

The Covenant Renewed

Joshua 24

Introduction

As chapter 24 begins, an assembly of the entire nation is called by Joshua at Shechem, suggesting a formal covenant ceremony. Shechem holds historical significance, dating back to patriarchal times. The gathering includes representatives from all the tribes of Israel, indicating its importance. While the phrase "before God" may not necessarily mean the ark and tabernacle were physically present, the sacred associations of Shechem lend weight to the solemnity of the occasion. Some believe the language in this chapter may reflect elements of ancient suzerainty treaties,³⁷ although it only partially aligns with the typical treaty format. The chapter highlights the significance of Shechem as a sacred site and the unity of Israel under Joshua's leadership.

24.2-13: Historical Prologue

Joshua commenced his covenant renewal address by recounting the history of God's interactions with Israel, tracing back to the time of Abraham. He revisited Abraham's journey to Canaan, the birth of Isaac, and the descent of Jacob and his descendants into Egypt. Reflecting on significant events such as the plagues in Egypt, the crossing of the sea, and the subsequent preservation of Israel in the wilderness, Joshua underscored the enduring faithfulness of God throughout generations, recognizing that much of this history would be ancient to his audience, 24.2-7.

Transitioning from ancient history to more recent events, Joshua recounted victories and experiences familiar to his listeners. He highlighted the defeat of the Amorites and the fulfillment of Balaam's blessings instead of curses. Additionally, he reminded them of the conquest of Jericho and the ongoing campaign against the various ethnic groups inhabiting Canaan. Joshua emphasized God's intervention, symbolized by "the hornet," which facilitated Israel's victories over their enemies, leading to their current dwelling in cities they did not construct and enjoying the produce of vineyards and groves they did not plant, all as manifestations of God's unparalleled blessings upon them, 24.8-13.

24.14-24: Joshua's Exhortation and the People's Response

All of Joshua's preceding discourse culminated in a decisive challenge to the assembly:

Therefore, fear the LORD and worship him in sincerity and truth. Get rid of the gods your ancestors worshiped beyond the Euphrates River and in Egypt, and worship the LORD, Joshua 24.14.

Moving with *fear of the Lord* is an excellent way to encapsulate the attitude expected of those during Old Testament times. It is an attitude of awe and reverence which recognizes God as one's creator and savior. It should be given in sincerity and faithfulness, implicitly of truth and heart.

See the two specific actions:

1. The abandonment of the gods worshipped by their forefathers beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt. Some form of idolatry was also found among Israel during the wilderness journey, which suggests goat worship.³⁸
2. The exclusive service of God.

Joshua presented a clear choice: either serve God or choose other gods, be they ancient Mesopotamian deities or the newer gods encountered in Canaan. He boldly declared his commitment:



