

Joshua 22 An Altar named Ed

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Overview

As promised, 22:34 tells us that this chapter concerns an altar named “Ed.” But this comes at the end of the chapter; we need to begin earlier.

1, 4, Focus on RGM/2

Birth

Reuben, Gen 29:32, eldest of Jacob’s sons, Leah’s first-born. “Behold, a son!”

Gad, 30:11, Leah’s first by Zilpah, seventh overall: Probably not “a troop cometh,” but “fortune cometh,” although there is a pun with “troop” that comes up in Jacob’s blessing.

Manasseh: Gen 41:51, Joseph’s eldest son in Egypt.

Blessing of Jacob

Reuben: 49:3-4

- “3 Reuben, thou [art] my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power.”—As firstborn, he would ordinarily be entitled to a double share of the inheritance.
- “4 Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel...”—Yet this is denied him. “Thou shalt not have the preeminence.” Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel, ends up with the double inheritance through his sons, instead of Reuben, the firstborn of Leah. Why?
- “...because thou wentest up to thy father's bed; then defiledst thou [it]: he went up to my couch.”—Cf. 35:22 for the incident that lies behind this.

The instability of Reuben is seen in

- the rebellion of Korah, Num 16
- his ambivalence in the War of Deborah, Judg 5:15

Gad: 49:19, “Gad, a troop shall overcome him: but he shall overcome at the last.”

Manasseh: 48:14-20, though the first-born of Joseph, was blessed second to Ephraim. Cf. blessing on Joseph in 49:22-26.

Blessing of Moses, Deut 33

v.6, a half-hearted blessing for Reuben: “Let Reuben live, and not die; and let [not] his men be few.” The second negative, though in brackets, is justified by extension from “not die.” “Do not let {him die or his men be few}.” Reuben was seventh in the first numbering, eighth in the second.

vv.13-17, Manasseh included in blessing of Joseph.

vv.20-21, “And of Gad he said, Blessed [be] he that enlargeth Gad: he dwelleth as a lion, and teareth the arm with the crown of the head. 21 And he provided the first part for himself, because there, [in] a portion of the lawgiver, [was he] seated; and he came with the heads of the people, he executed the justice of the LORD, and his judgments with Israel.”—Allusion to Gad’s leadership of the other two Transjordanian tribes in seizing their inheritance, Num 32:2, 6, 25.

2-8, What Joshua did

2, 3, Commended their Obedience

The subject matter of their obedience is 3a, the fact that they did not abandon the conquest, but sent a detachment to support their brethren.

Note the three-fold source of this command:

- “All that Moses ... commanded you,” in Num 32:20ff, as part of the original deal. Recall that the word “armed” probably is better translated “detached,” referring to a segment of the tribes, not all their soldiers.
- “Obeyed my voice” in Josh 1:12ff, where he carries on this requirement. Further, they have submitted themselves under his leadership during the years of conquest.
- But most important, they “have kept the charge of the commandment of the LORD your God.” That is, they recognized in the commands of Moses and Joshua the command of the Lord. This is the key to cheerful submission to human authority. We are not submitting to other people because of their excellence or superiority, but because we recognize them as God’s appointed authorities over us, and thus we are submitting to God through them. Cf. Col 2:22-24; 1 Pet 2:18,19, where one’s subjection even to a froward master is commanded “for conscience toward God,” because we fear him and submit to the circumstances that he gives us.

5, Charged Them

A summary and five details.

Summary

Note two aspects of this summary in 5a.

Their action: “take diligent heed to do.” God’s word focuses most of all not on what we must *believe*, but on what we must *do*. Clearly, we will not submit to such direct commands unless we believe what the Bible says of the one who gives them; but belief without works is dead (James). They are to submit themselves most carefully to God’s revelation.

The nature of the revelation: “commandment and law.” Consider the underlying verb for each of these, and what it tells us about the revealer.

- A commandment is something that we are commanded to do by one who has greater authority and power than we. Reminds us that God is the creator; we are only his creatures. This is the forceful side of our relation to him; leads us to fear him. But there is something more.

