

Exegesis of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10
The Covenantal Vow of Jabez: a Noble Theocratic Warrior



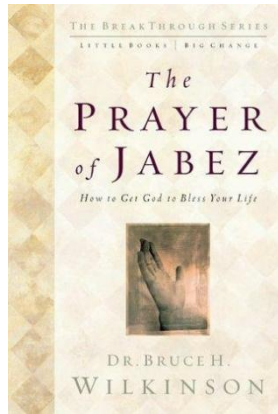
"Come, let us reason together."

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Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers, and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, “Because I bore him in pain.” And Jabez called on the God of Israel saying, “Oh, that You would bless me indeed, and enlarge my territory, that Your hand would be with me, and that You would keep me from evil, that I may not cause pain!” So God granted him what he requested.

1 Chronicles 4:9-10, *New King James Version*

I. Introduction



There is a popular book written around the once obscure text of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10. The book is Bruce Wilkinson’s, *The Prayer of Jabez*. This relatively short work made it to the *New York Times Best Seller List* for close to forty weeks. The *Pray of Jabez for Teens* was on the *New York Time Best Seller List* for eight weeks. It made it as high as number two on Amazon.

This present study is not a review of Wilkinson’s work, but was prepared out of a curiosity to investigate a text exciting Evangelical Christians. By examining each phrase in these two verses, I will variously develop and draw upon the theocratic context of the prayer, the covenantal context of Israel and the canonical context of Chronicles. Along the way I will support my renaming of this pericope to *The Vow of Jabez*.

My ultimate aim is an increased satisfaction and delight in Jesus and his redemptive-historical victory. This was a victory won in the procurement of the Resurrection-Realm. In Jesus we find an eschatological land with borders of Abrahamic proportion. In this way, our two verses play a part in the reverberating power of the Bible. Jabez’s words rebound to the praise and glory of our Triune God as we are reminded to contemplate our great salvation in Jesus Christ.

My analysis is affected by nuances in the Hebrew, and therefore I begin with a translation and examination of the original language (including the early Greek translation used by the Apostles). However, the technical side of this analysis can safely be skipped if one is interested

primarily in the arguments drawn from them (arguments which I will also try to support from various English translations).

II. The Hebrew Text of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

9 וַיְהִי יַעֲבֹז נִכְבָּד מֵאֶחָיו וְאִמּוֹ קָרְאָה שְׁמוֹ יַעֲבֹז לְאִמֶּר כִּי יִלְדֹתִי בְּעֶצֶב
 10 וַיִּקְרָא יַעֲבֹז לְאֵלֵהִי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְאִמֶּר אֶסְבִּירָךְ תְּבַרְכֵנִי וְהִרְבִּיתָ אֶת־גְּבוּלֵי וְהִיתָה יָדְךָ
 עִמִּי וְעָשִׂיתָ מִרְעָה לְבִלְתִּי עֲצָבִי וַיָּבֵא אֱלֹהִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר־שָׂאֵל:

Translation Notes:

My literal translation of the Hebrew is presented in the left column, and likewise the Greek Septuagint (LXX) in the right column. Grammatical and syntactical notes for both the Greek and Hebrew are provided to support translation decisions or to signal discussions that follow. In the column labeled Massoretic, “\” marks divide prepositions and suffixes from the Hebrew stems.

Hebrew Translations	Hebrew Notes	Massoretic	LXX	LXX Notes	LXX Translations
Was	Sequential Conjunction + was	וַיְהִי	καὶ ἦν		And was
Jabez	Yabez (where "abez" is not a Hebrew root)	יַעֲבֹז	ιγαβης	Note "ig" sound which renders the Hebrew	Igabas
Honorable	Nifal, reflexive passive, participle of כָּבַד	נִכְבָּד	ἔνδοξος	Adj. (doxos, as in doxology)	honored
More than his fellow countrymen,	"brothers" in the ANE can extend to the nation (Ex 2:11) Prefix: More than, suffix: His	מֵאֶחָיו	ὑπὲρ τοὺς ἀδελφούς αὐτοῦ		above his brothers.
And his mother	"Mother" Prefix: coordinating conjunction. Suffix: His	וְאִמּוֹ	καὶ ἡ μήτηρ		And mother
called	Qal, Active, Perfect	קָרְאָה	ἐκάλεσεν		called
his name		שְׁמוֹ	τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ		the name of him
Jabez		יַעֲבֹז	ιγαβης		Igabas
saying,		לְאִמֶּר	λέγουσα		saying,
"Because"	"Because" Instead of "indeed" 1 Chr 14:11	כִּי			

