

# The Book of Joshua

Lesson 3

Tribal Inheritances

Manuscript



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#### INTRODUCTION

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When the head of a large family business grew old, he determined that it was time for his five sons to take over. So, the father gathered his sons in the central office, handed each of them legal shares in the company and laid it on the line. “Each of you now owns a part of the business,” he said. “And all of you have to take your places and work together as never before.”

In many ways, Joshua did much the same with the tribes of Israel when he grew old. He knew that it was time for them to move forward without him. So, he gave each of the tribes inheritances in the Promised Land, and called for them to work together as never before.

This is the third lesson in our series on *The Book of Joshua*, and in this lesson we’ll look at Israel’s “Tribal Inheritances.” We’ll see how the second major division of Joshua called the people of Israel to live together as heirs of the Promised Land.

In earlier lessons, we summarized the original meaning of the book of Joshua in this way:

**The book of Joshua was written about Israel’s victorious conquest, tribal inheritances and covenant loyalty in Joshua’s day to address similar challenges facing later generations.**

Just as in Joshua’s day, the original audience faced the challenges of defeating their enemies, securing their tribal inheritances and renewing their covenant loyalty to God. So, our author wrote his book to guide his original audience in each of these areas.

To accomplish this purpose, our book unfolds in three major divisions: Israel’s victorious conquest in chapters 1–12, Israel’s tribal inheritances in chapters 13–22, and Israel’s covenant loyalty in chapters 23, 24. In this lesson, we’ll examine the second major division of our book, the tribal inheritances allotted to Israel.

On a large scale, this division of Joshua consists of three main steps. It begins with the initial boundaries of Israel’s inheritance in 13:1-14. It then moves to the specific allotments of inheritance given to each of Israel’s tribes in 13:15–21:45. And it closes with a narrative that focuses on Israel’s national unity in the days of Joshua in 22:1-34.

Following this outline, we’ll explore Israel’s tribal inheritances by looking at each of these three steps. Then we’ll close with some reflections on the Christian Application of this portion of our book. Let’s begin with the first step: the initial boundaries of Israel’s inheritance.

## INITIAL BOUNDARIES

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As we saw in a previous lesson, the author of Joshua understood that Israel had inherited large regions of the land promised to Joshua. And this inheritance was a special part of God's ongoing call for humanity to have dominion over the earth. But as we're about to see, our author also recognized that, in the days of Joshua, Israel didn't receive all of the lands promised to their patriarch Abraham. Rather, God only gave Israel a foothold, a strong presence in a portion of it. But from our author's point of view, it was essential that every generation of Israel identify and secure the lands that were within those initial sacred boundaries.

We'll look at two dimensions of this record of Israel's initial boundaries. First, we'll note its basic structure and content, and second, we'll turn to the original meaning of this portion of our book. Consider first its structure and content.

### STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

This section of Joshua divides into two episodes. First, 13:1-7 focuses on the boundaries of Israel's land in Cisjordan, the land of Canaan west of the Jordan River. And second, 13:8-14 gives attention to the boundaries of Israel's land in Transjordan, the territories east of the Jordan River.

As we approach this part of Joshua, we need to keep in mind a bit of background on the boundaries of Israel's inheritance. In Genesis 15:18-21, God promised Abraham's descendants a land that would extend to the west from "the Wadi of Egypt." This wadi, or "river" or "brook," as it may be translated, was either an eastern branch of the Nile that no longer exists, or Wadi El-Arish that still exists east of the Nile today. And toward the northeast, Abraham's land would reach as far as "the great river, the river Euphrates." From there, Israel would spread the blessings of God to the ends of the earth. But in reality, Israel's lands didn't reach these boundaries until the time of David's kingdom. In Joshua's time, God granted Israel only a portion, a foretaste of these territories on both sides of the Jordan. But as our book indicates, settling securely in these lands was a crucial first step for Israel.

**Beginning with Abraham, God promised a people would come, and that people would be a blessing to the earth, would have important roles to play. But one of the things, also, would be that he'd give them a land. That's key to who the Israelites were. They were a people who, when they finally left Egypt and got that land, understood that they didn't deserve it. God had paved the way for them to get a place on the planet that they hadn't earned, that they didn't have any right to, but that he gave them by his own promise and his certain plan to make it happen.**

— Dr. Douglas Stuart

## Boundaries in Cisjordan

The first episode on the boundaries in Cisjordan builds on the list of territories that Joshua had conquered in chapter 12. It opens in 13:1 with the fact that Joshua was “old and advanced in years,” and that “there remain[ed] yet very much land to possess.” The land that remained was in the region of the Philistines and in the northern regions of Canaan. In 13:6, God promised, “I myself will drive [the inhabitants] out.” So, in verse 7, God commanded Joshua to go ahead and treat all of Canaan as Israel’s inheritance.

## Boundaries in Transjordan

In the second episode, in 13:8-14, our author completed his sketch of Israel’s initial inheritance by describing the outer boundaries in Transjordan — the lands to the east of the Jordan. Our author began in 13:8 with the note that Moses had granted these territories as Israel’s inheritance before he died.

Israel’s initial tribal inheritances east of the Jordan extended to the south as far as Moab and to the north as far as Mount Hermon. But our author noted in 13:13 that the Israelites had not yet driven out some groups, like “the Geshurites or the Maacathites.” Still, Moses had designated the entire region as Israel’s inheritance by the time of Joshua. And to be as comprehensive as possible, our author also added a parenthetical note in 13:14. He explained that the Levites received an inheritance, but theirs was “the offerings by fire to the Lord,” rather than land.

