

JOSHUA

Lesson 21 - Chapters 18, 19, and 20

We're going to move rather rapidly for a couple of chapters in Joshua, as what we get is another long list of towns, cities, and boundaries that describe the territories of each of the tribes of Israel. This must be done in words because map making was only in its most primitive stages in this era, and by all accounts the Hebrews did not yet engage in drawing maps on papyrus or animal hides.

However for us it is easier to see their tribal boundaries on a modern map than to try and visually put together this puzzle of a word picture of Joshua 18 and 19. Even so, a map can give us a very wrong impression of reality of those times if we don't grasp that while OVERALL boundaries were given to each territory, in fact only certain cities and villages within each territory actually came under the control or use of the particular tribe to which the lot assigned it. A more accurate map would look something like the measles or chicken pox; clusters of "spots" with vacant areas in between. The spots would represent the actual areas under Israeli control, and the vacant areas either under enemy control or simply a kind of no-man's land.

Another problem for us (and for the best Biblical scholars) is that many (if not most) of the places used to describe each territory are presently not identifiable with any certainty. As in the US where no city or town has a patent on it's own name and thus anywhere from several to scores of other cities and towns bear exactly the same name, so it was in Canaan. We'll find several Bethels, at least 3 known Gilgals, many Kadeshes, and so on. Some of these places are fairly easy to discern, others we have good hints as later names in different languages are obvious attempts to vocalize the Hebrew town name into another language (usually an Aramaic or Arabic dialect), and still others are completely lost to history. Therefore even our maps are but the best possible educated guesses and estimations from whatever the highest current level of scholarship might be.

We ended last week by finding out that the seat of government for Israel was moved from Gilgal (which was in an as yet unassigned territory) to Shiloh in the newly assigned territory of Ephraim. There the Wilderness Tabernacle (or what remained of it) was erected and the priesthood officiated over the sacrificial rituals; there Joshua ruled and was headquartered. Shiloh would remain the capital of the 12 tribes until the time of Eli (in the book of Samuel), a period of at least 3 centuries (probably).

Rashi says that the sacred tent took a whole other form at Shiloh; that it had no roof and it had a stone floor. Further that it doubled as both a sanctuary and housing for Joshua and his

predecessors; thus it was called by a number of names including “the tent”, “the house of the Lord”, and “the tent of Joseph” during this era. I cannot say if he is necessarily correct but with the tribes dispersed all over the Promised Land, each mostly concerned with day-to-day life and its own tribal affairs and well-being, its not hard to imagine that the magnificent tent structure that took so much effort and many people to construct it in the first place would now be somewhat neglected.

By all accounts when David got his hands on the Ark of Covenant around 1000 B.C., he put it in a very common tent. Why didn't he simply order the Wilderness Tabernacle to be moved to his headquarters? Why don't we hear of great protests by the Priests and Levites about the greatest sacred object in Israel's possession being moved around by common Israelites and put into the possession of a Judean king instead of the Levite High Priest? Almost certainly because the Wilderness Tabernacle was a ramshackle by now; the magnificent curtains and coverings would long ago have worn out and apparently were replaced by quick and easy coverings or not replaced at all. The Priesthood was not functioning as it should and with the advent of the office of king (beginning first with Saul and then David) priestly influence and authority was greatly weakened.

In fact it should not take much imagination to see that with the establishment of a king over Israel, it would take some time of wrestling for position between the priesthood and the royal office of king to figure out some kind of acceptable government structure that divided up duties and authority between them in a whole new way. Not that this is what God had intended or ordained for Israel, but it is simply what happens when mankind starts tinkering with God's plans to make them better fit OUR plans; and it's what happens when we beseech the Lord to allow us to have our way (which He will do at times, and which He did do in Israel's want of a king).

Let's begin today by reading Joshua 18 starting at verse 11.

RE-READ JOSHUA 18:11 – end

The verses just preceding these told us that Joshua got fed up with waiting for the remaining 7 tribes who had yet to inherit their land portion to get on the stick, accept it, and finish conquering it. So he ordered that each tribe put forth 3 men to represent it (a total of 21 men) who would each go to the general area that had been determined by the lots that Moses drew for them some years earlier and then “describe” that area. Basically that means they were to reconnoiter it, record the existing cities and villages and major landmarks and geographical features in detail, and then bring it back so that the leadership could make some decisions about fitting each of the 7 tribes into a more precise amount of space according to its current population. This was aided by Joshua and the High Priest Eleazar going before the Lord using lots. Going before the Lord means that something took place at the Tabernacle (and we'll see that phrase used in both the Old and New Testaments).