I birthed		ילדתי	ἔτεκον		I birthed
in suffering (azev)."	For naming a son after disaster, see 1 Chron 7:23	בַּעֲצָב	ὡς γαβης		in gabas (root of lgabas)
And called	Qal, Active, Imperfect	וַיִּקְרָא	καὶ ἐπεκαλέσατο		And he invoked/appealed
Jabez		יַעֲבֵץ	יγαβης		lgabas
to God	Plural	לֵאלֹהֵי	τὸν θεόν		the God
of Israel		יִשְׂרָאֵל	ισραηλ		of Israel
saying,		לֵאמֹר	λέγων		Saying
"If	Marker of a condition (1 Chron 28:7,9)	אם	ἐάν	+ subj.=> "if perhaps"	"IF
blessing	Piel infinitive absolute	בִּרְךְ	εὐλογῶν	sing. Part.	Blessing
you bless me	Piel, active/causative (intensification) 2nd person with 1st person suffix	תְּבַרְכֵנִי	ἐμνησθήσῃς	subj.	You might bless me
and multiply	Hifil (causative)	וַהֲרַבִּית	καὶ πληθύνῃς	subj.	and might multiply
	Direct object marker	אֵת			
my land	Borders with "my" suffix (1 Chron 6:39, 1 Chron 21:12). Thematically: 1 Chron 22:18	גְּבוּלֵי	τὰ ὄριά μου	Plural	my boundary markers/borders
and be	3rd person, referring to hand	וְהָיְתָה	καὶ ἦ	3rd person sg. subj.	and might be
your hand	Suffix: your	יְדֶךָ	ἡ χεὶρ σου	Fem. Sg.	your hand
with me	Suffix: me	עִמָּי	μετ' ἐμοῦ		with me
and make	Qal	וַעֲשִׂית	καὶ ποιήσεις	Future	and create
from evil	Evil: 1 Chron 2:3; 1 Chron 7:23 (God brings calamity and evil: 1 Chron 21:15)	מֵרָעָה	γνώσιν	ד replaced ר	Knowledge
that not		לְבַלְתִּי	τοῦ μὴ		of the not
to pain me."	Qal active infinitive Suffix: me	עֲצַבֵּי	ταπεινώσαί με	Aorist Infinitive	to humble me."
And granted	Hifil active imperfect	וַיִּבֵּא	καὶ ἐπήγαγεν		And He brought
Eloheim		אֱלֹהִים	ὁ θεός		God
		אֵת	πάντα		All
what		אֲשֶׁר	ὅσα		as much as/that
he asked.	Cf. 1 Chron 2:55	שָׁאַל	ἠτήσατο		he asked

III. A Redemptive-Historical Reading of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

As we inspect the different elements of this text, we will develop increasing insight into the context of Jabez within all of Scripture. However, some introductory comments will be useful as we seek to establish a baseline for that emerging discussion.

A. The Larger Context of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10: *Return from Exile and Presence with God*

Chronicles is the last book of the Hebrew Old Testament and dates to around 480 BC. It is, as we say, post-exilic in that it was composed after the return from the Babylonian exile.¹ The authorship is uncertain, but Ezra is one candidate; for ease of writing I will assume he is the author, though I will also refer to the author as “the Chronicler.”²

The context of the Chronicles is Israel: *Israel the territory* and *Israel the people*. The people of God are back in the land, returned from Babylonian captivity—much smaller in number than before, and lacking the many citizens who remained in Persia.

Appropriate questions emerge from reading the book: Why did the Chronicler write? What purpose did the book serve -- especially the genealogies where Jabez appears? As one considers the prophetic activity of the time of return – the penning of 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi – one detects that there was a lot of revelatory energy being used to persuade post-exilic Israel of the validity of the YHWH mission. As a corpus, the post-exilic Scriptures are collectively directed and share a divine theme. They contribute to a moving and focused story.³

¹ The Southern Kingdom of Judah was captured by the Babylonians and the people of God were deported. Under the Persians, they were released from exile and sent back to the land.

² As authorship does not directly impact my thesis, I will not make a case for any particular author, but will direct readers to the commentaries on Chronicles.

³ Jesus appealed to this story-arc in John 5:39.

Chronicles contains real history, but it is not only history. It is scripture; in the life of the people of God it is a link between the visible realm and the invisible realm – between heaven and earth. For the Jews, back in the land after the exile, it said many things for their theocratic good, not least its exhortations to seek that which Judah’s Kings of old sought and prized: *the presence of God*. Going back to the celebrated king, the Chronicler directs the community to the covenant and the way of covenant blessing:⁴

David also commanded all the leaders of Israel to help Solomon his son, saying, “Is not the Lord your God with you? And has He not given you rest on every side? For He has given the inhabitants of the land into my hand, and the land is subdued before the Lord and before His people. **Now set your heart and your soul to seek the Lord your God. Therefore arise and build the sanctuary of the Lord God**, to bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord and the holy articles of God into the house that is to be built for the name of the Lord” – 1 Chronicles 22:17-19.

Presence with God is covenant-man’s (Israel’s) ultimate blessing and possession. Exile, at its core, was the people of God losing that Glory-Presence.⁵ Return from exile was to return back to the covenantal presence with Yahweh. And the prophets and the Chronicler, with and by Scripture, called the people to the covenantal documents. Sinai was not a forgotten mountain; Yahweh was to be sought with covenantal obedience.⁶

⁴ Covenant blessing in Israel was sustained according to the triumph of the covenant head. This is named Federal Theology in systematic language. It speaks to the idea, “so goes it for the head, so goes it for the whole.” A righteous king would secure the glory presence of God (see esp. the reign of Josiah, who, upon his death could no longer be the representative of the people of God). The Sinai covenant has in it the representative kingship. It has in it blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience – all of which is operative when the Chronicler writes.