**The question of geography in Joshua is very important, and the boundaries of the land is a very important question, especially related to mountains... And what they do, they create a boundary of what the Holy Land will be, and it becomes this marker, this waypoint, if you will. The northern point of Israel is Mount Hermon, traditionally, and then the eastern boundaries of Israel are created by the mountains, especially of Edom in the south, and then the highlands of Moab, the mountains, the plateau, the hill country, if you will, of Moab and Bashan. So, all across what is modern-day Jordan — all the way, northern Jordan to southern Jordan — that creates the eastern boundaries of the land.**

— Dr. Tom Petter

With the basic structure and content of the initial boundaries of Israel’s inheritance in mind, we’re in a position to ask about the original meaning of these verses. Why did our author begin this division of his book with a sketch of Israel’s inheritance at this stage in history?

## ORIGINAL MEANING

To answer this question, we must remember that in the days of the judges, the monarchy and the Babylonian exile, Israel struggled to gain and maintain control over the territories that God had granted them. Conflicts among Israel's tribes, trouble from other peoples within these lands, attacks by desert tribes, and eventually catastrophic invasions by great empires like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon, repeatedly diminished Israel's hold on the land that God had promised to Abraham.

By reminding his audience of the extent of these territories, our author pointed out how important it was for them to secure control over these lands. It was only then that Israel could move toward gaining more lands and spreading God's blessings to all the nations of the world.

To convince his audience that the initial boundaries of Israel's inheritance were never to be forgotten, our author wove the five themes he'd highlighted earlier in his book into these chapters as well.

### Divine Authority

In the first place, he pointed out how divine authority had established Israel's inheritance. He began his focus on Cisjordan in 13:1 with the words: "the Lord said to [Joshua]." And in 13:6, he reported that God told Joshua to "allot the land to Israel ... as I have commanded you." Beyond this, divine authority also established the borders of Israel's lands in Transjordan. In 13:8 we read that these were the lands that "Moses the servant of the Lord gave them."

The author of Joshua knew how easy it was for Israel to settle for occupying only a portion of these territories. So, he made it clear that if later generations lost their devotion to possessing the full extent of these lands, they would be turning against the authority of God and his authoritative human representatives.

### God's Covenant

In the second place, the author of Joshua noted that the initial boundaries of Israel's lands were secured by God's covenant with Israel. Regarding Cisjordan, God explained in 13:6 that all of Canaan belonged to Israel as an "inheritance," or "*nachalah*" (נַחֲלָה) in Hebrew. As we noted in earlier lessons, these territories were called Israel's inheritance because, in his covenant with Abraham, God promised them as an enduring possession for Israel. And God confirmed this promise in his covenant in Moses at Mount Sinai. In much the same way, in 13:8, Transjordan is also called Israel's inheritance.



By drawing attention to God’s covenant in this way, our author’s message was unmistakable. Every generation of Israel should acknowledge that Israel’s possession and control of these lands was established by God’s sacred covenant with their ancestors.

**In the book of Genesis, when God establishes a covenant relationship with Abraham, he promises him, really, four things. He promises him many descendants — they’ll number like the stars in the sky, the sand on the seashore. He promises that he’s going to protect them — that he’s going to be their God, that he’ll be with them, that he’ll prosper them. He also promises that, of course, they’ll become a blessing to all nations, a messianic promise that the Messiah will come through the Jewish people, the Hebrews. But fourthly, he promises that the people of God in the Old Testament will have a land of possession, the land of Canaan... And it’s not only a general promise to the people of Israel, but it’s specific to the tribes that each of them within the family of God, so to speak, have a particular inheritance.**

— Rev. Kevin Labby

## Standard of Moses’ Law

In the third place, the account of Israel’s initial boundaries also stressed that they accorded with the standard of Moses’ law. For example, in the opening of the section on Cisjordan, God said in 13:1, “there remains yet very much land to possess.” This wasn’t a new revelation. It was based on areas that Moses had directed Israel to possess in passages like Deuteronomy 20:16, 17. In much the same way, when it came to Transjordan, 13:8 refers to “their inheritance, which Moses gave them.” The law of Moses granted possession of these lands across the Jordan in passages like Numbers 32:33-42 and Deuteronomy 3:8-17.

The author of Joshua drew attention to the law of Moses to address anyone in his audience who questioned their need to possess Israel’s initial tribal inheritances. Moses himself had commanded Israel to take control of these territories.

## God’s Supernatural Power

In the fourth place, as our author dealt with the initial boundaries of Israel’s territories, he also drew attention to God’s supernatural power. In the section dealing with Cisjordan, God said, in 13:6, “I myself will drive [the remaining Canaanites] out from before the people of Israel.” And in the episode dealing with Transjordan, he noted that possession of these lands resulted from supernatural victories that God had granted Moses. In 13:10, he referred to the well-known miraculous victory over “Sihon king of the Amorites.” And in verse 12, he recalled the miraculous victory over “Og in Bashan.”

Both of these episodes indicated to the original audience that they must put their hope in divine intervention on their behalf. Only then could they realistically hope to gain and hold their inheritance in Cisjordan and Transjordan.

## All Israel

In the fifth place, the record of Israel's initial boundaries also focused on the participation of all Israel. Joshua 13:7 notes that Cisjordan was to be divided among "the nine tribes and half the tribe of Manasseh." Joshua 13:8 mentions that Transjordan was the inheritance of "the other half of the tribe of Manasseh, the Reubenites and the Gadites." To highlight the theme of all Israel even further, 13:14 also mentions the special inheritance of the tribe of Levi.

As he stressed time and again, our author made it clear to his original audience that the tribes of Israel must stand together. The unity of the people of God was essential to establishing their presence throughout the initial boundaries on both sides of the Jordan.

Having seen the initial boundaries of Israel's tribal inheritances, we should turn to our second main topic in this lesson: the specific allotments of inheritances to each tribe. How were these lands apportioned?

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## SPECIFIC ALLOTMENTS

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In this part of his book, our author went beyond identifying Israel's boundaries and focused on the particular portions assigned to specific tribes. As we're about to see, these allotments were problematic because some tribes received larger and better inheritances than others. Not surprisingly, the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings tell us that these disparities led to all kinds of distrust, abuse, division, even war among the tribes. To help his original audience deal with these kinds of troubles, our author called for them to respect the specific tribal allotments that God had established in the days of Joshua.

