

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
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Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua Chapters 16-17 – Part 2
The Tribe of Yosef

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INTRODUCTION

Last time, we began to consider the account of Yosef's tribal assignment, detailed in chapters 16 and 17 of Sefer Yehoshua. We first studied the special relationship between Yosef and the tribe of Yehuda, whose territory was spelled out in chapters 14 and 15. From that study it emerged that the Book was not arbitrary in singling out these two for consecutive and lengthy concern, for together they constituted the linchpins of ancient Israel. As the most important and powerful of the tribes, it was Yosef and Yehuda, eventually the so-called Northern Kingdom and Southern Kingdom, who together charted the destiny of the people of Israel during the thousand-year period of Biblical history.

In the last lesson we investigated the antecedents to that binary arrangement, focusing upon the sons of Ya'acov – the progenitors of the tribes, and especially Ya'acov's wives – the two sisters Rachel and Leah. What emerged from that analysis was a cautious reading that at once highlighted the great potential for diversity and cultural richness that the tribal arrangement yielded, but also the possibility for much more ominous developments such as rivalry, dissent, and even confrontation and internecine warfare. In retrospect, Biblical history was colored more by the latter than by the former, as the people of Israel struggled mightily but never fully succeeded in transcending narrow tribalism in order to embrace the true unity of purpose and strength of resolve that characterizes the most developed expressions of nationhood. The realization of that ideal vision of concord, harmony, and collective mission, wistfully enunciated by Israel's ancient prophets, would be delayed interminably until the end of days.

DETAILED BORDERS

As we begin to carefully analyze the structure of chapters 16 and 17, many other comparisons and contrasts to the "Yehuda" account of chapters 14 and 15 begin to emerge, thus reinforcing the implied connection between the two tribes. First of all, both accounts preserve very lengthy and detailed descriptions of the respective tribal boundaries. For Yosef there are understandably two separate lists, one each for its two constituent clans of Efraim and Menashe, while for Yehuda there is but one. For Yehuda, a thorough listing of specific towns, arranged according to their topographical regions, follows the delineation of the tribal borders, but for the clans of Yosef there is only a demarcation of boundaries. In both cases, though, the narrative pays close attention to place names and landscapes, devoting more detailed attention to these two tribes than to most of the others (who anyway are only introduced later).

In general terms, the tribal portion of Yosef mirrored that of Yehuda, for it too stretched from the Jordan River until the Mediterranean. Efraim's lands were situated just northwest of the Dead Sea,

separated from Yehuda by only a small strip of territory assigned to the tribe of Binyamin (whose portion is spelled out in chapter 18). The territory of Efraim stretched along the coast to the west and along the banks of the Jordan to the east, continuing northwards until the natural border provided by the "wadi Kane" that descends from the hill country to the Mediterranean Sea just south of Shechem. The tribe of Menashe was positioned north of Efraim, and their territory extended further northwards all the way to the fertile Valley of Yizra'el that is situated south of the Carmel range (modern day Haifa) and the Sea of Kinneret. Of course, Menashe also had lands on the Jordan River's eastern side that paralleled those on the west, for the fertile Gil'ad and Bashan (modern day Golan Heights) had earlier been assigned to part of the clan by Moshe.

PROMINENT WOMEN

In addition to providing detailed border descriptions for Yehuda as well as for Yosef, the text in both passages also balances the anonymous and dry boundary descriptions with a colorful and telling personal component in which women are featured with unusual prominence. In the case of Yehuda, the text incorporated the bittersweet reminiscences of Calev son of Yefune (14:6-15) and somewhat later mentioned the efforts of Achsa his daughter to secure springs of water (15:18-19). Recall that Calev had challenged any potential suitors for his daughter to first capture the fortified town of Kiryat Sefer. Otniel son of Kenaz his kinsman did so and was awarded not only headstrong Achsa as his wife, but a portion of land as well, presumably in the environs of the captured Canaanite stronghold. But alas, the land was arid and infertile, prompting Achsa to dramatically plead with her father for a deed to sources of water as well. Significantly, the text relates that Otniel himself, though admittedly a capable warrior, was reluctant to press their claim to the springs, and only did so after being urged along by his able and ambitious wife! The implication is clear: while the warrior men of Israel did not fall back from their responsibility to conquer the land and wrest it from its Canaanite grip, the much more important task of successfully settling it was equally a function of Israel's industrious women, whose love for Canaan was no less ardent.

For Yosef, we have the mention of the five daughters of Zelofchad, spirited women all, who determinedly secure for themselves in perpetuity their deceased father's tribal portion in the land (17:3-4). The background to their story is related in Sefer Bemidbar Chapter 27, where the people of Israel, still stationed on the Jordan's eastern banks, underwent a census. At that time, the men of military age were counted in preparation for the war of conquest, and the mechanism for apportioning the land according to tribe and clan was introduced. Suddenly, the five daughters of Zelofchad appeared before Moshe, El'azar the High Priest, the elders and the whole congregation of Israel, who had all solemnly assembled at the forecourt of the Tabernacle to ponder God's instructions. The women related:

Our father died in the wilderness, but he was not a member of the group that rallied against God as part of Korach's gathering. Rather, he died by his own transgression, but had no sons. Why should our father's name disappear from among his kin because he had no son? Instead, give us a portion (of land) among our father's brothers!

