

Joshua 9:21

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And the princes said unto them, Let them live; but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water unto all the congregation; as the princes had promised them.

Analysis

And the princes said unto them, Let them live; but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water unto all the congregation; as the princes had promised them. This verse records the resolution of the Gibeonite deception (Joshua 9:3-27). The Hebrew phrase chotvei etzim (חֹטְבֵי עֵץִים) ("hewers of wood") and sho'avei mayim (שֹׁאֵב מִים) ("drawers of water") describe menial labor tasks, typically performed by the lowest social classes or servants. This formula appears elsewhere in Scripture denoting servile status (Deuteronomy 29:11).

The Gibeonites deceived Israel into making a covenant oath (verses 3-15), and Israel's leaders discovered the deception three days later. Despite the deception, Israel's princes honored the oath sworn in Yahweh's name, refusing to break covenant even when obtained through trickery. This decision demonstrates the absolute sanctity of oaths made in God's name—violating such an oath would profane Yahweh's holiness and bring divine judgment on Israel.

The compromise—sparing Gibeonite lives but reducing them to permanent servitude—balanced covenant fidelity with the command to destroy Canaan's inhabitants (Deuteronomy 7:1-2). The Gibeonites became servants "unto all the congregation," specifically for the tabernacle's service (verse 27). This outcome preserved the integrity of Israel's oath while preventing Gibeonite idolatry from contaminating Israel. Centuries later, King Saul's violation of this covenant by attempting to destroy the Gibeonites brought divine judgment (2 Samuel 21:1-9).

Historical Context

The Gibeonites were Hivites living in a confederation of four cities (Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kirjath-jearim) about six miles northwest of Jerusalem. Archaeological excavations at el-Jib (ancient Gibeon) have uncovered massive defensive walls and a sophisticated water system, confirming a significant city during the Late Bronze Age (Joshua's era, approximately 1400 BC).

The Gibeonites' deception—wearing old clothes, carrying moldy bread, and claiming to come from a distant country—successfully tricked Israel's leaders into making a peace treaty without consulting the LORD (verse 14). This failure recalls Israel's earlier presumption at Ai (Joshua 7), demonstrating the constant need for divine guidance.

Ancient Near Eastern treaties and oaths were considered absolutely binding, particularly when made in a deity's name. Breaking such oaths invited divine curse. The Gibeonites' servitude specifically involved tabernacle service—cutting wood for the altar fires and drawing water for purification rituals and priestly washing. This role continued for centuries; during David's time, Gibeonites still served the tabernacle. When Solomon built the Temple, their descendants (the Nethinim, "given ones") continued this service (Ezra 2:43-54; 8:20). The Gibeonite covenant demonstrates both the binding nature of oaths and God's sovereignty in using even human deception to accomplish His purposes.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does this passage demonstrate the sanctity of oaths and the importance of keeping our word, even when inconvenient?

2. What does Israel's failure to consult the LORD before making this covenant teach about the necessity of seeking divine guidance?
3. How do we balance commitment to promises made under false pretenses with wisdom and justice?
4. In what ways does God work through human mistakes and deception to accomplish His sovereign purposes?
5. What does the Gibeonites' permanent servitude to the tabernacle reveal about God's ability to redeem compromised situations?

Interlinear Text

לֹא תִּשְׁלַח אֶלְيָהָם כַּנְשִׁיאִים וְיִאָמֶר אֵלָיו וְיִחַי וְיִלְבָּשׁ
 said H413 And the princes unto them Let them live H1961
 H559 H5387 H2421

לְכָל מִן יָמָן וְשָׁאָבֵן עַצְיָם חֲטָב
 but let them be hewers of wood and drawers of water H3605
 H2404 H6086 H7579 H4325

לְכָל מִן יָמָן וְשָׁאָבֵן עַצְיָם חֲטָב
 unto all the congregation had promised And the princes H0 H5387
 H5712 H834 H1696

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 29:11 (Parallel theme): Your little ones, your wives, and thy stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water:

Joshua 9:23 (Parallel theme): Now therefore ye are cursed, and there shall none of you be freed from being bondmen, and hewers of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.

Joshua 9:27 (Parallel theme): And Joshua made them that day hewers of wood and drawers of water for the congregation, and for the altar of the LORD, even unto this day, in the place which he should choose.

