of property when it came time to bury Sarah. And we should think of Israel as a slave in Egypt, as a wanderer in the wilderness, afraid because of the report brought back by the spies about the dangers of Canaan, such as those tall Anakites. But the same people of Israel crossed the Jordan under Joshua’s leadership burned Jericho and Ai, intimidated the southern half of Canaan in a stunning way, went on to Jabin and his northern coalition, a well-equipped army complete with horses and chariots, and then proceeded to burn Jabins’ cities and put the people of the allied cities to death.

Of course there was still a great deal to be done to consolidate the gains made in these two triumphant campaigns. In 11:18 we read that Joshua needed a long period of time to bring about this consolidation. Even then it could not be said that every square foot of Canaan was occupied by Israel. But who is suggested any such thing? Not the Bible! Still, it remains true that Canaan’s military forces had taken a frightful beating. And that’s what this passage of Scripture wants to make clear to us.
Verses 16 and 17 give us an overview of the situation by passing on some geographical details. In verse 16 various parts of Canaan in which Israelites had already made their presence felt are mentioned.

This sort of summary had already been begun by the narrator at 10:40-1, as a way of sketching the success of the operation against the cities of the south. Here the narrator repeats some of that material and supplements it by mentioning some parts of northern Canaan where the Israelites had also announced themselves.

The narrator begins with the south and mentions the following geographical areas. He begins with the hill country, which is also referred to in 10:40 in the report about the campaign in the south of Canaan. A little farther on he speaks of “the hill country of Judah” (vs. 21), which is to be distinguished from “the hill country of Israel.”

We need not make a problem of these two phrases and jump to the conclusion that the book of Joshua stems from a relatively late period in Israel’s history, or that these names were inserted into the book much later, since Judah and Israel did not become separate kingdoms until the time of David and Solomon. In principle the distinction between Israel and Judah was already felt in the time of father Jacob. The way the conquest of Canaan was carried out must have given rise to these separate designations (hill country of Judah and of Israel). The men of Judah established themselves in the southern part of the hill country in the middle of Canaan, while the other tribes, especially Ephraim, took control of the northern part, with the result that it soon came to be known as the “hill country of Israel” or even the “hill country of Ephraim” (Josh. 19:50; 20:7; 24:30).

The land usually known as the Negeb (or Negev) is also called the south country. This territory is mentioned next in 11:16.

Then comes the land of Goshen, which of course is not to be confused with the land of Goshen in Egypt where the Israelites used to live. The area in Canaan that bore this named derived the name from the town of Goshen, which must have been somewhere in the southern part of Goshen. Nothing further is known about this place (10:41; 15:51).

The narrator then goes on to mention the lowlands (Hebrew: shephelah). When this territory is mentioned earlier in 9:1, the whole southern part of the Palestinian coastal area is meant.

The names that come next all refer to areas in northern Canaan. The first of them is the plain of the Arabah. We come across the word Arabah elsewhere as the name for the well-known great plain of the Dead Sea extending down to Ezion-geber. The Arabah of verse 1b is the same area that is referred to in verse 2 as “the plain to the south of Chinneroth.” Chinneroth was northwest of the Sea of Galilee.

The next name we come to is hill country of Israel, which we discussed above. This time the word lowland is added to it—“the hill country of Israel and its lowland (shephelah).” This must be a continuation of the “shephelah” mentioned earlier in connection with the south, an extension of it.
toward the north. In other words, it is the top half of the Palestinian coastal plain, which stretched all the way from Joppa to Mount Carmel.

After this list in verse 16 of the particular areas in which Joshua operated with his army, the narrator goes on in verse 17a to give us the southern and northern boundaries of the territory. He does so with two bold strokes.

First of all, the southern boundary of Joshua’s sphere of operations was formed by “the barren hill country which rises in the direction of Seir.” The only place in this short description that we can fix with certainty is Seir. Seir was the territory that the Israelites had to circle around because the Edomites would not let them through. On their journey toward Canaan (from Kadesh via Ezio-geber to the gulf of Akabah to the region east of the Jordan), the Israelites had to go around Seir.

Now the text tells us that the southern boundary of the area in which Joshua operated was formed by the “barren hill country” (Mount Halak in many translations.) Unfortunately, we do not know exactly what this means. The only other place where this geographical designation comes up is in Joshua 12:7. There we are told again that this barren mountain or hill country rises toward Seir. It is generally assumed that the narrator is here referring to the row of chalky rocks that runs across the well-known Arabah from west to east, roughly from the site of Kadesh to Seir. When viewed from the Dead Sea, these rocks look like a gigantic dam closing off the south form the great, long valley through which the Jordan flows as it comes south. If this is indeed the case, it parallels the comparable designation of the northern boundary, which follows next.

That northern boundary, in the second place, was “Baal-gad in the valley of Lebanon, at the foot of Mount Hermon.” This mountain was already mentioned in 11:3. As we saw, it was located in the southern end of the Anti-Lebanon Range. Thus, if one were to survey the Jordan from the south, it could also appear to be closed off toward the north. We cannot be sure just what the name Baal-gad stands for. In any event, it must have been by Mount Hermon, probably somewhere to the west. In 13:5 it is mentioned again. The meaning of this name is ba-al of good fortune. It must have been a place know from ancient Canaanite history. It was known to the narrator and his contemporaries, but presumably not to later generations.

With these two bold strokes, the narrator indicates the northern and southern limits of Joshua’s sphere of operations. He then throws in a few more details.

(1) “He captured all their kings and put them to death” (vs. 17b). We will expand on this at some length in connection with Joshua 12. Let’s not forget that there, too, the issue is the fulfillment of a promise. When Moses discussed the first of the Ten Words (Deut. 6-11), he told the Israelites not to let themselves be led away from the service of Yahweh by anything or anyone. If they obeyed this command, they would prosper. “Then Yahweh will deliver their kings into your hand. You will see to it that their names disappear under heaven. No one will succeed in holding out against you; you will destroy them all” (Deut. 7:24). Now the Israelites could see that this promise was coming true! Surely there’s nothing wrong with pointing this out to readers more than once. Isn’t that exactly what Christian preaching aims to do—point repeatedly to the fulfillment of God’s promises?
(2) “For many days Joshua made war on these kings” (vs. 18). We do not know exactly how long those “many days” lasted. Scholars have long assumed that it must have been around seven years, given the request that Caleb made of Joshua, namely, that he be given the hill country inhabited by the Anakim (14:12). Caleb then said that although he was 85 years old, he was still just as healthy and strong as when he was sent out with the eleven other spies during his fortieth year. Thus, some 45 years must have passed between those two dates, i.e. Israel’s arrival at Kadesh and the division of the land (Ch. 14). Because Israel’s wanderings from Kadesh (via Ezion-geber) to Canaan took 38 years (Deut. 2:14), there are seven years left for the military operations of which we read in the first part of the book of Joshua (especially Ch. 10-11). Naturally, there could be a mistake somewhere in this calculation. It may be that part of a year was counted as a whole year. Thus there could be some truth to the claim made by Flavius Josephus that there were only five years between Israel’s entry into Canaan and the division of the land. The important thing, of course, is that Joshua was firm and resolute (see 1:9).

(3) Another matter to which our attention is drawn (vs. 19-20) is Joshua’s strict execution of God’s judgment on the Canaanites. Yahweh was not yet ready for that in Abraham’s days (Gen. 15:16), although God did make a beginning when He destroyed Sodom and some towns around it (Deut. 29:23). The complete execution of His judgment was left for Israel to carry out. Now the, Yahweh Himself paved the way for Israel to carry out this task. Only the Gibeonites made a covenant with Israel; no other city in Canaan was ready to take such a step. In destruction God revealed His judgment on centuries of Canaanite misconduct. He abandoned them to their stubbornness and hardness of heart, as He had done earlier with King Sihon (Deut. 2:30). Sihon did not give any thought to making peace with Israel either; instead, he went out to meet Israel in battle. Thus Joshua’s radical course of action was completely in line with God’s anger because of the long process of degeneration in Canaan. God’s patience was exhausted, and Joshua was faithful.

(4) Despite the godlessness and immorality that all the Canaanites had in common, there were differences between them. How many separate peoples were there? Scripture does not always give us the very same answer. Sometimes seven are listed (see Gen. 10:15-18; Deut. 7:1; Josh. 3:10; 9:1; 11:3). In this passage the narrator mentions only one of the people of Canaan—the Anakim. There was a reason for this. The Anakim had loomed large in the report brought back by the twelve spies. The name Anakim probably refers not to a special ethnic group but to a certain family or clan whose members were famous for their height. Next to the Anakim, the spies had said, they felt as small as grasshoppers. This kind of talk plunged the Israelites at Kadesh into a panic of unbelief (Num. 13:33), and we all know that sad outcome. Against that background, the narrator is particularly pleased to report that Joshua had also made a start on the extermination of the Anakim. As we saw earlier, Caleb was one of the Israelites who fought against the Anakim. We will hear more about this in Joshua 14:6-15. Perhaps the comment made here (11:21-2) about Joshua’s struggle against the Anakim is really to be read as a reference to Caleb’s campaign, for Caleb’s action was no doubt taken under Joshua’s leadership. The other possibility would be to view this report as pointing to an initial attack on the Anakim headed by Joshua himself. (Hebron, one of their cities, is already mentioned in 10:36.) If so, Caleb finished what Joshua started. In any case, the basic thrust of verses 20-21 is clear. Once again our attention is drawn to the vigorous measures Joshua took.
Verse 23 prepares us for Part II of the book of Joshua (which I will deal with in the next chapter).

“Thus Joshua conquered the entire land, which was completely in accordance with what Yahweh had said to Moses. Joshua gave it to Israel as her inheritance according to the allotments made to the tribes, for the land rested from the struggle.” The first part of the verse looks back. In fact, it looks back quite some way. The retrospect includes not just the carrying out of (the first part of) Joshua’s task, namely, bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land, but reminds us at the same time of the words that God had earlier spoken about this matter. God had made it clear that the conquest of Canaan would not be completed in a twinkling of an eye but would involve a lot of follow-up work and clean-up operations. Don’t lose sight of the phrase added to verse 23a—“completely in accordance with what Yahweh had said to Moses.” Otherwise we might be inclined to reproach the narrator for creating the false impression that the conquest of Canaan was already a completed success. He does no such thing of course. It could not possibly have been his intention to suggest that now there was nothing left to conquer. In fact, he tells us the opposite later in the book when he gets around to Joshua’s words of farewell (23:4-9). At the end of his life, after the land had been divided by casting lots, Joshua still talks about enemies to be hunted down and land to be conquered. No, the second part of verse 23a must not be separated from the first part. What we are told is simply that Joshua conquered the land in just the way that God had predicted long before. In other words, the conquest was a success, but it proceeded slowly, gradually. If we are careful to keep this qualification in mind, we see that what the narrator writes here is the simple truth.

“Joshua gave the land to Israel as her inheritance according to the allotments made to the tribes, for the land rested from the struggle” (vs. 23b). We must read this second part of the verse in the same benevolent/sympathetic manner that we applied to the first part. Naturally the comment that “the land rested from the struggle” should not be taken to mean that after the seven (or five) years of military action there was never any more conflict. The rest of the book of Joshua teaches us the contrary, and so does the book of Judges. No, verse 23b has a double purpose. In the first place it tells us that Joshua had for the most part completed the negative side of his task. Thus he could move to the positive part by dividing the land. Secondly, the end of verse 23b makes it clear why it was possible for Joshua to proceed with the division of the land. The great military operations of the last seven (or five) years were over. The land was at rest, and so the division could begin.

This kind of Scripture passage does not always make a positive impression, perhaps in part because of all the geographical data, including some names that are meaningless to us. But what if those Israelites to whom Joshua was now allowed to give the land were actually your ancestors? Then you would read this passage with entirely different eyes! Yet, weren’t those Israelites in a certain sense our ancestors or forefathers? When Paul mentioned the Israelites as he wrote to the church in Corinth, a church made up largely of Gentile Christians, he described the Israelites as “our fathers” (I Cor. 10:1). The same apostle, when he wrote to the church in Rome, which was also made up mainly of Gentile Christians, commented that Christians of heathen origin are “wild olive shoots” grafted into the tree that is Israel (Rom. 11:17). Why can’t we read Joshua 11:16-23 against the background of this proclamation of solidarity? Or do we want to keep ourselves separate from the one church that is being
gathered by God’s Son from the beginning of this world until its end? When the author of Hebrews points out that the walls of Jericho were toppled by faith, he Seizes on one of the many possible examples of Joshua’s time. He could have mentioned quite a number if he chose. And he could well have pointed back to Joshua 11:16-23.

The ancient reproach that this author of Joshua 11 is guilty of exaggeration and triumphalism must be rejected. It would be more accurate to characterize his account as sober and honest. Compare his geographical specifications with the “ideal boundaries” of the promised land as the Holy Spirit dares to set them forth in Numbers 34:1-12 AND Deuteronomy 1:7-8. When we realize this, we are led to praise Joshua for proceeding with the division of the land when Israel in fact occupied no more than what we would nowadays call a bridgehead. Joshua had the courage of faith to take up the positive side of his task: he divided the land. The division is described for us in Joshua 13-21. When we discuss those chapters, we will have occasion to talk about triumphalism again.

Ch. 37: The List of Defeated Kings (Ch. 12)

The fear that I expressed in connection with Ch. 36 I must repeat here, namely, that readers may cry out: “How dull and dry that list of kings is! Surely no preacher would ever base a sermon on Joshua 12!

There are three major emphases that we should be aware of even as we ask ourselves just how dull and dry this chapter is.

The content of Joshua 12

The title I have chosen for this section is not my own invention. It is basically the same heading that one finds above Joshua 12 in a number of editions of the Bible. But is such a heading correct?

It is not to be denied that this chapter does in fact talk about defeated kings. Twice a verse begins with the words: “These are the kings. . .” (vs. 1 and 7). But we should look at how these verses continue: “These are the kings of the land.” We must not forget about the land. The author of Joshua 12 was so certain that those who read what he wrote would think not only of defeated kings but at the same time of the land ruled by these kings that he refers to the land twice in verse 1 and twice again in verse 7, and even refers to it once by means of the pronoun it: “Moses, the servant of Yahweh, and the Israelites defeated them (i.e. Kings Sihon and Og). And Moses, the servant of Yahweh, gave it (literally: her, that is, the land, for erets, the Hebrew word for land, is feminine in gender) to Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh” (vs. 6). Thus Joshua 12 is not just about the execution of a number of people
whom God had sentenced to death. No, the people in question were kings, and the territory they ruled was part of the promised land, the land that we see Israel taking possession of, even if only gradually.

There is more to be said about the content of this chapter, which is set up to give us an overview. It consists of two major parts, each of which can be broken up further into parts.

The first part of the chapter (vs. 1-6) deals with the conquest of the land east of the Jordan. Verses 1-3 point back to the conquest of the land ruled by King Sihon, while verses 4-6 take up the conquest of King Og’s land.

These two stories are familiar. We read about Sihon in Numbers 21:21-30 and Deuteronomy 2:24-37. As for Og, he was dealt with in Numbers 21:31—22:1 and Deuteronomy 3:1-11. No doubt you remember how Moses, when he talked about the defeat inflicted on Kings Sihon and Og, talked at the same time about the two and half tribes inheriting their land. God was then giving Israel an assurance in advance, a down payment; so that she would believe all the more firmly that He was mighty enough to give her Canaan itself, that is, the land west of the Jordan. He was indeed mighty enough—and also faithful.

The second part of the chapter (vs. 7-24) deals with the conquest of the land west of the Jordan. First of all, verses 7 and 8 once more spell out the boundaries, northern and southern. Those boundaries had been given earlier (11:16-17), in two bold strokes. But the order there was different. First the southern boundary was defined, and then the northern boundary. The background was the course of events during Joshua’s campaigns in the north and the south.

Verses 9-24 give us the names of the defeated kings in this area. But the kings are mentioned not by way of their own names but by way of the cities they ruled—“the kings of Jericho, Ai, Jerusalem. . .” This emphasizes anew the importance of the land.

The cities ruled by the defeated kings are listed in a definite order. The cities in verses 9-16 are all in the southern part of Canaan: Jericho, Ai, Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, Eglon, Gezir, Debir, Hormah, Arad, Libnah, and Adullam. Then come cities in the central part of Canaan: Makkedah, Bethel, Tappuah, Hepher, Aphek, and Lasharon (vs. 17-18). Finally, cities in northern Canaan are listed: Madon, Hazor, Shimron-meron, Achsaph, Taanach, Megiddo, Kedesh, Jokneam, Dor, Goiim, and Tirzah (vs. 19-20).

As we read this overview, we come across a city now and then that was never captured by Joshua, even though its kings were killed by him (e.g. Jerusalem). There are also cities mentioned that were captured by Joshua but later had to be conquered by the Israelites again (e.g. Megiddo). Yet, despite these qualifications, the overview testifies to the tremendous success Joshua enjoyed during the seven (or five) years of warfare. In this overview we also come across kings who were not mentioned anywhere earlier in the book. This shows us that the author of the book of Joshua did not intend his account of the conquest of Canaan to be exhaustive. The important point for the reader to grasp is that a beginning had been made in the fulfillment of God’s promises. That was enough. Yahweh was mighty and faithful.
The connection between Joshua 12 and the Pentateuch

If we read the book of Joshua without keeping the Pentateuch in mind, we don’t find anything very special in it, and the fulfillment of God’s promises does not come home to us. We see Joshua then as a book of military history and war stories. Then it is no longer a beautiful book. It becomes a horrible book when we fail to see the legal basis for the way Moses and Joshua dealt with the Amorites and the Canaanites. But when we remember that God had already awarded the land of the godless Canaanites and Amorites to Abraham, we will see that each page of the book of Joshua presents us with the gospel, with the Bible’s teaching about God’s faithfulness and the gifts He gives us in accordance with His promises. In the days of Joshua, Yahweh began to fulfill the blessing which the patriarch Isaac gave his son Jacob before Jacob struck out on his own, namely, that Jacob and his descendants would take possession of the land that God had given to Abraham (Gen. 28:4). Notice that God gives (in His promise) and that Israel receives and takes possession. Aged Isaac already made this distinction.

In the name of Yahweh, Moses later spoke to Joshua along the same lines. When Kings Sihon and Og were defeated, he told Joshua to take heart from the victory as he looked ahead to the conquest of the land west of the Jordan. “Your own eyes have seen all that Yahweh Your God has done to these two kings. Yahweh will do the same thing to the kingdoms to which you (emphatic singular, pointing directly to Joshua) are about to go over. Fear not, for Yahweh you (plural) God-He will fight for you (plural)” (Deut. 3:21-2).

In connection with 11:17b, we have pointed back to the words that Moses later spoke (Deut. 7:24) to all of Israel in connection with the first commandment. Yahweh would deliver the kings of Canaan into Israel’s hand as long as she remained faithful to the Horeb covenant (especially the first commandment).

Here we see this promise being fulfilled literally, even if only in the first stages. Remember that the 31 kings listed in Joshua 12 did not include all the kings of Canaan. Moreover, the Canaanites later returned to some of the cities from which they had been driven out. Joshua did not place occupation troops in all the conquered cities. If we think carefully about the nature of his task, this shouldn’t surprise us. The fulfillment of God’s promises takes time. It was true then, and it’s still true today.

Joshua 12 and the New Testament church

The people of God in the old dispensation (the Israelites) were promised a certain land as theirs to inhabit. That promise does not apply to God’s people in the new dispensation.

We sometimes hear Christians in our time refer to Palestine as the “holy land.” Christians in the Middle Ages were deeply concerned about the fact that the “holy land” was in the hands of unbelievers.
It would not be too difficult to reawaken something of the spirit of the Crusades among Christians of our time.

But those who argue today that Palestine is the “holy land” are mistaken. Now there is no more holy land equipped with holy places. That stage of God’s dispensation of salvation is long gone. It has now become apparent that the horizon of God’s promises in much wider. We are privileged to know that God has promised the entire cosmos to Abraham (Rom. 4:13), that God’s Son is the Heir to the cosmos (Heb. 1:2), and that those who believe in Christ are co-heirs with Him (Rom. 8:17, 32).

The fulfillment of that glorious promise will be God’s work from start to finish, just as Israel received Canaan as an inheritance from God’s hand. All the same, God did agree to make use of Joshua and his soldiers. Clutching their swords, the Israelites carried out God’s death sentence on the godless and immoral Canaanites.

We, as believers of the new dispensation, have received no such commission. The only sword that we are given to use is the Word of God. And when we inherit the new earth, it will be only because of God’s almighty hand (Heb. 12:26-9; II Pet. 3:10; Rev. 21-22). The Paradise of the future will be attained not by a process of evolution, as the people of our time like to assure each other, but by God’s devastating intervention.
Chapter 4: Dividing the Inheritance

When we survey the structure of the second part of the book of Joshua (Ch. 13-22), we see that it is strikingly similar to the first part. The beginning, again, is a short command that Yahweh gave to Joshua. Then follows a fairly broad description of how Joshua carried out that divine command. First of all, in chapter 13, Joshua receives the command to divide the land among the tribes of Israel (Ch. 38-39). Then, in chapters 14-21, he carries out his assignment (Ch. 40-49). This main outline is simple.

Ch. 38: The Command to Divide the Land West of the Jordan (13:1-7)

Joshua 13 is made up of two parts. It begins with the story of God’s command to Joshua to get busy on a new assignment, to divide the promises land among the tribes of Israel by casting lots. Then it speaks of the two and a half tribes that had already received their inheritance in the land east of the Jordan.

Before we focus on 13:1-7, there are two remarks to be made. First of all, two words in this periscope should be underlined—the word you when God addresses Joshua in verse 1 and the word I which God uses in reference to Himself in verse 6. These words are the ones emphasized in Hebrew text.

What is this emphasis supposed to convey to us? Joshua was to start dividing up the land west of the Jordan among the nine and a half tribes. But who would see to it that the area awarded to a particular tribe by casting lots could indeed be taken over by that tribe? Joshua, who was no longer a young man? No, Yahweh Himself would. God was giving Joshua an assurance: “You, aged Joshua, you go right ahead and cast lots to divide the land, for I, Yahweh, I will look after things in the future when you’re not around anymore.”

This periscope consists of three parts. First comes the introduction (vs. 1). Then comes a long sentence spelling out the specifics (vs. 2-6). The last verse (vs. 7) forms the conclusion.

The introduction (vs. 1)

“Now Joshua was old, getting along in years. Yahweh spoke to him as follows: ‘You are old, getting along in years, and there is still a great deal of land that must be taken’” (vs. 1).

Anyone in our days who reads such words would want to know how old Joshua was when God spoke these words to him. We love precise numbers and like to know a person’s exact age. But the first readers of the book of Joshua were not so concerned about this question. We can only make an
educated guess at Joshua’s age at the moment described in verse 1. This moment must have come after the two great campaigns Joshua undertook against the North and the South, including the action against Jericho and Ai and the action against Hazor. Thus it must have been seven (or five) years after the crossing of the Jordan. And the crossing of the Jordan took place 40 years after the Exodus from Egypt. This adds up to roughly 50 years. But how old was Joshua at the time of Exodus? Shortly after the exodus he served as commander in Israel’s battle against the Amalekites (Ex. 17:8-16). It’s not likely that he was a young man at the time. Caleb, his comrade in the faith, was now about 85 years old (see 14:10-11). Could Joshua have been about the same age at the time? He lived to the age of 110 (24:29), 25 years longer. It could well be that Joshua was considerably older than Caleb at the moment of which 13:1 speaks.

We should note that this verse tells us twice that Joshua was a old man, well along in years. Moreover, the supposition that Joshua was quite old also fits in with the contrast between the emphatic “you” in verse 1 and the emphatic “I” in verse 6. You, Joshua will die before long, but I will remain.

If we may take it that Joshua was very old at the time of verse 1 (somewhere around 90), the meaning of the verse would be that Yahweh was telling Joshua to make haste because of his advanced age, to divide the land. It was an important task.

What did the task include? Verse 1b can be translated as follows: “There is still a great deal of land that must be taken.”

These words might leave us with the impression that a certain part of the land west of the Jordan had already been conquered by Joshua and divide among the Israelites, and that there was still a great deal left to be conquered, occupied and divided.

This is not the right understanding; it does not fit in with what we read in the preceding chapters. We have read about famous victories and battles in which many cities were captured by the Israelites. Strictly speaking, however, we read nothing about conquest followed by permanent occupation of entire territories. Certain places had been captured east of the Jordan (not all of them) and had even been occupied by Israelites. But in the land west of the Jordan, Israel occupied no more than its own campsite. This is what verse 16 reminds us of. (See also the discussion of 11:23 above and 18:1-10 below.)

The specifics (vs. 2-6)

The purpose of verse 1 is made very clear when mention is made of three areas still entirely in the hands of Israel’s enemies. Why those three areas and no others? The purpose is not to suggest that everything else was conquered, possessed and divided by the Israelites. Far from it. But why, then? I will come back to them question when we look at the word Canaanites.
(1) The first area mentioned was in the southwest (vs. 2-3). The southern boundary of this area was the Sihor. Sihor is sometimes used in the Bible as a poetic name for the Nile (Is. 23:3; Jer. 2:18), but because the word Sihor is also used to refer to brooks (see 19:2b), we should probably read it here as referring to the so-called “brook of Egypt,” which is know in our time as the Wadi el-‘Arish. (It flows into the Mediterranean Sea halfway between Egypt and Gaza.) The northern boundary of this area extended to the city of Ekron, which was the northernmost of the five Philistine cities. (The other four were Gaza, Ashdod, Ashkelon, and Gath.) This area was eventually inhabited by the Philistines, among others, but originally the Canaanites lived there. Hence it belonged to Israel by virtue of God’s promise (Gen. 12:7; Ex. 3:8-9; Num. 33:53; 35:1-12). God had promised to give Israel the land of the Canaanites.

(2) The second area lay more to the north, between the other two (vs. 4). There were Sidonians living in this area, but they were also Canaanites (Gen. 10:19). Thus their land, too, belonged to Israel by virtue of God’s promise. This territory extended fairly far inland, for the eastern edge touched on the territory of the Amorites. This was territory at a higher elevation (Num. 13:29), territory that included the springs that feed into the Jordan. This territory used to belong to Og, the king of Bashan. Thus it was also an Amorite kingdom and had had earlier fallen into Israel’s hands.

(3) The third territory lay still farther to the north (vs. 5-6); it was north of Tyre and Sidon. It included “the land of the Gebalites,” for example, the inhabitants of the city of Gebal. This city on the sea was called Byblos in Greek. It was not very far from the Lebanon range, and therefore it was famous from earliest times for the export of cedar wood, which then grew in abundance on Mount Lebanon. The Egyptians had long ago been involved in trade with this city, exchanging papyrus for wood. That is why the word biblia (i.e. goods from Byblos) came to mean book. Biblion is a diminutive form of biblos, and the plural of biblion (biblia) is often used to refer to the Scriptures (the Bible).

The hinterland of the port city of Gebal, then, was the Mount Lebanon region. Still further to the east was the Anti-Lebanon range, with Mount Hermon as its southernmost point (see also 11:3, 17). There are other names from Joshua 11 that we see again here-- Misrephoth-maim (i.e. Misrephoth on the sea) and Baal-gad. The latter was referred to as the northern boundary of the Promised Land (11:17). It also serves as such in this passage, but now we are given a bit more detail, for there is an additional phrase thrown in—“up to the way (ad lebo) to Hamath.” We also come across this phrase in Numbers 34:8 and in many later passages in Scripture. The city of Hamath was on the river known as the Orontes. Thus it was far to the north. When the Israelites were being prepared for the entry into Canaan while they were still camped east of the Jordan (Num. 34:1-12), Yahweh made use of the phrase “up to the way (ad lebo) to Hamath” in spelling out Canaan’s “ideal boundaries.” He used the same phrase when He talked to Joshua about the division of the land, which would have to take place before long (13:1-7). He did not just mention the (Philistine) area in the southwest as a rightful part of Israel’s inheritance (vs. 2-3) and the area of Tyre and Sidon (vs. 4) but even pointed out that the area to the north of Tyre and Sidon rightfully belonged to Israel. That area was also inhabited by Canaanites—the Sidonians. And all the land that belonged to the Canaanites God had promised to Israel’s forefathers. Joshua would have to keep this in mind when he proceeded to divide the land. Israel had a legitimate claim to all this territory.
Is this perhaps putting it too crudely? Wasn’t Yahweh asking too much of Joshua’s faith here? No. Joshua would have to carry out obediently both parts of the task that fell upon his shoulders as Moses’ successor, namely, leading Israel into Canaan and dividing the Promised Land among the Israelites (1:6). Both parts would have to be taken care of before he died. And if Israel would in turn cling to God’s promise in obedience, Yahweh would see to the fulfillment of that promise. You Joshua, you are old. Thus it’s time for you to move on to the division of the land. You can calmly count on the “ideal boundaries.” Just leave the rest to Me. “I (emphatic) will drive them out before the face of the Israelites. Only allot it (the land) to the Israelites as an inheritance, in accordance with what I have commanded you” (vs. 66).

