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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 14: THE PROMISED LAND

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapter 6 “Joshua” in *Discovering the Bible*.

Read chapters 9 “Joshua,” and 14 “Rahab” in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders* when indicated below.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read the book of Joshua before reading the following background information (see Note 1).

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

After approximately forty years of wandering in the wilderness, caused by the disobedience of the generation that left Egypt, the people of Israel finally entered the land their ancestors had been promised. If the early date for the exodus is accepted (see course unit 11), this would have been around 1400 BC; if the later date of the exodus is correct, it would have occurred around 1240 BC. Indications for the likelihood of the later date include the fact that Egypt controlled Canaan between 1500-1250 BC and the first mention of Israel in Egyptian records, the Merneptah Stele (see Note 2), dates to around 1207 BC.

At that time, the land of Canaan was inhabited by six groups of people: the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites (Exodus 3:8). These peoples were not native to the area, and no one group controlled the land or claimed it as their own. The various groups lived in small city-states, each ruled by its own king, and each consisting of a fortified town or city and its immediate surrounding area.

While they were a mixed group of different peoples, the inhabitants of Canaan unfortunately shared one common trait – their moral depravity. Leviticus 18 tells us that God cast them out of the promised land due to that extreme sinfulness when he gave the area to the Israelites. The same chapter accuses the Canaanites of specific evil practices, including child sacrifice. Some modern doubters have challenged the likelihood that this practice existed in ancient Canaan and have claimed that there is no actual historical proof for it. Archaeological evidence of child sacrifice by the Canaanites has been found, however. Ancient reliefs carved in the Egyptian temples of Karnak and Luxor, around the time of the pharaoh Rameses II (the probable period of the exodus), actually show this abominable Canaanite practice. The reliefs depict Egyptian soldiers attacking Canaanite fortified cities of the type described in the book of Joshua, and the kings of the cities are pictured making fiery offerings to their gods over the dead bodies of children on the city walls (exactly as we find described in 2 Kings 3:27). The scholarly publication of these Egyptian scenes (see Note 3) concludes that these representations unquestionably depict Canaanite child sacrifice.

Despite the evils perpetrated by the Canaanites, many people today may read the book of Joshua and fear that what it describes is genocide committed against those people by the ancient Israelites. This is actually highly unlikely. First, we should notice that far more scriptures speak of driving the Canaanites out of the land than those that mention "destroying" them (see Exodus 23:27-30; 34:24; Numbers 21:32; 32:21; 33:50-56; Deuteronomy 4:38; 9:1; 11:23; 18:12; 19:1; Joshua 13:6; 14:12; 17:18; 23:5, 9; etc.). In some cases we are told that God would drive the Canaanites out using methods similar to the plagues he placed on Egypt (Exodus 23:27-28; Joshua 24:12; etc.).

But we should remember that the language sometimes used in these accounts – of the destruction of “everything that breathed,” or “men and women old and young” in certain cities – is typical of ancient Near Eastern victory announcements, even when fighting men, not civilians, were the individuals actually involved. This is less strange than it may seem at first. Today, if we tell friends that our favorite sports team recently "annihilated" or "destroyed" another team, everyone understands that we mean they won decisively. In a similar way, as scholars have long recognized, ancient Near Eastern audiences, hearing about annihilation, understood that it was more often than not simply hyperbole for victory.

Importantly, the Bible indicates this to be the case. After telling Israel to “drive out” and “destroy” the Canaanites, Moses commanded the Israelites not to marry them or worship with them (Deuteronomy 7:1-3), which would have been impossible if they were to be literally destroyed. In Joshua, after battles reporting there were no enemy survivors, we are told the enemy was still there (compare Joshua 10:1 with 15:8; etc.). And we are specifically told that many Canaanites remained in the land (Joshua 16;10; 17:12-13; etc.), showing that much of the language of destruction is metaphorical rather than literal.

