

Joshua 22. Glan-y-Llyn. 14 February 2013. Deut. 12. 10-11a, 13-14; 13. 12-15; Josh. 22. 1-6, 10-34.¹

I want us this evening to sit in as spectators on the events of Joshua 22 – and to note three points in particular: first, how quickly and easily the trouble developed; secondly, to trace the main causes and reasons for this trouble; and, thirdly, to discover exactly how the potentially explosive situation of verse 12 was defused to give the ‘and they all lived happily ever after’ ending of verse 33.

You will not need me to tell you much by way of background. On the whole, things had gone very well. Israel’s Holy War – or better ‘the war of the Lord’ in the language of Numbers 21² – which lasted about 7 years was more or less now over. Israel had successfully invaded and conquered the land of Canaan. Their remaining enemies were at this point scattered and dispirited. And all that was left was a mopping-up operation – or it should have been.

The 2½ tribes had earlier settled on the East of Jordan with Moses permission.³ So we read in verse 4 of ‘the land of your possession, which Moses the servant of the Lord gave you on the other side of the Jordan’. This particular territory had once belonged to two pagan kings, Sihon, king of the Amorites, and a rather large gentleman from Bashan graced by his parents with the delightful name of ‘Og’. Both kings had been roundly defeated – and the land they had ruled now belonged to the 2½ tribes. The 2½ tribes had agreed with Moses that they would go ‘armed before the Lord – before the children Israel – to battle’ – an expression occurring, in one form or another, nine times in Numbers 32.

According to Joshua chapter 1, three days before Israel crossed the Jordan to confront the Canaanite nations, Joshua had drafted the 2½ tribes in on a temporary basis for the duration of the Canaan campaign. He held them to their earlier promise ‘you shall pass before your brethren armed, all your mighty men of valour, and help them’ – which met with their ready response, ‘All that you command us we will do, and wherever you send us we will go’.⁴ And they were as good as their word – they did just that – not only fighting under the national banner, but, according to chapter 4, leading the way both across the Jordan and into the plain of Jericho.⁵ And now the war was virtually over, the 2½ tribes were given an honourable discharge. They had done well, and, as we read, at the beginning of chapter 22, were now given a glowing commendation, were blessed and dismissed.⁶

Our story begins after the 2½ tribes had left the rest of the nation at Shiloh,⁷ and had reached their own territory on the other side of Jordan.⁸ Some keen-sighted individual in Israel observed that they immediately set about erecting an altar – and some altar it was too – something to really catch the eye! Grand and impressive – conspicuous in size – a ‘great altar to see to’ – literally, ‘an altar great to sight’ as verse 10 expresses it. The man who spotted the altar was horrified and raced off to Shiloh to spread the disturbing news. But then he didn’t know what lay behind the action of the 2½ tribes – he didn’t know their purpose and intention when they built the altar. But we do – because we have the benefit of having read verses 21 to 29. After they had left the 9½ tribes at Shiloh, the 2½ tribes had been forced to do some hard thinking. It had not been easy getting home because of the geographical layout of the area. The Jordan river ran through a deep valley about 1,300 feet below sea level, and, on each side, mountain plateaux rose over 2,000 feet above sea level. This 3,500 feet gorge formed a daunting natural ‘border’, as verse 25 describes it.⁹

As they made their way home, the 2½ tribes became increasingly concerned that a future generation of the 9½ tribes, encouraged by this natural boundary, would disown any link, any association, with their descendants.¹⁰ It was painfully obvious that their own children would need some very convincing argument if they were to satisfy the descendants of the 9½ tribes that they did, in fact, serve the same God and formed part of the same nation.¹¹ But with what persuasive evidence could they possibly provide their children? And then someone had a brainwave ... they would build an altar – but not just any altar – not an altar built to their own design or specification. Certainly not!

They would build it, as made clear in verse 28, after the ‘pattern’ of the Lord’s altar at Shiloh. It would be a replica, a facsimile, an exact copy of that altar. The idea was nothing short of brilliant, because the altar at the tabernacle at Shiloh was the very centre and focus for the life of Israel. All males in Israel were required to visit God’s dwelling place three times every year.¹² Everyone was familiar therefore with the pattern of the altar. And, in any case, the idea of building monuments as a reminder of some great event or of something was well understood. This would be number six in the book – and, as in the case of the first (the twelve stones erected at Gilgal which Joshua had taken out of Jordan in chapter 4)¹³, this altar would be for the benefit and education of their children. This altar was to serve as a silent witness to identify the 2½ tribes as part and parcel of the nation.

