

THE COVENANT

JOSHUA 20-24

¹Then YHWH spoke to Joshua, saying, ²“Say to the Israelites, ‘Appoint the cities of refuge, of which I spoke to you through Moses, ³so that anyone who kills a person without intent or by mistake may flee there; they shall be for you a refuge from the avenger of blood. ⁴The slayer shall flee to one of these cities and shall stand at the entrance of the gate of the city, and explain the case to the elders of that city; then the fugitive shall be taken into the city, and given a place, and shall remain with them. ⁵And if the avenger of blood is in pursuit, they shall not give up the slayer, because the neighbour was killed by mistake, there having been no enmity between them before. ⁶The slayer shall remain in that city until there is a trial before the congregation, until the death of the one who is high priest at the time: then the slayer may return home, to the town in which the deed was done.’”
⁷So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, and Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath-arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. ⁸And beyond the Jordan east of Jericho, they appointed Bezer in the wilderness on the tableland, from the tribe of Reuben, and Ramoth in Gilead, from the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan, from the tribe of Manasseh. ⁹These were the cities designated for all the Israelites, and for the aliens residing among them, that anyone who killed a person without intent could flee there, so as not to die by the hand of the avenger of blood, until there was a trial before the congregation.

Deuteronomy 4:41-43 tells the story of Moses setting up three cities of refuge in Transjordan – the three cities mentioned here in verse eight (see page 145 for an explanation of the role of the ‘avenger of blood’). Moses’ instruction for them to set up three cities in Canaan are given in Deuteronomy 19:1-13 (see the commentary on page 145).

We are dealing here with something as primitive as tribal revenge. But we are also dealing with a religious concern. Recall YHWH’s words to Cain:

Your brother’s blood is crying out to me from the ground!

– Genesis 4:10

The seriousness of shedding blood is underlined by the following principle enunciated in Genesis:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind.

– Genesis 9:6

In the case of manslaughter, something had to be done, lest the shed blood pollute the land and the sanctuary, and lead to YHWH abandoning his presence among them.

Asylum in a sanctuary was an attempt to create space for tempers to settle and for an inquiry to be made into the circumstances of the manslaughter.

Note the importance of ‘the elders’ (zāqēn, 20:4), and of the ‘congregation’ (‘ēdā, 20:6). The Hebrew for ‘place’ in verse four is māqôm, a word that picks up the older institution in which asylum was sought in a ‘sanctuary’.

On the subject of asylum see also Exodus 21:13 and Numbers 35.

Introduction to chapter twenty-one

Already a number of times we have been informed that the Levites do not possess land. Reminding the people of the allotment of land by Moses in Transjordan, Joshua says:

To the tribe of Levi alone Moses gave no inheritance; the offerings by fire to YHWH God of Israel are their inheritance, as he said to them.

– Joshua 13:14 (also 14:33)

In regard to the allotments in Canaan, the authors observed:

No portion was given to the Levites in the land, but only towns to live in, with their pasture lands for their flocks and herds.

– Joshua 14:4

At Shiloh, when allotments were being decided, Joshua declared:

The Levites have no portion among you, for the priesthood of YHWH is their heritage.

In the genealogy of the Levites in Exodus 6:16-25, three ‘sons’ are attributed to Levi: Gershon, Kohath and Merari (6:16). One of Kohath’s sons is Amram (6:18), the father of Moses and Aaron (6:20; also Numbers 26:59). Hence the special place given to the Kohathite clan here. It was the special privilege and responsibility of the Kohathites to guard the ark (see Numbers 3:29-31; 4:1-3, 34-37).

Responsibility for providing housing and grazing rights to the Levites

¹Then the heads of the families of the Levites came to the priest Eleazar and to Joshua son of Nun and to the heads of the families of the tribes of the Israelites; ²they said to them at Shiloh in the land of Canaan, “YHWH commanded through Moses that we be given towns to live in, along with their pasture lands for our livestock.” ³So by command of YHWH the Israelites gave to the Levites the following towns and pasture lands out of their inheritance. ⁴The lot came out for the families of the Kohathites. So those Levites who were descendants of Aaron the priest received by lot thirteen towns from the tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Benjamin.

The special place given to the Levites who claimed descent from Aaron, and the fact that the towns that were responsible for their care are all in the south, suggests a post-exilic perspective, by which time Levites not claiming descent from Aaron had been reduced to subsidiary non-priestly roles in the cult. The authors see the need to provide for all the Levites..

