

• *The two and a half tribes return to the east of Jordan*

1. *The people of God spread out to fill the land*

• *One firm requirement - continued obedience*

• *The time to separate*

• *Christians – a single family – spread out*

2. *The people of God stayed together in faith*

• *An apparent problem that needed investigating*

• *Phineas' strong protest*

• *When there is something we don't understand – love believes – un-love is sceptical*

It was now time to release the two and a half tribes that had been promised territory to the east of Jordan. Moses and Joshua had agreed they could have that territory on the understanding that they would first cross Jordan into Canaan and help their brother-Israelites before returning to the territory they desired ¹.

1. **The people of God spread out to fill the land.** The tribe of Reuben, the tribe of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh are summoned by Joshua ¹, commended for their obedience and loyalty ² and allowed to go to the land they had chosen years before ³. One requirement is firmly laid upon them: they must continue in obedience to Yahweh, the God of Israel ⁴. Joshua prays for God's blessing upon them and wishes them well ⁵. Manasseh has land on both sides of the river ⁶. Joshua gives them all a good share of the rewards of battle which had been taken from conquered territory ⁷ and they leave ⁸.

It must have been a moving experience. For forty years they had lived side-by-side in the wilderness. For about seven years they had been colleagues together in conquering Canaan. Now the time had come for them to separate into different parts of the land of Canaan.

We Christians, God's Israel, are still a single family, spread out to become a distinct people. We are not always in touch with each other but we belong together and have a common history.

2. **The people of God stayed together in faith.** The two and a half tribes built an altar at Geliloth ¹. When the tribes west of the Jordan heard about it they were alarmed. It seemed as if the Transjordanians had turned to other gods. The law demanded **one** central sanctuary and that was at Shiloh. Idolatry could not be allowed and the western tribes were ready to go to war to prevent any such thing happening ². But first they sent Phineas, grandson of Aaron, and ten tribal representatives to find out what was happening ³.

Phineas protested strongly at what had happened ¹. The sin at Peor years before had had long-lasting effects ². Were they going to commit a similar kind of rebellion ³? If so, God's wrath might fall again as it did in the days of the sin of Peor.

Perhaps – thinks Phineas – they had built an altar to **cleanse** the land ¹. Perhaps they felt Shiloh was too far away to come their for worship. In that case they should come and live in the area west of Jordan ². Another example of disobedience was Achan. Will they not consider what happened when he was disloyal to God's orders ³?

Suspicion comes when people are not intimately in touch with each other's minds and characters. When we see a brother or sister doing something which we do not understand we are very prone to invent our own reasons for what we observe. Our 'guesses' about what is going on in the other person's life are often wrong. Sometimes there is **integrity** in the other person, and we are quite wrong to be suspicious. Isaac imagined Abimelech would have murderous plans towards him – but he was wrong ¹! Eli imagined Hannah was drunk – but he was wrong ²! Love believes all things. Un-love is sceptical of all things.

¹ See 1:12-18

¹ 22:1
² 22:2-3
³ 22:4
⁴ 22:5
⁵ 22:6

⁶ 22:7a
⁷ 20:7b-8
⁸ 22:9

¹ 22:10

² 22:11-12

³ 20:13-14

¹ 22:15-16
² 22:17
³ 22:18

¹ 22:19

² 22:19
³ 20:20

¹ Genesis 26
² 1 Samuel 1

• **Two different ways of looking at things**

The misunderstanding arose out of a slightly different way of looking at things. Both sides knew that there should be only one central sanctuary in Israel and that the tribes should all go there three times a year. But the two sides – east and west of Jordan – had slightly different ideas about what this meant. For the westerners it meant that no altar should be built anywhere for the daily sacrificial worship of Israel except at Shiloh. The easterners agreed with this but they had thought it a good idea to build a replica of the altar at Shiloh to remind the eastern tribes of their connection with Shiloh. They both had an agreed outlook on the uniqueness of Yahweh and the sinfulness of idolatry, but they expressed their sense of Yahweh’s uniqueness in slightly different ways.

• **Agreement on Yahweh’s uniqueness expressed in slightly different ways**

True Christians are generally agreed about their faith. They agree that there is one Messiah, and that Jesus is the Divine ‘Lord’, the one and only Saviour who alone is to be worshipped and who alone gives salvation. Yet there may be differences of opinion in many minor matters.

• **Christians may hold different opinions on minor matters**

The western tribes act with wisdom despite their misunderstanding the easterners. They are willing to face the problem. They are not willing just to let the two and a half tribes do what they like. They send good men to protest at what seems to be a betrayal of loyalty to God. They do not slander or criticize their brothers but take the trouble to find out what the facts are.

• **Wisdom – taking the trouble to find out**

The Transjordanian tribes reply. They have been misunderstood. They profess their faith in Yahweh ^{☞1}. They did not intend to set up a rival sanctuary ^{☞2}. They feared that later generations might forget their connection with the western tribes. The altar was intended as a witness to their loyalty to Yahweh and a mark of loyalty to the similar altar at Shiloh ^{☞3}. It was certainly not intended as a rival sanctuary ^{☞4}.

• **The Transjordanian tribes explain**

Phineas and his men are pleased with the answer, and are relieved to know that there is no need to fear that God’s judgement is threatening them as it had on earlier occasions of idolatry ^{☞1}. They go back to report to the western tribes ^{☞2}. Everyone is happy ^{☞3}. Like other altars which have a short sentence as a name, they call it: ‘*Surely it is a witness between us that Yahweh is God*’. Despite their misunderstanding they were all loyal to Yahweh.

• **All loyal to Yahweh – misunderstanding cleared up**

☞1 22:21-22
☞2 22:23

☞3 22:24-28
☞4 22:29

☞1 22:30-31
☞2 22:32
☞3 22:33



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Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His *Preaching Through The Bible* (PTTB) books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.



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