Archaeology supports this understanding. Although the archaeology of the “conquest” of Canaan is complex, most of the archaeological evidence recovered does not indicate widespread destruction in the eras when the entry into the land might have occurred. Some cities (such as Lachish and Hazor) were clearly destroyed at the time of the later date for the conquest, but not most others (see Note 4). Actually, despite much excavation, until recently virtually no evidence of a “new” culture coming into the area and settling – as the Bible says the Hebrews did – had been discovered from either the earlier or later period.

But that situation has recently changed. A network of some three hundred previously unknown hilltop sites has been gradually brought to light by archaeological surveys conducted in Israel. These sites date to the period of the later date for Israelite entry into Canaan and are the kind of settlements one would expect of such an influx of people. This archaeological evidence fits well with the actual details of the biblical account: that few of the cities of Canaan were destroyed (Joshua 11:12), that the Israelites coexisted with the Canaanites to a great extent, and that even as late as the end of Joshua’s life, there were many areas of the promised land that remained to be settled (Joshua 13:1-8; Judges 1:1).



The name Israel in Egyptian hieroglyphs on the Merneptah Stele, c. 1207 BC. Image: Archival.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

Joshua 4:19 tells us that the people of Israel crossed the River Jordan and entered the promised land on the tenth day of the first month of the Hebrew calendar – in the spring of the year. Although the Jordan is usually a relatively small and peaceful river, the spring months bring runoff from the northern mountain ranges and the river can become a raging torrent. Crossing the Jordan at this time was no small challenge, and the text shows that the Israelites experienced it as a scaled-down version of the crossing of the Red Sea – cementing Joshua’s role as the successor of Moses.

The story is told in detail in Joshua 3:14-17. When the Israelites began to cross the Jordan, the waters flowing down toward the Dead Sea “piled up in a heap a great distance away, at a town called Adam.” Adam was about eighteen miles upstream (north) from where the Israelites crossed the river and was situated in an area where high mud cliffs rise directly next to the Jordan. Historical records show that mudslides frequently occur there – especially in the spring when the flooding waters undercut the cliffs, or when there are earth tremors. The mudslides that occur at Adam can temporarily dam up the Jordan, sometimes for hours, and such occasional blocking of the river has been recorded there since AD 1160 and as recently as 1927. Whether or not God used this natural phenomenon to allow Israel to enter the land does not matter – the timing was clearly providential and is clearly described as such in Joshua.

Two chapters are devoted to the taking of Jericho (Joshua 2 and 6), probably because the city was a powerful one that controlled access to the land, and its destruction was thus a significant victory that doubtless gave Israel a psychological advantage over the people of the whole area. The story of Rahab (see chapter 14 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*) is particularly important as it is one of a number of examples of the Israelites’ peaceful acceptance of Canaanites who capitulated (as opposed to killing them as would be expected had Israel been perpetrating genocide). When the Israelite armies eventually arrived at Jericho, the destruction of the massive walls of the city may well have been accomplished by an earthquake as is sometimes claimed, but once again, whether natural phenomena were involved or not, the timing of this event was clearly providential (Joshua 6:20).

The destruction of Ai recorded in Joshua 7-8 shows the skill of Joshua as a military tactician, but also shows an incident of unfaithfulness to God’s commands on the part of a single Israelite that had negative repercussions for the whole community. The incident teaches the stark lesson that, unfortunately, a wayward person can often do far more harm than one good person can accomplish for good.

Joshua 8:30-35 records the important renewal of the covenant that occurred when Joshua constructed an altar on the top of Mount Ebal, made sacrifices there, and wrote a copy of the law of Moses on stone tablets. Some archaeologists believe that the remains of this altar on Mount Ebal have been found. The structure is about twenty-five by thirty-five feet, with walls about five feet thick and nine feet high made of fieldstones, as Joshua describes. Importantly, the bones of sacrificed animals were found at the site along with pottery that dates back to c. 1200 BC. Then, with the people standing on Mount Ebal and the adjacent Mount Gerazim “Joshua read [out] all the words of the law – the blessings and the curses – just as it is written in the Book of the Law” (vs. 34).

