

## CONQUEST OF CANAAN

### Summary and Historical Background

One of the characteristics of Biblical history (in contrast to almost all other ancient Near Eastern historical writings) is that the failures as well as the successes of Israel's leaders are recorded. Joshua 9 is a classic example. Hardly any pharaoh or Babylonian king would record that he had been hoodwinked by his enemies! Yet the deception of Joshua is written down for all ages to learn.

Joshua's character is revealed as well by this humiliating situation with the Gibeonites as by his glorious military successes. We see Joshua, not only as a man of prowess, but also as a man of principle, even when that principle hurt him. He had two opportunities to renounce his oath with the Gibeonites. First, he could have renounced his oath right after the discovery of the Gibeonites' deception. Second, he could have ignored his responsibility when he received word of the Canaanites' attack on Gibeon. Yet he regarded the honor of the LORD's name more important than his own interests, and embarked on an exhausting march to Gibeon to maintain the covenant to which he swore. As it turned out, it was the beginning of a campaign that secured the southern half of Canaan for Israel (Josh 10).

Next, Joshua faced the most formidable foe of the war: the united armies of the north with their chariots (Josh 11). The chariot was the ancient counterpart of the modern-day tank. But Joshua, undaunted by the opposition, and unwavering in his faith, marched forth to defeat his enemies. This chapter ends the record of Israel's conquest of Canaan. With many of the major cities of Canaan conquered and ravaged, the individual tribes could begin to possess their own portions and root out the other cities that yet remained untouched.

Chapter 12 counts the two kings that were killed on the east side of the Jordan River and 31 kings that were killed in Canaan on the west side of the Jordan. That represented an impressive number of enemy leaders that no longer could oppose Israel, but it did not mean that all of their cities were captured. There still remained much work for the Israelites to do before they could possess the land.

### I. The Covenant with Gibeon — 9:1-27

#### A. Reaction of Canaanites — 9:1, 2

9:1, 2 — The response of the Canaanites to the victory of Joshua over Ai was to unite the whole area of Palestine (the hill country, the valleys or the Shephelah, and the Mediterranean Sea plain as far north as Lebanon) in a grand coalition against Joshua and Israel. Two reasons can be assigned for this coalition: (1) the Canaanites realized that they needed to be united to suppress this group before it defeated them one by one; and (2) the Canaanites probably hoped they could out-fight Israel, if no more miracles were performed by the LORD, just as the Amalekites and Canaanites had done 38 years before at Kadesh-barnea (Numbers 14:40-45).

#### B. Deception by Gibeon — 9:3-15

9:3-6 — The Gibeonites' response to Israel's victories was different. Their heart was not hardened by the LORD (cf. 11:20), but they took steps to join Israel, even as Rahab had done. Some information about Israel's covenant with the LORD had become known to them. The LORD declared that Israel could not make a treaty with any of the Canaanites living in the land, but it could make treaties with countries outside of Canaan (Deut 7:1-4; 20:10-18). Therefore, Gibeon decided to deceive Israel into thinking that they were outside of Canaan. They sent ambassadors to Israel that appeared to have taken a long journey. They equipped themselves with old sacks, old repaired wine bottles (probably by tying up the torn areas), old sandals, and old bread (some

translate "moldy" as "crumbling" - old bread does both). Using this deception, they asked for a covenant with Israel.

9:7 — Israel's leaders showed commendable caution; they questioned the evidences of the Gibeonites (seeing is not always what it appears to be).

9:8-13 — Gibeon again showed craftiness in their answer to Joshua's question. They related how much they had heard about the LORD's activity for Israel, but slyly omitted any reference to events of recent weeks (the Jordan crossing, and victories over Jericho and Ai). They told Israel that they had been in transit for some time, enough time for the bread to become moldy and their garments to become worn out. If the world doesn't try to force believers with opposition, it tries to seduce them with compromise. The compromises are not blatant and obvious, but are hidden. The world will often ask for recognition and reception by God's people whenever it thinks that it can gain its own ends thereby.

9:14-15 — Alas, Israel's leaders and Joshua fell for the strategies of the Gibeonites. They examined the provisions and made a covenant with Gibeon without consulting the LORD. It is always wise to seek God's guidance, even in apparently clear cases.

### **C. Revelation of the Deception — 9:16-27**

9:16-17 — The deception of Gibeon was not long a secret. Only three days were needed to expose their craft. Truly "a lying tongue is but for a moment" (Prov 12:19).

9:18-21 — The natural response of the congregation of Israel was complaint. How could they remain in a covenant with a people they were commanded to destroy? However, the oath of Israel's leaders protected Gibeon. The oath, though sworn under false pretenses, was sworn in the name of Jehovah. Violation of it would impugn the character of the LORD among the inhabitants of Canaan. Israel had to practice the truth of Ps 15:4.

9:22-27 — Gibeon did not entirely escape the consequences of her deception. The Gibeonites were made the lowest of slaves - water drawers and wood hewers. This curse particularly fulfills Gen 9:25, where Canaan was to be a "servant of servants," the very lowest kind of servant. This menial service was to be performed for both the people of Israel and the tabernacle of God.

