



Joshua - Chapter Twenty Four

IV Joshua 22:1-24:33 - Serving the Lord in the Land (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Twenty Four

Towards the end of his life, Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem and led the people to renew their covenant with God with the same fervour he led them into war to take possession of the land. God's relationship with his people is defined by covenant. However, covenants can be forgotten, not by God, but by people. This is why covenant renewal is so important. Covenant renewal requires a reminder, a resolve, and a remembrance memorial.

The Book of Joshua ends with notification of the death and burial of both Joshua and the high priest Eleazar. In addition, the bones of Jacob that had been brought out of Egypt at the exodus were buried in Shechem just as Joseph had requested should happen.

IV.c Joshua 24:1-33 - Covenant Renewal at Shechem

Refer to the chapter summary above.

IV.c.i Joshua 24:1-28 - The Tribes Renew the Covenant

After gathering all the Israelites to Shechem, Joshua then proceeds to challenge them, letting them know what it means to serve the Lord. It means to forsake all other gods and wholeheartedly serve God only. Joshua leads Israel with his own resolve by committing himself and his house to serve God alone. Israel needed to understand the commitment that it was making. It needed to understand the consequences of disobedience to make a meaningful resolve to serve the Lord. After a reminder of all God's benefits there is no better course of action, but to resolve to serve him.

Joshua leads the congregation in the establishment of a remembrance or memorial. A stone was erected to be a witness and a reminder of their covenant renewal with God. A memorial is something visual that brings to mind something that has taken place. This stone would serve just that purpose.

¹ Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God.

Joshua 24:1

Shechem was the town that nestled between Mounts Gerizim and Ebal, where the blessings and curses were read out to the people. Refer to Joshua 8:30-33. This may or may not be part of the same farewell described in the previous chapter. No specific place of gathering is mentioned in Joshua Chapter 23, so it could have been part of this same meeting at Shechem.



View of Shechem

The archaeological record demonstrates that the city of Shechem was an important centre of pagan worship in the Middle Bronze Age (2100-1550 BC). Extensive excavations at the mound known as Tell Balatah have revealed a large town surrounded by an elaborate fortification system. Several large and imposing 'courtyard temples' have been discovered there. It is likely that the covenant renewal under Joshua took place in the excavated Fortress Temple at Shechem. It was originally constructed in the 17th Century BC, and it is perhaps the worship centre called El-berith in Judges 9:46.

² And Joshua said to all the people, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors — Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor — lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³ Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; ⁴ and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt. ⁵ Then I

sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. ⁶ When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷ When they cried out to the Lord, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness for a long time. ⁸ Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹ Then King Balak, son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰ but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand. ¹¹ When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. ¹² I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites; it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³ I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.

Joshua 24:2-13

Thus says the Lord. Joshua's utterance of these words further confirms his status as the true successor to Moses. Because of these words many commentators say that this is a work of prophecy. Yet, there is nothing predictive in this opening passage. Prophecy is not necessarily a prediction of the future. It can simply be a uniquely direct and spontaneous word from God.

Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. Before God challenges Israel, he reminds them of his faithfulness. A brief history lesson is given, which declares this. Notice what is missing from God's review of Israel's history: their failures are strangely omitted. In later years, God said: <<***for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more***>> (Jeremiah 31:34b). Here, he seems to have 'forgotten' Israel's past sin and their continuous complaints against him.

I sent the hornet ahead of you. Some interpreters understand this as a literal reference to divine intervention using insects. However, the text says the hornet

singular rather than hornets. Others take this as a reference to Egypt, since the hornet was a symbol of Lower Egypt, but no mention of Egypt is found here or in the other related narratives. Therefore it seems best to take this as a figurative expression, with hornet as a metaphor for the sting of fear that the Lord inflicts on his enemies: *<<I will send my terror ahead of you and throw into confusion every nation you encounter. I will make all your enemies turn their backs and run. I will send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way>>* (Exodus 23:27-28 NIV), where hornet, singular in Hebrew is paralleled in the preceding verse by ‘my terror.’ This term is also found in: *<<Moreover, the Lord your God will send the hornet among them until even the survivors who hide from you have perished>>* (Deuteronomy 7:20 NIV). The focus in all three contexts where hornet appears is on the Lord’s driving out Israel’s enemies.

