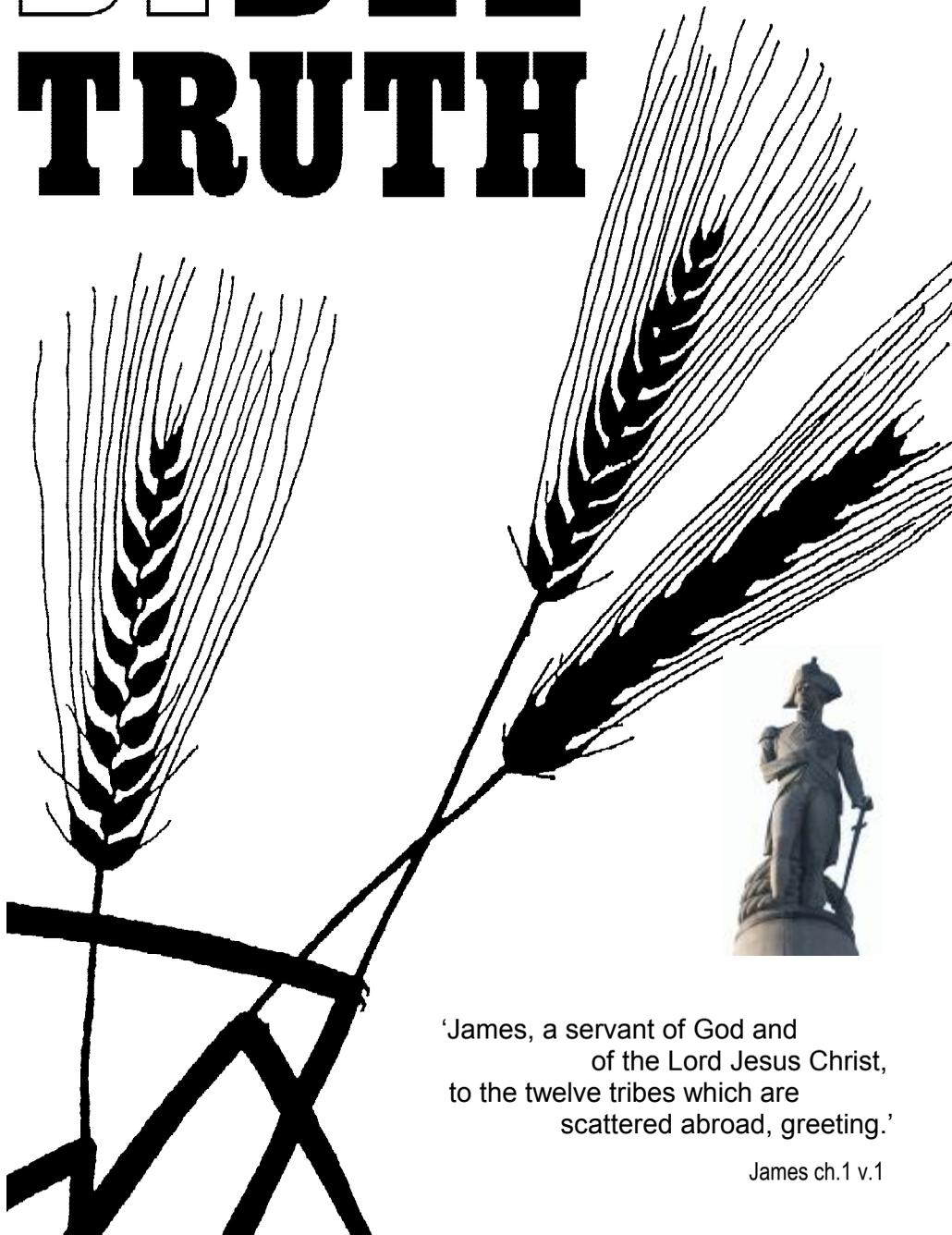


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‘James, a servant of God and
of the Lord Jesus Christ,
to the twelve tribes which are
scattered abroad, greeting.’

James ch.1 v.1

THE MOST IMPORTANT BATTLE IN HISTORY

by Pastor Jory Steven Brooks, USA.

If the average person were asked to name the most important battle in the world's history, their answer might well be the Battle of Britain in World War II, or perhaps more specifically the rescue of allied soldiers at Dunkirk. Those with a little more knowledge of the past might point back to the defeat of the Spanish Armada, or even perhaps the victory of Roland over the Moors. While all of these were certainly of great importance in the history of the world, one mainstream theologian has a very different answer.

Interestingly enough, Dr Martin Sicker, in his thoughtful study, *The Rise and Fall of the Ancient Israelite States*, points instead to an event in the Biblical history of Israel: the battle of Gibeon in Joshua ch.10. He states,

'Here was fought perhaps the most important battle in all human history ... since the religious destiny of all the world was at stake'.

(p.59)

Dr Sicker, however, gives few clues to explain his unique designation of this event.

What was so important about this battle? After forty years of wilderness wandering, the Israelites had marched into the land of promise, only to find the land already inhabited by Canaanite cities and their occupants. The Canaanite leaders, alarmed at the presence of these intruders, gathered their armies together and prepared not only to drive out the invading Israelites, but to annihilate them. Think of the disaster for the world if this had taken place! An Israelite holocaust would have meant that all of the covenant promises to Israel would have vanished unfulfilled, the empire of David and Solomon would never have come to pass, and 'David's Greater Son' the Messiah Jesus Christ would never have lived and died for the sins of the world. It was truly a most significant and fateful event in the history of mankind.

