



3. Joshua's First Farewell to All Israel ([23:1–16](#))

The final two chapters of the book contain Joshua's two farewell speeches to the entire nation, delivered at the end of his life. Both were given in the pastoral, hortatory style found in Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy, also delivered at the end of his life. The fact that Joshua gave such speeches to the nation places him on a level with Moses as God's anointed leader over the nation, and it reinforces again the picture presented many times in the book: Joshua was the worthy successor to Moses.

Because of the similarities between these two speeches, some scholars argue that these chapters represent two versions of only one event or speech, one or both of which are Deuteronomistic compositions dating many centuries later. However, significant differences exist between the two that must be taken into account. (1) The first speech is very pastoral, urging Israel to keep the law and to follow the Lord and warning it against turning away from him; as such, it is oriented to the future in significant ways. The second speech, while doing much of the same thing, reviews the past record of God's faithfulness to Israel in a much more systematic way. (2) The first speech was apparently delivered to the leaders of Israel (see v. [2](#)), while the second appears to have been to all the nation ([24:1–2](#)). (3) The first speech apparently was delivered at Shiloh, which had been the Israelites' religious center for some time (see [18:1, 8–10](#); [19:51](#); [21:1](#)), while the next was delivered at Shechem ([24:1](#)). (4) The first is less formal than the second, since it consists entirely of Joshua's words of exhortation and admonition to his audience, while the second is followed by the people's response and by a covenant renewal ceremony.

Joshua's speech in chap. [23](#) is reminiscent of the last speeches of Jacob ([Genesis 49](#)), Moses ([Deuteronomy 32–33](#)), and David ([2 Sam 23:1–7](#)). In it, Joshua summed up most of the important motifs introduced throughout the book, passionately urging Israel to be steadfast in loving God, in obeying his law, and in keeping themselves uncontaminated by the religious practices of their neighbors. Joshua promised that God would be with Israel in the as-yet-unfinished task of driving out their enemies, just as he had been in the past (vv. [3–5](#), [9–10](#)). The promises of God and their fulfillment are emphasized again here (vv. [10, 14–15](#); cf. [21:45](#)).

This chapter, while warm in its exhortations to Israel, also contains sobering warnings. If Israel would not love and obey God and keep themselves pure, then he would not drive out the nations, and they would remain as torments (v. [13](#)). Furthermore—and more seriously—Israel stood to lose the land itself, this very land that was so central to the nation's endeavors up to this point (vv. [15–16](#)). Just as good things would happen if they obeyed, so also bad things would happen if they disobeyed. This follows the pattern of much of the theology in Deuteronomy (see esp. [Deuteronomy 27–30](#)).

A striking feature of the speech is its realistic assessment of the situation heretofore. While on the one hand, Joshua affirmed in v. [9](#) that no one remained who had opposed the Israelites, in several other places he spoke of the “nations” remaining among the Israelites, and he warned the Israelites against them (vv. [3, 4, 7, 9, 12, 13](#)).

¹David M. Howard, *New American Commentary – Volume 5: Joshua*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 415-441.

With these emphases on the peoples remaining among them, on the warnings, and on the potential problems that lay before the nation, the speech is of a piece with those passages in Joshua that tell of the peoples whom the Israelites did not drive out and of land that yet remained to be conquered (see [13:2–6](#), [13](#); [15:63](#); [16:10](#); [17:11–12](#); [19:47](#)). Such texts lay the foundation for the Book of Judges. The Israelites did *not* fulfill their mandate in its entirety, so the seeds of their corruption were in place from the beginning in the form of peoples and nations who remained living among them.

God's ownership of the land is emphasized in this speech. Ultimately, the land belonged to God, not Israel. These warnings saw their most dramatic fulfillment when Judah was carried into Babylonian captivity because of its repeated transgression of the covenant ([2 Kings 25](#)). But they also were relevant almost immediately, during the period of the judges, when Israel began to do precisely what was warned against here (see esp. [Judg 2:16–23](#), [3:1–6](#)).

Most of Joshua's words here echo words found earlier in the book, as well as in Deuteronomy. This is fitting, given that his speech was a farewell in which he urged the people to remain faithful to God, to his law, and to all of the instructions they had received heretofore.

The chapter consists of repetitions of ideas and piling up of thoughts, which does not lend itself to a clear pattern or structure emerging. Neither does the syntax of the passage offer any clear pattern. For our purposes, we can identify three major sections of Joshua's speech: vv. [3–8](#), [9–13](#), [14–16](#). In each section, Joshua looked back at what the Lord had done for Israel (vv. [3–5](#), [9–10](#), [14](#)). Then, Joshua instructed the people as to what they needed to do to obey and to avoid the Lord's judgment (vv. [6–8](#), [11–13](#), [15–16](#)). Whereas the first set of these instructions contains no added warnings (vv. [6–8](#)), the second begins with instructions (v. [11](#)) but quickly turns to dire warnings of punishment if Israel should reject the Lord (vv. [12–13](#)). The third set consists entirely of dire warnings (vv. [15–16](#)). Thus, as Nelson notes, “there is a clear escalation in the severity of the rhetoric,” and “the perspective moves from a focus on the positive potentials in Israel's present and future (vv. [5](#), [8](#), [9–10](#)) to the real possibility of disobedience and destruction (vv. [13](#), [15–16](#)).”

Israel certainly was to obey the Lord because of what he had done for them in the past (vv. [3–4](#), [9–10](#), [14](#)) and out of a motivation of love for him (v. [11](#)). However, if such positive motivations did not work, the negative motivation of the threat of punishment also figured in Joshua's speech, becoming more prominent as his speech progressed (vv. [12–13](#), [15–16](#)). Sometimes, both then and now, people are not motivated to act purely out of positive motivations (the “carrot”)—which are clearly the best motivations for any action—but require motivations formulated negatively (the “stick”) in order to compel certain behaviors. In Israel's case, tragically, even such negative formulations were not enough to deter it from lapsing into disobedience many times, beginning with the period of the judges and continuing down to the time of the exile and even afterwards.

(1) Introduction ([23:1–2](#))

¹After a long time had passed and the LORD had given Israel rest from all their enemies around them, Joshua, by then old and well advanced in years, ²summoned all Israel—their elders, leaders, judges and officials—and said to them: “I am old and well advanced in years.

[23:1](#) This entire verse sets the stage for the activity of the chapter. Syntactically, it is all prefatory to the main action, which begins in v. [2](#). Every statement in this verse echoes earlier ones. The “long time” harks back to [22:3](#); the idea of “rest” echoes earlier statements in [11:23](#); [14:15](#); [21:44](#); and the statement on Joshua's advanced age repeats a similar statement in [13:1](#). All three statements refer to the passage of time in one way or another. Because of this passage of time, because the land now had rest, and because Joshua was old and his end was near, it was now appropriate for him to look back to remind the people of God's faithfulness and to look ahead, exhorting and warning them about the future.