1 - Satyr Playing the Pipe

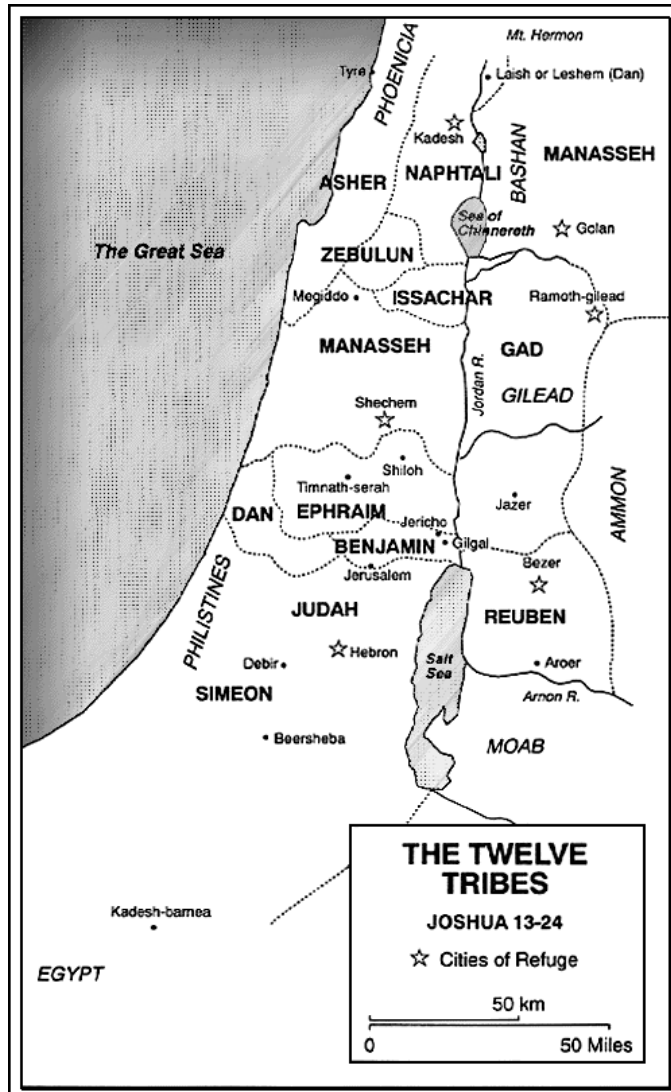
As for me and my family, we will worship the Lord, Joshua 24.15.

It was forbidden for the Israelites to show reverence to any other deity apart from the Lord. This was like how a vassal was not allowed to have any other overlord apart from the one to whom the treaty bound them. Anything resembling an alliance with other gods, whether in dress, sacrificial practices, or common mores, was also forbidden. Some things prohibited by law were not necessarily immoral, but their connection to the religion of foreign gods made them unusable for Israel.

In response to Joshua's call to fear and serve God sincerely, the people vehemently rejected any notion of disloyalty. They adamantly declared their commitment to Him, emphasizing their refusal to forsake Him, understanding the grave consequences of such abandonment as outlined in the covenant. Reflecting on their deliverance from Egypt, they express their desire to serve the God who rescued and preserved them in the wilderness. Recounting past blessings, including the expulsion of hostile peoples, they affirm their intent to remain loyal to God, not wavering in their devotion as Joshua had vowed. They resolve to serve Yahweh wholeheartedly, acknowledging Him as their God. Consequently, they pledged themselves anew to God's service, 24.16-18.

Joshua then raised the level of commitment, reminding them of God's holiness and jealousy. He warned of the consequences of turning to foreign gods, as disobedience would result in Yahweh's judgment upon them as a nation, turning blessings into curses. The weightiness of the moment is emphasized through two aspects of God's character: His holiness and His jealousy. God's *holiness* signifies His incomparability and unapproachable nature, while His *jealousy* reflects His zeal for maintaining His honor when His holiness is violated by sin. This zeal can manifest in punishment for evildoers or vindication for God's people. Joshua's warning underscores the seriousness of provoking God's jealousy, as He will not forgive transgressions and sins once His anger is aroused. The terms used for sin highlight the failure to meet God's standards and the intentional rebellion against Him. Overall, the passage stresses the gravity of sin and the necessity of God's grace for forgiveness.

The people respond affirmatively for the second time, pledging their loyalty to their covenant Lord. Despite the seriousness of Joshua's challenge, their response reflects a positive and hopeful outlook. They willingly take the role of witnesses, indicating their commitment to uphold the covenant and accept its consequences should they stray. This spirit of covenant adherence is seen as commendable,



2 - The Nation of Israel at the End of Joshua

akin to sentiments expressed in certain Psalms. By affirming their covenant obligation, the Israelites absolve God of responsibility for any future calamities, affirming His righteousness. Joshua reiterates the call to put away foreign gods, emphasizing the need for a negative removal of idols and a positive turning of the heart toward the Lord. Though no explicit action regarding idol removal is mentioned, the people decisively declare their readiness to serve the Lord and heed His voice, sealing their commitment with a solemn declaration.

