

Tuesday Evening Bible Study
Series #15: Historical Books of the Old Testament
Week 1: Joshua
Tuesday, January 22, 2019

The Book of Joshua: Living out a courageous faith.

Summary

Joshua is a story of conquest and fulfillment for the people of God. After many years of slavery in Egypt and 40 years in the desert, the Israelites were finally allowed to enter the land promised to their fathers. Abraham, always a migrant, never possessed the country to which he was sent, but he left to his children the legacy of God's covenant that made them the eventual heirs of all of Canaan. Joshua was destined to turn that promise into reality.

Where Deuteronomy ends, the book of Joshua begins: The tribes of Israel are still camped on the east side of the Jordan River. The narrative opens with God's command to move forward and pass through the river on dry land. Then it relates the series of victories in central, southern and northern Canaan that gave the Israelites control of all the hill country and the Negev. It continues with a description of the tribal allotments and ends with Joshua's final addresses to the people. The theme of the book, therefore, is the establishment of God's people Israel in the Lord's land, the land he had promised to give them as their place of "rest" in the earth. So the Great King's promise to the patriarchs and Moses to give the land of Canaan to the chosen people of his kingdom is now historically fulfilled.

In the story the book tells, three primary actors play a part: "the Lord" (as Israel's God), his servant Joshua, and his people Israel (the last a collective "character" in the story). We meet all three immediately in Ch. 1, where all three are clearly presented in the distinctive roles they will play in the story that follows. Chapter 1 also introduces the reader to the main concern of the book as a whole.

The role of the central human actor in the events narrated here is reinforced by the name he bears. Earlier in his life Joshua was called simply Hoshea (Nu 13:8, 16), meaning "salvation." But later Moses changed his name to Joshua, meaning "The Lord saves" (or "The Lord gives victory"). When this same name (the Greek form of which is Jesus) was given to Mary's firstborn son, it identified him as the servant of God who would complete what God did for Israel in a preliminary way through the first Joshua, namely, overcome all powers of evil in the world and bring God's people into their eternal "rest."

In the Hebrew Bible the book of Joshua initiates a division called the Former Prophets, including also Judges, Samuel and Kings. These are all historical in content but are written from a prophetic standpoint. They do more than merely record the nation's history from Moses to the fall of Judah in 586 BC. They prophetically interpret God's covenant ways with Israel in history -- how he fulfills and remains true to his promises (especially through his servants such as Joshua, the judges, Samuel and David) and how he deals with the waywardness of the Israelites. In Joshua it was the Lord who won the victories and "gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers."

Who wrote Joshua?

In the judgment of many scholars Joshua was not written until the end of the period of the kings, some 800 years after the actual events. But there are significant reasons to question this conclusion and to place the time of composition much earlier. The earliest Jewish traditions (Talmud) claim that Joshua wrote his own book except for the final section about his funeral, which is attributed to Eleazar son of Aaron (the last verse must have been added by a later editor).

On at least two occasions the text reports writing at Joshua's command or by Joshua himself. We are told that when the tribes received their territories, Joshua instructed his men "to make a survey of the land and write a description of it." Then in the last scene of the book, when Joshua led Israel in a renewal of the covenant with the Lord, it is said that "he drew up decrees and laws". On another occasion the narrator speaks as if he had been a participant in the event; he uses the pronouns "we" and "us".

Moreover, the author seems to be familiar with ancient names of cities, such as "the Jebusite city" for Jerusalem, Kiriath Arba for Hebron, and Greater Sidon for what later became simply Sidon. And Tyre is never mentioned, probably because in Joshua's day it had not yet developed into a port of major importance.

But if some features suggest an author of Joshua's own lifetime, others point to a writer of a somewhat later period. The account of the long day when the sun stood still at Aijalon is substantiated by a quotation from another source, the Book of Jashar (10:13). This would hardly be natural for an eyewitness of the miracle who was writing shortly after it happened. Also, there are 12 instances where the phrase "until this day" occurs.

It seems safe to conclude that the book draws on early sources. It may date from the beginning of the monarchy. Some think that Samuel may have had a hand in shaping or compiling the materials of the book, but in fact we are unsure who the final author or editor was.

Historical Context

At the time of the Israelite migration into Canaan the superpowers of the ancient Near East were relatively weak. The Hittites had faded from the scene. Neither Babylon nor Egypt could maintain a standing military presence in Canaan, and the Assyrians would not send in their armies until centuries later.