The exact time intended here is impossible to know with certainty, but it appears to refer to a time many years after the events in chaps. [13–21](#), and even chap. [22](#). The verse clearly echoes [13:1](#) in stating that Joshua was “old and well advanced in years,” and it also echoes [21:44](#)—both verses state that the Lord had given the people rest. Some scholars believe that the “long time” here is calculated from the *beginning* of the book (i.e., when God began to give rest to the land). However, it is also possible—and, in actuality, more probable—that the “long time” should be calculated from the *completion* of the process (i.e., that the speeches in chaps. [23](#) and [24](#) came “a long time” after the land distribution was completed, when God had finally given true rest to the land). In support of this, we may note that the farewell speeches, as they are presented in chaps. [23](#) and [24](#), appear to have come at the end of Joshua's life. Indeed, in [23:14](#), Joshua stated that he was about to go “the way of all the earth today,” indicating that his death was fairly close at hand. He was 110 years old when he died ([24:29](#)), and, if he was anywhere near Caleb's age of eighty-five when the land was distributed (see [14:10](#)), then his farewell speeches would have come about twenty-five years after the main events in the book. (See also the note on [14:10](#).)

[23:2](#) This was an all-inclusive speech in the sense that it was delivered to a wide range of the nation's leaders, who represented the entire nation. By way of contrast, in [24:2](#) we are told that Joshua spoke directly to “all the people” in addition to the leaders of the nation.

(2) *Exhortations and Admonitions: Part One* ([23:3–8](#))

³**You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake; it was the LORD your God who fought for you.** ⁴**Remember how I have allotted as an inheritance for your tribes all the land of the nations that remain—the nations I conquered—between the Jordan and the Great Sea in the west.** ⁵**The LORD your God himself will drive them out of your way. He will push them out before you, and you will take possession of their land, as the LORD your God promised you.**

⁶**Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left.** ⁷**Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them.** ⁸**But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now.**

[23:3–4](#) Joshua's speech more properly begins at the end of v. [2](#), where he acknowledged what the narrator had stated in v. [1](#), that he was “old and well advanced in years.” He referred to himself—“*As for me, I am old*”—in order to contrast himself with his addressees, to whom his first words were “*As for you, you have seen.*”

In vv. [3–4](#), Joshua took his first look back at what God had done for the nation. In v. [3](#), he reminded the nation that the Lord had fought for them, and that they themselves had been witnesses of this (“you have seen”). The reference to God’s fighting for Israel repeats the idea that the land was God’s and that he would give it to them, even to the extent of fighting on their behalf (see also [Deut 7:1](#); [11:23–25](#); [Josh 1:5, 9](#); [8:7](#); [10:14, 19, 42](#); etc.).

In v. [4](#), Joshua shifted the focus to his own role as distributor of the tribes’ inheritances. That Joshua had been a primary figure in the land distributions was well established (see [11:23](#); [12:7](#); [14:12, 13](#); [15:13](#); [17:4, 14](#); [21:2](#); [22:7](#)). What had not been emphasized previously was Joshua’s claim to individual conquest, which the NIV’s rendering indicates: “the nations I conquered” (lit., “all the nations that I cut off” [*krt*]). It was Yahweh who had fought Israel’s battles, not any individual. Nevertheless, a precedent for this unusual claim is found in [11:21](#), which states that “Joshua went and destroyed (lit., “cut off” [*krt*]) the Anakites from the hill country: from Hebron, Debir, and Anab, from all the hill country of Judah, and from all the hill country of Israel. Joshua totally destroyed them and their towns.” Later in the same passage we are told that “Joshua took the entire land, just as the LORD had directed Moses, and he gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions” ([11:23](#)). Both in chap. [11](#) and here Joshua’s individual conquests are linked to his giving of lands as the Israelites’ proper inheritance. Even though he is said to have given the tribes their inheritances, we know that ultimately it was God who did this (i.e., Joshua acted as his agent). These references to Joshua’s fighting and conquering peoples must be understood in the same way: God fought for Israel, and Joshua was his agent in several cases.

Joshua’s speech emphasizes the foreign nations that remained among the Israelites in a way that no other speech heretofore has done (see esp. vv. [3, 4](#) [2x], [7, 9, 12, 13](#)). The term for “nations” (*gôyîm*) is found seven times in this chapter, as opposed to only six times previously. This term normally refers to foreign, pagan nations, and here the danger from these godless nations is emphasized. The lands belonging to the nations in Canaan had been allotted as the Israelites’ inheritance in the earlier transactions of allotting the territories (on the allotment, see the commentary on [14:2](#)).

[23:5](#) After looking back at what God had done for Israel in vv. [3–4](#), Joshua now looked forward to what he would do. He would drive out Israel’s enemies so that Israel could possess the land, in fulfillment of his promises (cf. [Deut 9:3–5](#); [Josh 3:10](#); [13:6](#)).

[23:6–8](#) Then, after focusing on what God had done and would do for his people, Joshua exhorted them in terms similar to what God had said to Moses and to him on earlier occasions. The Israelites’ success was dependent on their obedience and on the centrality of the law in their lives (v. [6](#)). Joshua here charged the Israelites in terms almost identical to God’s charge to him (see [1:7–8](#)) and, to a lesser extent, with which he had exhorted the Transjordan tribes ([22:5](#)).

The Israelites were to keep themselves uncontaminated by the nations who remained among them and by the gods they worshiped (v. [7](#)). The problem of mixing with the peoples of the land and adopting their worship loyalties was the most severe problem throughout Israel’s history in the land, affecting it in almost every era. It quickly became the dominant problem in the period of the judges ([Judg 2:10–19](#)). It was the cause of Solomon’s downfall and the split in the kingdom ([1 Kings 11](#)). It was the cause of the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel ([2 Kgs 17:7–23](#)), as well as of the Southern Kingdom of Judah ([2 Kgs 21](#); [24:3–4](#)). It was a problem even in the postexilic period, when the people should have learned their lesson ([Ezra 9:1–2](#); [Neh 13:23–27](#)). Thus, while Joshua’s speech was warm-hearted and hortatory in tone, it nevertheless contained ample warnings and signs of the troubles that were to come, troubles that would be caused by Israel’s associations with the nations that remained among them ([Josh 23:4, 7, 12–13](#)).

Instead of following the Canaanites' gods, the Israelites were to cling to their own God (v. [8](#)). The word translated "hold fast" (*dbq*; also used in v. [12](#) and in [22:5](#)) means "to cling tightly." The root refers to the soldering process in [Isa 41:7](#) (i.e., a process in which things are joined together inseparably). This word has a rich theological content, showing the extreme closeness that people were to have with their God. For example, Hezekiah, a good king par excellence in Judah, is commended in terms of his trusting and "holding fast" (*dbq*) to God ([2 Kgs 18:5–6](#)).