⁵ Forgiveness, redemption, grace, etc. are penultimate to *presence with God* – restoring, as they do, man to the Glory-Presence. Adam enjoyed presence with God before grace and redemption were operative. For fallen man, being in the presence of God is his ultimate good and is the goal of redemption. Moses demonstrates this sort of thinking when he was willing to give up the land of promise if God was not to enter into it *with* the people. According to Moses’ calculus, it would be better to be in the wilderness with God than in the land without him, see Exodus 33:1-15. However, like other key elements of the biblical story, presence with God as a chief possession is only implicitly woven into Israel’s story; the retaining of the Glory-Presence is the unspoken driving motivation of many of the main characters. See Terrien, Samuel, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*. Religious perspectives, v. 26. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978. In this work, Terrien makes a detailed case for this thesis, summarized in part when he concludes, “The history of biblical religion hinges upon the growth and transformation of the Hebraic theology of presence,” 31. By appealing to Terrien, I am not arguing that Glory-Presence is the center of Old Testament theology, but that it is man’s greatest possession and good (trying not to be technical with the word *possession*, as if God is something to be put in a pocket).

⁶ Three categories that help to organize this material are 1) Exodus->Creation, 2) Exile->Curse, 3) Return from Exile. On the typological level, Exodus, Exile and Return from Exile are regular (observable). Behind them is the theology of

B. The Genealogical Context and Land Theology

Chapters 1-9 of I Chronicles are the context of our text. There we find a history of the world, and Israel's story is located within that record. Starting with Adam and Noah, the genealogies narrow in on Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This effectively connects Ezra's Israel with the former Israel and with creation itself. The small post-exilic Israel was one and the same with the Israel of the past, the Israel of God. The message was clear: those who lived and worshiped in Jerusalem were sharers in the ancient promises and the promised inheritance. Israel was still Israel, with all the merit and validity of King David and father Abraham.

What would make the genealogies of 1 Chronicles 1-9 significant to a post-exilic people?

Many things, but these at least:

1. They Established Birthright.

This is how the Chronicler himself exegetes the matter:

Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel—he was indeed the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel, so that the genealogy is not listed according to the birthright.

1 Chronicles 5:1

2. They Reestablished Who Gets What Land.

This was especially relevant in the post-exile situation after the inheritance was turned upside down and the rightful heirs removed from the land. In this way, *genealogies were a theology of land and inheritance*.

3. They Reasserted and Maintained the Davidic Line.

God's presence. Return from Exile remained the hope of the people of God even when they were back in the land (Nehemiah 9:26-30, Ezra 9:9-12). For more on this, see my unpublished paper, "Israel in Exile at the Time of Christ."

The book of 1 Chronicles is about David and Kingship even as it is about Temple and Worship. The genealogies are concerned with Judah because the book as a whole is concerned with David and the Messianic line.⁷

C. God/YHWH in the Genealogies:

Jabez appears at a significant point in the genealogy. Chapters 1 through 3 specifically reference Yahweh only once. The reader gets all the way to 2:3 before the covenant name of God is encountered. The next time He shows up in the list is in reference to Jabez. Everywhere God's exodus name appears in the genealogy, one encounters significant events—events that the Chronicler thought especially worth recording. Those events include Er, Jabez, the rise and fall of the Northern Kingdom, the rise and fall of the Southern Kingdom, David, the Temple, and finally (in chapter 9) he is named in connection with post-exilic peoples (a strategic place as if to show that God was interacting in that time and history). Based upon the appearing of Yahweh's name (or "God of Israel"), the account of Jabez stands out as noteworthy (though it may be unwise to draw much significance from this observation alone).

D. The Genealogy in 1 Chronicles 4: The Other Tribes of Judah

Diving into the genealogy may seem unnecessarily technical, but it is important for establishing the context of Jabez and finding clues regarding his vow. The genealogies are not easy to reconstruct if one considers the way moderns represent genealogical trees. The tribes of 1 Chronicles are especially difficult to piece together in the fourth chapter because they preserve lines of Judah not

⁷ See, for example, Luke 24:27. Problematic in connecting the Old Testament to Jesus is not the fact of the connection, but the *how* of the connection. How do the scriptures point to him? Unraveling this issue without resorting to allegory or parallelomania is the heavy lifting of Biblical studies. On parallelomania, see Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1-13 This article is available on the web at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/parallelomania_sandmel.pdf (last accessed 8 March, 2009). An important contribution to this field is Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub, 1999.

⁸ For more on Perez, father of Hezron, see Gen 46:12.

covered elsewhere in the Bible. My own scrutinizing of the text yields the following breakdown of chapter 4:

Verses 1-8 augment 1 Chronicles 2 and the clan of Hezron, son of Perez (the line of Judah himself after Judah was with the widow of Er).

A format closer to our visual representation of such matters might be this:

Judah→Perez→ **Hezron**→Caleb/Carmi→Hur→four sons

Hezron→Ashhur→eight sons

Notice that two main branches of Hezron are covered.⁸ Verses 1-8 have no obvious tie-in with the verses that follow; Jabez in verse 9 has no stated connection to any of the families in 1-8.

Verses 21-23 are the clans of Judah's third son Shelah.

The connection back to Judah picks up in this section.

Verses 9-20 chronicle *Eight Leaders in Judah*

We find Jabez listed among the *Eight Leaders in Judah*. Verses 9-20 describe the situations of leaders of which no stated connect is made directly to Judah; the connection to Judah is the bracket of 4:1 and 4:21. The eight names are these:

Jabez	(v.9)
Kelub	(v.11)
Kenaz	(v.13)
Caleb	(v.15)
Jehallel	(v.16)
Ezrah	(v.17)
Hodiah	(v.19)
Shimon	(v.20)

The years that Jabez lived may have been close to Israel's conquest period—such is a probable (though not certain) suggestion based upon the following observations:

⁸ For more on Perez, father of Hezron, see Gen 46:12.