As the tribes circled east of the Dead Sea, the Edomites refused them passage, so Israel bypassed them to the east. However, when Sihon and Og, two regional Amorite kings of Transjordan, tried to stop the Israelites, they were easily defeated and their lands occupied. Moab was forced to let Israel pass through her territory and camp in her plains. Also the Midianites were dealt a severe blow.

Biblical archaeologists call this period the Late Bronze Age (1550-1200 BC). Today thousands of artifacts give testimony to the richness of the Canaanite material culture, which was in many ways superior to that of the Israelites. When the ruins of the ancient kingdom of Ugarit were discovered at modern Ras Shamra on the northern coast of Syria (see chart, p. xxiii), a wealth of new information came to light concerning the domestic, commercial and religious life of the Canaanites. From a language close to Hebrew came stories of ancient kings and gods that revealed their immoral behavior and cruelty. In

addition, pagan temples, altars, tombs and ritual vessels have been uncovered, throwing more light on the culture and customs of the peoples surrounding Israel.

Excavations at the ancient sites of Megiddo, Beth Shan and Gezer show how powerfully fortified these cities were and why they were not captured and occupied by Israel in Joshua's day. Many other fortified towns were taken, however, so that Israel became firmly established in the land as the dominant power. Apart from Jericho and Ai, Joshua is reported to have burned only Hazor, so attempts to date these events by destruction levels in the mounds of Canaan's ancient cities are questionable undertakings. It must also be remembered that other groups were involved in campaigns in the region about this time, among whom were Egyptian rulers and the Sea Peoples (including the Philistines). There had also been much intercity warfare among the Canaanites, and afterward the period of the judges was marked by general turbulence.

Much of the data from archaeology appears to support a date for Joshua's invasion c. 1250 BC. This fits well with an exodus that would then have taken place 40 years earlier under the famous Rameses II, who ruled from the Nile delta at a city with the same name. It also places Joseph in Egypt in a favorable situation. Four hundred years before Rameses II the pharaohs were the Semitic Hyksos, who also ruled from the delta near the land of Goshen.

On the other hand, a good case can be made for the traditional viewpoint that the invasion occurred c. 1406 BC. The oppression would have taken place under Amunhotep II after the death of his father Thutmose III, who is known to have used slave labor in his building projects. The earlier date also fits better with the two numbers found in Judges 11:26 and 1 Kings 6:1, since it allows for an additional 150 years between Moses and the monarchy.

How should I read Joshua?

Joshua is the first book of what scholars call the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), which tells the story of Israel from the death of Moses to the time of the Babylonian exile. Despite its name, the Deuteronomistic History should not be read in the same way one reads modern history books. The biblical books do certainly contain historical accounts, but they also contain many other types of literary work: songs, liturgies, confessions, folktales, hero legends, administrative lists, etc. You should read Joshua, knowing that its primary concern is not with historical dates and events, but with telling the story of how God fulfills God's promises, both to Joshua's generation and to each subsequent generation of the book's readers.

Outline of Joshua

I. Part One: Conquering the Land (Chapters 1-12)

A. Preparation for the Conquest (1:1 – 5:12)

- 1) The commission of Joshua (1:1-18)
- 2) Rahab and the Spies (2:1-24)
- 3) Crossing the Jordan (3:1 – 5:1)
- 4) The consecration at Gilgal (5:2-12)

B. Conquest of the Land (5:13 – 12:24)

- 1) The Central Campaign (5:13 – 8:35)
 - a) Victory at Jericho (5:13 – 6:27)
 - b) Failure at Ai because of Achan's sin (7:1-26)
 - c) Victory at Ai (8:1 – 8:29)
 - d) Covenant renewed at Shechem (8:30-35)
- 2) The Southern and Northern Campaigns (9:1 – 11:15)
 - a) Introduction (9:1-2)
 - b) Southern Campaign (9:3 – 10:43)
 - (i) The treaty with the Gibeonites (9:3-27)
 - (ii) Joshua's defense of Gibeon (10:1-15)
 - (iii) The Southern cities are conquered (10:16-43)
 - c) Northern Campaign (11:1-15)
- 3) Summary of Conquests (11:16-23)
- 4) List of defeated kings (12:1-24)
 - a) Kings conquered by Moses (12:1-6)
 - b) Kings conquered by Joshua (12:7-21)