⁵The rest of the Kohathites received by lot ten towns from the families of the tribe of Ephraim, from the tribe of Dan, and the half-tribe of Manasseh.

⁶The Gershonites received by lot thirteen towns from the families of the tribe of Issachar, from the tribe of Asher, from the tribe of Naphtali, and from the half-tribe of Manasseh in Bashan.

⁷The Merarites according to their families received twelve towns from the tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad, and the tribe of Zebulun.

⁸These towns and their pasture lands the Israelites gave by lot to the Levites, as YHWH had commanded through Moses.

Towns chosen to care for the Kohathites

Towns responsible for the support of the Kohathite Priests (21:9-19)

⁹Out of the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Simeon they gave the following towns mentioned by name, ¹⁰which went to the descendants of Aaron, one of the families of the Kohathites who belonged to the Levites, since the lot fell to them first. ¹¹They gave them Kiriath-arba (Arba being the father of Anak), that is Hebron, in the hill country of Judah, along with the pasture lands around it. ¹²But the fields of the town and its villages had been given to Caleb son of Jephunneh as his holding.

On the special arrangements for Caleb see 15:13-14, supplemented by 14:6-15.

¹³To the descendants of Aaron the priest they gave Hebron, the city of refuge for the slayer, with its pasture lands, Libnah with its pasture lands, ¹⁴Jattir with its pasture lands, Eshtemoa with its pasture lands, ¹⁵Holon with its pasture lands, Debir with its pasture lands, ¹⁶Ain with its pasture lands, Juttah with its pasture lands, and Beth-shemesh with its pasture lands—nine towns out of these two tribes. ¹⁷Out of the tribe of Benjamin: Gibeon with its pasture lands, Geba with its pasture lands, ¹⁸Anathoth with its pasture lands, and Almon with its pasture lands—four towns. ¹⁹The towns of the descendants of Aaron—the priests—were thirteen in all, with their pasture lands.

Other Kohathites (21:20-26)

²⁰As to the rest of the Kohathites belonging to the Kohathite families of the Levites, the towns allotted to them were out of the tribe of Ephraim. ²¹To them were given Shechem, the city of refuge for the slayer, with its pasture lands in the hill country of Ephraim, Gezer with its pasture lands, ²²Kibzaim with its pasture lands, and Beth-horon with its pasture lands—four towns. ²³Out of the tribe of Dan: Elteke with its pasture lands, Gibbethon with its pasture lands, ²⁴Aijalon with its pasture lands, Gath-rimmon with its pasture lands—four towns. ²⁵Out of the half-tribe of Manasseh: Taanach with its pasture lands, and Gath-rimmon with its pasture lands—two towns. ²⁶The towns of the families of the rest of the Kohathites were ten in all, with their pasture lands.

In this list Dan is assumed to be in its original allotment to the west of Benjamin (Joshua 19:40-46), None of the towns that are allotted to provide residence and grazing rights to the Kohathite Levites is in Galilee or Transjordan.

Gershonites (21:27-33)

The towns responsible for providing residence and grazing rights to the Gershonite Levites are in the northern Transjordan territory of the Manasseh tribe and in Galilee.

²⁷To the Gershonites, one of the families of the Levites, were given out of the half-tribe of Manasseh, Golan in Bashan with its pasture lands, the city of refuge for the slayer, and Beeshterah with its pasture lands—two towns. ²⁸Out of the tribe of Issachar: Kishion with its pasture lands, Daberath with its pasture lands, ²⁹Jarmuth with its pasture lands, En-gannim with its pasture lands—four towns; ³⁰Out of the tribe of Asher: Mishal with its pasture lands, Abdon with its pasture lands, ³¹Helkath with its pasture lands, and Rehob with its pasture lands—four towns. ³²Out of the tribe of Naphtali: Kedesh in Galilee with its pasture lands, the city of refuge for the slayer, Hammoth-dor with its pasture lands, and Kartan with its pasture lands—three towns. ³³The towns of the several families of the Gershonites were in all thirteen, with their pasture lands.