## **II. The Campaign in Southern Canaan — 10:1-43**

10:1-2 — The covenant between Gibeon and Israel immediately caused great concern among the other Canaanites. Gibeon was a larger and more powerful city than Ai. Also, the area controlled by Gibeon was situated between the northern and southern parts of Canaan. Finally, it has been suggested that Gibeon may at one time have been a tributary to Jerusalem. The Canaanites, therefore, would have two or three reasons to suppress the Gibeonites: (1) a morale reason (to prevent other defections); (2) a military reason (to avoid being divided), and possibly (3) a revenge reason (to remind the Gibeonites that they owed their loyalties to them).

Gibeon was "as one of the royal cities." This phrase does not mean that Gibeon had a king; to the contrary it appears that it was ruled by elders (9:11).

10:3-5 — Adoni-zedek ("my lord is righteous"), who was king of Jerusalem, had a title that was similar to Melchizedek ("my king is righteous"). However, the name no longer carried a true spiritual concept. It was simply a dynastic title (like Windsor is the dynastic title of the kings of England). He certainly had no relationship to Jehovah! This king of Jerusalem immediately organized a coalition of other cities (Jarmuth, Lachish, Hebron, and Debir) to join with Jerusalem to attack Gibeon for its defection. The armies of these cities probably approached Gibeon by the main road that runs north from Jerusalem along the middle plateau in that region and then turned west to Gibeon. The short

route of these kings from Jerusalem was such that the Gibeonites probably had little warning of their coming, even though they must have anticipated it as a strong possibility.

10:6-7 — Gibeon immediately sent to Joshua to tell them of their great need. Joshua was faced with an intriguing opportunity. Even though he was not permitted to harm Gibeon directly, due to their covenant with that city, he could have allowed the Canaanites to do the work for him by not coming to Gibeon's rescue. But Joshua eschewed such a decision to be a dishonorable course. He remembered the covenant Israel made with Gibeon and immediately set out to aid that city in its war.

10:8 — The LORD honored Joshua's fidelity to an oath sworn in His name by giving him a gracious promise of victory. His foes were as good as defeated even before the battle had begun. The LORD honors those who keep their promises.

10:9-11 — However, the LORD's promise still demanded great effort from Joshua and his army. The march from Gilgal to Gibeon was about twenty-two miles, climbing up a grade of more than three thousand feet over rugged terrain at night, a very difficult march to accomplish in one night. There is evidence, however, that their way through the wilderness was lighted by the moon (the moon was still shining in the early morning at that same day (10:12)).

Joshua attacked in the morning and he was aided by the LORD, Who caused panic among the Canaanites and later rained hailstones upon them as they attempted to escape from the Israelites.

The escape route chosen by the Canaanites was down the valley of Aijalon towards the Mediterranean Sea and then they turned south toward their cities. This was the only route left to them. The Israelites controlled the route back to Jerusalem going east and then south; the Gibeonites apparently held the direct route going south; and so the Canaanites had to flee west down the valley past Beth-Horon and then south. This route was very rugged and often has been disastrous to retreating armies. A Roman army suffered rough treatment from Jews in the opening part of the First Jewish War on the very same road. In recent years, the Jews and Arabs have also suffered great losses in this rugged steep valley.

Two explanations can be advanced as to why the Canaanites and not the Israelites suffered from the hailstones. Obviously, the LORD can control hailstones to accomplish His purposes. Furthermore, the mountains reach a peak at Upper Beth-Horon and then descend rapidly for about two or three hundred feet. Any rough weather from the west would be concentrated on the ridge and on the seaward side. Furthermore, storms can come up quite quickly. The Canaanites who were running ahead of the Israelites must have run into the hailstones when they reached this area of their escape and many were killed.

10:12-14 — The Canaanites that survived the hailstones continued to flee to their cities. Joshua wanted to catch them while they still were demoralized and disorganized, so he prayed that the sun and moon might stand still. This miracle prolonged the daylight for about another day and allowed Israel to continue the pursuit of her enemies. Two possibilities can be used to explain this miracle. First, the LORD actually stopped the rotation of the earth for one day. This would be a first class miracle, much greater than stopping the flow of the Jordan or opening a way through the Red Sea. There would be many side effects from such an event, but the LORD is great enough to handle all these things without any trouble. However, many believe God usually does not use these kinds of miracles if there is another way of doing it. So they believe the LORD bent the light in a special way so that the battlefield remained sunlit for a whole day. Either is possible, but

the words actually speak of the sun standing still and not going down for a whole day and that there was no day like it before that time or after it.

10:16-27 — The pursuit caused the Canaanites to hide in caves and fortified cities if they could reach them. The five kings, who led their armies against Gibeon, tried to find a hiding place in a cave near Makkedah. However, they were discovered by Israel. The placing of the feet of the Israelite captains on the necks of the defeated kings symbolically suggested the subjection of the kings to Israel. The treatment of the kings was in accordance with the LORD's command: they were executed (Deut 7:1-4) because no Canaanite was to survive a battle; they were exposed by hanging them from a tree; and they were buried (Deut 21:22, 23) because no dead body was to be left in the open to defile the land.