There was no question of the altar ever being used for sacrifice or offering, such as the altars linked to the gold calves set up some 470 years later¹⁴ by Jeroboam at Bethel and Dan.¹⁵ Perish the thought – nothing could have been further from their minds. Their altar would never feel the heat of a flame, or bear the weight of a sacrificial victim. Indeed, as we read, later they were absolutely horrified at the very idea ... as witness their repeated and emphatic denials – four times (in verses. 23, 26, 28, and 29), they insist, ‘not for burnt offering or sacrifice’.¹⁶ Far

from being a rival altar – it would simply be a memorial altar, to serve as a symbol of the unity of the nation – acting, metaphorically, as a bridge over the Jordan.

The altar would be – and was – therefore deliberately built where it was, clearly visible to the tribes on the other side of Jordan,¹⁷ and was deliberately built on a larger scale than the altar at Shiloh. Why else should far less people want a bigger altar? Obviously they wanted it to be seen from a distance. And if in future some clever soul from the other side said, 'You're nothing do with us', their children had only to respond, 'Come and have a look at this altar then. Where do you think we got this design from?'

But it was not only a *brilliant* idea – it was a highly *commendable* idea – because it was the very first thing they set about doing on their return home. It showed their very real concern both for the future of God's work and for the spiritual well-being of generations to come.

Their priority wasn't to erect some great monument to commemorate their own recent exploits in the forefront of the battle – and what tales they must have had to tell!

Nor was their first priority to enjoy their possessions.¹⁸ In chapter 1, Joshua had promised that, when the Lord had given 'rest' to all the tribes of Israel following the Canaan campaign, the 2½ tribes could 'return' to their possession and 'enjoy it'.¹⁹ And now the Lord had given 'rest' to the whole of Israel – a point made three times from chapter 11 to chapter 22²⁰ – and so they (the 2½ tribes) were entitled, not only to 'return' to their inheritance, but there to 'enjoy' it.²¹

Nor was their first priority to share their spoil with those who had remained at home. Joshua had explicitly spoken of their plunder in terms of 'much riches, very much cattle, silver, gold, bronze, iron, and very much clothing', and told them to divide this with their brethren.²²

Nor was their first priority to celebrate their return to their families with a time of comfort and ease. We need to remember that they had been away from home for no less than seven years. What welcome-home parties await them – as these men remind themselves what their wives looked like – and catch up with how much their children had grown. They had been the first tribes to have their inheritance allotted to them, but they were the last to enjoy it. They had once promised Moses, 'We will not return to our homes until every one of the children of Israel has received his inheritance'.²³ And they had kept their promise.

But now that they had finally made it home, top of the list – their very first priority – was to build this altar. Full marks to them.

But then came their mistake – and it was a *colossal* mistake. They didn't tell anyone else what they had in mind.

True, they were able to report later (in verses 24 and 26) that at the time they had 'said', but this, we note, was only among themselves. They didn't breathe a word to Joshua, to Phinehas or to anyone else from the 9½ tribes about what they were proposing, or the reason for it. And why was this, we may well wonder? Was it too much effort to go back across the Jordan? I think not.

I think it more likely that they found it too embarrassing an issue to raise with their brethren – because their very concern could easily have been interpreted as calling in question the competence of the 9½ tribes – either in terms of the adequacy of the education they would give to their children about the identity of the 2½ tribes, or in terms of their children's own spiritual understanding and grasp of this – that the children of the 9½ tribes might disown the descendants of the 2½ tribes. The Bible doesn't actually say so, but if that was the reason, I can well understand their feelings; it was a delicate matter to raise. But their failure to come out into the open and to discuss it was highly dangerous, and proved almost totally disastrous. They were taking an action, which, if they cared to think about it, was – to say the least – open to easy misunderstanding.

Well, the man who first spied the altar scurried off to Shiloh, where the news was received with great consternation ... boom! ... according to verse 12, 'the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together ... to go up to war against them'. In one way, this was commendable zeal for God's honour and the purity of His worship, coming as it did from the children of those who had once worshipped the molten calf. Israel had come a long way since then – and at least they were prepared to address the problem – they didn't ignore it as of no importance or attempt to sweep it under the carpet. They cared sufficiently about the future of the testimony that they were willing to risk their lives in battle – and it would have been some bloodbath – and that after only recently concluding the seven-year Canaan campaign.