24.25-28: The Covenant Document Recorded

Here again, the ancient treaty pattern is highlighted, focusing on recording the treaty text and the role of witnesses, both of which are essential elements. The covenant document is mentioned for the first time, indicating the formalization of the covenant made by Joshua with the people. The context suggests mutual agreement and obligation. The covenant laid down statutes and ordinances for Israel, encompassing ethical and ritual aspects, emphasizing the people's total commitment to their covenant Lord.

These statutes and ordinances served as guidelines for living by the principles of the covenant, reflecting the underlying spiritual principle of the Lord's redemption of His people. Overall, they constituted the rule by which the covenanting parties were to live.

Joshua recorded the covenant proceedings in a book, following a tradition observed among Israel's neighbors where a covenant document accompanied treaty-making. This book, solemnly called the "book of the law of God," symbolizes God's witness to the covenant and the people's presentation before Him. The Hebrew word for "law" also implies "direction" or "teaching," indicating the guidance it provides. Additionally, Joshua erected a large stone under an oak tree in the holy place of the Lord, a common practice in ancient ceremonies. This sacred location near Shechem had historical significance dating back to Abraham's time, emphasizing its spiritual importance.

24:29-33: Epilogue

The Book of Joshua concludes with four significant historical notes.

1. It records Joshua's death at the age of 110, indicating his title as the "servant of Yahweh" and his burial in his inheritance at Timnath-Serah in the hill country of Ephraim.
2. It mentions that Israel remained faithful to Yahweh throughout Joshua's lifetime and that of the elders who outlived him, likely spanning around seven years.
3. It highlights the burial of Joseph's bones, fulfilling his faith in God's land promise as his burial site became part of Joseph's inheritance.
4. It notes the passing of Eleazar, Joshua's lieutenant during the conquest, possibly marking the end of the period of elders who outlived Joshua. These concluding remarks provide closure to Joshua's leadership and the fulfillment of promises made to Israel's ancestors.

What's In This for Us?

Historical Reflection: Just as Joshua recounted Israel's history to remind them of God's faithfulness, we can reflect on our personal and spiritual histories to recognize God's provision, guidance, and blessings throughout our lives. This reflection can deepen our gratitude and strengthen our faith in God's continued faithfulness.

Exclusive Devotion: Joshua's call to forsake all other gods and serve the Lord exclusively challenges us to examine our hearts and allegiances. In our modern context, this means prioritizing God above all else in our lives and rejecting any idols or distractions that compete for our devotion, whether material possessions, worldly pursuits, or personal ambitions.

Fear of the Lord: Joshua emphasized the importance of fearing the Lord, encompassing awe, reverence, and obedience. For us today, this entails recognizing God's holiness, acknowledging His authority over our lives, and living by His commandments out of reverence for Him.

Solemn Commitment: Just as the Israelites solemnly committed themselves to the covenant with God, we are called to make a sincere and wholehearted commitment to follow Him. This commitment involves words and actions as we align our lives with God's will and purposes.

Recording God's Faithfulness: Like Joshua recording the covenant proceedings in a book, we can document and celebrate God's faithfulness through journals, testimonies, or other means of remembrance. This practice serves as a tangible reminder of God's faithfulness and encourages us to trust Him in all circumstances, knowing He is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Conclusion

Joshua 24 provides essential lessons for Christians. Through Joshua's appeal and the people's response, we see the importance of historical reflection, exclusive devotion to God, the fear of the Lord, solemn commitment, and recording God's faithfulness in our lives. Just as the Israelites were called to choose whom they would serve and commit themselves wholeheartedly to the covenant with God, we are also challenged to make intentional decisions to prioritize God in our lives, forsaking all other idols and

distractions. By reflecting on God's faithfulness in the past and committing ourselves to Him in the present, we can confidently face the future, knowing He is always faithful to His promises. Let us, therefore, echo Joshua's declaration: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord," and live each day with unwavering devotion to our covenant-keeping God.