We'll look at our author's presentation of the specific allotments of Israel's inheritance in our usual way. First, we'll examine its basic structure and content, and second, we'll explore its original meaning. Let's turn first to the structure and content of this part of Joshua.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The record of Israel's specific tribal allotments, in 13:15–21:45, can be confusing. It contains long lists of peoples, regions, cities, towns and villages, interspersed with a number of brief stories and quick asides. To grasp the main ideas in all of this variety, it

helps to see that it divides into two main parts: the tribal allotments Moses directed in Transjordan, in 13:15-33, and a much larger record of the tribal allotments that Joshua directed in Cisjordan in 14:1–21:45.

The record of tribal allotments in Transjordan is rather short. It begins with the tribe of Reuben in 13:15-23. The tribe of Gad appears in verses 24-28. And the half-tribe of Manasseh's allotment in Transjordan follows in verses 29-31. Then, our author closed this section, as he did the preceding section, by mentioning the special inheritance of the tribe of Levi in verses 32, 33.

**Because the tribe of Levi was chosen as the tribe that served and executed the service of the priesthood for the entire nation of Israel, the tribe did not receive any land inheritance. It's said in Joshua 13 that *God* was their inheritance. Because of this, the tribe of Levi was excluded from the allotments among the twelve tribes of Israel, and the portion the tribe of Levi received was the offerings that were made by the Israelites — the gifts and tithes given by the entire nation of Israel.**

— Rev. Henryk Turkanik, translation

In these verses, the author of Joshua carefully delineated which portions of lands to the east of the Jordan were allotted to Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh. From a large-scale perspective, these allotments may seem clear enough, but for these tribes, the divisions were not as straightforward. Overlapping territories and disagreements over borders made our author explain in some detail to whom specific regions, and even towns and villages, belonged.

**When modern Christians read chapters 13–22 in the book of Joshua, they encounter something that does not really capture our imagination, and that is these long lists of boundaries for this tribe and that tribe, and this tribe had these cities and those tribes had those cities, and so on and so on it goes. In fact, sometimes when people read these as modern people, they look at it and say, “What in the world does this have to do with religion?” or “What's this have to do with faith at all?” Well, in the original setting of the book of Joshua, it had a great deal to do with the faith of Israel and their walk with God as individual tribes and as a unified people, because we have to remember that God, as the king, had given or allocated places in the world where each of the twelve tribes of Israel were to exist. It was to be their permanent inheritance, something that they were to hold onto and was to actually be the orientation, their homeland, their piece of the homeland for the entire nation of Israel.**

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Following this, our author gave a much longer record of the specific tribal allotments Joshua made in Cisjordan. These materials divide into six main sections.

## Opening Summary

They begin in 14:1-5 with a brief opening summary of Joshua's actions and how they reflected what Moses had already done in Transjordan. This section also notes more than once that Joshua's assignments of inheritances in Cisjordan were in accordance with the will of God.

## Closing Summary

In balance with this first portion, the record of allotments in Cisjordan ends with a closing summary in 21:43-45. Our author explained in 21:43 that all the tribes "took possession of [their lands], and they settled there." And to indicate to his audience how ideal the situation was, our author closed this entire section in verse 45 with the declaration that "Not one word of all the good promises that the Lord had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass."

**In Joshua 13–22, we find the realization of God's covenant promises to Israel, because in those chapters we find the land apportionment to the various of the twelve tribes. And particularly noteworthy is 21:45, that not one of God's promises had failed, pointing the reader back to what God had promised to Abraham, to give him a place, to make him a people, and to be present among his people. And when the land is fully apportioned, we now see Israel resting in the Promised Land that God had promised Abraham long ago, starting back in Genesis 12.**

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

## Judah

Four main sections stand between these two bookends. They begin with Judah, Israel's most prominent tribe, in 14:6–15:63. According to these verses, Judah received a very large inheritance, stretching southward to the Negev and toward the boundary of Edom. To the west, the border reached the land of Philistia and extended along the coast of the Mediterranean as far as the Wadi of Egypt. It reached northward along the Mediterranean coast slightly north of Jerusalem — or "Jebus" as it was called at the time — and to the east as far as the Dead Sea.

It's understandable why our author placed Judah's allotment first in this list and highlighted how much Judah had received. According to Genesis 49:8-12, Judah was destined to be the royal tribe of Israel. Our author highlighted the honor given to Judah, first, by providing a short narrative about the lands given to the prominent Judahite warrior, Caleb. Then, he went on to mention by name some 126 towns and villages in Judah's territory — far more than he listed for any other tribe.

## **Ephraim & Manasseh**

After the record of Judah's southern allotment in Cisjordan, we find a second lengthy record, the prominent allotments given to the tribes of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh in chapters 16, 17.

Ephraim and Manasseh received a great deal of land in the northern regions of Canaan. Their allotment extended from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea, with Ephraim south of Manasseh. These territories were among the most fertile in all of the Promised Land. In addition to this, you'll recall that half of the tribe of Manasseh had already been given land to the east of the Jordan.

It's no wonder that these tribes received the honor of possessing such a large and rich portion of Israel's inheritance. As Genesis 48, 49 explain, Ephraim and Manasseh were Joseph's sons. And Joseph was greatly honored because he was so faithful to God in Egypt. He replaced Reuben as Jacob's firstborn and received the firstborn's double inheritance through his two sons.