¹⁴ ‘Now therefore revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord

Joshua 24:14

Against the backdrop of the Lord’s faithfulness in fulfilling all his good promises, Israel is called to **fear or revere the Lord**, a technical expression connoting not simply fear but reverence and true devotion, **and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness**: *<<Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity. We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace>>* (2 Corinthians 1:12 NIV). Israel’s duty to serve or worship the Lord is the dominant theme in the final major section of the Book of Joshua. The word serve in Hebrew is ‘*abad*’ and occurs no fewer than sixteen times in Chapter 24 and an additional four times in the preceding two chapters.

¹⁵ Now if you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.’

Joshua 24:15

Choose this day whom you will serve. Joshua has urged the people to serve the Lord alone, and to put away the false gods (v.14). Now he makes his admonition even sharper: if it is evil in their eyes to serve the Lord, i.e. if they prefer not to be loyal to the one true God, the Lord alone, then they must choose between two different categories of false gods: their ancestral gods from Mesopotamia the origin of Abraham: *<<And Stephen replied: ‘Brothers and fathers, listen to me.*

The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, “Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you”>> (Acts 7:2-3), or the gods worshipped by the peoples they have dispossessed in Canaan.

But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Joshua exercises leadership by example, committing himself and his household to serving the Lord. Joshua was determined on this course no matter what anyone else thought. His relationship with God was not based on any man, but on the Lord alone, and he would serve God no matter what anyone else did. The people’s response was to decisively reject false gods and to serve <<*the Lord our God*>> (vv.16-17), which Israel did <<*all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua*>> (v.31), but which Israel failed to do in subsequent generations, as is tragically evidenced in the Book of Judges.

Inherent in Joshua’s declaration is that he would serve the Lord alone. He would not serve the Lord and someone or something else. There was one God in his life, and that God was the Lord.

¹⁶ Then the people answered, ‘Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods; ¹⁷ for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸ and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.’

Joshua 24:16-18

For it is the Lord our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Significantly, their declaration is based on God’s past dealings with them. How could they not serve such a great God?

Therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God. This is essentially the same attitude reflected by Jesus’ disciples in John 6:66-69, leading Simon Peter to declare: <<*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life*>>. If serving God sometimes seems hard, think of the alternatives.

¹⁹ But Joshua said to the people, ‘You cannot serve the Lord, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. ²⁰ If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.’

²¹ And the people said to Joshua, ‘No, we will serve the Lord!’

Joshua 24:19-21

You cannot serve the Lord. Joshua's point is surely not that the people are asked to do something impossible but rather that serving a holy and a jealous God cannot be done casually or without divine assistance. It is disconcerting that the people simply reassert their claim – No, we will serve the Lord! – rather than ask for further instruction or prayer: <<*The people of Israel said to Samuel, 'Do not cease to cry out to the Lord our God for us, and pray that he may save us from the hand of the Philistines'*>> (1 Samuel 7:8). This was the response Joshua wanted: a commitment, but made with full understanding of the consequences.

Joshua's warning that he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins is not to suggest that God is unforgiving, quite the contrary, but that he cannot condone apostasy, the point at issue in this context.

²² Then Joshua said to the people, 'You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.' And they said, 'We are witnesses.'²³ He said, 'Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.'

Joshua 24:22-23

You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord. The covenantal oath they have just made becomes their own responsibility alone. They have made the promise and they will know when if they fail to keep their word. The term witness carried with it legal obligation: <<*I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses*>> (Ruth 4:10), <<*You are my witnesses, says the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me*>> (Isaiah 43:10). Ultimately, though, God himself will be the witness: <<*They in their turn said to Jeremiah, 'May the Lord be a true and faithful witness against us if we do not act according to everything that the Lord your God sends us through you'*>> (Jeremiah 42:5), and: <<*You ask, 'Why does he not?' Because the Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant*>> (Malachi 2:14). The NT teaching is clear on this concept of making promises: <<*Let your word be "Yes, Yes" or "No, No"; anything more than this comes from the evil one*>> (Matthew 5:37), <<*For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not 'Yes and No'; but in him it is always 'Yes'*>> (2 Corinthians 1:19), and: <<*Above all, my beloved,*

do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation>> (James 5:12).

