



## 9. The Cities of Refuge ([20:1-9](#))

Finally, the task of apportioning the lands east and west of the Jordan to the twelve tribes was complete. Two final items remained to be taken care of: (1) the designation of the cities of refuge (chap. [20](#)) and (2) the Levitical cities (chap. [21](#)). The instructions here rely heavily on Mosaic legislation that first mentions both of these two types of cities. The two groups of cities were related to each other, since the cities of refuge were a subset of the Levitical cities: there were forty-eight Levitical cities, out of which the six cities of refuge were designated.

In the Pentateuch, the Israelites were first instructed that six cities of refuge should be designated as safe havens where a man could flee if he accidentally killed someone. In [Exod 21:12-14](#), the provision for this is placed at the beginning of the laws dealing with capital offenses: premeditated murder was to be punished by death (vv. [12](#), [14](#)), but accidental killing was not (v. [13](#)). In [Num 35:9-29](#), provisions for this are spelled out in much more detail, including the Lord's instructions that the Israelites should select six cities, three on each side of the Jordan ([Num 35:9-15](#)). [Deuteronomy 4:41-43](#) reports that Moses did precisely that for the tribes east of the Jordan (three cities). In [Deut 19:1-10](#), Moses gave instructions that the same should be done with three cities west of the Jordan. And we are told in [Num 35:6](#) that these six cities were to be designated from among the cities to be allotted to the Levites.

The legislation concerning the cities of refuge shows, on the one hand, God's mercy, in that those who killed accidentally could find a place of refuge. And yet, on the other hand, it also affirms the sanctity of human life, in that even an accidental death caused blood guilt that could be avenged if the killer did not go to a city of refuge. Furthermore, the killer who escaped to such a city was not free to return home until another death had taken place, that of the high priest ([Num 35:25](#), [28](#)).

It appears that the altar in the tabernacle and the temple functioned as a place of temporary refuge, but these cities were to provide long-term refuge. For example, in [Exod 21:14](#) God said: "If a man schemes and kills another man deliberately, take him away from *my altar* and put him to death" (author italics). The implication here is that the murderer was taking refuge at the altar. This is illustrated by two episodes in 1 Kings, where Adonijah and Joab sought temporary refuge by clinging to the altar ([1 Kgs 1:50-53](#); [2:28](#)). The cities of refuge were to provide a long-term place of refuge for those guilty of accidental killing.

Almost everything in this chapter comes from the Pentateuchal passages noted above; there is little that is new. However, what *is* new is the combination of elements here—the instructions for designating the cities, the rationale for this, the six cities so designated (including the names of the three cities west of the Jordan, which had not been named previously), and the setting in which this was finally accomplished. This was done in the context of the distribution of the rest of the promised land, which had just now been completed at the end of chap. [19](#). Thus, the rich theology of protection of accidental killers by setting up safe havens for them has now come to fruition: the earlier instructions and rationale are repeated (vv. [1-6](#)), and now, finally, the execution of the commands to do this is accomplished. That which had earlier merely been anticipated was now a reality (vv. [7-9](#)).

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<sup>1</sup> David M. Howard, *New American Commentary – Volume 5: Joshua*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 379-386, 390-391, 396-397, 402-414.

MAP: LEVITICAL CITIES AND CITIES OF REFUGE



(1) *Introduction: General Instructions (20:1–3)*

<sup>1</sup>Then the LORD said to Joshua: <sup>2</sup>“Tell the Israelites to designate the cities of refuge, as I instructed you through Moses, <sup>3</sup>so that anyone who kills a person accidentally and unintentionally may flee there and find protection from the avenger of blood.

**20:2** God gave Joshua the instructions for designating the cities of refuge, just as he had instructed “by the hand of Moses.” The instructions referred to here are found in [Exod 21:12–14](#); [Num 35:9–29](#); and [Deut 19:10](#) (see above). God told the Israelites, literally, to “give to yourselves” the cities of refuge (v. 2), that is, they were a gift to themselves from cities they already possessed. They would be a gift because any innocent person could avail himself of the protection offered there.

The purpose of these cities was so that the one who killed without murderous intention could flee there and receive protection. The word for “killer” here is *rôṣēah*, which can refer to one who premeditates a murder (e.g., [Num 35:16, 21](#); [Deut 22:26](#)) or to someone who killed accidentally, as here (e.g., [Num 35:6, 11](#); [Deut 4:42](#); [19:3, 4, 6](#)). The word is related to the verb found in the Ten Commandments—“You shall not murder [*ršh*]”—and denotes illegal and inappropriate killing. Even though there is an exception to the laws of capital punishment here, the deed itself is not condoned: the guilty one simply was to be spared death at the hands of an “avenger of blood.” He was still guilty, but the law treated him more leniently. This shows that the biblical legislation did make distinctions in degrees of guilt and that God’s law was sensitive to motives and intent of the heart, in providing more lenient treatment for what modern criminal codes call “manslaughter” (as opposed to premeditated murder).

**20:3** The law’s sensitivity to motives and intent becomes clear in v. 3 when we consider the words in question here. The NIV speaks of killing someone “accidentally and unintentionally.” In the first instance, “accidentally” translates *šĕgāgā*, which refers to inadvertent wrongdoing. Such inadvertent sins were due to one of two things: (1) negligence, that is, although the sinner knew that an action was wrong, he was negligent, accidentally committing the sin, such as an accidental homicide ([Num 35:22–24](#); [Deut 19:4–5](#)); or (2) ignorance, that is, the sinner was aware of his actions but remained unaware that they were sinful (e.g., [1 Sam 26:21](#); [Ps 19:12](#)[Hb. 13; “hidden faults”]; [Prov 5:23](#) [“great folly”]; [Ezek 45:20](#)). In both cases, the sinner was guilty: in the former instance, negligence resulting in accidents was to be accounted for, and, in the latter case, ignorance of the law was no excuse (just as today).

In the second instance in [Josh 20:3](#), the NIV’s “unintentionally” is literally “he did not know,” the meaning of which is clear; it is essentially synonymous with the second meaning of *šĕgāgā*. Here, too, ignorance when the law was broken did not excuse the sinner.