The problem was that, without realising it, they had jumped to a conclusion.

But then to them everything seemed so cut and dried. What could an altar be for if not for a centre for worship? Obviously the 2½ tribes weren't planning to invite them to a barbeque! From the words of verse 19, 'if the land of

your possession is unclean', it seems that the 9½ tribes assumed that the 2½ tribes had come to view their inheritance as somehow defiled, and so planned to cleanse and sanctify it by means of sacrifice. But this would be, in effect, rebellion and 'trespass' against the Lord. And that, not only because they – the nation – had been directed by God to cleanse the whole of their inheritance from all forms of pagan worship ... to destroy all the altars of the Canaanites²⁴ ... but because this would be a clear violation of the explicit commandment of God – for, according to both Leviticus 17 and Deuteronomy 12, when the Lord gave them 'rest' from all their enemies 'round about',²⁵ all offering and sacrifice was to be centralised in the one and only acceptable place – in the place which the Lord God chose.²⁶

And now, as Joshua pointed out in verse 4 of our chapter, the Lord had indeed 'given rest' to the 9½ tribes – as previously, according to chapter 1, He had given to them – to the 2½ tribes.²⁷ It followed that they – the people – were therefore now to offer no sacrifices other than at the central sanctuary²⁸ – at this time, the tabernacle located at Shiloh.²⁹

It therefore seemed clear to the 9½ tribes that either the 2½ tribes had forsaken the Lord for another God, or that they were introducing division and schism into the worship and service of the true God.³⁰ Either way, to set up a rival worship centre was a blatant act of apostasy. The 9½ tribes knew their Bibles, and they were determined to be loyal to the word of God. But, without realising it, the 9½ tribes were reading a lot into the little that they knew.

Spiritual wisdom would have dictated a very different procedure. The first step should have been to establish the facts – to check out the rumour. For the Spirit of God emphasises that at this stage all was based on hearsay – they 'heard it said', as verse 11 reads literally. Yes, in this case, the rumour happened to be true. But it might easily have not been. And many a brother or sister's reputation has been smeared and tarnished in our day by false or exaggerated reports.

The second step should have been to pray. According to verse 12, the congregation of Israel met at Shiloh, where the tabernacle ('the tent of meeting') was situated. And verse 13 stresses that Phinehas was the son of Eleazar. That is, that he was the son of the then High Priest, who enjoyed the facility of the ephod, with its Urim and Thummim, by which he was able to discern the will of God for the people. Indeed, according to Numbers 27, Moses had said of Joshua, 'he shall stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall ask counsel for him after the judgment of Urim before the Lord'.³¹ You would have thought therefore that the 9½ tribes would have availed themselves of the golden opportunity that this gave them.

Surely, they should have learned from the bruising they had received back in chapter 9 in connection with the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites were those Canaanites who had fooled Joshua and Israel with their dry and mouldy bread, their rent wine bottles, and their old garments and shoes. Appearances had been deceptive and Israel had burnt their fingers badly, and this, we are told, because they 'asked not counsel (they enquired not) at the mouth of the Lord'.³² In chapter 9, they had spared those whom they ought not; now they came perilously close to annihilating those whom they ought not.

The third step should have been to seek an explanation, and then – and only then – take the fourth step – to decide on an appropriate course of action and discipline.

But, oh no – not Israel! To them, everything was so straightforward. Their knee-jerk reaction was to issue a call to arms.³³ In next to no time, the combined forces of the 9½ tribes were poised to attack and destroy the 2½ tribes, and, according to verse 33, to devastate their land. You can almost hear them ... 'If they are going to worship and sacrifice like Canaanites, they can jolly well perish like Canaanites!'³⁴

You would have thought that they would have recalled their brethren's past companionship and fellowship ... that they would have taken account of the way in which all twelve tribes had stood shoulder to shoulder against a common foe until only a short time before ... that they would have reminded themselves that for seven years the 2½ tribes had, as verse 3 says, 'kept all the commandments' of Moses, Joshua and the Lord. The way in which the 2½ tribes had earlier risked their lives in God's service should have alerted the 9½ tribes to the fact that there was probably more to this than met the eye.³⁵

It was simply incredible just how fast the perilous situation developed. One moment the 2½ tribes returned home showered with compliments and praise ... the next they faced the threat of annihilation at the hand of Israel's formidable war machine.