- “Law” is *torah*, a noun from the verb *yarah* “to point out, teach, instruct.” Thus “law” (at least in the OT) is instruction that we receive from someone wiser and more experienced than we are. We are not alone in a hostile and foreign world. Just as little children have parents with experience in the world to guide and direct them, so we have a loving heavenly Father who understands completely the world in which we live, and who instructs us through his word.

5b, Detail

Now the five amplifications, marked as such by the lack of a conjunction before the first. Note the mixture of love and obedience throughout these, corresponding to the dual character of his revelation as commandment and teaching.

1. to love the LORD your God.—This is the first duty of Israel, according to the *shema* of Deut 6:4.
2. and to walk in all his ways—two senses.
 - Deut 5:33, “walk in the ways which the Lord hath commanded you.” They are his ways because they come from him; genitive of *source*. But this is more than just “obey his commandments.”
 - Cf. 1 Sam. 8:5, “thy sons walk not in thy ways.” They are his ways because they describe how *he* walks. Subjective genitive. This is the fundamental idea of “godliness,” living a God-like life.
 - The 1 Sam passage suggests that it is unnatural that Samuel’s sons not follow his example. Children naturally want to live as their parents do. So if we begin with the love of God, we should naturally want to live lives like his.
3. and to keep his commandments—Here we finally come to explicit obedience, but note that it is build on the foundation of love and childlike imitation.
4. and to cleave unto him—The verb is used elsewhere
 - of a husband cleaving to his wife, Gen 2:24 (first use in the Bible);
 - of Ruth sticking close by Naomi (1:14) and the workers of Boaz (2:8, 21, 23).

The verb means literally “to stick, as with glue.” Our responsibility is to hug the Lord and stay glued to him. We do this through regularity in spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, Bible study, and public worship. Notice how foreign this is from the idea of God on Sunday and the rest of the week for ourselves. When we recognize our weakness and his strength, our sinfulness and his purity, our ugliness and his beauty, we want to be with him, as close to him as we can be. We are called to be God’s Groupies, like the ardent fans who surround a rock star. If we do stick to him this way, the final command will not be burdensome.

5. and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul—The Hebrew accentuation sets this off, almost as a concluding summary. The verb: “serve him.” Obedience again, as in clause 3. But not grudgingly—note the qualifiers:
 - “with all your heart”—in Hebrew thought, embraces not only the emotions and feelings, but thought and intelligence as well. Cf. “wise-hearted,” Exod 31:6. No half-way commitment here; our obedience is to be willing and joyful.

- “with all your soul”—“soul” is literally “life.” Our entire being is to be at his disposal. Cf. Rom. 12:1,2. The Bible knows nothing of the distinction Christians sometimes make between lay people and those in “full-time Christian service.” From Joshua’s point of view, every member of RGM/2 is to be in “full-time service” to the Lord, serving him with their entire life.
 - 1 Cor 10:31, “Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.”
 - Colo 3:17, “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, [do] all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

The main focus of this chapter is as a case study in the spiritual unity of God’s divided people. Joshua’s commands to RGM/2 urge them to continue in Israel’s faith; now his final words to them continue to urge that unity. As we progress through the chapter, we shall learn several important facts about diversity in a spiritual unity.

6-8, Sent them Away and Blessed Them

The two actions are coupled together in vv. 6a, 7b, while the respective phrases are amplified in 6b-7a (“sent”), 8 (“blessed”). Both of these actions emphasize the essential unity of RGM/2 with the 9.5 tribes, an essential point in the light of the following events.

7a, Sending

We are reminded of the two-fold possession of Manasseh, on both sides of the Jordan. Their position is an important illustration of one of the main concerns of the chapter, the essential unity of the tribes on both sides of the river as one nation.

Application.—This is a major challenge for God’s people in every age: manifesting our broader spiritual unity in the face of the incidental divisions into which God may lead us. Moses put one half of the tribe on the east of Jordan; Joshua put the other half on the west. Yet they are still one tribe.

Fact.—True Israelites can live in different places without ceasing to be Israelites; true Christians can differ from one another without ceasing to be Christians. (But there are limits, as we shall see.) Mark 9:38-40. (But Matt 12:30, later.)

8, Blessing

Three details in v.8.