However, God’s law was not rigidly blind. It did indeed take into account intentionality when considering sins, and it imposed lesser punishments and allowed for atonement. This is clear from our passage here in [Joshua 20](#) (and its predecessors). It is clear from [Leviticus 4](#), which is devoted in its entirety to instructions related to atoning for sins committed unintentionally or inadvertently—the term *šĕgāgā* (or the related verb *šgh*) occurs four times in this chapter: vv. 2, 13, 22, 27—by means of the purification offering (sometimes known as the “sin offering”). It is also clear from [Lev 5:1–13](#), which deals with sins that are “hidden” (*lm*) from the sinner and that he then becomes aware of (see esp. vv. 2–4). Finally, it is clear from [Lev 5:14–6:7](#)[Hb. 5:14–26], where sinning unintentionally (*šĕgāgā* in v. 14; “not knowing” in v. 17) and “acting unfaithfully” (*m’l* in [6:2](#)[Hb. 5:21]) are all to be atoned for by

the reparation offering (or “guilt offering”). In all of these cases, the unwitting or accidental sins are atoned for and not punished as severely as intentional sins.

This raises a related point not directly addressed in this passage but important nevertheless: Did the Old Testament allow for the atonement of intentional sins—sins committed consciously and deliberately—in addition to inadvertent sins? Some have argued that in the sacrificial system explicated in [Leviticus 1–7](#), there is no sacrifice for deliberate sin. Indeed, [Num 15:30–31](#) would seem to indicate that there is no forgiveness in the Old Testament for deliberate sin: “But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or alien, blasphemes the LORD, and that person must be cut off from his people. Because he has despised the LORD’s word and broken his commands, that person must surely be cut off; his guilt remains on him.” The NIV’s “defiantly” in v. [30](#) is literally “with a high [or raised] hand,” and the idea is that of a fist raised skyward in rebellion against God. Because of arguments such as this, some Christians have further argued that Christ’s sacrifice was superior to the Old Testament sacrifices because his sacrifice covered *all* sins, not just inadvertent ones.

By way of answering the question, we must first affirm that Christ’s sacrifice was indeed infinitely superior to the Old Testament sacrifices. The Book of Hebrews makes this abundantly clear (see [Heb 7:27](#); [10:2–14](#)). However, concerning the more limited question of whether deliberate sins could be atoned for in the Old Testament, the answer certainly is yes. Otherwise, no Old Testament believer could ever have been forgiven. We can make at least two points in support of this.

First, the burnt offering ([Leviticus 1](#)) was “clearly propitiatory and expiatory (for ‘wrath,’ ‘guilt,’ ‘offense,’ ‘sin’),” at least in part. This fact is attested by the very words for the offering itself, in [Lev 1:4](#): “It will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.” [Leviticus 14:19–20](#) speaks of the priest offering a burnt offering on the altar, along with the grain offering, to “make atonement for him, and he will be clean,” and [Lev 16:24](#) is similar. Thus, the burnt offering is proof positive that there was atonement for deliberate sins in the Old Testament.

Second, [Num 5:6–8](#) shows that a person who “is unfaithful [*m’l*] to the LORD” must confess his or her sin and also make restitution, and then the sins can be forgiven. The verb “to be unfaithful” here (*m’l*) is the same one found in [Lev 6:2](#)[Hb. [5:21](#)] (see above) and is perhaps better translated “to commit a sacrilege.” It is also used with reference to Achan’s sin in [Josh 7:1](#). The key here is the confession of sin. It would appear, then, that the sin committed “with a high hand” in [Num 15:30–31](#) was a deliberate rebellion against God in which there was no confession; rather, the sinner was standing defiantly before God, with an upraised fist, not humbly, with a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart (see [Ps 51:17](#)[Hb. [19](#)]). This would be the Old Testament equivalent of the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit of which Jesus spoke (see [Matt 12:31](#); [Mark 3:29](#); [Luke 12:10](#)).

If someone had indeed killed inadvertently, he could flee to a city of refuge to escape the “avenger of blood” (*gō’ēl haddām*). This person is mentioned in only four contexts in the Old Testament, three of them legal or semilegal and one a narrative, all of them dealing with the same principle. A more general term (the *gō’ēl*) is mentioned close to fifty times and is usually translated as “close relative,” “kinsman redeemer,” or something similar. The *gō’ēl* seems to have been one who had certain obligations to fulfill, whether they were recovering people or property that had been lost through indenture, or they were paying a fee (usually by a relative or an owner), or they were meting out punishment for killing someone. The law of the *gō’ēl* is given in [Leviticus 25](#), where provisions for redeeming family property (vv. [25–28](#)), dwellings (vv. [29–34](#)), and needy relatives (vv. [47–49](#)) are made. The best-known example of this being played out in practice is from the Book of Ruth, where Boaz and an unnamed relative (a “kinsman redeemer”) were involved in a legal situation over their obligations to the widowed Ruth ([Ruth 4](#)).

The idea of blood vengeance behind our passage here in [Joshua 20](#) (and the related passages in [Numbers 35](#) and [Deuteronomy 19](#)) is more limited than the broader idea of the “kinsman redeemer.” The “avenger of blood” was not free to take private vengeance: the Bible clearly reserves vengeance to God alone ([Deut 32:35](#); [Isa 34:8](#); [Rom 12:19](#)). [Numbers 35](#) states clearly that the avenger of blood was only free to kill someone who had killed another if (1) that person ventured forth from a city of refuge ([Num 35:26–28](#)) or (2) that person was guilty of murder, and not manslaughter ([Num 35:16–21](#)). The avenger of blood had a legal status in society to carry out society's (i.e., God's) judgments and was by no means one who was to exact private vengeance.

## *(2) Specific Instructions ([20:4–6](#))*

**<sup>4</sup>“When he flees to one of these cities, he is to stand in the entrance of the city gate and state his case before the elders of that city. Then they are to admit him into their city and give him a place to live with them. <sup>5</sup>If the avenger of blood pursues him, they must not surrender the one accused, because he killed his neighbor unintentionally and without malice aforethought. <sup>6</sup>He is to stay in that city until he has stood trial before the assembly and until the death of the high priest who is serving at that time. Then he may go back to his own home in the town from which he fled.”**

[20:4–6](#) The circumstances of what was to happen to the manslayer are now given. The details in v. [4](#) are not found in the earlier passages in Numbers and Deuteronomy. The one who fled was to state his case before the elders of the city who, according to [Deut 19:12](#), had the power to return him to his original city and into the hands of the blood avenger. However, here the presumption is that he was innocent, and he was to be given a place to live.

The elders were to protect the one who fled from the blood avenger (v. [5](#)), and he was to remain there until two things happened (v. [6](#)): (1) until he had had a chance to make his case and defend his innocence and (2) until the high priest died. Then he was free to return home with no fear of reprisal.