(3) *Exhortations and Admonitions: Part Two* ([23:9–13](#))

⁹**"The LORD has driven out before you great and powerful nations; to this day no one has been able to withstand you. ¹⁰One of you routs a thousand, because the LORD your God fights for you, just as he promised. ¹¹So be very careful to love the LORD your God.**

¹²**"But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, ¹³then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land, which the LORD your God has given you.**

[23:9–10](#) Once again Joshua looked back at what God had done for Israel (cf. vv. [3–4](#)). An important emphasis here again is God's faithfulness to his promises. He had indeed driven out the nations before the Israelites, in fulfillment of his promises (see comments on v. [5](#)), such that no one had been able to withstand them (v. [9b](#)); the language here is similar to God's words to Joshua in [1:5](#).

God had also promised to fight for Israel, and he had fulfilled this too (see on v. [3](#)). He had done so to such an extent that one Israelite would be able to rout a thousand of its enemies (v. [10](#)). These words about the Israelites' prowess echo the words in Moses' song in [Deut 32:30](#):

How could one man chase a thousand,
or two put ten thousand to flight,
unless their Rock had sold them,
unless the LORD had given them up?

They are also similar to God's promises in [Lev 26:7–8](#): "You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you. Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you." When God fought for his people, the odds increased by factors of hundreds, even thousands, in their favor.

[23:11](#) At the heart of his speech (almost exactly midway through it), Joshua challenged the people to love the Lord their God, which was the heart of their duties as his people. Everything else—including the important exhortations to obey everything in the law (v. [6](#)) and to avoid pagan entanglements—was a means to an end, which was that Israel should have a close and loving relationship with its God. This exhortation is rooted in Moses' words in [Deut 6:5](#): "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." It is the substance of what Jesus called the first and greatest commandment ([Matt 22:37](#) and parallels). The constant exhortations to Israel to be faithful to

God were not given in a sterile or harshly demanding environment. Rather, they were issued in service of the larger principle that God wanted a loving relationship with his people: he promised to be with them ([Josh 1:9](#)), and in return he desired their loyalty and their love.

[23:12–13](#) After the brief but important instruction of v. [11](#), Joshua turned to an extended and serious admonition or warning in vv. [12–13](#). If Israel chose to reject the Lord and cling instead to the nations remaining among them, then what God had already done and what he promised to continue to do for the Israelites—to drive out the nations before them (cf. vv. [5, 9](#))—he would no longer do (v. [13](#)). Instead, the nations would become obstacles of the worst kind for the Israelites: they would be snares and traps to them (for earlier passages stating the same idea, see [Exod 23:33](#); [Deut 7:16](#); and especially [Num 33:55](#)). This prediction came true with a vengeance during the period of the judges (see [Judg 2:14–15, 21–23](#); [3:1–6](#)). The nations would become such obstacles to the Israelites that they would even cause them to lose the land itself, a land that was good, a land that had been God's gift to his people. Rejecting God was such a serious offense that it would yield even such a drastic result. God's standards would not be relaxed even for his own people.

A wordplay in vv. [8](#) and [12](#) involves a contrast. In v. [8](#), Israel was to cling (*dbq*) to the Lord himself, and in v. [12](#), if Israel clung (*dbq*; NIV has “ally” here) instead to the nations, God would bring punishment.

The dangers of intermarriage with unbelieving foreigners was such that this was strictly forbidden to the Israelites ([Exod 34:11–16](#); [Deut 7:1–4](#)). A dramatic example of how faith was polluted by intermarriage can be seen in Solomon's case ([1 Kgs 3:1](#); [11:1–8](#)). In a later time, when the Israelites discovered that many among them had indeed intermarried, the drastic step of a mass divorce was taken ([Ezra 9–10](#); cf. also [Neh 13:23–27](#)). The same prohibition was given by the apostle Paul: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” ([2 Cor 6:14](#)).

(4) Admonitions ([23:14–16](#))

¹⁴“Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed. ¹⁵But just as every good promise of the LORD your God has come true, so the LORD will bring on you all the evil he has threatened, until he has destroyed you from this good land he has given you. ¹⁶If you violate the covenant of the LORD your God, which he commanded you, and go and serve other gods and bow down to them, the LORD's anger will burn against you, and you will quickly perish from the good land he has given you.”

Joshua concluded his speech with a third set of admonitions and warnings. This time there were no further reviews of the past, except for an assertion that every one of the Lord's promises had been fulfilled (v. [14](#)). Beyond this, Joshua laid forth what the Lord would do if Israel violated the covenant (vv. [15–16](#)).

[23:14](#) Joshua indicated that he was about to die soon (lit., “today”). His words—“I am about to go the way of all the earth”—were also spoken by David to his son Solomon when he was about to die ([1 Kgs 2:2](#)). The passion with which they were to regard the Lord is indicated by the phrase “with all your heart and soul,” an expression used in [Deut 6:5](#) to indicate the passion with which the Israelites were to

love him (cf. the link to [Deut 6:5](#) in v. 11). Not only were they to love him in this manner, they were also to know with the same degree of certainty that his promises did come to pass. The repeated affirmations that God's promises were fulfilled highlights an important motif in the book, and they pick up most specifically on the similar statement in [21:45](#) (cf. also [22:4](#)).

[23:15–16](#) Joshua's logic as he concluded his speech was that, just as surely as the Lord's promises had come true for Israel's good, so also his swift and devastating punishment would come upon the Israelites if they violated the covenant. God's anger would burn (*hrh*) against his people, and, indeed, this did happen many times in Israel's history. Whenever the Lord's anger burned against his people, they suffered, usually at the hands of a foreign enemy. The following passages are typical: (1) “The anger of the LORD burned [*hrh*] against Israel so that he sold them into the hands of Cushan-Rishathaim king of Aram Naharaim, to whom the Israelites were subject for eight years” ([Judg 3:8](#)); (2) “He became angry with them [lit., “the anger of the LORD burned (*hrh*) against them”]. He sold them into the hands of the Philistines and the Ammonites” ([Judg 10:7](#)); (3) “So the LORD’s anger burned [*hrh*] against Israel, and for a long time he kept them under the power of Hazael king of Aram and Ben-Hadad his son” ([2 Kgs 13:3](#)). In Joshua, this had already happened once previously ([7:1](#): “So the LORD’s anger burned [*hrh*] against Israel”), and the results had been devastating.

This time, however, the results would be even more devastating. Joshua promised Israel that they would perish from the good land in which they lived if they forsook the Lord (cf. also v. 13). The land belonged to God, and it was his to give and his to take away. This promise saw its dramatic fulfillment when Judah was carried into Babylonian captivity because of its repeated transgression of the covenant ([2 Kings 25](#)). In this way, too, God's promises came to pass: if his people obeyed him, they enjoyed great blessing; but if they disobeyed him, they would suffer great calamity. God displayed remarkable patience, suffering through centuries of his people's covenant violations and disobedience. He repeatedly sent foreign oppressors to punish and prophets to warn, until the time came when his patience reached an end, and he sent them into exile.

4. Joshua's Second Farewell to All Israel ([24:1–28](#))

Joshua's second farewell to Israel took place at Shechem, site of the earlier covenant renewal ceremony ([8:30–35](#)). Although this address reflected the one in chap. 23 in several ways, there are also significant differences. The most significant difference between chaps. 23 and 24 is that the latter contains a covenant renewal ceremony, in which the people actually committed themselves to serving the Lord.

