

JOSHUA 9

THE GIBEONITES SAVE THEMSELVES BY TRICKERY

Joshua 9 opens the narrative of the second stage of the conquest of Canaan (9:1–11:15). This stage of the war pitted Israel against both the south (see chapter 10) and the north (see chapter 11) of Canaan. With two victories secured (those against Jericho and Ai), the Israelites' military prowess threatened the remaining Canaanite kings, who formed an anti-Israelite coalition (9:1–2). These sorts of military alliances are known from both biblical (for example, Genesis 14) and secular history of the ancient Near East and usually arose in response to a perceived regional threat by an emerging or dominant superpower. In this instance, that threat was Israel.

The inhabitants of Gibeon, however, chose a different route than open warfare with Joshua and the Israelites. Their plan was instead to trick the Israelites with a clever ruse—ironic enough given how the Israelites themselves successfully tricked the inhabitants of Ai with their own subterfuge in the previous chapter. The Gibeonites' plan was to disguise themselves as impoverished foreigners and make a treaty with Joshua (Joshua 9:3–14). The idea behind the plan was to take advantage of the instructions in the law of Moses to treat aliens and foreign cities equitably (see Deuteronomy 20:10–20).

Remarkably, the plan worked due to the Israelites' credulity and their failure to consult the Lord (Joshua 9:14). By the time the Israelites discovered the identity of the Gibeonites (verses 16–18), it was too late—they had entered a covenant with the Gibeonites and had sworn by the Lord not to harm them (verses 15, 19). The reasoning the Gibeonites gave at verses 24–25 for their deception is self-evident: it was undertaken out of desperation to save their lives. Unable to subject them to the same *herem* as the other Canaanites on account of the peace treaty but fully recognizing the deception, Joshua instead impressed the Gibeonites into servitude (verses 22–27). The concluding verse of the chapter gives the author's etiology for why Gibeonites served in menial labor roles in his day.

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