

Joshua 24:1-28, Covenant at Shechem

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Overview

Relation between Josh 23 and Josh 24

Recall similarities and differences, noted in our study of ch. 24.

Similarities:

- Joshua calls the same group of people together, “all Israel, their elders, and their heads, and their judges, and their officers” (23:2; cf. 24:1).
- Reminder of the victory God has given them (23:3-4, 9, 14; 24:6-13)
- Exhortations to godliness (23:6-8, 11; 24:14-15)
- Warnings against the consequences of apostasy (23:12-13, 16; 24:20)

Differences

Place.—24 is at *Shechem*, a city with great historical significance for the nation. 23 is not specified; probably either Shiloh or Timnath-Serah.

Person.—In 24:1, Joshua summons the people “to God,” while there is no such reference in 23.

Participants.—23 involves just the leaders; 24 appears to include the entire congregation (“all the tribes,” “all the people”).

Activity.—23 is simply a lecture by Joshua to the elders. 24 consists of a series of queries to which they must respond.

Structure.—24 has a distinctive literary structure associated with second-millennium suzerainty treaties, that is, treaties binding vassals to their lords. It is a legal process between Israel and the Lord, in which they renew his covenant over them (cf. v.25), as they accepted it initially at Sinai (cf. Exod 19:4-8 with Josh 24:6-18). 23 is a personal exhortation from Joshua to the people.

Hittite Suzerainty Treaties

Best known through Hittite archives from Boghazkoy, in north-central Turkey (about 100 miles east of Ankara). About 25 treaties preserved, with a very regular format. These are feudal treaties. They are issued by a great king to bind his vassals to himself, and define the terms under which they hold their land.

Example: Citations from treaty of Muwattališ and Aleksanduš, per McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant* (Analecta Biblica 21, Rome, 1963).

Introduction of the Speaker.—“These are the words of the Sun, Muwattalis, the Great King, King of the land of Hatti, Beloved of the Weather-God, ...”

Historical Prolog.—“When in former times Labarnas, my grandfather, attacked the lands of Arzawa and the land of Wilusa, he conquered (it) ... The Land of Wilusa never after fell away from the land of Hatti, but ... remained friends with the king of Hatti.”

Stipulations.—“Thou, Alaksandus, shalt protect the Sun as a friend!” “If anyone says an unfriendly word about the Sun and you keep it secret from the Sun, ... then thou, Alaksandus, sinnest before the oath of the gods; let the oath of the gods harry thee!” [May include requirement to defend the overlord, bring tribute regularly, return fugitives, ...]

Document.—“Moreover, let someone read thee this tablet, which I have made for thee, three times every year.”

Witnesses (usually Gods).—“The Sun God of heaven, lord of the lands, Shepherd of men, the Sun Goddess of Arinna, the Queen of the lands, the Weather-God, ...[, let these be witnesses to this treaty and to the oath]”

Curse and Blessing.—“If thou, Alaksandus, break the words of this document, which are placed on this document, then may these oaths wipe the out ... and wipe thy seed from the face of the earth. But if thou keepest these words, then may the thousand gods ... keep thee, thy wife, thy sons ... with friendly hand.”

We will find these same elements in the covenant that God makes with Israel in Josh 24. They also recur in parts of Exodus and Deuteronomy, and as a basis for the RÎB, the lawsuit format with which the prophets accuse Israel of departing from the Lord. It has even been suggested (Baltzer) that they form the basis for some of the literary patterns in the NT.

Application: Several points to note here.

