

The Treaty with the Gibeonites

Joshua 9:3 But when the inhabitants of Gibeon heard what Joshua had done to Jericho and Ai, :4 they worked craftily, and went and pretended to be ambassadors. And they took old sacks on their donkeys, old wineskins torn and mended, :5 old and patched sandals on their feet, and old garments on themselves; and all the bread of their provision was dry and moldy. :6 And they went to Joshua, to the camp at Gilgal, and said to him and to the men of Israel, “We have come from a far country; now therefore, make a covenant with us.”

The Hivite inhabitants of one town of Canaan, Gibeon, declined to join the Canaanite league against Israel in preference for a mutual defense treaty with Israel. But Deuteronomy 7:1–2 and 20:10–15 clearly did not permit Israel to make treaties with the seven Canaanite nations living in proximity to them.

Israel was the recipient of a crafty plan to deceive her. Worn-out bags of sackcloth were placed on the backs of donkeys; worn-out and torn wineskins were presented; worn-out shoes (lit., things tied on; i.e., sandals) which were clouted (i.e., patched) and old garments were worn; and bread that was dry and moldy (lit., marked with points, i.e., mildewed) was taken as provision. All of this was done to convince Joshua and the Israelites that they had come from a far country, that it would be permissible for Israel to enter into a league with them.

Joshua 9:7 Then the men of Israel said to the Hivites, “Perhaps you dwell among us; so how can we make a covenant with you?” :8 But they said to Joshua, “We are your servants.” And Joshua said to them, “Who are you, and where do you come from?” :9 So they said to him: “From a very far country your servants have come, because of the name of the Lord your God; for we have heard of His fame, and all that He did in Egypt, :10 and all that He did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan—to Sihon king of Heshbon, and Og king of Bashan, who was at Ashtaroth.

When questioned as to the possibility that the Gibeonites dwelt near Israel, they answered Joshua saying, We are thy servants. This phrase was a common one in the east as a token of respect. They were not asking to become the slaves of Israel, but for Israel to enter a mutual pact with them.

To convince Joshua of their interest and desperate need to make a league with Israel, the Gibeonites said, From a very far country thy servants are come because of the name of the Lord thy God. They heard what God did for Israel in Egypt and to the two kings of the Amorites beyond the Jordan, Sihon and Og. Ashtaroth has been identified with the Assyrian Ishtar and appears as Astaratu in the Karnak list of cities captured by Thutmose III. It is last mentioned in Jewish history as having been conquered by Judas Maccabaeus (I Macc VI).

Joshua 9:11 Therefore our elders and all the inhabitants of our country spoke to us, saying, ‘Take provisions with you for the journey, and go to meet them, and say to them, “We are your servants; now therefore, make a covenant with us.” ’ :12 This bread of ours we took hot for our provision from our houses on the day we departed to come to you. But now look, it is dry and moldy. :13 And these wineskins which we filled were new, and see, they are torn; and these our garments and our sandals have become old because of the very long journey.”

The deception worked well. The Gibeonites claimed that their elders had instructed them to make a league with Israel and that they had taken bread hot from the oven on the day they left. It was now dry and moldy. Also, they said their bottles of wine (lit., “skins of wine,” glass bottles were not known at this age) were filled at the beginning of their journey, but were now worn and useless. Everything contributed to a convincing story.

Joshua 9:14 Then the men of Israel took some of their provisions; but they did not ask counsel of the Lord. :15 So Joshua made peace with them, and made a covenant with them to let them live; and the rulers of the congregation swore to them.

Joshua made peace with the Gibeonites on the basis of circumstantial evidence. Even in those things which are most obvious it is not wise to implicitly trust our own judgment. What are your thoughts on this?

Joshua and the congregation had been deceived; and the notation, and asked not counsel at the mouth of the Lord, all too graphically explains why they fell into this error.

Joshua 9:16 And it happened at the end of three days, after they had made a covenant with them, that they heard that they were their neighbors who dwelt near them.

Joshua 9:17 Then the children of Israel journeyed and came to their cities on the third day. Now their cities were Gibeon, Chephirah, Beeroth, and Kirjath Jearim. :18 But the children of Israel did not attack them, because the rulers of the congregation had sworn to them by the Lord God of Israel. And all the congregation complained against the rulers. :19 Then all the rulers said to all the congregation, “We have sworn to them by the Lord God of Israel; now therefore, we may not touch them.