Merarites (21:34-40)

The towns responsible for providing residence and grazing rights to the Merarite Levites are in Zebulun and in Transjordan

³⁴To the rest of the Levites—the Merarite families—were given out of the tribe of Zebulun: Jokneam with its pasture lands, Kartah with its pasture lands, ³⁵Dimnah with its pasture lands, Nahalal with its pasture lands—four towns. ³⁶Out of the tribe of Reuben: Bezer with its pasture lands, Jahzah with its pasture lands, ³⁷Kedemoth with its pasture lands, and Mephaath with its pasture lands—four towns. ³⁸Out of the tribe of Gad: Ramoth in Gilead with its pasture lands, the city of refuge for the slayer, Mahanaim with its pasture lands, ³⁹Heshbon with its pasture lands, Jazer with its pasture lands—four towns in all. ⁴⁰As for the towns of the several Merarite families, that is, the remainder of the families of the Levites, those allotted to them were twelve in all.

⁴¹The towns of the Levites within the holdings of the Israelites were in all forty-eight towns with their pasture lands. ⁴²Each of these towns had its pasture lands around it; so it was with all these towns.

Summary (21:43-45)

After the inserted chapters twenty and twenty-one, this idealised summary brings to a closure the allotment of tribal land.

⁴³Thus YHWH gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them; and having taken possession of it, they settled there.

⁴⁴And YHWH gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their ancestors; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for YHWH had given all their enemies into their hands. ⁴⁵Not one of all the good promises that YHWH had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass.

The Transjordan tribes are blessed

¹Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, ²and said to them, "You have observed all that Moses the servant of YHWH commanded you, and have obeyed me in all that I have commanded you; ³you have not forsaken your kindred these many days, down to this day, but have been careful to keep the charge of YHWH your God. ⁴And now YHWH your God has given rest to your kindred, as he promised them; therefore turn and go to your tents in the land where your possession lies, which Moses the servant of YHWH gave you on the other side of the Jordan. ⁵Take good care to observe the commandment and instruction that Moses the servant of YHWH commanded you, to love YHWH your God, to walk in all his ways, to keep his commandments, and to hold fast to him, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul." ⁶So Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their tents.

⁷Now to the one half of the tribe of Manasseh Moses had given a possession in Bashan; but to the other half Joshua had given a possession beside their fellow Israelites in the land west of the Jordan. And when Joshua sent them away to their tents and blessed them, ⁸he said to them, "Go back to your tents with much wealth, and with very much livestock, with silver, gold, bronze, and iron, and with a great quantity of clothing; divide the spoil of your enemies with your kindred."

⁹So the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh returned home, parting from the Israelites at Shiloh, which is in the land of Canaan, to go to the land of Gilead, their own land of which they had taken possession by command of YHWH through Moses.

These verses would make a good conclusion to the Book of Joshua – and perhaps they functioned as such in an earlier version. All God's promises are in place in the Promised Land. Here we are assured that all is well, too, with the Transjordan tribes. They have kept their word, and now they can go home, as Moses promised, and enjoy the fruits of their labours with their families (see Joshua 1:12-18).

Verse five is a perfect summary of the essence of the covenant relationship, described in terms that recur frequently in the writings of the Deuteronomic School. A few key texts should suffice to illustrate this:

You shall love YHWH your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

– Deuteronomy 6:5

Israel, what does YHWH your God require of you? Only to fear YHWH your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul.

– Deuteronomy 10:12

Diligently observe this entire commandment that I am commanding you, loving YHWH your God, walking in all his ways, and holding fast to him.

– Deuteronomy 11:22

YHWH your God you shall follow, him alone you shall fear, his commandments you shall keep, his voice you shall obey, him you shall serve, and to him you shall hold fast.

– Deuteronomy 13:4

Introduction to Joshua 22:10-34

This is a story about the building of an altar by the Transjordan tribes. The problem is seen as so serious by ‘the whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh’(22:12) that they prepare to wage war over it. Comparisons are made with the apostasy at Beth-peor (22:17; see Deuteronomy 4:3; Numbers 25) in which Phinehas, the son of the high priest, Eleazar (22:13), also played a dominant role. War is averted when the assembly is assured that the altar is not intended for cult, but only as a reminder to the tribes of Canaan that the tribes of Transjordan are also part of Israel.

The key to the passage is found in the accusation: ‘Do not rebel against YHWH, or rebel against us by building yourselves an altar other than the altar of YHWH our God’(22:19). There is a clear echo here of the first of the ‘statutes and decrees’ of Deuteronomy, which was that there was to be only one altar ‘in the place that YHWH your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there’(Deuteronomy 12:5). In the story here that place is Shiloh ‘where YHWH’s tabernacle now stands’(22:19).