1. God speaks to people in terms that they understand. He uses a legal structure well understood in the ancient near east to describe his relationship to his people. This is the nature of revelation. It is not hard to understand. He condescends to make himself clear to us. “Cultural incarnation”—just as the Lord Jesus became flesh to dwell among us, so God’s word reduces his thoughts to human language and human patterns so that we can understand them.
2. God could use this particular form because it corresponded to the relation he has with his people, which is a feudal relationship. He is the great king, owner of all the earth. He grants the land of Canaan to Israel as a fiefdom, contingent on their fulfilling the stipulations he has laid down. It is fundamentally a conditional treaty. Invites us to think of our responsibilities to our great King. Perhaps this is why tales of chivalry lent themselves so well to Christian allegory (the Arthur cycle, Spenser’s Fairie Queene): they are set in the same feudal framework.
3. This is not the only form that God uses. The promises to Abraham, for example, are NOT in this form, and not conditional. Israel has forfeited her feudal claim to the land through her disobedience, but the seed of Abraham will one day enjoy it nevertheless because of the unconditional promise to Abraham.

Basic Overview of Josh 24:1-18

- 1, 28, Inclusio: Joshua convenes and then dismisses the people.
- 2-13, God’s Words, including

- Introduction of the Speaker
- Historical Prolog

14-24, Query-Answer between Joshua and the People, including

- Stipulations
- Curses and Blessings
- Witnesses

25-27, Memorials

- Document
- Witnesses

1, 28, Convening and Dismissal

The Place: Shechem

Gen 12:6, where Abram built his first altar to the Lord; makes this the oldest sanctuary that can be associated with the children of Abraham.

Gen 33:18, where Jacob camped on returning from Padan-Aram, and erected his altar. Reinforces the sacredness of this spot with patriarchal associations.

Gen 35:4, there was an oak there, where Jacob buried the strange gods in his household in preparation for worship at Bethel; may be the oak that turns up in Josh 24:25.

Josh 8:30-35, the site of Ebal and Gerizim, where Joshua confirmed the covenant with the nation after completing the southern conquest.

Thus this is a place heavy with holiness. It was a sanctuary for their ancestors before Shiloh, before Gilgal, before even Bethel. By bringing them he reinforces the historical account that he will shortly give, and upon which he will ground their duty to God.

Application.—In our modern mobile age, we tend not to remember the places with which we have associations. However, we cannot lightly cast off so fundamental a part of our human nature. Treasure sacred places; revisit them; renew your commitments. (My experience at Atsugi.) They may not be intrinsically sacred, but they can serve as stimuli to our memories.

The Representatives

Same four groups as in ch. 23, but this time (v.2) “all the people” are said to be there too. He calls all the tribes to Shechem, and then draws their representatives near to confirm the covenant in their behalf. But everyone could see and hear what was happening.

Elders.—Those distinguished by age; most general description. In both testaments, God places a premium on age and experience. Cf. the 70 elders whom Moses took with him to ratify the covenant at Sinai (Exod 24), or the 70 (same ones?) upon whom God put the Spirit so that they might help him with his work in Num 11:16ff. This appears to be the general description; the next three call out their specific functions.

Heads.—As in “heads of fathers’ houses.” Emphasizes their representative role for those whose heads they were.

Judges.—Reflects their responsibility to decide issues between the people. Recall the structure set up by Jethro in Exod 18; there, emphasizes their position as heads as well.

Officers.—“Arrangers,” “overseers.” Emphasizes their ability to organize work and get it done.

- One of the group in Exod 5:6, 10, 14, 15 who managed the work of the children of Israel in bondage.
- This is a specific qualification of the elders called to help Moses in Num 11:16.
- Also the title of those who coordinated the march across the Jordan in Josh 1:10; 3:2.

Application.—Two lessons here:

1. Many different functions involved in the role of elder to God’s people: representation, judging disputes, arranging and administering activity.
2. Our covenant relation with God governs all of these. In all of these capacities we need to be conscious of and guided by our relation to him.

