

JOSHUA 22

A MEMORIAL ALTAR EAST OF THE JORDAN

The final section of the book of Joshua comprises chapters 22–24. It constitutes a sort of epilogue to the main narrative, which itself is composed of the conquest (chapters 1–12) and allotment (chapters 13–21) subsections. This epilogue highlights a dispute that arose between the children of Israel (22:10–34), a final exhortation by Joshua (chapter 23), and a covenant renewal ceremony (24:1–28) before concluding with a brief note of Joshua’s death (24:29–33).

The dispute arose between the Reubenites, Gadites, and Manassehites on one side of the Jordan River and the remaining tribes on the other side. These three tribes had constructed a large altar near the Jordan in what they evidently thought constituted a legitimate worship site but that the other tribes felt was not authorized (22:10–12, 16). The debate hinged on whether the law of Moses allowed for multiple sacred sites besides the one authorized central site (see, for instance, Deuteronomy 12:13–14). The concern for whether to allow multiple worship sites seems to have been, among others, an issue of supervision: it is more difficult to ensure a proper mode of worship with multiple sites. The harsh language of the tribes on the west side of the Jordan River at Joshua 22:16–20 reveals that intertribal jealousies, suspicions, and prejudices lingered even after the settlement in Canaan. In response to this, the three tribes connected with the altar reaffirmed their devotion to Jehovah (verses 21–24, 29) and insisted that the altar was for memorial purposes and was not a place of actual sacrifice (verses 26–27).

In order to mediate and resolve the controversy, the aggrieved parties turned to Phinehas, the son of the priest Eleazar (verses 30–34). Why they did not turn to Eleazar himself, who was still alive, is unclear, but it probably had something to do with his advanced age. In any case, Phinehas had already intervened in a previous episode involving apostate Israelites (see Numbers 25), so his return here to resolve this new

dispute wasn't surprising. After hearing out the issue, Phinehas determined that the altar was legitimate. The name bestowed upon the altar, Ed (*ed*), is merely the Hebrew word for "witness" or "testimony," as is made clear in the declaration at the end of the chapter: "For it shall be a witness between us that the LORD is God" (verse 34).

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