**So, Ephraim and Manasseh are Joseph's sons. They're not sons of Jacob — Jacob being the man who got his name changed to Israel — and Jacob had these twelve sons. One of them, Joseph, was sold as a slave in Egypt. And then another, Levi, he was sort of withdrawn from the count of the twelve when the Lord decided to take for himself the tribe of Levi instead of all the firstborn of the people of Israel... And then the blessing of Jacob, he went to bless the sons of Joseph, and he articulated his blessing over Ephraim and Manasseh, and it's as though those two take the place in the numbering of Levi and Joseph. And so, when they go to divide up the land, apportion the land among the twelve tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh each receive an allotment of land, a tribal inheritance... And then, Joseph is represented in his sons, Ephraim and Manasseh.**

— Dr. James M. Hamilton

Chapter 16 begins with a brief overview of all of Joseph's lands in Cisjordan, and then gives specific details about the tribe of Ephraim. Following this, in chapter 17, the narrative moves to the tribe of Manasseh, including the story of Zelophehad's daughters'

land inheritance from Numbers 27. And this section concludes with Joshua's explanation of why Ephraim and Manasseh received more land due to their large numbers.

The prominence given to the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh is striking because these tribes caused all sorts of troubles by the time our book was written. But our author indicated that, despite this history, Israel should acknowledge how God had honored the tribes of Joseph.

## Minor Tribes

After dealing with the land allotments to the prominent tribes of Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh, our author turned to the minor tribes in chapters 18, 19. He began in 18:1-10 with a narrative of how Joshua called for representatives of each tribe to survey these lands. And he closed in 19:49-51 with a story indicating that the tribes approved of these arrangements because they gave Joshua his own special family inheritance.

Between these opening and closing narratives, our author recorded the allotments for Israel's minor tribes of Benjamin, Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan. Although these tribes received inheritances, they didn't receive nearly as much as Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh. And, in later times, these lesser tribes had difficulties maintaining their lands. Our author himself mentioned in 19:9 that the inheritance of Simeon was actually "in the midst of Judah's inheritance," a fact that eventually led to the assimilation of Simeon into Judah. And he also noted in 19:47 that "the territory of the people of Dan was lost to them" — a story we read in Judges 18. Knowing that these and other instabilities troubled the minor tribes, our author wrote to insure that his audience acknowledged these allotments.

## Levi

Joshua's allotments in Cisjordan also include a record of the tribe of Levi in chapters 20, 21. The author of Joshua began his record of the tribe of Levi by naming the cities of refuge in 20:1-9. According to Exodus 21:12-14 and Deuteronomy 19:1-13, these cities offered protection for those who committed unintentional homicide until Israel's courts could determine their guilt or innocence. Following this, in chapter 21, our author listed the Levitical cities in general, following Moses' instructions in Numbers 35:6-34.

The cities of refuge and other Levitical cities were scattered throughout the territories of other tribes in the land of Israel. This made it possible for the Levites to lead every tribe in God's service. Unfortunately, these allotments were easily forgotten in times of trouble. But the author of Joshua insisted that his audience must remember them because the service of the Levites was so crucial to the well-being of the nation.

With the structure and content of these specific tribal allotments in mind, we should briefly summarize the original meaning of these chapters.

## ORIGINAL MEANING

Modern audiences often have difficulty appreciating the geographical details that the author of Joshua included in these chapters. But his call wasn't just for Israel to secure their initial national inheritance. He also called them to recognize the specific status and differences God had established for each tribe so that they could move forward in furthering the spread of God's kingdom.

In his usual style, our author wove his five recurring themes into his record of Israel's specific tribal allotments.

### Divine Authority

In the first place, he stressed the divine authority that directed the distribution of lands among the tribes. In his record of allotments in Transjordan, our author remarked four times — in 13:8, 15, 24 and 29 — that these were the divisions of lands that Moses, God's divinely-authorized leader, had given them.

Our author also indicated the divine authority behind the tribal allotments in Cisjordan. In his opening summary, in 14:1, he wrote that “Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun and the heads of ... the tribes” established the divisions of the land. He made the same point in his record of Ephraim and Manasseh in 17:4. And we see this again in his discussion of the minor tribes in 19:51, and in his treatment of the tribe of Levi in 21:1.

In addition to this, our author introduced the inheritance of the tribe of Levi in 20:1 in his customary way, saying, “Then the Lord said to Joshua...” The implications for anyone in the original audience were clear enough. Dissatisfaction with these specific tribal allotments amounted to dissatisfaction with what God had directed.

### God's Covenant

In the second place, as the author of Joshua dealt with Israel's specific tribal allotments, he also emphasized that these divisions were based on God's covenant. The author repeatedly referred to the portions of land allotted to the tribes as their “inheritance,” using the Hebrew word, *nachalah* (נַחֲלָה). As we mentioned before, this term was closely tied to God's covenants with Abraham and Moses. In 13:32, he called the Transjordan lands Israel's “inheritances.” In verse 33, he identified the Levites' special portion as their “inheritance.” In his opening summary of allotments in Cisjordan, he used the term “inheritance” in 14:1, 2 and 3. He also spoke of Judah's land as an “inheritance” in 14:9, 13, and 15:20. He did the same with Ephraim and Manasseh in 16:4 and seven more times. And he called the minor tribes' allotments an “inheritance” some seventeen times. And in his last account of the tribe of Levi, in 21:3, he spoke of

how each tribe gave towns and pasturelands to the Levites from their “inheritance.” Finally, in his closing summary of this section, in 21:43, our author wrote that God had given Israel, “all the land that he swore to give to their fathers.” All of these references made it clear that these specific tribal allotments were rooted in God’s covenant. And if anyone neglected them, they neglected the sacred promise of God to his people as their covenant Lord.

### **Standard of Moses’ Law**

In the third place, in his report of Israel’s specific tribal allotments, the author of Joshua also stressed obedience to the standard of Moses’ law. This emphasis is most clearly seen in his treatment of Cisjordan. His opening summary states, in 14:2, that Joshua acted “as the Lord had commanded by the hand of Moses.” And 14:5 adds that the Israelites divided the land “as the Lord commanded Moses.” In 17:4, Zelophehad’s daughters appealed to what “the Lord commanded Moses.” The account of the tribe of Levi mentions in 20:2 that Israel was to follow what God had spoken to them “through Moses.” And, according to the closing summary, in 21:2, 8, cities were assigned to the tribe of Levi as “commanded through Moses.”