The conclusion (vs. 7)

Let’s take one more look at verses 1 and 2-6. What does Joshua receive from Yahweh there? A lesson in geography? If so, these verses would surely lead to misunderstanding. They seem to say that all the land west of the Jordan, apart from the three areas specifically mentioned, had already been conquered, divided and occupied by Israel. But nothing could be farther from the truth. You can rest assured that when God spoke these words to Joshua about the division of the land, the Israelites were still concentrated at Gilgal (by Shechem) and the surrounding area and had not yet spread out across Canaan. The soldiers from Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh were still with them. Not until Joshua 22 do we read about them departing.

No, Joshua was not given a lesson in geography. It was a lesson in faith instead. No one is ever too old for such a lesson. Yahweh gave him that lesson by pointing to Joshua’s advanced age on the one hand and the enormous riches of the divine promise (Canaan) on the other. Yahweh reminded Joshua of the extent of the promise—from south to north. It was the same kind of territorial sweep that was present in Moses’ words (Deut. 1:7; 11:24). Moses had gone so far as to speak of the Euphrates as the northern boundary.

In this same manner God now spoke to Joshua and guaranteed His promise by pointing to Himself. I will see to it! I will drive out the enemy before you. All you need do is divide the land by casting lots. Don’t be afraid; go right ahead.

Then came the conclusion: “Now then, divide this land as an inheritance among the nine tribes and the half tribe of Manasseh” (vs. 7).

There are two things to be noted here. First of all, the opening words (now then) are really one word in Hebrew (i.e. we-attah). We have come across this word elsewhere. “My servant Moses is dead. Now then. . .” (1:2). There it occurs among various official terms, for the issue was Joshua’s succession to the leadership and the legacy of Moses. We came across this word even earlier in Deuteronomy and also heard such undertones in the word there. We recall what a prominent place Joshua was given in
that treaty of succession (which we now call the book of Deuteronomy). And now it occurs in 13:7, a verse that presents us with the conclusion of what Yahweh said to Joshua as He commanded him to proceed with the division of the land. This conclusion also sounds like a stipulation in a treaty: “Joshua, you know for what purpose I called you and Moses publically inaugurated you. You know what part of the task assigned to you still awaits completion. From My side you have again received a full guarantee that I will keep My word. Now then. . .”

Here Yahweh speaks as Israel’s Great King. He gives Moses' successor a solemn reminder of the task that remains for him, namely, dividing the Promised Land among the tribes of Israel. He tells Joshua to proceed despite the fact that much of the land is still occupied. It does not lie there for the taking like a cake cut neatly into pieces. All the same, the land rightfully belongs to Israel.

There is a second fact that should draw our attention here. Joshua did not have to divide “this land” among all the tribes. Yahweh went on to say: “Divide this land as an inheritance among the nine tribes and the half tribe of Manasseh.”

These words (which follow the official “we-attah” or “now then”) also awaken memories. They make us think of how Reuben, Gad and half tribe of Manasseh were establishes in the land east of the Jordan. No doubt you remember how that story began. The tribes of Reuben and Gad made a request of Moses: since they were amazingly rich in cattle, they asked permission to stay behind in the grasslands east of the Jordan. In other words, they did not want to join the others in crossing the Jordan. We know how Moses responded to this request. It struck him as fundamentally wrong, but he eventually gave in, after the tribes agreed to a certain condition. For the details, read carefully through Numbers 32. Against that background, we can grasp the importance of these words, which God spoke to Joshua at a historic moment. If anyone in the future ever doubted whether Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh really belonged to Israel and whether they had permission to live in the land east of the Jordan, he could look back to what is recorded in Numbers 32, and also to Joshua 13, to the words that Yahweh Himself spoke when He commanded Joshua to proceed with the division of the land west of the Jordan. Yahweh Himself had spoken of nine and one half tribes and thereby given His official approval to the permission Moses granted to Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh to settle down in the land east of Jordan.

This beautiful periscope serves as an introduction to the entire second part of the book of Joshua. What an encouraging lesson it contains for us even today! If teaches us that we can always rely on the promises of God. There is no such thing as overestimation the riches and fullness of God’s promises or taking them too seriously. When God gave His command to Joshua to proceed with the division of the land west of the Jordan, He pointed once more to the “ideal boundaries” of Canaan. In other words, He thought in terms of “Greater Canaan.”

If only Israel had followed His lead when it came to thinking big! Soon we will hear Joshua complaining about the Israelites’ failure to trust fully in their faithful God Yahweh.

When we draw such a conclusion about Israel, we must not do so from the lofty heights of pride. The horizon of God’s promise is much wider for us than it was for ancient Israel. We now know
that the content of those promises is no one less than Jesus Christ, God’s Son, and all that He obtained, so that He is now the Heir of heaven and earth. When we look in the mirror of Israel’s history, we cannot help but be confronted by our own sin and misery. We do not hang on every word that issues from God’s lips, as Calvin emphasized when he dealt with this passage of Scripture. We do not cast all our hopes on the promises that issue from His mouth, promises that find their yea and amen in Jesus Christ. We are guilty of this sin even though we hold a “bridgehead,” a down payment on the inheritance that is preserved for us above in Christ. God has given us the Spirit as a guarantee that the rich promise will be fulfilled in full.

Ch. 39: A Review of the Division of the Land East of the Jordan (13:8-33)

In our discussion of this passage of Scripture, we will first look at the content. Then I will raise the question of what purpose this content is intended serve.

The content is very simple and easy to survey in two sections.

Verses 8:14 (actually, verses 8-12), describe the total area allotted to Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh. Nothing more needs to be said about this matter here, for it was already covered in connection with Numbers 21.

There are two short appendixes to these verses, and they should indeed receive our attention. The first of them (vs. 13) deals with the Geshurites and the Maacathites, whom the Israelites did not drive out of the land east of the Jordan. The books of Joshua and Judges also include a host of such comments and notes about the land west of the Jordan.

The second appendix (vs. 14) points out that God assigned no inheritance to the Levites, that is, no inheritance consisting of a particular piece of land to which they held inalienable rights. But when Yahweh did not give the Levites such an inheritance east of the Jordan, He was not doing them an injustice He had already made His decision on this matter known at Horeb: “The burnt offerings of Yahweh, the God of Israel—that God is Levi’s inheritance, just as He promised Levi.” What these “burnt offerings” are we can find out by reading what the torah had to say about sacrifices. The question of “honor and honorarium” for priests and Levites was dealt with in connection with Numbers 17:12—18:32. (Compare this passage with Deuteronomy 18:1-8.) Did Israel later take pains to observe and respect the rightful inheritance of Levi? Not at all. Think of the story of the young man from Bethlehem, who was a Levite out looking for work (Judges 17:8; 18:30).

After the whole territory east of the Jordan is discussed as the area assigned to Reuden, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh as their future habitation, we are told what land was assigned to each of these three groups.
As for Reuben (vs. 15-23), his land was farthest to the south, beginning with the brook Arnon. Two details are added. In verse 21 we are told that King Sihon had five “vassals” (“kings” according to Numbers 31:8) who, like their troops, were apparently among the original inhabitants of the land but were subjected by King Sihon and were obliged to support him in times of war as their sovereign. And in verse 22 (see also Num. 31:8), we are told that the Israelites put Balaam to death.

As for Gad (vs. 24-8), his inheritance lay to the north of Reuben’s. The half tribe of Manasseh (vs. 29-31) was the farthest north of the three. It included Bashan, the domain once ruled by King Og. The part of Manasseh that settled east of the Jordan can be called the Jairites and the Machirites. Moses had already spoken of Jairite villages (Deut. 3:14).

This survey is concluded with a double assurance (vs. 32-3). First it is pointed out that the allotment of the land east of the Jordan to the two and a half tribes was carried out by no one less than Moses, when Israel was still camped in the fields of Moab, opposite Jericho (vs. 32). In the second place, there is a reminder of the fair arrangement made with Levi. That Levi was not assigned a portion of his own in the land east of Jordan was not an injustice but simply a consequence of an agreement that had been made long before (vs. 33; see also vs. 14).

We turn now to the question of the purpose of reviewing how Moses dealt with the matter of the inheritance assigned to the two and a half tribes east of the Jordan. There is good reason to raise this question. The preceding periscope (13:1-7) gives us an introduction to the division of the land west of the Jordan among the nine and a half tribes. Yahweh had ordered Joshua to undertake this task. We would now look for a report on how Joshua carried out this task. That report will follow soon enough, beginning in chapter 14. But first we have this fairly extensive passage dealing with the land east of the Jordan. Why?

The question cries out all the more for an answer when we look back and see how often Scripture has dealt with the question of the inheritance of the two and a half tribes—nine times!

(1) The first time we read about Israel’s march through the land east of the Jordan and the conquest of that land is in Numbers 21. In Numbers 32 we are then told how that land was allotted to the two and a half tribes.

(2) When the “ideal boundaries” of the land west of the Jordan are mentioned in Numbers 34 and the executors are named (those who will have to serve in the allotment of the land), it is noted briefly that Reuben, Gad and half tribe of Manasseh already received their inheritance in the form of land east of the Jordan (vs. 13-15).

(3) The conquest of the kingdoms of Sihon and Og is also mentioned in the book of Deuteronomy—in the “preamble” (vs. 4) and also in the “historical prologue” (2:24—3:21). That historical prologue would not have been complete without a mention of the fact that the land already conquered had been assigned to the two tribes (3:12-17), on the condition that their men of valor were first to cross the Jordan with the rest of Israel to take part in the conquest of Canaan (3:18-20).
(4) When Moses took up the “sanction” of the Deuteronomy covenant, he reminded the people of the conquest of the land east of the Jordan in order to teach them about Yahweh’s faithfulness toward Israel and to appeal to them again to be true to Yahweh (Deut. 29:7-8).

(5) When Moses went on to deal with the question of his successor as leader, he reminded the people of the conquest of the territory east of the Jordan, this time intending to give Joshua an assurance: “You, Joshua, as my successor, will defeat the peoples west of the Jordan just as I defeated Sihon and Og and took their land” (Deut. 31:4).

(6) Hardly have we opened the book of Joshua when we hear Joshua addressing the men of the two and a half tribes and reminding them of the arrangement they had made with Moses (1:12-15).

(7) In Joshua 12 the narrator looks back and surveys the areas west of the Jordan where Israel made her presence felt in the Promised Land in a stunning way. Thirty kings had been defeated! But this summary in Joshua 12 is preceded by a reminder of Israel’s victory over Kings Sihon and Og and the awarding of their land to the two and a half tribes (vs. 1-6).

(8) In Joshua 13:7 we find the conclusion of God’s appeal to Joshua to carry out the second half of his task, by assigning the land west of the Jordan to the tribes of Israel. There is an implicit recognition of the earlier division, for God tells Joshua to divide the land among the nine and a half tribes.

(10) There is yet another passage that should be listed here, even though it comes a bit later: in 14:3 the question of the land east of the Jordan is touched on once more.

Ten times, then, this matter is raised. If it comes up so often and at such length in this passage, we are surely justified in asking what the meaning of it is.

We might respond by saying that the people of Israel loved repetition, which is true. But this explanation is not sufficient in itself; it does not fully explain why this matter is raised as often as ten times.

Let us compare the ten references to the land east of the Jordan to the twelfefold repetition in Numbers 7. In that chapter we are given an extensive report of all the gifts presented by the twelve tribes (all thirteen tribes except Levi) for the newly built tabernacle. How much did each tribe give? Each tribe gave exactly the same gift, but each time the gift is listed separately. Twelve times in all the gift (or series of gifts) is described. Then the whole business is surveyed once more.

When I dealt with that passage earlier, I raised the same question that I am raising now: Why all that reiteration? I suggested that this peculiar form would make it clear to those who were alive then as well as to later generations that Israel was one as to later generations that Israel was one as the people of Yahweh.

The same motif, it seems to me, supplies the answer here. The frequent reminders that the two and a half tribes were assigned land east of the Jordan must have been intended to drive home the point to Israelites on both sides of the Jordan that they were one people that they belonged together.
The twelve tribes together formed the one people of Israel. Strictly speaking, 13:8-33 does not deal with only Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh but also with another tribe, namely, Levi. Twice it is said of Levi that he received no inheritance in the form of land, not even east of the Jordan during Moses’ days. Yet Levi was not done an injustice, for Yahweh was his portion.

Doesn’t that mean that we must read 13:8-33 as having primarily a juridical meaning? (Note the emphasis on the Canaanites in 13:3-4, 6).

All rights must be upheld, including rights of inheritance. When it comes time to divide up the inheritance, everything must be done in a straightforward manner. The people must be able to count on strict judicial impartiality. After the inheritance is divided, there is to be no talk of children and heirs being short-changed or dispossessed.

This passage occurring at this point in the book of Joshua makes it clear to later generations that while the nine and a half tribes received their inheritance in the land west of the Jordan, the two and a half tribes east of the Jordan not only belonged fully to the people of Israel but were heirs with just as many rights as the others and were to be treated as such. Just as God had not done Levi and injustice when He have him no land of his own, so He did no injustice to Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh when He assigned them to a different area than the other nine and a half tribes.

Thus two points were being emphasized here. (1) Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh were also children and heirs. (2) In no sense were they children and heirs that had been short-changed or dispossessed.

After these two points have been driven home, the book of Joshua proceeds with a description of how the land east of the Jordan was allotted to the nine and a half tribes.

For us, too, this is a very instructive passage of Scripture. When it comes to standing up for the rights of heirs, the Torah and the Prophets do not make their point many more than ten times. Think, for example, of how this right was protected in the law about the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:8-55), when all land had to be returned to its original owners or their heirs. Think of Zelophehad, whose right to the land promised to him was guaranteed to his daughters after his death (Num. 26:33; 27:1-11; 36). Think of how Moses, in his commentary on the fifth commandment, warned against encroaching on the rights to a share of the promised land that would be assigned to the “first,” that is, the first generation (the executors of Numbers 34:16-29) in every tribe, clan and family (Deut. 19:14; see also 27:17). It was not unusual for ancient treaties to contain regulations about land held as property and the rights of heirs to that property. Think of how Samuel warned the Israelites about the injustices perpetrated by many kings in such matters. They took the best land away from their subjects to give it to those who found favor in their eyes (I Sam. 8:14). Think of what Ahab and Jezebal did to get their hands on the vineyard that belonged to Naboth as an inheritance from his fathers (I Kings 21:3). Think of how the prophets denounced those who were guilty of taking land that was not rightfully theirs (Is. 5:8; Mic. 2:2). Think of how Proverbs warns against the removal of boundary stones, particularly when widows and orphans lose their claim to land as a result (Prov. 15:25; 22:28; 23:10).
We Christians must heed the warning here, to be careful not to oppress or take advantage of persons, groups or nations that are socially and economically weak, and not to overlook their lawful claim to property and inheritance. On this score many of us are guilty. There are even Christians who deliberately ignore their own rights under the covenant and the rights of their children to many generations; in fact, they trample those rights underfoot by denying themselves and their children the right to address God in prayer as “our Father,” by laying no claim to God’s promises to themselves and their seed, and by making no use of baptism the Lord’s supper as seals of those promises until they and their children come to the conclusion by introspection or by some mysterious revelation that they are indeed children of God and co-heirs with Christ. They proceed this way despite the fact that many a baptism liturgy reminds us that the children born within the congregation are heirs of the Kingdom of God and of the covenant. They ignore the Heidelberg Catechism, which explains clearly what it means for us to address God in prayer as “our Father” (Question and Answer 120). They ignore that promise made in Psalm 25 to the man who fears Yahweh, namely, that he personally (literally: his soul, his very self) will prosper and that his seed will possess the land (vs. 13). The same promise is made to those who love Zion and those who build the cities (Ps. 69:36-7). Yes, the believers and their seed are co-heirs pointed to this inheritance earlier. We may not tamper with this promise; neither may we ignore it or scorn it. Christians who are guilty of such a thing would be better off remaining pagans (Matt. 10:15; 11:22, 24).

Ch. 40: Rules and Procedures for Dividing the Land (14:1-5)

In chapters 14-21 we are given some details about how Joshua carried out his second task, namely, dividing the land. We are also told about another closely related matter, the taking possession of the land assigned to each tribe.

I speak deliberately of “some details.” When we read the report recorded in the book of Joshua, we must not subject it to our demands. Instead we should thankfully take note of what we are permitted to know. We should pay special attention to the central thrust of the passage, which is that Joshua’s faith was strong enough to enable him to carry out the assignment God had given him, that is, to divide the land by casting lots even though it was not yet completely conquered and occupied.

God’s command and promise was not the only factor in the situation for Joshua; he also had to deal with people, people who appear in an unflattering light at times. Joshua had already discovered that God’s words are pure words, pure as the finest silver (Ps. 12:7) but that they are not always treasured as such by those for whom they are intended.

We have seen repeatedly that a thorough knowledge of the Pentateuch is the foundation for the entire structure of the book we call the Bible. It is indispensable for an understanding of the later works built on the Pentateuch. This is clear again in the periscope to which we now turn our attention.
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Now the relevant passage in the Pentateuch is the conclusion of the book of Numbers. That passage stands in the same relation to our periscope as God’s promise is to man’s faith and God’s command to man’s obedience.

I am referring to the last eleven chapters of Numbers. In those chapters we learn how God prepared His Old Testament congregation, camped in the fields of Moab opposite Jericho, for the entry into Canaan.

How did Yahweh go about it? By describing all the measures to be taken and the procedures to be followed once the people were in the Promised Land. Let us review them briefly.

In Numbers 26, the first of those eleven chapters, we read about God’s instructions for dividing the land: it was to be done justly. This meant that it would have to be done by casting lots; then there would be no favoritism. I discussed this matter at greater length in connection with Numbers 26. It is my conviction that lots were casts only to determine what part of the country each tribe would occupy. When it came to the further division of the land within each tribe’s domain, the Israelites were to take the size of the various families and clans into account (Num. 26:52; see also 33:54).

It is understandable that when the land was divided, clans and families would have to take some leadership. This would apply not only to the casting of lots (for there are many ways of casting lots) but also to the order in which the tribes received their inheritance by lot. Leadership was needed especially for the further division of the land among the families and clans within the tribes. Unselfish executors, “wise men” would be needed to parcel out the inheritance. God Himself selected a group of wise executors and gave their names to Joshua. The names of Eleazar and Joshua headed the list, which should not surprise us. Eleazar was the high priest. He belonged to the tribe of Levi, a tribe that had not received any part of Canaan’s land. Thus he was an excellent choice to make such decisions in an unprejudiced, unselfish way. Joshua was chosen because he was to take Moses’ place as leader. Then follow the names to ten “rulers” drawn from the nine and a half tribes (Num. 34:16-29).

That was not enough, for there would also have to be a place for Levi. Therefore it was decreed that the Israelites would designate as Levitical cities 48 cities within the territory assigned to the various tribes. The men of Levi could then live in these cities and also have the right to use the pasture land that went with the cities. From the book of Deuteronomy we learn that showing the proper consideration for the tribe of Levi was a matter of life or death for Israel. Moses emphasized this point heavily (see Deut. 4:41-3; Deut. 4:41-3; 19:1-13). After all, Levi occupied a position between Yahweh and His people (Num. 1:47-54). The cities of refuge (i.e. the cities to which someone that accidentally killed someone could flee) are closely tied to Levitical cities (Num. 35).

The periscope to which we turn (14:1—5) is intended to begin the report on how the matter of the division of the land was taken care of. Thus it is reminiscent of the previous passage, which dealt
with the allotment of the land east of the Jordan to the two and a half tribes (13:8-33). We see a resemblance in style: “And here follow the inheritances that the Israelites received in the land of Canaan” (vs. 1a).

There is also a resemblance in content. When it comes to inheritances, things must be done impartially—as they were when the land west of the Jordan was divided. The men who played the leading role in this process were the same ones whom God had designated when Israel was still east of the Jordan, namely, “Eleazar the priest, Joshua the son of Nun, and the heads of the families of the tribes of Israel” (vs. 16).

Naturally this does not include all the Israelites; it includes only the nine and a half tribes. This is what God had already commanded Moses (vs. 2), for the two and a half tribes had already received their inheritance in the land east of the Jordan (vs. 31).

What about the Levites? When we add up nine and a half and tow and a half, we get twelve. But there were actually thirteen tribes, for the sons of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) counted as separate tribes.

It’s true that Levi received no inheritance in the form of land. Yet there were cities assigned to him to inhabit, and he had the right to use the pastures that went with those cities.

That’s how things were arranged, says our periscope at the outset. How it was all worked out we will learn from the upcoming chapters in the book of Joshua. Once more our periscope expressly repeats that everything happened according to the law. “As Yahweh commanded Moses, so the Israelites acted when they divided the land” (vs. 5).

We come across this manner of speaking whenever it is pointed out that something was surely done or carried out in accordance with some agreement or some command (see Lev. 16:34b; 24:23b; Num. 1:54; 2:34; 5:4; 8:22; 27:23; 29:40).

Thus this periscope serves as an introduction, an introduction to an extensive report on the division of the land among the nine and a half tribes. But it clings firmly to the bond with the past. We have read about that past in the book of Numbers. We saw how serious God was about His promise that the Israelites would eventually live in the land of Canaan. Well in advance He gave orders about the division of the land. But did all the tribes that were included in the division of the land west of the Jordan take that promise of God with equal seriousness? We shall see.

In the next chapters of the book of Joshua, we will read what portion was assigned to the various tribes. How were these portions assigned? By casting lots—in other words, by God Himself.

The same God had already revealed to Moses and Jacob what results the casting of lots would yield. This is obvious from Genesis 49 and Deuteronomy 33, chapters that tell us how Jacob and Moses blessed the tribes of Israel. There is something similar to be observed in connection with the prophet Samuel. At God’s command he anointed Saul king in private (I Sam. 10:1). Later, when lots were cast to answer the question of who was to become Israel’s king, Saul was the man singled out (I Sam. 10:20-1).
“The lot is cast into the lap,” we read in Proverbs 16:33, “but the decision is from Yahweh.” Our Christian forefathers, who lived close to the Bible and therefore paid careful attention to God’s will for their lives, were careful not to cast lots needlessly. Moreover, they did so only after prayer, and they hated to see anyone playing games of chance (e.g. with cards or dice).

God rules all things, and it is His hand that guides the casting of lots. When lots were cast to determine the inheritances of the tribes of Israel, He was in control. This is apparent from Joshua 14-19, and very clear in the story of how Judah received his inheritance.

Ch. 41: The Inheritance of Caleb (14:6-15)

We do not know for certain whether the tribe of Judah was the first one to receive its portion of Canaan through the casting of lots. We are not explicitly told that this was so, although it does seem likely, for the book of Joshua deals first with the inheritance assigned to Judah (14:6—15:63). Then it turns to the inheritance of the sons of Joseph (Ch. 16).

But whatever the truth of the matter might be, the result of casting lots in Judah’s case was that tribe’s part of Canaan included the area which Yahweh had promised to Caleb 40 years earlier. This part of Canaan included the area which Yahweh had promised to Caleb 40 years earlier. This showed the people that God was in control and that He kept His promises—even using the casting of lots as a means. When Caleb received his inheritance, he would not be separated from the other people of his tribe.

We do not need to guess about the time of the story related in 14:6-15. The date is given to us: “When the men (literally: sons) of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, Caleb the son of Jephunneh said to him. . .”(vs. 6a). But we do not know the chronological order of the other events. It may be that Caleb raised the subject of his personal inheritance after the lot had been cast and the tribe of Judah received a certain area of Canaan as its own. But it is also possible that it was just the other way around, that is, that Judah received his portion after Caleb raised the subject of his own inheritance.

We should not forget that Caleb was one of the “executors” appointed by God. Thus he would have had plenty of opportunity to approach Joshua before the casting of lots began. Moreover, because of his great age, he must have been one of the spokesmen in the deputation that the tribe of Judah sent to Joshua (see vs. 6a).

Let’s assume for a moment that Caleb raised the subject of his own inheritance at the very outset, before the casting of lots. Even then we cannot accuse him of egotism. He did not come to Joshua asking for a gift, a secure piece of land that would fall into his hands without a struggle. No, the man was driven ahead by his trust in Yahweh, who had honored him with a special promise. Yet we almost wonder whether he really addressed Joshua in quite the way that our text indicates. Aren’t we supposed to be humble and polite in God’s presence?

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The basis for Caleb’s request (vs. 6b-9)

Bible readers would do well to underline a couple of words in these verses: the words you in verse 6 and I in verses 7 and 8. These are the words you in verse 6 and I in verses 7 and 8. These are the words that receive the emphasis. No one knew as well as Joshua what had happened when the ten spies returned to Kadesh with their pessimistic recommendations. That’s why Caleb said to him: “You, Joshua, you know all about what Yahweh said to Moses the man of God about me and you at Kadesh-barnea” (vs. 6b). With these words, Caleb reminded Joshua of the story that is also familiar to us, thanks to Numbers 13 and 14. But those two chapters of Numbers do not give us every significant detail, as we see from this passage in Joshua.

Caleb is surprisingly bold in his way of talking about himself. In verse 7, the word I is emphasized. As a man of forty sent out by Moses, Caleb had carried out his assignment with an upright heart. What was so upright about him? The other spies (the majority, the ten) had spoken the truth when they reported on the size of the Anakim, for example, but they struck such a miserable, cowardly tone that they threw the whole people into depression. Caleb had rejected their tone in the strongest of terms, and he continued to show that positive attitude in his bold approach to Joshua. Putting the emphasis on the personal pronoun, he said to Joshua: “But I remained faithful to Yahweh, my God” (vs. 8). In this bold statement we hear echoes of how Caleb condemned the whining of the ten spies.

Now comes something new, something we did not know from Numbers 13 and 14. We see for the first time how much God appreciated Caleb’s faithfulness. From verse 9 (see also vs. 12) we learn that during those critical days at Kadesh, God gave Caleb a promise via Moses, a promise that Moses confirmed with an oath. The promise was that the hill country containing the city of Hebron, which was the area inhabited by the Anakim whom the ten spies had used to frighten the people so much—that hill country would be given to Caleb and his descendants as their inheritance. If you read through Numbers 14:24 and 30 and Deuteronomy 1:36, you will see that the promise made there to Caleb is described in much greater detail here. We came across a similar phenomenon earlier: what we read in Joshua 5:1-12 deepens the knowledge we have gained from the Pentateuch.

The main thrust of Caleb’s request (vs. 10-12)

In these verses, too, we would do well to underline a few words. A certain word that we come across in 13:7 (we-attah) occurs here three times. This word is generally translated as now then or therefore. It usually points to a conclusion and reminds us of the official solemn language to be found in treaty documents. In other words, it is a bit like a lawyer’s whereas. We can’t help thinking of this legal aspect when we hear Caleb present his request to Joshua on the basis of what had happened 45 years before.
Caleb did not come to Joshua with a brazen request. He was humble about it; he began by pointing to the faithfulness of God, who had spared him to that day.

Now, God had never decreed that all adult Israelites, whether male or female, who experienced the events at Kadesh were to die outside Canaan. The only ones barred from Canaan were the men of war, those who were registered for military duty.

Caleb was only a human being. Some 45 years had passed since Kadesh, and he was now 85 years old. Because he was still just as strong as when he had been sent out as a spy at the age of 40, he praised Yahweh, who had not only spared his life in accordance with His promise but had granted him so much strength that he was still able to fight and to keep “coming and going” (vs. 11).

The phrase coming and going can sometimes be understood in a general sense. Originally it was used in reference to city dwellers that went in and out of the city gate as they traveled to and from their work outside the city (see Ps. 121:8). We already came across this general meaning of the phrase in Deuteronomy 28:6, a meaning that applies to human life in general. But sometimes there is also a special meaning, a military meaning (Num. 27:17; Deut. 31:2). The latter meaning is no doubt the one that Caleb knew that he and his men would encounter stiff resistance when they went into battle to dispossess the Canaanites living in the land assigned to them. After all, the dreaded Anakim lived there.

The last time we came across the Anakim was in Joshua 11:21-2. When we dealt with that passage, we left it an open question whether it was pointing ahead to attach Hebron by Caleb and his men. It can also be read as a reference to the original action against this city taken by Joshua himself, which is referred to in 10:36. If the latter interpretation is correct, Caleb must have been clearly aware what a severe battle he faced. He was explicit about this: “Now then, give me the hill country about which Yahweh spoke to you on that day. For you yourself heard on that day that Anakim lived there in great fortified cities. Yahweh will no doubt help me drive them out, just as Yahweh said He would” (vs. 12).