Although the contents of the chapter are straightforward and clear enough, the chapter nevertheless has been the subject of extensive study from many different perspectives. One of the most productive approaches has focused on the covenant entered into in this chapter, and comparisons have been drawn with ancient Near Eastern treaties, especially the Hittite treaties of the second millennium BC. A standard outline was followed in such treaties, which governed relations between kings who considered themselves equals to each other (parity treaties) or cases in which one was the overlord and the other was the vassal (suzerainty treaties).

G. E. Mendenhall was the first to identify such a treaty structure in [Joshua 24](#), correlating it with parallels in the ancient Near East. On the basis especially of Hittite treaties of the second millennium BC, scholars prior to Mendenhall had highlighted the following elements of international treaties:

1. *Preamble*: identifies the author of the covenant
2. *Historical Prologue*: describes the previous relationship between the two parties
3. *Stipulations*: the vassal's obligations to the overlord
4. A. *Deposit in the Temple*
B. *Periodic Public Reading*
5. *Witnesses*: the gods are called to witness the covenant
6. *Curses and blessings*: the gods will punish or bless, depending on whether the covenant is kept

Mendenhall's particular contribution was to note the parallels between such treaty forms and various covenants in the Bible. The overlord (or "suzerain") in these covenants was God, and his vassal was Israel. In [Joshua 24](#), Mendenhall identified the following elements of the standard second-millennium treaty form:

1. *Preamble*: "the LORD, the God of Israel" (v. [2a](#))
2. *Historical Prologue*: history of God's relationship with Israel from Terah and Abraham until the present (vv. [2b-13](#))
3. *Stipulations*: — — —
4. A. *Deposit in the Temple*: — — —
B. *Periodic Public Reading*: — — —
5. *Witnesses*: the people (v. [22](#)) and the great stone (v. [27](#))
6. *Curses and blessings*: — — —

K. A. Kitchen has identified more details that fit into the pattern:

1. *Preamble* (vv. [1-2](#))
2. *Historical Prologue* (vv. [2-13](#))
3. *Stipulations* (vv. [14-15](#) [and vv. [16-25](#)])
4. A. *Deposit* (v. [26](#): the Writing in the book of the law)
B. *Periodic Public Reading* — — —
5. *Witnesses* (vv. [22](#), [27](#))
6. *Curses and blessings* (implicit in vv. [19-20](#))

K. Baltzer, in an extensive study of ancient Near Eastern and Biblical treaties and covenants, added an element to the list used by Mendenhall, which he called the “Statement of Substance Concerning the Future Relationship of the Partners to the Treaty” and which took the place of the deposit and public reading in previous outlines of ancient Near Eastern treaties. He saw the following structure in [Joshua 24](#):

- Part One: Conditions of the Covenant (vv. [2–14](#))
 1. Preamble (v. [2](#))
 2. Antecedent History (vv. [2–13](#))
 3. Statement of Substance (v. [14](#))
- Part Two: Confirmation of the Covenant by Oath (vv. [15–27](#))
 1. Transition: Joshua Speaks for the People (v. [15](#))
 2. Antecedent History Referred To (vv. [17–18a](#))
 3. Statement of Substance Echoed (vv. [16, 18b](#))
 4. Witnesses (and Curses and Blessings) (vv. [19–24](#))
 5. Written Documentation (vv. [25–27](#))

Baltzer was forced to stretch the ideas of God as a witness and of blessings and curses in vv. [19–24](#), however, in order to accommodate the scheme.

The outlines drawn up by Mendenhall, Kitchen, Baltzer, and other scholars have been criticized as being overly rigid, forcing elements of [Joshua 24](#) into the scheme in an artificial way. It has been noted that [Joshua 24](#) does not claim to be the *text* of a treaty or covenant but rather a *report* of a covenant-renewal ceremony. This distinction is a helpful one, and it accounts for the variations from the standard treaty outline. [Joshua 24](#) is best understood against the general backdrop of the covenant treaty forms but with an eye to the differences as well as the similarities.

This chapter constitutes an appropriate capstone to the book's message and to Joshua's life. Joshua did in a short address much the same as Moses had done in several longer addresses at the end of his life (see [Deuteronomy 1–11](#))—looking back over what the Lord had done for him and the people and urging them to serve the Lord and to avoid apostasy. Joshua was functioning as a true spiritual leader and as Moses' worthy successor in doing so.

As a report of a covenant renewal ceremony, the chapter reminds us that, first and foremost, a covenant established (or ratified) a relationship between two parties. This is certainly an important part of the biblical covenants. For example, in the Abrahamic Covenant, God committed himself to doing many good things for Abraham ([Gen 12:1–3, 7; 15:4–5, 7, 18–21; 17:2, 6–8](#); etc.). At the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant, God first emphasized the relationship with his people Israel that he had established—and how he intended to strengthen it—*before* he placed any demands on his people ([Exod 19:4–6; 20:2; Deuteronomy 1–11](#)). The same is true in [Joshua 24](#): the first major portion of the chapter is devoted to a review of what God had done for his people (vv. [2–13](#)) before any requirements or warnings are uttered.

(1) Introduction and Review of the Past ([24:1–13](#))

¹Then Joshua assembled all the tribes of Israel at Shechem. He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel, and they presented themselves before God.

²Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. ³But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, ⁴and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau. I assigned the hill country of Seir to Esau, but Jacob and his sons went down to Egypt.

⁵“ ‘Then I sent Moses and Aaron, and I afflicted the Egyptians by what I did there, and I brought you out. ⁶When I brought your fathers out of Egypt, you came to the sea, and the Egyptians pursued them with chariots and horsemen as far as the Red Sea. ⁷But they cried to the LORD for help, and he put darkness between you and the Egyptians; he brought the sea over them and covered them. You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians. Then you lived in the desert for a long time.

⁸“ ‘I brought you to the land of the Amorites who lived east of the Jordan. They fought against you, but I gave them into your hands. I destroyed them from before you, and you took possession of their land. ⁹When Balak son of Zippor, the king of Moab, prepared to fight against Israel, he sent for Balaam son of Beor to put a curse on you. ¹⁰But I would not listen to Balaam, so he blessed you again and again, and I delivered you out of his hand.

¹¹“ ‘Then you crossed the Jordan and came to Jericho. The citizens of Jericho fought against you, as did also the Amorites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hittites, Girgashites, Hivites and Jebusites, but I gave them into your hands. ¹²I sent the hornet ahead of you, which drove them out before you—also the two Amorite kings. You did not do it with your own sword and bow. ¹³So I gave you a land on which you did not toil and cities you did not build; and you live in them and eat from vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant.’