2-13, God’s Words

2b, Introduction of the Speaker

“The LORD God of Israel.” Reminds us that the maker of this covenant is not Joshua, but God. Cf. v.1, “they presented themselves before God.” His title emphasizes

- his eternity (“LORD,” *YHWH*, the great “I Am”)
- his authority (“God”)
- his personality (“of Israel,” the one who has chosen Israel above all the other nations of the earth to be his own peculiar people)

2c-13, Historical Prolog

The Big Idea is that their duty toward God (to be outlined subsequently) is a response to his previous care and faithfulness to them. They owe this to him because of what he has done. Cf. 1 John 4:19.

2c, Where the Patriarchs Started

The Hebrew text emphasizes the location: “It was on the other side of the River (Euphrates) that your fathers lived, and worshipped other gods.” Couples these two things together:

- the place that they lived,
- the gods whom they worshipped.

The rest of the prolog will recount how God changed the place of their residence. The implication, worked out in the stipulation (cf. v.14), is that the people should abandon the old

gods as well. Here, at Shechem, they should worship the God whom Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob worshipped at Shechem, not the pan-Semitic gods honored in Babylon.

3-4, God's Care of the Patriarchs

Notice the sequence of verbs with God as subject. Abraham and the patriarchs are completely passive, until the descent to Egypt.

1. I took Abraham from across the Euphrates.
2. I caused him to walk through the land of Canaan. Gen 12 shows that this started at Shechem, a memory that would be reinforced by their presence at this ancient sanctuary.
3. I multiplied his seed: Isaac, Jacob/Esau.
4. Note the broken parallelism between Jacob and Esau.
 - I gave Esau Mount Seir
 - Next we expect to hear what he gave Jacob, but the account is interrupted by the descent to Egypt. The rest of the historical prolog is really a digression to explain how we get back to this point, at verse 13.

5-12, God's Mighty Hand

These verses show God's power at work for the Israelites. They are organized geographically in two sections, each with a summary (7b, 12). The first section moves outward from Egypt toward the wilderness, and each episode begins with God's hand and shows the subsequent acts of people. The second section moves inward from the wilderness toward the land of promise; each episode begins with human actions and ends with God's decisive hand.

5-7b, Moving Out from Egypt

Note the geographical movement: one victory while they are still in the midst of the land, the next on its borders.

5, Plagues in Egypt.—While they were still in Egypt, God raised up Moses and Aaron, who as a team declared God's plagues on the land.

6-7a, Victory at the Red Sea.—Note how God sets them up for the problem, then solves it for them: "I brought your fathers out," the Egyptians attacked, God delivered them. **Application:** God often brings a problem upon us just so that he can show his power more gloriously. As Moses said to Israel on the shores of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:13), "fear not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD."

Note the alternation between "you" and "your fathers." ("I brought your fathers out ... you came ... they cried unto the Lord ... he put darkness between you and the Egyptians ...") Most of Joshua's flock were not there at the Red Sea, yet he treats them as one with that congregation.

Application: There is a continuity within the people of God. We are one with the saints of past ages; their struggles and victories are ours as well, and we should draw courage from them.

7b, Summary of Victories in Egypt.—Once more, Joshua emphasizes the continuity across the generations. He also emphasizes their passivity and God's agency in the exodus. They are simply witnesses to what God has done.

7c-12, Moving Into the Land

Now we begin with victories on the border of the land, and then move into it.

7c-10, In Transjordan.—Without detailing the failures that kept them there for a generation, God notes that they dwelt there “many days,” and that it was he who brought an end to their wanderings by bringing them to Transjordan.

As at the Red Sea, so here God brings them into a place of danger so that he can show his power in delivering them.

- Sihon and Og fought with you; God delivered them into your hand.
- Balak without provocation sought Balaam to curse you; God disagreed (“I was not willing to listen”), and delivered them.

11, Cisjordanian Conquest.—Jericho is seen as the archetype of the entire conquest; all the nations are represented among its “lords.”

12, Summary of Inbound Victories.—We can recognize this as a summary because it returns to the “two kings of the Amorites,” Sihon and Og, in Transjordan.

