

Joshua 22:10

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when they came unto the borders of Jordan, that are in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to.

Analysis

And when they came unto the borders of Jordan, that are in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to. And the children of Israel heard say, Behold, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh have built an altar over against the land of Canaan, in the borders of Jordan, at the passage of the children of Israel. And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up to war against them.

This narrative demonstrates both the danger of misunderstanding and the importance of direct communication before judgment. The Transjordan tribes, returning home after fulfilling their military obligations (22:1-9), built "a great altar to see to" (mizbeach gadol lemar'eh, מִזְבֵּחַ גָּדוֹל לְמַרְאֶה, "an altar great in appearance"). The altar's size and visibility triggered alarm among the western tribes who assumed it violated the command for one central sanctuary (Deuteronomy 12:5-14). The phrase "the whole congregation... gathered... to go up to war" shows how quickly misunderstanding can escalate to conflict, even among covenant brothers.

The western tribes' response reveals both commendable and problematic

elements. Commendably, they took covenant purity seriously—the lesson of Achan (chapter 7) taught that one tribe's sin affects all Israel. They remembered Peor (Numbers 25) where idolatry brought devastating plague. Their zeal for God's honor was genuine. However, their immediate assumption of guilt without investigation was premature. The rush to war before seeking explanation demonstrates how even legitimate concerns can become destructive when pursued without wisdom, patience, and proper process.

From a Reformed perspective, this passage illustrates several principles:

1. the corporate nature of covenant community—what one member does affects all
2. the necessity of church discipline when heresy or gross sin appears
3. the importance of careful investigation before judgment;
4. the role of wise mediators (Phinehas, verse 13) in resolving disputes.

The Westminster Confession affirms that church councils should address doctrinal controversies (WCF 31.3), but always through proper process, not hasty condemnation.

Historical Context

The altar's location "by Jordan" placed it at the border between Cisjordan and Transjordan, visible from both territories. Archaeological surveys have found various altar remains in the Jordan valley, though none definitively identified with this narrative. Ancient altars served multiple purposes beyond sacrifice: boundary markers, memorials, and covenant witnesses. The Transjordan tribes' intention (revealed in verses 24-29) was memorial, not sacrificial—a witness to future generations of their covenant participation.

The reference to "Peor" (verse 17) recalls the apostasy at Baal-peor (Numbers 25) where Israel engaged in sexual immorality with Moabite women and worshiped Baal, resulting in plague that killed 24,000. Phinehas had distinguished himself during that crisis by executing judgment on flagrant offenders (Numbers 25:7-13), earning God's covenant of perpetual priesthood. His selection as investigator (verse 13) was wise—he had proven zeal for God's honor while possessing

authority to address potential apostasy.

The delegation sent to investigate (verse 13-14) included Phinehas and ten tribal leaders—one from each western tribe. This representative approach ensured that accusations came from the entire community, not merely individuals, and that any resolution would have broad legitimacy. The care taken in selecting the delegation shows that while the western tribes were prepared for war, they first pursued proper diplomatic process. This balance—maintaining firm conviction while following due process—models wise conflict resolution.

Related Passages

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Study Questions

1. How does this passage balance the need for church discipline with the danger of premature judgment?
2. What does the quick escalation from misunderstanding to war preparation teach about the importance of direct communication in resolving conflicts?
3. How can churches maintain theological vigilance without succumbing to a judgmental spirit that assumes the worst about others?

Interlinear Text

וַיָּבֹאוּ אֲלֵהֶם אֶשְׁרַחֲמָהּ
And when they came ^{H935} **unto the borders** ^{H413} **by Jordan** ^{H3383} **that are in the land** ^{H776}

כְּנָעַן וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן
of Canaan ^{H3667} **built** ^{H1129} **and the children** ^{H1121} **of Reuben** ^{H7205} **and the children** ^{H1121} **of Gad** ^{H1410}

וְהַחֲצִי יִשְׁבֹּט מְנַשֶּׁה הַמִּזְבֵּחַ שֶׁ
and the half ^{H2677} **tribe** ^{H7626} **of Manasseh** ^{H4519} ^{H8033} **altar** ^{H4196} ^{H5921} **by Jordan** ^{H3383} **altar** ^{H4196}

לִמְרֹאָה: גָּד וּלְ
a great ^{H1419} **to see to** ^{H4758}