The next event is found in Joshua 9 where the Hivite people of the city of Gibeon tricked the Israelites into making a peace treaty with them by wearing worn and patched clothes and shoes, having dry molded bread in their packs, and by saying they were from “a distant country.” Here again the Israelites had to learn a hard lesson regarding “checking the facts” and failing to ask God’s guidance in important matters.

Joshua 10 records the most clearly miraculous event of the period of the settlement: that of the sun “standing still” at noon while the Israelites routed the Amorite armies that were intent on destroying them. “The sun stopped in the middle of the sky and delayed going down about a full day. There has never been a day like it before or since, a day when the Lord listened to a human being” (Joshua 10:13-14). It is sometimes said in support of this story that using computer calculations scientists have discovered that a day is “missing” from history, but this is nothing more than an “urban myth.” In reality there is no certain way in which the event can be verified or disproved, but we should remember that God can accomplish things in many ways. Understanding how God could slow or stop the earth’s rotation without major problems may be difficult, but God could have made the sun and moon *appear* to be stationary, or could have performed the miracle in some other way that gave the Israelites the time or conditions they needed.

The mention of the capture and burning of Hazor (Joshua 11:10-11) is particularly important, as excavations at that site show that a tremendous conflagration destroyed the city’s Canaanite palace and temples around the time of the late date for Israelite entry into Canaan. Interestingly, the excavators found that cult statues in the burned temples had been purposefully decapitated and their hands and feet cut off. Most ancient societies carried off the gods of defeated peoples – both to take the enemy’s “power” away and to add it to their own. The Israelites were probably unique in not doing this, but they destroyed their enemy’s idols in a symbolic as well as a literal manner. This is, in fact, exactly how the Bible describes the destruction of the image of the pagan god Dagon in 1 Samuel 5:2-4.

The following chapters recount the eventual partitioning of the land of Canaan among the twelve tribes. As the Israelites were about to enter the promised land, the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh had asked permission to take the eastern side of the Jordan as their own area of inheritance. Joshua later gave the two and a half tribes permission to do this (Joshua 22:1-9), but when they settled in their own area they built what seemed to be a large altar next to the Jordan, on their own side of the river (Joshua 22:10). It was at this point that a potentially fatal misunderstanding occurred. The other tribes were immediately incensed at what appeared to be the rapid apostasy of the Transjordan tribes into their own system of worship rather than honoring the altar of Yahweh which was with the rest of the tribes. So “the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war” against the eastern two and a half tribes (Joshua 22:12). Fortunately, the disaster was narrowly averted (see chapter 10 in *Old Testament Leaders*).

In its closure, the book of Joshua recounts that the covenant with God was confirmed once again at Shechem, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim, which was now the location of the ark of the covenant, and that Joshua died at some point after this event.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

That the book of Joshua ends with the reconfirmation of the covenant at Shechem is not coincidental. While the two readings of the law and covenant renewals at Shechem (Joshua 8 and 24) may not be the most spectacular events described in the book, they are perhaps the most profound. The two events form the “bookends,” as it were, of Joshua – framing the book in a highly significant way.

The first covenant reconfirmation occurred directly after Israel conquered Jericho and Ai – the strategic entrances to the land. Before they proceeded further, Joshua led the Israelites to Shechem where he performed the covenant renewal, as we saw, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerazim (Joshua 8:30-35). This was the exact place where God had first promised the land to Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:6-7) and where Moses had commanded that the covenant was to be renewed when Israel arrived in the promised land (Deuteronomy 27-28).

It was there, between Mount Ebal on the north and Mount Gerizim on the south, that Joshua set the ark, and we are told that half the Israelites stood on one side of the ark – on Mount Ebal – and the other half stood on the ark's other side – on Mount Gerazim. In positioning the ark and the people in this way Joshua repeated exactly the covenant confirmation God made with Abraham in which God (symbolized by a burning torch) appeared between the two halves of a sacrificed animal (as we saw in Course Unit 7). In Joshua's reconfirmation, the ark itself represented God between the two halves of the "body" of Israel – the nation serving as a living sacrifice.