Our author’s appeal to the standard of Moses’ law in these chapters called all generations of Israel to observe these divisions of the land. To violate them was to bring the curses of God on his people. To observe them was to bring his blessings.

### **God’s Supernatural Power**

In the fourth place, these chapters also acknowledge that Israel’s specific tribal allotments were confirmed by God’s supernatural power. The record of allocations in Transjordan mentions the miraculous defeat of King Sihon in 13:10, 27. And we read of Balaam’s killing in 13:22, and of the victory over Og in Bashan in 13:31. All of these events recalled God’s supernatural activity in Transjordan.

In addition, our author’s record of allotments in Cisjordan repeatedly refers to casting lots to indicate God’s supernatural involvement. As passages like Numbers 36:2 and Proverbs 16:33 explain, casting lots was one of the ways God supernaturally revealed his will to Israel. The opening summary of Cisjordan mentions casting lots in 14:2. And casting lots appears in the allotments to the minor tribes some eleven times. Israel also cast lots for the inheritance of the tribe of Levi in 21:4, 10.

Our author’s purpose for these repeated notices of God’s supernatural involvement is not difficult to discern. Members of the original audience may have been tempted to deviate from these tribal allotments. But time and again our author demonstrated that these allotments were not to be violated because God himself established them.



It is interesting in Joshua that they actually cast lots to see who got what land, and I think this shows that it was in God's hands, that there wasn't going to be any inequality, even with Joshua choosing who gets what, but it's God's giving this to them. And by casting lots it is pointing to the significance that, again, this is God and his people, and God's giving this to his people in fairness. And there is this idea, I think, that needs to be understood, that God will uphold the property rights of these people, and inheritance is very important for them. And it's interesting also that this land will not go... no one can lose this land *forever*, that if they even sell off their land there comes a point where there's a Jubilee where the land has to be returned. And so, all of this is tied to the fact that this is their inheritance from God, that this is their right given by God, and God is upholding these boundaries and that no one, not even a king, can come along and say, "This isn't your land." Kings tried to, but not by law, they couldn't do that because it was God's gift to them and their inheritance from him as his people.

— Dr. T. J. Betts

## All Israel

In the fifth place, like earlier chapters in the book, these chapters on Israel's specific tribal allotments also stress the inclusion of all Israel. We can see this emphasis in the way the record of allotments in Transjordan specifies lands for each tribe to the east of the Jordan. The record of allotments in Cisjordan does the same. It not only reports what was given to the tribes of Judah, Ephraim and Manasseh, but also what was given to the minor tribes. And beyond this, it even specifies the cities devoted to the tribe of Levi.

Our author's detailed attention to *all* of the tribes of Israel reinforced his firm belief that *all* Israel must reside in the Promised Land. By the time our book was written, some tribes had been absorbed by others. Other tribes had lost territories to enemies here and there. And by the time the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and the Babylonians conquered Judah, only a remnant of the people of God remained in their tribal inheritances. But our author insisted on an ideal for which every Israelite should strive. All of Israel was to have its rightful portion of the Promised Land.

We've examined how the book of Joshua deals with Israel's tribal inheritances by reviewing the initial boundaries of their inheritance and the specific allotments to particular tribes. Now, let's turn to the third major step in our lesson: Israel's national unity.

## NATIONAL UNITY

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Time and again through the centuries the tribes of Israel divided and turned against each other. And our author knew that Israel could not move forward in expanding God's kingdom unless the tribes stood together as one people. To address this issue, our author closed this division of his book with a time when severe conflict threatened the national unity of Israel in Joshua's day.

As we've seen a number of times, the book of Joshua repeatedly draws attention to a major, natural divide that existed between the tribes of Israel in Transjordan and Cisjordan. This geographical division was problematic in Joshua's day because it nearly led to a war between the tribes on either side of the Jordan. So, as our author closed the second division on Israel's tribal inheritances, he recalled how Joshua led the tribes in Transjordan and Cisjordan to remain united. These events illustrated how his original audience should resolve similar tensions in their own day.

We'll follow our same pattern as we explore Israel's national unity by looking first at the structure and content of this section, and then at its original meaning. Consider first the structure and content of this chapter.

### STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

The account of Israel's national unity in chapter 22 is a rather straightforward narrative that unfolds in five main steps. It begins in verses 1-10 with the dramatic problem of the construction of an altar by the tribes of Transjordan.

#### Construction of Altar

After Israel's victories in Cisjordan, Joshua sent the tribes of Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh back to their inheritances east of the Jordan. He warned them to remain faithful to God. As they travelled, the Transjordan tribes built a large, imposing altar near the Jordan River. When the tribes of Cisjordan heard about this, they assumed the altar had been erected as a substitute for the Lord's altar at the Tabernacle of Moses.

#### Threat of War

The tension of the narrative increases in verses 11-14 with the rise of the threat of war. Fearful that the altar erected by the Transjordan tribes would bring God's anger on all of Israel, the Cisjordan tribes made plans to attack. But, in an attempt to avoid war, they first sent a delegation of Phinehas, son of Eleazar, and ten chief men to confront the tribes of Transjordan.

## Confrontation

The lengthy turning point of our story, in verses 15-31, reports the confrontation between this delegation and the Transjordan tribes. The delegation warned that the newly-constructed altar violated God's command to sacrifice only at the Tabernacle. But the leaders from Transjordan passionately explained that they had not built their altar for sacrifice. Rather, it was a symbol of their unity with the other tribes because they feared that the other tribes would reject them from the nation. In response, the delegation rejoiced because the Transjordan tribes had not been unfaithful to the Lord.

## Cessation of the Threat

The falling action of the narrative appears in verses 32, 33 with the cessation of the threat of war. The delegation reported on what they had learned, and the tribes in Cisjordan praised God and immediately stopped speaking of war.

## Naming of Altar

Then the final resolution of the dramatic tension of the story appears in verse 34 with the naming of the altar. The Transjordan tribes demonstrated their intentions by naming their altar at the Jordan, "Witness." As they explained, "[I]t is a witness between us that the Lord is God." By doing this, the Transjordan tribes confirmed their honorable motives, their intentions to sacrifice only at the Tabernacle and their commitment to the national unity of Israel.