This section introduces the passage and reviews the past in terms of God's gracious provisions for his people. The review of God's gracious actions on Israel's behalf goes back to Terah, Abraham's father, and continues up to the taking of the land. It begins with a reminder that Israel's ancestors had served other gods (v. [2](#)), and it is followed by an exhortation not to serve these or any gods (vv. [14–15](#)). It ends with yet another reminder that the land was God's gift to Israel (vv. [12–13](#); cf. [Deut 6:10–11](#)). Verses [1](#) and [2](#) present evidence suggesting the more formal nature of this chapter because the Israelite leaders “presented themselves before God” (v. [1](#)) and because the historical review is introduced with the traditional prophetic speech formula, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel” (v. [2](#)).

[24:1](#) Joshua gathered the Israelites at Shechem, which represented a new location for their national gatherings (most recently the setting appears to have been at Shiloh: see [18:1](#)). This is the first time this important city is mentioned in Joshua (except in the land distribution lists), although the covenant renewal ceremony in [8:30–35](#) took place at Mount Ebal, near Shechem. It was at Shechem that God first promised to give Abraham the land ([Gen 12:6–7](#)), and now, centuries later, God's promises finally had come true, and the covenant was renewed in the very place where he had made them.

The officials at this gathering were the same as in chap. 23—the elders, leaders, judges, and officials (cf. 23:2)—but this time the entire nation is also mentioned as being present (cf. also v. 2: “all the people”). They all presented themselves “before God,” which was undoubtedly before the ark.

24:2–4 Joshua's review of God's gracious acts for his people began with a reference to their ancestors as far back as Terah, who lived in Mesopotamia and who worshiped other gods (v. 2). Illustrative evidence of some of their ancestors' worship of many gods can be found in the account of Laban, Jacob, and Rachel, where Rachel stole the household gods in Laban's house ([Gen 31:19, 34–35](#)). This is also illustrated by the account in [Gen 35:2–4](#), where Jacob urged his household to divest themselves of the foreign gods they had kept among them, which they did.

Terah had three sons—Abraham, Nahor, and Haran ([Gen 11:27](#)), of whom Nahor and Abraham are mentioned here. God chose only Abraham, however, to bless and to use as a means of blessing to others, and thus the text here states that God took him from his homeland.

God led Abraham through “all the land of Canaan” (NIV: “throughout Canaan”), just as the Book of Genesis affirms ([Gen 12:6–9; 13:17–18](#)). He also gave him many descendants, beginning with his son Isaac and his grandsons Jacob and Esau (vv. 3–4). Of these two, the blessing passed through Jacob, who went down to Egypt (v. 4; cf. [Gen 15:13; 28:10–15; 35:9–13; 46:5–7](#)). Esau, meanwhile, was granted land east of the Jordan (cf. [Gen 32:3; 36:8](#)). A contrast is drawn between Esau and Jacob in the syntax here: “But as for Jacob and his sons, they went down to Egypt.” Even though Jacob was the one through whom the promise to Abraham would be mediated, he and his descendants spent a long “exile” in Egypt before finally returning to the promised land. God's plans for the Canaanites had not come to fruition until now ([Gen 15:16](#)).

24:5–7 The second phase of God's gracious acts for his people involved what he had done for them in Egypt. He sent leaders for his people—Moses and Aaron. Furthermore, he afflicted the Egyptians through the plagues (cf. [Exodus 7–12](#)) and brought the Israelites out of Egypt (v. 5; cf. [Exod 12:31–39](#)). Then he dramatically delivered the Israelites and destroyed the Egyptians at the Red Sea ([Exodus 14–15](#)). Following that was a long sojourn in the desert. The text here does not mention that this sojourn was due to the previous generation's rebellion against the Lord (see [Numbers 14](#)). Rather, because the present generation was a new one, which was not guilty of this rebellion, the desert sojourn is simply mentioned in passing.

A dramatic shift in perspective occurs in these verses. Whereas previously God had spoken of the people's ancestors in the distant past and in third-person address (“he,” “they”), in v. 5 “you” occurs for the first time, and “you” alternates with “they” through v. 7. After that, “you” is used exclusively. This puts the focus on the present generation in a dramatic way. The alternation also shows the unity of this generation with the fathers. A great number of people in this generation had actually witnessed and experienced many of the mighty deeds God had done for his people. They would have been the people who were under the age of twenty when the nation had left Egypt (see [Num 14:29–33](#)). Indeed, the major part of the review of the past in vv. 2–13 focuses on what God had done for those now alive and present with Joshua at Shechem. This shows that God did not just make himself known in ages past; he also worked mightily and graciously for the people being addressed. The impact of God's words was greater because of this focus on them. Christians today are still part of that great spiritual heritage (see, e.g., [Rom 11:11–24; Hebrews 11](#)).

24:8–10 The third phase of God's gracious acts for his people involved his work on their behalf before they crossed the Jordan River, and it is divided here into two parts: (1) the victories against Sihon and Og (v. 8; cf. [Num 21:21–35](#)) and (2) the thwarting of Balak's evil intentions (vv. 9–10; cf. [Numbers 22–24](#)). Sihon and Og are not mentioned here by name, but v. 8 clearly refers to them.

When God said that he was not willing to listen to Balaam (v. [10](#)), he was referring to Balaam's implicit request that God should put a curse on Israel, which he refused to do ([Num 22:10–12](#)). The NIV's "he blessed you again and again" here is somewhat misleading. The construction is more properly translated "he indeed blessed you" and expresses the surprise inherent in Balaam's blessing Israel, since his original intention was *not* to do so (see the similar construction in [Num 23:11](#); [24:10](#)).

[24:11–13](#) The fourth and final phase of God's gracious acts concerned his interventions and his blessings in the land of Canaan, that is, the activities covered in the Book of Joshua. The people's first great encounter at Jericho is mentioned specifically, but the other battles are only generically referred to by means of the references to the seven peoples of the land and to the hornet (vv. [11–12](#)). God's gift of the land is emphasized in v. [13](#).

The seven peoples listed here are the same as those listed in [3:10](#), only in a different order. In [3:10](#) Joshua had promised the Israelites that God would drive out these peoples from before them. The book comes full circle now in affirming that God had done what he promised: he had delivered the Canaanites into the Israelites' hands (v. [11](#)), and he had driven them out (v. [12](#)).

In v. [12](#) a reference to "the hornet" that drove the peoples out has occasioned much discussion. The affirmation that God had sent the hornet to do this echoes God's the promise in [Exod 23:28](#) that he would "send the hornet ahead of you to drive the Hivites, Canaanites and Hittites out of your way." In the next verses God had stated that the process would take a long time: "But I will not drive them out in a single year, because the land would become desolate and the wild animals too numerous for you. Little by little I will drive them out before you, until you have increased enough to take possession of the land" ([Exod 23:29–30](#)). This is confirmed by statements in the Book of Joshua (see esp. [11:18](#); [22:3](#); [23:1](#), and the commentary on [23:1](#)).