No we understand the main thrust of Caleb’s request: he was standing up for Yahweh. Yahweh’s good name and honor had been scorned by the unbelieving men of war Kadesh, because of their fear of the Anakim and the cities with high walls (Num. 13:19, 31-3; Deut. 1:28). Forty-five years later, Caleb was still incensed about this. He did not believe for a moment that Yahweh deserved the reproach implicit in Israel’s fear. He wanted to wipe away the reproach, for it tarnished God’s name. Joshua knew this as well as Caleb—hence the emphasis on the word you. By emphasizing this word, Caleb was appealing to Joshua as a witness of the shame that had fallen upon God’s name “that day” at Kadesh. (The phrase “that day” crops up twice in this passage.) That shame would simply have to be removed! That’s why Caleb felt called to do everything he could to bring about the fulfillment of the promise God had made to him. He ended with a prayer that God would be with him when it came time to drive out the Anakim. His last word was yet another appeal to the promise God had made.

Caleb’s request granted (vs. 13-15)
Caleb’s resolute language of faith must have been music in Joshua’s ears. It spoke well of Caleb that he asked Joshua’s permission to lay claim to something which God Himself had given him long before as his by right. By asking Joshua’s permission, he was recognizing Joshua as Israel’s leader in the battle and also the leader in the division of the land. True faith knows its place; it recognizes the order established by God. Yet it is not afraid to speak up when it is time, and it is courageous before the face of God and men.

“Then Joshua blessed him and gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as his inheritance” (vs. 13). The official tone that we heard in the first two parts of this story also comes through here. Then man whose request was granted is referred to not simply as “Caleb” but as “Caleb the son of Jephunneh.” This sets an official stamp on the story. Caleb and his descendants, it is noted expressly, have been assigned their inheritance in a lawful way, the same inheritance that Yahweh had already promised to them. It was all done through the man to whom God had entrusted the task of dividing the land. As for faithful Joshua, he granted his old comrade’s request wholeheartedly. In fact, he “blessed” him. Perhaps this meant that Joshua wished Caleb God’s full support as he sought to carry out the enterprise he had undertaken in such a believing way.

Finally, the narrator has two more points to make in connection with Caleb’s story. Completely in line with the official tone that echoes through his whole report, he reminds us of the basis of the permanent right to Hebron held by “Caleb the son of Jephunneh” (notice the use of the full name again). Hebron would always be reserved for Caleb “because he stood fully behind Yahweh, the God of Israel,” both when he was 40 and when he was 85 (vs. 14).

In conclusion we are given a piece of geographical information (vs. 15). It appears that the earliest name for the city awarded to Caleb is Hebron. At some point the Anakim took up residence there. As a result, Hebron was long known as Kiriath-arba, that is, the city of Arba. This Arba must have been a man of exceptional stature among the Anakim. Thus we could say that he was doubly tall. When the city fell into Israel’s hands, the original name was used again. In this respect the heathen influence of the Anakim was undone when God crowned Caleb’s plans for the conquest of Hebron with complete success and allowed the whole area to fall into the hands of the tribe of Judah.

There is probably more than one reason why the story of Caleb and Hebron occurs at this point in the book of Joshua, before the great series of inheritances allotted to the various tribes. One reason, no doubt, is to draw attention to the rights of Caleb and his descendants. What a great blessing a believing ancestor can be to subsequent generations. Even foolish descendants like Nabal “the Caleite” can still reap some of the benefits (1 Sam. 25:3).

Another reason why this story comes first is to warn Israel and out her to shame. It stands in stark contrast to what we read later in the book of Joshua. Our passage could well be given some such heading as: “As long as God is for us, who can be against us? Caleb lived and acted out of faith, but Judah and the other tribes did not always follow his example. They failed to drive out all the Canaanites!
We Christians of the twentieth century must not look down on the Israelites form the heights of pride. If we placed more trust in God as our almighty Creator and our Father in Jesus Christ, we would not so often find ourselves terrified of all sorts of giants—Theological and philosophical Anakim.

Let’s never make the mistake of regarding the faith of men like Joshua and Caleb as “Old Testament faith.” They shared that faith not only with Jonathan, who declared that God can provide deliverance through a few as well as through many (I Sam. 14:6), and with David, who declared to Goliath that Yahweh does not provide deliverance through the sword and the spear (I Sam. 17:47), but also with Christ and His apostles, who not only prescribed that faith for us but lived it themselves (see Luke 18:27; Rom. 8:31).

Ch. 42: Judah’s Boundaries and Cities (Ch. 15)

The many, many names we encounter in Joshua 15 should not scare us away from reading through this chapter carefully. Think of the intense interest with which our Savior must have listened when this chapter was read aloud in the synagogue when He was a child. Think of how He must have read this chapter eagerly Himself when He was old enough. Jesus, after all, was from the tribe of Judah (Heb. 7:14).

It’s a shame that the various sections of which this chapter consists are not demarcated more clearly in most Bible translations, through breaks in the text, or judicious paragraphing.

The major division in this chapter breaks it into two parts. Verses 1-20 deal with the boundaries of Judah’s territory, while verses 21-63 deal with the cities of Judah. In each of these parts there are further subdivisions.

The boundaries of Judah (vs. 1-20)

These boundaries are first discussed in general. Then the text goes into some specifics.

In verse 1 we hear a clear echo of Numbers 34:3-5, a passage containing a prophecy about the “ideal boundaries” of the area to be given to Israel as habitation. In the south Israel would border on Edom; Israel could not make any legitimate claim to Edom’s inheritance (Deut. 2:4-8). Joshua 15:1 shows us how that prophecy was fulfilled, how God kept His word to Edom. Judah’s inheritance ended in Edom’s border.

In verse 2-12 the boundaries are spelled out. The southern boundary is presented once more, but this time in greater detail. This boundary was already touched on in verse 1 as coinciding with the
southern boundary of the land promised to Israel as a whole. The more extensive description is given now because it also serves as Judah’s boundary.

This southern boundary is described in verses 2-4. In verse 51 we hear of the eastern boundary, the coastline of the Dead Sea. The northern boundary is spelled out in verses 5b-11. Verse 12 tells us what the western boundary is, namely, the Mediterranean Sea. Thus Israel was allowed to lay claim to the territory occupied by the Philistines. (13:3).

It is interesting to observe what kind of language describes the boundaries. They are not something inanimate; a boundary “goes out” or “runs through” or “climbs up” or “circles around.” What we are presented with, then, is an animated description that takes nature of the terrain through which the boundary passes into account.

The description of Judah’s boundaries ends in verse 12. The author chooses this point in the narrative to throw in a story about a certain area that Caleb awarded to his daughter Achsah. This story consists of two parts.

(1) In the first part of the story (vs. 13-17), we are reminded that God awarded a certain part of Judah’s territory to Caleb, and that Joshua recognized this (see 14:6-15). That area was Hebron and surroundings. The city had been known for some time as Kiriath-arba, that is, the city of Arba. This Arba had been a great man, a “father,” among the Anakim. These Anakim were made up of three groups that were named after family head—Sheshai, Ahiman and Talmai.

Now then, the area of the dreaded Anakim, the giants that causes Israel to tremble at Kadesh, was “given” by Joshua to Caleb. In other words, it was assigned to Caleb. That meant a fierce battle ahead, a battle against the Anakim; the “people of the neck.” Caleb managed to drive them out of Hebron. Just when he did so is not important for our purposes. Here we are reminded that Caleb and his descendants took possession of Hebron in a completely lawful way.

They also took possession of Debir, which was southwest of Hebron. This city was mentioned in Joshua 10:38-9, where we read that Joshua captured it. Apparently Joshua did not occupy the city, for it was taken over by the Canaanites again and strengthened. Sometime later Caleb faced the task of conquering it again. He promises that the man who took Debir would be given his daughter Achsah as his wife. Othniel was the lucky man.

This Othniel is the same man whom we later encounter as a judge (see Judges 3:9). He is called “the son of Kenaz, the brother of Caleb,” which means that both Othniel and Caleb were descendants (perhaps even sons) of Kenaz. Thus Othniel was a relative of Caleb, perhaps even his brother. If so, he was a much younger brother.

Caleb was a man of exceptional strength at age 85, and therefore there was nothing strange about having become a father some fifteen or twenty years earlier. As for the possibility of Othniel marrying his own niece, the people of ancient Israel would not have objected to this in quite the way that we would.
In the second part of this story (vs. 18-19), the author gets to the special purpose he had in bringing up this story, namely, to explain how Othniel and Achsah, as a married couple, came to possess such an exceptionally beautiful inheritance. It was really Achsah's doing. Most likely she made the journey as bride to the house of her bridegroom seated on a donkey, with the bridegroom accompanying her. Along the way she urged him to ask her father for some open land to go along with the city of Debir, which they had already received. From the rest of the story it is clear that she meant a certain kind of land, namely, land that included access to water. Perhaps Othniel regarded this as an excessive demand, but that didn't stop Achsah: she made the request herself. Caleb was apparently at the bridegroom's home when the bridal procession approached. When Achsah spotted her father, she jumped off the donkey to show her respect for him (see Gen. 24:64; I Sam. 25:23), but she must have done so in such a way that Caleb assumed that she wanted to ask him something. Otherwise there is no explanation for his asking: "What do you wish?" Some scholars present quite a different reading of this text: "Once she was off the donkey, she clapped her hands" (presumably to attract her father's attention). Whichever reading is correct, it is clear that Achsah asked her father for a present. She pointed out to him that he had given to her husband (and thus to her) some "land of the Negeb" (i.e. dry land) but that they also needed land with water. Caleb then gave his daughter land so renowned for its abundance of water that it was known as the "upper springs" and the "lower springs" (vs. 19b).

Caleb was a blessing to his descendants, and so was Achsah, a worthy daughter of such a father. An upbringing in faith produces bold believers.

The story recorded in 15:13-19 is recorded in almost the very same words in Judges 1:11-15. The authors of Joshua and Judges must have both found this story recorded in another source. But the author of Judges 1 was interested mainly in the first part of the story, for he wanted to talk about conquests made by the tribe of Judah. The author of Joshua 15 seems to have been more interested in the second part of the story, in which it is explained to later generations how it came about that Othniel and Achsah possessed such a magnificent inheritance. But in both books we sense a definite prophetic purpose, namely, to speak to subsequent generations about Caleb's faith in Yahweh and His firm promises. That faith bore fruit during Caleb's own life for his descendants. But later we will see that Caleb's faith was not shared by all the people of Judah.

The cities of Judah (vs. 21-36)

The list of cities that now follows is intended to be more than a catalogue useful for reference purpose. It begins by summing up the cities by district, while in some districts further groups of cities are distinguished.

First came the cities in the Negeb (vs. 21-32). This passage begins with a reminder of something that we were already told in verse 1—that these cities lay at the southern tip of Judah's territory, not far from the boundary of Edom (vs. 21). They are divided into four groups: group 4 (vs. 29-32).
When these cities in the Negeb are finally added up in verse 32, we are given a total of 29, although about 35 were listed. Apparently a later copyist added a few cities without changing the total.

Next came the cities in the Shephelah (vs. 33-47). The Shephelah is the lowland in the southwest of Palestine. The cities in this area are mentioned in four separate groups. The first group is dealt with in verse 33-6. When the sum of these cities is added up, verse 36 gives us a total of fourteen, although in fact there are fifteen cities mentioned. Again, it seems likely that some copyist added one name without changing the total. Group 2 is covered in verses 37-41, group 3 in verses 42-4, and group 4 in verses 45-7. The cities in group 4 lay in the coastal strip help by the Philistines, which only later would fall into the hands of the Israelites. The survey of the Philistine cities is not complete either: Gath and Ashkelon (see 13-3) are missing. But the rights of Israel (more specifically, Judah) to this area maintained.

Then come the cities in the hill country (vs. 48-60). By the term hill country the hill country of Judah is meant, the same hill country mentioned in 11:21. The cities of this hill country are arranged into five groups. The cities of group 1 (vs. 48-51), including Debir, were located in the southwest part of the hill country. The cities of group 2 (vs. 52-4), including Hebron, were to the north of group 1. The cities of group 3 (vs. 557), including Maon, the hometown of Nabal, were to the east of groups 1 and 2. The cities of group 4 (vs. 58-9) lay to the north of Hebron. And the cities of group 5 (vs. 60) were to the west of Jerusalem.

Finally we come to the cities in the wilderness (vs. 61-2). This “wilderness” is the area between the hill country and the Dead Sea. In other words, it is the Judean wilderness that has become so famous in recent times because of the manuscripts discovered at Qumran. Among these cities was the so-called “City of Salt.” This city was important because salt was needed for offerings.

There are a number of interesting remarks that could be made about these cities mentioned in Joshua 15. The Kerioth mentioned in verse 25, for example, may well be Judas Iscariot’s hometown, and the Beersheba of verse 28 is probably the place where Abraham used to live.

Some of these cities we encountered earlier, e.g. the Makkedah of verse 41 (see 10:28). Some other Judean cities that come up later in the Bible (e.g. Beth-shemesh, which is mentioned in I Samuel 6:12) are not mentioned here. Thus we should not regard this list as exhaustive. Although it is no doubt based on data that go back a long way, it did not take on its current form until after Joshua’s death, and later more alterations were made. But regardless of how the list was put together, it described clearly—for insiders, at least—what inheritance was lawfully assigned to Judah when the lots were cast.

At the end of this list of cities comes an honest, frank admission: Judah was not able to drive out the Jebusites (vs. 63). We know that this was not accomplished until David came along; David was the one who finally captured the fortress of Zion (II Sam. 5). From Judges 1:* we learn that Jerusalem was indeed captured and burned by the men of Judah, but apparently they failed to take the fortress. The Jebusites were able to hold out in the fortress, and as a result, the men of Judah had to put up with the presence of Jebusites in Jerusalem, right on their northern border.
With this comment about Jerusalem, the part of the book of Joshua that deals with Judah’s “portion” and begins so beautifully with the story of Caleb’s faith and boldness, comes to a close. The end stands in sharp contrast to the beginning: Caleb drives the Anakim out of Hebron, but the other men of Judah fail to dislodge the Jebusites from Jerusalem’s fortress.

We should not be too harsh in our judgment as we survey this situation. At Horeb Yahweh Himself had said that He would not drive out all the Canaanites before Israel in one year (Ex. 23:29). Yet He warned Israel expressly against making peace with the Canaanites (Num. 33:52-6; Deut. 7:1-2) and reminded them that all the Canaanites would eventually have to be wiped out (Deut. 20:16-18). Israel was sadly lacking in the courage and boldness needed to achieve the final goal. Although the book of Joshua gives us information about a special transitional period, it eventually tells us to Joshua’s own disapproval of this sorry course of events. Joshua and Caleb had to fight against unbelief and disobedience in Israel not only when they returned to Kadesh with the other ten spies. Forty-five years later, when the Israelites were established in Canaan and Joshua and Caleb were old men, the same battle still had to be fought; despite the fact that God had added a number of great wonders to the mighty deeds He had already performed to help Israel. (Think of the crossing of the Jordan and the battle of Gibeon.)

The readers of the book of Joshua will come across more such sentences as the one we find in 15:63. They occur in chapters 16 and 17. Perhaps we should underline them in red and remember that the voice of prophecy speaks to us in such sentences, which were intended to tell subsequent generations what Israel did with the covenant she was privileged to make with Yahweh. Then we as Christians should think carefully about the “How much more” of Hebrews 10:28, 31 and 12:25. When we look at our own situation, we see that we have nothing to boast about. Instead we should be wondering anxiously what God will do one day with Christendom.

Ch. 43: Joseph’s inheritance (Ch. 16-17)

Just as we do not know whether Judah was in fact the first tribe to receive its inheritance in Canaan by the casting of lots, we do not know that the “sons of Joseph” were second. It seems likely that they were, for their inheritance is the second one that the book of Joshua describes.

First the entire territory assigned to the sons of Joseph (i.e. Ephraim and Manasseh) is described (16:1-3). Then the territory of each tribe is described separately. Finally there is a short appendix in which we are told that the sons of Joseph complained about the inheritance assigned to them.

The territory assigned to Joseph (16:1-4)
In Genesis 48 we read the moving story of the blessing that father Jacob pronounced over the two sons of Joseph. To each of them he promised a place among his own sons, just as though they were as much his sons as Reuben and Simeon. In effect he was giving Joseph a double portion of the inheritance, which is the portion of a first-born (Deut. 21:17). Moreover, he crossed his arms when he placed his hands on their heads to bless them, with the result that his right did not wind up on the head of Manasseh, who was Joseph’s oldest son, but on the head of Ephraim, the younger. On Manasseh’s head he placed his left hand.

In 16:4-5 we have a clear reminder of this prophecy when the two sons of Joseph are mentioned. First they are mentioned in order of age: “The sons of Joseph, Manasseh and Ephraim, received their inheritance.” But the text then goes on to take up Ephraim’s inheritance first. It does not get around to Manasseh until 17:1.

The relatively long passage of Scripture dedicated to Joseph’s inheritance bears some striking similarities to the description of Judah’s inheritance. Think first of the story in which we saw how faithfully God saw to the fulfillment of his promise to Caleb. Ephraim and Manasseh were also called by God to enter the future emboldened by His promises. But just as Caleb’s example was not followed by the men of Judah, the example set by faithful Joshua, who was of the tribe of Ephraim (Num. 13:8; Josh. 19:50), did not make much of an impression on the men of his tribe. How it must have disturbed Caleb and Joshua that even the people of their own tribes could doubt the faithfulness and power of Yahweh. They suffered the same kind of disappointment and sorrow that Christ had to suffer (Matt. 22:29) and that His followers also face (II Tim. 4:3).

What verse 1a tells us literally is that “the lot for the sons of Joseph came out.” This way of speaking, which we also encounter in connection with some of the other tribes (e.g. 19:1), probably refers to the manner of casting lots. Pieces of wood or stone or pottery bearing the names of the participants would be put in a bag. Then someone who was impartial (e.g. a small boy) would draw one piece out of the bag.

The text then goes on to describe the area that fell to the sons of Joseph by lot (vs. 1b-3). The description is not as extensive as it was in Judah’s case. Only the southern boundary is spelled out. It ran roughly from the Jordan to the Mediterranean Sea. There is not a word about the northern boundary, which may well be because Ephraim and Manasseh were so slow about taking control of the cities and villages assigned to them in the north. Or were there no cities and villages in that area so well-forested? Eventually, perhaps considerably later, these tribes were awarded certain cities within the territory of Asher and Issachar (17:10-11).

Ephraim’s land (16:5-10)
After reading the chapter on Judah’s inheritance, we might now expect an extensive description of Ephraim’s boundaries and then a list of his cities. However, not as far as boundaries are concerned, we are told only about the south (vs. 5-8). It is the same boundary referred to in verses 1-3 as the boundary of the entire territory assigned to the sons of Joseph, but this time we are given a bit more detail.

As for cities, we are not given an extensive list. Instead we are presented with two disappointing pieces of information. From verse 9 we gather that Ephraim was awarded of information. From verse 9 we gather that Ephraim was awarded some northern cities that really belonged to Manasseh’s inheritance. This may well have taken place somewhat later. One of these cities that came into Ephraim’s possession was Gezer (vs. 10). But we read that the Canaanites living in Gezer resisted the efforts to drive them out, although they were eventually forced to submit to slave labor. Just when the later development took place we don’t know, although I Kings 9:20 does tell us something about the nature of the slave labor. The descendants of the people who were supposed to be driven out of Canaan in accordance with God’s command but were spared by the Israelites were later employed by King Solomon for his great building projects—the temple and the palace. That was how the pagans found their place in Israel’s life. Yet they managed to teach Israel a great deal. Little of which was valuable. They taught Israel to be unfaithful to Yahweh and His covenants. That’s why we would do well to underline in red such Scripture passages (see 15:63). Then we would see how the dangers threatening Israel grew and we would not be surprised at God’s growing anger when Israel became more and more infected with the Canaanite spirit.

The information about Gezer is all the more disappointing because Joshua had already inflicted a severe defeat on the soldiers of Gezer during his campaign in the south when Gezer tried to rescue Lachish. Even the king of Gezer died in this battle (10:33; 12:12). Clearly Ephraim did not have the courage of faith to capitalize on this earlier victory and consolidate the gains made by Joshua.

**Manasseh’s land (17:1-13)**

When the narrator tells us about the land allotted to Manasseh (vs. 1a), he throws in a couple of comments by way of background. For one thing, he reminds us that Manasseh was a son of Joseph, just as Ephraim was. Actually, Manasseh was the older of the two.

He also talks about the part of Manasseh known as the half tribe of Manasseh east of the Jordan. He identifies that part of the tribe with Machir, who was one of the sons of Manasseh. Because of the bravery shown by this part of Manasseh even before the crossing of the Jordan, Moses had promised them the well-known territories of Gilead and Bashan (Num. 32:41; Deut. 3:14). Jael was the leader of the Machirites who distinguished themselves in battle. The other parts of the tribe of Manasseh received their inheritance in the land west of the Jordan (vs. 2).
At this point the narrator informs us what happened in the case of the promise that Moses (with God’s permission) made to the daughters of Zelophehad, namely, that they would also inherit land in Canaan (Num. 26:33; 27:1-11, 36). It turned out that the faith of those spirited daughters of Zelophehad—they are all mentioned by name in verse 3—was not put to shame. Their attitude reminds us of Caleb (14:6-15) and of Caleb’s daughter Achsah (14:17-19). What Joshua 17 says about these daughters of Zelophehad, particularly about their appeal in faith to God’s promise, an appeal that they addressed to those who were responsible for dividing the land (i.e. Eleazar, Joshua and the other leaders), could well lead us to expect that such faith would also be found among others in the tribe of Manasseh. Yet that was not the case.

We saw earlier that the orderly list of boundaries and cities presented for Judah was not repeated for Ephraim. No such orderly list is presented for Manasseh either.

As for the boundaries, they are mentioned in verses 7-9. But within these boundaries lay some cities that belonged to Ephraim (vs. 9).

There is no list of the cities of Manasseh. But we do learn that certain cities within the territory of Issachar and Asher came into the possession of Manasseh at some time or other. But even of those cities we are told that the men of Manasseh did not know how to take them. (It becomes a sad refrain.) We are given the scant comfort of knowing that when the men of Manasseh became somewhat stronger later on, they forced the Canaanites whom they could not drive out of their territory to subject themselves to forced labor. But they never eliminated these Canaanites altogether. Thus here, too, there was a Canaanite altogether. Thus here, too, there was a Canaanite enclave left in the midst of Israel. Naturally, such a heathen outpost would always function as a hotbed of infection for Israel.

The complaint of the Josephites (17:14-18)

Casting lots is not something we do just for fun—or if we do, we shouldn’t. The purpose of casting lots is to let God Himself make the decision in a difficult matter.

But what happens when one of the parties is dissatisfied with the outcome after lots have been cast? Doesn’t that amount to rebellion against God Himself?

This is just what the sons of Joseph did. They said to Joshua: “Why did you only give me one portion as my inheritance, when you know that I am a numerous people because Yahweh has blessed me greatly to this day? (vs. 14).

These are words with a pious ring to them, but were they true? When we read Numbers 1 and 26, we see that Ephraim and Manasseh did not come up with more men for military duty than the other tribes, or with a greater total than any other two tribes put together. Moreover, they did not receive just one piece of land to share. They were given one area in the land east of the Jordan and two more west
of the Jordan. All the same, Joshua took them seriously and gave them some good advice: he told them to go to the land of the Perizites and the Rephaim, which were rich in trees, and get themselves some more space by driving out the Canaanites living there (vs. 15). Because the Josephites were so numerous, this solution would not be hard for them to put into effect: a job is quickly done if a lot of people pitch in and help. It is well known that in Old Testament times, Palestine had many more trees that it has had in modern times.

But the sons of Joseph stood firm. The hill country assigned to them, to which the narrator already refers as the “hill country of Ephraim” (see 11:21), was not enough for them. Even if they started cutting down trees it would not be enough. And they couldn’t use the level areas in the region assigned to them either because they were inhabited by Canaanites equipped with metal chariots. On the flat terrain those chariots could be devastating.

How that response must have disappointed faithful Joshua! Had the Josephites already forgotten how God had helped Israel in the battle against the king of Hazor, who had also fielded a huge army complete with chariots of war (11:4, 6, 9)?

Hence there is a definite tone of admonition in what Joshua now says to these Josephites. The narrator himself was deeply impressed by Joshua’s words, as we can see from the way he introduces them. Solemnly he writes: “Then said Joshua to the house of Joseph, to Ephraim and to Manasseh. . .” (vs. 17a). We sense that something grave is to follow.

There are two main elements in the response Joshua gives at this point. First, he repeats his rejection of the complaint made by the Josephites, namely, that they did not receive enough land. It simply wasn’t true. God had not short-changed them when the lots were cast. The two tribes together did not receive just one portion. If they were to cut down some trees in the hill country, they could easily double the amount of land they had available for human habitation, and they wouldn’t even have to fight for it. Apparently was hot with indignation. Five times in his response he uses the word ki, which we could translate as surely or without a doubt. “Surely the hill country will also be yours. Surely there are trees there, but if you cut them down, the new area will also be for you. Surely you will drive out the Canaanite. You surely will, even though he has iron chariots. You surely will, even though he is strong” (vs. 18). Many translations take account of the word ki by making the verb more emphatic.

The narrator does not give us any further commentary on Joshua’s answer. But the fact that he passes it along and the way in which he records it tells us enough. It is another passage that should be underlined in red, for we hear the voice of prophetic admonition speaking to Israel and to us as well. We can also grieve the Spirit of God by our fear of men. Man is no more than grass (Is. 51:12).

We do not know when this discussion between Joshua and the Josephites took place. Was it after lots had been cast to determine how the remaining land would be distributed among the other tribes? Is that when the Josephites approached Joshua like whining children? Did they address themselves to Joshua alone and not to the other members of the commission responsible for dividing the land? (14:1). Did they think they would get special favors from Joshua because he was an Ephraimite? Faithful Joshua, of course, did not show any favoritism in his response to them.
Ephraim and Manasseh were privileged tribes. Like Caleb, they were bearers of an extra divine promise. But what a difference there was between them and Caleb! Their names will come up more often in situations that do not reflect well on them.

Some Christians are a lot like Ephraim and Manasseh—privileged and blessed with ability. Think of the gifted Corinthians, who were a problem and a concern to Paul. But God is patient with such children in the faith, just as he was patient with Ephraim and Manasseh until the exile and even beyond it (Jer. 3:12-13; 31:20).

**Ch. 44: Joshua Prods the Remaining Seven Tribes (18:1-10)**

Anyone who wants to understand this passage of Scripture properly would do well to take into account the lesson to be drawn from the one before.

God had commanded Joshua to divide the land west of the Jordan among the tribes still waiting their turn. Joshua set to work (Ch. 13), as we see in the stories about the land assigned to Judah and the land assigned to the sons of Joseph proves this (Ch. 14-17).

Just how the various areas were assigned to the different tribes is not entirely clear, nor is it clear how each tribe divided its land among the various families and clans (17:5). What we do know, however, is that Joshua did not do all the work alone. He had to work alone. He had to work with other people, people who could have cooperated or oppose him. For example, there was the great commission for dividing the land, which was composed of Joshua himself, the high priest Eleazor, and the heads of the tribes (14:1). Joshua and his colleagues in this commission worked together harmoniously. We must bear this in mind as we study the periscope to which we now turn our attention. When only Joshua’s name is mentioned (Joshua reproaches the seven tribes and gives instructions to a second commission), this does not mean that his actions did not have the backing and approval of the high priest Eleazar and the heads of the tribes. On the contrary, the final result is ascribed to him together with the other members of the commission (19:51).

But Joshua had to deal with more people, the people of the tribes who were receiving their inheritance. The story of Ephraim already shows how sadly cooperation might be lacking (Ch. 17). In the process of reclaiming the land, there are three stages to be distinguished. The first stage includes the great battles at Gibeon and Meron in which a number of cities were destroyed and various kings were put to death. But those stunning victories did not mean that the land as a whole was occupied. It is important to note, however, that by this point Israel held the upper hand in Canaan. The Canaanites lived in fear of the Israelites before they had even crossed the Jordan. After the miraculous crossing of the Jordan and the amazing conquest of Jericho, their fear deepened and increased still more after the victorious campaigns in the north and the south.

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We should not make a great problem of the fact that a commission of 21 people (three from each of the remaining tribes) dared to travel through unoccupied land in order to describe it. We can simply assume that the Canaanites did not dare to lift a finger against them, for they lived in the hope that their lives might yet be spared if they gave the Israelites no cause to take military action against them.

This stage, this set of circumstances, is referred to in 11:23, where we read that the land rested from the struggle. The struggle referred to, of course, is Joshua’s devastating campaign against the north and the south. We should also think of this uneasy peace when we read in 18:1: “The whole congregation of the Israelites was called together at Shiloh. There the tent of meeting was set up. The land lay subjected before them.”

We must be particularly careful as we ponder the last sentence: “The land lay subjected before them.” We must be careful neither to underestimate nor overestimate it.

We must not underestimate it, for it echoes the effects of Joshua’s stunning military campaigns in the north and the south. On the other hand, we must not overestimate is either, for we should not take it to mean that all of Canaan was now occupied by the Israelites. We have learned otherwise from chapters 14-17.

