

CHAPTER IV

JOSHUA

Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee nor forsake thee. (Deuteronomy 31:6)

These were the words of Moses as he took leave of his beloved people. The time had come when the children of Israel must test the depth and firmness of their knowledge of their leader's God. These desert-trained young Israelites could not remember a day when they had not had Moses' patient loyalty and wisdom to lean on. They turned hopefully to Joshua of whom Moses had said, "He shall go over Jordan before thee."

As Moses had done years before Joshua sent men - only two this time - to explore the Promised Land. In the walled city of Jericho they narrowly escaped capture. They were forced to hide for three days among the mountains. When they returned to camp they brought glad tidings. The might of Israel's God was already known throughout the land of Canaan, how he had dried the waters of the Reed Sea, and had utterly destroyed Sihon and Og. The inhabitants of the land were faint with fear. The autumn planted grain was almost ready for harvest, and the arid days of summer would soon be upon them. It was time for Israel to claim the land.

Early one morning the disciplined congregation broke camp. With animals, tents and household goods they set out down the steep, winding road to the Jordan valley. Swollen by spring rains, the tumbling, muddy river swirled above the roots of willows and small aspens along its banks. No voice of protest or of fear was raised by the joyful people. For three days the children of Israel purified themselves according to their desert rituals. When at last they saw the ark of the covenant of the Lord carried by the priests toward the river they arose unhesitatingly and followed.

Some twenty kilometers to the north, where the swift river curves sharply, a landslide crashed across the riverbed. It imprisoned the Jordan, as it has done even in modern times. Down at the Jericho ford a few hours later, when the priests bearing the ark stepped out into the water the river, caught behind the landslide, ceased to flow. The difficult crossing, which the Israelites had faced so courageously, was but a walk on the stony riverbed. The descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob crossed over 'on dry land' to the Promised Land.

On that day the Lord magnified Joshua in the sight of all Israel; and they feared (revered) him, as they had feared Moses, all the days of his life. (Joshua 4:14)

A strong man from each tribe carried a stone from the riverbed. At their encampment on the Western shore the twelve stones were set up. An Egyptian or a Babylonian might have inscribed them with the glory of the moment. Joshua followed the local custom of simply arranging the natural stones so that the purposeful hand of man might be evident.

And he spake unto the children of Israel, saying, When your children shall ask their fathers in time to come, saying, What mean these stones? Then shall ye let your children know, saying,...the Lord your God dried up the waters of Jordan from before you, until you were passed over, as the Lord you God did to the Red (Reed) Sea, which he dried up from before us, until we were gone over: That all the people of the earth might know the hand of the Lord, that it is mighty: that ye might fear the Lord your God forever. (Joshua 4:21, 24)

JERICHO

Carefully, in Gilgal, the Israelites reviewed their conduct. They renewed the rite of circumcision which had been allowed to lapse in the desert wanderings. They relived the Passover, that last, awe-inspiring night when their parents had marched away from their tormented Egyptian masters. Then they turned their attention to the conquest of Canaan.

A short distance from Gilgal the walled city of Jericho stood watch over both the rugged, steep way up to the highlands and the valley road to the north. Jericho must therefore be the first target. Indeed, the city gates were already shut because of fear of this nation whose God had dried up the river Jordan before them.

...As I was with Moses, so I will be with thee: I will not fail thee nor forsake thee. (Joshua 1:5)

So God had promised Joshua. Although the plan that answered his prayer for guidance was puzzling, Joshua and the children of Israel followed through with firm confidence. Israel's men of war set out for Jericho. Without uttering a word in all their ranks they tramped around the city. Behind them marched seven priests, blowing continually on their raucous ram's horn trumpets. Behind these the ark was carried. The rest of the people followed in disciplined silence. Once around the city they marched. Then they returned to camp. The following day, and for a total of six days, this mysterious procession was repeated. The besieged Canaanites watched from their walls in fascinated terror. They were certain that some powerful magic spell was being cast upon them.

On the seventh day, the ominous marchers continued until they had encompassed the condemned city seven times. Suddenly the priests blew mightily on their horns and every Israelite shouted. Pebbles trembled at the vibration. Stones slipped in the wet, compacted rubble. The walls of Jericho fell down flat! Israel's soldiers raced forward.

Of the cities of these people, which the Lord thy God doth give thee for an inheritance, thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: ...That they teach you not to do after all their abominations, which they have done unto their gods;... (Deuteronomy 20:16, 18)

This was Moses' saying concerning the conquest. To the Semitic nations of those days such destruction seemed neither strange nor cruel. Destruction of the vanquished enemy was a fitting tribute to the god who had given the victory. Moses had set the matter on a higher plane. It was not the pleasing of Israel's God but the safeguarding of the mission made the measure necessary.

There was to be one exception in Jericho. A bit of red cloth hanging from the window of a certain house on the wall marked the home of Rahab. She was the woman whose courage and quick ingenuity had saved the two spies from certain capture. Rahab and her family were rescued and permitted to join the children of Israel. No other inhabitant of Jericho survived the slaughter and tremendous conflagration that marked Israel's victory.

