

## DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Twenty-Second Week - Wednesday

### THE ALTAR OF THE REUBENITES

*"And when they came to the region of the Jordan which is in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh built an altar there by the Jordan--a great, impressive altar. . . . And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered together at Shiloh to go to war against them. . . . Now when Phinehas the priest and the rulers of the congregation, the heads of the divisions of Israel who were with him, heard the words that the children of Reuben, the children of Gad, and the children of Manasseh spoke, it pleased them. Then Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said . . . 'This day we perceive that Yahweh is among us, because you have not committed this treachery against Yahweh. Now you have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of Yahweh'" (Joshua 22:10, 12, 30-31).*

We have sometimes wondered that no traveler in Palestine has ever thought of looking for the great monumental altar which was erected near the Jordan by the men of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh on their return to their own land. It was a "great altar," very conspicuous from afar, and produced by the united labor of no small army of men. In all probability it was a vast heap or mound of earth and stones intended to endure to future generations. It is by no means unlikely that it is still in existence. That it has not been recognized is probably from its having become overgrown with mold and shrubs so as to be scarcely distinguishable from a natural hillock.

The occasion of the erection of this altar is very remarkable, and in the highest degree honorable to all the parties concerned. It will be remembered that the tribes of Reuben and Gad, with the half tribe of Manasseh, had received their inheritance on the east side of Jordan on the express condition that they would send their warriors to assist their brethren in the conquest of Canaan. They very faithfully and honorably performed this engagement. Now we do not suppose that they were away from the families for the entire time, seven years at least, for that would have been an absurd and needless self-denial. They doubtless went home while the camp lay in winter quarters; and seeing how short the distance between them was, they could go home on leave when particular domestic occasions required their presence. Still, they must have been truly glad when Joshua called for them in order that he might commend their conduct and finally dismiss them to their homes with his blessing

They had not been gone when it was anxiously whispered among the people at Shiloh that these men had no sooner crossed the river to their own country than they had set up a great altar on the cliffs overhanging the eastern border of the Jordan, visible from afar. Although there was no evil intention on their part in building such an altar, nevertheless it left room for much dangerous suspicion on the part of those back on the Canaan side. The Mosaic law had decreed that there should be but one altar--and that being the one at the tabernacle--for all the people. The act of the returning warriors was therefore open to the suspicion that they meant either to adopt another worship or, at the least, set up another and independent place for that worship on their own side of the Jordan.

Beside the obvious tendency this would have of encouraging idolatry, it could not fail to destroy the connection by which the tribes were linked together. If a separate place were allowed to exist, there could be no difficulty in foreseeing that the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, would cease to trouble themselves to visit the tabernacle in Canaan and before long come to regard themselves as a separate people.

This was precisely the view those on the Canaan side took, and seriously and sadly buckling on their weapons they proceeded to Shiloh for orders. Their holy jealousy on this occasion for the glory of God and for the honor of the institutions he had given them is most becoming, and gives us a favorable opinion of the character of this generation. The sequel bears out this impression. The task which lay before them, though clear, was painful. They resolved in the meekness of wisdom not to proceed hastily, for it was just possible that they were mistaken. At all events they would not have it laid to their charge that they had condemned their brethren unheard. They resolved therefore to send a deputation to inquire into the affair and remonstrate with the transjordanian tribes.

Phinehas, the son of the high-priest, and with him ten of the great family chiefs (one from each tribe), were chosen for this important office. They were thus persons of great weight of character and approved discretion, entitled by their high position to demand an explanation. They were less likely than younger men to have their judgments warped or compromised by the hasty impulses of passion. The delegates proceeded on their mission, and on arriving in Gilead stated the grounds of complaint, prefaced by the impressive words, "Thus says the whole congregation of Yahweh."

On hearing how their construction of the altar was misconstrued, the two and a half tribes were overwhelmed with grief and astonishment; and with becoming warmth, amounting to horror, they disclaimed the injurious imputation and declared the views on which they had really acted. They commenced by invoking God himself to witness the innocence of their intentions. The form in which they did this is the most emphatic that language can express, and such as can scarcely be represented in a translation. There are the three principal names of God in Hebrew--El, Elohim, Jehovah--and all three are used together by them and repeated twice: "Yahweh God of gods, Yahweh God of gods, He knows, and let Israel itself know--if it is in rebellion, or if in treachery against Yahweh, do not save us this day."

They proceed to declare that their objective was in all respects the very reverse of that imputed to them. Instead of the altar signifying a separation, they had set it up as a monument to future ages of the connection between the tribes separated by the river. If at any coming time their descendants should attempt to cast off the connection and assert their own independence, or if the Israelites on the Canaan side should hereafter attempt to disown their union and declare that the people beyond the river had "no part in the Lord," this monument might be pointed to in evidence of the fact that such a solidarity did in fact exist. Its presence would invoke questions, and this would produce the history of the circumstances in which it originated and the purpose for which it was established.

We have a remarkable example of this in the case of the stones taken up out of the bed of the Jordan and set up at Gilgal: "That this may be a sign among you when your children ask in time to come, saying 'What do these stones mean to you?' Then you shall answer them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of Yahweh; when it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. And these stones shall be for a memorial to the children of Israel forever" (Joshua 4:6,7).

This altar of Reuben, Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh was almost precisely similar to that, and still more similar to that heap which Jacob and Laban set up as a memorial of the covenant between them. That heap was in fact in this same land of Gilead, probably not far from the altar now set up, the establishment of which may indeed have been suggested by the older monument. This seems to be indicated also by the name they gave to the altar and the terms in which they described it: "There we said, 'Let us now prepare to build ourselves an altar, not for burnt offering nor for sacrifice, but that it may be a *witness* between you and us and our generations after us, that we may perform the service of Yahweh before Him with our burnt offerings, with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your descendants may not say to our descendants in time to come, "You have no part in Yahweh"" (22:26,27). Compare this with the case of Jacob and Laban: "Laban called it Jegar Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Galeed.<sup>1</sup> And Laban said, 'This heap is a witness between you and me this day'" (Gen. 31:47,58).

Joshua himself, at a later day, gave his sanction to this kind of memorial. After the people had renewed their covenant with God, he "took a large stone, and set it up there under the oak that was by the sanctuary of Yahweh. And Joshua said to all the people, 'Behold, this stone shall be a witness to us, for it has heard all the words of Yahweh which He spoke to us. It shall therefore be a witness to you, lest you deny your God' (Joshua 24:26,27). The stone would become an enduring monument of that which it had *heard*, when the men who also heard it had descended to the tomb.

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<sup>1</sup> Both names mean "the heap of witness."