It is not specifically stated what removed the manslayer's guilt. He was sentenced to a period of exile in the city of refuge, away from his home, and he could not return home until the high priest died. Many have argued that the high priest's death marked a period of amnesty ushering in a new era. However, a more probable explanation is that since the high priest represented the sacrificial system, his death atoned for the sins of the manslayer. No ransom was to be accepted for a murderer or for a manslayer ([Num 35:30–31](#)). Only on the occasion of a death—the high priest's—was the manslayer free to leave. As Greenberg states, “The sole personage whose religious-cultic importance might endow his death with expiatory value for the people at large is the high priest.” In [Numbers 35](#), the high priest is mentioned as having been anointed with “holy oil” (v. [25](#)), which would tend to support his position as the acceptable “sacrifice.” For Christians, the typological associations with the death of Jesus Christ—the great High Priest whose death atones for their sins—are certainly visible here.



*(3) The Cities of Refuge Set Apart ([20:7–8](#))*

**<sup>7</sup>So they set apart Kedesh in Galilee in the hill country of Naphtali, Shechem in the hill country of Ephraim, and Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the hill country of Judah. <sup>8</sup>On the east side of the Jordan of Jericho they designated Bezer in the desert on the plateau in the tribe of Reuben, Ramoth in Gilead in the tribe of Gad, and Golan in Bashan in the tribe of Manasseh.**

[20:7–8](#) The six cities of refuge are now listed, the three west of the Jordan first (v. [7](#)) and the three on the east side second (v. [8](#)). To the west of the Jordan, “Kedesh in Galilee,” in the north, was mentioned already in [12:22](#) and [19:37](#). It was part of Naphtali's territory. Shechem was in the central highlands, in the territory of Ephraim, listed as marking the border of western Manasseh in [17:2, 7](#). The third city, Kiriath Arba (Hebron), was in the south, in Judah's territory ([11:21](#); [14:13–15](#); [15:13–14](#); etc.).

East of the Jordan (v. [8](#)), the three cities are mentioned almost word for word as they were specified by Moses in [Deut 4:41–43](#). However, the only other times they appear in Joshua are in the list of Levitical cities ([21:27, 36, 38](#)). The list here is south to north: (1) Bezer was on the desert plateau east of the Dead Sea, in Reubenite territory; (2) Ramoth in Gilead, east of the Jordan, in Gad's territory; and (3) Golan in Bashan, east of the Sea of Kinnereth (Galilee), in eastern Manasseh's territory.

No place in the land was more than a day's journey from one of these cities. All six of these cities are mentioned again in the next chapter, since they also were Levitical cities. Despite their importance here and in the Pentateuch, however, they do not appear again in the Old Testament.

*(4) Summary ([20:9](#))*

**<sup>9</sup>Any of the Israelites or any alien living among them who killed someone accidentally could flee to these designated cities and not be killed by the avenger of blood prior to standing trial before the assembly.**

This verse summarizes the law of the cities of refuge well, adding the intriguing information that any alien (*gēr*) living among the Israelites was to be afforded the same protections. This adds to the inclusive vision found in the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua that we have noted earlier (see the commentary at [2:11, 21](#); [8:33](#)).

*(1) Introduction ([21:1–3](#))*

**<sup>1</sup>Now the family heads of the Levites approached Eleazar the priest, Joshua son of Nun, and the heads of the other tribal families of Israel <sup>2</sup>at Shiloh in Canaan and said to them, “The LORD commanded through Moses that you give us towns to live in, with pasturelands for our livestock.” <sup>3</sup>So, as the LORD had commanded, the Israelites gave the Levites the following towns and pasturelands out of their own inheritance:**

**21:1** Previously, the “heads of the fathers of the tribes” were involved in distributing the land. They are mentioned along with Eleazar the priest and Joshua, son of Nun, as overseeing the allotments (see [14:1](#) and the commentary there). At the end of the process, they are mentioned again along with Eleazar and Joshua ([19:51](#)).

In this passage, they were again involved, this time as those to whom the Levitical leaders came to present their claim to their lands (v. [1](#)). The Levitical leaders were themselves “the heads of the fathers of the Levites,” which indicates that the system of organization at the national level (twelve such leaders: see on [14:1](#)) was mirrored at the tribal level as well.

This episode is the last of the five in which individuals or groups came to Joshua to claim their lands. God himself had promised cities to the Levites throughout the territories ([Num 35:1–8](#)), and now that all the other tribes had received their allotments, the Levites asked for theirs. As they had been previously, Eleazar and Joshua were prominent in the distribution (see also [14:1](#); [17:4](#); [19:51](#)).

**21:2** The setting was at Shiloh, the place where the Israelites had gathered previously and from where they had sent out twenty-one surveyors to aid in the remaining land distributions ([18:1–10](#)). This was a significant religious center in Joshua's day and remained so for many years (see the commentary on [18:1](#)).

Shiloh is specifically said to be “in the land of Canaan” (NIV has “in Canaan” here), which was certainly an unnecessary bit of information from one perspective, since any reader would have known this. However, the only previous occurrence of this phrase is in [14:1](#), at the beginning of the land apportionments, and the reference here ties the Levites’ inheritance to that of the rest of the tribes. Even though their inheritance was different, in that they only received scattered cities, they still were given an inheritance by God on a par with that of the other tribes (*nāḥālā*: v. [3](#)); they were *all* “in the land of Canaan,” just as God had promised to Abraham. This reinforces the notion of the unity of the nation.

The Levites reminded Eleazar, Joshua, and the tribal leaders of God's promise “by the hand of Moses,” which was given in [Num 35:1–8](#). They had been promised forty-eight towns, along with their pasturelands ([Num 35:7](#)), and that was what they asked for here. The word for pasturelands (*migrāš*) refers to the grazing lands around the cities. It occurs about 110 times in the Old Testament, almost always in connection with the Levites’ inheritance (it occurs ninety-eight times in [Joshua 21](#) and its parallel passage in [1 Chronicles 6](#)).

**21:3** In keeping with the themes of harmony, unity, and obedience found in the book, now the Israelites obeyed “the mouth of the LORD” and gave the Levites what God had promised them.

## 11. The Land Distributions Concluded ([21:43–45](#))

**<sup>43</sup>So the LORD gave Israel all the land he had sworn to give their forefathers, and they took possession of it and settled there. <sup>44</sup>The LORD gave them rest on every side, just as he had sworn to their forefathers. Not one of their enemies withstood them; the LORD handed all their enemies over to them. <sup>45</sup>Not one of all the LORD's good promises to the house of Israel failed; every one was fulfilled.**

A glorious spiritual summary concludes the entire section devoted to the land distributions (chaps. [13–21](#)). Davis calls it “the theological heart of the Book of Joshua.” Several significant themes from earlier in the book are reiterated here (esp. from chap. [1](#)). It is a fittingly triumphant ending to the third major section of the book, the heart of the book in terms of the real-world lands, borders, allotments, cities, et cetera, that the Israelites inherited. Everything God had promised his people for centuries had now been meticulously delineated and allotted, with scrupulous attention to detail and fairness.