II. Part Two: Dividing the Land (Chapters 13-21)

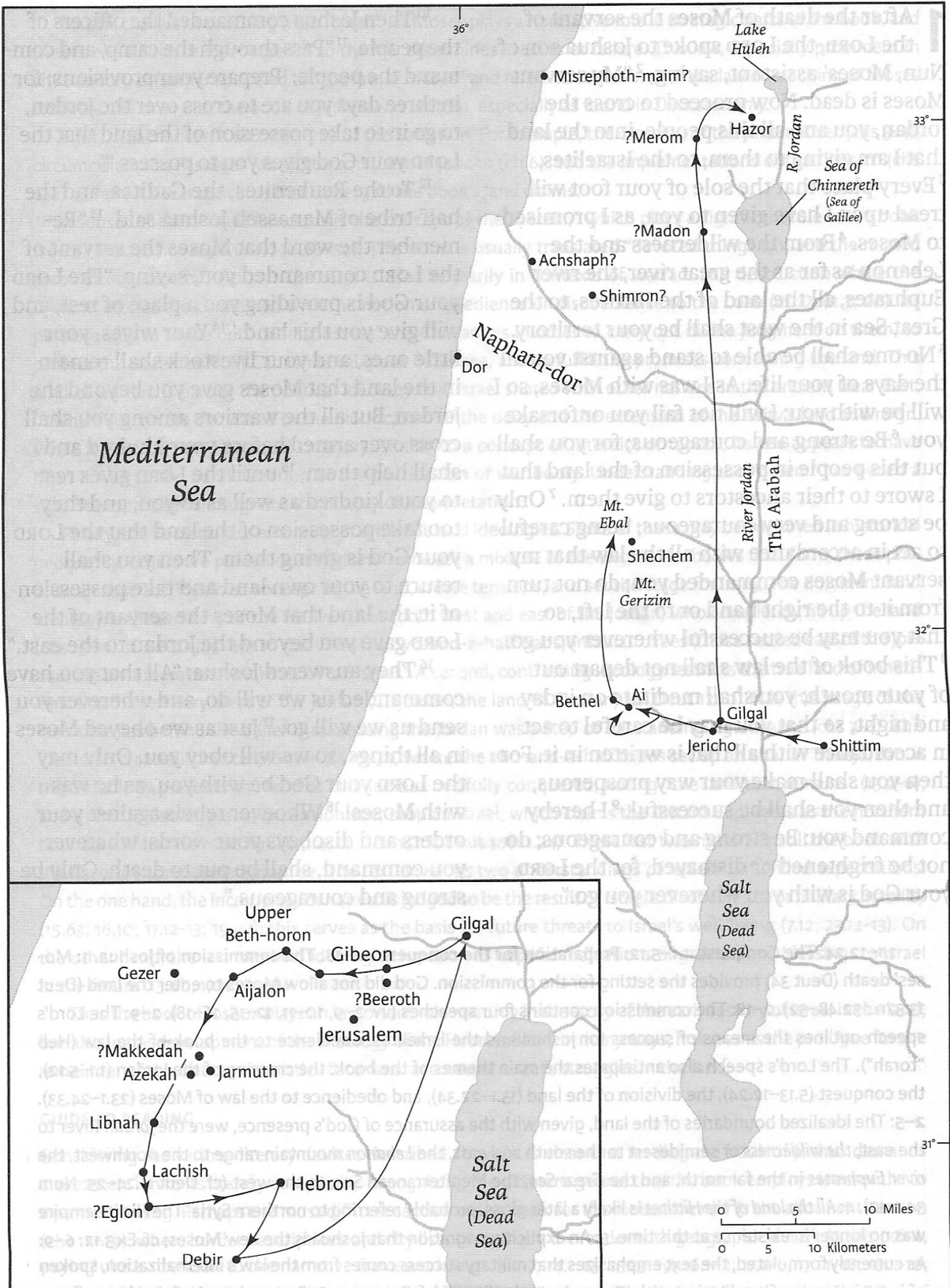
A. Division of the Land (13:1 – 21:45)

- 1) Remaining Land (13:1-7)
- 2) Land assigned by Moses to the tribes in Transjordan (13:8-33)
- 3) Land assigned by Joshua and Eleazar to the tribes of Canaan (14:1 – 19:51)
 - a) Introduction to the process (14:1-5)
 - b) The town given to Caleb (14:6-15)
 - c) Lands given to Judah and Joseph at Gilgal (15:1 – 17:18)
 - d) Seven other tribal allotments (18:1 – 19:50)
 - e) Summary of the process (19:51)
- 4) Allotments to persons of marginal status (20:1 – 21:42)
 - a) Six cities of refuge (20:1-9)
 - b) 48 cities of the priests (21:1-42)
- 5) Ironical conclusion (21:43-45)