1. The context of 4:1 is Judah (the Chronicler is picking up with Hezron who was introduced in 2:5). However, the eight leaders mentioned are much later than Hezron and later than the descendants listed after him.
2. The Chronicler switches to Joshua/Caleb at 4:15 (Caleb son of Jephunneh, cf. Joshua 21:12) without any transitional warning. This is also true of the other eight rulers.
3. Entirely different lines start and stop without warning that the author has changed genealogical lines.
4. Rabbinic commentaries place Jabez after Joshua and during Israel's conquest phase of Canaan (or in the time of the Judges).⁹
5. Jabez has a city named after him in Canaan. I take this to imply that the city was taken in conquest and was retained by his tribe.

IV. Phrase by Phrase Analysis of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10

I am suggesting that Jabez is within the sphere of ancient covenant treaties and particularly under the Sinai administration. As noted above, he may have lived during or after the time of the conquest. Within that covenantal context (especially given the theocratic meaning of Israel)¹⁰ I would like to scrutinize the scant details we have of his life.

What follows is a look at 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 to see if we can uncover the purpose of the text and then, by derivative, find application within the New Covenant. The various phrases from the New King James translation will serve as section headings as we move through the text (nine sections in all). **Bold-face font** indicates the elements of each phrase that receive primary attention

⁹ *Tanach the Stone edition ; the Torah, prophets, writings ; the twenty-four books of the bible newly translated and annotated* . Brooklyn, N.Y.: Mesorah Publ, 2003, p1880-81., "The Sages identify Jabez with the great Judge Othinel, who succeeded Joshua (*Temurah* 16a)."

¹⁰ The theocratic meaning being God found on earth in a national people who have weapons for warfare and armed priests with religious duties. Israel was national and holy. A country and a nation of priests (cf. Exodus 19).

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within each section. With the New King James Version as a base, I will suggest tweaks to the translation as per the context and the translation notes earlier provided. After all the phrases are analyzed, I will conclude by putting everything back together with a summary review.

1. “Now Jabez was more honorable...”

The name Jabez is a play on words with the Hebrew word for *pain* or *sorrow*. Jabez is also the name of a city (near Bethlehem, see the Brown-Driver-Briggs entry of Jabez) that memorialized his valor as he turned out to be a hero in Israel (of which more will be given below, but see 1 Chronicles 2:55 for the city name).

2. “Now Jabez was more honorable than his brothers”

The verb translated “Honorable” in 1 Chronicles is used to describe mighty warriors and depositories of peoples. The same form is used in 1 Chronicles 11:21 and 25 (nifal passive):

20 Abishai the brother of Joab was chief of another three. He had lifted up his spear against three hundred men, killed them, and won a name among these three. 21 Of the three he was **more honored** than the other two men. Therefore he became their captain. However he did not attain to the first three. 22 Benaiah was the son of Jehoiada, the son of a valiant man from Kabzeel, who had done many deeds. He had killed two lion-like heroes of Moab. He also had gone down and killed a lion in the midst of a pit on a snowy day. 23 And he killed an Egyptian, a man of great height, five cubits tall. In the Egyptian’s hand there was a spear like a weaver’s beam; and he went down to him with a staff, wrested the spear out of the Egyptian’s hand, and killed him with his own spear. 24 These things Benaiah the son of Jehoiada did, and won a name among three mighty men. 25 Indeed he **was more honored** than the thirty, but he did not attain to the first three. And David appointed him over his guard.

The mighty warriors – those more honorable in dispatching foes – are those of military note. Taken this way, one can hear the Chronicler putting Jabez in the class of valiant-theocratic heroes. Jabez was one who helped establish God’s glory in the land and thus spread the borders of Yahweh. Jabez was a tool for expelling or continuing the expulsion of the seven wicked nations (either in the

original conquest, the period of the judges, or even later). In this way Jabez was the father of conquest city named after him (1 Chronicles 2:55, see 1 Chronicles 4:8 for a similar phenomena).

The fathers of clans in 1 Chronicles 1-9 are sometimes listed as fathers of regions (the names of lands being the name of the people who took them in conquest). Conquest gives way to land and ownership, and thus the naming of the land in victory.

3. “and his mother called his name Jabez, saying, ‘**Because I bore *him* in pain.**’”

The life of a mother begins with birth pains, and does not end there. Matthew Henry writes of the passage this way:

That it might likewise be a memorandum to him what this world is into which she bore him, a vale of tears, in which he must expect *few days and full of trouble*. The sorrow he carried in his name might help to put a seriousness upon his spirit. It might also remind him to love and honour his mother, and labour, in every thing, to be a comfort to her who brought him into the world with so much sorrow.¹¹

Ancient life was a life of sorrows terminated by death. Life began with sorrow and ended in sorrow. The pain and sorrow describing childbirth is the same primitive root that is used of the woman in Genesis 3 – the covenant curse on Eve is that of bearing children in sorrow.

This parallel with the curse upon our first mother will be significant as we discover more faint-connections that reach from Jabez back to Adam and the garden. Jabez’s mother was in the line of Eve. Adam and Eve were expelled from God’s glory-presence in their rebellion. A land with a restored glory-presence was only to be regained through a sword. The struggle of God’s people in conquest is not merely horizontal (between Israel and other nations), but stretches upward, pointing to the great realities of the fall and Satan and the cosmic warfare enacted on earth.

¹¹ Henry, Matthew, and Leslie F. Church. Commentary on the Whole Bible: Genesis to Revelation. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1978.