Summary

They are to take with them both riches and cattle.

Detail

Here Joshua amplifies the “riches.”

- silver and gold, because they are intrinsically rare
- brass (actually, at this period bronze) because making it required mining and melting copper and tin together, hardly an industry appropriate to a nomadic people

- iron, because of the scarce technology needed to make it. This is the late bronze age; iron was available only in native form from meteorites. No one knew how to smelt it from ore. Furthermore, it required alloying into a form of steel before it could be useful. As late as the time of David, the knowledge of how to work iron was closely held by the Philistines and not known to Israel (1 Sam 13:19-21).
- Beautiful clothing, perhaps attractive through its novelty.

Application: God can bless his people with the wealth of the heathen, without their needing to become heathens. Need to develop a godly attitude toward riches. Note 1 Tim. 6:17,

- “Be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches.”—Don’t worship wealth or make it your God
- “Trust ... in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy.”—Don’t despise it; it is a blessing from God.

Or again 1 Cor 7:31, the need to use the world without abusing it.

Mechanism

“Divide the spoil of your enemies with your brethren.” At first glance, this seems to be an injunction to the men of the RGM/2 detachment to share what they take back to Transjordan with those who did not come to battle. However:

- The verb “divide” means “share,” and can have two senses: “share with” (give a portion to somebody) and “share in” (receive part of what someone else has).
- Hebrew, like English, distinguishes these by the prepositions that are used with the verb. And in this text, the preposition used is that appropriate to “share in.” Translate: “share in the spoil of your brethren.”
- To confirm this, note that “brethren” is used repeatedly in the discussions of RGM/2 to describe their relation to the other 9.5 tribes. Compare vv. 3, 4, 7.

Thus the command is permissive rather than restrictive. Joshua is not commanding them to share the booty that they already have with their fellow tribespeople. Rather, he is telling them to expect to take back with them some of the spoil won in the conquest of Canaan. His blessing thus is really a command to the 9.5 tribes to share their spoil with RGM/2.

- Why should this require special permission? Answer: They have already received their own cities in Transjordan. The 9.5 tribes who helped them in that conquest didn’t take any spoil with them; why should RGM/2 expect to receive some now from the cities that they have helped their brethren conquer?
- The unexpected nature of this endowment is seen in the description of it twice as a “blessing,” which refers to the bestowal of good upon someone through an act of speech by a competent authority (usually God, but here Joshua acting as commander of the host of Israel). Without Joshua’s intervention, RGM/2 would not have these good things when they return home. If this is simply a narrative description of what they already possess, it would hardly be a “blessing.”

So why does Joshua convey this special benefit on RGM/2?

- There may be a qualitative difference in the spoils acquired in relatively urbanized Canaan from those in the more rural heights of Transjordan. That was specifically a land for cattle; Canaan may have had better trade connections. But I'm at the limits of my archaeological knowledge here.
- This may have been special recognition for RGM/2's adherence to their promise. The other tribes have not had to endure extended separation from their families. Recall that the conquest lasted on the order of seven years (6.5 years from 14:7,10, plus perhaps another six months minimum for the allocation of the land, including the move to Shiloh and the reconnaissance mission). That's a long time to be away from your wives and little ones. They are workmen worthy of their hire, oxen not to be deprived of the fruits of treading out the grain (cf. 1 Tim 5:18).

Application.—Consider the jealousy that the 9.5 tribes may have felt over this requirement that they share the spoil from “their” cities, or the jealousy that RGM/2 may have felt over leaving their families for such a long period of time. God demands different levels of sacrifice (Matt 20:1-15; John 21:18-22) and grants different levels of blessing and the accompanying responsibility (Matt 25:15). If we look at one another, we shall be jealous. If we focus on our relation with him, we will find his strength sufficient for the burdens he gives us, and his blessing abundant beyond what we deserve. Get your eyes off other believers and onto the Lord!

Fact.—One important way in which believers will differ is in the burdens they carry and the blessings they receive.