Notice how many times lots were drawn by now, and how much elasticity there was to territorial assignments depending on the most current conditions. As we move along to the end

of Joshua and then immediately into Judges we'll see that the territories of each tribe expanded, contracted, moved, or even disappeared. So all we can ever do to understand where a given territory for a given tribe lay is to take a snapshot in time, because this was not a static thing; it changed.

After the foray of the 21 men, the lots were drawn and the first lot that came out was for Benjamin. Note the phrase in verse 11 that it was divided up "according to their families". In other words, while we tend to think of the territory of Benjamin as just one monolithic hunk, that's NOT how it was thought of then. Rather families (clans) were given cities and associated villages, and they existed in a generally recognized area that (when added together) could roughly be called the territory of Benjamin.

The area set aside for the clans of Benjamin lay between the area of Ephraim and the area of Judah, like a buffer zone. Although it is not a large area it is prestigious as it contained Jericho and Jebus. Jebus, of course, would eventually be captured by David and be called the City of David and then later Jerusalem. By all rights Benjamin was the last born son of Jacob and should have traditionally received the least status; but being the first drawn of the lots (for the final 7 tribes), and then given the position of having borders contiguous with BOTH the Joseph and Judah tribes indicated a much higher than expected status in the Israel hierarchy. This elevated status was thoroughly understood by all the tribes of Israel and it would play a significant role in Israel's future.

The next tribal allotment went to Simeon, and we find this in the opening verses of Joshua chapter 19.

READ JOSHUA CHAPTER 19 all

Simeon is a very interesting case, I think. They were given territory WITHIN the territory of Judah. Now, while Judah would certainly have been unhappy with the giving up of some of its territory to Simeon, in reality this was more of a slap in the face to Simeon. Surrounded completely by Judah put Simeon in a very dependent situation. Essentially this was the fulfillment of a curse pronounced on Simeon by his own father, Jacob.

Turn your Bibles to Genesis 49.

READ GENESIS 49:1-7

Here we see that Levi and Simeon were lumped together and given essentially the same cursed future: they would be divided and scattered in the Promised Land. Yet the way this came about for those two tribes was very different.

Levi went on to become a VERY prestigious tribe, the priestly tribe. In fact they were elevated in such a way that they were not to even be considered a tribe of Israel any more; rather they would be set apart for full-time service to Yehoveh on Israel's behalf. Interestingly the "scattering" prophesy for Levi was fulfilled in that they received 48 cities with a meager

amount of pastureland immediately outside of each city. These 48 cities were not close together or connected in such a way as to form a “territory of Levi”. Rather they were dispersed all over Israel in all the tribal territories and while the cities were technically owned by the Levites in another sense they were only permitted to live there and control the city at the consent of the local tribe.

Simeon, on the other hand, was not scattered in the same way. At first glance there appears to be no scattering at all. But notice something about the description of the area they were given: there were NO described borders. Rather there is only a list of cities and villages given to them. Though they were all located in a rather concentrated area within Judah’s territory, nonetheless it was to be a weak confederation of cities that caused Simeon to decrease in power and population, and so the tribe went into a steady decline over the centuries. Eventually there was no territory of Simeon.

In fact we know that some of the clans of Simeon moved north and were absorbed into the various tribes of what would in time be known as the Northern Kingdom. Other clans and individual families threw their allegiance to Judah, and others yet to Benjamin. So indeed Jacob’s curse on Simeon played out by them ultimately being divided up among all the other tribes of Israel (for the most part).

We’ll move a little quicker, now. The 3rd lot fell out for Zebulun, and its territory was up north, at the northern end of the Jezreel Valley. So Zebulun had some good fertile territory at its disposal. Notice how the description of Zebulun again involves boundary lines and not just a city or village list (as it was for Simeon).

The fourth lot was for Issachar; Issachar is described by both cities and boundary lines and it, too, is in the north of Canaan.

The fifth lot described the territory of Asher. Notice verse 31 that is common to each of the pronouncements of each of the tribal territories that the territory was given “according to families” as opposed to just given over to the tribal prince to own and then allow the families to use at his pleasure. The clans and families all belong to a tribe, but the tribal leader is NOT a king who by definition owns everything in the land over which he reigns. Therefore the city or village given to a clan is OWNED by that clan (so to speak) and is not but a temporary assignment that their tribal chief can invalidate at his will (at least that’s how it was SUPPOSED to work!).