That Jabez would be given a name that is negative in its basic meaning (a play on words with “pain”) is not uncharacteristic of the ancient Israelites. In 1 Chronicles 7:23, Beriah is named after evil and disaster (son of calamity/evil). Such a name, we must not assume, would therefore negate a life.¹² Indeed, we see in Jabez a man who was born in pain yet valiant in war. His seemingly negative name is not an impediment to the context of the prayer or his life, for the prayer is about holy war and God’s glory, and Jabez is playing a part in that bigger story.

4. “And Jabez called on the God of Israel”

In Wesley’s commentary on this passage, there is a bold observation of Jabez’s military purpose in calling upon the Lord. Great actions require great assistance, and befitting a warfare mentality, Jabez requests a heavenly force:

When he was undertaking some great and dangerous service he “Called”. “Enlarge” [means to] Drive out these Canaanites, whom thou hast commanded us to root out.¹³

“Calling on the God of Israel” is unique in Scripture to important individuals and events. The phrase itself is a holy reminder of the first recorded calling out to God. In Genesis 4:26 we read: “[Seth] called his name Enosh. Then men began to call upon the name of the Lord.”

Calling on God in the Old Testament is sometimes a theocratic act¹⁴ and always a doxological one.¹⁵ King Asa in 2 Chronicles 14:9ff sends out a call. He sends up a request for victory in the land of lower Judah. Likewise, Jabez calls upon the Great King for the defeating of God’s enemies. Calling upon God is evocative of mighty and significant figures. Jabez stands with others of similar valor. *Calling* carries with it notions of theocratic valor, leading to the logical

¹² The theology of a name primarily serves redemptive-historical purposes and not primarily the psychological well being of the one so named. Modern musings about psychological damage from a bad name must not work backward into assumptions about what would or would not have been appropriate naming ethics for the ancient people of God.

¹³ Wesley, John, G. Roger Schoenhals, John Wesley, and John Wesley. *Wesley's Notes on the Bible*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Francis Asbury Press, 1987.

¹⁴ Israel was ruled by God as a nation with the authority to act militarily in his name. Israel was thus *theocratic*.

¹⁵ *Doxos* is the Greek word for glory, majesty or fame. When used of God it relates also to praise and worship. Something *doxological* serves the purpose of glorifying God.

question: Who is Jabez that he is chronicled as one of the exceptional figures who calls upon the name of the Lord?

To answer that, an obvious observation must be made. Jabez had a working knowledge of theocracy and of the covenant God he addressed. He knew of father Abraham; he knew of Jacob and the promises made to the patriarchs.¹⁶ It is to the God of Jacob (the God of Israel) that he calls; his call follows the pattern of Jacob's vow in Genesis 28:20-21 – the **vow** he made after seeing the gate of heave, the staircase connecting heaven and Earth. Jacob's vow begins with an "if" followed by a vow formula. The New King James (with various other English versions) begins the prayer of Jabez with an "oh." I am proposing that we translate it with an "if" and thus follow the lexical meaning of the Hebrew and the Greek translation of the LXX (see the chart above). This improvement will assist us in understanding the nature of Jabez and his mission (a valiant theocratic warrior who merited the right to be listed with other exceptional figures who called upon the name of the Lord).

5. "Oh that you would bless me..."

With this translation, the New King James obscures or masks what may be a covenantal oath-formula. Jabez is making a vow like the oath Jacob made with God:

His prayer which is here recorded, and which, like Jacob's, is in the form of a vow (Genesis 28:20), seems to have been uttered when he was entering on an important or critical service, for the successful execution of which he placed confidence neither on his own nor his people's prowess, but looked anxiously for the aid and blessing of God. The enterprise was in all probability the expulsion of the Canaanites from the territory he occupied; and as this was a war of extermination, which God Himself had commanded, His blessing could be the more reasonably asked and expected in preserving them from all the evils to which the undertaking might expose him. In these words, "that it may not grieve me," and which might be more literally rendered, "that I may have no more sorrow," there is an allusion to the

¹⁶ The prayer itself is addressed to the God of Abraham's grandson, Israel.

meaning of his name, Jabez, signifying "grief"; and the import of this petition is, Let me not experience the grief which my name implies, and which my sins may well produce.¹⁷

The Net Bible catches and preserves the vow formula, and translates the phrase this way:

‘If only you would greatly bless me and expand my territory! May your hand be with me! Keep me from harm so I might not endure pain!’ God answered his prayer.¹⁸

The English translation of the *Stone Edition TANACH* (earlier mentioned) agrees, translating the prayer as a vow or oath:

Jabez called out to the God of Israel, saying, ‘**If** you bless me and expand my borders, and Your hand is with me, and You keep me from harm that I may not be saddened...’ And God granted him that which he requested (p. 1881, **emphasis mine**).



As per the table of translation notes above, one can see where the Hebrew text does indeed warrant reading “if” instead of “oh.”

Contextually this adjustment makes sense, for Jabez is in a theocracy making a vow to God with knowledge of the Abrahamic promises and the conquest of Canaan (not to exclude the Sinai covenant itself). This is better explained by two points which will also help us to apply these verses to New Covenant Christians (i.e., people not in the Jabez theocratic context).

a. The Bible Distinguishes between *Life in Mosaic-Israel vs. Life in Any Land Generically*

Jabez lived in a covenantal context – one connected to the patriarchs and the promises made to them which were provisionally embedded in the Sinai covenant.¹⁹ His prayer was not isolated and personal, but was in reference to the national promises of land inheritance made to Abraham and Jacob. He was praying as one *in the theocracy*, the holy territory.

