

Bible Study # 40 Exodus 23.20–33 03–24–2021

Danger lay ahead for the people of Israel. They were going to face severe trials as they progressed towards Canaan. Protection was to be provided by an angel, but they had to be careful they were not enticed by foreign gods. The boundaries of the 'sworn land' were restated by Moses (v. 31) and the warning was given that the conquest was not going to be accomplished all at once.

This note is important, for in the book of Joshua the record of the conquest clearly shows that this is what happened. In principle, the land was fairly quickly conquered; in reality, the total conquest did not come until David and his men captured Jerusalem (2 Sam. 5:6-10).

20-21 The introductory particle 'See' (or 'Behold') draws attention to the very significant announcement that was made. No precise identification is given of the angel, but his prerogatives and mission link him with the revelation of the angel of the Lord. The first part of his mission was to guard the people on their journey and to bring them to Canaan, the place that God had designated for them (Gen. 12:6-7; 15:18-21; 26:3; 28:13).

The verb used of God's action regarding the land is stronger in meaning than just 'prepare', for it carries with it the overtones of divine certainty. To rebel against the angel would be to rebel against God. This is made clear by the reference to the angel not forgiving rebellion, and the fact that God's name dwelt in him. In a similar way, God's name resided on the tabernacle (Deut. 12:5, 11) and the temple (1 Kings 8:29).

In spite of such a clear direction, Israel did rebel in the wilderness as noted in Psalm 78:17, 40, 56, in each case using the same verb for 'rebel' as here.

Two aspects in this verse are related to covenantal formulation. First, the words, 'If you listen carefully and do all that he says', is an example of a formula that is analogous to ones in the extra-biblical texts, when a superior was speaking to an inferior. Implicit obedience was required of covenantal servants.

Secondly, the promise was that obedience to the Lord would mean He would be an enemy to Israel's enemies and oppose those who opposed them. One of the features of many of the extra-biblical treaties in the Near East was the assurance that the superior would defend his vassals if attacked.

This is precisely what the Lord says He will do for Israel. Defeat of Israel's enemies was based on obedience (see Lev. 26:7; Deut. 6:19), while defeat of Israel was to be a mark she had departed from God (Lev. 26:17, 25, 32; Num. 14:42; Deut. 1:42).

The role of the angel in leading the people to the sworn land is reiterated (cf. v. 20). The land to which they were headed was occupied by a variety of tribal groups – Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivites and Jebusites – but the assurance was that God would destroy them.

The verb used for this action basically means to hide, but came to denote non-existence or being obliterated. It is used a few times in the Old Testament of annihilation of Israel's enemies (Exod. 9:15; 2 Chron. 32:21; Zech. 11:8). Other passages deal with the detestable practices of the Gentiles in Canaan, and the need for their total destruction.

God's ultimate judgment on sin and unbelief found a preliminary fulfilment in the process of the conquest of Canaan. Eventually not all the Canaanites were obliterated, and the remainder became slaves under Solomon's reign (1 Kings 9:20-21), except for the Gibeonites whose treaty with Joshua was honored (Josh. 9:1-26).

One of the problems for Israel entering Canaan was going to be the attraction of heathen gods. No worship was to be rendered to them, nor service given to them. 'Serve' can have a wide meaning, though it is better to retain the translation 'serve' (esv) rather than change to 'worship' (niv). Neither should there be any imitation of heathen practices, while their sacred stones were to be broken in pieces.

The 'sacred stones' were cultic pillars that had to be destroyed, while Israel was told later not to follow this pattern, as such objects were things hated by God (Deut. 16:22). The thrust of this verse is expanded in Deuteronomy 4:15-31 and 7:12-26.

The negative command regarding worship of false gods is followed in verse 25 with the positive command. Israel's devotion was to be to the Lord alone. God's care was to rule over every aspect of their lives, including food, water, health, fertility, and longevity. These promises were not given irrespective of obedience to the Lord, but like all the other promises were conditional upon faithful adherence to the terms of the covenant.

The later announcement of covenantal blessings covered the same general areas as here (Deut. 28:1-6). There does not seem to be any real difference in meaning between 'In your land, I will give you a full lifespan' and 'that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you' (20:12).

The Lord's 'terror' has already been referred to in the Song of the Sea (15:16), while the verb 'throw into confusion' was used in the describing what the Lord did to the Egyptian forces after the people of Israel had crossed the Red Sea (14:24). As strong encouragement to Israel in heading towards Canaan, God assured them that He would confront their enemies so that they would be like the Egyptians.

Rather than facing Israel, they would display their backs as they fled. Divine assistance would come to Israel's aid as they confronted belligerent opponents.

The reference to 'a hornet' is uncertain. This probably rests on the LXX translation, but the major dictionary of biblical Hebrew lists four possibilities. Even if 'hornet' is correct, yet rather than adopting a literal interpretation, it is possible that this is a use similar to the way that 'fly' and 'bee' occur in Isaiah 7:18 to depict the Assyrian army.

This understanding would mean that God was promising some intervention to help in the process of removing the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites from the path of Israel. On the other hand, it could refer to dejection on the part of the enemies, who having heard of what happened at the exodus from Egypt would be fearful of meeting the large contingent of Israelites.

The occupation of Canaan was not to be a speedy process since rapid expulsion of the inhabitants would result in vacant fields and the incursion of wild animals. This is confirmed in the later historical references (see especially Judg. 1:27-36). Only 'little by little' would Israel enter into the full occupation of the allotted territory.

The book of the covenant concludes with reference to the extent of the sworn land and warnings regarding relationships with the existing inhabitants. Treaties between Israel and these peoples were forbidden, as were any approximation to their worship practices. The boundaries of the land that God had in store for Israel are set out in verse 31, being given in a form slightly different from other passages dealing with the same territory.

Here, 'the sea of reeds' is mentioned, referring, not to the Red Sea, but to the upper portion of the Gulf of Aqaba, as in 1 Kings 9:26. 'The Sea of the Philistines' was the Mediterranean, this being one of the various expressions used to describe it. To the south 'the desert' was the limit, probably meaning the Negev area, while in the north-east the boundary was set as the Euphrates River.

The variation in descriptions of the land God swore to give to Israel points to the fact that it was a broad concept, rather than territory that could be surveyed and pegged with minute precision. The inhabitants were also to be given over to Israel, so that they could dispossess them. No treaty arrangements were to be made with them or with their gods.

The usual verb for initiating a covenant arrangement is used, though with a different preposition than normal. The reference to 'gods' is significant, as often the lives of people and their gods were so closely intertwined that it was hard to make a difference between them (cf. the judgment not only of the people, but also of the gods of Egypt, 12:12).

The continuing presence of Gentiles in the land would easily become a snare to Israel. Their idols would be prominently displayed, and their religious practices could easily appeal, especially as they had altars and offered sacrifices. Separation was a divine demand on the Lord's redeemed people.

Our next study will be Exodus 24:1–18.