Thankfully, the 9½ tribes resolve to wipe out their brethren was followed by a moment's calm reflection. Deuteronomy 13 envisaged a very similar situation (albeit that of a city) – 'if you hear say that children of Belial (worthless, corrupt individuals) have drawn away the inhabitants of the city, saying, let us go and serve other gods, ... then you shall enquire, and make search, and ask diligently, and if it is indeed true and certain ...' – then you hit them!

The first step therefore should have been to conduct a careful investigation to establish if the story was true. It is a great pity that the 9½ tribes had not launched an investigation sooner than they did. They would have saved themselves a lot of trouble and embarrassment. But better late than never! And I note that they stood united in their proposed disciplinary action. Each tribe was represented by a man who, according to verse 14, commanded respect and in whom they had confidence. These were men who, according to verse 16, were able therefore to speak for 'the whole congregation of the Lord'. And I note that the 'ten princes' of verse 14 included a prince from the half tribe of Manasseh! The 9½ tribes weren't going to let family ties and connections influence or interfere with their judgement.

Yet even now the delegation weren't going to find out whether their suspicions were correct – they weren't going to seek explanations. They took it for granted that they were in the right. They were going to sort their brethren out – to persuade them to mend their ways ... or else! Although I suppose we need to give them the credit at least for trying – albeit at the last moment – to conquer their brethren by words rather than by swords.

But, speaking of words, we can hardly miss the 'charming' way the men on the delegation expressed themselves in verses 16-19 – revealing their terribly smug and arrogant attitude. Their opening words, spoken in the name of the 'whole congregation of the Lord' – 'What trespass is this ...' – set the tone for all that followed. These were strong words indeed. And, in the space of just four verses, the delegation managed to accuse their brethren of 'trespass' (of treachery, of breaking faith) once; of 'turning away from following the Lord' twice; and of 'rebellion' no less than four times. They charge them with wickedness to be classed with 'Peor', with, that is, the Ba'al worship and its associated orgies instigated 'through the counsel of Balaam' in Numbers 25.³⁶

It is, I guess, not surprising that they referred to this particular incident. Firstly, Beth-Peor was in Moab, now in the possession of the 2½ tribes. Secondly, Phinehas, the head of the delegation, had then distinguished himself as the great defender of the faith – whose holy zeal had saved the whole nation from God's judgement – the man of whom the Lord Himself said that he 'turned back my wrath from the children Israel, because he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so I did not consume the children of Israel ...'.³⁷ It was not surprising therefore that Phinehas, as the spokesman, should refer back to the occasion. And I can't help wondering if the good man now carried a spear with him – ready to deal with the ringleader if he could identify him, just as he had done at Peor.³⁸

Thirdly, the Ba'al Peor incident was relatively recent – having come at the end of the wilderness wandering, just prior to the seven-year Canaan campaign – and was therefore still very much alive in the memory of Israel.

And fourthly, it was not only the last spiritual departure before Israel entered the land ... it was one of the vilest incidents ever to stain their history – meriting mention by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10 – 'neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed'³⁹ – when 23,000 died in one day⁴⁰ and 24,000 died in all.⁴¹

Separately, on the basis of their experience with Achan at the beginning of the conquest of Canaan, the 9½ tribes were terrified that the whole nation would suffer as a result of the sin of the 2½ tribes – for, as they pointed out in verse 20, he (Achan) did 'not perish alone in his iniquity'. They therefore spoke in verse 19 in terms of the 2½ tribes rebelling 'against us' as well as against the Lord.

