

Joshua 9: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Joshua chapter 9 And they went to Joshua in the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, We have come from a distant country, so now make a covenant with us.

But the men of Israel said to the Hivites, Perhaps you live among us, then how can we make a covenant with you? They said to Joshua, We are your servants. And Joshua said to them, Who are you, and where do you come from?

They said to him, From a very distant country your servants have come, because of the name of the Lord your God. For we have heard a report of him, and all that he did in Egypt, and all that he did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon the king of Heshbon, and to Og the king of Bashan, who lived in Ashtaroth.

So our elders and all the inhabitants of our country said to us, Take provisions in your hand for the journey, and go meet them and say to them, We are your servants. Come now, make a covenant with us.

Here is our bread. It was still warm when we took it from our houses as our food for the journey on the day we set out to come to you. But now, behold, it is dry and crumbly. These wineskins were new when we filled them, and behold, they have burst.

[1 : 4 6] And these garments and sandals of ours are worn out from the very long journey. So the men took some of their provisions, but did not ask counsel from the Lord. And Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them, to let them live.

And the leaders of the congregation swore to them. At the end of three days, after they had made a covenant with them, they heard that they were their neighbours, and that they lived among them. And the people of Israel set out and reached their cities on the third day.

Now their cities were Gibeon, Kephira, Beroth, and Kiriath-Jerim. But the people of Israel did not attack them, because the leaders of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel.

Then all the congregation murmured against the leaders. But all the leaders said to all the congregation, We have sworn to them by the Lord, the God of Israel, and now we may not touch them. This we will do to them.

Let them live, lest wrath be upon us, because of the oath that we swore to them. And the leaders said to them, Let them live. So they became cutters of wood and drawers of water for all the congregation, just as the leaders had said of them.

[2 : 5 0] Joshua summoned them, and he said to them, Why did you deceive us, saying, We are very far from you, when you dwell among us? Now therefore you are cursed, and some of you shall never be anything but servants, cutters of wood and drawers of water for the house of my God.

They answered Joshua, Because it was told to your servants for a certainty that the Lord your God had commanded his servant Moses to give you all the land and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you.

So we feared greatly for our lives because of you and did this thing. And now, behold, we are in your hand. Whatever seems good and right in your sight to do to us, do it. So he did this to them, and delivered them out of the hand of the people of Israel, and they did not kill them.

But Joshua made them that day cutters of wood and drawers of water for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord to this day, in the place that he should choose. In Joshua chapter 9, when the kings of Canaan hear about the victory over Ai and Jericho, they gather together in war against Israel.

And there is an expression similar to when X heard that, repeated at a few points in chapters 9 to 11, in verse 1 and 3 of chapter 9, and in verses 1 of chapter 10 and 11.

[4 : 04] However, the Gibeonites, a local group condemned with the rest of the people of the land, devise a different plan. Their plan is to trick Joshua and the Israelites. The Lord had given Israel instructions to destroy the people of the land.

However, they could treat people outside of the land on different terms. Deuteronomy chapter 20 verses 10 to 18 reads, When you draw near a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it.

And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labour for you and shall serve you. But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it.

And when the Lord your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves.

And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the Lord your God has given you. Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here.

[5 : 05] But in the cities of those peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.

The Gibeonites seemed to have some awareness of the terms that the Lord had set for Israel. At least they knew that, if they represented themselves as coming from far away, they would have a good chance of arriving at some terms of peace with Israel.

The ruse of the Gibeonites might remind us of Israel's own ruse, which they used to defeat Ai in the previous chapter. The Gibeonites pretend to come from a very far distance, but really they just lived to the northwest of Jerusalem.

They sought to make a covenant with Israel, something that Israel had been expressly warned against in Exodus chapter 34 verses 12 to 16. Take care, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you go, lest it become a snare in your midst.

You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars and cut down their asherim, for you shall worship no other god, for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous god, lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land.

[6 : 25] And when they whore after their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice, and you take of their daughters for your sons, and their daughters whore after their gods, and make your sons whore after their gods.

The Gibeonites were members of the Hivites, and as such were condemned to destruction. Joshua and the Israelites are initially wary. They want to make sure that they do in fact live far away.

The Gibeonites present themselves as a distant people wanting to become a vassal of Israel, a people in service to them. Joshua questions them further about their origin, and the Gibeonites give an answer designed to please Joshua and the people about the fame of the Lord and his victories in Egypt and the Transjordan, and the way that the report had reached them.

They show Joshua their supplies, which gives the misleading impression that they had travelled a very great distance to them. This would have given Joshua and the Israelites an encouraging impression of the spread of the fame of the Lord throughout the wider region, and the provisions are used as evidence for the story.

It isn't exactly clear who examines or partakes of the food. It could be either Joshua and the people, or it could be the Gibeonites themselves, demonstrating in their eating it.

[7 : 37] Israel ends up entering into the covenant with the Gibeonites, without ever inquiring of the Lord. This is a fateful omission. It leaves them wide open to the deception of the Gibeonites, and Joshua should have learned some of the lessons from the initial failure at Ai, when they failed to discover that the Lord was not on their side and trusted in their resources, and ended up being defeated.

Joshua makes a covenant of peace with the Gibeonites, which is then ratified by the leaders of the people, pledging to let the Gibeonites live. But three days later, the ruse is discovered, and because they had made the solemn covenant with them, they could not attack them.

This causes unrest among the people, who complain about the bad judgment of their leaders in the matter. At this point, we might think back to the grumbling of the Israelites under Moses, something that this generation had largely moved beyond.

But Joshua and the leaders clearly failed in this matter. To deal with their mistake, they determined that the Gibeonites should be employed as slave laborers for Israel, much as the sojourners mentioned in Deuteronomy chapter 29 verse 11.

Joshua places them under a judgment. He condemns them to menial service for the community and the house of the Lord, but in exchange, their lives are saved. The Israelites' covenant with the Gibeonites does not merely mean that they must not be put to death.

[8 : 56] The Israelites now have a responsibility to the Gibeonites. They must come to the aid of the Gibeonites in the following chapter. The Gibeonites play a role later on in the story of Israel too. The covenant with them remained in force centuries later.

In 1 Samuel chapters 6 and 7, the Ark of the Lord remained at Kiriath-Jerim, one of the cities of the Gibeonites, for about 20 years, after it was returned from the land of Philistia.

The rest of the tabernacle was situated at Gibeon for many years during David and Solomon's reigns. This can be seen in 1 Chronicles chapter 16 verse 39 and 1 Kings chapter 3 verses 4 and 5, where Solomon has his dream when he's at Gibeon.

It seems then that the Gibeonites were blessed with the custody of the Ark and the tabernacle at this point later in their history. Gibeonite cities are mentioned among Israel in Nehemiah chapter 7 verse 29 and the Gibeonites are involved in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem in Nehemiah chapter 3 verse 7.

In 2 Samuel chapter 21, the most notable story concerning the Gibeonites after this, there is a three-year famine upon the land in the reign of David because Saul had broken the covenant with the Gibeonites that Joshua made at this point and had put them to death.

[10:12] 2 Samuel chapter 21 verses 1 to 3. Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year, and David sought the face of the Lord. And the Lord said, There is blood guilt on Saul and on his house because he put the Gibeonites to death.

So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites. Although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had sought to strike them down in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.

And David said to the Gibeonites, What shall I do for you? And how shall I make atonement that you may bless the heritage of the Lord? Centuries later then, it seems, the covenant with the Gibeonites was still in effect.

A question to consider. How might the Gibeonites remind us of the tribes of Simeon and Levi? What encouragement might the Gibeonites have taken from this?