The mention of foreign gods makes the reader wonder how they could have been tolerated up to this point. Perhaps, as in vv.14-15, Joshua is referring to the inner motivations of their hearts.

²⁴ The people said to Joshua, 'The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey.'²⁵ So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

Joshua 24:24-25

The Lord our God we will serve, and him we will obey. The people make their promise just as their ancestors had done at Mount Sinai: <<*The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.'* Moses reported the words of the people to the Lord>> (Exodus 19:8). What sincerity and obedience will the following years reveal?

²⁶ Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord. ²⁷ Joshua said to all the people, 'See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God.'²⁸ So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

Joshua 24:26-28

Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God. The title the book of the law of God occurs elsewhere only at Nehemiah 8:18, where it is explicitly identified with <<*the book of the law of Moses*>> (Nehemiah 8:1), and <<*the book of the law*>> (Nehemiah 8:3). Those same titles are also found in reverse order in Joshua 1:8 and 8:31 respectively. It is likely that the book of the law of God in Joshua refers, not to additions Joshua makes to the Mosaic legislation, although Joshua is a likely source for Deuteronomy Chapter 34, the account of Moses' death, but to the particular covenant enacted by Joshua with the people in v.25, in which the people reaffirm their intention to be true to the Mosaic covenant. In that case the writing has not survived, except here in the Book of Joshua.

He took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord; this stone shall be a witness against us. This seventh monument in the land serves as a reminder of Israel's duty to serve the Lord, who fulfilled every promise

in bringing them into the land. Joshua required that the covenant be confirmed by the testimony of two witnesses, the people and the stone. Therefore, this was a binding covenant before God: <<***A single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of any crime or wrongdoing in connection with any offence that may be committed. Only on the evidence of two or three witnesses shall a charge be sustained***>> (Deuteronomy 19:15). Rededication to God can be a wonderful and powerful thing for any Christian as well. For more information on the stone monuments refer to the comments made on Joshua 4:20 and the chart in the supplementary material on the website.

IV.c.ii Joshua 24:29-33 - Death of Joshua and Eleazar

These final verses in the Book of Joshua summarise the deaths and burial of both Joshua and the high priest Eleazar. In addition, it makes note that the bones of Joseph, which had been carried all the way from Egypt since the time of the exodus: <<***And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, 'God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here'***>> (Exodus 13:19), were finally laid to rest in the Promised Land as Joseph had requested nearly five hundred years earlier.

²⁹ After these things Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died, being one hundred and ten years old. ³⁰ They buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-erah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

Joshua 24:29-30

Now at the end of his life, and for the first time, Joshua is called the servant of the Lord, an appellation Moses received at the end of his life: <<***Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord's command***>> (Deuteronomy 34:5), and by which he is often referred to in the Book of Joshua; refer also to the comment made on Joshua 1:1. Like Joseph before him in Genesis 50:26, Joshua is credited with a life span of one hundred and ten years, which was considered the ideal life span in Egypt throughout its three thousand year history from the Old Kingdom to the Hellenistic period.

³¹ Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that the Lord did for Israel.

Joshua 24:31

The statement that Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and of the elders of his generation seems encouraging at first glance. But upon reflection, it

is vaguely unsettling, as it allows that Israel's faithful service may be limited. What will happen in the next generation? The death of Joshua and his generation is recounted in Judges 2:6-15.

³² The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Joshua 24:32

The burial of the bones of Joseph at Shechem brings the Book of Joshua, and indeed, the patriarchal history to a fitting close. Joseph's final wish in Genesis 50:25 is granted, and all three aspects of God's promise to the patriarchs are, at least in part, fulfilled: Israel has become a great nation; it stands in blessed relationship to the Lord; and it has a land of its own. This is also mentioned in Hebrews 11:22 as an example of Joseph's faith.

³³ Eleazar son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of his son Phinehas, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim.

Joshua 24:33

Eleazar son of Aaron died. Given the prominence of Eleazar both in the Pentateuch and in the Book of Joshua, his death notice serves as one more sign of the passing of an era. Now Phinehas became high priest.