



Joshua - Chapter Nine

II Joshua 6:1-12:24 - Taking the Land (continues)

Summary of Chapter Nine

As did the sparing of the Canaanite prostitute Rahab with her family and their incorporation into Israel in Joshua 2:1-21 and 6:22-25, the present episode forces reflection on the divinely mandated complete destruction of the Canaanite nations, especially since the mandate explicitly states: <<*Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy*>> (Deuteronomy 7:2b). The rationale given in the Deuteronomy passage is that to spare and intermarry with Canaanites will: <<*turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods*>> (Deuteronomy 7:4a). Thus, the issue is one of religious loyalty to the true God rather than to other so-called gods. That both Rahab and the Gibeonites express belief in the power and supremacy of the Lord eases the tension created by their inclusion.

II.d Joshua 9:1-27 - The Gibeonites Save Themselves by Trickery

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ Now when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan in the hill country and in the lowland all along the coast of the Great Sea towards Lebanon – the Hittites, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites – heard of this, ² they gathered together with one accord to fight Joshua and Israel.

Joshua 9:1-2

Now when all the kings who were beyond the Jordan heard of this. When the Canaanite kings heard how the Lord delivered Jericho to Israel, they had reason to

be afraid. When they heard how the Lord gave them victory over Ai, they had even more reason to be afraid.

They gathered together with one accord to fight Joshua and Israel. This is a classic, frontal attack; they will try to defeat Israel on the field of battle, in head-to-head confrontation. They were superior in numbers and believed that brute force would win the day. They did not know that God had spoken: <<***Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan today, to go in and dispossess nations larger and mightier than you, great cities, fortified to the heavens, a strong and tall people, the offspring of the Anakim, whom you know. You have heard it said of them, ‘Who can stand up to the Anakim?’ Know then today that the Lord your God is the one who crosses over before you as a devouring fire; he will defeat them and subdue them before you, so that you may dispossess and destroy them quickly, as the Lord has promised you>>***

(Deuteronomy 9:1-3).

³ But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and to Ai, ⁴ they on their part acted with cunning: they went and prepared provisions, and took worn-out sacks for their donkeys, and wineskins, worn-out and torn and mended, ⁵ with worn-out, patched sandals on their feet, and worn-out clothes; and all their provisions were dry and mouldy.

Joshua 9:3-5

The identification of the city of **Gibeon** with el-Jib, a site 6 miles or 9.7 km northwest of Jerusalem, has been confirmed archæologically by the discovery of numerous jar handles inscribed with the name Gibeon.

They on their part acted with cunning. The Gibeonites will try to deceive Israel into making a peace treaty with them, although Israel was forbidden to make peace with any of the tribes of Canaan: <<***When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces>>***

(Exodus 23:23-24). The methods of deception used by the Gibeonites are then documented. They were clever, they misrepresented themselves, and they even gave false evidence of their deception, i.e. **worn-out sacks** and **wineskins**, old and **patched sandals**, and **dry and mouldy** bread that they claimed was fresh when their journey had commenced. Beyond their deceptive appearance, the Gibeonites simply lied. All their other devices simply lead to strengthen the deception offered.

Cunning, Hebrew *'ormah*, implies cleverness and calculation. The extra emphasis in saying they on their part underscores the comparison between Joshua and the Gibeonites; that is, just as Joshua had acted shrewdly to win at Ai, so the Gibeonites acted shrewdly for the sake of their survival.

Although it would be tempting to link the two accounts, the author does not use the same word for crafty or cunning as was used for the serpent in the Garden of Eden: <<Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God say, "You shall not eat from any tree in the garden"?'>> (Genesis 3:1). On that occasion the word used was *'arum*.

⁶ They went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the Israelites, 'We have come from a far country; so now make a treaty with us.'

Joshua 9:6

The Gibeonites claimed they came from a far country as grounds for Israel's making a treaty or covenant with them. This deception suggests awareness of the distinction Moses drew between cities inside and outside the Land of Promise in Deuteronomy 20:10-18.