Abraham and Jacob were promised *real* land and Jabez was praying for that territory to be

¹⁷Jamieson, Robert, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown. *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical, on the Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1973.

¹⁸ The NET Bible defends this reading in the notes.

¹⁹ The Abrahamic promises were provisionally realized under the Sinai covenant when the nation did indeed get land, but ultimately the promises are fulfilled in world-wide inheritance and a kingdom that is Christian.

enlarged through conquest. To make good use of this fact, however, we must go back to the garden of God in Genesis (which leads naturally to a second point).

b. The Mission of Adam was like the Mission of Israel

Adam was called to grow the garden of God. He was to take dominion over the earth/land (Genesis 1:28, 2:15). In this way, Israel is understood as a recapitulated holy territory, like unto an Edenic garden of God. In the book of Ezekiel, Israel is compared to Eden (36:35, cf. also 34:9). Zion is the Mountain of God, a garden on a hill with its peak in heaven. This imagery fits with Jabez being in a holy realm (not unlike Adam in the Garden), desiring that the borders expand as to multiply the Glory-Presence of God. That expansion provisionally meant slaying humans who opposed the glory of God and his image.²⁰

For the territory of Jabez to grow was for the Kingdom of God to expand in Canaan. For it to grow for Jabez was not a private venture, but meant the covenant community was prospering. Jabez shared the same covenantal situation as the people in the post-exilic period. They too were in the land of God yet unconquered. In this way, Jabez's prayer has to be taken **not** as a private prayer, but as a communal conquest vow. And this explains why his prayer made it into the community book (the Scriptures).

The Vow of Jabez is within the Chronicles of the Nation, not within the private prayer journal of a pious Jew.²¹ His vow is like the prayer of a King: *national* and related directly to the inheritance of the nation. He stands as one who, with his tribe and nation, was promised real territory. And this explains his request: "enlarge the territory."

²⁰ Ultimately it meant slaying a human who established the glory of God and his image (but that is to skip ahead).

²¹ Jabez was pious, but pious in the context of the theocracy and the covenant.

6. “Oh, that You would bless me indeed, **and enlarge my territory**”

If the prayer of Jabez is laden with Genesis idea, one may wonder if there are any additional connections to the language of Genesis 1. And it turns out that the word “enlarge” is the Hebrew word elsewhere translated increase/multiply. The “enlarge” of 1 Chronicles is the “multiply” of Genesis 1:28:

Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and **multiply**; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Adam’s kingdom assignment was to multiply and grow the kingdom with the image of God. The first theocratic mandate is not divorced from ideas that we find in the prayer of Jabez. For Jabez, enlarging the territory was to be done through military conquest. Jabez was praying for success in a holy siege.²² When Israel came into the land, it was yet unconquered. Holy War was the reality and enemies had to be dispatched and the land subdued. Second Chronicles 20:5 puts it this way:

Then Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the LORD, before the new court, ⁶and said: “O LORD God of our fathers, *are* You not God in heaven, and do You *not* rule over all the kingdoms of the nations, and in Your hand *is there not* power and might, so that no one is able to withstand You? ⁷“*Are* You not our God, **who drove out the inhabitants of this land before Your people Israel, and gave it to the descendants of Abraham Your friend forever?** ⁸“And they dwell in it, and have built You a sanctuary in it for Your name, saying, ⁹“If disaster comes upon us—sword, judgment, pestilence, or famine—we will stand before this temple and in Your presence (for Your name *is* in this temple), and cry out to You in our affliction, and You will hear and save.” ¹⁰“And now, here are the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir—whom You would not let Israel invade when they came out of the land of Egypt, but they turned from them and did not destroy them— ¹¹“here they are, rewarding us by coming to throw us out of **Your possession which You have given us to inherit.** ¹²“O our God, will You not judge them? For we have no power against this great multitude that is coming against us; nor do we know what to do, but our eyes *are* upon You.” ¹³Now all Judah, with their little ones, their wives, and their children, stood before the LORD.

²²The idea of *siege* and warfare within the theocracy is rooted in Genesis where Cherubim were stationed with flaming swords to guard the garden with strength, power and violence.

Jabez was being blessed, but in the Old Testament sense of possession and inheritance. Indeed, blessing must be understood in its covenantal context. From that understanding, a proper application of the Prayer of Jabez can be made for the New Covenant people of God.²³

7. “Oh, that You would **bless me indeed**, and enlarge my territory”

From the Hebrew, this could have been translated woodenly as, *blessing, bless me*. Praying to the God of Israel, one may safely guess that Jabez was on target if he had in mind the promises made to Abraham: *In blessing, I will bless thee* (Genesis 22:17). This rare and unique Hebrew construction is used in 1 Chronicles 4 and in Genesis 22. Used here, it may be a reference back to Abraham, signaling that larger context, as if to say: "Let the blessing of Abraham come.”

And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time,¹⁶ And said, By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only *son*:¹⁷ **That in blessing I will bless thee**, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which *is* upon the sea shore^d; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;¹⁸ And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.¹⁹ So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba. -- Genesis 22:15ff.