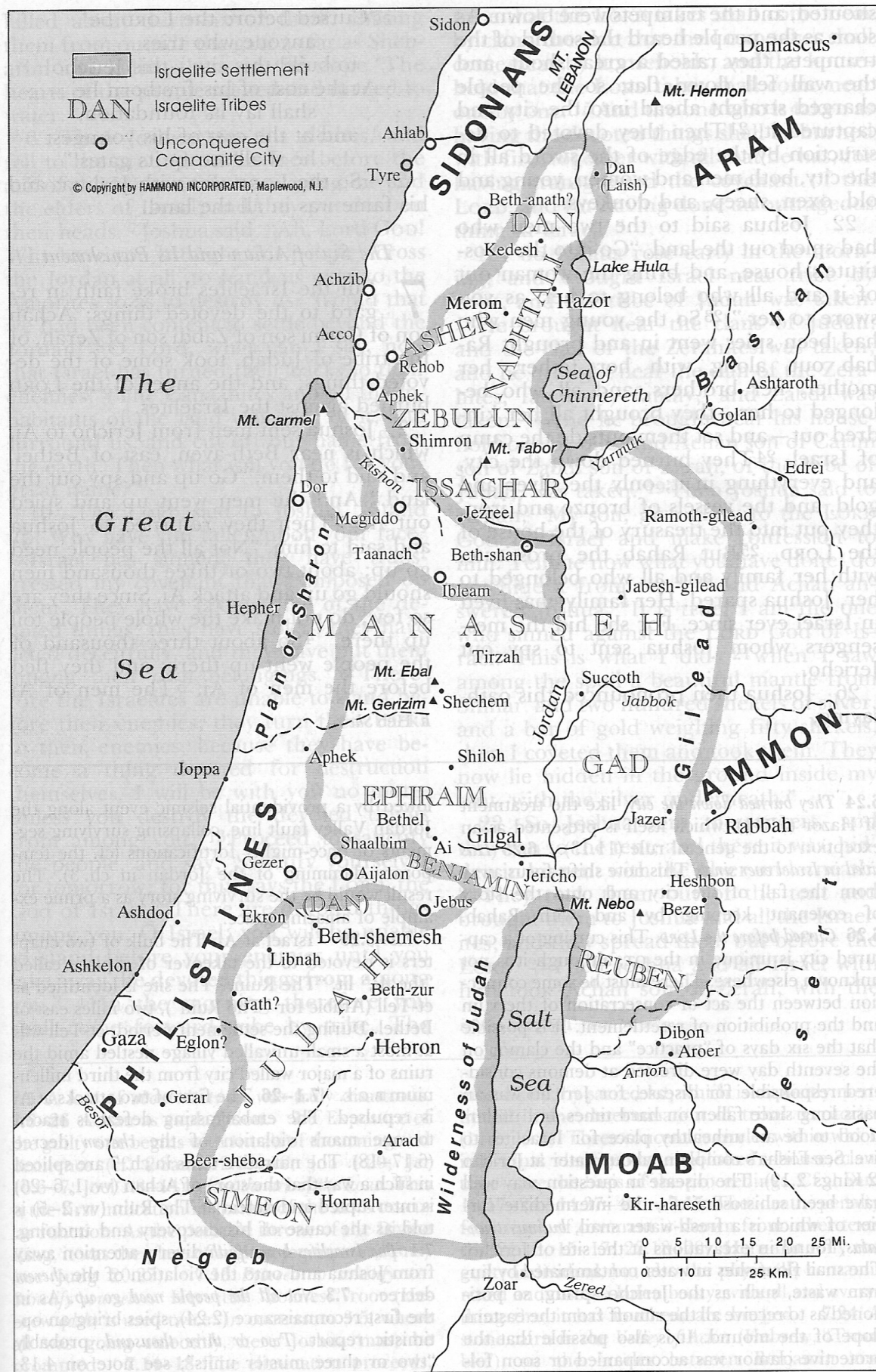
III. Part Three: The Call to Courageous Faith (Chapters 22-24)