With the basic structure and content of this narrative about Israel's national unity in mind, we should make a few comments on its original meaning.

## ORIGINAL MEANING

It isn't difficult to see why our author closed this division of his book with the narrative of chapter 22. This story explains how the tribes were able to maintain their unity, even in the face of tremendous potential for conflict. The tribes of Cisjordan rightly prepared to punish the tribes of Transjordan for what they thought was flagrant rebellion against God. But they wisely investigated the situation and gladly rejoiced in their national unity in the worship of God. These events charted a course for the original audience to follow whenever similar conflicts arose among the tribes of Israel.

We can see that our author designed his narrative about national unity to guide future generations by noting the same five themes we've seen many times in his book.

## Divine Authority

In the first place, the theme of divine authority appears in the construction of an altar. In 22:1, we learn that it was Joshua, God’s ordained leader, who called for the tribes of Transjordan to return to their allotted lands. And more than this, in the rise of the threat of war we see in verse 13 that the divinely-ordained authority, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar the priest led the delegation from Cisjordan.

Our author drew attention to Joshua and Phinehas to shape his audience’s outlooks on this story. They were not to treat this as a record of irrelevant events in the past. Instead, the participation of divinely-ordained authorities called them to apply these events appropriately to uphold national unity in their own day.

## God’s Covenant

In the second place, the story of national unity in chapter 22 also touches on God’s covenant. This theme comes to the foreground especially in the confrontation between the delegation from Cisjordan and the tribes of Transjordan. As we read in verses 25, 27, the Transjordan tribes didn’t want the other tribes to say, “You have no portion in the Lord.” The word “portion” translates the Hebrew term *cheleq* (חֵלֶק). And, as passages like Joshua 18:7 and 19:9 illustrate, our author closely connected *cheleq* (חֵלֶק) with the word “inheritance,” or *nachalah* (נַחֲלָה). As we’ve seen a number of times in this series, the term “inheritance” was commonly associated with God’s covenants with Abraham and Moses. So, the Transjordan tribes wanted to ensure that the tribes west of the Jordan treated them as full heirs of the covenant promises given to their ancestors.

The author of Joshua drew attention to these matters to impress his call for national unity on his original audience. He insisted that his original audience must never lose sight of the fact that all the tribes of Israel — north, south, east and west — had a portion in the Promised Land that was rooted in God’s covenant with Israel.

## Standard of Moses’ Law

In the third place, our author’s account of Israel’s national unity also highlights the standard of Moses’ law. In the opening step of the narrative, Joshua warned the tribes of Transjordan, in 22:5, “[B]e very careful to observe the commandment and the law that Moses ... commanded you.” In the confrontation between the tribes, the delegation from Cisjordan warned in verse 19, “[D]o not rebel against the Lord or make us as rebels by building for yourselves an altar.” To do so was to violate Moses’ law. And in verse 29, the tribes of Transjordan affirmed the standard of Moses’ law when they exclaimed, “Far be it from us that we should rebel against the Lord.”

Our author's focus on the law of Moses raised a crucial qualification for the pursuit of national unity. As important as it was for his audience to seek the unity of the nation, they were to do so only in accordance with the regulations of Moses' law.

## God's Supernatural Power

In the fourth place, the narrative of national unity also draws attention to God's supernatural power. This theme appears especially in the confrontation between the delegation from Cisjordan and the tribes of Transjordan. In verse 17, the delegation warned of God's power to curse them by reminding the Transjordan tribes that "there came a plague upon the congregation of the Lord" when Israel sinned at Peor. And by contrast, once Phinehas heard the Transjordan tribes' explanation, he acknowledged the supernatural blessing of God in verse 31, where he said, "Today we know that the Lord is in our midst."

These references to God's supernatural curses and blessings reminded the original audience that the call to national unity in their day was no mere human affair. As in the days of Joshua, they also would experience God's curses and blessings as they pursued, or failed to pursue, the goal of national unity.

## All Israel

In the fifth place, it shouldn't surprise us to find that this narrative on national unity also highlights the theme of all Israel. The tone is set in the first step of the story when Joshua referred to the Israelites on both sides of the Jordan as "brothers" in verses 3, 7 and 8. In the confrontation, the delegation acknowledged, in verses 17, 20, that the sin of some in Israel could bring God's wrath against the whole congregation of Israel. And in verse 34, the entire narrative ends with a declaration of the unity of Israel's faith when the altar is named, "a witness between us that the Lord is God."

The author of Joshua made it clear that the tensions between Israel's tribes in Joshua's day were resolved because of deep commitments to the unity of Israel's tribes. And he did this to call his original audience to the same level of commitment to national unity in their day as well.

So far in our lesson we've seen how our author's account of Israel's tribal inheritances deals with the initial boundaries of the land, the specific allotments of inheritances to the tribes of Israel, and the establishment of national unity among the tribes. Now we're in a position to turn to our last consideration in this lesson, the Christian application of this division of our book.

## CHRISTIAN APPLICATION

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The many details of this division of the book of Joshua were designed to give very practical guidance to the original audience. Our author addressed how crucial it was for his audience to secure the initial inheritances their ancestors had received. He explained how they should value the specific allotments God had given to each tribe. And he called on them to emulate how Israel maintained national unity in Joshua's day. But how do we apply these practical lessons about Israel's tribal inheritances to ourselves? Simply put, we have to remember that what happened in Joshua's time was only one step toward the much greater fulfillment of God's inheritance for his people in Christ.

We'll deal with Christian application of this division of Joshua in the light of how Christ fulfills Israel's tribal inheritances in the three phases of his kingdom: its *inauguration* in his first advent, its *continuation* throughout church history and its *consummation* at his second advent. Consider first how we should apply Israel's tribal inheritances in light of the inauguration of Christ's kingdom.

