

Joshua 5:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And Joshua made him sharp knives, and circumcised the children of Israel at the hill of the foreskins.

Analysis

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Joshua's immediate obedience to God's command demonstrates exemplary leadership. The Hebrew wayaas lo Yehoshua (וַיַּעַשׂ לוֹ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, "Joshua made him") shows personal involvement in preparing instruments and performing or supervising the covenant ritual. This wasn't delegated to priests but executed by military/civil leadership, emphasizing that covenant faithfulness is comprehensive, not merely cultic.

The location name Givat ha-aralot (גִּבְעַת הָעֶרְלוֹת, "hill of the foreskins") permanently commemorates this event. Ancient naming practices connected places with significant events occurring there—Bethel ("house of God"), Peniel ("face of God"), etc. The graphic specificity of "foreskins" emphasizes the physical, historical reality of covenant incorporation rather than abstract spirituality.

From a theological perspective, this mass circumcision represents corporate covenant renewal. An entire generation received the sign that should have been administered in infancy but was delayed due to wilderness circumstances. This corporate inclusion prefigures the New Testament pattern where household baptisms (Acts 16:15, 33; 1 Corinthians 1:16) incorporate families into the visible covenant community. The Reformers saw this parallel as supporting infant baptism—just as circumcision was administered to infants in Israelite households, baptism

should be administered to children of believing parents, marking them as covenant members who must later personally embrace the faith.

Historical Context

The location "hill of the foreskins" is traditionally identified with Gilgal, Israel's base camp during the conquest, though exact identification remains uncertain. The name created a permanent memorial to covenant renewal, similar to other geographically-named events in Joshua (e.g., Valley of Achor, chapter 7).

This mass circumcision occurred around 1406 BCE (traditional chronology), involving potentially hundreds of thousands of males born during 40 years of wandering. The logistical and medical challenges would have been substantial—mass circumcision of adults is painful and debilitating, requiring recovery time (Genesis 34:25 records how Simeon and Levi attacked Shechem's males on the third day after circumcision, when pain was most intense). Israel's willingness to undergo this painful procedure while surrounded by enemies demonstrated extraordinary faith and covenant commitment.

The timing—immediately after entering Canaan—shows that enjoying covenant blessings (possessing the land) requires covenant obedience (receiving the covenant sign). God doesn't bless His people independently of their covenant relationship with Him. This principle continues in the New Covenant—believers receive spiritual blessings "in Christ" (Ephesians 1:3), connected to union with Him, not as autonomous individuals outside covenant relationship.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does Joshua's personal involvement in administering the covenant sign challenge leaders to actively participate in spiritual formation rather than merely delegating it?
2. What does the painful nature of circumcision teach about covenant membership sometimes requiring sacrifice and discomfort?
3. How should the corporate dimension of covenant renewal (an entire generation circumcised together) shape our understanding of the church as covenant community?
4. In what ways does this mass circumcision before conquest illustrate that spiritual preparation must precede attempts at spiritual warfare or kingdom advancement?
5. How does the permanent place-name "hill of the foreskins" emphasize the historical, physical reality of redemptive events rather than merely symbolic or spiritual interpretations?

Interlinear Text

וַעֲשֵׂה	ל	וְיְהוֹשֻׁעַ	חֲרֵב	יָמָיו	וְיִמְלֵךְ	אֶת
made	H0	And Joshua	knives	him sharp	and circumcised	H853
H6213		H3091	H2719	H6697	H4135	
בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל	אֶל	גִּבְעַת	הַעֲבָלוֹת:			
the children	of Israel	H413	at the hill	of the foreskins		
H1121	H3478		H1389	H6190		