FORBIDDEN RICHES

The road beyond to the city of Jebu-Salem (later called Jerusalem) was notoriously dangerous. It twisted up the steep hills that form the Western wall of the Jordan Valley. Ambushes could barely be guarded against. Joshua's scouts found a safer, easier route further north. It passed Ai and Bethel into the heart of the Canaanite highlands. As a sizable town, Ai could only have been a small outpost at that time.

"We only need a few thousand men to take Ai," counseled the scouts, "for they are few." Accordingly, three thousand men marched out to Ai, confident of victory. However the pagan forces of Ai defeated them soundly.

Consternation seized the Israelites when their beaten warriors straggled into camp. Joshua and the elders tore their garments in anguish. Joshua appealed to God:

Alas, O Lord God, wherefore hast thou at all brought this people over Jordan, to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? And the Lord said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? ...There is an accursed thing in the midst of thee, O Israel: thou canst not stand before thine enemies, until ye take away the accursed thing from among you. (Joshua 7:7,10,13)

Under Moses' forceful leadership, the children of Israel had been firmly welded into one nation. In their concept of themselves, the fault of one was the fault of all. The Israelite who was responsible for the "accursed thing" must be found and destroyed. He had brought grievous punishment upon them all.

Joshua summoned the twelve tribal heads to draw lots, not depending on chance, but confident of God's direction. The culprit was shown to be one of the tribe of Judah. The heads of the families of Judah drew, then the household heads. The lot fell on a man named Achan.

And Achan answered Joshua and said,... When I saw among the spoils (of Jericho) a goodly Babylonish garment, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold of fifty shekels weight, then I coveted them, and took them; and, behold, they are hid in the earth in the midst of my tent, and the silver under it. And Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan, the son of Zera, and the silver, and the garment, and the wedge of gold, and his sons, and his daughters, and his oxen, and his asses, and his sheep, and his tent, and all that he had:... And all Israel stoned him with stones, and burned them with fire, after they had stoned them with stones.
(Joshua 7:20,21,24,25)

Grieved, but purged of dishonesty and greed, Israel returned to the conquest of Ai and Bethel. Joshua himself led the strategic portion of the army. The two cities were sacked. The Amorites were surrounded and slain.

GIBEON

The fear of Israel and her powerful, invisible God traveled quickly throughout the land. Frantically, the many city-states schemed to save themselves. It was not long after the triumph at Ai that a strange group of men rode into the oasis camp at Gilgal. They were shabbily dressed, their sacks and wineskins torn and patched. "From a far country thy servants are come because of the name of the Lord thy God," they told the men of Israel. Some of the elders questioned them, suspicious of strangers in this unfamiliar country. The travelers explained:

This our bread we took hot for our provision out of our houses on the day we came forth to go unto you; but now, behold, it is dry and it is moldy: And these bottles of wine, which we filled, were new; and, behold, they be rent: and these our garments and our shoes are become old by reason of the very long journey.
(Joshua 9:12,13)

The matter was clear to the busy Israelite leaders. The conquest of Canaan was their goal. Peace with distant countries was advantageous. "Joshua made peace with them, and let them live" without taking time to ask counsel of the Lord.

Three days later, it came to light that these "ambassadors" were clever envoys from Gibeon, less than twenty kilometers beyond Bethel! This was a dilemma. Moses' command for total destruction on the one hand and on the other, a word that had been spoken, an alliance that could not be broken. Joshua redeemed the situation as best he could. He laid a curse on the Gibeonites and decreed that they must henceforth be hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation of Israel. These tasks they willingly accepted in exchange for their lives.

THE VALLEY OF AJALON

Unfortunately, the matter was far from ended. The city of Gibeon, with its three sister cities, had abandoned Canaan's cause and surrendered. Yet five other large city states quickly formed an avenging alliance and gathered a mighty army. The men of Gibeon cried to their new allies for help. Ready or not for a large-scale encounter Israel had no choice but to honor the treaty. However they remembered this time to consult the Lord. They were told to go with confidence.

Swiftly the warriors went up from Gilgal. They marched all night so that they might take the enemy by surprise. The unprepared Canaanites were routed. A violent hailstorm further decimated their ranks. Even so, daylight found the victory incomplete.

Then spake Joshua to the Lord ...in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. (Joshua 10:12)

Was it the sun's last rays, reflected from the high storm clouds that prolonged the day until moonlight? The age of logic and science had not yet dawned on the magic-oriented people of the Near East, and Israelite bards exulted for future generations,

And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. (Joshua 10:13)

Joshua's captains placed their feet upon the necks of the vanquished city kings, the universal sign of conquest, and he reminded them:

Fear not, nor be dismayed, be strong and of good courage: for thus shall the Lord do to all your enemies against whom ye fight. (Joshua 10:25)

The five kings were executed. Their cities, with the exception of Jebu-Salem, were destroyed with such fierce conflagration that ashes two and three feet deep remain to tell the story to twentieth century archaeologists.