Moshe presented the women's reasonable case before God for His adjudication, and He did not disappoint:

The daughters of Zelofchad speak fittingly! Assign them an inheritance of land among their father's brothers, and transfer their father's portion to them. Further, tell the people of Israel that if a man dies without a son, then his portion is to be assigned to his daughter...this shall be a statute of law to the people of Israel...

Thus, in both narratives, that of Yehuda as well as that of Yosef, the text pointedly indicates that the women of those respective tribes demonstrated a sincere and serious attachment to the land and a willingness to overcome obstacles in order to secure their place in it. Significantly, these women were singled out by name, a fact that may come to emphasize the glaring difference between military triumph and settlement, the twin pillars of Sefer Yehoshua as a whole. While the former is typically secured by nameless masses of fighting men that triumph precisely because of the suppression and sacrifice of their individuality for the common good, the latter can only be achieved by specific personalities brave enough to clear and work their particular plot of land in order to build their own homes and raise their own families upon it. In the Biblical frame of reference, the woman or mother figure takes responsibility for the care of the house and the nurturing of the children, while warfare is undertaken by the men. In the end, of course, the contribution of both is essential for the overall success of the endeavor, and the double account of Yehuda and Yosef therefore mention both.

OVERCOMING CANAANITE RESISTANCE

Lastly, in both sections, the verses tell us that there were portions of the assigned territories that could not be settled in actuality because of an entrenched Canaanite presence that could not be dislodged. In the case of Yehuda, the stronghold of the Yevusite tribe who dwelt in the environs of Jerusalem remained beyond Yehuda's reach (15:63). In the case of Yosef, the Canaanite territories were more extensive: the town of Gezer in the coastal plane (16:10) in a region assigned as the tribal portion of Ephraim, as well as the fertile area of the Yizra'el valley encompassing the towns of Bet She'an, Yivle'am, Dor, 'Ein Dor, Ta'anach, and Megiddo, all in the lands of Menashe (17:11-13). This provides us with yet another indication that the conquest and settlement of the land of Canaan was a lengthy process over time that did not unfold instantaneously.

The account of Yosef's tribal boundaries concludes with an unusual discussion that ensues between its leaders and Yehoshua concerning the assignment of its territory:

The people of Yosef said to Yehoshua: "Why did you give me one portion, a single allotment and only one territory? See that I am numerous, for so much has God blessed me!" Yehoshua said to them: "If indeed you are numerous, then go up to the forested land and clear territory for yourself in the land of the Perizite and the Refaim, if the hill country of Ephraim is too small." But the people of Yosef said: "The hill country is insufficient, and the Canaanites who dwell in the valleys have chariots of iron, those that are in Bet She'an and its towns as well as those in the Valley of Yizra'el." But Yehoshua said to the house of Yosef, to Ephraim and to Menashe: "You are a numerous people and have great power, you shall not have only one allotment. You shall also have the hill country, for though it is forested you will cut it down and possess its limits. You shall also drive out the mighty Canaanites in spite of their chariots of iron!" (17:14-18).

THE CHALLENGE OF SETTLING THE LAND

In the initial exchange, Yosef expresses surprise at having received so little land. Though they are numerous, the portion of their assigned territory in the hill country that is both cultivatable as well as unsettled by the threatening Canaanites, is relatively small. Most of their allotted tribal lands are either forested and hence unsuitable for immediate settlement, or else already inhabited by the technologically

superior Canaanites, who farm the fertile valleys. How then are they to succeed in the new land if they have insufficient tracts for their needs?

Yehoshua listens attentively, but his response is unsympathetic. There is no choice but to clear the forests AND to dispossess the Canaanites. Both tasks represent, of course, very different challenges. The one involves the back-breaking labor associated with clearing the land of trees, brush and the ubiquitous limestone, erecting terraces on its sometimes steep slopes, and only then industriously engaging in the thankless occupation of the subsistence farmer until bounty can be wrung from the earth. The other is no less daunting, for it is to confront the iron chariots and horses of the Canaanites who dwell in the fertile and verdant valleys, while armed with only inferior light weapons of bronze. But, says Yehoshua, Yosef is capable of doing so. After all, wasn't the entire success of their conquest up to this point equally unlikely, considering the overwhelming military confederacies that they faced?

In essence, the conversation between Yosef and Yehoshua highlights the dual nature of Israel's challenge, the trial that has been deftly woven into all of the book's narratives from its beginning. The first half of the book addressed the military conquest of the land, the second that we stand to soon complete addresses its settlement, but at their core they both represent a single awesome task for the people of Israel: they must have sufficient strength of spirit to believe in themselves and in the rightness of their cause, while they must simultaneously maintain a steadfast trust in God's ongoing assistance. Armed with such an "arsenal", says Yehoshua, they will indeed be invincible.