This story is to reinforce the command that there be only one sanctuary in Israel, and so represents, not history, but the agenda of the Deuteronomists.

¹⁰When they came to the region near the Jordan that lies in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by the Jordan, an altar of great size. ¹¹The Israelites heard that the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh had built an altar at the frontier of the land of Canaan, in the region near the Jordan, on the side that belongs to the Israelites. ¹²And when the people of Israel heard of it, the whole assembly of the Israelites gathered at Shiloh, to make war against them.

¹³Then the Israelites sent the priest Phinehas son of Eleazar to the Reubenites and the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, ¹⁴and with him ten chiefs, one from each of the tribal families of Israel, every one of them the head of a family among the clans of Israel. ¹⁵They came to the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh, in the land of Gilead, and they said to them, ¹⁶“Thus says the whole congregation of YHWH, ‘What is this treachery that you have committed against the God of Israel in turning away today from following YHWH, by building yourselves an altar today in rebellion against YHWH? ¹⁷Have we not had enough of the sin at Peor from which even yet we have not cleansed ourselves, and for which a plague came upon the congregation of YHWH, ¹⁸that you must turn away today from following YHWH! If you rebel against YHWH today, he will be angry with the whole congregation of Israel tomorrow.

¹⁹But now, if your land is unclean, cross over into YHWH’S land where YHWH’S tabernacle now stands, and take for yourselves a possession among us; only do not rebel against YHWH, or rebel against us by building yourselves an altar other than the altar of YHWH our God. ²⁰Did not Achan son of Zerah break faith in the matter of the devoted things, and wrath fell upon all the congregation of Israel? And he did not perish alone for his iniquity!’”

The Transjordan tribes are part of Israel

²¹Then the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, ²²"YHWH, God of gods! YHWH, God of gods! He knows; and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith toward YHWH, do not spare us today ²³for building an altar to turn away from following YHWH; or if we did so to offer burnt offerings or grain offerings or *communion sacrifices* on it, may YHWH himself take vengeance. ²⁴No! We did it from fear that in time to come your children might say to our children, 'What have you to do with YHWH, the God of Israel?' ²⁵For YHWH has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you, you Reubenites and Gadites; you have no portion in YHWH.' So your children might make our children cease to worship YHWH.

²⁶Therefore we said, 'Let us now build an altar, not for burnt offering, nor for sacrifice, ²⁷but to be a witness between us and you, and between the generations after us, that we do perform the service of YHWH in his presence with our burnt offerings and sacrifices and *communion sacrifices*; so that your children may never say to our children in time to come, "You have no portion in YHWH." ' ²⁸And we thought, If this should be said to us or to our descendants in time to come, we could say, 'Look at this copy of the altar of YHWH, which our ancestors made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifice, but to be a witness between us and you.' ²⁹Far be it from us that we should rebel against YHWH, and turn away this day from following YHWH by building an altar for burnt offering, grain offering, or sacrifice, other than the altar of YHWH our God that stands before his tabernacle!"

³⁰When the priest Phinehas and the chiefs of the congregation, the heads of the families of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the Reubenites and the Gadites and the Manassites spoke, they were satisfied. ³¹The priest Phinehas son of Eleazar said to the Reubenites and the Gadites and the Manassites, "Today we know that YHWH is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against YHWH; now you have saved the Israelites from the hand of YHWH."

³²Then the priest Phinehas son of Eleazar and the chiefs returned from the Reubenites and the Gadites in the land of Gilead to the land of Canaan, to the Israelites, and brought back word to them. ³³The report pleased the Israelites; and the Israelites blessed God and spoke no more of making war against them, to destroy the land where the Reubenites and the Gadites were settled. ³⁴The Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar Witness; "For," said they, "it is a witness between us that YHWH is God."

Joshua's Testament (23:1-16)

The whole of Deuteronomy is presented as the testament of Moses. Here, much more briefly but with the same essential message, is the testament of Joshua. Comparisons are made with the speech of Samuel (1Samuel 12:1-24), with David's prayer in 2Samuel 7:1-29 and his testament in 1Kings 2:1-9.

The author of this testament is the Deuteronomist, and he is speaking to his contemporaries who at one stage have been through the destruction of Samaria and the expulsion of the people of Israel from the land, and, at a later stage, a repetition of this in Judah. Those listening to this testament in post-exilic Judah cannot afford to miss its important message.

On the theme of rest (23:1) see Joshua 1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4.