In those chapters we have learned a few things about the second stage, the stage in which the Israelites proceeded to divide the land by casting lots. And there we see also that the second and third stages must not be confused, for casting lots is not the same thing as taking possession of the land. The areas assigned were by no means fully in the hands of the Israelites, so that the tribes could simply move in and settle down. Even the tribe of Judah, which included such people as Caleb and Achsah, did not hold all the land awarded to it. And “Joseph” was not in control of all his land either, despite the fact that Joshua belonged to Ephraim and the spirited daughters of Zelophehad to Manasseh.

In that second stage Joshua had to deal with people. He had to deal with tribes who were supposed to cooperate when lots were cast. But from 18:1-10 we gather that there were tribes that were not even ready for the second stage (casting lots to divide the land), to say nothing about conquering and occupying the land parcelled out (the third stage). No, these tribes were still bogged down in the first stage. They were still enjoying the relative peace brought about by Joshua’s overwhelming military victories. They pastured their sheep and goats in the open fields in relative security, with no immediate danger to fear. They lived the mobile life of a shepherd people, circling around the base that served as Israel’s main camp. Operating on this basis, these tribes had lived a life of relative peace for some years, and they were content to go on this way.

Now then, it should not surprise us that this kind of lethargic attitude toward Yahweh and His promise was highly irritating to men like Joshua. In the long run it became intolerable.

Joshua wanted to do something about the situation; he wanted to bring about a change. Hadn’t he been commanded by God Himself to see to it that the land was divided? (13:1, 6-7). Therefore he took some measures.
Verse 1 tells us about the first measure that Joshua took to prod the complacent tribes into motion. That verse consists of three sentences: “The whole congregation of the Israelites was called together at Shiloh 1a. There the tent of meeting was set up 1b. The land lay subjected before them 1c.”

Let’s look first at 1b. My translation will probably leave readers thinking of the following course of events: first the whole congregation is called together, and then the tent of meeting is set up. Before we know it, our reading of verse 1b determines the meaning we give to verse 1a, namely, that all the Israelites, including men and women and children, went over to Shiloh. After all, the text speaks of the “whole congregation.”

But this would be the wrong way to interpret verse 1a. Concerning the word congregation, we should remember what we discovered about this word when we encountered it in 1:10-11. And we must be careful not to fill this word with a contemporary democratic meaning foreign to ancient Israel, as though a “congregation” by definition would include both men and women, both adults and children. Earlier we saw that the Hebrew word that is here used for congregation (edah) is often used in the Pentateuch to refer to a gathering of men, especially old men. And that’s how it is used here, as we can see from verse 8.

Once we understand this, we understand what verse 1a is getting at: Joshua was so fed up with the caution and inaction of the tribes that he called a meeting of the elders.

Where was this meeting held? At Shiloh. The name Shiloh has not come up earlier in the book of Joshua, and so requires some explanation—which comes in verse 1b, which I translated above as follows: “There the tent of meeting was set up.” It could almost be translated: “There the tent of meeting had been set up.”

This is a case where the one explanation calls for the other. At first the tabernacle—for that’s what the text means when it speaks of the “tent of meeting”—did not have a fixed location in Canaan. Now it had finally been given a place of its own. Better yet: we could say that the tent of meeting was established there. The time was ripe for this more permanent arrangement, for as verse 1c tells us: “The land lay subjected before them.”

The permanent location chosen for the tabernacle was Shiloh. Why Shiloh?

Some scholars have speculated that Yahweh Himself chose Shiloh by means of a revelation after Ephraim’s territory was assigned. Shiloh lay within that territory; it was north of Bethel and east of the route that led from Bethel to Shechem (Judges 21:19). This may be, but we read nothing about it in the Bible. We simply don’t know why Shiloh was chosen as the site for the tabernacle, nor do we know when this step was taken.

Why does verse 1b tell us that Shiloh was the permanent site of the tabernacle? Only to set the stage for the story of how seriously Joshua took their inertia of the seven tribes. Joshua knew that something would have to be done. He wanted these seven tribes to join in, so that lots could be cast and
they could all be assigned land west of the Jordan. First he wanted to cast lots. Then he would urge the seven tribes to do whatever was necessary to take possession of the land assigned to them.

And where was the casting of lots to take place? “Before the face of Yahweh” (vs. 6,8,10). In this case that meant near the tabernacle (19:51). That’s why we are told where the tabernacle stood at this point in Israel’s history. Later history confirms that Shiloh was indeed the fixed site of the tabernacle. The story of young Samuel is set in Shiloh.

So much for the opening verse, which I will repeat once more before we go on to verse 2: “Then the whole congregation of the Israelites was called together at Shiloh, which was where the tabernacle was set up. The land lay subjected before them.”

Verse 2 tells us something about the seven tribes that had not gotten around to claiming land for themselves in Canaan. The passage that follows (vs. 3-10) can be divided into two parts.

(1)Verses 3-7 gives a report on a conversation Joshua had with Israel’s elders. The words spoken at the meeting were intended especially for the representatives of the seven tribes that had not claimed an inheritance. It may well be, of course, that what we read in these verses is a short summary of a much longer speech that Joshua addressed to these tribes. He asked them: “How long will you (plural) delay in taking possession of the land that Yahweh has given to you (plural)?” (vs. 3).

Here Joshua was again speaking the language of faith. He reminded the Israelites of the promises God had given them when He spoke to them long before, promises originally addressed to their forefathers. In His promise God had already given the entire land of Canaan to these hesitant, fearful Israelites. That’s why their delay in taking possession of the inheritance was such a serious matter. It might look as though they were guilty of no greater sin than inactivity, but in fact they were guilty of rebellion and disobedience. Daily they enjoyed the pleasures given by God as they lived from Canaan’s abundance. But in reality they were afraid to take hold of the full content of what God had promised them. They were not loyal to Yahweh.

There would have to be a change. That’s why Joshua came forward with his plan, Each of the seven tribes was to appoint three men to a commission. This commission of 21 men would travel through the land to draw up a careful description of it and then work out a plan for dividing it. Joshua emphasized the importance of fairness, for every tribe would have to receive its due when the inheritances were parcelled out. Provision had already been made for Levi, as well as for Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh. Judah and Joseph had also received their inheritance. Judah was in the southern part of the land to the west of the Jordan, and Joseph was to the north of him. Thus there were seven tribes that still had to receive inheritances. But this meant that they would also have to take possession of the land assigned to them and hold on to it. To make sure that the inheritance was divided fairly, the commission that described the land would report to Joshua, who would then bear the responsibility for dividing the land properly—by casting lots, of course.

(2)What we learn from verses 8-10 is that Joshua gave some further instructions to the 21 commissioners after the meeting. Verse 8 can be translated as follow: “Then the men stood up and went
their way. Then Joshua gave the following command to the men who were going to go out to describe the land: ‘Go out and pass through the land and describe it. Then come back to me. Then I will cast lots for you (plural) here before the face of Yahweh at Shiloh.’

Verse 8a confirms my conviction that the assembly described in verse 1 did not include all the Israelites from Gilgal. We do not read that the entire people, children as well as adults, left their camp at Gilgal and settled in at Shiloh. All we learned about Shiloh in verse 1b is that the tabernacle was set up there. The presence of the tabernacle there did not require the presence of all the people.

We should remember that by this time not all the Israelites were at Gilgal. Judah and Ephraim had already left for their own territory. Furthermore, a man like Joshua would not have seen any reason for the remaining tribes to live in tents around the tabernacle, as they had done in the wilderness. Joshua wanted the Israelites to spread out. For all we know, he was the one who took the initiative in setting up the tabernacle at Shiloh. At the very least, his approval would have been required. We do read in verse 9 that Joshua himself had a campsite at Shiloh, but that does not necessarily mean that he was surrounded by all the men, women, and children of Israel. A similar camp, where there were only soldiers with Joshua, was also mentioned in 10:21.

Verse 1 tells us only that there was a meeting. No doubt this meeting, like most meetings, involved only the elders. That meeting was held at Shiloh, which was the obvious location. Because the tabernacle was at Shiloh, the high priest Eleazar, who became a member of the great commission for describing and dividing the land, was stationed there. And verse 8 tells us that when this meeting was over, the “men” went their way.

Verse 9 tells us: “After this the men went away. They traveled through the land and put down on paper a description by cities, dividing the land into seven parts. Then they returned to Joshua at the camp at Shiloh.”

From this verse we see that the cities played a particularly important role in the description of the various areas. The reason for this is obvious. The original inhabitants of Canaan must have built their cities in the best parts of the land. When we read about how the lots were cast to determine what areas the various tribes would receive, the cities are mentioned repeatedly.

Finally we see that Joshua really did cast lots for the seven tribes “at Shiloh before the face of Yahweh” (vs. 10). Thus he carried his assignment through and completed the work that God had given him to do. But the fact that he had to take such measures must have disappointed him deeply. And this was not to be the last disappointment in Joshua’s life, as the later chapters in the book of Joshua show us.

In Hebrews 4:8, Joshua is mentioned as the man who brought Israel into Canaan. This was a partial rehabilitation after the unbelief into which the Israelites had slipped in the wilderness (see Heb. 3:19). But Joshua’s problems with unbelief, inertia and fear were not over. The Israelites moved around in Canaan and enjoyed the abundance of the land without understanding that they would have to take possession of what God had given them in the form of promises made to their fathers promises that
applied also to the children. Only in faith could they take possession of what God had given them. Believing forefathers like Isaac, who spoke of taking possession of the land (Gen. 28:4) can have descendants who are held back by inertia, fear and lack of faith. Such men as Joshua, whom God chose to honor, would still have to suffer a great deal of sorrow and disappointment before they entered the rest that is reserved for the people of God (Heb. 4:19).

Ch. 45: The Inheritance Assigned to the Seven Tribes (18:11—19:48)

In this passage of Scripture we are given a report on the outcome of the casting of lots at Shiloh. When we survey the passage, we see that the seven remaining tribes were assigned land west of the Jordan in the following order: Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan. We saw that land west of the Jordan had been assigned earlier to Judah and Joseph (i.e. Manasseh and Ephraim). Was the order in which these events were reported drawn up by the narrator, or did God guide events so as to take the past history of each tribe into account? The latter, it seems to me.

Father Jacob had four wives. Strictly speaking, he had two wives (Leah and Rachel) and two concubines (Bilhah and Zilpah). The sons of Leah were: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun (Gen. 29-30). The sons of Rachel were Joseph and Benjamin (Gen. 30, 35). The sons of Bilnah were Dan and Naphtali (Gen. 30:6), and the sons of Zilpah were Gad and Asher (Gen. 30:11).

When we discussed the order of the names of the sons of Jacob on the precious stones attached to the high priest's chest piece (Ex. 28), we saw that they were not arranged chronologically in order of birth. The order was one of descent: first came the sons of Jacob's wives, then the sons of his concubines.

God apparently also took the past history of Israel’s tribes into account when Canaan was divided by casting lots. (I am limiting myself not to the land west of the Jordan, and therefore I will leave Reuben and God out of the picture.) First came Judah and Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh). Then Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, and Issachar received their inheritances. They, too, were sons of Jacob's wives. Finally Asher, Naphtali and Dan, who were sons of Jacob's concubines, received their inheritances.

This order is worthy of attention especially since we have seen it before. God is scrupulous about taking rights into account. (Think of the speech made by Caleb in 14:6-15.) God observes the rights that He Himself has conferred. When punishment is in order He can choose to withdraw those rights, but He can also choose to honor them. This does not fit in very well with our modern ideas and preferences, but it is indeed God's way of acting as reported to us in the Bible. When God so arranged things that someone was the first-born son of his father, that person was to receive a double portion of the inheritance. This right was not to be taken away from him (Deut. 21:15-17). When a man died without leaving any sons behind, his daughters were to marry within their own tribe (Num. 36:7-9).
Think also of the law of the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25). As for the rights that belonged to children of wives as opposed to the children of concubines, Sarah appealed to these rights. Her appeal was contrary to Abraham’s wishes, but met with God’s approval (Gen. 21:8-16; see also 25:6). Isaac would be Abraham’s real heir—not Ishmael, even though God did have a rich promise for Ishmael (Gen. 21:13).

It went the same way with the sons of Jacob. The result of the casting of lots was that first, the sons of Jacob’s wives inherited a portion of Canaan—Judah, Joseph (Manasseh and Ephraim), Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, and Issachar. Then came the sons of the concubines—Asher, Naphtali and Dan. The sons of the concubines did share in the inheritance, but God remained sovereign and permitted Himself to discriminate alone lines that arose from His former actions. He had the perfect freedom to do so. This never ceases to amaze us, but it is not “according to the flesh.” When we tell our children that the Lord Jesus gave Peter the prime place among His disciples (Matt. 16:18; Acts. 2:14; 3:4) and that He loved John especially (John 19:26; 21:7, 20), the children may find this strange because they have not yet learned that God is not only almighty but also free and sovereign in His actions. If God’s historical leading means that you or I receive an unimportant place among God’s people, we must bow before God’s will in this matter. It is God who determines who will serve as elders, and Christ freely determines who will receive the gifts of the Spirit. There is nothing humiliating about having to bow to God’s will in such matters. In any case, even the humblest place in God’s Church is a great gift of grace. If we accept the place assigned to us with gratitude and honor it, God will honor us. He also honored the rights of such lesser lights as Asher, Naphtali and Dan, the rights that were awarded to them when Jacob, and later Moses, blessed the tribes.

We now turn to the inheritances assigned to the seven remaining tribes. To understand this passage well, we should take advantage of the geographical assistance that a good Bible atlas can give us.

**Benjamin (18:11-28)**

Verse 11 does not tell us expressly that Benjamin was the first of the seven tribes to receive his inheritance by lot. This becomes certain later in the passage, for we are told that Simeon was second, Zebulun was third, and so forth. It may have been an honor for Benjamin to come first; on the other hand, first in the group that came last.

There is greater honor reflected in something else that we read in verse 11, namely, that Benjamin’s territory was situated between Judah and Joseph. Of the open land between Judah in the south and Joseph in the north, Benjamin received the eastern half. (Here we read an expression that also comes up in the case of the other tribes: the land was assigned by lot to Benjamin’s tribe “according to its families.” This phrase is added because the phrase “sons of” can sometimes be understood too literally. A tribe might be made up of a greater number of families or clans than the tribal father (in this case, Benjamin) had sons.)
There was honor for Benjamin in the place he was assigned. Scripture places him among the sons of the wives of Jacob; he was given land that lay between Judah and Joseph. But when we consider the honors bestowed on Benjamin, we must not forget his place with regard to the tabernacle. When the tabernacle was set up during the years of wandering in the wilderness, the camp of Ephraim was always west of it. Manasseh and Benjamin were part of the camp of Ephraim, which was really made up of the three tribes of Rachel. When camp was broken and the Israelites moved on, these three tribes marched directly behind the tabernacle. It may be that when Moses blessed Benjamin, he had in mind God’s special relationship to this tribe (Deut. 33:12). Jerusalem, where the temple was later established, was within the boundaries of the territory assigned to Benjamin (18:28). Jerusalem was never conquered by the Benjaminites; in fact it was not conquered by Israel until the time of King David. Thus it never really became a Benjaminite city. Such a transfer also took place in the case of some other cities that could have belonged to Benjamin. Kiriath-jearim was taken over by Judah (14:16; 18:14), and Bethel came to belong to Joseph (Judges 1:22-6). King Jeroboam, an Ephraimite, later established the calf worship at Bethel. Just how such cities were transferred from the possession of one tribe to another we do not know (17:11). In fact, we don’t know whether it was done by agreement or by force.

There is a final comment to be made about Benjamin. In verse 12:28 his territory is described in the same way as Judah’s territory; first came the boundaries (vs. 12-20). The northern boundary is given to us in verses 12-13, the western boundary in verse 14, the southern boundary in verse 15-19, and the eastern boundary (the Jordan River) in verse 20. After that the cities are listed (vs. 21-8). Among the cities are some familiar names: Jericho, Bethel, Gibeon, and “Jebus (that is, Jerusalem).” Geba (vs. 24) is better known to us as Gibeah, which was King Saul’s hometown.

Simeon (19:1-9)

In the case of this tribe, we do not find the usual scheme of division (i.e. boundaries and cities). The reason for this is that Simeon’s inheritance lay within the boundaries of Judah. The commission of 21 men must have conferred with the elders of Judah and decided that one of the seven portions of land could be found within Judah. Apparently the men of Judah could get by with less land. When the lots were cast, this portion fell to Simeon. That’s why there are no borders mentioned in Simeon’s case.

We should probably see this course of events as a fulfillment of Jacob’s prophecy about Simeon and Levi: “I shall divide them among Jacob and scatter them among Israel” (Gen. 49:7). But God brought about this punishment in a very mild way. Levi was certainly scattered in his habitation (see Ch. 21 on the Levitical cities), but he was allowed to occupy the position of mediator between God and His people. As for Simeon, the relationship between Simeon and Judah was eventually so good that Simeon, like Benjamin, remained faithful to the house of David after Israel split up into two kingdoms. Thus the punishment of Simeon was hardly severe. Yet father Jacob did not allow him to take Reuben’s place as the first born after Reuben disqualified himself. And when it came to camping around the tabernacle and the order in the march, Simeon was assigned a subordinate place. The number of men from
Simeon’s tribe registered for military duty declined sharply during the wilderness period, which may have been a result of the punishment for the sin at Baal-peor. When Moses blessed the tribes, he apparently skipped Simeon (Deut. 33), unless the omission is the result of a copying mistake. In the book of Joshua, Simeon is mentioned among the last group of tribes, and even here he doesn’t come first. Thus we can hardly speak of honors paid to Simeon.

There are no boundaries mentioned for Simeon—only cities. Yet it is possible that these cities—or some of them at least, for there are two groups of cities mentioned—formed a certain district together. Among the cities mentioned is the famous city of Beersheba.

**Zebulun and Issachar (19:10-23)**

Leah’s youngest son was Zebulun, and her second youngest son was Issachar (Gen. 30:18, 20). But the tribe of Zebulun received its inheritance by lot before the tribe of Issachar. In this case God let the younger son go first, just as He had done in the case of the two sons of Joseph: Ephraim, the younger of the two, got preferred treatment. God permits Himself such things now and then. What we must do in such situations is bow before His sovereign will.

The descendants of Leah’s two youngest sons made the journey through the wilderness under the protection of Judah (another tribe of Leah) and joined Judah in always camping east of the tabernacle. Thus they camped right next to Moses, Aaron and the priests (Num. 7). That was a good place to camp. And when it came time to march on, the camp of Judah led the way.

But when God gave these tribes their inheritance in the Promised Land, they found themselves far removed from Judah. Judah lived the farthest south of all the tribes, except for Simeon, and Zebulun lived the farthest north, except for Naphtali. And directly south of Zebulun was Issachar.

The area assigned to Zebulun was beautiful indeed. It was in that area that Jesus spent his youth, for Nazareth falls within Zebulun’s territory.

Father Jacob promised Zebulun a blessing that was tied in with the sea (Gen. 49:13). Moses said something similar (Deut. 33:18-19). Yet Zebulun’s territory did not extend all the way to the Mediterranean Sea, for to the west of Zebulun lay Asher’s land. Nor did Zebulun border on the Sea of Galilee: Nephtali’s land stood in the way. Issachar’s territory did not extend to the Mediterranean Sea either.

Earlier I raised the possibility that Zebulun and Issachar may have been able to enjoy the import and export advantages of the sea without actually living right along the sea. From the very beginning Zebulun apparently possessed fruitful land (the plains of Jezreel) and extensive forests; hence its export of grain and wood.
In the case of Judah and Benjamin, we were given a description of the boundaries and then a list of the cities. This is not the case in connection with Zebulun and Issachar. There is mention of Zebulun’s boundaries but only in the sense of a row of cities, a list that also includes some other cities. In Issachar’s case we are not even given this kind of boundary in the list of cities. The northern part of the plain of Jezeel belonged to Zebulun’s territory, and the rest of it belonged to Issachar. Many an army was to cross this plain in the course of Israel’s history.

Asher, Naphtali and Dan (19:24-48)

This is not the first time we have seen these three tribes mentioned together. During the wilderness years, they pitched their camp together north of the tabernacle, and together they formed the rearguard when Israel was on the march. We now see something similar when the land is parceled out.

Jacob’s two concubines were Zilpah and Bilhah. The former, Leah’s slave, was the mother of Gad and Asher; the latter, Rachel’s slave, brought Dan and Naphtali into the world (Gen. 30). As we know, Gad received his portion east of the Jordan. The remaining three tribes descended from slaves received inheritances west of the Jordan.

Even then the remaining three were broken up at first. Asher was assigned an area near the Mediterranean Sea, to the west of Zebulun; the Carmel range lay in his territory. And Naphtali wound up partly to the east and partly to the north of Zebulun. His land bordered on the Jordan and on the Sea of Galilee. When Moses blessed the tribes of Israel, he ended with these two—Naphtali and Asher.

At first Dan did not live in the north. He received his inheritance in the area left open between Judah and Joseph, the area of which Benjamin took the eastern part. The western part was reserved for Dan, and it included places like Zorah, Eshtaol and Timnah, which we recognize form the story of Samson, who was a Danite. But although Dan was once the second biggest tribe (after Judah), he did not do too well in the division of the land. Yet, the area assigned to him was in fact big enough. By rights it included even the Philistine city of Ekron. But according to Judges 1:34, the Danites did not succeed in driving out the original inhabitants. That’s why they later set out to conquer more land in the north. They captured Leshem (which is called Laish in Judges 18) and renamed it Dan. At that point Asher, Dan and Naphtali were somewhat reunited again. Dan was later one of the sites King Jeroboam picked for the worship of a golden calf (along with Bethel).

Judges 18 tells us quite a bit about that expedition undertaken by the Danites. Here in verse 47 we already find a reference to it. Since that conquest took place sometime later, after the death of Joshua, the short reference to it here must have been composed long after the time when the lots were cast. We have come across such additions more often in these chapters, e.g. “Jebus (that is, Jerusalem)” in 18:28. In no way do they alter the substance of the documents about the division of the land, but we
do not know just when they were inserted into these ancient records about the division of the land. There’s no point in turning our imagination loose on such questions, for that would amount to disregarding the deeply rooted sense of justice that prevailed not just in Israel but also in the surrounding nations. The ancient Near East was a world that made extensive use of treaties and regarded the breaking of treaty obligations as a grave matter. The conclusion of the book of Joshua reminds us of this once more in a powerful way. And the next little periscope we come to makes the same point. When it comes to parceling out an inheritance, everything must be done honestly and scrupulously. And the documents involved in the process are not to be taken lightly or tampered with.

Ch. 46: Joshua’s Own Inheritance (19:49-51)

Although this little periscope consists of two parts, they have something in common, namely, that they both have to do with rights—rights conferred by grace.

(1) When the division of the land was complete, the Israelites offered Joshua a separate piece of Canaan’s territory as his own inheritance in the Promised Land. Of course this offer was made by the heads of the people, probably under the leadership of eh executors or the commission of ten (see 14:1-5). And that commission must have been motivated by gratitude to God for what God had given His people in such a man as Joshua.

But this was also a question of justice. Joshua had a right to a special inheritance. We do not read that Joshua was allowed to choose for himself. He chose a place within the territory assigned to his own tribe—Ephraim (see Num. 13:8). Yet we are told that this happened in accordance with what Yahweh had said (19:50). This no doubt means that during the wilderness years God gave Joshua a promise much like the one He gave to Caleb (see 14:9).

God knows how to honor those who serve Him faithfully. When the ten spies instigated doubt at Kadesh, the people rejected Joshua and Caleb’s position. These two then had to join the disobedient Israelites as they marched back to Ezion-geber. We do not read that they uttered a single rebellious word against Yahweh. They awaited His deeds—and those deeds came: at the Jordan, at Jericho, at Gibeon, at Merom. Those great works of God spoke such clear language that Caleb boldly asked for his inheritance when they were still Anakim living upon it. That same clear language led Joshua to say to his own tribesmen, the Ephraimites: “You shall drive out the Canaanites, even though they are strong and have iron chariots.” As soon as he received his own private inheritance at Timnath-serah, he began to rebuild the city, which may have been destroyed during one of the earlier campaigns (see 11:13). Here Joshua settled down, and here he was buried (24:30).

What a conclusion! The chapters about the division of the land that was promised to the Israelites (but not yet conquered) begin with the inheritance of Caleb (Ch. 14) and end with the inheritance of Joshua (Ch. 19). This tells us something, namely, that God was faithful about keeping His
word. In this way God rewarded the righteousness of these two men, who narrowly escaped being stoned at the hands of the people of Yahweh (Num. 14:10). He vindicated them and made their righteousness shine like the noontday sun (Ps. 27:6). The same thing has happened to many, many others who were oppressed. Joshua and Caleb were only two such, who in their own time were scorned, but in God’s time were exalted.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was also humiliated but where is He now? Sitting on high at the right hand of Majesty. And what awaits Him? An indescribable inheritance.

(2)Our periscope, which concludes the chapters that deal with the division of the Promised Land (Ch. 14-19), reminds us once more just how precisely, honestly and scrupulously the allotment proceeded. Everything was done under the supervision of the commission of executors that God already established before the crossing of the Jordan, during the last months of Moses’ life (Num. 34:13-29).

This applies to all the tribes who received an inheritance west of the Jordan. But there is something else that needs saying.

Earlier I raised some questions with regard to the tribes that were left until the very end (18:1-10). Certain stagnation was caused by the inertia of the seven remaining tribes, their fear of undertaking what was involved in a full acceptance of God’s promise. They were already in Canaan, and the inhabitants of the land were already quaking in terror because of the great success of Joshua’s sweeping military operations in the north and the south. The seven tribes profited from this fear. They could pasture their flocks undisturbed in the general vicinity of Gilgal under the protection of Joshua’s army, which had not yet been demobilized. The men of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh had not yet returned to the land assigned to them east of the Jordan.

The seven tribes were content to go on living in the same way. Joshua, however, was not prepared to allow this situation to continue indefinitely. He castigated them for neglecting their responsibility and did not rest until they were also assigned their portions of the Promised Land by lot, which meant that they would also have to conquer land and take possession of it.

Joshua was not railroading them or using every device at his disposal to have things his way. Neither did he act out of any desire to decide on his own how the land would be parceled out. No, the whole time he worked in close harmony with the executors, that is, Eleazar and the heads of the tribes. The lots were cast at Shiloh, “before the face of Yahweh and the entrance to the tent of meeting.”

When Joshua was assigned his inheritance, the division of the land was complete. But the land had only been assigned: now came the time when it would have to be conquered and possessed. In that next phase, too, the Israelites would have to heed the appeal to have faith. The Israelites would have to lay claim to the right that God had bestowed on the believers and their seed, a right that was a gift of grace. They would have to appropriate that which was theirs “in Christ.” But they would have to be careful not to forsake or surrender that right through inaction or excessive caution. The right brought with it an obligation to appropriate the faith that was promised to them. “May” and “must” come together when God addresses us. Anyone who overlooks this rule runs the risk of losing the great
inheritance through indifference (Heb. 12:16), losing it for himself and his descendants as well. And what is that inheritance? Jesus Christ and the salvation He has obtained for us—justification, sanctification and glorification. If we enjoy the good things of this life (including the security brought by our accomplishments as church) without looking upwards (toward Christ) and ahead (toward our final inheritance with Christ), we run the risk of lowering our defenses against the temptations of the world and the flesh, and we may well wind up falling behind in grace.

Ch. 47: Cities of Refuge West of the Jordan (Ch. 20)

Chapter 20 of the book of Joshua should come as no surprise to us. After the division of the land, it is only to be expected that God would press to have three cities west of the Jordan designated as cities of refuge, so that anyone who accidently killed someone could find asylum. There were already cities of refuge in the land east of the Jordan.

When we survey Israel’s history from Mount Horeb on, we see that the question of bloodshed innocently lay very close to Yahweh’s heart. The reason quickly becomes clear when we review the various Scripture passages that bear on this matter. We then see that God’s concern for anyone who shed blood innocently flowed from His concern for a much more encompassing objective. Remember that Canaan was God’s land (Lev. 25:23). Now, God did not want His land to be defiled by the blood of someone who had shed blood innocently any more than He wanted to see a single murderer go unpunished (Num. 35:11; Deut. 19:4). God’s purpose was that Canaan should be a land undefiled by blood and death, for Yahweh, Israel’s God, was the God of life. How could He live among the Israelites in Canaan if their land was defiled? The land could be defiled through idolatry or some other sin forbidden by the terms of the Horeb covenant, but it could also be defiled by blood. It would be defiled if a guilty murderer was left unpunished, but it would also be defiled if someone who had shed blood innocently was put to death by a relative of the dead man seeking vengeance.

In connection with this subject, we will now look back at a few passages of Scripture.