The “hornet” is promised in Exod 23:28 and Deut 7:20. What is it?

- Abstract sense of “fear,” cf. the parallelism Exod 23:27,28, “27 I will send my fear before thee, ... And I will send hornets before thee,” Compare Rahab’s reaction in Josh 2:11, “And as soon as we had heard [these things], our hearts did melt, neither did there remain any more courage in any man.”
- Actual insect infestations, perhaps used as primitive biological warfare by the invading Israelites (throw hives over the walls)? No record.
- Perhaps best is Garstang’s observation that the Hieroglyphic sign for lower Egypt (from Cairo north, including the delta region; staging area for any foray into Canaan) is best recognized as a hornet, and that regular Egyptian campaigns into Canaan, notably from the time of Thutmose III (15th century) would have weakened the area and facilitated Israelite conquest. TIII is the best candidate for the Pharaoh of Exodus 1, who slew the Israelite babies and from whom Moses fled. He led at least 16 campaigns into Canaan and further north over a 20-year period, beginning with one that led to the fall of Megiddo and the subjugation of over 100 cities. For the next 200 years and more, campaigning through Canaan was *de rigueur* for Egyptian Pharaohs; Merneptah about 1229 mentions Israel among the people he finds in Canaan. Thus in the providence of God the same Egyptian dominance that thrust Israel out of Egypt to send them back to Canaan also softened up the nations of Canaan in preparation for their invasion.

As in the first summary, so here the Lord emphasizes that the victory is NOT due to any prowess of theirs, but to his strength and intervention. **Application:** God’s dealings with his people are on the basis of grace throughout BOTH testaments.

13, Completion of the Patriarchal Promise

Picks up where v.4 left off. Finally, Jacob gets his inheritance. Why did he have to wait so long?

1. In the sovereignty of God, he does not start from scratch. When he left, Israel was a nomadic clan, following their herds, living in tents. Had they received the promise straight off, they would have had to make the transition, build cities, plant crops, subdue the land. But for the last 400+ years, the Canaanites have been tending the land, building cities, and planting vineyards, and now Israel enters freely into the enjoyment of these labors of the unbelievers.
2. God could have given him their cities before, but in the time of Abraham “the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full,” Gen 15:16. Israel had to wait for their sin to be full so that God could justly punish them and transfer their wealth to Israel.

Application: God will fulfill his promises. He will grant us far more than we can ask or think. But his broader purposes may require that we wait longer than we think appropriate. Be patient—it will pay off in the end.

Note: one of the arguments for a late date for the Exodus is the presence of destruction levels in many Canaanite cities in the 13th and 12th centuries but not around 1400. But according to Joshua, only a few cities were destroyed (e.g., Hazor), and these do show earlier destruction levels. God gave most cities to Israel without destruction, so that they could enjoy their contents.

14-24, Query-Answer between Joshua and the People

Recall the parts of the treaty:

- Introduction of speaker (v.2)
- Historical prolog in first person (2-24)

The next three parts are framed in question/answer form:

- Stipulations (at beginning and end of this section)
- Curses and blessings
- Witnesses

Application.—The query-answer form reminds us that God’s covenant is something that we must either accept or reject. It is not imposed unilaterally. There is a natural tension between this reality and the equal reality of God’s sovereign election, and perhaps in glory we will understand how the two fit together. Our responsibility now is not to diminish either, and this passage reminds us of the importance of making a decision and committing ourselves.

14-18, Stipulations

This section is parallel to the demand often expressed in the treaties that the Great King will tolerate no rivals.

