

Friday, June 17 / Sivan 29, 1439 BCE

Kadesh-Barnea

Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. (Proverbs 3:5–6)

It was another sweltering day in the desert furnace. The wind blew from no particular direction, creating mini whirlwinds that danced through the training arena, picked dry leaves from the sand, and sent them upward into obscurity. The sun that one moment gave life to foliage and brought light to the darkest morning seemed obstinately angry today, cooking the warriors as they trained.

The clanging of swords and pounding of shields formed a rhythmic bass to the high tenor battle cries as the men thrust forward with shouts and deflected blows with baritone grunts.

Hoshea spun as the sword thrust barely missed his shoulder. He lifted his shield and deflected the weapon. He simultaneously lifted his right leg and kicked Shammua in the belly. Shammua, forced back a couple of steps, saw his opportunity and crashed his heavy sword down on Hoshea's exposed head. Hoshea raised his sword defensively, protecting himself against Shammua's attack. While Shammua was concentrating on another downward blow, Hoshea swept Shammua's leg off the ground and dropped him onto the soft sand. Hoshea put the point of his sword to Shammua's neck, declaring himself the victor, and they both broke out laughing.

Caleb, watching the scrimmage, jumped on Hoshea, and Hoshea's sword went flying from his hand. They rolled in the sand, using their fists and elbows. Caleb balanced himself on top until Hoshea flipped him and lay across Caleb's chest. Hoshea grabbed his arm, and used his legs to hold Caleb's body stationary. He twisted Caleb's muscular arm downward. Caleb

shrieked in pain and acknowledged his defeat by tapping Hoshea three times in submission. Now all three—Caleb, Hoshea, and Shammua—roared in pleasure.

“The enemy will not be so kind,” Hoshea declared, still smiling. “We must be vigilant and aware of all his strategies in battle. Even when you go for your kill strike, Shammua, remember your unprotected side and guard it with your life at all times. In hand-to-hand combat, as in life, if you are overconfident, you will make a mistake and fail. Pride always comes before the fall.”

Rubbing his sand-coated arm, Caleb snickered. “You were just lucky this time, you big bear. I was moments away from putting you asleep.”

“Yeah, sure, ‘big dog.’” Hoshea could not hide his sarcasm. “Whatever you say.” And tears of pleasure poured from his eyes.

As they lay supine on the desert sand, a young, breathless man hurried up to them. “Hoshea, the commander-in-chief has summoned you and Caleb. You are to go to his tent immediately.”

“Shammua, I leave you in charge of the training. Teach them well. We will soon be in battle again.” Hoshea did not like his men idling.

Shammua stood at attention, slapped his right hand on his heart, and bowed his head. “Aye, Commander.” He turned toward the sixty warriors engaged in their tactical military practice and started shouting instructions.

Hoshea reached for his fur-trimmed, hardened leather helmet and placed it on his head. Over his white tunic, he wore a scaly, light-brown leather vest that had been boiled and hardened

in herb-infused water, so it repelled arrows and spears. A one-half-cubit flap over each shoulder protected his biceps. The vest was tightly laced together with goat sinew, and the symmetrical design on the front was pleasing to the eye.

The training area, just west of the tribes of the Ox, was quite a distance from the central tent where Moses sat as the commander-in-chief. The camp, which now housed almost two and a half million people, looked more like a city. Thirteen tribes made up the Israelites, who were divided into five groups, each displaying their own vexilloid.ⁱ Hoshea, the son of Nun, came from the tribe of Ephraim, where the Ox flag waved defiantly. The tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin all shared the northern part of the city. To the south, the flag of the Lion waved proudly. This is where the tribes of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun pitched their tents and cooked their meals. To the east of the city, next to the flag of Man standing tall in the desert, Shammua's tribe of Reuben's descendants lived, along with the tribes of Simeon and Gad. To the west, the flag of the Eagle fluttered over the tribes of Dan, Naphtali, and Asher. The Levite priests, displaying no flag, occupied the centre of the tent city dedicated to the tabernacle. Moses's tent was the largest in the Levite section.

It was a military city cleverly designed to protect their religious artifacts and their sacred covenant box. On the outskirts of the military camp, small groups of non-Israelites huddled together in makeshift living quarters. These were men and their families who had witnessed the divine phenomena when the tribes marched through the city of Elim, won military victory in Rephidim, trekked through the land of Esau and Ammon, and finally arrived in Kadesh-Barnea.