It hardly needs to be said that such words were not calculated to endear them to the 2½ tribes – that such words were not likely to make for a speedy reconciliation and for peace. The delegation accused their brethren of treachery ... of rebellion ... of turning away from the Lord – of just about every sin in the book.⁴²

Yet there was one redeeming feature in their message. This was heralded by the 'notwithstanding' – the 'nevertheless', the 'but' – of verse 19. In spite of the atrocious sin which they then believed their brethren had committed, they made what amounted to an extremely generous and self-denying offer. They told the 2½ tribes that they were welcome to come back across the Jordan – that they, the 9½ tribes, were willing each to move over a bit to make room for them – meaning, of course, less territory for themselves. And yet chapters 13 to 21 had been devoted to the account of how they had carved up and apportioned the land.⁴³

And that dividing of the land had not proved at all easy. As it was, in chapter 17 the tribes of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh) had complained that they did not have enough space, because they – a 'great people' as they saw themselves – had been given only one lot and portion as their inheritance.⁴⁴ Not that they got much sympathy from Joshua, even though he himself was from the tribe of Ephraim. 'If you are a great people', he responded, 'then get up to the forest' and clear ground there – where the giants were – and also drive out the Canaanites with their iron chariots in the valley. In effect, he told them to stop moaning and to get on with it.

Yet now the 9½ stood ready to rip up all their maps and plans if it proved necessary – to put everything back in the melting pot and to start again. They were prepared to fall over backwards, as it were, to avoid any trouble and conflict. They cared so much about their future as God's people that they were prepared to forfeit their own possessions if that would help.

By the time we reach verse 20, the situation was explosive. Remember that it had all been one huge misunderstanding. Just imagine for a moment that we had been in the sandals of the 2½ tribes. A group of our brethren, for whom we have previously done a great deal (indeed for whom we have even risked our lives) ... a group of our brethren suddenly storm in, and without so much as a 'by-your-leave', charge us with a catalogue of serious offences of which we are entirely innocent. How would we react? How did the 2½? It was desperately important that they kept calm. One unwise, one hasty word would have sparked off a civil war which would have made the battle with the tribe of Benjamin at the end of the book of Judges seem like a tea party.

And it is positively thrilling to note the calm and composed way in which the 2½ received the charges. They did not interrupt their brethren's lecture – even though it was no less painfully repetitive than it was simply outrageous.

When many of us would have been sorely tempted to file a lawsuit for slander, they listened patiently.⁴⁵ And, when they were finally permitted to speak – when they were able to get a word in – they didn't take their brethren to task for their lack of confidence in them – they didn't tell them to mind their own business and get back across Jordan – there was no trace of the 'Who made you rulers and judges over us?' attitude.⁴⁶

Yet they were clearly appalled at the charges levelled against them,⁴⁷ and were in dead earnest – as witness the repeated 'the Lord is God of Gods'⁴⁸ of verse 22. And in just two sentences in verses 22 and 23, the 2½ tribes rebut all three charges – that of 'trespass' (the word translated 'transgression' in the King James Version of verse 22 being the same as that rendered 'trespass' in verse 16), that of rebellion, and that of 'turning away'.

They point out that their only motive and intention had been to avoid – to guard against – the very division they were now accused of causing!⁴⁹ As the Greek Old Testament expresses it, 'We have done this as a precaution against this very thing'. Clearly, all twelve tribes feared the very same thing; namely, any form of division among the people of God. And the 2½ tribes conclude in verse 29 with an expression of horror at the very thought of rebelling against the Lord.⁵⁰

As a result of their courteous attitude and detailed explanation, in the event, everything was sorted out amicably and peacefully. Initially the delegation in verse 30, and subsequently the whole 9½ tribes in verse 33, were fully satisfied that everything was alright after all – 'the thing pleased them' – 'it was good in their eyes', literally.⁵¹

And so the chapter ends with Israel's *God* blessed and Israel's *swords* sheathed.⁵² A disastrous feud had been averted. Israel had pulled back from the brink of disaster – but it had been a *very* close shave!

So much for history! But we have it on good authority that 'these things happened to them for ensamples (for types), and were written for our admonition (for our instruction)'.⁵³ What then are the key lessons we need to learn from our passage?⁵⁴

First, on the plus side ...

From the initial actions of the 2½ tribes:⁵⁵

- That their concern lay with the spiritual well-being of future generations – the desire to see them fear and serve the Lord.
- That their desire was to maintain and preserve the unity of God's people.
- That their first priority was spiritual – not building any memorial for themselves or seeking the comfort and enjoyment of their homes. The Lord came first.

And ...