Structurally, it has been noted that this short passage summarizes everything that precedes. Verse [43](#) (which speaks of the land in which Israel settled) summarizes chaps. [13–21](#). Verse [44](#) (which speaks of the conflicts with Israel's enemies) summarizes chaps. [1–12](#). Verse [45](#) summarizes everything that precedes. In terms of its content, Davis has well noted that this short section consists of *praise* to God. It is not just dispassionate reporting; rather, it praises him for his complete fidelity to his promises. Our awesome and reliable God is described in these verses.

These verses emphasize the totality of Israel's success, the overarching picture of complete victory, and the all-encompassing nature of God's faithfulness to his promises and his people. It is of a piece with similar passages, such as [10:40–42](#); [11:16–23](#); and [23:1](#). It does not echo the passages that stand in tension with it, which speaks of unfinished business, of lands that remained to be captured. Yet on its own terms, it does present an accurate picture of the prevailing situation at the time.

[21:43](#) The Lord's *gift* of the land is stressed here, as it had been from the beginning ([1:3](#)). His *promises* are also stressed (cf. [1:6](#)), as is the people's *inheritance* (see on [1:11](#)). In a new emphasis, their settlement in the land is also highlighted.

[21:44](#) *Rest* for the land is highlighted again (see also [11:23](#)). The enemies' inability to withstand Israel echoes God's promise in [1:5](#). The Lord's handing over of all the Israelites' enemies echoes God's promise of his presence wherever Joshua went ([1:5](#), [9](#)), as well as repeated statements about God fighting for Israel throughout the second major section of the book (see [6:2](#); [8:1](#), [7](#); [10:10–11](#), [14](#), [19](#), [42](#); [11:8](#); etc.).

[21:45](#) The final, sweeping affirmation is that everything that God had promised Israel came to pass; none of his promises failed. This is certainly a fitting note on which to end this extraordinary section of the book.



## 1. Joshua's Farewell to the Transjordan Tribes ([22:1–8](#))

After all that had transpired and all that the nation had gone through together, the time had now come for the tribes to return to their inheritances and begin their settled lives in the land. The tribes whose inheritances were east of the Jordan had been faithful in their commitment to God and to their word, in that they had helped their brothers take their lands, even while their own lands had been, in effect, waiting for them. The episode here echoes and fulfills Joshua's earlier exhortation to these tribes to be faithful to God and to their fellow Israelites (see [1:12–15](#) and the commentary there). It also echoes these tribes' response to Joshua's exhortation ([1:16–18](#)).

### (1) *Joshua's Exhortation* ([22:1–5](#))

**<sup>1</sup>Then Joshua summoned the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh <sup>2</sup>and said to them, “You have done all that Moses the servant of the LORD commanded, and you have obeyed me in everything I commanded. <sup>3</sup>For a long time now—to this very day—you have not deserted your brothers but have carried out the mission the LORD your God gave you. <sup>4</sup>Now that the LORD your God has given your brothers rest as he promised, return to your homes in the land that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you on the other side of the Jordan. <sup>5</sup>But be very careful to keep the commandment and the law that Moses the servant of the LORD gave you: to love the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast to him and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul.”**

[22:1](#) The time frame for the action now is not specified. The NIV's “Then” is *'āz*, which means “at that time,” but it does not give any specific indication about the time relationship between events in chap. [22](#) and those in the preceding chapters. The reference in this verse to the two and one-half Transjordan tribes follows up on the references to them in chap. [13](#), where their land inheritance is mentioned.

[22:2–3](#) Joshua commended these tribes for their faithfulness to what Moses, Joshua, and God himself had commanded them: they were not to settle into their lands until the entire land of Canaan had been taken (see commentary on [1:12–15](#) for the background to this passage). The tribes' obedience is stressed here: they did everything that Moses had commanded, they obeyed what Joshua had commanded, and they kept the charge that God had given them.

The length of time that the Transjordan tribes had deferred their own settling down was “a long time now” (v. [3](#)). No specific indication of the length of time is given, but this reference combines with the similar reference in [11:18](#)—“Joshua waged war against these kings for a long time”—to indicate that the taking of the land was not done in a single, short campaign, contrary to the impression sometimes given by the battle summaries in chaps. [10–11](#).

[22:4–5](#) God too had been faithful to his promises: he had given rest to the tribes west of the Jordan (v. [4](#)). Joshua instructed the Transjordan tribes to return home and settle there (v. [4](#)) and also that they should take special care to remain obedient to the Lord (v. [5](#)).

Joshua's words in v. [5](#) are passionate, and they capture the heart of the chapter's message about faithfulness and loyalty. The words echo similar exhortations in Deuteronomy ([Deut 4:29](#); [6:5–6](#); [10:12, 13](#); [11:13](#)) and in Joshua ([1:7–8](#); see commentary there) that the Israelites should be faithful to God. What God had urged Joshua himself to do in chap. [1](#), Joshua now urged the people to do. This

exhortation is the essence of the “first and greatest commandment,” to love God passionately, with every fiber of one's being ([Deut 6:5](#); [Matt 22:37–38](#)). The verbs in v. [5](#) give a comprehensive picture of what a proper relationship to God was to include: to love God, to walk in all his ways, to obey his commands, to hold fast (or cling) to him, and to serve him. These were to be done not as a matter of external conformity but “with all your heart and all your soul.”

## (2) *Joshua's Blessing* ([22:6–8](#))

**“Then Joshua blessed them and sent them away, and they went to their homes. <sup>7</sup>(To the half-tribe of Manasseh Moses had given land in Bashan, and to the other half of the tribe Joshua gave land on the west side of the Jordan with their brothers.) When Joshua sent them home, he blessed them, <sup>8</sup>saying, “Return to your homes with your great wealth—with large herds of livestock, with silver, gold, bronze and iron, and a great quantity of clothing—and divide with your brothers the plunder from your enemies.”**

[22:6–8](#) Joshua's blessing was of the nature of a parting farewell, as is seen in several other places in the Old Testament: see [Gen 31:55](#)[Hb. [32:1](#)]; [47:10](#); [2 Sam 13:25](#); [19:39](#)[Hb. [40](#)].

The farewell blessing is interrupted in v. [7](#) by the author's parenthetical explanation of the unique situation of the tribe of Manasseh, which had two land portions, one on each side of the Jordan (cf. [13:29–31](#); [17:1–13](#)). Both Moses and Joshua are acknowledged as distributors of the land here. The insertion undoubtedly was for the purpose of stressing the unity of this tribe, which symbolized within its own tribal context the larger unity that was to characterize the entire nation. This unity was strained by the events narrated in the following verses, but ultimately the unity was preserved, and the Transjordan tribes' loyalty to their brethren and their God was established beyond any doubt.