Hoshea, at twenty-two, was an old soul. His steely green eyes, wide smile, and jet-black hair that fell to his muscular shoulders enchanted many young tribal women who dreamed that perhaps one day they might become his wife and live in his tent.

As Hoshea and Caleb approached the headquarters, their bodies still covered in sand, a little boy about seven years old, with a wooden sword and a warrior helmet, sprinted toward Caleb.

“Abba, Father... Attack!” He twirled his sword, turned three hundred and sixty degrees, and with a downward blow made a loud *kiap*. Caleb smiled at his son Hur, feigned an injury, and fell. Hur jumped on his belly and cried, “Surrender or die, heathen!” Caleb put his long arms around the little rascal and kissed him on the neck until Hur burst out laughing.

“My strong and fearless lion, you have defeated your enemy.”

Ephrath, Caleb’s beautiful wife, smiled proudly as she watched Hur and Caleb bond as father and son. A light grey robe with a carefully embroidered red design caressed her body and dropped to below her knees. Her head was covered by a white cotton cloth draping onto her shoulders and fastened by a bright-red headband. She wore no sandals on her sandy, calloused feet.

“Where are you going so determined, my husband?”

“Moses has summoned us to the big tent. Shamefully, we are dirty as we have just come from the training arena.”

“Will you be home for dinner?” Ephrath loved having her husband close to her. “I am making your favourite quail recipe tonight. Hoshea, please come as well. You are always a pleasure to have in our tent.”

Hoshea glanced at his friend and nodded.

They continued along their way, passing the makeshift corrals for the camels and warhorses, and then the sheep and goat enclosures. If they hurried, they would be there in ten minutes. It was always an honour to visit the commander-in-chief, and they didn't want to keep Moses waiting. Before entering Moses's pavilion, however, they stopped to dust off the sand that stuck to them like skin.

Moses's tent was the largest in the city, as appropriate to the commander-in-chief of two and a half million people. Like all the tents in the city, it was constructed of black panels of goat hair. The hair was carefully spun into strands and then woven together, forming two two-cubit panels that could be sewn together to make tents. The panels on Moses's tent were bleached after two years of the hot desert sun. Some of them had been removed and replaced by fresh strips. The woven goat hair was ideally suited the desert weather. When the sun was beating down on the encampment, the walls could be lifted to allow the breeze to pass through. In the bitter night, when the cold stung, the black panels absorbed the heat and, together with a fire built just inside the door, kept the Israelites warm. The fabric was not dense, and the moonlight found its way between the spaces on the black roof, giving an impression of brilliant stars sparkling in the night sky. But when it rained, the fibres expanded to form a watertight roof. Poles, secured by strong ropes and four-cubit pegs driven into the ground, made the tents unmovable in the strong gusts of desert storms. The entrance to the tent was the most crucial part for most nomads; it was here that the father of the family would sit, as on a throne, watching the commotion and goings-on of the tribe. A thick curtain, decorated with the four characters of the nation of Israel—Ox, Eagle, Man, and Lion—covered the entrance.

Four bulky guards stood stoically at attention at the entrance of the marquee, swords strapped to their sides and tasselled, lethal bronze spears in their hands. They wore helmets like

Caleb and Hoshea's, and their armour, although a different colour, was similar in design to Hoshea and Caleb's own.

Five steps led up to the entrance. Seeing their approach, the guards stamped their feet and crossed their spears to block access.

“Caleb and Hoshea to see the commander-in-chief,” Hoshea barked.

One of the guards went inside the tent while the others stood their ground.

A few seconds later the guard returned. “Let them pass.” The soldiers stamped their feet one more time, withdrew the spears, and, with faces unmoving and eyes ahead, formed an opening for them to enter.

Moses, now eighty-two years old, sat high on sheep- and goat-skin pillows at the end of the marquee, deep in contemplation. He was a complex man, often tormented by his responsibility and his accountability to God. The burden of having become the prophet and commander-in-chief of this multitude of Hebrew slaves weighed heavy on his shoulders. Moses had led them out of Egypt to this place, now called Kadesh-Barnea, and they were so close to the promised land. God had always given him direct and explicit instructions; there was never any doubt of what He wanted Moses to say and do.