Fear of these strange people, who fought with such zeal and confidence, raced throughout the land. North of Lake Chinnereth (later called Lake Galilee) alarmed city-states buried their petty differences and joined forces. Israel's vastly outnumbered foot soldiers hurried northward to match their light arrows, spears and swords, under their God, against the plunging horses and heavy chariots of the pagans. So swift was their attack that they took the gathering army completely by surprise. The victory was quickly theirs. They burned the chariots then put Hazor, the leading city, to the torch. They left no survivors, as Moses had commanded. But this time the children of Israel were permitted to enrich themselves with the spoil of the cities and the cattle.

DIVIDING THE LAND

So Israel laid claim to the Promised Land. The campaigns were carried out with wise strategy and with God-oriented courage. The well-to-do, well-armed Canaanites did not understand, and against this they had no adequate weapons. Nevertheless the conquest was a matter not of days but of years, and it was not complete. Some walled cities, among them JebuSalem on its rocky promontory, were bypassed. They were left independent for decades. In the coastal plain and the broad, fertile valley of Esdraelon the Canaanites remained unchallenged. However many of the varied tribes of Canaan had bowed to the yoke of servitude. It could at last be said that the land was subdued before Israel. God's word came to Joshua:

...Thou art old and stricken in years, and there remaineth yet very much land to be possessed. Now therefore divide this land for an inheritance unto the nine tribes, and the half tribe of Manasseh. (Joshua 13:1,7)

(Reuben and Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh had chosen to make their home in the grazing land east of Jordan.)

At Joshua's call, the tribal heads gathered at Shiloh, "on the east side of the highway that goeth up from Bethel to Shechem." There they established the ark, which they had brought up from Gilgal. The work of apportioning the land began.

This was no simple task! Judah's territory had already been agreed upon in Gilgal. Their land extended from south of Jebus-Salem southward beyond Beersheba, and from the Salt Sea (which is now called the Dead Sea) to the Mediterranean. However, Beersheba stood at the edge of the Negeb, the unfriendly land from which Israel had so recently emerged. The eighty kilometer shore of the Salt Sea was a wild, arid region of eroded cliffs, caves and ravines. It rose steeply to the low mountain ranges that ran north and south through the land. The western slopes of these mountains, wooded and well watered, merged with the coastal plain. But this plain was firmly in the hands of the Canaanites and the newly intruding Sea People, the Philistines. Austerity would always be Judah's lot.

Joseph was represented by the two tribes of his half Egyptian sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim was assigned certain hills and rich valleys northwest of Judah, from Jordan to the sea. Was the strict discipline and stern resolve of Moses' followers already crumbling? Descendants of Joseph immediately complained that there was not enough room in the forest-covered hills, and that the inhabitants of the valleys had chariots of iron. Joshua replied curtly that it was their task to cut down the trees on the hills, and to overcome the Canaanites in spite of their iron chariots.

However the partitioning of the land soon ground to a halt. So little was known of the Promised Land!

Joshua sent men out to pass through Canaan and write the description of the cities in a book. They brought them to him at Shiloh, and he cast lots for the tribes.

Benjamin and Dan would share Judah's northern border. Simeon would live in the southern area. North of Manasseh, near Lake Chinnereth, Issachar, Zebulun, Asher and Naphtali were clustered. Only the tribe of Levi, from whom the priests were usually drawn, received no block of land. Instead, certain cities and their surrounding fields were allotted to them within each of the other tribes. They, whose loyalty had been so thoroughly tested in the wilderness, would be the servants of the sanctuary and Israel's religious teachers.

The partition of the Promised Land, both to live in and to conquer, was finished at last. Joshua called the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, who had fought faithfully beside their kinsmen in Canaan. He earnestly bade them to take diligent heed to the law, to love the Lord their God and serve Him with all their heart and soul. Then he sent them homeward, with joy and high resolve, to their possessions east of Jordan.

COVENANT RENEWAL

Joshua summoned a great family reunion. The elders, the heads, the judges and the officers of all Israel came. He reviewed before them all the evidence that the children of Israel were indeed a chosen and protected group. Joshua called upon them all to renew the sacred covenant with their God,

...choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, (Euphrates) or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. And the people answered and said, ... the Lord our God, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, ... therefore will we also serve the Lord; for he is our God. And Joshua said unto the people, Ye are witnesses against yourselves that ye have chosen the Lord, to serve him. And they said, We are witnesses. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the

law of God, and took a great stone, and set it up there under an oak that was by the sanctuary of the Lord. And Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, this stone shall be a witness unto us; for it hath heard all the words of the Lord which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God. So Joshua let the people depart, every man unto his inheritance.

(Joshua 24:15-18, 22, 26-28)

Out into the Promised Land they went, these custodians of the unfolding knowledge of I Am. Soon they were to face one of the harshest tests of all.