

Assumptions

The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if it be in rebellion, or if in transgression against the LORD, (save us not this day,)... And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the children of Manasseh, This day we perceive that the LORD is among us, because ye have not committed this trespass against the LORD: now ye have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.
Joshua 22:22, 31

This account is a reminder of a common aspect of human nature that can be the cause of untold conflicts if not put in check. After the years of conquest in Canaan had finally ended, and the enemies of Israel there were generally subdued (Joshua 21:43-45), in this chapter Joshua released the warriors from the tribes that had been given inheritance on the east side of Jordan – Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh – so that they could return to their homes and families there. They had kept their promise to Moses and Joshua to leave all behind and come to help the remaining tribes fight for their inheritances on the west side of Jordan. As they returned, they had built a huge altar on the bank of Jordan where they crossed that resembled the actual altar in the tabernacle in Shiloh. Very quickly, as word of this structure reached the western tribes, they reversed from blessing the eastern warriors to preparing to go to war against them, assuming the new altar was erected as an alternative to the official one in Shiloh. As we read the account, it reveals how the mere hearsay of the altar at Jordan had been extrapolated into a number of assumptions, which had been built upon past experiences of the Israelites, culminating in the final assumption of rebellion by the eastern tribes. The account demonstrates that all of the assumptions made were wrong, and could have caused a civil war among God's people. Fortunately, before going to war, the western tribes sent representatives to question the inferred rebellion. As a result, as we see in our text, the assumptions were all proven wrong, and a tragedy was prevented.

All of God's people need to learn the lesson of this chapter and apply it freely in our own experience. While we all are averse to having our own motives misjudged, when the roles are reversed, it seems that human nature is predisposed to make wrong assumptions about the motives of others' actions. Sometimes there is even past experience where the assumptions were applicable, but may not be in the present. Then, often the wrong assumptions lead to other wrong assumptions, to the point that "war" is determined (see James 4:1-2), and conflict results from a false construct. Let us learn instead to give the "benefit of the doubt," and when necessary obtain clarification rather than assume. It is notable that the Israelites were all pleased that their assumptions were proven false. May that be our desire, and may the Lord fill us all with a lasting dose of Ephesians 4, Romans 12, and Matthew 18, for the application of this passage written aforetime for our learning.