Joshua 9:20 This we will do to them: We will let them live, lest wrath be upon us because of the oath which we swore to them.” :21 And the rulers said to them, “Let them live, but let them be woodcutters and water carriers for all the congregation, as the rulers had promised them.”

Although many contend that this oath was obtained by fraud and thus the Israelites could declare it ab initio, null and void, Israel chose not to break the league; for “the violation of an oath is a sin of the first magnitude, for it is a breach of the third commandment, a taking of God’s name in vain, which He will not hold guiltless.

As Leviticus 19:12 informs us, to commit perjury in the name of God is an act of profanity. From such awful considerations it follows that an oath is to be feared (Eccl 9:2), and that once made it is binding (Num 30:3), a solemn example of which is seen in the case of Jephthah (Jud 11:29–31)” (Pink, p. 256).

Joshua 9:22 Then Joshua called for them, and he spoke to them, saying, “Why have you deceived us, saying, ‘We are very far from you,’ when you dwell near us?”

Joshua 9:23 Now therefore, you are cursed, and none of you shall be freed from being slaves—woodcutters and water carriers for the house of my God.” What are your thoughts?

Joshua 9:24 So they answered Joshua and said, “Because your servants were clearly told that the Lord your God commanded His servant Moses to give you all the land, and to destroy all the inhabitants of the land from before you; therefore we were very much afraid for our lives because of you, and have done this thing. :25 And now, here we are, in your hands; do with us as it seems good and right to do to us.”

Joshua 9:26 So he did to them, and delivered them out of the hand of the children of Israel, so that they did not kill them. :27 And that day Joshua made them woodcutters and water carriers for the congregation and for the altar of the Lord, in the place which He would choose, even to this day.

Joshua Commands the Sun to Stand Still

Joshua 10:1 Now it came to pass when Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem heard how Joshua had taken Ai and had utterly destroyed it—as he had done to Jericho and its king, so he had done to Ai and its king—and how the inhabitants of Gibeon had made peace with Israel and were among them, :2 that they feared greatly, because Gibeon was a great city, like one of the royal cities, and because it was greater than Ai, and all its men were mighty.

Adonizedek, king of Jerusalem, upon hearing of the destruction of Ai and Jericho, and the recently instituted peace between Gibeon and Israel, viewed the Gibeonite league as a dangerous trend in southern Canaan. He discerned that opposition against the Israelites was wearing down when such a great city as Gibeon, a royal City, one that was greater than Ai, established a league with Israel. Something had to be done.

Joshua 10:3 Therefore Adoni-Zedek king of Jerusalem sent to Hoham king of Hebron, Piram king of Jarmuth, Japhia king of Lachish, and Debir king of Eglon, saying, :4 “Come up to me and help me, that we may attack Gibeon, for it has made peace with Joshua and with the children of Israel.” :5 Therefore the five kings of the Amorites, the king of Jerusalem, the king of Hebron, the king of Jarmuth, the king of Lachish, and the king of Eglon, gathered together and went up, they and all their armies, and camped before Gibeon and made war against it.

The Jerusalemite king summoned other kings whose positions were threatened by Gibeon’s association with Israel.

As we might expect, Adonizedek stood at the head of this Amorite league. Next came Hebron, a city of great importance from a very early period (Gen 23:2; 35:27) and her king Hoham. Piram king of Jarmuth was also summoned. Jarmuth is also mentioned in chapter 15:35 and in Nehemiah 11:29. It has been identified with Yarmuk. Japhia, king of Lachish, a city in the Shephelah or lowlands of Judah, and Debir, king of Eglon, the modern Ajlan, not far from Lachish, were summoned.

Adonizedek does not propose to attack Israel directly, but to attack Gibeon and punish her for her league with Israel. What can we learn from this?

Joshua 10:6 And the men of Gibeon sent to Joshua at the camp at Gilgal, saying, “Do not forsake your servants; come up to us quickly, save us and help us, for all the kings of the Amorites who dwell in the mountains have gathered together against us.”

Joshua 10:7 So Joshua ascended from Gilgal, he and all the people of war with him, and all the mighty men of valor. :8 And the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not fear them, for I have delivered them into your hand; not a man of them shall stand before you.”

Once again Joshua heard those comforting words from the mouth of the Lord, “Do not fear them.” He had heard them before the victory at Jericho and before the successful ambush of Ai. They guaranteed triumph despite the size of the opposition.