

Israel's Legacy of Unfaithfulness – The Wilderness and Early Canaan Eras

I. Introduction

1. God's self-revelation – His proclamation of His *goodness* manifested in *lovingkindness* (covenant integrity and fidelity) set the stage for His renewal of the covenant.
2. Inheriting the land of Canaan was the covenant's immediate goal, *but as it was Yahweh's dwelling place where covenant Father and son would dwell together.*
3. Yahweh committed to bringing His son to His dwelling place, and thus the balance of the Exodus narrative recounts the construction of the tabernacle, climaxing with the Lord taking up residence there in preparation for the journey to Canaan. * 35:1-40:38

II. The Wilderness Era

A. Provision for the Journey to Canaan

1. Israel needed to be fully provisioned before departing Sinai for Canaan, and the Lord supplied this in two primary aspects: *relational* provision and *logistical* provision.
2. *Leviticus* (titled "And He Called" in Hebrew) details Yahweh's *relational* provision, which consisted of resource – centered in the Levitical priestly system – by which Israel's infidelity and defilement could be redressed and the covenant relationship maintained.
 - a. Hence Leviticus records various regulations and rituals for acceptable worship, for maintaining and restoring covenantal purity, and for remedying covenantal guilt.
 - b. This provision, then, included *practical instructions* to govern the Israelites' daily lives and their relationships with one another and their God, along with *priestly rituals and offerings* for maintaining those relationships and remedying failures regarding them.
3. In turn, the first part of *Numbers* (chaps. 1-9) records Yahweh's *logistical* provision for the journey to Canaan. This included instruction for ordering Israel's encampment (with Yahweh's sanctuary situated in the center of the camp), the process for moving the camp from one place to another, and the assignment of duties to the three Levitical clans (Kohath, Gershon, and Merari) in the task of handling and transporting the Lord's sanctuary.

B. The Wilderness Ordeal

1. Israel departed Sinai with Yahweh leading them, and yet their pattern of infidelity and rebellion reemerged almost from the moment they set out. They resented the manna and bemoaned their circumstance, and the Lord rebuked them with a fire that burned around the outskirts of the camp. But they ignored this warning and began openly lamenting their supposed loss of Egypt's rich provisions. Thus *Taberah* ("burned with fire") became *Kibroth-Hattaavah* ("graves of greediness") when Yahweh responded with a flood of quail culminating with a devastating plague. * Num. 11:1-35
2. Aaron and Miriam's rebellion soon followed, after which Israel set up camp in the *Wilderness of Paran* (10:11-12, 12:16). There the nation's future was profoundly altered, for it was there that Moses dispatched the twelve spies into Canaan, and that for two reasons:

- a. First, the people would be *encouraged* and *strengthened in their resolve* when the spies brought back first-hand news of the land's richness, even as the Lord had described it.
- b. But spying out the land would also *test Israel's faith*, for it would reveal Canaan's fortified cities and the powerful, militant people groups inhabiting its expanse.

The spies returned with a report that answered both intentions, and the result was that the hearts of the people melted and they conspired to appoint a new leader and return to Egypt.

Though Moses again interceded and pled the Lord's covenant faithfulness (Num. 14:11-19), this unbelief and rebellion would not go unanswered. Yahweh would preserve His covenant son, but now the nation would wander in the brutal, consuming wilderness until the entire adult generation had perished. The children, whom the adults claimed to fear for, would enter the land, along with Joshua and Caleb who alone had shown themselves faithful (14:20-45).

3. The book of Numbers records Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the *Plains of Moab* on the east side of the Jordan River, where the remnant nation camped just prior to crossing over into Canaan. *That long journey involved numerous episodes of testing and failure, all overarched by Yahweh's demonstrated commitment to His covenant and its outcome.* Beyond the mere fact of Israel's remarkable preservation for forty years, the Balaam episode perhaps served as the most poignant testimony to Yahweh's commitment (Num. 22-24).
4. Numbers concludes with Israel camped on the Plains of Moab and preparing to enter the land of Canaan. **Deuteronomy**, then, consists of a series of messages delivered by Moses in that place as his final words to the nation he had led for four decades. *Those messages followed the prophetic model of rehearsing the past for the sake of understanding the present and the future.* Specifically, Moses reminded the people of their history with their covenant God, with a view to rightly perceiving and ordering their future with Him in the covenant land.