In v. [8](#), the great wealth that the Israelites had gathered from the Canaanites is elaborated, with the livestock, precious metals, and clothing that they had taken. The Transjordan tribes were to divide up the spoils with their brethren in another display of unity and loyalty. An earlier such dividing up of the spoils was when Moses instructed the Israelites to do so after their battle with the Midianites: “Divide the spoils between the soldiers who took part in the battle and the rest of the community” ([Num 31:27](#); cf. also [1 Sam 30:21–25](#), where David gave similar instructions to his own fighting men).

## 2. A Crisis of Loyalties ([22:9–34](#))

The Israelites' unity as a nation was immediately threatened when the Transjordan tribes left to return to their homes east of the Jordan. Ironically, it was a gesture on their part—which they intended as a symbol of unity—that precipitated the crisis that almost tore the nation apart. However, when their true intentions were revealed to have been honorable, and not rebellious, the crisis was resolved, and the Israelites on both sides of the river settled in their own lands.

(1) *The Crisis Develops* ([22:9–12](#))

<sup>9</sup>So the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh left the Israelites at Shiloh in Canaan to return to Gilead, their own land, which they had acquired in accordance with the command of the LORD through Moses.

<sup>10</sup>When they came to Geliloth near the Jordan in the land of Canaan, the Reubenites, the Gadites and the half-tribe of Manasseh built an imposing altar there by the Jordan. <sup>11</sup>And when the Israelites heard that they had built the altar on the border of Canaan at Geliloth near the Jordan on the Israelite side, <sup>12</sup>the whole assembly of Israel gathered at Shiloh to go to war against them.

This section sets the stage for the crisis in bare outline. Several critical details that explain the crisis do not emerge until later. We do not know, for example, the reason that the Transjordan tribes built their altar (v. [11](#)). We are not told what was wrong with this and why the rest of the Israelites gathered for war against them (v. [12](#)). However, something clearly was wrong.

[22:9–10](#) The Transjordan tribes left their fellow Israelites at Shiloh, where the climactic gathering had been held and the final land distributions had been made (see [18:1](#)), to return to their own lands. The references in v. [9](#) to “Shiloh in Canaan” and “Gilead, their own land” emphasize the fact that the two portions of Israel were going to different places, one portion remaining in Canaan proper and the other leaving, to go to a land (Gilead) that was not, strictly speaking, in Canaan. This anticipates the problem of a divided nation that is addressed in the remainder of this chapter.

The tribes arrived at Geliloth, near the Jordan, which appears to have been the site of Gilgal, the place where they had first entered the land and set up a pillar of memorial stones and circumcised the nation ([4:19–20](#); [5:9–10](#)). At this place significant in the nation's history, the Transjordan tribes built a large altar. Its imposing size, visible from afar, explains the significance of this altar west of the Jordan. In the first place, its erection west of the Jordan by the tribes living east of the Jordan emphasized something the Transjordan tribes wanted to affirm: the nation's unity and their own loyalty to the God who gave Canaan to his people. However, for a people living east of the Jordan, its position across the river could potentially have caused it to have been forgotten. Thus, its imposing size would have allowed it to be seen from vantage points across the river and thus remembered.

[22:11–12](#) Verse [11](#) is somewhat awkward syntactically, but it reports in direct speech the Israelite tribes' surprised reaction to the altar's presence (lit.): “And the Israelites heard, saying, ‘Look! [The Transjordan tribes] have built the altar opposite (or, at the border of) the land of Canaan! At Geliloth of the Jordan! At the side of the sons of Israel!’ ” Three times the location of the altar is mentioned. Clearly the altar was west of the Jordan, which was not in territory allotted to the Transjordan tribes. That is, they had built a large altar in land belonging to Judah or Benjamin ([15:7](#); [18:17](#)), not their own land east of the Jordan.

The tribes west of the Jordan (the Cisjordan tribes) reacted strongly to this altar by assembling to go to war (v. [12](#)). As we have noted, the reason for their reaction is not revealed until later (vv. [16–20](#)), as is the motivation for the Transjordan tribes' having built the altar in the first place (vv. [21–29](#)). The basis for the Cisjordan tribes' reaction is found in the law against offering a burnt offering or sacrifice at any location other than the tabernacle ([Lev 17:8–9](#)) and in the more general law in [Deut 13:12–15](#) against worshipping other gods. In both instances, the Israelites were authorized to kill the offenders, and this was why they now prepared to go to war against their fellow Israelites.

It is striking to notice one of the terms used for the Cisjordan tribes here. Even though they were only nine and one-half tribes, they are called by an inclusive term in v. [12](#): “the whole assembly of Israel” (see also v. [16](#), and “the whole community of Israel” vv. [18](#), [20](#)). The two and one-half

Transjordan tribes are clearly not included in this designation, that is, they were not considered to be part of the Israelite assembly, at least at this point. A survey of the rest of the chapter reveals that the narrator and the speakers consistently maintain such a distinction until the misunderstanding about the altar has been explained in a satisfactory manner (by v. 30). Beginning with v. 30, there is no reference again to such all-inclusive terms as “all Israel” or “the whole community,” only to the more general terms, “the Israelites” or “the community.”

The significance of these careful distinctions is that the story is being presented in order to highlight two facts about the altar: (1) the grave danger posed by its existence and (2) its potential for irreparably dividing the nation. The Cisjordan tribes had already inherited their lands in Canaan proper, which was where Abraham had been promised his lands ([Gen 17:8](#)). The Transjordan tribes’ inheritance lay outside of Canaan, so if they were to be considered truly a continuing part of Israel, they needed to demonstrate this clearly. Their building of an altar—which the Cisjordan tribes interpreted as being a rival altar to the one at the tabernacle, one devoted to sacrifices to false gods—threatened their place as true Israelites. The author, by carefully labeling the tribes in this chapter, preserves a distinction between the tribes until the altar’s true nature and intent has been made clear: the Cisjordan tribes were “true” Israelites, living in the land promised to Abraham, whereas the Transjordan tribes, living outside the land, were not yet to be included with “all Israel” until the nature of their commitment to the Lord was clarified. After the clarification, however (i.e., after v. 29), all twelve tribes are treated as part of the one nation, Israel. Thus, the issues of the unity of the nation and the tribes’ loyalties are reflected even in the way in which the narrator labels the tribes.