From the initial actions of the 9½ tribes:

- That they showed a great concern for the purity of the worship of the people of God.⁵⁶ These men knew their Bibles and were determined to be loyal to the word of God.
- That they refused to ignore the problem – that they were determined to deal with the matter.
- That they were united in their planned discipline – that they were not willing to let family ties or connections influence their actions.
- That they were willing to suffer considerable personal loss – they were willing to forego their own possessions if that would help further the interests of the people of God.

But then there were undoubtedly faults on both sides. We learn:

From the faults of the 2½ tribes:

- That serious problems can arise from a breakdown in communication ... that serious problems can arise from the failure to inform others what one has in mind when embarking on something new and different.⁵⁷

And ...

From the faults of the 9½ tribes:

- That they were ready to act on mere hearsay.
- That they were quick in jumping to conclusions.⁵⁸
- That too easily they forgot the past loyalty and faithful service of their brethren. Seemingly, the fact that they had stood shoulder to shoulder against a common foe for many years now counted for next to nothing!
- That they spoke in a harsh and smug manner – there was none of ‘the spirit of meekness’ here, of which Paul wrote in Galatians 6: ‘Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of meekness, considering yourself, lest you also be tempted’.⁵⁹

But the end of the episode reflected credit on both sides.

From what the 2½ tribes did to redeem the situation, we learn :

- Something of their self-control – not losing their temper or reacting in anger.
- Their willingness to hear out what the other party had to say, and then to patiently explain the real position and their true motives for doing what they had.

And ...

From what the 9½ tribes did to redeem the situation, we learn :

- Of their willingness to admit their mistake, and not to attempt to justify either themselves or their actions.

Since the days of Joshua, an incredible – and terrifying – amount of trouble, division and misery has been caused by ‘misunderstandings’, by the failure to consider others and to consult with them, and by jumping to hasty conclusions.

This evening, we must leave the last word with the apostle Paul: ‘With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace’.⁶⁰

Footnotes

¹ Hear an audio sermon at http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=2024. [Maureen and Graham.]

² Num. 21.14.

³ Moses' agreement with the two-and-a-half tribes' request to stay east of the Jordan was a concession.

⁴ Josh. 1. 16.

⁵ Josh. 4. 12-13.

⁶ Josh. 1. 1-6.

⁷ Josh. 1. 9.

⁸ The NKJV renders the end of Joshua 22. 11 'on the children of Israel's side'. But JND gives 'built an altar over against the land of Canaan, in the districts of the Jordan, separately from the children of Israel'. Brenton renders the Septuagint 'on the opposite side to the children of Israel'. The Hebrew text can be translated, 'over against the land of Canaan ...near the border/coast of the children of Israel'. Keil/Delitzsch comment, 'The Israelites (on this side) heard that the tribes in question had built the altar "opposite to the land of Canaan" (lit. in the face or in front of the land of Canaan), "at the opposite region of the children of Israel" (two descriptions which may be explained on the supposition that the name of Canaan is used in a restricted sense, the valley of the Jordan being expressly excepted, and Canaan considered as only extending to the valley of the Jordan)'. And Gill comments, 'the altar was built on their side [that of the 2 ½ tribes], or those in the land of Canaan would have known of the building of it, and have seen them at it, and not come at the knowledge of it by hearsay only ... "built an altar over against the land of Canaan" ... clearly shows it was on the other side Jordan ... "at the passage of the children of Israel"; where they passed over when they first came into Canaan, and where those tribes also passed over at their return'.

Josephus says, 'Now when the tribe of Reuben, and that of Gad, and as many of the Manassites as followed them, were passed over the river, they built an altar on the banks of Jordan, as a monument to posterity, and a sign of their relation to those that should inhabit on the other side. But when those on the other side heard that those who had been dismissed had built an altar ...', Antiquities of the Jews, Book 5, Chapter 1, Paragraph 26.

It is probably best to render 'built an altar over against the land of Canaan, near the region of Jordan, near the region of the children of Israel.

⁹ This is a section of 'the Rift Valley that stretches from the Sea of Galilee down to the southern tip of the Dead Sea', NIDOTTE, article 'Arabah', vol. 4, pages 406-407.

¹⁰ Josh. 22. 24-25.

¹¹ When the Reubenites, &c., had proffered their request to be permitted to dwell on the east of the river, they had not perceived this possible difficulty so clearly.

¹² Deut. 16. 16.

¹³ Josh. 4. 19-24.

¹⁴ From 1399 BC to 931 BC.