Asher received some very important and valuable territory as it included the Mediterranean Sea coast and so afforded an opportunity for ports and the accompanying trade business. Of course there was one little problem: Joshua had conquered NONE of the seacoast. So it was up to Asher to figure out how to take it.

Naftali received the 6th lot and this territory was located between Asher and the upper Jordan River region. It went well north to the northernmost boundary of what would have at that time been thought of as Canaan, and on its southern border laid Zebulun and Issachar. Later this region would be called the Galil, and still later the Galilee.

The tribe of Dan received the 7th and last lot, a sure sign of its status in the eyes of Yehoveh. As quickly as the territory is described, we are told in verse 47 that the territory was not large enough for them; and this fits well with the earlier census' that showed that Dan was among the largest tribes of Israel. Therefore they looked for more territory and thus went far to the north of Canaan and conquered a place called Leshem, changing its name to Dan.

Dan was in tough right away and they must have known it. Judah was forced to give up some it's western most towns, and Ephraim some its southern most towns in order to form the territory of Dan. Neither of the two most prestigious tribes of Israel would have liked that very much. Worse, the major unspoken-for area Dan was given was the central and southern Mediterranean Sea coast, which was currently occupied by the fierce, formidable, and technically advanced Sea Peoples (later called the Philistines). Much of the tribe of Dan elected to switch rather than fight and thus the interest of many of their clans in moving well north.

The capturing of Leshem probably seemed like a great thing for Dan, but it turned out to be a slippery slope. Pagans surrounded them and Dan quickly adopted their ways. The northern city/territory of Dan became a center of Israelite idolatry and Calf Worship was mixed in with worship of the God of Israel. You can visit the area to this day (a beautiful spot by the way), and see the capital city of Dan; but you can also see the paganism and that is truly a sad thing. Thus we'll see mention of Dan in the Bible reduced to near nothing over time (except when it was invoked as a curse), and he won't really re-enter Israel's wonderful prophetic future until late in the prophetic process.

In verse 49 Joshua finally receives his reward of an inheritance of land within the tribal boundaries of Ephraim. Why Ephraim when he has been the head of all Israel for many years? Because he is from the tribe of Ephraim and represents a powerful Ephraimite clan; and these tribal and clan links are deeply ingrained in Hebrew society. It is noteworthy that the section of Joshua concerning the dividing up of the Promised Land begins with one of the two scouts (Kalev, Caleb) that came back with a good report about the Land of Canaan (while Israel was still out in the Wilderness) getting the 1st inheritance of land given within the formal Promised Land; and the section ends with the other scout (Joshua) getting his inheritance after all the other tribes have received theirs'.

There are a couple of important principles being demonstrated in this arrangement: 1st and most important is that God completed what He said He'd do. And what He'd do is give Israel a land of it's own. 2nd is that Joshua did all that the Lord commanded. Joshua was obedient; he was a model leader for Israel to follow in the future. The verses on this subject were written in such a way to neither glorify the land given to Joshua as special or the best of all the Promised Land, nor to glorify the leader of Israel, Joshua. Rather it was to draw attention to the holy God of Israel who keeps His word always. Even though centuries may pass when it seems like God MUST have changed His mind; when earthly circumstances appear to have passed by any hope that what God said He'd do even makes any sense in the present reality; although men have given up and fallen away from God, what He said would happen WILL happen. A big "amen" is called for here!

But what else is called for is a repentance and renewal within both the Jewish and Christian communities to abandon doctrines that were long ago established under the premise that God HAS forgotten His promises; or perhaps HAS changed His mind. Put plainly, men have decided that God is either not faithful or not able to do what He has said He will do. How much we read particularly the older testament of the Bible and shake our heads in disgust at those faithless Israelites who committed idolatry, who joined themselves with the world, who mixed a little of this and a whole lot of that to form a religion that is not very recognizable from a Scriptural viewpoint, and who abandoned the principles of God in favor of new and more comfortable humanistic philosophies. Yet in most respects has the Church done much better? I've often said that the Judaism of Christ's era and the Christianity of our current era look like the two rails of a train track. They're separated but they follow exactly the same path, starting and ending at the same places. Where they began was purity, where they ended up was polluted.