(1) At Horeb, when there was no tabernacle yet but only a plan to erect one, God told Moses about His intentions in this matter. He would see to it that there was a place to which someone who had shed blood innocently could flee (Ex. 21:12-14). That place would be His alter. Moses recorded this in the well-known Book of the Covenant (Ex. 20:22—23:23). He dealt with this matter under the heading of applications of the sixth commandment. The term, cities of refuge is not used in this passage.

(2) Then, or on some later occasion, God must have raised this matter with Moses again and introduced the idea of “cities of refuge,” although no record of such a discussion is preserved for us in Scripture. This we gather from what we read in Numbers 35:1-8. This passage deals with the cities to be assigned to the Levites. Suddenly, without any preparation or explanation, it mentions “six cities or refuge” (vs. 6). This shows us once more that not everything discussed between God and Moses is
recorded in the Pentateuch. Those first eight verses of Numbers 35 are concerned mainly with a different question, namely, the cities to be assigned to the Levites.

(3) But in the rest of Numbers 35 (i.e. vs. 9-34), the cities of refuge are discussed at length as a separate topic. God’s purpose with these cities was the following: He wanted make sure that it would always be possible for Him to live among the Israelites once they settled down in the land of Canaan. That’s why He ordered that all murderers were to be put to death, but at the same time He decreed that anyone who killed a person accidentally was to be spared. To make this a real possibility, cities of refuge were to be designated. This was already arranged when the Israelites were still east of the Jordan.

(4) The next Scripture passage stems from the same period. From Deuteronomy 4:41-3, we learn that Moses, when Israel was still east of the Jordan, picked out three cities to serve as cities of refuge. From south to north they were: Bezer, Ramoth and Golan. Moses didn’t waste any time when it came to carrying out God’s commands! No wonder. Who knew better than Moses how concerned God was about protecting those who had killed someone accidentally. And Moses was well aware of the purpose behind this concern, namely, to make sure that it would always be possible for the God of life to live among the Israelites. (Think of what Exodus 25-40, the chapters on the tabernacle, teach us about Yahweh as the God of life.) Moses took the matter of the cities of refuge very seriously because he knew how important it was to God.

(5) The same point comes home to us in Deuteronomy 19:1-13. In this periscope Moses deals with the fifth commandment and with Israel’s obligation to see to it that the judges would always strive for righteousness once the people were established in the land of Canaan. Earlier we saw what was involved in that righteousness. It was not enough to see to it that all murderers were put to death; it was just as important to protect anyone who had killed a person accidentally, “so that no innocent blood will be shed in the land of Yahweh your God will give you as your inheritance and so that there will be no blood guilt upon you” (vs. 10).

(6) There is one final Scripture passage to examine—Deuteronomy 21:1-9. This passage does not deal with cities of refuge. But it does deal with murder—more specifically with murder committed in an open field, a murder in which the identity of the perpetrator is unknown. (The context is a discussion of the sixth commandment.) This chapter tells us the advice Moses gives for such difficult cases. The judges were to differentiate themselves from this horrible misdeed and ask Yahweh to cover this blood and not hold it against His people.

As I said, this passage does not deal with cities of refuge, but it does deal with blood. And we already saw how emphatic and specific Moses was in commanding Israel to take steps (including prayer) to make sure that there was no innocent blood crying out and giving Yahweh a reason to visit His people in judgment.

Anyone who is familiar with these Scripture passages will not be surprised that Joshua chapters 14-19, which deal with the division of the land west of the Jordan, are followed by Joshua 20, a chapter dealing with cities of refuge. It appears that Yahweh Himself issued the command (vs. 1) to designate three such cities west of the Jordan—Hebron, Shechem and Kedesh. No doubt Yahweh thought that the
time had come. Therefore He gave Joshua a brief reminder of the instructions that He had already given to Israel by way of Moses. He did not go on to explain the purpose of the cities of refuge; that was not necessary. Through Moses, that purpose had already been laid out for Israel on a number of occasions as we have seen. In fact, there may well have been occasions not reported in Scripture when Moses explained this matter to the people, for Moses continually taught the people about Yahweh and the service that Israel’s God asked of His people. Thus God’s purpose in designating certain cities as cities of refuge must have been clear enough to the Israelites. The land of Canaan had been given to them by Yahweh, and they would be allowed to live in it. Now then, God would live among the Israelites in that land—on one condition, namely, that the land was not to be defiled by death. There was to be no innocent blood shed on Canaan’s soil, for Yahweh was the God of life. His people living in His land would have to conduct themselves as the people of life.

When we discussed the Pentateuch, we saw repeatedly that Israel was shown in many, many different ways that Yahweh abhors anything that has to do with death. When we discussed the chapters that deal with the tabernacle, we saw a certain Paradise motif present there—even in the physical makeup of the tabernacle, such as the metals, the materials, the colors, the figures, and the implements. The tabernacle was a foretaste, a sign and seal on God’s promise that He would once again dwell in the midst of His people, as He had done in Paradise.

By leading Israel into the land of Canaan, He hoped to bring them a step closer of the fulfillment of that promise. In this land of God, Israel could find rest with God (Deut. 12:9-10; Josh. 11:23; 21:44), just as God Himself wished to find (Sabbath) rest there from the great works He had done in Egypt, the wilderness, at the Jordan, at Jericho, and during the battles of Gibeon and Merom (Ps. 95:9, 11; Heb. 4:1-11).

Yahweh wanted to live among the Israelites in Canaan. But then they would have to be sure not to make things impossible for him by profaning the land with blood—especially not with innocent blood. Read Numbers 35:22-4 once more to see what a serious matter this was. Innocent blood!

This primary demand was later understood by the Gibeonites and honored (see II Sam. 21), for King Saul had trampled it underfoot. And think of all who followed in the footsteps of Saul, that persecutor of the church with his false orthodoxy! To the extent that Israel forgot Yahweh as the God of life, she was punished, until there was “no life” left in her. The result was that God’s glory finally forsook the temple, and Canaan fell to pagan invaders. True, God sent His Son anyway, but even that “Holy and Righteous One” was put to death in Israel, contrary to Pilate’s judgment (Acts 3:13-14). Then God gave the vineyard to others. And what have those others done with what they have received from the Lord?

Ch. 48: the Cities Assigned to Levi (21:1-42)
Chapter 20 of Joshua did not come as any surprise to us; we were expecting such a chapter. The same could now be said of Joshua 21. In fact, we have even more reason for expecting chapter 21, because of the discussion of cities of refuge in chapter 20. If there could be talk of cities of refuge, there would have to come talk of the cities assigned to the Levites. Such passages have occurred before. We will look at them one by one, beginning with the later ones and moving on to the earlier ones.

(1) Joshua 14:3-4. When the narrator of Joshua was about to present his account of the division of the land west of the Jordan, he first raised the subject of certain tribes that would not be included in the division—the two and half tribes. Those tribes had already received their inheritance from Moses in the form of land west of the Jordan. They were the only tribes to receive land. Not even Levi had received anything. It had been established that the Levites would be assigned some cities east of the Jordan, and that they could live in those cities and would also have the right to make use of the pastures that belonged with those cities. But in Moses’ own time, no cities east of the Jordan were ever designated as Levitical. That task was left for later, and therefore we read about this matter in Joshua 21.

(2) Joshua 13:14. The Joshua 14 passage pointed back to this text, which tells us that the tribe of Levi had no inheritance in the land east of the Jordan. “The offerings made by fire of Yahweh, the God of Israel—the (God) is their inheritance.”

(3) Deuteronomy 10:8-9; 12:12, 18-19; 14:27-8; 16:11, 14; 18:1-8. When Moses talked about the Ten Words in the book of Deuteronomy, he reminded the people of the service (sharath—Deut. 10:8) Levi performed between Yahweh and Israel. Yahweh Himself was Levi’s inheritance. Therefore the people were not to forget about “the Levite.” Moses did not speak about the cities that were to be assigned to the Levites to live in, but he did come close to it, for the Deuteronomy 19 he mentioned the cities of refuge. As we shall see from Joshua 21, all six of the cities of refuge were Levitical cities.

(4) Numbers 35:1-8. To prepare for the entry into Canaan, God commanded Israel, through Moses, to assign 48 cities for the Levites to inhabit. At the same time, the Levites would be allowed to make use of the pasture lands that went with the cities.

(5) Leviticus 25:32-4. It was not the case that the only Israelites allowed to live in the Levitical cities were members of the tribe of Levi. Gibeon, for example, was originally a heathen city, and it still had heathen inhabitants, but it was designated a Levitical city. But there was a difference in rights between Levites and non-Levitical Israelites. If a Levite had once owned a house and sold it. A non-Levite, by contrast, held such a right for only a year. Moreover, a Levite’s house would always revert to him or to his descendants in the year of Jubilee. This was a rule that did not apply to non-Levite’s.

(6) Numbers 1-4. In these chapters we read that the Levites were divided into three groups—the Kohathites, the Gershonites and the Merarites. We are also told the order in which they camped around the tabernacle and what tasks they were given during the journey through the wilderness. Aaron and his sons belonged to the Kohathites.

Thus the 48 cities were to be divided not among three groups of Levites but among four:
These four groups received the following cities as their places of habitation.

The priests (group a) received the following cities in Judah and Simeon: Hebron, Libnah, Jattir, Eshtemoa, Holon, Debir, Ain, Juttah, and Beth-shemesh. In Benjamin’s territory they received Gibeon, Geba, Anathoth, and Almon.

The other Kohathites (group b) received the following cities in Ephraim: Shechem, Gezer, Kibzaim, and Beth-horon. In Dan’s territory they received Elteke, Gibbethon, Aijalon, and Gath-rimmon. And in Manasseh’s land west of the Jordan they received Taanach and Gath-rimmon.

The Gersonhites (group c) received two cities in Manasseh’s land east of the Jordan: Golan and Beeshterah. In Issachar’s territory they received Kishion, Daberath, Jarmuth, and En-gannim. In Asher they received Mishal, Abdon, Helkath, and Rehob. In Napthali they received Kedesh, Hammoth-dor and Kartan.

The Merarites (group d) received the following cities in Zebulun’s territory: Jokneam, Kartah, Dimnah, and Nahalal. In Reuben’s territory they received Bezer, Jahaz, Kedemoth, and Mephaath. In Gad they received Ramoth, Mahanaim, Heshbon, and Jazer.

A few things strike us about this list of cities. First of all, six names appear in italics, namely, the cities of refuge discussed in Joshua 20. These special cities were scattered all over the territory of the twelve tribes so that anyone who had killed someone accidentally would be able to seek refuge in such a city quickly before an avenger could strike him dead. No doubt you also noticed that the cities of refuge always come first in the list. This is a reminder of the purpose of Joshua 21, namely, to draw attention to the service (sharath) performed by the tribe of Levi before Israel on God’s behalf and before God on Israel’s behalf.

We also see that the 48 cities are not broken down mechanically into four per tribe, making each tribe responsible for four Levitical cities regardless of the circumstances. In the time of Moses God had already rejected this crude, mechanical way of working with numbers. The allotment of cities to the Levites was to be discussed and worked out fairly. “As for the cities that you shall give from the possession of the Israelites, those who had much will have to give more, and those who have little may

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Group</th>
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<tr>
<td>a) the priests</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>b) the other Kohathites</td>
<td>10 cities</td>
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<td>c) the Gersonhites</td>
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<td>d) the Merarites</td>
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give less, each one according to the inheritance assigned to him, when you give cities to the Levites” (Num. 35:8). The list of cites above shows that the commission stuck to this wise rule. We read that the family heads of the Levites approached this commission, which was made up of Eleazar, Joshua, and the heads of the tribes—the same men who figure in the story in chapters 14-19.

When and why did these Levite heads of families approach commission?

We must be careful not to make the date too early. First of all, they came to Shiloh (21:2). Apparently after Gilgal, Shiloh became the place where the commission went about its work (18:1). It could have happened some considerable time after Judah and Joseph received their inheritances, for by then land had finally been assigned to the seven reluctant tribes (19:51). The family heads of Levi must have had to wait until the assignment of land to the seven last tribes was complete. After all, cities that had not yet been assigned to a certain tribe could hardly be handed over to the Levites by that tribe.

When we think of the tribes handing those cities over to the Levites, we should not assume that the tribe of Levi immediately took control of all 48 cities, so that its people could immediately take up residence there and let their flocks find pasture in the fields beyond the city walls. From our study of Joshua 13, we know that having land assigned was not the same as receiving it and taking possession of it. Think back also to Joshua 14, the story of Caleb’s request (vs. 6-15). That passage taught us clearly that the land promised and assigned to the Israelites still had to be conquered. The people had to take possession of it in faith. But some in Israel did not possess such faith. There were seven reluctant tribes that lagged behind. Now we read that in the territory assigned to these tribes (i.e. Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Ashen, Napthali, and Dan) certain cities were assigned to the priests and Levites. This happened before those tribes set out to conquer the areas assigned to them. And when they did set out, they were not always victorious—at least, not right away. Scripture itself tells us that Taanach, which was a Levitical city (21:25), was not conquered by Manasseh (17:12; Judges 1:27).

What the family heads of the Levites did (i.e. going to the commission and asking for their rights) must therefore be seen as an act of faith. And writing a chapter like Joshua 21, which includes the dry list of names we went over earlier, was also an act of faith. We can well understand that there has been dissension over this chapter. Some scholars have chosen to assign it a very late date, perhaps even after the exile, or around the time of David and Solomon; however, it is generally admitted that the material must have circulated in some preliminary version first.

Though we may be inclined toward the one view or the other, we may not simply cross out the date that Joshua 21 itself bears on its forehead (see vs. 1-2). We must not ignore the parallel between verse 1 and Joshua 14:6a (“The men of Judah came to Joshua at Gilgal. . .”). We should also note the resemblance to the story of Caleb, which follows immediately (vs. 6b-15). It is striking that Caleb is also mentioned again in 21:12.

For those Levite heads of families to approach the commission was definitely an act of faith. The commission responded with an act of faith when it assigned the Levites some 48 cities in the territory
divided among the twelve tribes, for much of this territory had not yet been conquered. Finally, recording this event and including the names of the 48 cities was an act of faith.

We know that in the days of Horeb, Israel was already living among nations that attached great importance to written documents. We also know that the Israelites themselves valued such documents highly (the Book of the Covenant, the Ten Words, and Deuteronomy). Then why should we hesitate to believe that the book of Joshua (including Ch. 21) was written with the help of such documents. (See 1:1-9 and also chapter 24).

A document that included the names of the 48 cities assigned to the Levites would not be regarded by the Levitical family heads as an empty promise, a scrap of paper that the commission used to get rid of them. The names of the commission’s members stood behind the promise.

If we wonder what meaning Joshua 21 has for us today, we can begin with the general answer that it shows us once more what faith is: firm reliance on God’s promises. The Family heads of Levi boldly took hold of God’s promise that their tribe, too, would receive a certain portion in the land of Canaan, even if it was a different kind of inheritance than the other tribes received, and even if those tribes still had to take a great deal of territory away from the Canaanites and take possession of cities for the Levites to inhabit.

This can be said as a general statement: faith means being sure of things not seen (Heb. 11:1). Today we must live out the promise that we will one day inherit the entire earth with Christ, even though we see little of the fulfillment of this promise as yet and things often look as though that promise will never become reality.

Given the task assigned to Levi, Joshua 21 also contains a special lesson. Levi had a double task; his task was priestly and prophetic.

Concerning the priestly work Levi was called to do, think back to the chapters that dealt with the tabernacle (Ex. 25-40), the Torah’s provisions about sacrifices (Lev. 1-7), the great Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), and Levi’s function as an isolation garment coming between Yahweh and His people (Num. 1-4). Moses spoke of Levi’s service to God for Israel and to Israel for God as a “sharath.” Thanks to the sacrifices and prayer offered by Levi, Yahweh could live in the midst of Israel—until the service was falsified to such an extent that there was really nothing left of it. Then Yahweh left His sanctuary, His city and His land (Ezek. 10:18; 11:23).

Levi’s priestly sacrificial service was later fulfilled and replaced by the death and shed blood of our Savior, and Levi’s priestly intercession through incense and trumpets (Num. 10:1-10) is being fulfilled above by the Savior until the day that Christ and His prayer between heaven and earth are taken away (II Thess. 2:6-7). Then the earth will have no protection left against God’s anger a apostate Christendom.

Levi also had a prophetic task in Israel. He was called on not only to bring sacrifices and to pray but also to teach Israel. Think of the symbolism of the lamp stand as a blossoming almond tree (Ex.

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37:17-24). Among the subjects of instruction was the difference between the clean and the unclean (Lev. 11-15). Think also of Moses’ prayer for Levi (Deut. 33:8-11). What a blessing it must have meant for Israel that there were such Levitical teachers spread among all the cities. This “lot” was expressed by Father Jacob as punishment for Levi (Deut. 49:7). God indeed fulfilled Jacob’s words, but in a way that turned the Levites to Israel’s benefit. Moses had already proceeded form the assumption that the Levites would be scattered throughout the territory allotted to the twelve tribes.

We see God’s providential hand especially in the assigning of certain cities to the priests, the sons of Aaron. From the list above we learn that all those cities lay in the area assigned to Judah, Simeon and Benjamin. In other words, they were in the central part of the country not far from Jerusalem, where the temple was later built.

This prophetic task of Levi was also taken over by our Lord Jesus Christ and is still being fulfilled by Him today. He received the Holy Spirit from the Father in such abundant measure that He was in turn able to pour out the Spirit over His disciples. Therefore the Lord’s followers were able to absorb their Lord’s teaching in the line of Moses and the Prophets and could pass on that teaching orally and in written form (John 15:25-6; Luke 24:44-9). By way of the Spirit of Christ, the apostolic church in the first decades also received other gifts through which her Lord helped her in a powerful way through the difficult early years (Mark 16:20; Acts 28:5; Rom. 15:18-19; l cor. 12:4-11, 28-30; Heb. 2:4). In addition to the gift of the apostolate, the church received the gifts of driving out evil spirits, of speaking in new tongues, of handling snakes, and of drinking poison. But these were only temporary gifts, and it was obvious that they would have to end. They were replaced abundantly by the extension and up building of Scripture. Through this divine means, Christ now instructs, leads, admonishes, warns, redirects, and comforts His church in such a perfect way that nothing is to be added to Scripture and nothing taken away. By means of the Scripture, Christ still continues fulfilling His task as our High Priest and Teacher. Perfection was achieved not through the Levitical priesthood but through the royal priesthood of Christ (Heb. 7:11).

49: Reviewing the Division of the Land (21:43-45)

The last three verses in Joshua 21 can easily be misread. We might take them to mean that during Joshua’s lifetime all the Canaanites were driven out of the Promised Land, so that the Israelites became masters of all the cities and towns and therefore enjoyed such rest as the nation did not experience again until the days of David and Solomon.

If we read the passage this way, we will surely run into difficulty, for we know that the Israelites endured many a bitter struggle with the Canaanites after Joshua’s death (see Judges 1). And we saw earlier that the Canaanites were never fully driven out of Israel—never. Not even David managed to do
that. His son Solomon used the descendants of Israel’s original population for forced labor, but he did not wipe them out (I Kings 9). Is the conclusion of Joshua 21 misleading then, or downright false?

The issue becomes problematic if we read Scripture from the wrong point of view, if we assume that the author is speaking of the distant past and looking back at it. However, this passage should be read from the perspective of a different time, a much earlier time, a time before Joshua, namely, the time when God have promises about the land of Canaan to Israel’s “fathers”—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. What had the fathers managed to take as their own possession in the land? Nothing—not a single acre. And their children had to undergo severe humiliation in Egypt. But God had brought about a change in the fortunes of the Israelites and now He was beginning to fulfill the promises He had made to their fathers—but only beginning. He Himself had said at Horeb that Israel would not take possession of the Promise Land all at once. The Canaanites would be driven out of the land only gradually (Ex. 23:29-30; see Deut. 7:22).

When we read the book of Joshua against the background of what Israel went through in the wilderness and ponders the crossing of the Jordan and the fall of Jericho; then we cannot help but be amazed at the incredible turn of Israel’s fortunes in a very short period of time. And when we bear in mind the overwhelming defeats Joshua inflicted on the armies that opposed Israel (thanks to help from above) and survey all the cities, both great and small, that fell to Israel, we can understand and appreciate the note of gratitude sounded in the three final verses of Joshua 14-21. Then those verses will not seem exaggerated, and there will be no conflict between Joshua 21 and what we read in Judges 1. Then we will understand that there were still centers of Canaanite resistance in the land, plenty of them, and that some of them even managed to grow stronger as time passed because many of the Israelites who lived out in the country fled from their homes and villages to find safety behind the thick walls of nearby cities (see Num. 32:17). On the basis such course s of events, we can explain the fact that Caleb had to conquer the city of Hebron anew (10:26; 15:13). In any event, Scripture itself tells us, in the very chapters that are here being concluded, that the conquest and possession of the areas assigned to the various tribes took a certain amount of time, indeed, that in some areas the Israelites still had not succeeded in driving out the Canaanites and taking over their fortresses.

There are two things to be said about this intermediate period. First, we could point to the “not yet.” The job took centuries—until the time of the kings. To account for this, we must speak not only of the tempo set by God in advance but also of Israel’s disobedience and love of ease, as we have already seen. The book of Judges will drive home this point further, for it is a matter of great importance.

Second, we can also point gratefully to the “already.” That’s what happens in this passage. The power of the Canaanites, before which the Israelites had trembled in the wilderness, was broken. The Canaanites were not undertaking any more operations against the Israelites. Wasn’t that sufficient reason to speak of “rest”? (vs. 44). Yet this first rest in relation to enemies within the land is not to be equated with the rest that God gave to David when he became so powerful that no foreign enemy could hold out against him (II Sam. 7:1, 11). Equating the two would lead to trouble.
Even if gratitude is the dominant note sounded at the end of Joshua 21, we should not exclude the possibility that the Spirit of prophecy is also speaking a word of warning and admonition here. Reminders of God’s goodness and faithfulness can also put His people to shame. A periscope like this one must have been read and heard by later Israelites with mixed feelings, as we see from Psalm 95, for example: “O that you would listen to His voice today!” (vs. 7).

There is a sequel to the book of Joshua. The story is continued. Remember that Joshua is the first of the books of “the Prophets.” Its place within the canon is significant.

Ch. 50: The Men form the Two and Half Tribes Head Home (22:1-8)

A confrontation with the past can easily awaken within us feelings of shame, as we saw in connection with the preceding periscope. That periscope is very closely bound up with Joshua 22, the chapter to which we turn next. The lesson which the Spirit of prophecy taught to ancient Israel also comes to us; the emphasis is that we are to serve no other God than Yahweh (who is the same God whom we now know as the God and Father of the Lord Jesus Christ), and that we are to guard against any arbitrary, self-willed forms of worship as we seek to serve Him. In other words, we are to be careful especially not to break the first and second commandments.

The first eight verses of Joshua 22 talk about the men of war form the two and a half tribes that settled east of the Jordan. We last read about these men in 1:12-18. The two and a half tribes (Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh) were to provide 40 elaphim of their best fighting men to go along across the Jordan to do battle with the Canaanites alongside their brothers. In Joshua 22 we are told about these circumstances under which these men returned to their families and their own land east of the Jordan.

Why did the author of the book of Joshua include a report on their return? Not for the same reason that a historian of our time would have given for including this matter. People of the Western world fear incompleteness in their written records. We would feel obliged to report on the return of the soldiers because we had earlier explained that these men joined the other tribes in crossing the Jordan. Not to leave a loose end, we would later report that at a certain juncture those soldiers headed home.

The book of Joshua is not worried about loose ends. It is only because a certain deed performed by these men on their way home almost led to civil war in Israel that we read about their return to their own families and land. We do not read anything about the occasional visits home these men must have been allowed to make, when they could see their families and tell the people back home about the great deeds Yahweh had performed on behalf of His people. Surely there must have been times between the entry into Canaan and the division of the land (a period of some five to seven years) when these men could be spared for a while. A modern military historian would no doubt have recorded this fact, eager to be as complete and thorough as possible. But the author of the book of Joshua had a different goal in mind. He wanted to tell coming generations about the good days when Israel first lived in the land of

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Canaan. He wanted to emphasize the respect for God’s commands and statues that still filled the hearts of the Israelites during the time of Joshua.

In the first part of the introduction to Joshua 22 (vs. 1-6), we are told that Joshua gave permission to the men in the two and a half tribes to go home. There are two things we should note about these verses.

(1) Chapter 22 begins with the word then. This word deserves our attention for a moment, for it is emphasized in the text.

In the most popular translations of the Bible, the word then is often used in places where there is no such word in the Hebrew text. It is added for the sake of readability. “Then God spoke all these words…” (Ex. 20:1); but the Hebrew text really says: “And God spoke all these words. . . . “. This is just one example.

In Joshua 22:1, however, there is indeed a Hebrew word corresponding to our word then. We came across that same word (az) in 8:30 and 10:12, where we saw that it is often used to lead up to a point that needs emphasis. That’s why it is used here. In the periscope before (21:43-5) we read about a period of rest for Israel, once the military power of the Canaanites was broken and the land was divided among the nine and a half tribes. Now then, Joshua reflected on this situation and pointed out to the soldiers of the two and a half tribes that the rest represented a fulfillment of a promise made by Yahweh. His words to these men echoed what Moses had said earlier (Deut. 12:8-12). When Israel was finally at rest in the Promised Land and was no longer threatened by her enemies, there would have to come an end to the freedom and irregularity in the sacrifice, which Israel had permitted herself during the period of warfare against the Canaanites (see Deut. 12:13-28).

Joshua had some positive things to say about the conduct of the men form the two and a half tribes. They had faithfully carried out the task God had given them and had not left their brothers west of the Jordan in the lurch. And now that there was “rest” west of the Jordan, the men from the two and a half tribes could return to their “tents” east of the Jordan (vs. 4). When Joshua spoke of “tents,” he probably meant houses, since the Israelites east of the Jordan would probably have chosen to live in fortified cities for safety’s sake. (Num. 32:17). But Joshua had lived so many years in the wilderness that he was still speaking of “tents.” Moses also continued to speak of tents at the end of Israel’s long journey (Deut. 16:7).

(2) The second thing that should draw our attention is the command that Joshua gave the men of the two and a half tribes when he said farewell to them (vs. 5). This is what he wanted them to take to heart as they went their way: they were to remain faithful to the instruction that they, together with Joshua, had received from Moses, the servant of Yahweh. The instruction that God had given to Joshua himself (1:1-9) Joshua was pleased to pass on to others, especially to these men who would be living in a somewhat isolated area. These men were to serve Yahweh their God “with all their heart and with all their soul.” In other words, they were to serve only Yahweh and exclusively Yahweh. That was also how Moses had spoken (Deut. 6:5).
The author of the book of Joshua included Joshua’s words of farewell to the men of the two and a half tribes because they served as a final introduction to the story he wanted to tell later in the chapter. The commands and instruction (mitzvah and torah) of Moses would play a very important role in that story. The issue would by faithfulness to Yahweh without as much as a glance toward the idols of that time.

At the end of verse 6, the author is not yet finished with the introduction to the story he proposes to tell. Therefore he does not simply conclude: “Then Joshua said farewell to them and let them go. And they headed home.” He had two more comments to make, both with the same basic idea behind them. Both of these comments are reminders of the unity of Israel. In verse 1-6 he had spoken about the unity or oneness of Yahweh, Israel’s God. Now it was time to say something about the unity of the people (vs. 7-8).

(1)The first comment is his own remark. He points out that it was not the case that those tribes east of the Jordan had nothing to do with the other tribes anymore. He points to the tribe of Manasseh to drive this point home, for half of Manasseh lived east of the Jordan while the other half was west of the Jordan. This was certainly an indication that the tribes east of the Jordan were as fully a part of Israel as the tribes west of the Jordan. Manasseh had one foot on either side of the river!

(2) The second element the narrator adds is another comment Joshua made to the men of the two and a half tribes before they returned home, one which also demonstrated the unity between those who were leaving for home that they were entitled to a share of the booty that had been taken from the enemies defeated west of the Jordan. Before they returned to their homes, they were to divide that booty with their brothers who would be remaining west of the Jordan. Before they returned to their homes, they were to divide that booty with their brother who would be remaining west of the Jordan. Joshua insisted that this be done before they left and gave orders to set the process in motion. The narrator mentions Joshua’s command twice. The first time he explains: “One more thing. When Joshua let them go home and said farewell to them, he also told them: ‘Return home with great wealth, that is, with much cattle, with silver and gold, with bronze and with iron and with many clothes.’” Then he tells how Joshua repeated the command more briefly: “Divide the booty taken from the enemy with your brothers.” The second, shorter command clarified the first.

All of this is introduction: In verses 1-6, the message is: One God! In verses 7-8: One people!

Ch. 51: The Alter East of the Jordan (22:9-10)

In the discussion of 22:1-6, I mentioned the likelihood that the soldiers of the two and a half tribes had been given leave occasionally to go home in small groups and visit their families. Apparently
there was some contact between the soldiers who crossed the Jordan to join in the war for Canaan and the men who stayed home.