- “Do not set your eyes upon another. Your fathers paid tribute to the land of Egypt, but you shall not pay tribute.” Muršiliš II and Duppi-Tešup (from Baltzer’s appendix, p. 184)
- “If in days to come Yarimlim sins against Abba-AN, ... if he lets go of the hem of Abba-AN’s robe and take hold of another king’s robe, he shall forfeit his cities and territories. Further, if a successor of Yarimlim sin against Abba-AN or a successor of Abba-AN, if he lets go of the hem of Abba-AN’s robe or the hem of the robe of a successor of Abba-AN and

takes hold of the hem of another king's robe, he shall forfeit his city and his territories.”
(McCarthy pp. 185-186)

14-15, *Joshua's Demand*

14, the requirement.—Expressed in ABCB form. The common element (B) is the requirement that they “serve the Lord.”

- Positive: “fear the Lord.” In our day people belittle the fear of God and create a Santa Clause deity of their own liking. But three times (Ps 111:10; Prov 1:7; 9:10) the Scriptures declare this to be the beginning of wisdom or knowledge, and Rom 3:18 insists that it is a characteristic of lost humanity that “there is no fear of God before their eyes.” To see ourselves as lost and helpless, and to recognize God as the all-powerful king whom we have offended, must lead to fear if we are seeing clearly at all.
- Negative, “put away” other gods. “Put away gods,” as Jacob bade his family do at this spot long years before (Gen 35:4). Joshua's comment indicates that some of them are clinging to the gods of Mesopotamia, as Rachel did (Gen 31:34), while others still harbor an attachment to the deities of Egypt, whom the Lord defeated so gloriously at the Exodus. No souvenirs of our former life are permitted. We must put away these attachments.

The combination of these two demands a consistency that might otherwise be lacking. In a polytheistic society, it is all too easy to think that one might simply to add the Lord to one's existing pantheon. Joshua is very clear that this is not acceptable: they must both fear him and avoid others. The common requirement, “serve the Lord,” is modified the first time with two phrases that emphasize this need for consistency, “in sincerity and in truth.” This is an amplification of Deut 6:5-8.

- “in sincerity,” lit. “completeness,” “integrity,” internal consistency. Focuses on the matter of internal divided allegiance. They are not to let part of their personality follow the pagan gods, while yielding another part to the Lord. All must belong to him, according to Deut. 6:5.
- “in truth,” consistency between inward commitment and outward expression. Their inward service to him and their outward expression must coincide, according to the mechanisms recommended in Deut 6:6-8. This condition precludes two errors: not only public worship in spite of a pagan heart (hypocrisy), but also a private love for the Lord that is restrained in its outward expression (“undercover Christian”).

15a, the alternative.—Once again the gods of Mesopotamia—at least they have a family link there. Drops the gods of Egypt (who would want to retain the gods of slavery?), but introduces the new threat, the gods of the Amorites, and this was in fact their undoing.

15b, Joshua's resolve.—He and his house will serve the Lord. He will enter this covenant, whatever they choose to do. **Application.**—Notice the power of his personal example. He is willing to step out and be counted to do what is right.

16-18, *The People's Response*

They resolve to follow the Lord along, reciting the high points of the historical prolog, from Egypt working out.

At the risk of reading too much into the details, it is interesting that they do not say anything about God's care of the patriarchs. Gal 3:6-22 recalls the two great covenants, the unconditional one with Abraham (corresponding to Josh 24:5-7) and the conditional one at Mount Sinai (dominant in Josh 24:7-12). The people here focus on the relation with God under Sinai, but skip over the more fundamental covenant with Abraham, whose full potential was not realized until the coming of the promised seed, the Lord Jesus. (Not sure that we should fault them; Gal 3:23 suggests that further revelation was needed to realize that potential.)

19-21, Curses and Blessings

There are no blessings here, only curses. They have already received the blessings, in the form of the promised land.

How different Joshua's response to their profession is from our inclination.

- The Four Laws approach seeks to talk someone into recognizing that they are believing. "Won't you please believe?"
- Joshua almost tries to talk them out of it! "Are you sure you recognize what this is going to cost you?" Compare our Lord's words in Lk 14:25ff, urging the multitudes to count the cost.