10:28-35 — Joshua proceeded to besiege and conquer several important cities: Makkedah (near Azekah), Libnah, Lachish and Eglon. A relief force that came from Gezer to help Lachish was also defeated, though the city of Gezer was not captured.

10:36-39 — Hebron and Debir pose a problem. Here their conquest is ascribed to Joshua. But Joshua 14:6-15 and Judges 1:9-15 seem to place the conquest of these two cities well after this campaign. In fact, Judges seems to state that the capture was after Joshua's death. The problem is cleared up when one accepts two conquests of some of these cities. The campaign of Joshua was a general conquest of the land, but a thorough conquest was left up to the individual tribes. The campaign in the south and later in the north under Joshua provided temporary control of some of the cities. However, surviving Canaanites returned to their cities to rebuild them. Thus these cities had to be conquered again by the tribes which received that land. Hebron was one of these cities. Also, the first king of Hebron was killed at the cave near Makkedah (10:24-27), and he was immediately replaced by another king who also was conquered by Joshua (10:36-37).

10:40-43 — Joshua's victorious campaign is summarized here. He left nothing living in the towns he conquered. The strength of the Canaanites was broken. Such a campaign suggests to us that it is important to deal swiftly, energetically, and thoroughly in our spiritual conflicts. Let no known sin remain secure in its stronghold! Let no service for the LORD be pursued haphazardly!

The cause for this campaign was Joshua's covenant with the Gibeonite cities. God blessed Joshua for keeping his covenant with Gibeon. Joshua 9:1-2 seems to suggest that a grand coalition of all Palestine was forming against Joshua, but the disciplinary action against Gibeon by the southern cities backfired and brought them into conflict with Joshua prematurely, thus dividing the Canaanite forces and making it easier for Joshua to conquer the Canaanites in two campaigns instead of one.

### III. The Conquest of Northern Canaan — 11:1-23

11:1-5 — The Canaanites in the north, led by the king of Hazor, made another grand coalition against Joshua. Hazor was a huge city at that time, having two citadels - one enclosing 30 acres and the other over 200 acres. The larger citadel was chiefly a chariot parking lot.

The coalition got together a large army and a great many chariots, which were the equivalent of modern-day tanks. They made a camping ground at a commonly agreed place (showing advanced planning), namely, at the waters of Merom. Two identifications are suggested for the waters of Merom: (1) the Huleh Lake (about ten miles north of the Lake of Galilee); and (2) a town called Merom, about ten miles east of the Huleh Lake.

11:6 — The LORD once again appeared to Joshua just before the battle and encouraged him. Even the great armament they had prepared would be worthless, for the Lord had delivered them into Joshua's hand. Two specific instructions are added: Joshua was to hock (cut the hamstrings of the

horses) and to burn the chariots. Such an injunction was in harmony with Deut 17:16. They were to continue to trust the LORD, not military armaments that they might capture.

11:7-9 — Human and divine activity are seen working together once again (cf. Phil 2:12, 13). Joshua launched a sudden surprise attack. The chariots evidently were caught in a position where they had limited use, either in the swamps of Lake Huleh, or on the 4,000 foot elevation of Merom. There apparently was no room for the chariots to maneuver as a result of the sudden attack. The LORD also acted (the specifics are not mentioned) and delivered the enemy into Joshua's hand. The Canaanites fled in two directions: northwest to Sidon, and northeast to Mizpeh (which is probably near Mt. Hermon). Not every Canaanite was killed, but all who remained in the area were killed. Some escaped.

11:10-13 — Joshua captured all the cities of the coalition, but Hazor was the only one that was burned with fire. This limitation of burning only Hazor must apply only to the northern campaign, because Jericho also was burned with fire (6:24) and so was Ai (8:19-20). "In their strength" should be translated "on their mounds."

11:14-15 — Israel's obedience to the commands of the LORD was stressed. Nothing was left undone. Complete victory in our lives can only be gained by complete obedience.

11:18 — These campaigns took more than a few months. Comparing the 38 years of Israel's wilderness wanderings (Deut 2:14) with the 45 years added to Caleb's life from the time when the wanderings began (Josh 14:10), it is possible to account for seven years of war under Joshua in the promised land before the tribes were assigned their inheritances.

11:19-20 — The LORD's activity was seen in hardening the hearts of the Canaanites. They were not repentant of their sin, so there was no escape for them as had been allowed the Gibeonites. He prevented the Canaanites from seeking surrender to Joshua. The destruction of these unrepentant sinners helped to preserve the purity of Israel for a while.

11:21-23 — The feared Anakim people were also destroyed by Joshua - only those who lived in the coastal cities survived. When the general war ended, the land was ready to be distributed to the tribes.

The expression that Joshua took the whole land does not mean that every Canaanite city was destroyed. Joshua only destroyed the main centers of the Canaanites' power, but the smaller cities were to be captured by each tribe as it claimed its inheritance. The failure of the tribes to completely dispossess the Canaanites was due to Israel's later apostasy and disobedience.