The reference to Joshua's age repeats 13:1. It is important that 'all Israel' (23:2), and all those responsible for the running of the community, are listening.

Israel is reminded of what YHWH has won for them, and promised that the Canaanites remaining will be driven out, provided that Israel is faithful and does not compromise by 'mixing in with these nations' (23:7). That can only lead to being unfaithful to the first and basic commandment which is to worship only YHWH.

It is clear that when the Deuteronomists are composing this speech, long forgotten is the fact that the tribes of Israel were indigenous to Canaan. They were the ones who rallied to the religion of YHWH, having discovered and embraced Yahwism.

¹A long time afterward, when YHWH had given rest to Israel from all their enemies all around, and Joshua was old and well advanced in years, ²Joshua summoned all Israel, their elders and heads, their judges and officers, and said to them, "I am now old and well advanced in years; ³and you have seen all that YHWH your God has done to all these nations for your sake, for it is YHWH your God who has fought for you. ⁴I have allotted to you as an inheritance for your tribes those nations that remain, along with all the nations that I have already cut off, from the Jordan to the Great Sea in the west. ⁵YHWH your God will push them back before you, and drive them out of your sight; and you shall possess their land, as YHWH your God promised you. ⁶Therefore be very steadfast to observe and do all that is written in the book of the law of Moses, turning aside from it neither to the right nor to the left, ⁷so that you may not be mixed with these nations left here among you, or make mention of the names of their gods, or swear by them, or serve them, or bow yourselves down to them, ⁸but hold fast to YHWH your God, as you have done to this day. ⁹For YHWH has driven out before you great and strong nations; and as for you, no one has been able to withstand you to this day. ¹⁰One of you puts to flight a thousand, since it is YHWH your God who fights for you, as he promised you.

The consequences of disloyalty

¹¹Be very careful, therefore, to love YHWH your God. ¹²For if you turn back, and join the survivors of these nations left here among you, and intermarry with them, so that you marry their women and they yours, ¹³know assuredly that YHWH your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare and a trap for you, a scourge on your sides, and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land that YHWH your God has given you.

¹⁴“And now I am about to go the way of all the earth, and you know in your hearts and souls, all of you, that not one thing has failed of all the good things that YHWH your God promised concerning you; all have come to pass for you, not one of them has failed. ¹⁵But just as all the good things that YHWH your God promised concerning you have been fulfilled for you, so YHWH will bring upon you all the bad things, until he has destroyed you from this good land that YHWH your God has given you. ¹⁶If you transgress the covenant of YHWH your God, which he enjoined on you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, then the anger of YHWH will be kindled against you, and you shall perish quickly from the good land that he has given to you.”

This warning, placed on the lips of Joshua as he approaches his death, would have rung true to those who fled the terrible destruction of Israel at the hands of the Assyrians (721BC) and the massive deportation that followed upon it. Those reading the testament from exile in Babylon in the early years of the sixth century would also have reflected on the failures that had led to their ‘perishing from the good land that YHWH your God has given you’ (23:13).

On the ‘anger’ of God see pages 40-42.

Introduction to Joshua 24:1-28

This is a fuller statement of the covenant already mentioned in Joshua 8:30-35. It is appended here by the Deuteronomists who are writing for people who have lost the land given by YHWH to their ancestors. They had put great hopes in Josiah. His premature death and the political mistakes of his successors on the throne of Judah led to the complete collapse of his ambition to restore Israel's possession of the Promised Land. The Deuteronomists want to conclude the story of Joshua and the initial occupation with the story of the covenant agreed to by 'all of the tribes of Israel at Shechem' (24:1). YHWH has been faithful to the covenant. The exiles must renew their commitment and trust that the land will once again be theirs. The same old lesson has to be learned. They must not get caught up in worshipping the gods of the land, whether in Babylon or back in Canaan. Surely history has demonstrated that their very identity and survival as a people depends on trusting YHWH and living according to the 'statutes and edicts ... written in the book of the law' (24:25-26).

YHWH and the patriarchs (24:1-4)

¹Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. ²And Joshua said to all the people, "Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. ³Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many. I gave him Isaac; ⁴and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I gave Esau the hill country of Seir to possess, but Jacob and his children went down to Egypt.