### INAUGURATION

When Christ inaugurated his messianic kingdom in his first advent, Israel had spent hundreds of years scattered far from the Promised Land. Even those who had returned to Palestine lived under the tyranny of one Gentile nation after another. But the faithful in Israel never lost hope for regaining their inheritance in the Promised Land. And they looked forward to the time when their inheritance would expand to include the entire world under the rule of their Messiah.

**God's promise of a land to Israel goes back to the Garden. God gave a commission to humankind in the Garden to subdue, not just the Garden, but the whole earth. And so, what we see in the gift of land is, again, this echo of the promise to take dominion over the whole earth, to spread the borders of God's kingdom. And we start to get a glimpse of that in the Davidic kingship in Psalm 2 and Psalm 72 — "Ask of me and I will give you the nations" — or in Isaiah's vision that Israel's role was to be a blessing to all the nations, echoing the Abrahamic covenant that, "I will bless you, and through you I will bless all the families of the earth." And so, in Isaiah 2, we read how the nations will stream to Israel and her witness to Christ, or to the Messiah. So, what we see in Jesus' ministry when he comes is that he restores Israel to that role to be a light to the nations. And so, at the end of Matthew's gospel he says, "Go, and tell all the nations everything that I have commanded you; disciple them in all that I have done for you and with you." And then we see in the book of Acts how "you'll be my witnesses," again, echoing Isaiah 43: "Go, and tell that there's only**

**one Savior for all the nations.” And so, the land represents the whole earth and God’s dominion over the whole earth.**

— Dr. Greg Perry

The New Testament explains that Jesus’ first advent was a major step toward fulfilling this hope. As Hebrews 1:2 explains, God appointed Jesus as the “heir of all things.” Or as Paul put it in Romans 4:13, Jesus is the “heir of the world.” And more than this, as passages like Galatians 3:29 tell us, “If you are Christ’s, then you are ... heirs according to promise.” In the words of Romans 8:17, we are “heirs — heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”

This is why the four gospels report that Jesus ministered throughout the boundaries of Israel’s tribal inheritances that had been allotted in Joshua’s day. He and his disciples ministered both in the northern and southern territories of Cisjordan. And, on occasion, they ministered in Transjordan as well. All the while, Jesus gathered to himself a faithful remnant from the tribes of Israel who would inherit the earth with him. And beyond this, the newly-ascended Christ gathered into Jerusalem representatives of the tribes of Israel who began to follow him “from every nation under heaven,” as Acts 2:5 tells us.

But overall, the most important connection between Israel’s inheritance and the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the church that began on the day of Pentecost. In Ephesians 1:14, the apostle Paul referred to the Holy Spirit as “the guarantee of our inheritance.” And in 2 Corinthians 1:22 and 5:5, Paul also called him “a guarantee.” But to understand why Paul viewed the Spirit as a deposit — or as the first installment of our future inheritance in Christ — we need to recall that, according to Genesis 1:2, it was the Spirit who brought order to creation in the beginning. And Old Testament prophecies, like Isaiah 44:3, 4, explain that the Spirit of God will also bring about the renewal of creation in the days of the Messiah. In effect, the gift of the Holy Spirit to Christ’s church is the foretaste of this renewed creation. He is the portion of our worldwide inheritance granted in the inauguration of Christ’s kingdom as we wait for the consummation of all things in Christ’s return.

For this reason, the major themes that appear repeatedly in this portion of Joshua give us opportunities to reflect on the foretaste of our inheritance in the Holy Spirit. Much like Joshua distributed Israel’s inheritance in the Promised Land with divine authority, Jesus and his apostles and prophets distributed believers’ inheritance in the Spirit with divine authority as well. Just as Joshua’s distribution of lands was based in God’s covenant, Jesus’ distribution of the Holy Spirit to God’s people was in fulfillment of the new covenant in Christ. Israel’s inheritance under Joshua accorded with the standard of Moses’ law, and the distribution of the Spirit was the result of Christ’s perfect obedience to Moses’ law, in the light of God’s further revelation after Moses’ time. Israel’s inheritance depended on God’s supernatural power, and the New Testament makes it clear that during Jesus’ first advent, even greater supernatural power was at work in the distribution of the Holy Spirit. And the ideal of all Israel’s inclusion in Joshua’s day was

expanded during the inauguration. Not only the faithful remnant of Israel, but also the Gentile believers received the deposit of Christ's inheritance in the Holy Spirit.

Having touched on how Christian application of Israel's tribal inheritances should turn us toward the inauguration of Christ's kingdom, we should also look at how it applies to the continuation of his kingdom throughout church history.

## CONTINUATION

Between Jesus' first and second advents, Christ continues to bless his people with foretastes of the world to come through his Spirit. And much like the book of Joshua called Israel to move forward by securing the Promised Land, the New Testament calls us to move forward in the Holy Spirit. We are to "walk by the Spirit," according to Galatians 5:16, and to "be filled with the Spirit," according to Ephesians 5:18. In addition, much like the original audience of Joshua was to acknowledge the specific allotments of every tribe, followers of Christ are to acknowledge something similar in the Spirit. As 1 Corinthians 12:4 teaches, "[T]here are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit." Moreover, the original audience of Joshua was called to seek unity as they lived together in the inheritance of the Promised Land. And, in Ephesians 4:3, the apostle Paul called Christ's followers to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit."

In this light, every time we encounter the five major themes of this division of Joshua we have opportunities to discern how we are to live for Christ day by day. Just as Joshua acknowledged the divine authority behind Israel's inheritance, we are to acknowledge divine authority in Christ by seeking our inheritance in the Spirit and not in the things of this world. As Israel's right to their initial inheritance was based on God's covenant, we can be confident that the Spirit seals us for the day of redemption because of the new covenant in Christ. As Israel received their initial inheritance in submission to the standard of Moses' law, we live in the inheritance of the Spirit as Moses' law is applied in the light of New Testament revelation. As Israel's inheritance was granted by God's supernatural power, our inheritance is poured out by the power of God's Spirit. And as all Israel had a share in their national inheritance, Christ's followers from every tribe and nation on earth share the same inheritance in the Spirit.