We read that the Reubenites and the others returned from “Canaan” (west of the Jordan) to “Gilead” (part of the territory east of the Jordan) and built an altar along the way, a very large altar. But later in the chapter it becomes apparent that the entire Israelite population east of the Jordan takes responsibility for this deed. This suggests that there was a certain amount of contact between the soldiers and the people back home. The people east of the Jordan must have often discussed the possibility of becoming isolated from the other tribes. That was why the returning soldiers could be sure that their deed would meet with the approval of the people back home.

Where did they build that altar? It is clear from what we read later in the chapter that the altar was built west of the Jordan. But verse 10 tells us only when they did it, namely, when they came “to the geliloth of the Jordan, which is in the land of Canaan.” It is not entirely clear just what this word geliloth refers to, but most likely to some bends in the Jordan River is meant. As a map shows the Jordan makes many twists and turns. But it is also possible that the word geliloth is a name that some area bore because the Jordan made so many bends there. In any event, when the returning soldiers reached that part of the Jordan with all its bends, they realized that they were crossing a very important boundary. The river was “the Jordan, which lay in the land of Canaan.”

The Israelites had some strange ways of speaking about rivers. They spoke, for example, of “the Jordan of Jericho” (Num. 22:1). Yet the Jordan did not flow only through the region around Jericho. They meant “the Jordan opposite Jericho: or “the Jordan near Jericho.” The returning soldiers must have thought to themselves that the Jordan lay just inside Canaan and marked its boundary. The narrator takes over this idea. There was indeed a contrast between Canaan (which was west of the Jordan) and Gilead (east of the Jordan). The narrator had just given expression to this difference in verse 9. In verse 10 he points to the historic step that the returning soldiers from the two and a half tribes took when they crossed the Jordan with all its twists and turns, for the Jordan actually demarcated Canaan’s border. They were very well aware of this and that’s why they hit upon a certain plan, which they then proceeded to carry out at once; they built an altar.

Ch. 52: the Response of the Nine and a Half Tribes (2:11-20)

For good reason the narrator told us in verse 10 that the altar was so large that it was bound to attract attention. The builders had made it large because they wanted people on both sides of the Jordan to see it and talk about it. They succeeded in this objective more quickly than they thought, as we learn from verse 11: “The Israelites (i.e. the ones living west of the Jordan) heard people say: ‘Behold, the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half tribe of Manasseh have built an altar opposite the
land of Canaan, out toward the bends of the Jordan, out toward the land near the river occupied by the Israelites (i.e. the ones who lived west of the Jordan).”

In these words we sense a rumor racing through the land. Somebody said this about the altar, and somebody else said that. In the text we have three different statements about the location of the altar: (1) opposite the land of Canaan, (2) out toward the bends of the Jordan, and (3) out toward the land west of the Jordan occupied by the Israelites. But the same idea was behind all three: “They want to break with Yahweh and with us.”

If you are familiar with the book of Deuteronomy, you will recall what Moses told Israel to do in case of transgressions against the first or second commandment (Deut. 13). In such cases decisive action was needed. If an entire city was said to be guilty of such a sin, the first thing to do was to find out whether this was true. If it turned out to be true, that (Israelite) city was to be placed under the ban and was not to be spared (Deut. 13:12-18).

Because of the rumors and the accusation they contained, “the entire assembly (of elders) of Israel (i.e. the tribes west of the Jordan) gathered at Shiloh to take military measures against them (the Israelites east of the Jordan)” (vs. 12).

The nine and a half tribes did not march off at once to do battle. First a meeting was held in which the Israelites would consider what they had to do in preparation for such a battle, for they were indeed thinking in terms of a battle. Fortunately, the meeting was dominated by the wisdom that inquired into the Word of God, especially Yahweh’s will in such a situation as this. Now the, the Word of God was recorded in the book of Moses’ torah (i.e. Deuteronomy). That book of the torah was kept by the priests in the tabernacle (Deut. 31:25). Thus Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, could simply read to the assembled elders the passage that spoke to this question (i.e. Deut. 13).

The rule Scripture laid down was that the people were first to undertake an investigation to determine whether the rumor they heard was true or not (Deut. 13:14). Therefore the meeting appointed Phinehas and ten other leaders (one from each of the tribes west of the Jordan) to carry out such an investigation.

From the suspicions raised by this delegation, we understand the thinking behind the action taken by the nine and a half tribes. They feared that the Israelites living east of the Jordan were in the process of committing “ma-al” against Yahweh, the God of Israel, by turning away from Yahweh and building an altar in disobedience and rebellion against Him (vs. 16).

This is a significant verse, for it names the sin of what the nine and a half tribes accused the two and a half tribes, namely, ma-al. This sin represented a violation of someone’s rights. In the Pentateuch, whenever this sin was committed, it was an offense against Yahweh, whether directly or indirectly (Lev. 5:14—6:17; Num. 5:5—6:2). Thus, whenever an Israelite committed ma-al against a fellow Israelite, he was transgressing the covenant with Yahweh, which left no room for injustices that his subordinate covenant partners (vassals) might perpetrate against each other. Moses and Aaron had committed ma-
al directly against Yahweh, and so had Achan, which was why all three of these men had to die. The sin of which the Israelites east of the Jordan were guilty in the eyes of the nine and a half tribes was also direct ma-al against Yahweh. After all, they had built an altar. This was not something one would do in honor of man.

Now, then God Himself gave laws concerning altars (Ex. 20:22-6) and Moses also laid down some laws 40 years later (Deut. 12), it was not forbidden to build an altar to Yahweh. On the contrary. The possibility was left open that in the future offerings would be sacrificed to Yahweh on altars in various places. However, such altars were not to be set up arbitrarily, on the basis of the people’s own opinions, desires and initiative. They were to be built only at God’s command. Moses had gone into this matter at some length in Deuteronomy 12, as we saw just a few pages back. Once Israel was at “rest” in the land, there was to be an end to the freedoms Israel had taken in how sacrifices were offered. The special circumstances began during the wars of the last year of Moses’ life, when the kingdoms of Sihon and Og were conquered. Later, if there were to be any more altars erected (a possibility which Moses left open in Exodus 20), there was to be no arbitrariness or human design involved. Such an altar could be erected only at the command of Yahweh Himself.

But what had the men of the two and a half tribes done? On their own authority, taking the initiative themselves, they built an altar in their territory. No one had heard anything about a command of God to build such an altar.

The delegation earnestly pointed out to the two and a half tribes the possible consequences of this deed, which they saw as a great evil. They said. “Wasn’t the sin of Peor enough? To this day we still have not purified ourselves of that sin. Because of that sin, a plague struck the entire congregation of Yahweh” (vs. 17).

Various explanations of this verse have been given. Some scholars believe that the speakers were alluding to the inclination toward idolatry that continued to cling to the Israelites to that day, or that they were complaining that the sin of Peor had given rise to venereal diseases among the Israelites (see Num. 25). The second explanation is based on fantasy and speculation. As for the first, Joshua himself suggested no such thing when he addressed Israel later (24:14). The book of Joshua says nothing about idolatrous tendencies in Israel at that time.

This verse must be understood somewhat differently. The men form the nine and a half tribes were here asking their brothers east of the Jordan whether they were taking account of the experiences Israel had had with Yahweh. Experience had taught that when Israel sinned against Yahweh while Yahweh continued being good to His people, He did not simply forget about Israel’s sin. This was true of the story of the worship of the golden calf, for example. Yahweh had yielded to Moses’ pleas on that occasion, but He did say that He might well come back to this sin if Israel fell into similar misconduct in the future (Ex. 32:34; 33:5a), which is indeed what happened. When Israel continued to provoke God time after time, there was finally an end to God’s patience. It simply isn’t true s as some theologians like to suggest, that God’s patience is inexhaustible.

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The events during the journey through the wilderness proved otherwise (Num. 11-14). Progression in sin leads to progression in punishment.

After the journey through the wilderness, some 38 years after the exodus from Egypt, God began anew with Israel. He did not want to chastise His people endlessly; He led them to Canaan's border (Num. 20). But the more He elevated them, the more they could fall and be punished (Ezra 9:13; Heb. 10:29; 12:25). Even though God did not want to punish all of Israel with destruction because of the sin of Baal-peor committed by some (and the nation owed much to the bold response of the priest Phinehas; Num. 25:11), the same Phinehas, relying on his knowledge of God and His manner of dealing with people, felt impelled to warn his brothers east of the Jordan to be very, very careful. Did they think that God had forgotten all about the sin of Baal-peor, the sin that had led to death? No, in God's eyes Israel was still a people able to commit such a sin, a people upon which guilt rested. For some sins (e.g. idolatry and the worship of images) there was no atonement possible.

Well then, did they want to add to that guilt? Did they want the measure to be full? Did they want Israel to risk destruction?

The service of Yahweh was one and indivisible, and so were the people, in His eyes. This meant that if Israel did not cleanse itself of the apostasy and unfaithfulness of some, Yahweh would sooner or later have to reject the entire people.

This instruction of Scripture was very clear to the Israelites. It was the instruction Moses had given in Deuteronomy 13. Following the "One God, one people" rule, God would punish Israel as a whole for the sin committed by one. Those were the "ways" of Yahweh. All of Israel knew His "way of doing things" from the history of the last half century. Hence the (rhetorical) question in verse 17: Have you forgotten what happened at Baal-peor? Do you suppose God has forgotten?

This declaration in verse 17 agrees with verse 18, where we read: "You have turned away from following Yahweh today. And if you rise up against Yahweh today, He will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel tomorrow." The words in italics are very important.

In this verse, the appeal to the unity of Israel is underlined once more, along with a certain lesson of history, namely, that God's patience is not to be trifled with. The two and a half tribes were reminded that God takes note of what sins some members of His people commit today in order to punish all of His people for those sins when the measure of their sin is full. Because God's people are single, undivided whole, the unfaithfulness of some can lead to the punishment of all.

That was part 1 of the admonition (vs. 16-18). Then follows part 2 (vs. 19-20), which takes a different point of departure but comes back to the same warning: don't forget that Israel is one and must remain one. One God and one people!
The delegates from the nine and a half tribes wanted to approach their brothers east of the Jordan in a benevolent spirit. Thus they assumed that their brothers, who had asked Moses for permission to take up residence east of the Jordan, later regretted the choice they had made because they saw that the real Canaan was west of the Jordan, which was where the tabernacle was established and Yahweh had His habitation. In comparison the land east of the Jordan was nothing; it was unclean.

Well then, the delegates reasoned, if that was how the brothers east of the Jordan felt, "then settle down among us. But do not rebel Yahweh and against us by building some altar here other than the altar of Yahweh, our God" (vs. 19). They were not saying that there could never by any other altar than the altar (of burnt offering) in the outer court of the tabernacle. We read no such thing in the text, and neither party to this discussion would have been justified in laying such a restriction on the other. On the basis of God’s law for the altar given at Horeb (Ex. 20) and what Moses went on to write about the second commandment in Deuteronomy 12, no such thing could be said. No, the issue in Exodus 20, Deuteronomy 12 and Joshua 22 was arbitrariness and willful human design in the service of the one true God. The men of the nine and a half tribes interpreted the building of the altar as arbitrariness and self-willed worship. They took it to mean that their brothers east of the Jordan had turned their backs on the altar of Yahweh in the outer court in the temple and also on the service of Yahweh that went with that altar (vs. 19a).

We Christians today don’t seem to be aware of punishment for self-willed piety. In families all around us we see self-willed apostasy from God, and a process of apostasy that has gone on for generations. God threatened His people with punishment when He gave them the second commandment at Horeb. God would regard and treat Israel as a single unit, just as a body forms a unity. Israel knew that and found out just what it meant when Achan committed ma-al against Yahweh. First his sin cost 36 Israelite soldiers their lives in the battle against Ai. Then Achan's entire family was stoned along with him. All members of the covenant community are responsible whenever one or a few break the covenant, fail to keep their word, or are somehow unfaithful toward the God and Father of them all. The men from the nine and a half tribes who came to warn their brothers east of the Jordan reminded them of the story of Achan, when God detected ma-al among His people and punished the entire people for it, treating that people with all its members as one person, one body (vs. 20).

I might add, parenthetically, that it becomes clear here that the men of the two and a half tribes had built the altar east of the Jordan—not west. The delegates assumed in their speech that this was done to purify the territory assigned to the two and a half tribes east of the Jordan (vs. 19a).

Ch. 53: The Two and a Half Tribes Declare their Innocence (22:21-29)

The spokesmen for the two and a half tribes east of the Jordan certainly answered in an impressive way. They appealed to God as witness of the purity of their intentions, calling Him El, Elokim and Yahweh. They even repeated this threefold appeal to the names of God.
“Let God know, and let Israel know." From these words in verse 21 we see the two foci of the discussion once more.

No, there was no thought in their minds of committing ma-al, of rebellion against Yahweh. If that had been the case, they would indeed deserve to die that very day.

They had not set up that altar to take the place of the one that stood in the outer court of the tabernacle, which action would break the bond between Yahweh and the rest for Israel across the Jordan. That was not why they had made the altar so large, and that was not why they had modeled it after the altar in the outer court of the tabernacle (vs. 28).

They did not have any cultic purposes in mind when they set up the altar. They did not intend to offer sacrifices on it—not for a moment (vs. 23).

The altar had been erected as a monument, as a memorial. It was intended as a reminder for the future to people on both sides of the Jordan. Future generations of Israelites living east of the Jordan could point to this reminder if they were ever accused of not being real Israelites and not being part of the people of Yahweh and having no portion in Yahweh. If the Israelites west of the Jordan ever said such things about the two and a half tribes, that striking altar (a copy of the one in the tabernacle, but on a much greater scale) would testify in favor of the two and a half tribes, as it were, and silence those Israelites west of the Jordan. That's why the Reubenites and Gadites had already given it a name in which this intent came to expression--Witness. "It is truly a witness between us that Yahweh is God" (vs. 34).

A few more matters in these verses draw our attention.

(1) Although the discussion included the delegates from west of the Jordan, on the one hand, and the men of Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh, on the other (vs. 21, 30-1), the Reubenites and Gadites took the lion's share of the responsibility for the deed (vs. 25, 32-4), which should not surprise us. The tribe of Manasseh lived partly to the east and partly to the west of the Jordan, and therefore later generations from that tribe living east of the Jordan could point to their kinship with their tribesmen west of the Jordan as proof that they were really part of Israel. But all the members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad lived east of the Jordan, and therefore these two tribes had greater reason to fear that their descendants might one day stand completely outside Israel and be regarded as aliens who did not share in the covenant with Yahweh. Because of this concern, it was natural for them to take the lead in the discussion.

(2) A survey of the commentaries on Joshua reveals that chapter 22 is often read against the background of the assumption that Moses commanded Israel in Deuteronomy 12 never to offer sacrifices anywhere else than on the altar in the tabernacle. Benne Holwerda rightly points out:

A calm reading of Joshua 22 shows that a situation with more sanctuaries is presupposed. Think especially of what we read in verses 24-27, where the tribes east of the Jordan say that they erected
the altar because they were afraid that the religious bond between the eastern and western tribes would be broken in the future by the western tribes, which would mean that the brothers in the east would be spiritually isolated and would consequently be misled into idolatry. This fear makes sense only if sacrifices offered by the various tribes did not all have to be made in the central sanctuary. If there was only one legitimate sanctuary according to the law (Shiloh or Jerusalem), the tribes west of the Jordan would regularly encounter their brothers from the east there, and then the idea would never arise that the latter had nothing to do with Yahweh. Then the tribes east of the Jordan would have no reason to take measures against that danger at the very outset; there would be no such danger looming on the horizon. Their fear shows that the idea could easily arise that they were not true servants of Yahweh, which in turn presupposes that the Israelites did not meet together regularly at some central sanctuary but went their own ways in matters of worship and sacrifice. The fear is only explainable if the situation was such that people hardly knew each other anymore and really had no more communion with each other, if there was no common cultus in a single center, if the people worshiped separately, each group in its local sanctuary. If the tribes east of the Jordan had their cultus and therefore rarely came into contact with their brothers in the west, then in the long run the view could easily arise that the people of the east did not belong with the west, that they were not true worshipers of Yahweh. Then the land would be broken, which would lead to fatal consequences. The tribes east of the Jordan knew that they were geographically isolated, and therefore they must have had their own sanctuaries for cultic purposes. But their geographical isolation could easily lead to spiritual isolation, to exclusion from the body of Israel. Therefore they wanted to use this monument near their border to remind their brothers west of the Jordan that they had brothers on the other side of the Jordan, and that Yahweh had children there.

(3) If we accept this explanation of verses 24-7, verses 28-9 will give us no trouble. Those verses tell us (repeating something said earlier) about the purpose of the two and a half tribes in building the altar. They had given the altar a certain form and a tremendous size so that their children could use it as a sign and guarantee of their portion in Yahweh and His people. In verse 29 they go on to say what they did not mean by erecting the altar: "It was far from our minds to rebel against Yahweh and to turn away from Him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, cereal offerings and sacrificial offerings to take the place of the altar of Yahweh, our God, that stands before His dwelling place." As you recall, the delegates from west of the Jordan had suspected the two and a half tribes of setting aside the altar in the outer court of the tabernacle and thereby breaking with the service of Yahweh connected with it (vs. 19b). The spokesmen from the two and a half tribes rejected this suggestion. It was not at all their intention to set up a rival altar to compete with the one in the tabernacle (vs. 29). They desired no other service than the service of Yahweh. Ch. 54: The Dispute Is Resolved (22:30-34). In this passage we discover that Phinehas was the leading spokesman for the delegation from the nine and a half tribes west of the Jordan. That he should play this role was obvious, given the fact that the two and a half tribes had built something that looked just like the altar in the outer court of Yahweh's tabernacle. Moreover, the tribe of Levi, especially the priests, had been commissioned to instruct Israel and to provide enlightenment in the difficult cases (Deut. 17:8). Phinehas was completely satisfied that the
people east of the Jordan had not committed ma-al against Yahweh. Therefore there was no reason for Yahweh to punish all of Israel. The two and a half tribes had not brought catastrophe upon the nation; on the contrary, they had saved the people from the hand of Yahweh (vs. 31).

Phinehas and his associates then headed home. When they got back, they presented their findings to the people. The assembly that had delegated them to investigate the matter was satisfied with their report and happily withdrew the allegations. The people praised God, and no one gave any more thought to organizing a campaign against the two and a half tribes east of the Jordan or striking their entire territory with the ban, following the provisions of Deuteronomy 13.

The meaning of Joshua 22 for Israel and for the Christian church was and still is that heirs must take each other into account in all they do. Right down to the present, this should remain our starting point for any consideration of how we are to deal with each other and get along together. We must be careful not to let this lesson wash away in a flood of emotional appeals to come home to our God and Father. Remember: God laid a claim on us when we were still in the loins of our forefathers. What we must now do is respond to that claim by staying close to God or, if need be returning humbly to Him if we have strayed away. God's deeds in the history of His church must be honored and remembered.

Given this basis, we as heirs have a threefold duty.

(1) We must be concerned about each other. There is no room for isolationism and individualism among God's people. At Horeb God spoke to an entire people (singular). Christ gave promises to an entire ekklésia in her battle against "the gates of death," that is, the power of the grave, Satan with his forces and his tricks (Matt. 18:18; Heb. 2:14), his heart "out of the sea" (to the west of Patmos, meaning Roman oppression by force) and his heart "out of the earth" (to the east of Patmos, meaning the Oriental world with its cunning lies about God and man). (See Revelation 13.) God's church must cling to her God, the one and only true God, whom we know from His holy Word and whom we serve in accordance with His instructions. We are not to serve any unbiblical god. We are not even to serve the true God of the Bible in a way of our own devising, in a style of our own. Speculation about God and fantasies about new ways of serving and worshiping Him have stirred up a great deal of discord. They are not to be tolerated.

(2) We must listen to each other. This is especially important when we are guessing or inferring. Human nature is always ready to jump to conclusions and act on little evidence and write people off. But there is wisdom to be found in pious people. It is striking that Joshua, the man of war, stays in the background in Joshua 22 while Phinehas, the priest and teacher, steps forward. The Word must be the determining factor--not the sword, or numbers, or the majority. A unity reached and maintained by some route other than the Word may make quite an impression on the eyes and hearts of the flesh, perhaps even for centuries, but because it is not of the Spirit, it will be worthless on the day of days. For us to let go of each other is not a spiritual thing to do; it is not how we should deal with each other as Christ's church. We must make pressing appeals to each other and try to convince each other, but we cannot compel each other to do this or that. It certainly looked as though the Israelites east of the Jordan were in the wrong. Deuteronomy 12:13 said plainly: "Be careful that you do not offer your
sacrifices anywhere at all." But there was also Deuteronomy 13 to consider: first investigate and find out whether what you hear is true. And be willing to find each other again. Splits in the church are easier to make than to heal.

(3) We must persevere together in the true service of God. The territory east of the Jordan had received its Levitical cities (Ch. 21). It was the task of the Levites, through instruction in the Word, to keep Israel faithful to Yahweh and His service. Perhaps the two and a half tribes were not sufficiently on guard against the appearance of evil. But their intention was commendable, namely, to instruct coming generations about the history of God's redemptive deeds. And we must likewise instruct coming generations about the cleansing through the Word that the Spirit of Christ granted to Europe (Eph. 5:26). The book of Joshua tells us not only about God's concern for monuments but also about a similar concern certain people have had who have followed God in this respect, for example, Joshua (4:5, 9) and the people of the two and a half tribes (22:26 - 8). It is not without reason that the book of Joshua comes first in the row of the "Prophets." Even those who have wandered the farthest away must first be reminded of their origin and of God's deeds in their past. Such a prophetic confrontation can made us feel sad and ashamed, but it can also comfort us and lead us to contrition and repentance that puts us back on the proper road to salvation.
Chapter 5: Preserving the Inheritance

Ch. 55: Joshua follows Moses' example

Now that it is time to discuss the last part of the book of Joshua, I must remind you once more how the book is put together. The first part tells us how the Israelites entered their inheritance (Chapter 3), the second part how they divided it (Chapter 4), and the third part how they were instructed to preserve it (Chapter 5).

Each of these three parts of the book has the same internal structure: first we are told about the plan, and then about the execution of the plan. This structure is also the key to Joshua 23-24.

These two chapters are both concerned with the task assigned to Joshua near the end of his life, showing Israel how her inheritance could be preserved. Joshua 23 tells us about a meeting on this subject involving Joshua and the leaders of the people. We read about a much broader meeting in Joshua 24, a meeting at which the covenant was renewed with the entire people and the duty to preserve the inheritance was impressed upon them again.

By holding these meetings, Joshua was apparently following the example of Moses. When Moses knew that death was not far away from him, this servant of Yahweh held two meetings. It would be worth our while to review these two meetings from Moses' days briefly, for it may help clarify the events of which Joshua 23-24 tells us.

We know from Deuteronomy 31 that shortly before Moses died, Yahweh revealed to him something about Israel's future conduct and misconduct. This revelation inspired Moses to compose the well-known song that we find in Deuteronomy 32. But first the quintessence of that earnest song of warning was communicated by Moses in a smaller meeting probably attended only by priests and Levites. Then the song was presented to a larger meeting made up of all of Israel (Deut. 31:24-9; 32:44-7).

Joshua witnessed these events with his own eyes and ears. No one was closer to the scene than he. It should not surprise us that when he was old he believed that he should follow Moses' example when he in turn saw his own life's end approaching. After all, wasn't he Moses' one and only successor?

When we discussed Deuteronomy 31-32, we saw just how fully God's covenant was the focus of attention during the two meetings held by Moses. The first 43 verses of Deuteronomy 32 follow fully the pattern of the treaty documents of the ancient Near East. In Joshua 23, likewise, God's covenant is not only mentioned explicitly but is used as the framework within which everything else in Joshua's address finds its place. And in Joshua 24, just as in Deuteronomy 32, we find traces and reminders of the classic pattern for treaty documents.
Ch. 56: The Circumstances of the First Meeting (23:1-2a)

Whet did the first of the two meetings take place? We read: "It happened many days after Yahweh had given Israel rest from all her enemies around her that Joshua became old, well advanced in years."

In 13:1 the question of Joshua’s age also drew out attention. Then followed the report of how God commanded Joshua to proceed with the division of the land of Canaan. Now that task had been completed.

If it is true that God told Joshua to proceed with the division of the land because he was already so far along in years, we can be sure that Joshua’s age at the time of the meeting described in chapter 23 was very advanced indeed. He had good reason to believe that he would die before long; verses 26 and 14, which both touch on Joshua’s approaching death, agree on this point. The events of this chapter must have taken place some 60 or 70 years after the exodus from Egypt.

The meeting described in chapter 23 did not involve as many people as the one in chapter 24, i.e. the famous meeting at Shechem. Even the latter meeting did not include every man, woman and child in Israel. Only rarely does Scripture speak of such a meeting. Yet 24:1 tells us that "all the tribes of Israel" were called together for the meeting at Shechem. We read no such thing in chapter 23.

The important thing in chapter 23 is not the quantity but the quality of the people at the meeting. They all had some responsible function or other. They were "elders, heads, judges, and officers" (vs. 2). But these four labels are not names for four separate groups. An elder, for example, might well be a head and a judge at the same time. But all the men present at the meeting held responsible positions and therefore represented "all Israel."

Ch. 57: Joshua's Appeals for Loyalty (23:2b-16)

We would do well to underline a couple of words in verses 2b and 3a--the words I and you (plural). For the sake of clarity, we could translate the opening words of this passage as follows: "As for me, I am old. But as for you [plural], you have seen..."

These opening words make it apparent how Joshua viewed the meeting. There were two parties to the discussion--Joshua on the one side and the "elders, heads, judges, and officers" on the other. Both parties were present as representatives. Joshua represented Yahweh, while the men with whom he was meeting represented "all Israel."

Hence the subject on which Joshua addressed these assembled leaders at this meeting. The subject can be summed up in one word--loyalty.
Joshua was to speak at length on this topic. He was to repeat his appeal, making it three times in all. Each time he would begin by reminding his audience of Yahweh's loyalty to Israel and asking them about the basis for that loyalty. Then he would go on to talk about Israel's loyalty to Yahweh. This way of approaching the subject fit in well with the relationship between Israel and Yahweh, for Joshua addressed these leaders of Israel in the style of one speaking to a vassal on behalf of a great king (see Deut. 25:17—26:19).

First appeal (vs. 3-8)

We should first of all pay attention to the twofold indication of God's faithfulness that Joshua presented to the leaders at the meeting. We will learn again that it's all the same to faith whether we speak of God's promises or of His doing, giving, and fulfilling.

Joshua first pointed out to the leaders what Yahweh had already done with the peoples of Canaan for Israel's sake. Surely it was Yahweh Himself who had done these things. We think of the two blazing campaigns right through the land of Canaan, in the course of which God had performed such wonders that the Canaanites were paralyzed with fear (vs. 3). Even if the Canaanites had not yet been entirely wiped out, every Israelite tribe could point to an area of Canaan as its own (vs. 4).

But when Joshua thought about the areas of Canaan from which the Canaanites had not yet been driven out, he immediately went on to remind his audience of the well-known divine promise, namely, that although Yahweh would not drive out all the Canaanites at once, if Israel was faithful to Him, He would eventually drive them out of the land He had promised to Israel.

In both these respects Joshua demonstrated the loyalty of Yahweh toward Israel--in what had already happened and in what was still to happen. God's faithfulness was a guarantee of the promises that still awaited fulfillment (vs. 5).

Thus there was no need to worry about the parts of Canaan not yet cleansed of Canaanites--at least, not if Israel lived by the law written in the book of the torah (teaching) of Moses (vs. 6). All who were present knew that teaching through and through. That teaching had put such a stamp on them and on Joshua that Joshua could continue, using language that clearly paralleled the language of Deuteronomy: "...that you may not turn aside from it either to the right or to the left and not mix with these people that still remain in your midst. You shall not mention the names of their gods or swear by them. You shall not serve them or bow down before them. No, you shall cling to Yahweh your God, as you have done to this day."

Second appeal (vs. 9-13)
Once again Joshua reminds the leaders assembled before him of the great deeds God performed when Israel entered the Promised Land. Yahweh Himself had fought on behalf of His people. A small number of Israelites were able to make a large number of Canaanites take to their heels, in accordance with God's promise (Deut. 28:7). Yahweh had kept His word.

Joshua uses the indications of God's faithfulness to appeal once more to Israel to be faithful in turn to Yahweh. "Take heed to yourselves [literally: to your souls--see Deut. 4:15] that you love Yahweh your God. For if you turn back [from following Him] and join with what is left of these peoples that still remain among you and intermarry with them and mix with them and let them mix with you, then you will discover that Yahweh your God does not continue to drive out these people before you but that they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, so that you go under [and disappear] from this good land that Yahweh your God has given you."

