

## A Taste of Conquest and Defeat

*Joshua, Judges*

### **Rahab**

The fortress of Jericho stood on a large and fertile plain just west of the Jordan and guarded the foot of the road that climbed steeply up the Judean hills. In order to gain control of Canaan, an army had to first take Jericho to reach the road, then conquer several more fortresses that guarded the high ground at the top of the road. From there an army could launch strikes to the south and north of Canaan while leaving a safe camp on the plains of Jericho.

Joshua knew all of this from his reconnaissance mission forty years earlier. But he didn't know how things stood in Jericho now, so he dispatched a pair of spies to reconnoiter. They slipped into the city during business hours, gathered some information, then (when it became clear that the city officials were on to them) convinced a prostitute named Rahab to hide them. A brothel was a good place for unfamiliar men to enter without attracting the neighbors' attention, and a prostitute was unlikely to be a fan of the city rulers.

The spies had guessed right: Rahab was happy to betray her city into Israel's hands. Her attitude doesn't seem callous when

we understand what she was rejecting and what she was choosing. Canaanite society was divided into sharp classes. At the top were "kings," actually lords of individual walled fortresses like Jericho. The kings owed allegiance to the Egyptian pharaoh, but Egypt was having internal troubles, so in practice Egypt left the kings free to run their territories ruthlessly.

Under each king was a class of nobles and another class of priests. In exchange for their support, the king gave them lands and status. Below these was about ninety-eight percent of the population. Slaves and tenant farmers worked the lands owned by the king, nobles, and priests. They lived in villages near the city. Free farmers and shepherds lived in villages farther from the city, but they paid taxes to the king and were subject to conscription for wars or building projects without pay. Crop failures might drive a family to sell its land or some of its children to the king or nobles, or a poor family might supplement its income by making its daughters prostitutes for the wealthy. Rahab probably sold her body because it was the only way for her family to survive in that system.

No wonder the Israelites considered her a good bet. Jericho was buzzing with the news that the God of these invaders had freed them from Egypt, led them through the desert, and defeated the Amorite kings. The upper classes were cringing in fear, but to Rahab, what she heard about the God of Israel inspired her with hope. She saw her chance to join a society whose God cared about oppressed slaves enough to liberate them and do mighty deeds for them. So she risked her life to save the spies in exchange for a promise that Israel would spare her family when they took the city.

### Another Dry Crossing

In Joshua's whole army, only he and Caleb had walked across the Reed Sea bed and seen the waters piled up on either side. So to prove to this new generation that He was the real God and able to keep His promises, Yahweh repeated that miracle at the Jordan River.

When the cavalcade halted at the edge of the gorge, they saw the green, fertile upper level at the other side. But the leaders

could see that below stretched a belt of lifeless gray clay, and below that was a thick jungle. At the bottom, a thousand yards down, the river tumbled by. It was early April, and the winter rains and melting mountain snows had swollen the Jordan to a torrent.

Alone, the priests picked up the poles carrying the ark of the covenant and trekked down through the jungle to the water's edge. As their feet touched the water, the river stopped flowing from somewhere upstream. Soon the riverbed was dry, and the priests carried the ark to the middle. Joshua signaled for the people to follow. It must have taken the rest of the day to get all of the children, donkeys, and flocks across.

This exercise proved two things. First, Yahweh was demonstrating that He had more power than Canaan's chief god, Baal, who was supposed to have more power than the god of sea and river. Second, Yahweh was showing that He, not Baal, had the rightful claim on the land. According to Near Eastern custom, one could tell if an accused person was guilty by throwing him into a river. If he didn't drown, the gods had declared him innocent. Anyone in Canaan or Israel would have understood Yahweh's jest: His throne was not drowned even in the time it took for a whole army to pass through the riverbed. Yahweh was thumbing His divine nose at Baal, just as He had at Egypt's gods.

### Jericho

Joshua still didn't know how he was going to take the fortress, so he hiked over to have a look for himself. As he approached, he met a man holding a drawn sword. Grimly, Joshua challenged him: "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

"Neither," the man retorted, "but as commander of the army of Yahweh I have now come."

Joshua's eyes widened. He had imagined that *he* was the commander of Yahweh's army, that this war was human against human. Israel was the good guys; everybody else was the bad guys. Sure, Yahweh was in charge, but . . .

And for the first time in more than forty years of involvement in this endeavor, Joshua's eyes were opened to the real situation. This was Yahweh's battle against the dark spiritual forces who

had usurped His earth. He had humiliated them in Egypt; now He was taking on the ones in Canaan. The Israelites were the good guys only because Yahweh had chosen them as His human agents and only to the extent that they followed His orders. Joshua was the human commander, but this being (whoever or whatever he was) was evidently his commanding officer. Joshua's nose hit the dirt.