Here's the thing: a large segment of our Jewish and gentile brothers and sisters in the faith believe its time to solve the Middle East and Israel problem by doing the one thing that God says must NOT be done: give up that land that He set apart for His people (land that we are watching Joshua's people fight for) to people who have no spiritual right to it. Many Jews and Christians see things as so radically changed from the time when the Scriptures were written that certainly we would be ignorant bumpkins to still believe that its instructions and prophecies remain valid.

And one of the reasons they believe this is because with all their hearts they are certain that with the birth of Christ the Lord threw the Bible away and wrote a new one that we call the New Testament. I am encouraged that you who are listening to this either already understand that no such thing took place, or are at least reconsidering this long-held Christian belief. Let us determine together to do what we can to return to our faith roots as best we can, with the direction and power of our Lord as our compass and sail, even if it means that our friends and families pull away from us for not following the crowd. As I have said to many folks, if the Lord can throw His promises away in the past, what's to say He won't do it again in the future? But I'm not concerned about it because He didn't, and He won't.

Let's move on to Joshua chapter 20. We'll read it next week; but before we do here is the gist of this chapter: now that the Land has been subdued (note that I did NOT say conquered) and the tribes have been allotted their territories, Yehoveh instructs Joshua that it is now time for the tribes to set aside the network of cities that will become known as the Levitical cities and some that will become the cities of refuge. There were to be 48 cities set aside for the Levities to live in. This was not to be a mixed population; it was to be for the Levites only, however no doubt some foreigners and some of the other Israelites lived there if there was a specific purpose or reason.

Out of these 48 cities 6 were to be designated as Sanctuary Cities, or cities of refuge: 3 on the west side of the Jordan, and 3 on the east side. There was also a provision for 3 more cities of refuge to be established if Israel spread out and conquered more territory and thus needed the extra sites of refuge.

Now these cities were to be strategically spread out in the Promised Land (and in the Trans-Jordan) so that a person who needed it could get there rapidly.

The instructions for cities of refuge were laid out while Moses was still in charge, when the Israelites were still in the Wilderness. So the first few verse of Joshua 20 are essentially a repeat of Numbers 35:9-29.

We are too short on time to read these verses this week, but we will next time.

I am fascinated with this concept of the cities of refuge. Most scholars see this simply as an ancient way of handling a situation of accidental or unintentional manslaying before there was strong central government and police forces to deal with it. So, the Hebrews merely adopted it. While there is an element of truth to that, I see something considerably deeper; I see a parallel with an obscure and mysterious place that the Bible calls Abraham's Bosom.

An often-asked question in the church is, "what happened to the righteous who died BEFORE the advent of Yeshua?" While I readily admit that I cannot be 100% certain of the answer, I believe the God-patterns are our best guide; it was much the same then as happens today, but with a notable difference: the advent of Yeshua. When a person dies today their spirit/soul is released from its corpse and it immediately goes to one of two places: Heaven or Hell. So there is a kind of judgment (or perhaps, better, determination) by the Lord that happens immediately upon our death now, as then.

Before Christ died for our sins the names for these two places in Hebrew literature translate to Abraham's Bosom and the Place of Torments. Abraham's Bosom was for the righteous dead; the Place of Torments for those who died in their sins, without righteousness. Those who followed Torah, who sought proper atonement by means of the sacrificial system when they sinned, and who trusted the God of Israel went to Abraham's Bosom, a kind of holding place of the righteous dead UNTIL something else occurred that would release them to go and be free in a permanent state of freedom and safety. But it seems that the only safety their souls had in Abraham's Bosom came at the price of being as captives there, even if it was a pleasant place.

There were a couple of caveats though (and in the name of time I'll not go back to everywhere in the Bible this is quoted, but I've covered this before so you can review it on your own). There were two main categories of sins defined in the Torah: unintentional (sometimes called inadvertent), and intentional sins. Now that does NOT necessarily mean accidental sins and on-purpose sins like it sounds. It more means lesser sins and greater sins; and more to the point forgivable sins and unforgivable sins. The unforgivable sins were few, and yet another idiom used for this category was high-handed sins. The New Testament labels the unforgivable sin as, "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit", a subject we won't debate today.

Here's the thing to understand: the sacrificial system ONLY had the ability to atone for the unintentional, or lesser, or forgivable sins (whichever of these terms you prefer). Therefore certain sins HAD no atonement available. One of these unforgivable (no sacrifice available) sins was murder; unjustifiable killing of a human being.