9-10, What RGM/2 Did

Built an altar. Note two characteristics:

1. Its location: the shore of Jordan “in the land of Canaan” (v.10), “over against [at the foot of] [the mountains of] the land of Canaan” (v.11). The altar was constructed at the side of the river, just on the western bank.
2. Its appearance: “large in appearance.” (Cf. Gen. 2:9 for the construction ADJ + *lemar)eh*.) We shall see in the sequel that its visibility was critical.

The author does not reveal to us immediately their motive. What do we think of this action? What did the other Israelites think?

11-20, What Israel Did

This section is a study in handling matters of offense among brethren.

11-12a, They Hear

The altar comes to their attention. We do not know how they found out about it, although its size and visibility no doubt made it unavoidably obvious, as did its location in their own territory.

12b, They Arm for Battle

Why are they upset?

- Exod 20:22-26 forbids shaped altars, and permits only piles of earth or structures of unhewn stone, “in all places where I record my name.” That is, lay or cairn altars could be multiplied throughout the land, but not a shaped altar with horns (see “Altar,” ISBE pp. 106ff). A formed altar was permitted only at the tabernacle. Note the association of this command with the prohibition of idolatry; a formed altar implied a sanctuary with attendant deities.
- 22:28 shows that this altar had a pattern or form, and thus was in violation of Exod 20:22-26. It implied the existence of idols and their worship.
- Deut 13:12-17 expressly commands war against any Israelite city that turns away from the worship of God, as RGM/2 have apparently done. Thus the children of Israel are being obedient to the law in assembling thus against RGM/2.

Application.—There are limits to the tolerance that can be justified under “love of the brethren.” Our God is a jealous God who hates evil, and if we are to be godly, we must hate it too.

Fact.—Not every one who names the name of Christ is a believer; cf. Matt. 12:30, and contrast with Mark 9:40. Difference from US is not a cause for division; difference from CHRIST is. Geographical separation does not divide Israel, but following after another God does.

13-20, They Send an Envoy

A critical provision of Deut 13 is the requirement for diligent enquiry, v.14.

Application.—Deut. 13:14 is an excellent guide for us when we are confronted with suspicions that another believer has fallen short. Note the three steps:

1. “enquire *dr\$*”.—The suspicions begin with the testimony of witnesses (v.12) that a city has gone astray. Those witnesses must be interrogated carefully to determine whether their testimony is consistent and credible. *Dr\$* focuses on verbal inquiry. In Joshua’s case, Joshua and the elders will have interrogated those who brought the news of the altar.
2. “make search *xqr*”.—This verb has less to do with asking questions, more with studying and examining a matter. In Joshua’s case, they may have gone on a fact-finding mission into the Jordan Valley to see the altar for themselves.
3. “ask *\$)l*”.—Even with the facts of the matter clearly in hand, the elders cannot rush into action, but must still give the accused a chance to explain themselves. This is the step that is described in Josh 22:13-20 in the sending of the ambassadors.

Our accusations toward other believers should be moderated with this same spirit of care and diligence not to rush prematurely into an accusation: be sure we understand the witnesses, verify whatever we can for ourselves, and give the accused a chance to answer.

13-14, The Ambassadors

Note their identity and their qualifications

Phinehas the son of Eleazar.—His zeal for the Lord was established in Num 25:1-8, when he slew a man involved in fornication with a Midianite woman. His past faithfulness assures them that he will not hesitate to condemn RGM/2 if the facts merit.

Tribal Representatives.—One man from each of the 9.5 cisjordanian tribes, so that each tribe is represented in the party. The same principle as in the spies in Num 13. In both places they are said to be “princes,” and here this is defined more particularly as “head of the father’s house.” Thus these are senior people, with the wisdom of years, already trusted with leadership within their tribes.

14a is difficult. On the one hand, there is universal agreement, on the basis of Joshua 7:14, that the hierarchy of social groups is [father’s] house → family → tribe, and a strong sense that “father’s house” is limited to a living patriarch with all his descendants. On the other, the expression A)xd A)xd le-B is a standard idiom for “one A for each B,” see examples in BDB sub voce)xd (e.g., Num 13:2).. In combination, these two locutions would require far more than ten princes. The answer appears to be an extension of “father’s house” to refer to a larger unit, as in “house of Judah” and “house of Israel” long after Judah and Israel are dead. Compare also Num 7:2, where similar language is used to indicate only one man from each tribe.