Three suggestions usually are advanced about the identity of the "hornet." (1) It is usually understood as a metaphor representing the terror or panic that an encounter with Israel's God would engender. Passages such as [2:9–11](#), [24](#); [5:1](#); [6:27](#); [Exod 15:14–16](#); [23:27](#) all show this terror, speaking of it using different terminology (cf. also [Gen 35:5](#)). (2) Some have identified the hornet as the power of the pharaoh of Egypt, whose symbols were a bee or hornet. However, the text does not mention Egypt or even hint that Egypt is in view here; furthermore, nowhere in the Bible is such an identification made. (3) Others suggest taking the word literally, arguing that such insects have been used at different points in history in warfare. Even though this practice is known in history in certain places at certain times, however, it is not known from anywhere in the ancient Near East, and such an argument depends on many inferences and assumptions that, in the end, appear to be unlikely. Hornets are not mentioned in the actual battle descriptions in chaps. [6–12](#), and, in any case, the reference is to "*the hornet*," not "*hornets*." Thus, the first possibility appears to be the most likely (i.e., that we are dealing with a metaphor here). We should remember, however, that the larger point is that God fought for Israel, regardless of how we interpret the reference to "the hornet."

On the face of it, the two kings in v. [12](#) were Sihon and Og, whom Israel had defeated in the wilderness ([Num 21:21–35](#)) and now are called "the kings of the Amorites" ([Deut 3:8](#); [31:4](#)). However, the Israelites' triumph over the Amorites east of the Jordan is told in v. [8](#); the verses here refer to actions west of the Jordan. It is possible that Adonizedek and Jabin, the heads of the northern and southern coalitions that opposed Israel in chaps. [10–11](#), are in view here. In chap. [10](#) the coalition is characterized as "Amorite" ([10:6](#)). The Old Greek traditions have "twelve kings" instead of "two kings," but this number—although it is a common one and is also found in Assyrian royal inscriptions referring to the number of enemy kings killed—does not correlate with any groupings of kings in Joshua. Syntactically, the phrase "the two Amorite kings" is not connected to anything else in the verse, and perhaps the

simplest solution to this difficulty is to understand that the author is here inserting a brief flashback to victories east of the Jordan to go along with those west of the Jordan.

As this first section comes to an end in vv. [12b](#) and [13](#), God once again reminded the people that their present position in the land was entirely his doing. Not only did he send “the hornet” to drive out the Canaanites, but this was accomplished even without their own weapons as the instruments. The victories were God's, not dependent upon military power (cf. [Ps 44:2–3](#)[Hb. [3–4](#)]). Obviously, the Israelites did wield their weapons on occasion. For example, at Jericho we are told that they “destroyed with the sword every living thing in it” ([6:21](#)), or at Ai the enemy “had been put to the sword” ([8:24](#)), or in the battle of Gibeon many “were killed by the swords of the Israelites” ([10:11](#)). Therefore, God's statement that it was *not* “with your sword or your bow” must be understood as saying that it was not by their own power, by the might or ferocity of their own weapons, that they had success. Only by God's power did they accomplish what they did, something the book affirms over and over again.

The hyperbole here places the emphasis squarely where it belongs, on God's initiatives and provisions for his people. Jesus used similar hyperbolic language when he said, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple” ([Luke 14:26](#)), even though he had stressed elsewhere that people were to love their neighbors as themselves ([Matt 22:39](#); [Mark 12:31, 33](#); [Luke 10:27](#)). His point was that, compared to their love for their neighbors or family, their love for God should cause that human love to appear like hate. So too here: in the overall scheme of things, the Israelites' swords had nothing to do with their inheriting and taking the land. It was all God's doing.

That this was God's work is emphasized in the final statements of the historical review portion of Joshua's address. Essentially everything they now possessed had been given to them by God. They had not worked the land, built the cities, or planted the vineyards and olive groves that they now were enjoying. This fulfilled the promise God had made earlier, in [Deut 6:10–11](#), where he told the Israelites that the land they were coming into was “a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant.” Once again God was faithful to his promises. The land was nothing but God's gracious gift to his people.

(2) Covenant Affirmations ([24:14–24](#))

¹⁴“Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. ¹⁵But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

¹⁶Then the people answered, “Far be it from us to forsake the LORD to serve other gods! ¹⁷It was the LORD our God himself who brought us and our fathers up out of Egypt, from that land of slavery, and performed those great signs before our eyes. He protected us on our entire journey and among all the nations through which we traveled. ¹⁸And the LORD drove out before us all the nations, including the Amorites, who lived in the land. We too will serve the LORD, because he is our God.”

¹⁹Joshua said to the people, “You are not able to serve the LORD. He is a holy God; he is a jealous God. He will not forgive your rebellion and your sins.” ²⁰If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, he will turn and bring disaster on you and make an end of you, after he has been good to you.”

²¹But the people said to Joshua, “No! We will serve the LORD.”

²²Then Joshua said, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen to serve the LORD.”

“Yes, we are witnesses,” they replied.

²³“Now then,” said Joshua, “throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.”

²⁴And the people said to Joshua, “We will serve the LORD our God and obey him.”

The proper response to God's gracious dealings was for Israel to forsake other gods and follow him, the one true God. Joshua himself would lead the way by example (vv. [14–15](#)). The people's response was one of commitment (vv. [16–18](#)), after which Joshua warned them about the consequences of this commitment, which the people were willing to accept (vv. [19–21](#)). A formal covenant renewal or covenant ratification ceremony seems to be in view in vv. [22–24](#), with the people testifying as witnesses to their own actions, although these verses only report on such a ceremony (i.e., they may not contain the entirety of what was said and done).

[24:14–15](#) Now God left off speaking directly, and Joshua addressed the people, charging them to be faithful in serving the God who had been so faithful in helping them. He again mentioned the gods of their ancestors (cf. v. [2](#)) and urged the people to remove them (“throw away”) from their midst. In v. [14](#) the NIV's “serve him with all faithfulness” is literally “serve him with integrity (*tāmîm*) and truth (*'ēmet*).” The NASB renders the phrase here as “sincerity and truth,” the NRSV as “sincerity and ... faithfulness,” the REB as “loyalty and truth,” the NLT as “wholeheartedly.” The word *tāmîm* connotes the idea of wholeness, blamelessness, integrity, even “perfection,” and thus Joshua's exhortation is a passionate one that the people should be totally devoted—blameless—in their worship of their God. The first part of v. [14](#) contains a concentration of theologically freighted words: the Israelites should fear (*yr'*) the Lord, and they should serve (*'bd*) him with integrity (*tāmîm*) and truth (*'ēmet*). Joshua was urgently impressing on the people what they should do.

The phrase “in Egypt” in v. [14](#) adds something new here. In v. [2](#) we have learned that Israel's ancestors had worshiped other gods early on, when they were still in Mesopotamia (see comments on v. [2](#)). However, Joshua now stated that this also had been true in Egypt. There is no direct reference to such false worship from the narrative texts in Exodus about Israel's time in Egypt. However, twice reference is made in the Pentateuch to the gods the Israelites had worshiped there: (1) [Lev 17:7](#) mentions goat idols that the Israelites had sacrificed to, and (2) in [Deut 32:16–17](#) they are charged with worshiping “demons,” which were foreign gods, idols, which had not been worshiped in Israel until recent times (i.e., in Egypt, or the wilderness). In v. [15](#) Joshua added a third set of gods, “the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.” Thus, false worship had been a hallmark not only of Israel's distant ancestors or of their more immediate ancestors in Egypt, but even of themselves, here in the land of Canaan. Joshua's implication was that the nation had never truly rid itself of false worship, and he was urging the people in the strongest terms possible to do so now.