The commander outlined Yahweh's orders. Once a day for six days Joshua was to march his men around Jericho with trumpets blaring. On the seventh they would march around it seven times, then the people would shout and the walls would collapse. Every living thing in the city must be killed (except Rahab's family), and all booty would be holy to Yahweh. The strange tactics would display that this was Yahweh's battle from first to last, so He alone would receive the spoils. As the first of Canaan's cities to fall and a center of worship for the moon god, Jericho would be a symbol of Yahweh's judgment on the whole evil culture and the spirits behind it.

The attack went just as Yahweh commanded, except for one detail. One soldier couldn't resist taking just a little of the plunder for himself. To let Israel know what He thought of such infractions, Yahweh withdrew His support in the next battle against the city of Ai. After a humiliating defeat, Israel's courage melted to mush, and Joshua spent all day on his face complaining to Yahweh. Finally Yahweh responded: "Stand up! What are you doing down on your face?" He explained the trouble and ordered the culprit and his whole household (who were presumably accomplices) stoned to death. Because Israel was a community, the corruption of one man defiled the whole group. If Israel wanted a God who accompanied her at every step and gave detailed instructions for every battle, then she must pay the high price of such intimacy with a Holy God. He intended to be stern at this early stage to convince the mob to take His holiness seriously.

### **Almost Victory**

For the next seven years, Israel did take this lesson seriously, and Joshua led Israel in a two-pronged strategy to break the northern

and southern Canaanite power bases. King after degenerate king fell with his nobles to Israelite swords. Not a few local peoples decided to throw their lot in with the newcomers. The city of Gibeon, for instance, was ruled by elders who hoped the Israelites might be more pleasant masters than the Canaanite overlords. They tricked Joshua into making a treaty with them and later became loyal servants of Yahweh.

The Israelite system should have attracted most of the underclasses of Canaan. Instead of a system that drove poor people to becoming slaves of their creditors, Yahweh's law said that each extended family must have its own plot of land, and that clans (groups of families) were responsible to take care of their own so that land would never be sold outside the clan. It could be rented for a period, but every fifty years it reverted to the original family. Yahweh cared about the private needs of little people in a way Canaan's gods never did. He even cared about the land: every seven years the land had to be left uncultivated (Israel didn't know that land needs to be left fallow periodically to reaccumulate soil nutrients, but Yahweh did).

Yet the Israelites let their golden opportunity slip away. After seven campaigns, the first stage of conquest was solidified. Joshua was around ninety years old, and it was time for the tribes to divide up the land and claim their inheritances without their aging general. But the people were getting tired. Caleb's family requested its portion and set off enthusiastically to wrest it from the enemy. The rest of Judah showed up for its allotment, but those clans were much less successful in taking their property because they trusted Yahweh less, so they decided to cut their losses and settle down among the Canaanites. Live and let live. The tribes of Joseph took the same attitude and even grumbled about the measly portion they were getting. They didn't like having to clear forests in the rocky hills, and they were afraid of the Canaanites on the fertile plains who had iron-clad chariots while Israel didn't know how to work iron. The Israelites refused to listen when Joshua told them not to fear chariots, so they settled in the hills to eke out a living and left the Canaanites to enjoy the plains. Finally, Joshua practically had to drag the other tribes to allot and move into their lands. Conquest was just too much work,

or too scary, and it was easier to tolerate Canaanite neighbors. One could even learn a few things from them.

This was just what Yahweh had warned against. Living as neighbors would lead soon enough to intermarriage, then intermingling of religions, and eventually to a debasing of Israel's morals. The drinking and whoring of Canaanite worship was attractive, and Israelite farmers would figure they could hedge their bets by placating Canaan's fertility gods *and* worshiping Yahweh. Pretty soon their kids wouldn't be sure whether Yahweh and Baal might not be different names for the same god.

It was this danger that had moved Yahweh to order the execution of all Canaanites and the destruction of all religious objects. When the Israelites faltered in this mission, Yahweh started leaving them to defeat. This was partly punishment and partly a test: if Israel wouldn't exterminate Canaan, could she resist its seduction?

This was Joshua's question just before his death. He held a spectacular covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem, a natural amphitheater flanked by two small mountains. Half the people stood on Mount Gerizim shouting the blessings for keeping the covenant, while the other half stood on Mount Ebal shouting the curses for breaking covenant. Joshua gave a stirring speech, exhorting the nation to choose whom it would serve: the pagan gods or Yahweh. The people swore to remain faithful to Yahweh and agreed that if they rebelled they deserved the curses. They cried, "Far be it from us to forsake [Yahweh] to serve other gods!" (Joshua 24:16).