Application.—Experience and qualifications count. There are two ways to assess them.

1. By specific performance, as with Phinehas.
2. Through age and existing position.

15-20, Their Message

Arranged chiastically: accusation—offer—accusation. Each accusation consists of an example from their recent history and an analysis of the risk to the entire nation. The first accusation includes more in-depth analysis of their sin. NB: It’s easy to accuse, but hard to think of solutions to the problem. The love and piety of the 9.5 tribes is seen in the offer they make to RGM/2 to try to correct the problem.

16-18, First Accusation

Definition of Sin.—In 16, the ambassadors use three terms to describe what they perceive as the sin of RGM/2:

- *m(l*, “trespass.” Refers to a fundamental breach of trust with God or violation of his sacred prerogatives. The only time it is applied to the transgression of one person against another is in the law of adultery in Num 5:12,27, which seems to draw from the sacral meaning. Just as the prophets draw on the human term “adultery” to describe idolatry, so here a religious term “unfaithfulness” is used to describe human infidelity.

The next two terms amplify this, and are repeated in v.18a. They reflect the two aspects of God’s instruction to his people that we have already observed in 5a, his “commandments” and his “teaching.” Thus the ambassadors are directly accusing them of violating the charge that Joshua gave them back in v.5.

- *\$wb*, “turn away from following.” The focus here is on God as a wise teacher, whose example and precept we are to follow. They have despised the value of this wisdom.
- *Mrd*, “rebel.” Here the emphasis is on God as their sovereign, whose authority they have rejected.

Example from Israel’s History.—In 17, they recall the sin of Peor, the very episode in Num 25 in which Phinehas demonstrated his devotion to the Lord. Phinehas accuses the people of not yet

being cleansed from this sin; their hearts are still “prone to wander,” as Joshua himself recognizes in 24:14.

Broader Consequence.—18b reminds them that the sin of a few can bring God’s wrath on the whole congregation, as in Num 25 when God sent plague among them, or 1 Chr 21:1,14, when David’s sin in numbering the people led to a plague on 70,000.

20, Second Accusation

There is no definition of sin this time; they just use the term *m(l*, the comprehensive term from 16.

Example from Israel’s History.—Now the example they choose is closer to home, the sin of Achan just a few years before.

Broader Consequence.—Like the sin of Peor, this was a transgression that brought God’s judgment on a wider circle of people, in the defeat at Ai and the death of 36 Israelite soldiers.

Application.—We never sin in a vacuum. God’s blessing on us as a church family depends on the faithfulness of each individual member. If you yield to temptation, it’s not just your own business; it can bring judgment and defeat on the entire congregation. The fundamental truth of our unity in a body, 1 Cor. 12, implies that if one member suffers, all suffer (1 Cor 12:26). If one member sins, the others cannot escape the consequences of that sin.

This public consequence of sin may be one reason that God makes us as a congregation responsible for one another’s conduct. We are not only to examine ourselves when coming to the Lord’s Table, but also to “discern the body” (1 Cor. 11:29), to “judge ourselves” (1 Cor 11:31), to put away evildoers (1 Cor 5:11), to provoke one another to love and good works (Heb 10:24, the leading reason that we are not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together).

19, The Offer

The ambassadors bring more than just an accusation.

1. They offer a potential excuse. Perhaps RGM/2 feel they need their own sanctuary because they have found their own land to be unbearably defiled. The 9.5 do not delight in the perceived sin of RGM/2, as though it exalted them by contrast, but want desperately to find a reasonable explanation. They do not delight in judgment.
2. They have a suggested solution. The other 9.5 tribes will give up some of their territory to make room for them on the other side of Jordan. The 9.5 are willing to sacrifice if necessary to deliver their brethren from sin.

The offer is all the more remarkable after our conclusion from vv.6-8 that RGM/2 have already received a bonus share of the spoil from the conquest, in compensation for their enforced absence from their families for seven years. Far from being jealous, the 9.5 are ready to give them even more, if that would avert sin.