Blessing, in Israel, under the Mosaic covenant, is a covenantal notion (see Deuteronomy 28); in the Mosaic context it necessarily meant covenantal obedience in order to be blessed. For Jabez, this meant that Israel had to keep the Law in order for the conquered territory to remain secure. Rebels could not keep the land but had to be removed (like Adam removed from the garden). In those cases where Law-breakers were not so deposed, the prophets started writing books like Habakkuk.

Jabez’s prayer for blessing, in its covenantal context, was a prayer that the community would keep the Law²⁴ and not experience the pain of the covenant. Of course, we know they did

²³ The Great Commission may be one application, envisioning the expansion of the church through evangelism. Likewise, the protection of the borders is experienced through teaching, discipleship, preaching, worship and even church discipline.

²⁴ Equivalent to Keeping the Law is “Keeping Torah” or “Keeping the Sinai Covenant.” I will use all interchangeably.

not keep Torah. We later discover that the town of Jabez (1 Chronicles 1:25) was lost to the Babylonians (1 Chronicles 6:15). Evil came. Habbakuk happened; Israel as Adam all over again.²⁵

Not surprisingly, the same word for *blessed* in our text is also found in Genesis 1. The “bless me indeed” is also the “blessed them” of Genesis 1:22 and 28. Adam was under a works arrangement (a blessing for obedience and pain for disobedience). The development of this *covenant of works* language is expanded in Deuteronomy 7:12-13 and 30:16.

“Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers. 13 And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you – Deuteronomy 7:12-13.

Ultimately the principle of blessing for obedience is taken up by Jesus himself (so John 17:1-4) who secures the Abrahamic promises (see Galatians 3 and Romans 4; compare Genesis 17:20).

Adam and Israel were both told to work and to multiply in order to be blessed. Both failed. A kingdom was also covenanted with Abraham. The difference was that the kingdom promised to him was proffered as a Royal Grant.²⁶

Looking ahead to the climax of the covenant in Jesus, we see that the Abrahamic covenant is grounded on the basis of faith and not Law—it was established on different principles, and not nullified by the later (Galatians 3:17) Law covenant. The Abrahamic covenant means that the people of God inherit the land and multiply in a new way.²⁷

Ramifications for the New Testament and Land Inheritance Theology

One of the remarkable activities of the early church in the book of Acts is that the Jewish Christians sold their land and gave it to the Church. For those first Christian Jews to sell part of

²⁵ Cf. Hosea 6:7.

²⁶ See Weinfeld’s article, “The Covenant of Grant” in Greenspahn, Frederick E., *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East*. New York: New York University Press, 1991, 69ff.

²⁷ The land is now the whole earth received in the resurrection, and current expansion is through Gospel missions and the orderly life of the Church.

Israel was an extraordinary expression of the true nature of the kingdom of God. It meant that they looked beyond the land reserved for fire, and hoped for a greater land.

If Jabez taught Jews anything, it was that land was to be fought for and won, not sold. Naboth taught similar principles. In 1 Kings 21:1-3, Naboth would not part with the land of his tribe even if the king himself demanded it. The land was the inheritance. To not have the land was, as it were, to be without a plot in the kingdom of God. Knowing this, we can approximate the profound symbolism of the Jews who sold their land in Acts 4:32-35. They heard the news of the resurrection and sold their plots of land. In the light of the victory of Jesus, the earlier Jabez-Realities are seen as expired.

Did the Jews of Acts 4 lack the vision of Jabez? Did they not value the theocratic inheritance that he valiantly fought for? Their acts seem incongruous with his warfare and Naboth's sacrifice. Alas, they did not lack vision. They had been granted the eschatological sight needed to spy out the land they were inheriting. They discovered that the epoch-changing Jesus was the inheritance. A new heaven and a new earth was breaking into the old creation through the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of his followers. That understanding of the resurrection prompted Christian Jews to do what Naboth died to prevent: relinquishing of property in Israel. Acts 4:33 says that, "the apostles gave witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus," and that was the news whereby Jews could divest themselves of the provisional and shadowy inheritance. Peter testifies to this new way of thinking in his first letter:

Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴**to an inheritance incorruptible** and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, ⁵who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials – 1 Peter 1:3ff.

The people of God now stand upon the *terra firma* of resurrection realities. Christians do not pray for an enlarged territory—they possess it already and will fully experience it in the consummation of

the ages.²⁸ The borders are enlarged in Jesus (only waiting to be revealed), and the meek inherit the new heaven and earth. Faith sees that the old creation is reserved for fire—passing away—and causes us to orient ourselves to new realities, exhorting one another with questions such as, “How then should we live?”

The payer of Jabez makes sense in its original context, but theocratic Israel has since expired. What remains is payer which is true across all epochs; we share with Jabez an upward and forward gaze as we too spy the trustworthy, Living and Consummating-God. Alas, we do so from a better vantage point. To pray as Jabez prayed would be to rewind redemptive history and act as if the appearing of Jesus had not taken place; we would be forced to live as if the resurrection and ascension had not happened and that the shadow-land was at risk.²⁹ Paul teaches us in Galatians how the Abrahamic promises found correspondence with the Jews and Gentiles together located in the Church (a community of faith, not a community of Sinai). The Torah-inheritance gave way to a mystery (Ephesians 2:8-15). Israel’s Great Conquest gave way to the Great Commission.