But Joshua died, as did the leaders who had known him, and their successors were not cut from the same cloth. Less than fifty years after Joshua's death, Israel had degenerated so far that she looked very much like a poor imitation of Canaan huddling in the few pieces of land the Canaanites hadn't taken back.

### Judges

So began a sordid cycle. The people's love for Yahweh grew cold, and they practiced fertility religion in order to take by manipulation the prosperity that Yahweh would have given freely. Like a cuckolded husband, Yahweh would withdraw His favor and let

raiders plunder or enslave His people. When they saw they were losing every battle and were in danger of starving to death, they would cry out to Yahweh for help. Then Yahweh would forgive and raise up a military leader to liberate Israel. And when the people were comfortable again, they would forget Yahweh, go back to the debauched customs of their neighbors, and the cycle would repeat.

Moses had warned the people not to say when they grew rich, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deuteronomy 8:17). And three generations of Israelites had sworn they would never do this and had invited Yahweh to curse them if they did. So Yahweh held the children to the bargain.

The author of the book of Judges sums up the situation neatly: "In those days Israel had no king [not even Yahweh most of the time]; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25). What everyone saw fit to do got pretty disgusting. For instance, a Levite took a concubine, but she ran away from his shack in the backwoods of Ephraim and returned to her father's house in Bethlehem, a nice little village in Judah. So the Levite traveled to Bethlehem to fetch her back. On their way home, they stopped for the night in Gibeah, a town in Benjamin. They sat in the city square for hours before an old man noticed them and offered them his hospitality. (Hospitality was a sacred duty throughout the Near East. It was a matter of honor to offer it to travelers.) Sometime later the scum of the town banged on the host's door, demanding that he give the Levite over to them for gang homosexual rape. The only defense the Levite and his host could think of was to send the concubine out to the men, who raped and abused her until she died on the doorstep. The Levite carried her corpse home, then cut it into pieces and sent them to the elders of the other tribes. The tribes were scandalized, so they attacked Benjamin. Three days of slaughter and pillage followed. In the end, there weren't enough women left in Benjamin to carry on the tribe, and the other tribes refused to give wives to Benjamin, but they agreed to let the Benjaminites kidnap women from an Israelite town who hadn't shown up for the battle when called (Judges 20:1-21:24).

This was the kind of degeneracy Yahweh was trying to drive out of His people by letting raiders oppress them. But even when He raised up a deliverer, He had poor material to work with. Ehud, for instance, was an assassin. Jephthah was an outlaw bandit of confused ethics; he even offered his daughter as a blood sacrifice to Yahweh. Samson was more interested in sex than national liberation. And Gideon was a coward who tried every way he could think of to get out of having to lead Israel. But as with Jacob and Moses, Yahweh enjoyed working with losers because it would be obvious to anyone that He, not the human leader, deserved credit for the victory. Yahweh even told Gideon to send home all but 300 of the 32,000 troops who had gathered to drive out countless thousands of bandits.

In fact, in an age where women were commonly treated like the Levite's concubine and Jephthah's daughter, Israel's only really noble leader in several centuries was a woman. Deborah was a prophetess in Ephraim, and people came from far and wide to put before her their legal disputes. When a Canaanite king was oppressing the northern tribes, she asked a man named Barak to lead troops against the invaders. But Barak was afraid to go without Deborah. Because of his cowardice, Yahweh showed what He thought of Israel's men by allowing a housewife (Jael) to kill the Canaanite general.

### What About a King?

It was an impossible situation. The Canaanites were remultiplying, and new peoples were moving from across the Mediterranean and settling on the western shore of Palestine (Phoenicians in the north and Philistines in the south). While they raided from the west, nomads encroached from across the Jordan. Marauders made travel between tribes, and even between villages, perilous. Canaanites still held ground between tribal settlements. Even the geography was against Israel: hills and valleys dissected the region, especially cutting the northern tribes off from Judah and Simeon in the south. In theory Israel was a confederacy united under a common faith, gathering together three times a year around the tabernacle to celebrate their love for Yahweh. But in reality it was every clan for itself, with some villages so

remote that they scarcely remembered their brethren. In particular, Judah (which contained Simeon) was rarely involved in the battles and interests of the rest of Israel.

What could be done? Some Israelites wanted a king to unite the nation against her enemies. Gideon had refused to become king, saying that Yahweh ought to be Israel's King (Judges 8:23). His son Abimelech tried to make himself king by murdering his brothers and staging a coup, but Yahweh dealt with him. Moses had warned that a human king would bring Israel nothing but trouble if he were not totally committed to Yahweh's justice (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). Kings were expensive; they tended to finance grandiose wars, building projects, and lifestyles by taxing their people. But although local elders, prophets, and occasional guerrilla freedom fighters were cheaper, they were not keeping Israel from chaos. Something had to change.