Surely you can see the difference between the previous appeal and this one. In the previous appeal, there is no mention of covenant wrath, but here there is. And the warning could be given in even stronger terms. Joshua must have been thinking about what God had revealed to Moses about Israel's conduct in the future, for he continued to press for a renewed commitment, for continuing loyalty.

Third appeal (vs. 14-16)

Again Joshua reminds the assembled leaders of God's faithfulness, which was still evident. He feels that the end is approaching for him. "Behold, I am now going the way of all the earth" (vs. 14). Here Joshua uses an expression for dying that comes up more often in Scripture (see I Kings 2:2). He speaks of a regularity that we still see all around us in our time. All men destined to die (Heb. 9:27). Happy the man who makes good use of the closing years of his life, as Joshua did, to the glory of God's name.

We see immediately that Joshua emphasizes the word I. For the sake of clarity, we could translate this text as follows: "As for me, I have now reached the point where I am about to go the way of all the earth." Through these words Joshua wanted to draw the attention of his audience to the fact that his work among them was almost over. But given the fact that Joshua served as a representative of Yahweh, the God who had made a covenant with Israel, we could better say that he was drawing attention to the great work for "which God wanted to use him and in which God had shown His willingness to remain faithful to His Word as He had given it. Thus Joshua continues: "Recognize now with all your heart and with all your soul that not a single word has fallen [to earth] of all the good words that Yahweh has spoken to you. They have all come to fulfillment concerning you. Not a single one of these words has fallen [to earth]."
Joshua was to fall himself before long, but the representatives of Israel would have to recognize that God had not permitted him to die before the twofold task to which Joshua had been called was completed. First he had led Israel into the promised inheritance, and then he had seen to it that the inheritance was divided.

It had all come true as promised—for the generation whose leaders now stood before Joshua. The people had only to look around them. Israel was indeed the recipient of many good things—but what about the future?

If you read Joshua 23 as a speech given by an old an old man who fell into that familiar malady of old age, repetitiveness, you're wrong. The three parts of Joshua's appeal for loyalty are leading up to a climax. Joshua expresses himself in ever stronger terms.

This time Joshua does not speak about all the good things that Israel was continuing to enjoy, as he had done in verse 8. Neither does he appeal in so many words to the faithfulness of Yahweh, as he had done in the first two parts of his address, although an implicit appeal is still there. This time he frightens his audience.

He imagines what might happen if Israel should be disloyal and fail to keep God's covenant, conducting herself as an unfaithful vassal. What would happen in that case? "Just as all the good words that the Yahweh your God has spoken to you have come true, Yahweh will see to it that all the evil words He has spoken come true as well, so that He wipes you [plural] out in this good land that Yahweh your God has given you. If you transgress the covenant of Yahweh your God and break His commands, serving foreign gods and bowing down before them, the wrath of Yahweh will be unleashed against you and you will quickly perish [and disappear] from the good land that He has given you."

The books of Deuteronomy rings through this last appeal especially Ch. 28-29). It is true that Joshua did not mention the heaviest punishment of that which Moses had threatened Israel with in God's name, namely, exile. A man of his own time, a time when Israel was established in Canaan but had not yet occupied al of Canaan, he thought of the he danger that Israel might make friends with the remaining Canaanites and take over the service of their gods. If that happened, Israel would disappear from the Promised Land which she had entered not long before.

Joshua did not use any more powerful means to appeal to Israel to be loyal to Yahweh. But the approach he used with Israel was severe enough, especially since it came at the end of such an address. Throughout the entire address, he had one and the same purpose in mind, namely, to show Israel under what conditions she could preserve and retain the inheritance granted to her.

He chose first to speak to Israel's elders about this matter. After that he added more force to his words by holding a ceremony in which Yahweh officially and formally renewed His covenant with Israel (see Ch. 24).

Joshua 23 was written for our instruction as well even though our dispensation is different from Israel's dispensation in many ways. Still, we have the same God, a God who is serious about the
promises He makes. Yet those promises will not be fulfilled for those who despise Him and neglect His service. God's Spirit does not deal with us as though we were inanimate objects. The gospel of Christ is not fulfilled automatically but by the way of faith and obedience and covenant loyalty. Unbelieving members of the covenant may finally lose their inheritance. To point this out is not to foster fears, provided we do not undermine God's clearly expressed benevolent intentions. Joshua did not address stern language to his audience to teach them to doubt God's promise. On the contrary, precisely because God was so serious about His promises, disobedience would meet with very heavy punishment.

And because Joshua knew that God was upright and honest about His covenant with Israel, he saw to it that there was an occasion after his speech when he could renew the covenant with Israel in God's name and give it new strength. After Joshua 23 comes Joshua 24.

The book of Joshua comes first among "the Prophets." Thus Joshua 23 occupies a significant position in the canon, which is all the more reason to give it careful attention. The "Prophets" were later to reflect on the deeds of God recorded in the book of Joshua. This reflection begins already in Judges, for there we are told about the beginning of Israel's unfaithfulness.

But that's not the only reason that Joshua 23 is so important for us today. It is a chapter that does indeed speak of ancient Israel, but what it says applies to us even more.

Joshua 23 mentions only one promise, namely, the promise with regard to Canaan. It tells us how Israel could win more and more of Canaan for herself and then retain the land.

It has been revealed to us that the gospel confers a threefold redemptive benefit upon us, namely, the forgiveness of our sins, the daily renewal of our lives, and the benefits that will be ours when Christ returns (i.e. the resurrection of the body and eternal life on the new earth). This will be a new earth—not a small part of the earth.

There are Christians who focus their expectations of the future on a certain land—Palestine and on a certain people in that land—the Jews. They believe that Christ will not return until their vision of the future is fulfilled: The Jewish people will return to Palestine, and they will turn to Christ. This expectation of a massive conversion of the Jews to Christ is said to rest on Scriptural evidence, especially Romans 11:25-26a.

That passage does indeed speak of a massive conversion of the Jews. But there are two questions we must raise. First, does the apostle tie the conversion to any specific land? Second, to what future is he pointing? Is he pointing to a time that is still in the future for us, or a time that is already behind us?

As for the first question, what Paul says about the Israel of his days is not tied to any specific land. The text reads as follows: "Brothers, I want you to properly understand this mysterious matter—so that you will not be deceived. There has come only a partial hardening over Israel, until the great stream of the nations goes in, and so all Israel will be saved."
These words date from a time when the apostle was saddened by the stubbornness of the Jews in the face of the gospel. Yet he wanted to warn the Christians of pagan or Gentile origin against the danger of pride, against the inclination to assume that in the future God would have dealings only with them and never with any more Jews. Paul knew better, perhaps through a special revelation that dealt with this point. There would come entirely different days, days in which the gospel would not run into so much opposition from both Jews and non-Jews (the “nations”). Then the “pléroma” of the nations would go in, and “all Israel” would be saved.

We must be careful not to read too much into such terms as "pléroma" and "all Israel." The apostle certainly did not mean to say that every last Jew, 100 percent of them, would be saved, including Caiaphas and Judas Iscariot. In the Bible the word all does not have the same meaning as it does in arithmetic, Often it simply means many, just as we often say all when we mean many.

In his sad days, Paul was allowed to prophesy that there would come a time when many, many people--both Jews and non-Jews--would repent and turn to Christ. How many of the "non-Jews" would this involve? When Paul uses the word pléroma, we must not ascribe an absolute meaning of fullness to it. What Paul means is the broad mass, the great stream.

Is it the case that since the time of Paul, there has never been a broad stream of both Jews and non-Jews turning to Christ? Are we still to await such a thing?

Clearly this stream of converts came in a long time ago. For Paul this event still lay in the future, but for us it is a long way in the past. It is true that the Jews and the Gentiles remained hostile to Christianity for a long time--especially the Jews, who entreated the Romans to put Peter Polycarp to death. But a change came to both the Jews and Gentiles. The change in then Gentiles is well known to all of us; after all, most of us are of Gentile descent. But there was also an important change among the Jews. True, it did not affect the Jews outside Palestine very much, for most of those Jews have persisted in their unbelief right down to the present. Mainly, they are the ones behind the rise of the Zionist movement and the birth of the state of Israel. But in Palestine events took a different course, though not right away. The Jews still defended their position bravely in the two Jewish wars that took place around 70 and 130 A.D. Even after that, Jewish scholars in Palestine as well as in Babylon were hard at work opposing Christianity. But around the time of the emperor Constantine and afterward until the rise of Islam, the inhabitants of Palestine and the surrounding lands were by and large Christian. The many church buildings which Nelson Glueck has unearthed in the Negeb as well as in the area east of the Jordan have confirmed this. Admittedly, there were already a number of Christian churches in Judea during the days of Paul (Gal. 1:22; I Thess. 2:14), but their number increased greatly later.

The church of the new dispensation has been given a promise that extends far beyond a single land and a single people. The church no longer lives by the Horeb covenant. That covenant was indeed limited to one people and one land, but it has since been replaced. The renewed covenants into which Israel entered under Moses and Joshua have also been replaced.

The church of the new dispensation has been told: everything is yours (I Cor. 3:22). Her Head is the Heir of heaven and earth, and she will one day inhabit the new earth.
Jewels of promises have been given her. On her head she wears a crown made up of all the wonderful things God has promised her and her descendants. None of these promises will fail to be fulfilled. In Paradise they will be fulfilled finally and completely.

But she must be very careful with that crown. She must persevere in the service of the God and Father of her Lord Jesus Christ and not throw everything away by chasing foreign gods or idols or false gods of any sort. Today, too, the warning is timely: Remember what our Savior HImself said to the church at Philadelphia: "Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown from you" (Rev. 3:11).

Ch. 58: Joshua Meets with All the People of Shechem (24:1-2a).

The meeting described in Joshua 24 is quite different from the one in chapter 23. Many Israelites must have been present at both, for both times Joshua called together "the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers" (23:2; 24:1). But even if the meeting in Joshua 24 was made up largely of the same people as the meeting in chapter 23, we see immediately from the way this meeting is introduced to us in verse 1 that it had a more official character, for we read: "After that Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders of Israel, the rulers [the same Hebrew word is translated as heads in 23:2], the judges, and the officers, and they presented themselves before the face of God." The official and ceremonial character of this meeting is apparent from the following three things in verse 1.

(1) The place of the meeting is mentioned—Shechem. Scholars have spent a lot of time trying to figure out why the place of the meeting in Joshua 23 is not mentioned, while the place of the meeting in Joshua 24 is mentioned. The solution to this problem is fairly simple: the place had to be mentioned in any agreement of a juridical nature. When the agreement was drafted in written form, it would have to mention the place where it was reached. Hence we are told that the meeting took place at Shechem.

(2) It would also have to mention what people or groups of people took part in the meeting. Hence we are told that the meeting was attended by elders, rulers, judges, and officers.

(3) Finally, we are told that all these people "presented themselves before the face of God." This expression makes us think in terms of an official ceremony, as we see from its use in Deuteronomy 29:10 (vs. 9 in the Hebrew text). In our own language, there is a considerable difference between "they went to" and "they presented themselves before." The later phrase sounds more official and ceremonial, which is why it is used in this passage. Moreover, we read that the men summoned to the meeting presented themselves "before the face of God," Given what we read in 24:26 about the "sanctuary of Yahweh" we should probably take this phrase as equivalent to "before the face of Yahweh." In that place it could be in part a reference to the holy place at Shechem of which we already read during Abraham's life (Gen. 12:6-7), to the altar that Jacob built there (Gen. 33:18, 20), and to the
altar that Joshua built on Mount Ebal (8:30). If I am correct in equating the expression "before the face of God" with "before the face of Yahweh," it may well mean "before the tabernacle." It may be that the tabernacle had been set up at Shechem with an eye to the coming covenant renewal. Apparently the tabernacle did not always remain at Shiloh during Israel's early days in Canaan (Judges 20:18, 26). I do not know which possibility or which combination of possibilities must be chosen as giving us the meaning of the phrase "before the face of God." But this much is sure that verse 1 teaches us that the meeting described in Joshua 24 involved a good deal of ceremony.

What actually happened at Shechem is explained to us in verses 2-28. We read: "Next Joshua made a covenant that day for the people and laid down statutes and ordinances for that covenant at Shechem. Joshua wrote down these words in a book of instruction (torah) of God" (vs. 25-26a). Before we move on to the events at Shechem, we should look briefly at this conclusion. All three of its sentences speak of covenant making.

(1) The first one does so explicitly, "Next Joshua made a covenant that day for the people." "For the people" here means on behalf of the people. Joshua was authorized to do so, just as Moses had been.

(2). The second sentence reads: "And he laid down statutes and ordinances for the covenant at Shechem." Here the Hebrew text uses the words choq (plural: chuqqim) and mishpat (plural: mishpatim). These are familiar terms from the book of Deuteronomy for the two elements that together make up the mitsvah, the set of commandments, the covenant laid upon Israel, in the name of God.

(3) The third sentence tells us that Joshua made a written record of the agreement. Joshua wrote these words "in [on] a book [or a scroll, or a tablet] of the torah of God." If someone at some later time wanted to know what agreement had been made between God and Israel at Shechem, it could be looked up.

It was an international custom to make a written record of any covenant that had been made or renewed. It was also customary to keep the document in some holy place. Is that why it was called a book of the torah of God--because Joshua not only made that covenant before God in His name but also left the document with God?

Whatever the answer to this question may be, this is clearly what happened to the document Joshua prepared. In this respect, too, he followed the example of his predecessor Moses, Moses had entrusted his torah and his song to the Levites, who were to keep it in the tabernacle (Deut. 31:24-5). Joshua must have done the same with this document. When the author of the book of Joshua wrote chapter 24, he must have made use of this holy book of Joshua's torah, which had been deposited in the sanctuary as the property of God. Yet his was limited use. Including the entire covenant document within the book of Joshua would have required too much space. And it wasn't necessary either. There are clear traces in Joshua 24 of all the elements involved in the making or renewing of a covenant. These traces include:

Preamble (vs. 2b)
History prologue (vs. 2c-13)

Covenant stipulations (vs. 14)

Swearing of the covenant (vs. 16, 21, 24)

Sanctions of the covenant (vs. 20)

Witness (es) of the covenant (vs. 22, 26)

Written record of the covenant (vs. 26)

For more information on these elements, which appear in all classic covenants, refer to my discussion of Exodus 20 and the book of Deuteronomy.

Because of the limited and somewhat free use that the author of the book of the book of Joshua made of Joshua’s holy written record of the covenant, Joshua 24 cannot be as easily divided as Exodus 20, for example, or the book of Deuteronomy. The elements of the classic covenant are scattered and mixed together. But Joshua 24:2-28 can easily be divided into two parts. In the first part Joshua speaks about the covenant in the name of Yahweh (Ch, 59), and in the second part he steps forward as the first Israelite to accept the covenant publicly (Ch. 60-63).

Ch. 59: Joshua Speaks to Israel in Yahweh's Name (24:2b-14)

In this part of Joshua 24, three of the classic elements of a covenant document are clear, the preamble, the historical prologue, and the covenant demands.

Preamble (vs. 2b)

In verse 2a the author told us that Joshua spoke to "all the people." But from verse 1 it is apparent that this phrase does not include women and children or even young men, but only older men. Then, in verse 2b, we come to the first words that Joshua addressed to the meeting: "Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel."

This is a true preamble. In the preamble to a covenant document, the great king who was making the covenant would be mentioned together with the vassal who was entering the covenant for the first time or was having his covenant with the great king renewed. In this case the great king was Yahweh and the vassal was Israel. Earlier, in verse 2a, the author gave us the name of the mediator between these two-Joshua. Joshua was to speak to Israel as though Yahweh Himself was speaking—using the first person. But at one point (vs. 7) he would step back and speak about Yahweh in the third person. After the halfway point (vs. 15) he would always speak of Yahweh in the third person, for Joshua himself also belonged to the people of Israel. (This shift from a first-person style to a third-person style, which is characteristic of a historical prologue, occurs elsewhere in Scripture: Exodus 15:26 and 20:1-17.) Indeed, it is a majestic preamble.
Historical prologue (vs. 2c-13)

What was the special purpose of the historical prologue in a covenant treaty when a great king renewed a covenant with his vassal?

The suzerain wanted to make it abundantly clear that he had been gracious to his subordinates. Therefore such a prologue would likely include a report or account of the miserable circumstances in which the vassal in question or his father or his grandfather used to live. The vassal had been poor or sick or wide open to attack. Sometimes there was also a reminder about previous unfaithfulness on the part of the vassal. All of this was thrown in to paint a background against which the current generosity of the gracious suzerain would appear all the more striking.

All of this was well and good, but the real issue between the suzerain and his vassal was the ground, the land—including whatever cities there might be and the orchards, vineyards and olive groves and any other immobile assets the land might contain. Entire lists of such grants made by Ugaritic kings have been unearthed, lists that include specific mention of houses, vineyards, olive groves, and so forth, just as in Joshua 24. Thus, what we read in this chapter should not surprise us.

The book of Joshua is a book about an inheritance. It tells us first how Israel entered the inheritance, then how the Israelites were each assigned their portion of the inheritance, and finally how the Israelites were supposed to preserve the inheritance. Later Israelites must have made joyful use of this holy document in order to tell their contemporaries as well as the rising generation about the meaning of the Promised Land. Indeed, the land was the main focus of the historical prologue with which Joshua introduced the solemn renewal of the covenant at Shechem. It may be that the author of Joshua took over verses 2c-13 just as they stood in the covenant document. He must have respected this part of the document deeply, for here Joshua spoke as the fully authorized representative of Yahweh.

In familiar style, this passage of Scripture now reviews the history of Israel from the lives of the patriarchs to the situation in Joshua's time, bringing the covenant up to date.

Four generations of forefathers are mentioned—the generations of Terah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Very little is said about the first three, but the author goes on at length about Jacob. But the thread running through all 4 subdivisions of this prologue is the same—the land, the inheritance!

We know from Genesis 11 and other sources that Terah had three sons (Abram, Nahor and Haran) as well as a daughter (Sarai). Abram married his half sister Sarai, and Nahor married his niece Milcah, who was the daughter of his brother Haran. The children continued to intermarry, just as people often did in the ancient Near East and still do in the Middle East today.
Of Terah verse 2 says: "On the other side of the river your fathers lived in the old days--Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods."

Here we are told two things about Israel's forefathers. First of all, they lived "on the other side of the river." This river is the Euphrates, which formed one of the ideal boundaries of the Promised Land, The forefathers came from a place outside the inheritance which was later promised by God and indeed given to His people in due course.

Consequently there is also the explanatory comment attached that Israel's forefathers served foreign gods when they lived beyond the boundaries of the Promised Land. Immediately we sense what Joshua is driving at. Those who honor other gods than Yahweh do not belong in the promised land.

Joshua was to come back to this point later, but he wanted to bring it up at an early stage. Canaan, after all, is the land of Yahweh.

So far the Promised Land has been mentioned in only an indirect way and a negative context. Now this changes. Verse 3 reads: "Then I took your father Abraham away from beyond the river and let him pass through all the land of Canaan. I made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac."

Here the promise land is named expressly, and it is said that God let Abraham see all of it. But this remark is preceded by another: Abraham was taken away by Yahweh from the area beyond the Euphrates. The hearers must have understood this as an allusion to Abraham's break with his house and hearth and gods, a break that Yahweh commanded him to make. It was only then that God let Abraham see the entire land of Canaan. Joshua's hearers knew that this land had been promised to Abraham. But it had not actually been given to Abraham. It would be given to his descendants. Hence it made sense that his descendants should also be named--in the person of Isaac. There is no need to think here of the other children of Abraham, i.e. his sons by Hagar and Keturah.

Israel is the direction in which the prologue is headed. The prologue brings the story all the way to the people actually standing before Joshua listening to his words.

Again we see a split: Isaac had two sons--Jacob and Esau. But the land given to Esau was not the land that Joshua wanted to talk about. Esau received the hill country of Seir.

The reminder about Esau and the land given to him serves also to draw attention even more strongly to Jacob and the land he received as an inheritance. Esau did receive something, but it was nothing more than the hill country of Seir. The prologue even draws attention to the noteworthy difference between the fulfillment of the promise of land made to Esau and the fulfillment of the promise made to Jacob: Esau was already well established in Seir when Jacob and his descendants had not yet made a beginning in taking possession of Canaan, for Esau the time between promise and fulfillment was not long, but for Jacob and his sons there was a long pathway of suffering. Think of all the obstacles they encountered along that route. Yet Yahweh cleared all the obstacles out of the way, which shows just how serious He was about the promise of land made to Jacob and His descendants. There were four such obstacles mentioned by Joshua. We will take them up one by one.
(1) Egypt. In verse 4 we read: "I gave to Esau the hill country of Seir, to take possession of it." Joshua's hearers all knew that Esau had established himself in Seir years ago. Moses had pointed this out (Deut. 2:4). Joshua goes on: "But Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt."

In strict geographical terms, it was correct to speak of "going down" to Egypt, for Egypt was lower than Palestine. Did Joshua also mean that Jacob and his sons "went down" in the sense that they embarked on a path of suffering? The name Egypt already speaks volumes.

As an authorized representative of Yahweh, Joshua goes further: "Yet I sent Moses and Aaron, and I struck Egypt in the [well-known] manner in which I operated in your midst. After that I led you out" (vs. 5).

But Egypt did not give up the prey so easily. When I led your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea. But the Egyptians pursued your fathers with chariots and riders to the Red Sea. But when they cried out to Yahweh, He placed darkness between you and the Egyptians, and He let the sea come over them and cover them. With your own eyes you have seen what I did to the Egyptians."

Earlier I pointed out how Joshua suddenly forgets to speak in the first person. He must have been under the sway of his own powerful memories of what had happened at the Red Sea.

Nor was this the only time Joshua went back and forth in his way of speaking. Sometimes he said "I led you out" and sometimes "I led your fathers out" of Egypt, thereby emphasizing the unity of earlier and later generations. This switching back and forth between "you" and "your fathers" can be explained on the basis of the unity of the church of all ages. But when it is said in verse 7b: "With your own eyes you have seen what I did to the Egyptians," we must think in terms of real eyewitnesses. We see something similar in Joshua 4:21-4. In the discussion of that passage I expressed my conviction that there were more Israelites who survived the 40 years in the wilderness than we sometimes suppose. Hence there is no need to interpret Joshua in figurative terms when he says: "With your own eyes you have seen. . . ." Joshua was one of those eyewitnesses and he saw other such eyewitnesses standing before him. That may well be the reason why he spoke of Yahweh in the third person in verse 7 and let go of the first-person style for a moment.

(2) The wilderness. The wilderness through which the Israelites passed was not quite as wild and desolate a place as we sometimes imagine. In fact, there are nomadic peoples who would not be happy living anywhere but in such a wilderness. The wilderness has its oases and its pasture lands. In the springtime it is covered with a glorious carpet of flowers. Therefore the wilderness could also be thought of as an area of "steppes."

In this passage, the word for wilderness or steppes is used in a less favorable sense: "After that you lived in the wilderness for a long time" (vs. 7c). This is a reference, of course, to the 38-year period of wandering after Kadesh. This was another apparent obstacle to Israel's reaching the Promised Land. But God took away this obstacle too and gave Israel an extra gift in the form of the land ruled by Kings Sihon and Og. "I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived on the far side of the Jordan, and
when they did battle with you, I delivered them into your hand. You took possession of their land. I wiped them out before your face."

The motif of the land as a gift comes to the fore even more clearly here, even though Israel has not yet reached that destination. Even in the land God save Israel east of the Jordan, there was another important obstacle in the way.

(3) Balaam. "Then Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, arose and made preparations for fighting against Israel. He summoned Balaam the son of Beor to come and curse you. But I did not wish to listen to Balaam. On the contrary, he had to bless you, and I saved you from his hand."

When people point out that Balak did not actually make war on Israel--Jephthah pointed this out in Judges 11:25--we can answer by saying that Joshua never maintained that he did. King Balak used cunning rather than force. He tried to enlist the world of devils, which is hostile to God and to Israel, against the people of Yahweh (Num. 22-24). But although there was reason enough for Yahweh to listen to the accusations that Satan might make against Israel, he did not do so. If He had listened, He would have had plenty of reason to withhold from His people the fulfillment of the promise He had made to them and refuse to let them into the land of Canaan. But God closed Balaam's mouth and even made him bless Israel.

(4) The inhabitants of Canaan. Once the Israelites had crossed the Jordan, they found a final enormous obstacle in their path. Here we finally learn that the citizens of Jericho did not give up their land without resistance. There must be a good reason why they are called the "lords" of Jericho, that is, the owners of the city and its land. Now, the other peoples that lived within the boundaries of Canaan did not surrender their land and possessions without a fight either but tried to offer resistance. Yet, God paralyzed them by frightening them.

In some translations we read that God sent "hornets," a mean-tempered insect, before the Israelites. Other translations state that God brought consternation and terror on the inhabitants of Canaan. The noun and verb in question are in the singular, which is why I lean toward the second reading of this text (see also Deut. 7:20). As I see it, verse 12 should read: "But I sent fear out before you, and it chased away before you two [coalitions of] Amorite kings; [this did not happen] by your sword and bow." The text does speak literally of two kings, but this prologue probably means the two coalitions of kings mentioned in Joshua 10 and 11. They are referred to as "Amorites," like Sihon and Og, because they lived a bit farther inland. The Canaanites lived closer to the seacoast (13:1-7).

Those were the four obstacles. Yahweh swept them aside and thereby showed His faithfulness, and also His gracious mercy, which went far beyond the mercy any great king ever showed a vassal with a miserable past. God dealt with Israel as the almighty God over against frail human beings who could not hope to stand in the face of His immense power. The prologue therefore ends as follows: "Thus I gave you a land that you did not have to work for and cities that you did not build, even though you live in them. You eat of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant" (vs. 13).
Isn't this sketch of the situation strikingly similar to non-Biblical examples of historical prologues in treaty documents? Bible readers should also think about Psalm 44:3-4 in this context. The history of God's deeds in Egypt, at Horeb and in Canaan was the foundation for the "Prophets" and the "Psalms," which are the second and third parts of the Bible.

The covenant demand (24:14)

In an ancient covenant treaty, after the historical prologue came a demand, namely, that the vassal in question was to serve only his great king, who had been so gracious to the vassal and his forefathers. This example was apparently followed by Moses and by God Himself, right down to the use of the standard transitional phrase—we-attah (now then). See my discussion of Deuteronomy 1:6–4:49.

This is also the word with which verse 14 begins: "Now then, fear Yahweh. Serve Him uprightly and faithfully. Avoid the gods that your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt, and serve Yahweh."

We recall that the historical prologue to the Ten Words ("I am Yahweh your God, who led you out of the house of bondage, out of Egypt") led up to the first commandment, which was followed by nine others, in the Deuteronomy covenant, Moses laid a great number of covenant stipulations before Israel after the historical prologue (Deut. 5:26). Joshua followed these illustrious examples, but he was brief about it, limiting himself to the first commandment. Here, too, he showed that he was a disciple of Moses, who saw the entire covenant wrapped up in the first commandment. Joshua appealed to Israel to draw the consequences of what he had said in the historical prologue—in two respects.

First a positive consequence: Israel should "fear" her benefactor Yahweh and stand in awe of Him. Therefore she was to serve and honor and praise Him "uprightly and faithfully." What Joshua had in mind when he used the word *uprightly* was a radical, fully consistent service of Yahweh that left no room for compromise. And he used the word faithfully to indicate that Israel was to stand firm in the service of Yahweh.

There was also a negative consequence. Just as a vassal could not serve two great kings at the same time, for the one might be an enemy of the other, so Israel could not serve both Yahweh and other gods, e.g. the gods that her forefathers used to serve in Mesopotamia or the gods she used to serve in Egypt. There are some scholars who believe that Joshua contradicts himself here, for earlier he said to Israel's elders that they should cling to Yahweh "as you have done to this day" (23:6),

Now he says that they had to get rid of the idols. But there is no need to make a problem of this.

Joshua did take seriously the possibility of the Israelites falling into the sin of idolatry again. That's why he reminded them twice about their origins in Mesopotamia (vs. 2, 14). The possibility of
idolatry was obvious, given Abraham's Mesopotamian origin. Moreover, both Isaac and Jacob married relatives who had originally come from Mesopotamia as well (Rebekah in Isaac's case Leah and Rachel in Jacob's case). Thus the danger of being infected with Mesopotamian idolatry was not imaginary; think of Rachel (Gen. 31:19; 35:2). And Israel had not kept herself free of idolatry in Egypt either (Ezek. 16:26; 20:7-8; 23:19).