Thus Deuteronomy ties together the great features of Israel's existence and shows their covenantal significance. They include the Exodus, the wilderness period, the era of the judges, the later monarchy, the future exile, and Israel's ultimate restoration in Messiah.

III. In the Promised Land

A. The Conquest of Canaan

1. Deuteronomy ends the Pentateuch and has Israel standing at the threshold of its inheritance, while the book of **Joshua** records the period of Canaan's conquest and settlement.

Though it is a triumphal book that celebrates Yahweh's great victories on Israel's behalf, it also continues the pessimistic and foreboding tone that runs through all of Israel's history.

2. Thus Joshua's final exhortations to Israel closely paralleled Moses':
 - a. Like his predecessor, Joshua reminded the people of Yahweh's great acts of faithfulness as their covenant Father-God, and he called them to fully devote themselves to Him.
 - b. As Moses had, Joshua exhorted his brethren to faithfully live out their sonship, while also warning them that judgment and wrath lay ahead because they would not be able to fulfill their covenant calling (cf. Joshua 23:1-24:27 with Deuteronomy 29:1-31:21).

B. The Pre-Monarchy Period

1. Joshua ends with Israel secure in the promised land, with each tribe possessing its own inheritance. And once again, the nation had voiced its commitment to Yahweh and the covenant (24:1-18). But Joshua, like Moses before him, knew this commitment would not stand. It hadn't in the past, and it wouldn't as Israel moved into the future (24:19-28).

Thus Joshua's death introduced a prolonged, cyclical era of unfaithfulness, rebellion, and national decline in which appointed judges oversaw Israel's national life.

- a. This era is recorded in the book of **Judges**, and continued up until the emergence of the monarchy. During this time, Israel had no human king; Yahweh was King as covenant Lord, and He administered His rule through judges He raised up to lead His people.
 - b. There was no human king in Israel, but more importantly, Yahweh Himself was not regarded as King by His Israelite subjects. *Israel was to administer Yahweh's lordship as image-son, but the people were living as their own individual lords.* * ref. 17:6, 21:25
 - c. This circumstance is thematic in the book of Judges, and the text substantiates this theme by recounting a repeated historical cycle in which Israel's national life was defined by **rest, complacency, apostasy, subjugation, repentance, deliverance** and **restoration**.
2. This pattern was especially pronounced in the era of the Judges, but it characterized Israel throughout its history, beginning at Mount Sinai.
 - a. Israel was a corrupt and wayward *son*, and this failed sonship expressed itself in failed **brotherhood** among the Israelite people. Thus the book of Judges records progressive isolation and disunity among the twelve tribes, which finally culminated in intertribal warfare (19:1-20:48) – *a phenomenon that would later be repeated in conflicts between the two Israelite kingdoms of Judah and Israel.*
 - b. So the nation's failed sonship expressed itself in failed **mission**. Israel was to lead the nations into the knowledge of Yahweh through its faithfulness as "son of God." But rather than bearing truthful witness to its covenant God and Father, Israel testified against Him by aligning itself (in its perspectives, lifestyle and worship) with the nations around it (ref. Judges 3:5-7, 6:25-30, 8:22-35, 17:1-18:31, etc.). *Indeed, Israel fell so far as to become indistinguishable from Sodom and Gomorrah – godless nations the Israelites regarded as epitomizing human sin and rebellion against the true God (19:1-30).*

By each man doing what was right in his own eyes, Israel effectively transformed its communion with its Father in His holy habitation into life within an idol temple.

Moses and Joshua discerned the emptiness of Israel's commitment to Yahweh, and they sternly warned the people of what lay ahead for them and their offspring. *But what is remarkable is how quickly their warnings were realized, and how even repeated acts of mercy, deliverance and restoration failed to secure Israel's faithfulness to their faithful Lord. Every man was his own "lord," and it was inevitable that the Israelites would seek a king in their own image – a ruler who would model their own notions of power and kingship.* This is the mindset that drove Israel's longing for a king – a king who would make them like the other nations, and it explains why they found in Saul the perfect answer to their desire. Thus the apostasy of Judges bore its fruit in the emergent monarchy in 1 Samuel.