This vocation wasn't something Moses had sought. Whatever the reason, God had chosen him to be His messenger, His spokesman to the people of Israel. When God gave him his assignment to go to Egypt and lead the Hebrews to freedom, had Moses not asked God to send someone else?ⁱⁱ He didn't want the job. He felt inadequate, insufficient, and incompetent. He had

murdered an Egyptian soldier, deserted his people, and chosen a life of unsociable, solitary enjoyment.

Upon God's call, however, Moses had obediently, begrudgingly travelled to Rameses, Egypt, and brought great news to his brethren: those imprisoned and enslaved by the Egyptian overlords were to be set free and brought to a land flowing with blessings and prosperity. The Israelites, however, complained bitterly and didn't co-operate with Moses and the divine plan. They said his talk of freedom only encouraged Pharaoh to make things worse for the Hebrews. Many of them demanded Moses "let them alone." Even after their escape from Egypt, when God provided water for them to drink in the scorching heat of the desert, they complained that it was bitter.

Moses was radically different from the other prophets God had sent to the tumultuous tribes of Israel. The prophets of the past had received their prophecies in dreams and visions, while Moses received his when he was wide awake. God spoke to His other prophets in oblique and symbolic parables—but to Moses, He spoke directly and lucidly. All other prophets were terrified when God appeared before them, but God spoke to Moses face to face, as a friend. The prophets of the past needed to undergo time-consuming preparations to hear the divine word, while Moses spoke to God whenever and wherever he wanted or needed to.

Every step of the journey, God had always imparted specific directives to Moses. However, now at Kadesh-Barnea, the people were worried about what lay ahead of them in the promised land, so they came to Moses and asked if it was possible to send men ahead to assess and anticipate the next leg of their journey.ⁱⁱⁱ

Moses was appalled at their audacity. How could they show such rude and disrespectful behaviour toward the promise of God? Oh, how their impudence tortured him. Moses then consulted with God and let him know the people's request. He expected God to be angry. So imagine his surprise when, for the first time, God told him to do as he saw fit. "You want to send spies? Fine—send them as determined by your understanding. I will not tell you what to do in this case; you make the decision." And although Moses found the request of the people despicable, he felt if God didn't mind, he would give in to their will. He was tired of clashing and arguing with them. This was the route of least resistance, and he welcomed the prospect of less stress in his life.

Directly across from their encampment was the promised land, where Moses's people would settle and flourish. They were so close, Moses could almost taste it. He could smell it in his bones.

The front gate sentry approached Moses and snapped to attention, bringing his right arm to his heart. "Sir, Hoshea and Caleb are here to see you."

Waking up from his daydreams, Moses smiled. "Excellent. Send them in."

They stepped through the curtain into the tent and found themselves in the men's partition. It was refreshingly cool, and the smell of old leather and seared rosemary filled the air. On the sandy floor were some of the sun-damaged goat-hair panels from the outside tent. Sheepskins and Egyptian rugs were sprawled and scattered along the path to where Moses sat. Tribal-made carpets embroidered with depictions of their long journey from Rameses decorated

the walls. Behind and to the left of Moses's chair was an entrance to the woman's salon, where they could hear children playing and Zipporah, Moses's wife, scolding them lovingly.

Moses, tall and handsome, sat on his elevated seat, stroking his long, curly beard. If you could ignore the grey in his beard, his smooth skin, sparkling eyes, and alert movements would convince you he wasn't a day over forty. A white cotton cloth covered his head and fell to his shoulders. Bright red twine fastened it in place on his forehead. The buttonless tunic that covered his slight pot-belly was brown with vertical red stripes. It wrapped around his long white sarong, which brushed the floor. Moses was quite the antithesis of the armed warriors who stood before him.

"Please, s-s-sit," Moses stuttered.

As they lowered their bodies onto the cushions in front of Moses, two female domestics poured red wine into goblets. Vessels of honey and pomegranates were scattered in front of them.

After the servers finished their duties, Moses signalled for them to leave the tent.

"How are you, my treasured comrades? P-p-please, have some fruit, and drink some refreshing wine. How are the training activities?"