Thus Joshua took account of the possibility of idolatry in Israel's future. Let's not forget that he knew about God's revelation to Moses about Israel's future misconduct (Deut. 31:16; 32:44-7). But we must not read Joshua's words as meaning that Israel was guilty of idolatry right then. The words put away make it sound as though idolatry was a present problem, but there is no need to accept such a translation. We could just as well translate the Hebrew verb in question as avoid or stay far away from. In fact, such a translation is not only permitted but required. After all, does it make sense to suppose that Joshua knew of cases of idolatry in Israel but did nothing about it? Would such men as Moses, Joshua, Eleazar, and Phinehas really have tolerated idolatry right under their noses? We do not read here that Joshua ordered the Israelites to turn in all their idols, great and small, and that he then buried them by the oak at Shechem, as Jacob had done long before. Yet that's just what Joshua would have had to do, given the strong words he uttered in verses 15-24. Therefore, to avoid any misunderstanding on this point, I would prefer to translate this text as follows: "Avoid the gods. . ." or "Stay far away from the gods. . ." Even if we continue to use the translation "Put away the gods. . ." we must remember that Joshua could not possibly have meant idols actually kept in the tents of the Israelites. We would then have to read the "put away" as referring to the idols owned by the heathen population left in Canaan, that is, "the nations left here among you" (23:7) and the "foreign gods which are among you" (24:23). At the preparatory meeting with the elders, Joshua had already warned in the strongest of terms against any kind of friendly contact—to say nothing of intermarriage--with the Canaanite population (23:11). And in this final address to Israel he would do so again.

The purpose of verse 14 is clear. Yahweh, who had given the land of Canaan to Israel out of pure grace, had the exclusive right to be honored as God in that land. As Joshua solemnly held this divine right before the people, using the style of a vassal covenant, he also saw that Israel was surrounded by the danger of idolatry.

Ch. 60: Joshua Confronts Israel with the Choice (24:15)

As we saw earlier, the author of Joshua 24 probably made use of the written document that Joshua prepared as a record of the covenant renewal. If this supposition is correct, we may take it that he followed the covenant document more closely in verses 2-14 than in the rest of the story (vs. 15-28). In the second set of verses, various parts of the ceremony involved in making or renewing a covenant can be pointed out, but we find them in more of a narrative setting. Instead of letting the covenant document speak directly, the author now tells the story more in his own words. In the process he may well have been drawing on his own recollections or the recollections of others. Still, as we go through
verses 15-28 (Ch. 60-63), we will try to see what stages in the covenant renewal procedure the various sets of verses correspond to. As I composed this material, I seriously considered dealing with verse 15 along with verse 14 in the preceding section, for in a certain sense verse 15 is a continuation of verse 14: "But if it does not seem good to you to serve Yahweh, you must choose today whom you shall serve--whether the gods whom your fathers served [when they lived] beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you now live. But as for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh."

This verse could easily have been copied word for word from Joshua's covenant document. Yet I have chosen to deal with it separately, because at this point the author begins to deal with the people's acceptance of the covenant.

In this verse we learn in what capacity Joshua spoke further to the people. Up to that point he had spoken as the fully authorized representative of Yahweh. So strongly did he identify himself with Yahweh's position that he repeatedly used the first-person pronoun, just as if it were Yahweh Himself speaking to Israel. But now Joshua suddenly speaks as an Israelite, as someone who himself was part of the covenant people. After moving to that position, he now continues to speak within the style of a vassal covenant: "As for me and my house, we will serve Yahweh." We know that a great king would first let it be known in the historical prologue how good he and his predecessors had been to the vassal and his forefathers, that therefore he expected the vassal to swear that he would be loyal and true to the great king and his descendants. Thus the vassal was pledging faithfulness not only on his own behalf but also on behalf of his descendants. And that was just what Joshua was doing here: "As for me and my house. . . ."

Joshua was the first one to take the step of pledging loyalty to Yahweh. He was setting an example for the people.

He used a rather strange tactic to highlight the example he was setting. Right at the outset he raised the possibility that Israel might not want to choose for Yahweh. What if the Israelites chose for other gods instead? In that case, Joshua said, he himself and his entire house were still committed anew to the service of Yahweh.

The question has sometimes been asked whether Joshua was serious in speaking as he did. Was he really confronting Israel with a choice?

I believe that Joshua was serious, but the choice in his speech was not a genuine choice. It was not a real "either/or." Joshua contrasted the gods of Mesopotamia, where Israel's forefathers had lived, with the gods of the land of Canaan, where Israel lived now. (Notice that the word "you" gets the emphasis--"in whose land you now live.";) Yet everyone knew that in the face of Israel's so-called theocracy, the idolatries of different countries bore clear features of similarity. It made no real difference whether Israel fell back into the idolatry of her Mesopotamian forefathers or took over the false gods of the land in which she now lived. It all boiled down to the same thing; it was the same mess either way. Joshua would come back to this point later.
Precisely by posing the question this way, by placing the idolatry of the present and the past over against the service of Yahweh, Joshua was serious about what he was saying. Once more he made an appeal to Israel's history, from Terah to the present, the history he had dealt with at greater length in the historical prologue.

The choice, then, was not between this set of idols and that set of idols but between all the idols on the one hand and Yahweh on the other. Yahweh was Israel's benefactor from of old, and He was the one who had now given her the Promised Land.

Ch. 61: Israel Responds by Choosing for Yahweh (24:16-22)

From the answers that the elders gave Joshua, we gather that they understood him very well when he made the covenant demand (vs. 14) and set an example for them (vs. 15). Joshua had said: "As for me, I will remain faithful to Yahweh." The elders replied: "Yes, and we will too." But we should read their entire answer. In verse 16 we hear them responding to the demand made by Joshua (serve Yahweh). In verses 17-18a we see them, like Joshua, appealing to history. And in verse 18b they declare that they want to follow Joshua: "Yes, we want to serve the Lord too."

"Then the people answered as follows: "Far be it from us to forsake Yahweh in order to serve other gods, for Yahweh alone is our God. He led us and our fathers out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. He has done these great signs before our eyes. He has preserved us on the way that we followed and among all the peoples through whose midst we passed. Yahweh drove out before us all the peoples and the Amorite who lived in the land. We, too, shall serve Yahweh, for He is our God."

The narrator lets us know that Joshua reminded the people of the deep seriousness of the oath they were about to swear. He told them what kind of God Yahweh was (vs. 19), and then went on to point out what consequences this might have for them (vs. 20).

"Then Joshua said to the people: 'You plural will not be able to serve Yahweh, for He is a holy God, a jealous God, and He will not forgive your transgressions and sins' (vs. 19).

Of course this statement of Joshua's is not to be lifted out of its context and turned into a general assertion, as though there is no forgiveness with God. Christians know better. And why else would God have given His people all these instructions about sacrifices in Leviticus 1-7?

Of course Yahweh was willing to forgive sins--many sins! But there were certain sins which He would not forgive, namely, sins through which the covenant between Yahweh and Israel was violated.

One of those sins was idolatry. There was no pardon for those who worshiped idols (Deut. 13), and that's what's at issue here--idolatry. With an eye to the danger of idolatry, Joshua was saying to Israel that it would not be easy for Israel to serve Yahweh, first of all because He was a holy God, and
He was a holy God, first of all. We saw just what this means when we discussed Leviticus 18:1-5. Because of all the idolatry, the land of Canaan had become a stinking mess. It was a land of death and decay. Yahweh could no longer tolerate the rotten odor of the Canaanites, and he appointed Israel to cleanse the land thoroughly.

Second, Yahweh was a jealous God. What this means from the second commandment, which is closely bound up with the first. Sin against the second commandment is ma-al, just as it is ma-al when a married woman gives herself to a man other than her husband (Num. 5:11-31). Yahweh had chosen Israel as His wife, His beloved, His segullah (Deut. 7:6). That's why any idolatry or worship of images on Israel's part led Yahweh to be jealous.

Joshua surely put his point in crude/strong terms: "You [plural] will not be able to serve Yahweh." But that kind of language was necessary. Joshua knew that Yahweh wanted to be the only one for Israel, and that Israel was surrounded by many dangers. The land was far from completely cleansed (23:12). And we should not forget the revelation about Israel's future that God had given to Moses and Joshua (Deut. 31:16). Even if Joshua did not know when the apostasy would begin, he did know that it would definitely come. This must have been one of his reasons for speaking such strong language.

If we do not universalize this verse but read it within the framework of the time and the setting, it will not give rise to feelings of defeat and despair in the hearts of believers.

From verse 20 we gather that Joshua also spoke to the people at the meeting about sanctions, that is, about the blessing and curse of the covenant. This is what he went on to say about Yahweh: For if you [plural] forsake Yahweh and serve foreign gods, He will change his conduct toward you: He will do you harm and destroy you after first having treated you well."

What we read here shows us how to understand God's un-changeability: in the sense of faithfulness to His word once He has given it, but not in the sense that God is impassive and unmoved by anything that happens on earth. Such features fit in with a god of our own imagining, for we can make of such a god whatever we want and let him do whatever we want. Yet the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom we know from the Scriptures, first loved the Israelites in a wholehearted way (Deut. 7:8), as we learn from history, but later changed completely in his attitude toward Israel, so that he became an "enemy" for Israel (Is. 63:10).

Joshua now issued a warning about this, speaking in the same line as Moses. God could be a consuming fire against Israel's enemies (Deut. 9:3), but also against Israel herself (Deut. 4:24).

From the response of the people (vs. 21), it is apparent that what Joshua had said to the people was not received as foolishness, and that he had not gone too far in what he demanded of them. The people at the meeting were faithful and loyal (23:8). They showed that they meant what they said by declaring: "No, but we will serve Yahweh."

When a vassal in ancient times swore that he would be faithful to his king, he did so by bringing a conditional curse upon himself. If he failed to live up to his promise, he would be a witness against
himself. (See my earlier discussions of this idea in connection with Numbers 5:19 and Deuteronomy 27:11-26.)

It is said here of Joshua that he dealt with the people in accordance with that pattern. "Then Joshua said to the people: 'You [plural] are witnesses against yourselves that you [plural] have chosen Yahweh in order to serve him. You said [that you are] witnesses.'"

This verse is reminiscent of verse 15, where, Joshua had said; "Choose this day whom you shall serve." Here Joshua recognizes and accepts the choice they have made, namely, that they have chosen Yahweh in order to serve Him.

**Ch. 62: Israel Promises to be Faithful to the Covenant (24:23 - 24)**

The author of Joshua has now reached the point in his story when the intermezzo (the discussion between Joshua and the people) is over. He has also told us how the elders of the people brought down a conditional curse upon themselves.

It was a thrilling story. Apparently the author was so moved by it that he completely forgot to tell us that verse 23 is made up exclusively of words of Joshua. If we did not pay careful attention, we could easily assume that the elders were still speaking in this verse, which is not the case. Joshua is repeating the covenant demand once more. In the process he uses the familiar opening word we-attah (now then), which we also noted in verse 14. The author probably lifted this verse word for word from Joshua's covenant document. It reads as follows: "Now then, put away the foreign gods that are in your midst, and incline your heart to Yahweh, the God of Israel."

As I said, this verse looks a great deal like verse 14. Therefore I would point out once more that Joshua is not presupposing that there are idols among the Israelites themselves, e.g. in their tents or houses. What he was referring to were the idols worshiped by those Canaanites who still lived among the Israelites. Such idols were exceedingly numerous. There are areas in Palestine where one can hardly start digging without coming across an image of Astarte.

In verse 24 we see that the men at the meeting had as far as calling a conditional curse down upon themselves (vs. 22). They had not yet sworn to accept the covenant. The actual acceptance or renewal of the covenant is reported in this verse: "Then the people said to Yahweh: 'We will serve Yahweh our God, and we will listen to His voice.'"

The elders had also spoken such words during the discussion, but then they were not yet under oath. Therefore their declaration is noted separately, for it represents a solemn vow of obedience and faithfulness.
Ch. 63: The Covenant Documents (24:25-28)

When I discussed Exodus 20 and the book of Deuteronomy, I pointed out what ceremonies were involved in the making or renewing of a covenant. The covenant would be written down, and a sacrificial animal would be slaughtered. There would be a sacrificial meal, and the treaty document would be deposited in a holy place. It would be established who would serve as witness to the covenant, and provisions would be made to have the covenant document read aloud periodically.

Not all of these things are mentioned in Joshua 24. We hear nothing, for example, about the slaughter of a sacrificial animal. There was no such thing either after the renewal of the covenant in the fields of Moab (recorded in Deuteronomy). Such a sacrifice was unnecessary, for the Deuteronomy covenant was not a new covenant but a renewed covenant. At the time when the Horeb covenant was made, a sacrificial animal was slaughtered and the covenant partners were both sprinkled with its blood, that is, both the people and Yahweh, the latter represented by the altar (Ex. 24:6-8). These actions remained in effect/force and therefore were not included in the covenant ceremony described in Joshua 24, which is why we can speak of it as a covenant renewal. Neither did this renewal of the covenant involve a sacrificial meal. The people apparently went home without any such thing (vs. 28).

But some of the other aspects of a covenant ceremony do come up in Joshua 24. We read: "After that Joshua made a covenant for the people that day and established statutes and ordinances for the covenant at Shechem. Joshua wrote these words in a book of the torah of God. Next he took a great stone and set it up there, under the tree that stood in the sanctuary of Yahweh. Then Joshua spoke to the entire people: 'Behold, this stone will be a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of Yahweh that He has spoken with us. Therefore it will be a witness against you so that you will not deny God. After that Joshua let the people go, each to his inheritance" (vs. 25-28). These verses tell us first of all about the covenant Joshua made, secondly about the book he wrote or had someone else write, and thirdly about the stone he set up.

(1) In verse 25a we read that Joshua made a covenant for the people. Here our attention is drawn to the important position occupied by Joshua. He occupied the office of God's authorized representative among the Israelites, as Moses had done before him. Therefore he had the right, in God's name, to lay on Israel anew the obligations of the Horeb covenant.

This is what is meant by the statement that Joshua established "statutes and ordinances." He subjected Israel to God's demands when the covenant was renewed. Earlier we saw that the phrase "statutes and ordinances" is a broader description of what is involved in the single word commandment (mitsvah), which is a synonym of the word covenant in the teaching of Moses (Deuteronomy).

(2) In verse 26a we read that Joshua "w e these words in a book of the torah of God." This sort of thing was customary in ancient times. The covenant ceremony would not have achieved a proper conclusion if the agreement made had not been written down. That's also why the preservation of the
Moses gave his song and the book of his torah to the priests for safekeeping. No doubt this is also what happened with Joshua's document, which may well be why it is called a "book of the torah of God." It was not an everyday writing but writing from God (via Joshua), writings about God that was kept in God's presence.

(3) Finally, Joshua set up a stone (vs. 26b-27). From these verses we see that Shechem must already have been an ancient holy place in Joshua's time. Otherwise there would not have been any allah or elah, that is, a large and stately oak or terebinth tree, there. Such trees grow very slowly and can become very, very old. The place might well have become holy centuries before, when Abraham erected an altar there to the one true God, the God who would later allow Israel to call Him Yahweh (Gen. 12:6-7; Ex. 3). The term holy place should not make us think in terms of a building. A building would not fit in here, for we read that the tree stood in the holy place—not near it. Thus it is enough to think in terms of an open area under a stately oak tree. The author presupposes that the place was already known as a mizdash, a holy place of Yahweh.

Here a stone is set up as "a witness against us" (vs. 27). When Joshua used such language, he spoke as an Israelite among Israelites. But when he later spoke of "a witness against you, he spoke in a different capacity as Yahweh's authorized representative.

Earlier we read about "witnesses" to the making or renewing of a covenant (Deut. 4:26; 31:26). This stone would warn Israel in the future against honoring other gods and would condemn the people if they fell into this sin despite the warning. There is no further meaning to find in this ceremony in which a stone was erected. We have no reason to suppose, for example, that this stone set up at Shechem was inscribed with the text of the renewed covenant. Such a thing could have been done, of course, but the Bible says nothing about it. A written record of the covenant had already been made "in a book [or tablet] of the torah [instruction] of God."

Ch. 64: The God of History

When we compare chapters 23 and 24 of Joshua, we see that Joshua 23 inspires us to look ahead. We saw that the promise God gives to us, as believers of the new dispensation, is not limited to a certain land (Palestine) but is really a threefold promise. The first two elements in that promise are already ours in part right now, i.e. justification and regeneration. But the promise will not be fulfilled fully until the Lord's return, when the element of sanctification will also be realized completely through the resurrection of the flesh and eternal life on the new earth.

Joshua 24 is not a contrast with any of this, of course, not at all. Yet when we read this chapter, we cannot help but be struck by the important place it gives to the historical prologue. This reminds us that although we Christians, just like the ancient Israelites, stand before God with empty hands, we do have a glorious history behind us, a history full to overflowing with the benefits God has showered on
our forefathers. Unfortunately, however, we cannot say that our eyes are always open to this history, as we see from the following considerations.

First of all, think of the abstract way we Christians have of speaking about God. How rarely do we think of Him historically! An abstract God is much too tame—not a God one could really call on in time of need or a God one would learn to fear. When a man like Samuel talked about God, he referred to His tsidegoth, His righteous deeds, His deeds of redemption in the past (I Sam. 12:7), which are through and through historical. There is no better way of speaking about our heavenly Father than to talk about His works at length. Through such an approach we stay far away from dangerous Gnostic fantasies that seek to tell us all sorts of strange things about God as a "being."

Take the songs that Christians sing as another example. The Psalms are songs that stand within the historical framework of God’s concern with Israel in virtue of the Horeb covenant and even in virtue of the covenant made long before with Abraham. Yet these songs of the covenant have lost ground in the course of the centuries to hymns that focus on "Jesus and the soul," hymns that make scant reference to God's works in creation and in the governance of all things, to the history of His people, or to His blessing and curses (covenant wrath) over Israel.

All too much, our eyes have been closed to history. Take baptism as another example. According to the instruction of all of Scripture, including the writings of the apostles and their followers, the children of the church are also holy, that is, called and destined to serve God, just as their parents are (I Cor. 1:2; 7:14). Hence when groups of pagans converted to the Christian faith, there was no reason to deny these people the baptism of their children. But in the Middle Ages children were not baptized as freely, not until they had made confession of their faith. Instead of following the Bible, which regards the children of believers as holy, the church operated with the fiction that the children it baptized had made confession of their faith through the so-called godfather and godmother. The fiction replaced the fact, the history of the matter. And this fiction has proved stubborn. In fact, it survives to this day and not just within the Roman Catholic Church.

The Roman Catholic Church has faced no more determined opposition than from the Anabaptists, yet the Anabaptists have been strikingly united with them on the question of baptism, for they also draw the logical consequence of the age-old fiction when they refuse to baptize babies and permit baptism only for those who have progressed so far that they can confess their faith with their own mouths. On the surface this looks like wonderful reformation, but in reality it testifies to the very same lack of insight into the historical connection God had created between believers and their seed.

The old Anabaptist idea, which is really a medieval Roman Catholic idea is still alive and flourishing. There are Protestant Christians who no longer insist on the baptism of children. Some of them wait for their children, to make their own decision in adult hood. Some of them do baptize their children, but say nothing about baptism as a covenant seal, with the result that the sacrament has no more real importance for them than it does for those who do not believe in infant baptism. Instead, attention is focused on the confession of faith. Fortunately, this approach still leaves room for a number of Biblical truths about God and our Savior. Yet, an ancient error is maintained. History is neglected; the historical prologue is forgotten. And Joshua 24, the chapter that introduces the rest of "the Prophets," is neglected.
"Still," someone might object, "Joshua 24 has an Old Testament character about it, and so do all the 'prophets.' We must remember that we live in the new dispensation.

"It's true that the Horeb covenant has "disappeared," and so have its renewals under Moses and Joshua. But the substance of the Law and the Prophets remains, namely, Christ and the obedience He has achieved for us. God's covenant with Abraham still applies to us today. Through the Spirit of Christ, that covenant also covered our forefathers. Through faith in Christ, they, too, became children of Abraham (Gal. 3:6-9, 14). Anyone who ignores the gospel of the ages today is threatened with the consuming fire of God's judgment. We are warned just by Moses and the Prophets but even more strongly by Christ's apostles (Rom. 11:20-1; Heb. 10:29; 12:25). Whenever we fail to honor God's historical rights, we are guilty of ma-al (injustice) over against God. Earlier we saw how heavily not just Achan but also Moses and Aaron were punished for this sin. Since even more grace has been shown us, how would we be punished? May Joshua 24 teach us to listen carefully to the numerous reminders of the historical prologue, which even the apostles later presented to their hearers.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Paul and his companions were not planning to bring the gospel to Philippi, but the Spirit of Jesus drove them there (Acts. 16:6-10). Paul later reminded the Philippians about that favor (eudokio) or good will of God (Phil. 1-2). He pointed out what fruit their faith had immediately born. Lydia had provided lodging for Paul, the jailer washed his bleeding back, and the church repeatedly gave him diaconal support (Acts 16:15, 33; Phil. 1:5; 2:12-13). God also gave the Christians in other parts of Europe such forefathers.

We may not act today as though we must start at the very beginning. We are descended from generations of people whom the Spirit has immersed in the bath of His Word. We are people who already stand in the light of the gospel's promises. Christian preaching may not leave such facts unreported. Any such neglect of the historical prologue represents an injustice to the honor of God, who sought us out a long time ago with his goodwill. What have we and our parents and grandparents done with that grace?

The apostle Paul went to work in the same way in his letter to the Ephesians. Those Christians, too, were reminded of the path along which the gospel came to them. That path went a long ways back in history, namely, all the way back to God's intention before "the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). What the apostle means by this expression is the time that preceded the events in which Israel was involved at Horeb (i.e. the patriarchal era). In other passages he refers to the same era (before Horeb) with the expression "ages ago" (II Tim. 1:9; Titus 1:2), referring to Abraham, to whom God made the promise that in him all the generations of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). Now, when Paul begins in Ephesians 1 with a historical prologue that reaches back into the distant past in which God's electing mercy already went out to the "Ephesians," he also forges ahead to the more recent past of his readers, the period in which they were dead and wandered in darkness, the period from which God called them to the light. He then appeals to them to "walk as children in the light" (Eph. 2:1; 5:8). People who are placed in the light of the gospel must stay in that light. The apostle Peter calls that confirming our call and election (II Pet. 1:10). Note the language he uses: not neglecting it but confirming it.
Joshua's appeal to Israel has the same thrust: make your choice for Yahweh (24:15, 22).

When Joshua made this appeal, he did not retract his historical prologue and place Israel's existence on a shaky foundation. The people at the meeting knew better, for they had learned from Moses that there was no other choice open to them. God had first loved and chosen Israel (Deut. 9:7). Well then, Israel was not to let its divine election slip away through neglect for that would lead to rejection. No, the elders to whom Joshua spoke these words must have understood that they and their descendants were being urged to respond to God's calling and election by remaining with Yahweh. That's what their "choosing Yahweh" meant. It was not an initiative on their part but a thankful clinging to the way on which God's gracious election had placed them long before. It was not a departure from the path of their calling and election but a remaining on that path.

Our Savior also asked His disciples to remain and abide in just this way (John 15:4). And His apostles followed Him in this, in turn setting an example for their followers and disciples.

May these examples (of Moses and Joshua and of Christ and His apostles) be followed by all Christian teachers and preachers. If they give proper priority to the historical prologue, their appeal to choose for the service of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will not flow from a well-meant but a-historical zeal for conversion. Instead they will ask for agreement with another apostolic word: "We love Him because He first loved us" (I John 4:19).

Ch. 65: Conclusion of Joshua and Transition to Judges (24:29-33)

The book of Joshua ends with a periscope in which we are told about 3 burials—the burials of Joshua, Joseph and Eleazar, in that order. But we should not assume that the Israelites waited with the burial of the bones of Joseph until Joshua and Eleazar were dead. Moreover, it is likely that Eleazar died and was buried before Joshua, for verse 33 could well be translated as follows: "Eleazar, the son of Aaron, had also died in the meantime, and he was buried on the hill of Phinehas, his son, which his son had received in the hill country of Ephraim."

The order followed in this report on the three burials, then, was not chronological, as far as we can tell. If a chronological order had been used, it would have begun with Joseph, then gone on to Eleazar, and ended with Joshua. Why did the author prefer a different order—Joshua, Joseph, and then Eleazar?

That the author should end his book with a periscope in which three of the five verses deal with Joshua should not surprise us, given the important place assigned to Joshua in this book. It was only natural for him to end this book with an account of the death of this "servant of Yahweh," who is now given the same title that Scripture gives to Moses (24:29. And the report on Joshua's burial at Timratserah (vs. 30) follows naturally upon the report of his death. The author senses that it is also fitting to go on and comment on the faithfulness of the elders, who were contemporaries of Joshua and who had left
Egypt as boys or young men under twenty years of age and had witnessed the great deeds of Yahweh in the following half century (vs. 31).

In this way the author of Joshua brought his book to a fitting conclusion, by way of a periscope that dealt with Joshua, the leading figure in his book, and at the same time he formed a transition to the book of Judges, in which the faithfulness of the elders and the conduct of Israel are discussed anew (2:7, 10). We have seen earlier that the authors of some of the Bible books had a remarkable way of linking the end of one historical book with the beginning of another and that this interconnection as valued highly among the Israelites. We kept this phenomenon in mind as we talked about the canonical position of Joshua 1:1-9.

Even this transitional passage was not enough for the author of Joshua. He wanted to underline his closing comments about Joshua. In fact, he underlined them twice--by appending to his report on Joshua's burial a similar report on the burials of Joseph and Eleazar.

He had good reasons for adding these two reports. The bones of the patriarch Joseph must have been committed to the earth long before Joshua's death, but only here is this fact noted. We can all sense the reason for this; Joseph was the man who had firmly believed that God would lead the Israelites out of Egypt one day (Gen. 50:25). His bones were carried along on the journey to the Promised Land (Ex. 13:19). Furthermore, the book of Joshua often mentions Eleazar in connection with the division of the land. He was one of the members of the commission entrusted with this work (19:51).

The purpose of this periscope about Joshua's burial, which is underlined by the report on the burials of Joseph and Eleazar, now comes to light clearly. It is the conclusion to a book that tells us about Israel's inheritance--how Israel entered that inheritance, divided it, and was called to preserve it.

At the same time it represents a transition to the book of Judges, a book that also tells us about Israel's inheritance—how that inheritance was neglected, threatened, squandered, and forsaken. That's why the conclusion of the book of Joshua devotes a periscope to the theme of Israel's inheritance.

This is a theme with two aspects, just as there are always two aspects involved in inheritance. Inheritance always involves two parties—the party that gives the inheritance and the party that receives (either to use it as intended or to misuse it).

This concluding periscope now fixes the attention of ancient Israel—and also our attention today—first of all on Yahweh, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and on the certainty of what He promises. Joseph's faith in God was not put to shame (Heb. 11:22), and neither was Joshua's faith or the faith of Eleazar and his son Phinehas.

May we also bury our dead in such trust and faith. And when the time comes for us to die in turn, may we obey the apostolic command: "Fix your hopes completely on the grace that will Lone day, given you through the revelation of Jesus Christ His appearance on the clouds" (1 Pet. 1:13). Christ is the heir to all things (Heb. 1:2).
Placing our hope and faith in God's promises is not just a privilege; it is a duty, an obligation, something we must do. We have not only been given the right to what God has promised us but must make use of that right in faith and must be sure not to neglect it.

God gave Israel a right to the land of Canaan—both through His promise and through the initial fulfillment of His promise.

For Israel, the realization of that promise was not a matter of a privilege but an obligation. Israel had a duty to claim what God had promised.

Israel was reminded of this right and duty through the remarkable combination of the three burials reported at the end of the book of Joshua.

The idea of a connection between burials and rights should not strike us as strange. Even for someone who had the means, a burial would not take place automatically. Abraham had to purchase the right to bury Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. It is generally accepted that what is described for us in Genesis 23 is the process one would customarily go through in buying land for such purposes. Since that time Abraham had a right to the cave—perhaps it was a double cave—along with the field and the trees. His descendants could exercise that right as well by using the cave, which they did (Gen. 49:29-30; 50:13). Let’s take another example. King Og also took action based on connection between burial and rights. During his lifetime he built himself a mausoleum in an area that he had taken from the Ammonites. He reasoned that he would be buried there as proof that he had a right to that land.

When we bear all of this in mind, we are not surprised at how the conclusion of the book of Joshua draws attention to Israel’s right to the property she held in Canaan. It does so three times. We read that Joshua was buried in the area assigned to him as his inheritance (nachalah) (vs. 30). This was coming to him by right. We also read that Joseph was buried in an area to which his father Jacob had already obtained rights by purchase and had bequeathed those rights to his son Joseph (vs. 32; Gen. 33:19; 48:22). Finally, we learn that Eleazar was buried in an area that had been given to his son Phinehas. The gift to Phinehas must have been made because of appreciation for what he had done for Israel. In this case, too, it was a matter of an honest reward for someone who had served faithfully.

Israel had a right to Canaan. Israel was permitted to claim the land promised to her, but she was also obliged to do so.

If The Israelites held back and the promise was not fulfilled, the cries of their fathers would point the finger of accusation at them. Those graves were reminders to trust in God, just as our graves are today, and at the same time they were reminders of God’s faithfulness to His promises.