YHWH and the redemption of the people from Egypt (24:5-7)

⁵Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I plagued Egypt with what I did in its midst; and afterwards I brought you out. ⁶When I brought your ancestors out of Egypt, you came to the sea; and the Egyptians pursued your ancestors with chariots and horsemen to the Red Sea. ⁷When they cried out to YHWH, he put darkness between you and the Egyptians, and made the sea come upon them and cover them; and your eyes saw what I did to Egypt. Afterwards you lived in the wilderness a long time.

YHWH and victory in Transjordan (24:8-10; see Deuteronomy 2-3)

⁸Then I brought you to the land of the Amorites, who lived on the other side of the Jordan; they fought with you, and I handed them over to you, and you took possession of their land, and I destroyed them before you. ⁹Then King Balak son of Zippor of Moab, set out to fight against Israel. He sent and invited Balaam son of Beor to curse you, ¹⁰but I would not listen to Balaam; therefore he blessed you; so I rescued you out of his hand.

YHWH and the gift of the Promised Land (24:11-13)

¹¹When you went over the Jordan and came to Jericho, the citizens of Jericho fought against you, and also the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites; and I handed them over to you. ¹²I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove out before you the two kings of the Amorites;

The victory of Sihon and Og illustrate the other victories told in the Book of Joshua. **it was not by your sword or by your bow. ¹³I gave you a land on which you had not laboured, and towns that you had not built, and you live in them; you eat the fruit of vineyards and oliveyards that you did not plant.**

Verse thirteen is key. In the ancient Near East it was taken for granted that one worshipped the gods of the land where one lived (see 24:2). Israel must be different. YHWH gave them the land. They must worship YHWH alone.

Joshua commits himself to live by the covenant
and invites the others to follow him (24:14-15)

¹⁴“Now therefore revere YHWH, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve YHWH. ¹⁵Now if you are unwilling to serve YHWH, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve YHWH.”

The people commit themselves to the covenant (24:16-18)

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake YHWH to serve other gods; ¹⁷for it is YHWH our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; ¹⁸and YHWH drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve YHWH, for he is our God.”

Joshua outlines the implications of their commitment (24:19-24)

¹⁹But Joshua said to the people, “*You will never be able to serve YHWH, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not put up with your disloyalty and your sinning.* ²⁰If you forsake YHWH and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” ²¹And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve YHWH!”

YHWH is a holy God who remains totally sovereign and transcendent. They cannot confine or control him. YHWH is a jealous God: he will not stand by and see his chosen people destroy themselves by worshipping other ‘gods’. What they do matters and it will have consequences, which YHWH will not pretend away. If they are going to accept the covenant they must abide by it. Knowing this, the people confirm their decision.

The covenant at Shechem (24:22-28; see 8:30-35)

Joshua has been presented as a model for King Josiah's reconquering of the land. He is also presented as a model for the exiles in Babylon to renew the covenant, in the hope that the faithful YHWH will restore them to the land.

²²Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen YHWH, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses."

²³He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to YHWH, the God of Israel."

²⁴The people said to Joshua, "YHWH our God we will serve, and him we will obey."

²⁵So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and *edicts* for them at Shechem. ²⁶Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of YHWH. ²⁷Joshua said to all the people, "See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of YHWH that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God." ²⁸So Joshua sent the people away to their inheritances.

Joshua dies and is buried (24:29-30)

²⁹After these things Joshua son of Nun, the servant of YHWH, died, being one hundred ten years old. ³⁰They buried him in his own inheritance at Timnath-erah, which is in the hill country of Ephraim, north of Mount Gaash.

Some final notices (24:31-33)

³¹Israel served YHWH all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua and had known all the work that YHWH did for Israel.

³²The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the portion of ground that Jacob had bought from the children of Hamor, the father of Shechem, for one hundred pieces of money; it became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Joseph is buried near the sanctuary of the Joseph tribes at Shechem

³³Eleazar son of Aaron died; and they buried him at Gibeah, the town of his son Phinehas, which had been given him in the hill country of Ephraim.

Eleazar was consecrated high priest at the death of his father, Aaron (Numbers 20:28). He was high priest during the last months of Moses' life and throughout the time that Joshua led Israel (see Numbers 27:18-23; Joshua 14:1). He is buried in his son's town. Phinehas, son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron, was the hero of Baal-peor (see Numbers 25:11). He presided over the last battle organised by Moses against the Midianites (see Numbers 31:6). He led the negotiations with the Transjordan tribes (Joshua 22:13-34).

With the death of Joshua and Eleazar we enter the story of the third generation: the generation settled in the Promised Land – a story told in the Book of Judges.