

Joshua 22:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

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.

Analysis

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.

The word "heard say" (shama leimor, שָׁמַע לֵאמֹר) introduces secondhand report, not eyewitness testimony—this becomes crucial to the conflict. The verb "behold" (hinneh, הִנֵּה) expresses surprise or alarm. The phrase "built an altar" (banu mizbeach, בָּנוּ מִזְבֵּחַ) triggers immediate crisis because Deuteronomy 12:4-14 explicitly forbade multiple altars—Israel must worship only at the place God chose (the tabernacle, then Jerusalem). An unauthorized altar suggested covenant rebellion and idolatry.

The location "over against the land of Canaan, in the borders of Jordan" is geographically ambiguous. Does it mean facing Canaan from the eastern side, or on the western Canaanite side facing eastward? This ambiguity fuels suspicion. "At the passage" (el gelilot haYarden, אֶל-גְּלִילֹת הַיַּרְדֵּן) suggests near a ford or crossing point—a highly visible location, which seems odd for secret idolatry but makes sense for a memorial (as 22:26-28 will explain).

Historical Context

The centralization of worship was fundamental to Mosaic law (Deuteronomy 12:1-14). Unlike pagan nations with shrines at every high place, Israel's single sanctuary prevented syncretism and maintained pure worship. Unauthorized altars had resulted in divine judgment before—Korah's rebellion (Numbers 16), the golden calf (Exodus 32), and Baal-Peor (Numbers 25). The western tribes' alarm was theologically justified—the entire community could suffer for one group's sin (Joshua 7:1-26, Achan's theft). The Jordan River crossing points were limited to specific fords, especially during non-flood seasons. A large altar at a major crossing would be impossible to miss—its visibility suggests the eastern tribes intended it as a witness (22:27-28), though the western tribes initially interpreted it as apostasy. The historical parallel to Jeroboam's later golden calves at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12:28-30) shows this fear wasn't paranoid—rival altars did eventually lead to Israel's division and idolatry.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. How quickly do you jump to worst-case interpretations when observing others' actions without understanding their motives or asking directly?
2. What theological principles are worth defending zealously, even at risk of conflict, versus matters where misunderstanding should prompt conversation first?
3. How can you balance doctrinal vigilance with charitable assumption toward fellow believers whose practices differ from yours?

Interlinear Text

וַיִּשְׁמָע ו	בְּנֵי י	יִשְׂרָאֵל:	לֵאמֹר ה	הֵנּוּ ה	בְּנֵי ו	
heard	And the children	of Israel	say	H2009	have built	
H8085	H1121	H3478	H559		H1129	
ו	בְּנֵי י	רְאוּבֵן	בְּנֵי י	גַּד	וְחִצִּי	שֵׁבֶט
And the children	of Reuben	And the children	of Gad	and the half	tribe	
H1121	H7205	H1121	H1410	H2677	H7626	
הַמְנַשֵּׁשׁ ה	אֶת	הַמִּזְבֵּחַ ה	אֶל	מִוֶּל	אֶרֶץ	כְּנָעַן
of Manasseh	H853	an altar	H413	over against	the land	of Canaan
H4519		H4196		H4136	H776	H3667
גְּלִילֹת	הַיַּרְדֵּי	אֶל	עַבְרָה	בְּנֵי י	יִשְׂרָאֵל:	
in the borders	of Jordan	H413	at the passage	And the children	of Israel	
H1552	H3383		H5676	H1121	H3478	