¹⁵ 1 Kings 12. 28, 29.

¹⁶ An altar of witness was erected. This was not for sacrifice and worship, to rival that of the tabernacle, like the altars attached to the calves at Bethel and Dan (1 Kings xii. 28, 29).

¹⁷ Josh. 22. 11.

¹⁸ They had previously built sheepfolds and fortified towns – to shelter their children from the inhabitants of the land, Numb. 32. 16,17, 24.

¹⁹ Josh. 1. 15.

²⁰ Josh. 11. 23; 21. 44; 22. 4.

²¹ Josh. 1. 15.

²² Josh. 1. 8.

²³ Num. 32. 18.

²⁴ Deut. 12. 1-3.

²⁵ Deut. 12. 9-10.

²⁶ Lev. 17. 1-9; Deut. 12. 1-28.

²⁷ Josh. 1. 15. See too especially, 'And the Lord gave them rest *round about*, according to all that He swore to their fathers', Josh. 21. 44.

²⁸ See W L Alexander's note in the Pulpit Commentary on Deuteronomy, pages xxx and xxxi:

'The central sanctuary was where God chose to put his Name, and where' was his habitation (ch. xii. 6, 21), and this was where the ark of the covenant was. There it was that God had engaged to meet his people, and there it was that his Name was put (Exod. xxv. 22 ; 2 Sam. vi, 2). Now, during the whole of Samuel's time and part of that of David, the ark was in abeyance, nor was there any sanctuary in which it was placed. After the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh, the ark was for a season a captive in the land of the Philistines, and when at length it was restored, it was only to find temporary accommodation in private houses and un-consecrated courts, until it was brought up by David to Jerusalem. During all this time, therefore, there was no central sanctuary to which the worshipper could bring his offering, and consequently no one place more legitimately appropriate for this act of worship than another. The alternative before the men of that time was thus, either to omit the offering of sacrifice altogether or to offer it at such places as were most convenient and suitable for such a service. They chose the latter; and in so doing they obeyed the earlier and more general law (Exod. xx. 24), while they neglected the later and more special one—not because they were ignorant of the latter, but because they had not the means of

obeying it (comp. 1 Kings iii. 2). It is to be noted that the law in Deuteronomy appointing the one place for sacrificial worship is not absolute and unconditioned. It is expressly qualified by the condition of the Lord's giving them rest from all their enemies round about (ch. xii. 10). Until this was done, then, the law was in abeyance ; so that, if circumstances required, other methods than that which it prescribed of observing the primary and absolutely imperative ordinance of sacrifice might be followed. We find, accordingly, that it was only as it was considered that the Lord had given them rest from their enemies that it was deemed fitting to fix upon a certain place to which the people might repair as to the dwelling-place of Jehovah, to present their worship and offerings. Thus, after the occupation of the land by the Israelites, it was not until the land was subdued before them, and the Lord had given them rest round about, that the congregation of the children of Israel assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there (Josh, xviii. 1 ; xxi. 44 ; xxii. 4). The rest, however, which was then given to them was not destined to be permanent. Times of unsettlement ensued, and at length the sanctuary at Shiloh was averted and the ark of the covenant carried away by hostile invaders ; nor was it till the time of David that it could be said definitively that the Lord had given rest to his people from all their enemies, as he had promised. Then at length the occasion had arrived when a house might be built for the Lord to dwell in; and David, recognizing this, determined, seeing " the Lord had given him rest round about from all his enemies," to build a house unto the Name of the Lord ; and though he was not permitted to carry this into effect, because of the wars in which he had been engaged in the earlier part of his reign, his purpose was approved of by God (2 Sam. vii. 1 ; 1 Kings viii. 18)'.²⁹

²⁹ Josh. 18. 1; 19. 51; 22. 9.

³⁰ On the contrary, it was intended to prevent those very evils. (1) It was erected to preserve the unity of the nation.

³¹ Num. 27. 19.

³² Josh. 9. 14.

³³ Josh. 22. 12.

³⁴ Even the size of the altar should have caused the 9½ tribes to pause and to think. Why should less people want a bigger altar? Surely the only likely motive was that they wanted it to be seen from a distance. Unless therefore the 2½ tribes were being deliberately provocative, the large dimensions of the altar needed some explanation.