In v. [15](#) Joshua laid out two choices for the people, made the more urgent by his insistence that the choice be made “today” (“this day”). If they found serving the Lord to be “evil in your eyes” (NIV: “undesirable to you”), then they should choose between the gods of Mesopotamia whom their distant ancestors had served or the more immediate gods of the Amorites (i.e., Canaanites), among whom they were living. In his famous words at the end of the verse, Joshua took his stand clearly and unambiguously on the Lord's side. Joshua stands as a good example of a leader willing to move ahead of his people and commit himself, regardless of the people's inclinations. His bold example undoubtedly encouraged many to follow what he pledged to do, in their affirmations of vv. [16–18](#).

The choice laid out here for Israel was a breathtaking one. The language about choice is not found elsewhere in the Old Testament. Normally, God was the one who did the choosing, having chosen Israel from among the nations to be his people (see, e.g., [Deut 4:37](#); [7:6–7](#); [10:15](#); [14:2](#)). But now, *Israel* was being asked to choose *its* loyalties, something the pagan nations did not have to do because they could embrace all the gods. The Israelites were being asked to do what Rahab had done, namely, to embrace this *one* God and, by doing so, to reject all others (see on [2:9–11](#)). Joshua laid out for Israel the choice, but he did not threaten them or try to coerce them. The choice was simple, and he set an example by his own choice.

[24:16–18](#) The people rose to Joshua's challenge and promised to serve the Lord, not other gods (vv. [16, 18](#)). They echoed the spirit of God's words in vv. [2–13](#), acknowledging that it was indeed he who had delivered them at each step of the way, but they focused on different aspects of his deliverance. They also added to God's words (e.g., mentioning “that land of slavery,” v. [17](#)), showing that they were well aware of their history and God's part in it. The Israelites saw (*r'h*) in these signs the hand of God, just as God had said that they had seen (*r'h*, v. [7](#)). Joshua had suggested that perhaps it was evil in their eyes to follow the Lord (v. [15](#)), but they insisted that they did see things aright now, and they would serve him. This is an incisive reminder for the present day as well, since often, when God does cause events to work out for his people, they do not see his hand in it, but rather attribute it merely to chance or coincidence.

[24:19–20](#) Joshua's statement that Israel was not capable of serving the Lord introduces a “deep paradox” here, one that Butler calls “perhaps the most shocking statement in the OT.” Joshua had just urged Israel in vv. [14–15](#) to serve the Lord with all faithfulness, and he had done so in passionate terms. He also laid out what appeared to be a true choice for the people. And yet now, when the people responded that they would do so, he turned the tables on them and stated that they were *not* capable of doing so. Furthermore, he stated that God himself would not forgive their rebellion and sin. These were harsh words indeed.

The key to understanding these statements comes in two other statements that Joshua made, which affirmed two of God's defining characteristics: he is a holy God and also a jealous God (v. [19](#)). Both of these characteristics are part of God's very nature and set him apart from all other gods and from his people. In [Lev 19:2](#) the Israelites are urged to be holy because of God's own holy nature: “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.” God's holiness pervades the instructions in the Pentateuch about the building of the tabernacle, the offering of the sacrifices, and the celebrating of the festivals. Wherever God was, that place was holy, whether it was a piece of ground ([Exod 3:5](#); [Josh 5:15](#)), a physical structure such as the tabernacle ([Exod 26:33–34](#); [28:35–36](#); etc.) or the altar ([Exod 29:37](#); [30:10](#)), or even a day dedicated to him (i.e., the Sabbath: [Gen 2:3](#); [Exod 20:8, 11](#); [Deut 5:12](#)).

God's jealous nature also set him apart from other gods. They were jealous among themselves, displaying endless petty rivalries. However, God's jealousy played itself out with the consequences being visited on his own people when they were unfaithful. This was (and is) part of God's very nature: he would not brook any competition for his people's loyalties. This is clear in the Second Commandment

in [Exod 20:4–6](#): “You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Butler well notes that “[God] loves [his people] so much that he wants their undivided love in return. He will not share them with any other god.”

Joshua's response to the people that they were unable to serve the Lord properly communicates the absolute and awesome nature of God's holiness and his jealousy. He would not forgive them if they persisted in sin. However, [Exod 20:6](#) shows that even this jealous God would show his love in a most bountiful way if his people loved him and kept his commandments. Joshua himself assumed that the Israelites would make a choice ([Josh 24:14–15](#)). His dramatic words here emphasize the solemnity of the requirements, to purge from the Israelites any false notions of “cheap grace.” Theirs was not to be a nominal, superficial faith. As J. H. Michaelis noted, Israel could not serve the Lord “by your own resolution only, and without the assistance of divine grace, without solid and serious conversion from all idols, and without true repentance and faith.”

Verse [20](#) makes it clear that what Joshua stated in v. [19](#) about God's not forgiving his people was not an absolute, timeless statement, but that his forgiveness depended on whether or not his people forsook him in favor of “foreign gods.” As Calvin stated, “when it is said that he will not spare their wickedness, no general rule is laid down, but the discourse is directed, as often elsewhere, against their disobedient temper. It does not refer to faults in general, or to special faults, but is confined to gross denial of God, as the next verse demonstrates.” After all the good that he had done for them, God would reward any rejection of him by his people with harsh judgment. This is not, however, the action of a capricious God. He had graciously taken the initiative again and again with his people and provided for them over and over again, as vv. [2–13](#) affirm. Yet if his people persisted in rebellion in spite of such loving and sustained overtures, he would not tolerate this forever.

[24:21–24](#) The second section of the chapter ends with a set of exchanges between Joshua and the people about their resolve to serve the Lord. First, the people protested that Joshua was mistaken when he said they were not capable of serving him (v. [21](#)). No doubt they were sincere, and no doubt they obeyed for a time. However, as the Book of Judges makes clear, they soon demonstrated that theirs was indeed a shallow, superficial faith.

In response to their protest of loyalty to the Lord, Joshua held the people responsible to be witnesses against themselves—that they had indeed chosen to serve the Lord—and they readily agreed (v. [22](#)). As we noted in the introduction to the chapter, calling the gods as witnesses between two parties was a standard part of ancient Near Eastern treaties. However, since here Yahweh was God alone and the entire point was that there were no other gods, such gods could not be invoked. Rather, Joshua held the people to be their own witnesses. Later he erected a large stone that would serve the same purpose (v. [27](#)).

The expression in v. [23](#), “incline your heart to the LORD” (“yield your hearts ...”), indicates an attitude of commitment to him, rejecting others. In [1 Kgs 11:2](#), [4](#), [9](#) we are told that Solomon's heart inclined after foreign gods because of his foreign wives, which was precisely the type of behavior Joshua was warning against.