8. “that Your **hand** would be with me, and that You would keep me from **evil**”

There was a pitiful coexistence of sorrow and blessing in the life of Israel. These two opposites coexisted in the covenant documents and in the covenant community. On the basis of Jabez’s obedience, he experienced conquest and blessing. To be kept from evil,³⁰ as he desired, was to remain obedient to what the finger of God had written in the Law documents. The covenant

²⁸ As intimated earlier, the any new sense of enlargement would instead map to evangelism. The borders of the kingdom of God are the walls of the church. The church seeks to expand those walls and bring in converts through the declaration of the news that Jesus is King and that he invites the nations to enjoy his glory.

²⁹ The point here is not merely academic. Dispensational notions of the kingdom of God border on advocating that the inheritance is still beggarly and that the shadowy principles of Torah are the near-term eschatological future of the world.

³⁰ The Massoretic text is pointed to read “from evil.” An alternative pointing is quite possible, but not well attested. See Heard’s article, “Echoes of Genesis in 1 Chronicles 4:9-10: An Intertextual and Contextual Reading of Jabez’s Prayer” in *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, Volume 4 (2002), accessible on the internet https://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_24.pdf (last accessed, 3 March, 2009). See also Pechawer, Larry. *The Lost Prayer of Jabez*. Joplin, MO: MIREH Publishers, 2001. In the case of Pechawer, the argument is forcibly made that this alternative reading is a king of missing key to the prayer.

community of the Chronicler, back in the land after Israel's exile ended, needed to constantly pray this prayer. For they, like King David, were not exempt from evil if they exercised disobedience:

And David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Please let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for His mercies are very great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man." 14 So **the Lord sent a plague upon Israel**, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell. 15 And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it. As he was destroying, the Lord looked and relented of the disaster [**evil**], and said to the angel who was destroying, "It is enough; now restrain your hand." And the angel of the Lord stood by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. 16 Then David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, having in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem. So David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell on their faces. – 1 Chronicles 21:13-16.

9. "be with me"

When Jabez asked God to be with him, he was asking for Yahweh of Armies to lead in military conquest. There can be no way to sanitize this prayer for modern sensibilities, for it belongs to a violent warfare model of theocracy.³¹ Jabez might as easily have prayed, "God, be with me as I make your arrows drunk with the blood of your enemies." Everything about his prayer is colored by the covenant context in which it was prayed.

V. Summary

The Hebrew wording of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10 puts it squarely in the context of a vow made by a valiant fighting hero of Judah—a warrior who sought to bring the theocracy of Yahweh to press upon the enemies of God. Jabez sought the expansion of God's kingdom. He was victorious, and a city was named after him (1 Chronicles 2:55).

Jabez and his vow must be understood in the context of the Sinai Covenant. That covenant had in it stipulations: blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. That same Law with its statutes (Colossians 2:14) was nailed to the Cross in Jesus Christ. Jesus took humanity into a victorious conquest over Sin, Satan, Death and the Law. The Law was holy and good (Romans 7),

³¹ To find it distasteful that God was a theocratic King over a people of warfare (see 1 Samuel 15, Numbers 31), would be to expect God to conform to creaturely notions instead of bowing on bended knee to his self-revelation in Scripture.

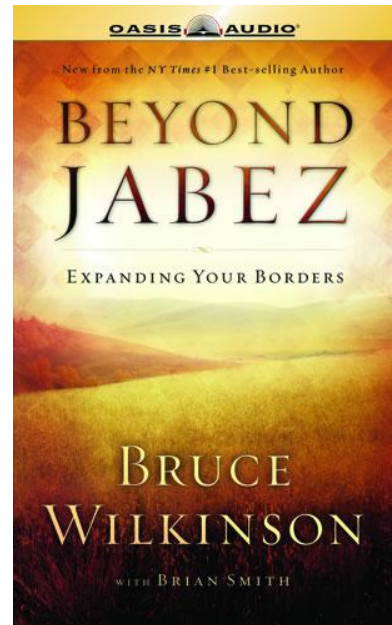
but was co-opted as to strengthen sin (1 Corinthians 15:56). Jesus cleansed the heavenly realm in his triumph (Revelation 12, Luke 10:18) and thus guaranteed the successful expansion of his territory to include the whole earth (Jews and Gentiles alike). David prayed for this:

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;
And let them say among the nations, “The LORD reigns.” – 1 Chronicles 16:31

That prayer ascended from the Old Covenant and echoed in heaven before the Father, where it was sent back to us as an Amen in Jesus who by his Spirit speaks to us the new realities:

But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; **both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.** 11 Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, 12 looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? 13 **Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.** – 2 Peter 3:10-13

In the eschatological sense, we can say that Jesus and the Resurrection (the first installment of the new heavens and new earth) take us beyond the borders that Jabez could see!³²



³² I am not suggesting that this is the line of development followed by Bruce Wilkinson. I am saying that the Resurrection of Jesus and his procurement of the inheritance is the enlargement of our world – taking us beyond sin and death. The experience of the new heavens and the new earth, however, must await the consummation of all things. Until that day, we follow the pattern of Jesus: Suffering then Glory. First there is a cross, then there is a resurrection (see in particular Forde, Gerhard O., and Martin Luther. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1997).

VI. Teaching Outline and Map



1. Reading the text itself
2. A brief survey of the modern popularity of 1 Chronicles 4:9-10
3. What did Chronicles mean to the original readers (what function did it serve)?
4. Exposition of the text
5. Land and inheritance: what it means in the ANE vs. New Covenant. *Acts: Selling of land vs. prayer for expansion*
6. Sorrow (Adam, Sin, Death, Satan)
7. Verbal parallels between Jabez and Adam and typological land
8. Jesus and the ultimate inheritance