Thought Questions for Discussion

1. Reflecting on Joshua's challenge to the Israelites, what modern-day "idols" can distract us from wholeheartedly serving God?
2. How does the historical context of Shechem and the covenant ceremony enhance our understanding of the significance of Joshua's address to the Israelites?
3. How can we apply Joshua's call to fear the Lord and serve Him in sincerity and truth in our daily lives?
4. What parallels can we draw between the covenant renewal ceremony in Joshua 24 and our commitment to God in contemporary worship settings?
5. Discuss the implications of God's holiness and jealousy as highlighted in Joshua's appeal to the Israelites. How do these attributes shape our understanding of God's character today?
6. How does the concept of covenant adherence and witness-bearing resonate with our responsibility as Christians to uphold our faith in today's society?
7. What lessons can we learn from the Israelites' affirmation of loyalty to God, particularly in their rejection of idolatry and commitment to exclusive worship?
8. Consider the significance of Joshua recording the covenant in a book and erecting a stone as a memorial. How can we similarly commemorate God's faithfulness in our lives?
9. Reflect on the epilogue of Joshua, which highlights the faithfulness of God and the passing of leaders like Joshua and Eleazar. How does this perspective inform our understanding of God's sovereignty and provision?

10. How can the lessons from Joshua 24 inspire us to live lives of unwavering faith and commitment to God amid life's challenges and uncertainties?

³⁷ On Suzerainty treaties, Woudstra (p. 340) writes These treaties date from the second and the first millennia BC. Scholarly debate continues the question of which kind most closely resembles the biblical materials. The treaties referred to usually follow a fixed format, which includes the following elements: 1. preamble (corresponding in this case to 24:2); 2. historical prologue (vv. 2–13); 3. stipulations (vv. 14–15, followed in 16–25 by the people's response); 4a. Deposition of the treaty text (v. 26); 4b. public reading of the covenant document (no parallel in ch. 24); 5. witnesses (v. 27; cf. also v. 22; in pagan treaties, the witnesses were the contracting parties' gods, so naturally, this could find no exact correspondence among Israel); 6. curses and blessings (implicit in vv. 19–20).

³⁸ "They must no longer offer their sacrifices to the goat-demons that they have prostituted themselves with. This will be a permanent statute for them throughout their generations," Exodus 17:7. Many people in the ancient Near East believed that goat-demons lived in the wilderness. Jeroboam is said to have set up worship sites for golden calves and goat demons (2 Chronicles 11:15). Various factors, including the development of the Jewish religion and Persian and Egyptian influences, led to pronounced but variant demonic conceptions in early Judaism. They surround human beings in vast numbers, attack them at night and steal whatever is not fastened or sealed. See Janowski, B. "Satyrs." *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. Leiden; Boston; Köln; (Janowski 1999) Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999, p. 733.

Works Cited

- Bratcher, Robert G., and Barclay Moon Newman. "A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Joshua." *UBS Handbook Series*. London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1983.
- David M. Howard, Jr. "Joshua." *The New American Commentary* (Broadman & Holman Publishers) 5 (1998): 61.
- Hess, Richard S. *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Janowski, B. "Satyrs." In *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, 733. Leiden; Boston; Koln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge; Brill: Eerdmans, 1999.
- Jr., David M. Howard. ""Three Days" in Joshua 1-3: Resolving a Chronological Conundrum." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41, no. 4 (December 1998): 539-550.
- Kotter, Wade R. "Gilgal (Place)." *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (Doubleday) 2 (1992): 1022.
- Smith, James E. *The Books of History*. Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995.
- Wiseman, D. J. ""In the Old Testament"." In *New Bible Dictionary*, by D. R. W. Wood, & I. Howard Marshall, 156. Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996.
- Woudstra, Marten H. *The Book of Joshua*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981.
- Ziese, Mark. "Joshua." In *The College Press NIV Commentary*, 161. Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 2008.