

Joshua 9:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai,

Analysis

And when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done unto Jericho and to Ai, They did work wilily, and went and made as if they had been ambassadors, and took old sacks upon their asses, and wine bottles, old, and rent, and bound up;

The Gibeonite deception introduces a complex ethical situation testing Israel's discernment and covenant faithfulness. The phrase "did work wilily" translates the Hebrew *vaya'asu ormah* (וַיַּעֲשׂוּ עֲרֻמָּה), using the same root (*arum*) that describes the serpent in Eden as "subtil" or "crafty" (Genesis 3:1). This linguistic connection suggests satanic opposition to God's purposes—the Canaanites, facing divinely mandated judgment, resort to deception just as Satan deceived humanity in the garden.

The elaborate ruse—old sacks, worn-out wineskins, patched garments—demonstrates sophisticated psychological warfare. The Gibeonites understood that Israel's covenant theology distinguished between distant nations (with whom treaties were permissible, Deuteronomy 20:10-15) and Canaanite nations (to be utterly destroyed, Deuteronomy 20:16-18). By presenting themselves as distant travelers, they exploited this theological distinction, turning Israel's own covenant law against them.

From a Reformed perspective, this account warns against making decisions based solely on external appearances or human reasoning without seeking divine

guidance (verse 14: "and asked not counsel at the mouth of the LORD"). The Gibeonites' strategy succeeded precisely because Israel relied on empirical evidence (visible wear on provisions) rather than spiritual discernment. This foreshadows New Testament warnings against being deceived by false apostles who disguise themselves as servants of righteousness (2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

Historical Context

Gibeon was a significant Canaanite city, described as "a great city, as one of the royal cities" with "all the men thereof mighty" (Joshua 10:2). Archaeological excavations at el-Jib (identified with ancient Gibeon) reveal impressive water systems and fortifications from the Late Bronze Age. The city controlled important trade routes between the coastal plain and the hill country, making it strategically valuable.

The Gibeonites were Hivites (verse 7; 11:19), descendants of Canaan listed in the Table of Nations (Genesis 10:17). Hivite settlements included Shechem (Genesis 34:2) and cities near Mount Hermon (Joshua 11:3). Their inclusion in the list of nations to be destroyed (Deuteronomy 7:1) meant that a treaty with them violated explicit divine command. However, the Gibeonites' knowledge of Israel's theological framework—including the distinction between near and far enemies—indicates they had been carefully observing Israel and studying their religious practices.

Ancient Near Eastern treaty-making involved elaborate protocols, including oath-taking, shared meals, and exchange of gifts (verses 14-15). Once established, treaties created binding obligations that even kings could not easily break. This cultural context explains why Joshua and the elders felt bound by the treaty despite its being obtained through deception.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Study Questions

1. How does the Gibeonites' use of deception warn us about spiritual warfare and the enemy's strategy to undermine God's purposes?
2. What does Israel's failure to "ask counsel at the mouth of the LORD" teach about the danger of making decisions based solely on appearances?
3. How can we develop discernment to distinguish between legitimate cultural engagement and compromise with worldly values?

Interlinear Text

וַיִּשְׁבּוּ י	גִבְעֹן וְ	שָׁמָע וְ	אֶת	אֲשֶׁר	הָ	עָשָׂה
And when the inhabitants	of Gibeon	heard	H853	H834		had done
H3427	H1391	H8085				H6213
יְהוֹשֻׁעַ	לִירִיחוֹ וְ	אֶלְעִי:				
what Joshua	unto Jericho	and to Ai				
H3091	H3405	H5857				

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 10:2 (Parallel theme): That they feared greatly, because Gibeon was a great city, as one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all the men thereof were mighty.

Joshua 9:17 (Parallel theme): And the children of Israel journeyed, and came unto their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, and Chephirah, and Beeroth, and Kirjath-jearim.