⁷ But the Israelites said to the Hivites, 'Perhaps you live among us; then how can we make a treaty with you?' ⁸ They said to Joshua, 'We are your servants.' And Joshua said to them, 'Who are you? And where do you come from?' ⁹ They said to him, 'Your servants have come from a very far country, because of the name of the Lord your God; for we have heard a report of him, of all that he did in Egypt, ¹⁰ and of all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, King Sihon of Heshbon, and King Og of Bashan who lived in Ashtaroth. ¹¹ So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, "Take provisions in your hand for the journey; go to meet them, and say to them, 'We are your servants; come now, make a treaty with us.'" ¹² Here is our bread; it was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey, on the day we set out to come to you, but now, see, it is dry and mouldy; ¹³ these wineskins were new when we filled them, and see, they are burst; and these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey.'

Joshua 9:7-13

The Hivites are included in the virtually identical lists of Deuteronomy 20:17, those to be devoted to complete destruction, and Joshua 9:1-2, those determined to fight against Joshua and Israel. The Gibeonites may have represented a subset of a larger Hivite population in Canaan. The Hivites, often identified as Hurrians, appear to have been of Indo-European origin.

The comment perhaps you live among us indicates that the men of Israel were initially suspicious, but they nevertheless proceed without inquiring of the Lord.

Your servants have come from a very far country. Plainly, the Gibeonites lied to Israel. However, despite their lies, they have a proper admiration, fear of, and honour for the God of Israel.

Because of the name of the Lord your God; for we have heard a report of him shows that it is because God fights for Israel, they know it would be useless to oppose his people.

¹⁴ So the leaders partook of their provisions, and did not ask direction from the Lord. ¹⁵ And Joshua made peace with them, guaranteeing their lives by a treaty; and the leaders of the congregation swore an oath to them.

Joshua 9:14-15

So the leaders partook of their provisions. This shows that they trusted their senses instead of the Lord. 'Look at this bread. Feel and taste how stale it is. Surely, they must have come a long way.' They walked by sight, not by faith.

The notice that Israel did not ask direction from the Lord represents a rare instance of explicit commentary by the narrator. The Gibeonite deception was clever, and therefore powerful. However, the real problem was that Joshua and the leaders of Israel never sought the Lord: <<*But he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall inquire for him by the decision of the Urim before the Lord; at his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the Israelites with him, the whole congregation*>> (Numbers 27:21). While it helps explain how Israel was duped, it also constitutes a serious criticism of Israel's willingness to trust their own surface-level impressions while neglecting the insight that inquiring of the Lord could have offered. What would have happened if the Lord had revealed the Gibeonites' deception to Israel? This, of course, remains an open question; although Gibeon may have been spared on the basis of their acknowledgment of the Lord. Without directly criticising the Gibeonites, the narrator simply notes that they acted with cunning to escape God's judgement. A few verses later, however, the Gibeonites are cursed for their deception (vv.22-23).

And Joshua made peace with them, guaranteeing their lives by a treaty. Because they believed that the Gibeonites were from a distant land, they made the treaty with them. God allowed Israel to make treaties with distant nations, but not with the Canaanites.

¹⁶ But when three days had passed after they had made a treaty with them, they heard that they were their neighbours and were living among them. ¹⁷ So the Israelites set out and reached their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kiriath-jearim. ¹⁸ But the Israelites did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel. Then all the congregation murmured against the leaders. ¹⁹ But all the leaders said to all the congregation, 'We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we must not touch them. ²⁰ This is what we will do to them: We will let them live, so that wrath may not come upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them.' ²¹ The leaders said to them, 'Let them live.' So they became hewers of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation, as the leaders had decided concerning them.

Joshua 9:16-21

The leaders of the congregation had sworn. The right course of action in the case of wrongful or unlawful oaths involving action yet in the future, e.g. Jephthah's unwitting vow to sacrifice his daughter in Judges 11:30-40, is to repudiate the oath and to seek forgiveness for having made it: *<<Or when any of you utter aloud a rash oath for a bad or a good purpose, whatever people utter in an oath, and are unaware of it, when you come to know it, you shall in any of these be guilty. When you realise your guilt in any of these, you shall confess the sin that you have committed. And you shall bring to the Lord, as your penalty for the sin that you have committed, a female from the flock, a sheep or a goat, as a sin-offering; and the priest shall make atonement on your behalf for your sin>>* (Leviticus 5:4-6). However, oaths that establish a covenant relationship are of a different order and must be kept. Refer to Genesis 26:26-31, 1 Samuel 20:8, 2 Samuel 21:7 and Ezekiel 16:59-60.

The text does not state why all the congregation murmured against the leaders, but it may have been because the covenant with the Gibeonites prevented the congregation from destroying them, or, perhaps more selfishly, from despoiling them.