This section ends in v. [24](#) as it began in v. [21](#): with the Israelites vowing to serve the Lord (and to obey him).

(3) Sealing the Covenant ([24:25–28](#))

²⁵On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. ²⁶And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD.

²⁷“See!” he said to all the people. “This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God.”

²⁸Then Joshua sent the people away, each to his own inheritance.

In the structure of the covenant treaty form discussed at the beginning of this chapter, some of the information here would correspond to the deposit in the sanctuary, public reading (v. 26), and witnesses (v. 27) (so Kitchen), or a written documentation (so Baltzer). However, as we have noted, it is not clear that this chapter is intending to reproduce faithfully every element of such a treaty, so certainty is impossible. For the first (and only) time in the chapter, the word “covenant” is mentioned. This has occasioned much scholarly discussion about the precise nature of the covenant because God's involvement is limited to the recital of his past deeds; he does not appear as an active party at the end of the proceedings. What is clear is that the people were binding themselves to serve and obey him. The writing down of the decrees and laws and the calling of the great stone as a witness against them both served to seal their solemn commitment to this.

[24:25](#) Joshua made a covenant “for” or “on behalf of” the people (the Hb. preposition can mean either). Once again he functioned as the nation's leader. This covenant bound the people in a strong commitment to serve and obey only Yahweh their God, as over against the gods of the Canaanites or any other foreign gods. He established (“drew up”) the terms “for it” (i.e., for the covenant; NIV has “for them”): the decrees and laws. The terms here (*hōq ūmišpāt*) are actually singular, “a statute and an ordinance” (NASB). They are used forty-one times together, five times in the singular: [Exod 15:25](#); [Josh 24:25](#); [1 Sam 30:25](#); [Ezra 7:10](#); [Ps 81:4](#) [Hb. 5]. In [Exod 15:25](#) and [1 Sam 30:25](#), what is in view is a specific ordinance for the specific context. In [Ezra 7:10](#) the larger context of the law is in view, as it is many times when the two terms are plural. In [Ps 81:4](#) [Hb. 5] the decree and the law are for the establishment of festival observances. Here in [Joshua 24](#) the “decree and law” that Joshua established centered around a specific ordinance, which was the primary concern and focus of the chapter, namely, that Israel would be committed to Yahweh alone. By extension, of course, such a commitment would entail Israel's keeping the entirety of the law, but the immediate focus is more intensely concentrated on this single-minded and whole-hearted commitment to God.

[24:26](#) The covenant was sealed by (1) the recording of the words in a book and (2) the setting up of a stone as a “witness” to it. “These words” (or, with NIV, “these things”) refers to either the words spoken by God, Joshua, and the people in this chapter or else, more broadly, to an account of everything that had transpired, including the words and the events of that day. The book in which this was recorded is called “the Book of the Law of God.” This term is used again only in [Neh 8:8, 18](#), where it refers to “the Book of the Law of Moses,” that is, the entire corpus of the law (see [Neh 8:1](#)). Here the nature of this book is not so clear. The words of the covenant ceremony in [Joshua 24](#) are not found in the Pentateuch in this form. Thus, by writing “*these words* in the Book of the Law of God,” Joshua was not contributing to the writing of the Pentateuch itself. He may have recorded the words of the ceremony in a copy of the law that was in his possession, or, more probably, he may have recorded these words in another book, which was called “the Book of the Law of God” by virtue of its contents. The essence of its contents is known to us via the present canonical Book of Joshua.

The covenant was also sealed by the erecting of a large stone under an oak tree. This oak tree was near the Lord's "holy place," which probably was not a formal building or temple but a reference to the "holy place" created at Shechem by the bringing of the tabernacle there, where it would have stayed, at least for a time. The reference in v. [1](#) to the people's presenting themselves "before God" suggests that the tabernacle was now here, housing the ark. The stone under the oak tree functioned as a legal reminder or guarantor (a "witness") of the covenant just entered into (v. [27](#)). Now the stone and the people were both witnesses to this covenant (v. [22](#)). This also echoes the function of the altar built by the Transjordan tribes, which also was a "witness" ([22:34](#)).

We have good evidence of the significance of large trees at Shechem and elsewhere. In the Bible they appear primarily as landmarks or gathering places. For example, a great tree "of Moreh" was a distinguishing marker of Shechem as far back as Abraham's day ([Gen 12:6](#)), and "great trees of Moreh" are mentioned in [Deut 11:30](#). Jacob buried items of foreign worship under an oak tree at Shechem ([Gen 35:4](#); perhaps the same one that Abraham saw?). In [Judg 9:6](#) "all the citizens of Shechem and Beth Millo gathered beside the great tree at the pillar in Shechem to crown Abimelech king"; no doubt this passage refers to the same tree and stone mentioned in [Joshua 24](#). Other prominent trees include "the great trees of Mamre at Hebron" in Abraham's day ([Gen 13:18](#); [14:13](#); [18:1](#)); "the Palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim," where Deborah rendered legal decisions ([Judg 4:5](#)); "the great tree in Zaananim near Kedesh," where Heber pitched his tent ([Judg 4:11](#)); "the oak in Ophrah," where the angel of the Lord met Gideon ([Judg 6:11, 19](#)); and "the great tree of Tabor," where Saul was to meet three men ([1 Sam 10:3](#)).

We also have evidence elsewhere of the significance of large standing stones such as the one here. They were used primarily as markers to memorialize significant events or people. Jacob set up the stone he had used for a pillow as a pillar to mark the place where God had met him and where he had made a vow ([Gen 28:18, 22](#); [31:13](#); cf. also [35:14](#)). He also set up a stone, as well as a pile of stones next to it, to mark (as "witnesses") the agreement he made with Laban about their future interactions ([Gen 31:44–52](#)). He also set up a stone to mark his wife Rachel's tomb ([Gen 35:20](#)). Moses built an altar and twelve stone pillars at the foot of Mount Sinai to mark the giving of the covenant there ([Exod 24:4](#)). Absalom erected a pillar as well, but it was a monument to himself, not to the Lord ([2 Sam 18:18](#)).

[24:27](#) The stone itself was now a witness of the covenant (as were the people in v. [22](#)). It had "heard" everything that the Lord had said to Israel. The text only claims that the stone had heard what God had said (i.e., vv. [2–13](#)), not the rest of the ceremony (vv. [14–24](#)). So its presence would serve as a testimony to God's faithfulness to his people, just as the twelve stones that Joshua erected on the bank of the Jordan were to serve as testimonies to what he had done at the Jordan ([4:9, 20–24](#)). Such a reference to the stone's "hearing" is obviously a literary metaphor, in the same way that references to rivers clapping their hands and mountains singing for joy ([Ps 98:8](#)) or to the trees of the field singing for joy ([Ps 96:12](#)) are metaphors.

[24:28](#) With a short, laconic statement, the main story line of the book of Joshua is concluded. There were no more lands to be taken, no more territorial distributions to be made, no more speeches to be given, no more covenants to be entered into. Everyone was able to return to his inheritance, which was the goal from the beginning of the book.