## *(2) The Accusation ([22:13–20](#))*

**<sup>13</sup>So the Israelites sent Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, to the land of Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh. <sup>14</sup>With him they sent ten of the chief men, one for each of the tribes of Israel, each the head of a family division among the Israelite clans.**

**<sup>15</sup>When they went to Gilead—to Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh—they said to them: <sup>16</sup>“The whole assembly of the LORD says: ‘How could you break faith with the God of Israel like this? How could you turn away from the LORD and build yourselves an altar in rebellion against him now? <sup>17</sup>Was not the sin of Peor enough for us? Up to this very day we have not cleansed ourselves from that sin, even though a plague fell on the community of the LORD! <sup>18</sup>And are you now turning away from the LORD?**

**“ ‘If you rebel against the LORD today, tomorrow he will be angry with the whole community of Israel. <sup>19</sup>If the land you possess is defiled, come over to the LORD’s land, where the LORD’s tabernacle stands, and share the land with us. But do not rebel against the LORD or against us by building an altar for yourselves, other than the altar of the LORD our God. <sup>20</sup>When Achan son of Zerah acted unfaithfully regarding the devoted things, did not wrath come upon the whole community of Israel? He was not the only one who died for his sin.’ ”**

The Cisjordan tribes confronted their fellow Israelites across the Jordan, raising the specter of terrible punishment on the entire nation resulting from what they regarded as their fellows’ sin. They pointed to two cases: the Israelites’ sin at Peor in the wilderness ([Numbers 25](#)) and, more immediately, Achan’s sin at Jericho ([Joshua 7](#)). As we have noted, the backdrop for their reaction is found in the laws

against offering a burnt offering or sacrifice at any location other than the tabernacle ([Lev 17:8–9](#)) and against worshipping other gods ([Deut 13:12–15](#)).

[22:13–14](#) These verses reflect the emphasis on unity from another vantage point: they show ten carefully chosen representatives, leaders of the nine and one half (i.e., ten) tribes west of the Jordan. The representatives were each heads of family divisions—literally, “head of the house of their fathers” (*rô’š bêt ’ăbôtām*)—within the Israelite clans (*’ălāpîm*), each representing a tribe (*maṭṭēh*).

The presence of Phinehas, the priest, shows the emphasis on true (i.e., correct) ritual. It especially recalls his own actions in the incident at Peor, when he had taken drastic measures to stop a plague that had broken out because of Israel's disobedience ([Numbers 25](#), esp. vv. [7–13](#)). That incident is specifically recalled in v. [17](#). Thus, the seriousness of the potential problem is underscored by Phinehas's role and by the reference to the Peor incident. Joshua is not mentioned in this chapter after v. [7](#). Rather, Phinehas and the Cisjordan tribes are the characters who raised their concerns about all Israelites remaining loyal to God. Perhaps Phinehas's priestly role is emphasized because the laws forming the backdrop to the incident here are given in the Pentateuchal legislation falling under the priest's concerns ([Lev 17:8–9](#); [Deut 13:12–15](#)) and because of Phinehas's earlier role at Peor.

[22:15–20](#) Phinehas and the ten representatives crossed the Jordan themselves into Gilead in order to confront their fellow Israelites with what they saw as a great offense (v. [15](#)). These representatives are called “the whole assembly of the LORD,” that is, they stood as representatives of the entire godly portion of the nation. At this juncture, the faithfulness of the Transjordan tribes is still in doubt. (On the significance of such labels, see the comments on vv. [11–12](#).)

The seriousness with which the Cisjordanian delegation regarded the Transjordan tribes' action in building the altar is seen in the term they used for it (*m’l*), found twice here in v. [16](#) (as a verb, “break faith,” and as a noun, “rebellion”). It is the same term used of Achan's sin in v. [20](#) (“acted unfaithfully”) and in [7:1](#) (see the commentary on [7:1](#) for further discussion of *m’l*). They understood the altar to have been a major breach in relationship with the Lord. They equated the offense of this altar not only with Achan's sin, but also with the sin committed at Peor. The sin at Peor had occurred many years earlier in the wilderness. It had involved the Israelites' prostituting themselves by bowing to the Moabite gods—specifically, the Baal of Peor—seduced by the women of Moab to do so. A plague had broken out in the Israelite camp as an expression of the Lord's displeasure, and twenty-four thousand people had died before Phinehas had intervened and caused the Lord's anger to abate ([Num 25:6–9](#)).

The Cisjordan tribes' fear was that such a horror could happen again. Indeed, they claimed that the stain of this sin remained with them “up to this very day,” that the plague was still (lit.) “in” (*b-*) the congregation (v. [17](#)). The plague itself was not still raging because [Num 25:8](#) states that it had stopped. Nevertheless, its effects were still being felt in a very real way. The implication is that Israel had never truly rid itself of this sin, that it always flirted with—if not participated in—idolatry and the allure of pagan religious systems. Achan's case was proof positive of this, and the Cisjordan tribes feared that this altar represented another such case.

The Cisjordan representatives did not ask a question (as the NIV suggests in v. [18](#)), but rather they pointed an accusing finger (verbally) at their fellow tribes and accused them of having turned back from following after the Lord. They also stated their belief in a domino effect of sorts: their rebellion would result in the Lord's anger against the rest of the nation (just as had happened with the case of Achan: see v. [20](#)). The stain of sin was infectious, and its effects were catching.

Following their accusations, the Cisjordan representatives urged their Transjordanian brothers to take drastic action (v. 19), to abandon their inheritance east of the Jordan and settle west of the river if the land of their possession was unclean (NIV: “defiled”). The tabernacle resided there, symbolizing God's presence and standing as the fulfillment of God's instructions about setting his name in the place where he would choose (see [Deuteronomy 12](#) and the commentary introducing [18:1–10](#)). From their perspective, it was better that the Transjordan tribes abandon their possession and pursue true worship than to keep their land and engage in apostasy. The “land of *your* possession” east of the Jordan is contrasted with “the land of *the LORD's* possession” west of the Jordan in this verse. Implied is the idea that perhaps the land east of the Jordan was not actually to be considered the Lord's possession, certainly not so if its Israelite inhabitants were to succumb to pagan worship. In the same sense in which Achan “made himself a Canaanite” by his actions (see the comments introducing [7:1–26](#)), so also here the question arises: Were the Transjordan tribes truly Israelites, or were they becoming Canaanites? The crucial difference from Achan, however (as we learn in the next section), was that the Transjordan tribes were not guilty at all of what they were accused of.

A certain self-interest reveals itself in the Cisjordan tribes' comments in that they feared for their own lives (v. 20). They feared that their fellow Israelites' “sin” would result in the entire nation's being punished, just as it had in Achan's case.