We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we must not touch them. The rulers of Israel were wise in not allowing one sin, the wiping out

of the Gibeonites, to follow another sin, i.e. making the oath without seeking the Lord, especially in light of public pressure to do otherwise. It is a mark of godliness to hold to an oath, even when it is difficult: *<<but who honour those who fear the Lord; who stand by their oath even to their hurt>>* (Psalm 15:4b). It is refreshing to see that going back on their word was not even really a possibility for the rulers of Israel. This was a simple matter, not even up for debate: we must not touch them.

Later, King Saul broke this vow to the Gibeonites and his sin brought famine upon Israel in the days of David: *<<Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord. The Lord said, 'There is blood-guilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death'>>* (2 Samuel 21:1).

²² Joshua summoned them, and said to them, 'Why did you deceive us, saying, "We are very far from you", while in fact you are living among us?' ²³ Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall always be slaves, hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.' ²⁴ They answered Joshua, 'Because it was told to your servants for a certainty that the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land before you; so we were in great fear for our lives because of you, and did this thing.' ²⁵ And now we are in your hand: do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us.'

Joshua 9:22-25

There is an interesting ambiguity in Joshua's words to the Gibeonite deceivers. They are pronounced cursed, to always be slaves. Specifically, they are to be hewers of wood and drawers of water, which were menial tasks in ancient societies. Yet, while v.21 states that these duties are to be carried out *<<for all the congregation>>*, Joshua assigns the Gibeonites more particularly to the house of my God and the summary statement in v.27 combines both the general and the particular statements. Joshua could not kill the Gibeonites, but he could control them by making them perpetual workers for the tabernacle service. Supplying wood and water for the extensive sacrificial system in Israel would indeed be hard work, but to be closely associated with the house of God should be construed as a blessing: *<<For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness>>* (Psalm 84:10).

Because it was told to your servants for a certainty that the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land. The people had clearly

heard what God had promised to Moses and they believed that God was powerful enough to do this. Therefore, they had come up with a plan that would save their nation and allow them to remain in the land, even as slaves.

Significantly, there seems to be no complaint from the Gibeonites. They simply say: And now we are in your hand: do as it seems good and right in your sight to do to us. Essentially, they were happy with the prospect of being incorporated into Israel, and by being made servants of the Lord, even if it was in menial service (if, indeed, it can be said there is such a thing).

What is there to say about the Gibeonites after this chapter?

- The Gibeonites became servants at the tabernacle, just as Joshua had commanded.
- Gibeon becomes a priestly city; the Ark of the Covenant stayed at Gibeon often in the days of David and Solomon (1 Chronicles 16:39-40 and 21:29).
- At least one of David's mighty men was a Gibeonite (1 Chronicles 12:4).
- God spoke to Solomon at Gibeon (1 Kings 3:4).
- Gibeonites were among those who rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem with Nehemiah (Nehemiah 3:7 and 7:25).

These are examples of the great things God can do with people who are sinners, but come to him in humility and love.

²⁶ This is what he did for them: he saved them from the Israelites; and they did not kill them. ²⁷ But on that day Joshua made them hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord, to continue to this day, in the place that he should choose.

Joshua 9:26-27

In the place that he should choose. During the time of the exodus, the wilderness years and the conquest of the Holy Land it was known that God would identify a place where the people were to come before him for the main festivals: <<***But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there, bringing there your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, your votive gifts, your freewill-offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks***>> (Deuteronomy 12:5-6) However, the specific identity was not revealed at that time. Shiloh appears to have served as Israel's central sanctuary from the time of Joshua: <<***Then the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them***>> (Joshua 18:1), until the fall of Shiloh on the eve of the monarchy: <<***When the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, 'Why has the Lord put***

us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies'>> (1 Samuel 4:3), <<He abandoned his dwelling at Shiloh, the tent where he dwelt among mortals>> (Psalm 78:60), and: <<Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel>> (Jeremiah 7:12). From the time of David and Solomon, Jerusalem served as the central sanctuary: <<It was told King David, 'The Lord has blessed the household of Obed-edom and all that belongs to him, because of the ark of God.' So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing; and when those who bore the ark of the Lord had gone six paces, he sacrificed an ox and a fatling>> (2 Samuel 6:12-13), and: <<The Lord said to him, 'I have heard your prayer and your plea, which you made before me; I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there for ever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time>> (1 Kings 9:3).