If a person committed an unintentional and therefore forgivable sin, they could repent in their hearts and follow the Levitical procedures of the proper sacrifice and be forgiven. If they died thereafter, they were righteous in God's eyes. But if they committed an intentional and therefore unforgivable sin then NO procedure could atone for them and they died in an unrighteous state. The spirit/soul of the former went to Abraham's Bosom, the latter to the Place of Torments.

When Jesus died we're told in Ephesians 4 that he went "up"; but before he went "up, he went down. In the Gospel of Luke we get the story of Abraham's Bosom and the Place of Torments that centers on Lazarus. And we're told that when Jesus went down he presented the Good News and let the captives there free.

Because of His death as the Son of God, as our Messiah, His blood atoned for the sin natures of the captives of Abraham's Bosom, and His Living Water attribute cleansed them so thoroughly that they were now able to go and be in the presence of God.

Look at the parallels with laws concerning the city of refuge. A person who commits a forgivable, unintentional sin (manslaughter) races to a place where he is held safe from being destroyed. However there is judge that determines if the killing that this person is responsible for is murder or not. If it is murder (an unforgivable sin), he's turned away. If it's not (a forgivable sin), he is let in. Atonement is made for him, and he is forgiven BUT he must remain captive there indefinitely if he wants to be safe. He raced to the city of refuge in the first place because the Kinsman Redeemer (or Blood Avenger) of the person who died had the legal right to take the life of the perpetrator in retribution even if the killing was accidental. But.....the Levitical city of refuge provided the ONLY place that was off limits to that Blood Avenger. If the perpetrator ever ventured out of the city of refuge, he became fair game.

Yet there is a strange unexplained provision in all this: once the High Priest of Israel dies THEN the perpetrator can leave the city of refuge and the Blood Avenger may no longer legally kill him. In fact if the Blood Avenger DID take revenge under those circumstances it would be murder on his part, an unforgivable sin. What has the High Priest dying have to do with anything? Why is the perpetrator of manslaughter let off the hook because the High Priest passed away? Well there's been lots of commentary among the Hebrew Sages and Rabbis about this subject and while there is no universal agreement (there rarely is on much of anything) the majority would agree that there is some mysterious unspoken kind of atonement that happens as a result of the High Priest's death, as illogical as it may seem.

Compare this to Abraham's Bosom and Yeshua. A man sins (a forgivable sin) and at death his soul races to the safety of Abraham's Bosom. He is more or less a prisoner there until something or someone releases him to complete safety and full forgiveness where the legal Blood Avenger can't destroy him. It was later in the Biblical times that the concept of Abraham's Bosom was developed. In those days they really didn't know what that release mechanism of the captives was from Abraham's Bosom; but we do now. Jesus is called our High Priest. When our High Priest died on the Cross one of the first things He did was to go to Abraham's Bosom and tell the captives there that they were no longer prisoners. They were no longer captives in an intermediate place; they could go home (to Heaven as it turns out)

without fear of retribution.

The cities of refuge were a picture and physical demonstration of the spiritual principle of Abraham's Bosom and Messiah and Heaven. It shows that if we die in our unrighteousness, we are already judged. If we die in righteousness we can go to a safe place (Heaven) without fear of retribution. The Evil One has been given permission to possess those who sin.....except for those who sin AND seek atonement in the Lord. But it took the death of our High Priest to make the ultimate safe destination open to mankind.

There was a kind of righteousness that these saints of old, pre-Yeshua, held that came from their trusting and their obedience to God's laws. But of itself it was insufficient to allow them to stand before God in His heavenly realm. It took another kind of righteousness, a higher and humanly unachievable kind of righteousness, Yeshua's righteousness, for that to occur. The saints of old had to go through a sort of two-step process, if you would; they had to trust God and obey Torah, and upon their death they were quickly ushered to a safe place away from Satan's clutches; but this place was NOT Heaven because something else had to happen for that to eventually become possible: the death of their (and our) spiritual High Priest, the Messiah Yeshua.

Today it's a one-step process that has only been possible for about 2000 years, since the Crucifixion of Christ. Absent from the body, present with the Lord. Abraham's Bosom is empty, never again to be occupied, because it's no longer needed. But that Place of Torments is another matter; from there, there is no escape and no hope. Die in your unrighteousness and there is no middle ground, no second chance. No one can go to the Place of Torments and be redeemed from there, as the story of Lazarus demonstrates. Since the coming of Christ the only acceptable righteousness is the righteousness that He provides. It's His righteousness that we do NOT attain; we simply wear it like a garment. It is a garment, given as a gift, from the merciful hand of the king.

I think that's enough to chew on today. We'll continue next week.