### (3) *The Defense* ([22:21–29](#))

<sup>21</sup>Then Reuben, Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh replied to the heads of the clans of Israel: <sup>22</sup>“The Mighty One, God, the LORD! The Mighty One, God, the LORD! He knows! And let Israel know! If this has been in rebellion or disobedience to the LORD, do not spare us this day. <sup>23</sup>If we have built our own altar to turn away from the LORD and to offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, or to sacrifice fellowship offerings on it, may the LORD himself call us to account.

<sup>24</sup>“No! We did it for fear that some day your descendants might say to ours, ‘What do you have to do with the LORD, the God of Israel? <sup>25</sup>The LORD has made the Jordan a boundary between us and you—you Reubenites and Gadites! You have no share in the LORD.’ So your descendants might cause ours to stop fearing the LORD.

<sup>26</sup>“That is why we said, ‘Let us get ready and build an altar—but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.’ <sup>27</sup>On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, ‘You have no share in the LORD.’

<sup>28</sup>“And we said, ‘If they ever say this to us, or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica of the LORD's altar, which our fathers built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you.’

<sup>29</sup>“Far be it from us to rebel against the LORD and turn away from him today by building an altar for burnt offerings, grain offerings and sacrifices, other than the altar of the LORD our God that stands before his tabernacle.”



The Transjordan tribes responded passionately that they were innocent of any rebellion or breach of faith. The entire paragraph shows them to have been innocent of anything malicious: they never intended to use this altar for sacrifices to God himself, let alone to other gods. Rather, they intended it only as a memorial or witness for their children (vv. [26–27](#)). Their concern was the same as that of the tribes west of the Jordan: that the unity of Israel be maintained and that their loyalty be to the Lord alone (vv. [25, 27](#)). This echoes their response, along with that of the other tribes, in [1:16–18](#).

The defense is the climax of the passage in terms of the plot's unfolding because the Transjordan tribes' motivations in building the altar are not revealed until now (vv. [27–28](#)). We learn that their intentions, previously suspected to be sinful, were entirely honorable. The defense is passionate, and this is reflected in the syntax. It is choppy in places, and much repetition is found in these verses. It reflects the agitated state of mind in which the Transjordan tribes found themselves, and we can easily imagine them stumbling breathlessly (and perhaps even indignantly) over their words in order to clarify the matter and justify themselves. Structurally as well, this section represents the heart of the passage, as D. Jobling has pointed out.

- (a) Transjordanians build an altar (v. [10](#))
- (b) Cisjordanians threaten war (v. [12](#))
- (c) Cisjordanians send an embassy (vv. [13–15a](#))
  - (d) Accusatory speech by the embassy (vv. [15b–20](#))
  - (e) Transjordanians' reply (vv. [21–29](#))
  - (d´) Accepting speech by the embassy (vv. [30–31](#))
  - (c´) Return of the embassy to Cisjordan (v. [32](#))
  - (b´) Withdrawal of the Cisjordan threat of war (v. [33](#))
- (a) Transjordanians name the altar (v. [34](#))

[22:21–23](#) The Transjordan tribes began their defense in v. [22](#) by calling God as their witness in the strongest possible terms: three terms for God are used, each set repeated twice. The NIV and most Bible versions have three terms, each one independent of each other: *'ēl*, “God” or “the Mighty One,” *'ēlōhîm*, “God” (which can also be “gods”); and *yhwh*, “the LORD” or “Yahweh.” The Hebrew may be rendered in other ways as well. For example, **NRSV** has “The LORD, God of gods,” the **REB** has “The LORD the God of gods,” and Nelson has “Yahweh is God of gods.” The exact wording here is found again only in [Ps 50:1](#), where the same range of meanings is possible. In [Gen 33:20](#), we find *'ēl 'ēlōhê yiśrā'ēl*, which the NIV text note indicates could be “God, the God of Israel” or “mighty is the God of Israel.”

The piling up of the terms for God here, and their repetition, is unique in the Old Testament, and it indicates the agitated state of mind of the Transjordan tribes and their eagerness to have their position vindicated. They affirmed as forcefully as possible their loyalty to this God. After the string of terms for God is ended, we find an interesting sequence in which the idea of knowing is important: the tribes affirmed that, as for God, “He knows!” Then, they stated that, as for Israel, “it *will* know!” (or, following the NIV, “*let* Israel know!”). In affirming God as they did, these tribes were also appealing to him as their witness to vindicate them. Then their Israelite brethren would know the truth.

Following their opening exclamations, the Transjordan tribes cast themselves on the mercy of their fellow tribes (v. [22b](#)) and on God himself (v. [23](#)). They were willing to suffer whatever consequences would be meted out, if indeed they were guilty of what they were being accused of. They used words that their accusers had used: *mrd*, “rebellion” (cf. vv. [16](#), [18](#), [19](#)[2x]), *m’l*, “to act unfaithfully” (cf. vv. [16](#), [20](#)), and *šwb*, “to turn away” (cf. vv. [16](#), [18](#)). They were willing for God himself to “seek” (*bqš*) them (NIV has “call us into account”). They had nothing to hide, and they were anxious to prove it. Their attitude demonstrated a refreshing transparency, which came from their certainty of their innocence.

The Cisjordan tribes had not mentioned sacrifices or offerings of any kind, but the Transjordan tribes did in their response, five times: vv. [23](#), [26](#), [27](#), [28](#), [29](#). They were well aware of the prohibitions against false worship and sacrifice, and they took care to show that this was not their intent.

[22:24–25](#) Turning the argument away from asserting their innocence, the Transjordan tribes now gave the reason for what they did: it was rooted in their fear of being cut off from their fellow Israelites sometime in the future. The Jordan River formed a natural boundary between them and their brethren, and they feared that their descendants might be rejected by their brothers’ descendants. Worse than that, however, they feared that the Cisjordanian’s descendants might cause the Transjordanian’s descendants to cease their worship of God (v. [25](#)). They would do this by referring to the obvious boundary between them—the Jordan River—and then claiming, by extension, that only those living west of the Jordan, in “the LORD’s land,” had a legitimate portion in the Lord (cf. v. [19](#)). In this way, their descendants might be completely cut off from the blessings promised to all Israel.

The Transjordan tribes’ urgency and sincerity is indicated in many ways, including the content of their words, their insistence in uttering them, and even in the way in which they vowed their innocence. Following the insistent appeal to God in v. [22](#), their words at the beginning of v. [24](#) take on the nature of an oath and can be translated as “Now *surely*, on account of anxiety did we do this!”

In v. [25](#), only the Reubenites and the Gadites are mentioned as targets of the Transjordan tribes’ rejection (i.e., eastern Manasseh was not included with them). This was because eastern Manasseh would have still been considered to have had roots west of the Jordan, by virtue of the Manassites who settled there. Note that ten representatives from Transjordan had been sent (v. [14](#)); these represented all ten of the landed tribes there, including western Manasseh (but excluding the Levites). This highlights the question in the chapter in another way: whether the tribes *east* of the Jordan, outside of Canaan, could legitimately be considered part of Israel. In vv. [32–34](#), only the Reubenites and Gadites are mentioned again, but by this time, their status had been settled: they were truly a part of a unified Israel.