Yet all was not lost, for God raised up a great deliverer to lead his people into battle. Israel was led by Joshua, who was not only a

prophet of God but a masterful general. We get a glimpse of Joshua's brilliant - and largely unappreciated - tactical moves in an interesting book, *The Military History of Ancient Israel*, in which author Richard Gabriel presents a detailed 'blow by blow' analysis of the Israelite conquest.

Unfortunately, few Christians today have much knowledge or appreciation of Old Testament history, and even fewer have ever heard of the Battle of Gibeon. The Biblical account gives us an overview of this historic event.

'Joshua therefore came unto them suddenly, and went up from Gilgal all night. And the LORD discomfited them [i.e., the Canaanites] before Israel, and slew them with a great slaughter at Gibeon, and chased them along the way that goeth up to Bethhoron, and smote them to Azekah, and unto Makkedah. And it came to pass, as they fled from before Israel, and were in the going down to Bethhoron, that the LORD cast down great stones from heaven upon them unto Azekah, and they died: they were more which died with hailstones than they whom the children of Israel slew with the sword.'

Joshua ch.10 vv.9-11



Joshua rescues Gibeon and then goes on to break the power of the kings to the south. The crosses indicate the cities that fell

Joshua and his troops, perhaps numbering 15,000 according to Gabriel, had made one of the most remarkable forced-marches in history, ‘... a difficult and twisting climb of about 18 to 20 miles over an elevation of more than a thousand metres’, accomplished in the darkness of night (Gabriel, p.141). With no sleep and nothing for breakfast, the Israelites made a pre-dawn attack on the Canaanites while they were likely still in their beds. The Israelite attack was a complete surprise. In the ensuing panic, Joshua’s troops pursued the fleeing enemy for many miles in every direction over the course of that day. The final pursuit to the city of Azekah, for example, covered a distance of eleven miles, so Joshua’s troops in full battle gear had ranged and fought over rough terrain a total distance of 30 to 40 miles with no rest or food since the day before.

The elements aided this conquest, for the Canaanites had evidently discarded their protective shields in their flight and their survivors ran into a heaven-sent ‘hailstorm’ that killed many of them who had escaped the slaughter.

The Biblical record continues,

‘Then spake Joshua to the LORD in the day when the LORD delivered up the Amorites before the children of Israel, and he said in the sight of Israel, Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the people had avenged themselves upon their enemies. Is not this written in the book of Jasher? So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day. And there was no day like that before it or after it, that the LORD hearkened unto the voice of a man: for the LORD fought for Israel’.

Joshua ch.10 vv.12-14

The sun and the moon continued to shine all day long until the carnage was over. It was truly an epochal day; ‘... there was no day like that before it or after it ... ’ in the history of the world! The late Dr Charles A.L. Totten referred to this remarkable event as ‘Joshua’s Long Day’. Historians today refer to this battle as Joshua’s Southern Campaign, and it was followed up by an equally successful invasion of northern Canaan to drive out the remaining Canaanites in Galilee and surrounding regions.

In the Southern Campaign there were five kings who led armies against the Israelites, but when their soldiers fled in panic, all five had a planned method of escape; they took refuge together in a secluded cave in an effort to try to save themselves. The Sacred text records,

‘And Joshua returned, and all Israel with him, unto the camp to Gilgal. But these five kings fled, and hid themselves in a cave at Makkedah. And it was told Joshua, saying, The five kings are found hid in a cave at Makkedah. And Joshua said, Roll great stones upon the mouth of the cave, and set men by it for to keep them: And stay ye not, but pursue after your enemies, and smite the hindmost of them; suffer them not to enter into their cities: for the LORD your God hath delivered them into your hand’.

Joshua ch.10 vv.15-19

As a wise military commander, Joshua recognized the importance of not getting side-tracked by a few men cornered in a cave, regardless of their prominence. He ordered his men to block up the cave entrance with large stones, thus imprisoning the five kings, and quickly continue their pursuit of the fleeing armies. It was important not to let the enemy reach the Canaanite cities where they could regroup and organize resistance to Joshua’s forces. Instead, with the armies defeated, the Canaanite cities would also easily fall.

One by one, the cities did fall: Makkedah and Libnah were conquered in one day each; Lachish in two days; Eglon and Hebron and Debir each took a day apiece. The five kings were removed from their confinement in the cave and executed. Southern Canaan was at last cleared of the Canaanites and their wicked false religion.

What was so evil about the Canaanites that they had to be practically exterminated? The religion of Canaan included horrifying child sacrifices as well as polytheism and government-sanctioned temple prostitution. Author Steven M. Collins, in his excellent book *Israel’s Lost Empires*, explains in more depth the nature of the Canaanitic religion with many accompanying illustrations of their horrible practices. We can be thankful that Israel won the battle of Gibeon and the ensuing struggle for Galilee. The concluding ‘Northern Campaign’ by Joshua is discussed in our Bibles in Joshua chapters 11 to 14.

With the conquest of the Land of Promise complete, Joshua apparently soon after stepped out of the limelight of history and returned to private life.

For whatever it is worth, rabbinic tradition says that Joshua later married, but produced only daughters and left no son to continue his father's leadership over Israel. The great prophet and general is said to have died alone and was buried at a now unknown location called 'Thimnath serah' in 'Har gaash', a term meaning 'angry mountain'. The tradition also says that no one came to his funeral. As Dr Gabriel phrased it,

'In war, he had been their great general and hero. In peace, he was no longer needed. And it was said that no one came to pay final respects, an honour to which all men are entitled'.

(p.147)

If true, it was a sad and unfortunate ending for one of the greatest Israelite leaders of all time. May we never forget his deeds and the deeds of all of our forefathers!