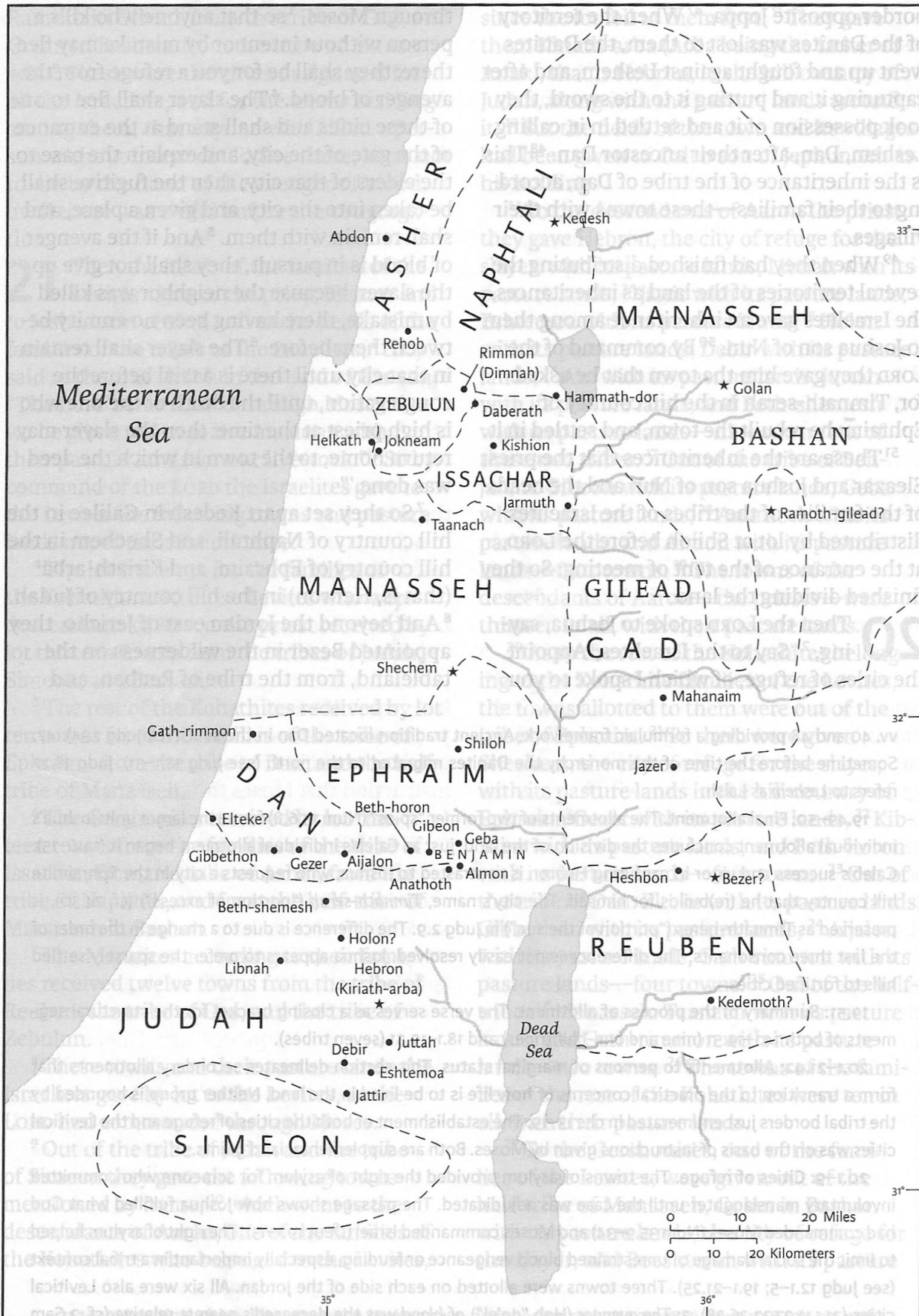
A. Epilogue (22:1 – 24:33)

- 1) Misunderstanding with the tribes of Jordan (22:1-34)
- 2) Joshua's Farewell Exhortation (23:1-16)
- 3) Renewal of the Covenant at Shechem (24:1-28)
- 4) The death and burial of Joshua and Eleazar (24:29-33)



The conquest of Canaan according to the book of Joshua.





The Levitical cities. Cities of refuge are highlighted with a star. The tribal boundaries are shown by a dashed line.

Resources

Introduction from The New Oxford Annotated Bible (NRSV), 2010

HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV), 1989

“Book of Joshua,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/nrs/joshua/>

“Joshua,” <https://www.enterthebible.org/oldtestament.aspx?rid=26>