Most of the nations of the ancient world offered sacrifices to their gods, but only in Israel was the idea of sacrifice connected to how people should live. It was an attitude and an approach taught by God and which grows with Israel's story. In Egypt Moses told the pharaoh that Israel must be freed *to sacrifice to* their God (Exodus 8:8; etc.). In Joshua we see that the covenant reaffirmations at Shechem symbolized the next step in God's taking a people for himself – that his people were symbolically *to be a sacrifice to* him. The concept finds eventual New Testament expression in the words of the apostle Paul: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1).

A final detail of this story shows how carefully and symbolically the mind of God designed the covenant reaffirmation ceremony at Shechem. While modern Western societies think of geographic north as being the primary cardinal orientation (hence the "N" arrows on compasses and maps), the ancient Israelites saw the world from a different perspective. The primary cardinal orientation for the Hebrews was facing east rather than north. As a result, the Hebrew word for south is *yamin* or "right hand," and the Hebrew word for north is *smol* or "left hand." But in Hebrew *yamin* is also the word for "blessing" and *smol* – on the left hand – is often associated with evil or curses (which we still see in the New Testament – as in Matthew 25:31-46). This meant that the Israelites who stood to the north and south of the ark at Shechem well understood the blessing and cursing aspects of the covenant to which they agreed. Eventually, as the Bible shows, Israel repeatedly broke their covenant with God and reaped the punishment of which he had warned them. That punishment came, as the later prophets would repeatedly remind Israel, from nations to the *north* of Israel – the side of cursing that sadly, they had chosen.

In addition to the profound and thought-provoking lessons of the covenant found in Joshua, the book is a veritable mine of examples of the good traits of many of its characters – from Joshua's persistence (see chapter 9 in *Old Testament Leaders*) and Rahab's resourcefulness to Caleb's unflinching courage. There are few books in the Old Testament with so many worthwhile examples to study.

* Note 1: The book of Joshua is sometimes assailed by skeptics who claim the work is a fictional account not written until centuries after the events it purports to describe – perhaps sometime in the seventh century BC. However, a great many details of the book, such as the ancient names of the Canaanite city-states (Joshua 18:13; etc.) and the relative importance of those cities (Joshua 11:10) could not have been known in later times and certainly not as late as the seventh century.

*Note 2: The so-called "Berlin statue pedestal" inscription may be as much as two centuries earlier than the Merneptah Stele, but the claimed reading of "Israel" on the Berlin artifact is philologically unlikely.

* Note 3: A. Spalinger, "A Canaanite Ritual Found in Egyptian Reliefs," *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 8 [1978]:47-60.

* Note 4: Of the three cities that are said to have been completely burned by the Israelites, Jericho (level IV) was evidently destroyed in a violent and fiery manner, but different conclusions have been reached as to when this occurred, and excavation is complicated by significant erosion at this site. The burning of Hazor is clearly supported by evidence that the city's Canaanite palace and temples were destroyed by fire around the time of the late date for Israelite entry into Canaan. The situation with Ai is more complex, as it is uncertain which of a number of possible sites actually represents the ruins of that city.

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REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

Briefly describe the social organization of the peoples living in Canaan at the time of Israel's entry.

What are some of the clear indications that the Israelites did not perpetrate genocide against the Canaanites?

What were the three covenants that were made or renewed with God at Shechem?

Looking Below the Surface:

What similarities and differences do you see between the original covenant ceremony with Abraham, the covenant at Sinai, and the covenants described in the book of Joshua? Is there a development?

Everyday Applications:

Just as the Israelites' coming out of Egypt can be seen as a symbolic picture of coming out of sin, in what ways does the story of Israel's going into the promised land suggest parallels with the responsibilities of our Christian lives?

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