22, Witnesses

In the pagan treaties, the pantheon is invoked as witnesses (see handout). This is obviously inappropriate when it is the one true God who is making the treaty. Instead, Joshua calls the people themselves as witnesses; in addition, the stone in v.27 serves as witness.

23-24, Repetition of Stipulations

As in 14, it is clear that some of them are still clinging to pagan gods. In the light of all that they have sworn, Joshua adjures them to surrender them and serve the Lord alone.

25-27, Memorials

v.25 is a summary introduction to 26-27; the "making of the covenant" requires the production of a document. Cf. Korosec, editor of the Hittite treaties: "In line with the view prevalent everywhere in the ancient Near East, execution in writing is essential to the conclusion of a treaty. The treaty document is not merely evidence of a treaty that exists, say, by virtue of a mutual agreement. The treaty in fact comes into being only when the document is written" (quoted in Baltzer p. 16).

"He made for them a statute and an ordinance": this collocation of *sim*, *xoq*, and *mi\$pa+* occurs elsewhere only at Exod 15:25 and 1 Sam 30:25, in both of which it refers to some commemorative ruling based on a historical event. Is there an allusion here to periodic reading of the covenant, one of the common features in the Hittite treaties otherwise absent from Josh 24? In fact, we know from Deut 31:10-12 that the law was to be read to the nation once every seven years at the feast of Tabernacles.

Application.—We humans are prone to forget; the older we grow, the easier it is to forget. We need reminders of the things that are most important.

Joshua 24 Covenant at Shechem

The text describes one document (an entry in the “book of the law”) and one witness (the stone). Other texts suggest that the stone was also a document, and the book also served as a witness.

Documents

May be two:

“**The book of the law of God**”.—This name for it appears in Neh 8:18 (cf. 8:1, 8). Also called

- “book of the law,” Josh 8:34; 2 Kings 22:8, 11 (discovered under Josiah); 2 Chr 34:15; Neh 8:3
- “book of the law of Moses,” Josh 8:31 (citing Deut 27); 23:6; 2 Kings 14:6 (citing Deut 24:16); Neh 8:1
- “book of the law of the LORD,” 2 Chr 17:9
- “book of the law of the Lord by Moses,” 2 Chr 34:14 (Josiah)
- “book of the law of the Lord their God.” Neh 9:3
- In Deut, we read of “this book of the law,” 28:61; 29:21; 30:10; 31:26. These references, and the citations elsewhere, suggest that the heart of it is Deuteronomy (or perhaps the entire Torah). Josh 1:8 shows that it was intended for Joshua’s special attention.

The notice here suggests that appendices could be added to it; Joshua records the day’s transactions “on the flyleaf of his Bible,” for reference by future Israelites. Later, it was incorporated into the book of Joshua. *Note: shows something of the editorial processes underlying our Bible.*

The Stone.—Perhaps the law was inscribed on it, as it had been in 8:32.

Witnesses

In addition to the stone, the book, kept in the ark, was also to be a witness, Deut 31:26. It would be particularly appropriate if the covenant were recorded in both places, since the book is not readily accessible, while the stone would be publicly visible.

Summary

So God reminds Israel of her treaty with himself. Not actually a new covenant, but one in a series of renewals of Sinai: compare

- Exod 19:1-8 (before giving of law)
- Exod 24:3,7 (after it was given);
- Deut 26:17 (records the people’s agreement to the covenant in the plains of Moab)
- Josh 8 (which involved recital of blessings and curses per Deut 27)
- 2 Kings 23:1-3 (Josiah’s revival, based on discovery of Deut in the temple)
- Neh 10:1 (after confession of ch. 9)

Key points for us to remember today:

Joshua 24 Covenant at Shechem

- God binds his people to himself in a formal relation. Our covenant is different from theirs (new vs. old), but we are still in covenant, bound to obey him because of what he has already done for us.
- We need to be reminded of its terms periodically. This is one function of the Lord's Supper for us today.