[22:26–29](#) The climax of the passage is now reached. After heightening the suspense yet again, restating what the altar was not intended for, the author reveals the Transjordan tribes’ motivation for building the altar. The altar was to be a witness (*‘ēd*) between the two parts of Israel. It would represent the unity of eastern and western tribes in the proper worship of the Lord at his true sanctuary. They would offer the sacrifices and offerings there, not at the altar they had built. The use of the term “witness” for the first time in the book reveals the legal status of the altar in the minds of the

Transjordan tribes. As a noun, *‘ēd* (or *‘ēdâ*) frequently functions as “a legal witness to the truth of a matter.” Such a witness was usually a person or group (e.g., [Ruth 4:9–11](#); [Isa 8:2](#); [Jer 32:10, 12, 25](#)). In some cases, inanimate objects were called to witness, as we see here and in [Josh 24:27](#), where Joshua erected a great stone to be a witness to the people's renewal of their covenant with God. God himself called the heavens and the earth to be witnesses of whether or not his people would choose to obey him ([Deut 30:19](#)).

The altar that the Transjordan tribes had built is revealed in v. [28](#) not to have been a true altar at all, but only a replica (*tabnît*) of the true altar. True worship was in no jeopardy; this imitation altar was merely to serve as a reminder to the Transjordan tribes of the true altar at which they would offer their true worship of God and as a reminder and a witness to *all* the tribes of the unity between them.

The altar's location should have been a clue from the beginning as to its purpose. Significantly, the Transjordan tribes did not build it on their side of the Jordan, but across the river from where they would live. It served little useful purpose to them there; for it to have been used regularly to offer sacrifices, it would need to have been east of the river. Here, its imposing size comes into play (cf. v. [10](#)). There it would stand, west of the Jordan, out of practical reach for regular offerings, yet functioning as a silent reminder of the true altar at the Lord's sanctuary. It beckoned the Transjordan tribes to cross the Jordan to offer their sacrifices at the altar of which it was only a copy. And when these tribes reached the climactic point in their defense where they revealed the altar's nature as a copy, they told their brethren to “look” at it (v. [28](#)). The word for “look” here (*r’h*) and the word for “appearance” in v. [10](#) (*mar’eh*) come from the same root, and so the Cisjordan tribes are invited to look at it and its imposing appearance to see what the Transjordan tribes would see in years to come. The reason for its imposing size is thus revealed.

The Transjordan tribes' final words are another emphatic denial that they would ever contemplate offering sacrifices of any type except at the true altar at the tabernacle (v. [29](#)). They again used the vocabulary that had been used against them: they would not *rebel* against the Lord nor *turn away* from him (see the comments above on vv. [22–23](#)). Thus, their denial of any wrongdoing comes to a close. Their innocence and proper intentions could not be doubted.

#### (4) *The Crisis Resolved* ([22:30–34](#))

**<sup>30</sup>When Phinehas the priest and the leaders of the community—the heads of the clans of the Israelites—heard what Reuben, Gad and Manasseh had to say, they were pleased. <sup>31</sup>And Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, said to Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, “Today we know that the LORD is with us, because you have not acted unfaithfully toward the LORD in this matter. Now you have rescued the Israelites from the LORD's hand.”**

**<sup>32</sup>Then Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest, and the leaders returned to Canaan from their meeting with the Reubenites and Gadites in Gilead and reported to the Israelites. <sup>33</sup>They were glad to hear the report and praised God. And they talked no more about going to war against them to devastate the country where the Reubenites and the Gadites lived.**

**<sup>34</sup>And the Reubenites and the Gadites gave the altar this name: A Witness Between Us that the LORD is God.**

The Transjordan tribes' impassioned defense quickly defused the crisis, satisfying the people's representatives. The response of Phinehas and the leaders occupies only one verse (v. [30](#)), an abrupt ending to a crisis that has been described in twenty verses (vv. [10–29](#)). The passage concludes with assurances and peace on all sides and a formalizing of the altar's purpose with a name for it (vv. [31–34](#)). The unity of the nation is preserved, the place of the Transjordan tribes assured, and a civil war and the Lord's punishment is avoided.

[22:31](#) The threat of the Lord's wrath being poured out on the entire nation, which was a very real fear (vv. [18, 20](#)), was now averted. The Cisjordan tribes were now assured that their eastern brothers had not been acting faithlessly (*m'l*). In a very real sense, then, they had “rescued” the nation from catastrophe.

[22:32–33](#) The conclusion of the episode is signaled by the leaders' return home in v. [32](#). The formal identification of Phinehas—“Phinehas son of Eleazar, the priest”—helps to bring matters to a close, as well, echoing the way in which he is introduced in the account (v. [13](#)). Things came to a happy conclusion, with the western tribes rejoicing and praising God when they heard the news (v. [33](#)). The war thus avoided would have been a fearsome thing: the word used here—“devastate” (*šht*)—denotes complete destruction and ruination; this is the only occurrence in Joshua of this otherwise common word. Given that this term indicates destruction and despoiling of cities and property as well as people, the potential war would have been far more destructive than most of the encounters with the Canaanites, where the term is not used and where only people were killed, for the most part.

Only two of the Transjordan tribes are referred to now in vv. [32–34](#): Reuben and Gad. Eastern Manasseh, which was clearly also allied with them (see vv. [1, 7, 10, 13](#), etc.), is not mentioned, for reasons noted above (see v. [25](#)).

[22:34](#) The climax of the chapter reveals the full meaning of the altar: it was to testify to God himself. Previously, the account had revealed that it was to be a witness (vv. [27, 28](#)), but the earlier verses do not reveal the precise nature or function of the “witness.” Now we see that it was to affirm that Yahweh was God. It was a symbol of Israel's national unity, and this symbol was to testify to Israel's God. In a similar vein, Jesus told his disciples that people would know they were his disciples by seeing their love for each other, that is, their love would point people to Christ ([John 13:35](#)).

The general thrust of the verse is clear, communicating what we have just noted. However, the specifics are more difficult. The most intelligible reading restores the word *‘ēd*, “witness,” after the word “altar,” yielding the following reading: “and the Reubenites and the Gadites called the altar ‘Witness,’ for it is a witness between us that the LORD is God.” This reading is followed by most modern Bible versions ([NASB, REB, NRSV, NLT](#)). The NIV understands the verse slightly differently, with a lengthy name as the title of the altar.