"The training is progressing well, sir. We now have approximately 603,500 willing and able fighting men, and we are training every day. We have created some short-range tactics, teaching our soldiers hand-to-hand combat with and without swords and daggers. This tactic is now essential preparation and compulsory for all our troops. We have also established numerous specialized squads adept in medium-range attacks, and they are developing elite skills in handling and throwing spears and javelins. Our long-range strategy has been and will continue to

be slings and archery. We have an extraordinary unit of left-handed men from the tribe of Benjamin. They are so accurate with their slings that they can throw a stone from twenty cubits at a strand of hair. They are truly gifted.”^{iv}

Moses nodded approvingly.

“We learned a lot in our battle at Rephidim against the Amalekites. We are ready for new battles. God willing, if He leads us into battle, we will be victorious. We blundered at Rephidim by exposing our weak flank to the open plain and lost many of our undertrained stragglers. It will not happen again.”

“What you sh-sh-should have learned from this battle, my brothers, is that God and only God gives victory or allows defeat. Yes, it is important to be the best we can be, and to always be prepared to do God’s will, but it is God who determines the outcome, not us. Without God’s blessings, we will trip, fall, and f-f-fail.”

“Amen,” Hoshea and Caleb sang in unison.

“Surely our living God, who brought us out of Egypt, who opened the Red Sea for us to walk through, who fed us and gave us water in the scorching desert, and who defeated the Amalekites, would never forsake us or forget His promises to us,” Caleb piped in.

“I never worry about God forgetting us, Caleb, but I do worry about our complaining and b-b-belligerent people. They constantly forget what God has already done, what He is doing now, and what He will do in the future. He brings water out of a stone one minute, and the next minute everyone is grumbling about the lack of variety on their table. He turns a desert bowl like Kadesh-Barnea into an oasis, and yet they say they were better off in captivity in Egypt. Here we are, ready to enter the promised land, and the people complain and want to know what is ahead

of them. A starving man, when offered a loaf of bread, doesn't ask about the ingredients before he g-g-gobbles it down, does he? Instead of celebrating and remembering God's marvels, our people look out over the wilderness and grumble. It weighs so heavy on my heart. Our tribes complained about being hungry all the time as we marched through the wilderness, even though God was feeding them like a mother sparrow feeds her newborn chicks. They complained when I didn't come back quickly enough from the top of Mount Sinai, and they began to worship an unresponsive, lifeless image—a man-made golden calf. It is blatant idiocy to th-th-think a piece of lifeless metal could rescue them from anything. All through our pilgrimage to the promised land, they complained to me about the food. Even my flesh-and-blood brother and sister, who helped me execute the horrible plagues God sent to the Egyptians, criticized my leadership. Know this, Hoshea and Caleb: a man's heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. No man can honestly know his own heart, and God alone can test the mind.”

Caleb felt his heart beat quicker, took a deep breath and turned to look directly at Hoshea's steely eyes to see if he had sensed it as well. Something big was about to be announced and they were going to be part of it.

“I c-c-called you here to inform you that God has allowed me to select one leader from each of the tribes—except for the Levites, of course^v—and to send them as spies into the land of Canaan. Ahead of us is the land He promised to our ancestors. It is ours in which to live and flourish. I want these spies to be multilingual, to be well trained in the martial arts. I want them to go through this land and find out what kind of country it is. I want to know how many people live there and how strong they are. They must let me know if the land is g-g-good or bad and whether the people dwelling there live in open towns or fortified cities. I want to know if the soil

is fertile and whether the land is wooded or cleared. If it is indeed fertile, I want some of the fruit that grows there as proof. I want you to return in forty days.”

Hoshea and Caleb reacted with open mouths and utter disbelief.

ⁱ An object which functions as a flag but differs in appearance, consisting of a staff with an emblem at the top. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 1:660; John MacArthur, Revelation 1-11: *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1999. Rev. 4:8; J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse: Lectures on the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1966), 106.

ⁱⁱ “Now go! I will help you speak, and I will tell you what to say” (Ex. 4:12-13).

ⁱⁱⁱ “But you came to me and said ... Let’s send men ahead of us to spy out the land” (Deut.1:22-23).

^{iv} Judg. 20:16.

^v Num. 1:40.