Application.—We are responsible to examine and exhort one another, but it’s so easy to fall into sin ourselves in doing so, exercising this responsibility in a way that tears down others to exalt ourselves. An important corrective is to ask ourselves whether we are willing to go out of our way to restore an erring brother. Can we do something to help them avoid the sin in which they have become ensnared? This requires at least two forms of investment on our part:

1. We must figure out what we could do to help. This usually requires putting ourselves into their shoes, trying to understand the circumstances that have tripped them up.
2. We must examine our own hearts: are we willing to sacrifice to help deliver a brother or sister from sin? This is the implication of Gal 6:1, “restore such a one.”

Fact

Differences with other believers may be unavoidable. God has provided here clear guidance for how we are to deal with them.

- Diligent examination of the witnesses and the facts
- Execution of the matter by the hands of experienced, qualified individuals, people who have proven their faithfulness to the Lord
- A recognition of the potential impact of the sin on the wider congregation
- A desire to see the erring brother restored that is strong enough to motivate us to sacrifice to enable that to happen.

21-29, How RGM/2 Explain the Altar

They begin (22-23) and end (29) with unequivocal denials of their guilt, and in the middle disclose their own internal counsels to the examination and approval of their critics.

22-23, First Denial of Sin

They invoke the Lord as witness at the beginning and end, and in the center (*tow\$iy''nu*, 2ms, thus addressed to the Lord rather than to the ambassadors), they call on him to judge them if they speak not the truth. Two points to their denial:

- They deny all three accusations of rebellion from v.16: “rebellion,” “transgression,” “to turn.”
- Specifically, they have no intention of actually *using* the altar for sacrifice. Thus it does not violate the command of Exodus 20:24 that only earthen altars are permitted for sacrifice away from the sanctuary. And since it is not to be used for worship, it cannot be intended for idol worship, as forbidden in Deut 13:12-17.

29, Second Denial of Sin

The same two points as the original denial in 22-23:

- They are not rebelling against or turning away from the Lord.
- They did not construct the altar to offer sacrifice, but merely as a symbol of their devotion to the one central altar “before his tabernacle.”

24-28, Explanation

The explanation is cast in terms of their counsel among themselves: “saying” (24), “we said” (26), “said we” (28). The first anticipates an objection to their future worship from the western tribes. The second and third, in very similar terms, plan their response.

24-25, Anticipated Objection from Western Tribes

They fear that future generations may interpret the Jordan as a God-given boundary between the tribes, and thus refuse to grant RGM/2 access to the worship of the Lord.

26-27, First Response

The altar is not intended for sacrifice, but as a witness, to remind *both* groups of Israelites “to do the service of the LORD before him.” Note:

- Not “that we might do,” but “to do.” The reference is to the worship of both groups. The altar on the border is to remind both sides of their common faith.
- “Before him,” that is, in Shiloh.

In this response, they are hope the altar will forestall any such accusation as they fear in 24-25.

28, Second Response

Many of the same terms as 26-27, but now they anticipate that if the westerners overlook the significance of the altar and seek to exclude them from worship, then they can call it to their attention: “Behold the pattern of the altar of the Lord.” The similarity in shape to the altar at the Tabernacle shows that they are already participants in that worship, and should be admitted to it.

Application

It is commendable that they anticipate the possible estrangement between their children and future westerners, and take steps to guard against it. Believers need to be alert to the danger of offense and careful not to cause it.

At the same time, RGM/2 are not as careful as they might have been to avoid offending the current generation of westerners. Why could they not have discussed their plan with representatives of the 9.5 tribes in advance?

30-34, Israel’s Verdict

30, The ambassadors reach their conclusion: “It pleased them.” Apparently a consensus decision.

31, They communicate their decision to RGM/2 promptly and clearly. The statement here is the inverse of the fear they expressed in v.18.

- There, they feared that tribal sin could bring the Lord’s displeasure on the whole nation.
- Here, they affirm that tribal obedience shows the Lord’s blessing on the whole nation.

32-33, The rest of the nation accepts their report and stimulates blessing to God.

34, RGM/2 reaffirm the memorial purpose of the altar.

Application: Once again, we are reminded that our love for one another should stimulate us to rejoice in the innocence of one another, not to tear down one another by finding and condemning sin.