Christian application of Israel's tribal inheritances not only looks back at what Christ did in the inauguration of his kingdom, and at our current circumstances during the continuation of his kingdom, it also strengthens our hopes for the inheritance we'll receive at the consummation of his kingdom.

## CONSUMMATION

According to Revelation 21:1, you and I have the sure hope that when Jesus returns he will rule over "a new heaven and a new earth." The fallen creation will be refined by fire, evil will be eliminated, and the kingdom of God will extend throughout creation. But this new creation will not only belong to Christ. In Revelation 21:7 we learn



that on that great day God will declare, “The one who conquers will have this heritage.” As the people of God, the new creation will be *our* eternal inheritance.

**The theme of national inheritance in the book of Joshua is an important topic and has many applications for us as Christians today, because the promise of the land was only partially fulfilled in the days of Joshua. That is, the land which the Lord promised Abraham was not geographically limited to the land of Canaan, as we see in the book of Joshua. We read in Romans 4:13: “For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” Here Paul tells us that Abraham will inherit the world — the entire world! ... And these promises are fulfilled to the Gentiles too, who aren’t the offspring of Abraham in the flesh, but receive these promises by faith in Christ, who is himself Abraham’s offspring. So, what Abraham received and what Israel received in the days of Joshua was a small picture of a greater, larger, and more complete land that God promised to Abraham, fulfilled in Christ, and will completely fulfill in Christ’s second coming. Eventually, when Christ comes back he won’t only reign in Canaan, but he will reign and inherit the whole earth — the new earth and the new heavens — and we will reign with Christ forever.**

— Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

For this reason, the five main themes in this division of Joshua turn our eyes toward the hope we have in the consummation of Christ’s kingdom. As divine authority undergirded what Joshua did in his day, Jesus will do God’s bidding perfectly and fully when he returns in glory. As Israel’s inheritance was secured by God’s covenant, our final inheritance is secured by the new covenant in Christ. As Joshua distributed Israel’s inheritance in accordance with the standard of Moses’ law, every follower of Christ will be fully conformed to the image of Christ and will fulfill the standard of all divine revelation in the world to come. As Israel’s possession of its inheritance resulted from God’s supernatural power, God will display his power as never before when Christ returns. And as Israel’s inheritance included all Israel, everyone that is in Christ will receive their eternal inheritance in the world to come.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson, we’ve explored Israel’s tribal inheritances in the second major division of the book of Joshua. We’ve seen how our author gave priority to the initial boundaries of Israel’s inheritance by describing Israel’s land in both Cisjordan and

Transjordan. We've also considered the specific tribal allotments distributed in Joshua's day in both Transjordan and Cisjordan. And we've seen that our author promoted national unity among all the tribes of Israel by describing how Israel remained unified in Joshua's day. Finally, we've looked at Christian application of this division of Joshua in light of the inauguration, continuation and consummation of Christ's kingdom.

The author of Joshua impressed on his audience how important it was for them to affirm what God had accomplished under Joshua's leadership. And today, we must do the same as followers of Christ. We know that Jesus has *already* secured our eternal inheritance. Day by day, we live with the foretaste of this inheritance in the Holy Spirit. And we look forward to the day when Christ will return in glory. On that day, he will take his rightful place as the heir of all things and he will distribute the great inheritance of the new creation to all who have trusted in him for all eternity.

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## GLOSSARY

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**Abraham** – Old Testament patriarch, son of Terah, father of the nation of Israel with whom God made a covenant in Genesis 15 and 17 promising innumerable descendants and a special land

***cheleq*** – Hebrew term (transliteration) meaning “portion” or “territory”; sometimes associated with inheritance

**Cisjordan** – The lands to the west of the Jordan River that God promised to Israel as an inheritance (lit. “beside the Jordan”)

**consummation** – Third and final stage of redemption when Christ will return and fulfill God's ultimate purpose for all of history

**continuation** – Second or middle stage of inaugurated eschatology; the period of the kingdom of God after Christ's first advent but before the final victory

**covenant** – A binding legal agreement made between two people or groups of people, or between God and a person or group of people

**Eleazar** – Third son of Aaron and high priest at the time of Moses and Joshua; father of Phinehas

**inauguration** – First stage in inaugurated eschatology; refers to Christ's first coming and the ministries of his apostles and prophets

**Jacob** – Son of Isaac who became the familial head of the twelve tribes of Israel

**Joseph** – Eleventh son of Jacob; favored by his father; sold into slavery by his jealous brothers; rose to power in Egypt by interpreting Pharaoh's dreams; father of Ephraim and Manasseh

**Joshua** – Leader of Israel after the death of Moses who brought the Israelites into the Promised Land and faithfully distributed Israel's tribal inheritances

**Levites** – Those from the tribe of Levi; served as priests for the nation of Israel

**Moses** – Old Testament prophet and deliverer who led the Israelites out of Egypt; man with whom God made a national "covenant of law" and who administered the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant to the Israelites; also appeared with Elijah at Jesus' transfiguration

***nachalah*** – Hebrew noun (transliteration) meaning “inheritance”

**new covenant** – The covenant of fulfillment in Christ; first mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31

**new heavens and new earth** – The last stage of redemptive history when creation will be completed and perfected; God's eternal kingdom where his people will dwell with him forever in perfect peace and fellowship

**Phinehas** – Son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron; high priest after his father; known for his zealous faith

**Promised Land** – The land that God promised to give as an inheritance to Abraham and his descendants

**Transjordan** – The lands to the east of the Jordan River where the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh received permission to settle (lit. “across the Jordan”)

**Wadi of Egypt** – Either an eastern branch of the Nile that no longer exists, or Wadi El-Arish that still exists east of the Nile; one of the borders of the Promised Land identified in Genesis 15