³⁵ And I would plead that, if you ever come across a case where someone does something of which you disapprove, but which you know is entirely out of character. you hold fire on forming any quick judgement. There may well be factors of which you know nothing.

³⁶ Num. 25. 1-18, 31. 16. They were accused by Phinehas of a sin like that at Peor – which led to God's 'anger', v. 18. This may have rung a bell in that the 2½ tribes had earlier been accused by Moses of discouraging the people just as had the 10 spies, when the Lord's 'anger' had been directed against Israel, Numb. 32. 6-15.

³⁷ Num. 25. 11. Compare Paul's, 'Oh, that you would bear with me in a little folly ... For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ', 2 Cor. 11. 2 (Greek as LXX).

³⁸ Num. 25. 7-9 (Zimri).

³⁹ 1 Cor. 10. 8.

⁴⁰ 1 Cor. 10. 8.

⁴¹ Num. 25. 9.

⁴² If the suspected tribes were rash in raising the altar without having first consulted the heads of the nation, and especially the high priest from whom the will of God was to be known, and without duly considering the aspect it might bear to their brethren on the other side of the river, yet they themselves were also wronged by this too hasty judgment on the meaning and motive of their deed.

⁴³ That is, the earlier chapters record, not a case of 'divide and conquer' but of 'conquer and divide'!

⁴⁴ Josh. 17. 14-17.

⁴⁵ They met it with no angry recrimination.

⁴⁶ See Acts 7. 27.

⁴⁷ No words can suffice to express the horror of the two and a half tribes at the sin of which they have been supposed guilty.

⁴⁸ 'Jehovah, El, Elohim'.

⁴⁹ 'In their effort to promote unity, they had almost occasioned a fatal schism', Blaikie, Expositor's Bible, page 375. "The very thing you thought we were doing is the very thing that we're trying to avoid."

⁵⁰ 'The Lord Himself require it' ... NIDOTTE, vol. 1, p. 723, asserts that this usage of the verb means "investigate" in a legal sense. This repetition of God's name is meant to show the solemnity of their oath. "Far be it from us" This is an emphatic exclamation (cf. 24:16; Gen. 44:7; 1 Sam. 2:30; 14:45; 20:2,9; 22:15).

⁵¹ And I note the words of Phinehas in verse 31, 'Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the Lord'. Did the good man have in mind, I wonder, what God had said of him back in Numbers 25, 'Phinehas ... has turned my wrath away from the children of Israel ... so that I consumed not the children of Israel'?, Num. 25. 11.

⁵² Josh. 22. 33.

⁵³ 1 Cor. 10. 11.

⁵⁴ Bitter contention often arises from simple misunderstanding. The Israelites were on the verge of a civil war as a result of a simple mistake of judgment. Much unhappiness might be avoided if the lessons of this incident were well considered by Christian people.

⁵⁵ Consider the incident in relation to the 2½ tribes

⁵⁶ Zeal for God's honour is always commendable. The indignation of the western tribes exhibited in a striking manner their jealousy for the Lord God.

⁵⁷ Do we ever stop to ask ourselves, 'If I do this or that, what are others likely to make of it?' We should be careful to avoid the appearance of evil. These tribes had voluntarily chosen a position of isolation. They were now acting in a way which exposed their conduct to suspicion.

⁵⁸ Love should incline us to view the conduct of others in the best light (1 Cor. xiii. 7).

⁵⁹ Gal. 6.1.

⁶⁰ Eph. 4. 2-3. As a matter of the utmost urgency, he says, v. 3, they – and we – are to be eager – to bend every effort (as the word means) – to preserve that unity *already formed by the Holy Spirit* – in whom both Jews and gentiles have common access to the Father, 2. 18, and in whom they are being built together for a dwelling-place for God, 2. 22. *The Spirit's work* had made them one – but it was *their business* to keep and preserve it in practice. And the *means* of maintaining this unity of the Spirit is, Paul says, the bond – that which holds things together – of 'peace' – the bond which consists of peace, that is – the peace of which he had spoken in chapter 2 – the peace made by the Lord Jesus between believing Jews and gentiles, vv. 13-17. The practical point for us is that, *if the greatest dividing factor* between Christians has been removed – and it has – there is absolutely no excuse for us allowing *other factors* – such as the colour of a person's skin or somebody's social or educational background – to mar and disrupt our fellowship and unity as Christians.