

Deuteronomy 27:1–8

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Moses and the elders prescribe the rituals to be performed when Israel arrives in the Promised Land.

Moses has concluded the exposition of the Ten Commandments and a renewal/ratification of God's covenant provision with Israel in chapters 5 – 26. Now he proceeds to instruct the current generation about the preparations for the covenant renewal ceremony. This ceremony will involve the entire nation of Israel, to be celebrated upon entering the Promised Land. To do this, Moses, *with the elders of Israel, commanded the people* (v. 1). The *elders* in ancient Israel were respected men who served as local authorities in their towns and among their tribes. They were well known for their maturity and wisdom (Deuteronomy 1:13).

They accompanied Moses to teach the Israelites to *keep all the commandments which I command you today*. The Israelites were required to keep all the instructions the Suzerain (Ruler) God gave to them in the book of Deuteronomy. This was the covenant (or agreement) between the King and His people. They were to obey all these covenantal laws to live as loyal vassals to their Suzerain because it is only through obedience that they could receive His blessings. Many of the blessings were a practical matter, that doing what God instructs is for their good (Deuteronomy 10:13). Upon reflection it seems obvious that a society where everyone tells the truth and lovingly cares for their neighbor will be greatly prosperous. But God also promised providential blessings in addition to natural consequences (Exodus 23:24-29).

In the verses that follow, Moses and the elders described the covenant ceremony that the people of Israel were to perform once they arrived in the Promised Land. The description contains two parts:

- A summary of the ritual (vv. 2–3)
- Specific instructions regarding the ritual (vv. 4–8).

The ritual was to be performed *on the day when the Israelites crossed the Jordan to the land which the LORD their God was giving them* (v. 2). This ritual was comprised of three specific actions. The Israelites were to:

- *Set up for themselves large stones*. They were to serve as a monument (Exodus 24:4 – 8).
- *Coat them with lime*. The *lime* could have been what is now known as gypsum. In the ancient Near East (including Egypt), this was a common way of posting public pronouncements. This would have made the stones white and a good background on which to *write*.
- *Write on them all the words of this law* (v. 3). This could be a reference to just the Ten Commandments, but it could have included the blessings and curses, the parts of the Law dealing with civil matters, or the entire book of Deuteronomy.

These stones were to be a testimony to Israel of the LORD's faithfulness in giving them the land of Canaan. They were also to serve as a reminder to both the Israelites and the Canaanites that the law of the LORD would be the standard of goodness and truth in the Promised Land. It would remind Israel of the covenant they had agreed to follow between themselves and their Suzerain (Ruler) God, together with the blessings and cursings thereof.

Another purpose was so that they might *enter the land which the LORD their God gave them*. Accomplishing this ceremony appears to be a condition for Israel to *enter the land* and take possession of it. The entire nation was to acknowledge their covenant relationship with God, and their responsibility in keeping the covenant before God would bless them to take the land.

This was *a land flowing with milk and honey*, another way of saying that the land was fertile and productive (Deuteronomy 6:3, 11:9). It was the land that *the LORD, the God of their fathers, promised* them. The land of Canaan was God's gift to Israel. It was secured in the promises that the Suzerain God made to Israel's fathers—Abraham (Genesis 12, 15:18), Isaac (Genesis 26:3), and Jacob (Genesis 35:12). These forefathers received the promise, but the generation entering the land saw its fulfillment.

Vv. 4–8 provide specific details relating to the performance of the rituals *when they cross the Jordan* (v. 4). He commanded God's people to *set up these stones on Mount Ebal and coat them with lime* to make them suitable

to write upon them the covenant between themselves and their Suzerain God. The place called *Mount Ebal* lies to the north of Shechem, about 48 kilometers (30 miles) north of Jerusalem (See map in the Additional Resources section).

Shechem was a very important place in Israel's history. Abram built his first altar to the LORD there (Genesis 12:6 – 7), and Jacob lived there for a while (Genesis 33:18). Also, as one of the highest mountains in the region, *Mount Ebal* was important for Israel because it allowed them to view most of the Promised Land from its summit.

It was there on Mount Ebal that the Israelites also were commanded to *build an altar to the LORD their God, an altar of stones* (v. 5). They were not to *wield an iron tool on the stones*, meaning that they were to *build the altar of the LORD of uncut stones* (v. 6). God's people were to use stones that were in their natural state to build the altar of the LORD, not stones that were cut or formed by tools of a stonemason. This might have been to symbolize that man is to follow what God says, without adding to it or taking away (Revelation 22:18-19).

Once the altar was built, the Israelites were to *offer on it burnt offerings to the LORD their God*. The word translated *burnt offering* (Hebrew "ֹלָה") refers to "that which goes up," as in smoke. The worshiper who brought this kind of offerings laid his hands on the animals to declare that the gift belonged to him and that the benefits of the burnt offerings would be his (Leviticus 1). The worshiper had to offer an animal *without defect*, that is, with no physical abnormalities (Leviticus 1:3; 1:10). To this point, Israel had been offering burnt offerings upon the bronze altar associated with the tabernacle. Here, they were to make offerings upon Mount Ebal upon an altar made of stones.

In addition, the Israelites were to *sacrifice peace offerings on the altar of the LORD* (v. 7). The *peace offerings* were sacrificial meals shared by the worshiper, people, and priests. The worshiper would make the sacrifice to either express gratitude to God for blessings received or to fulfill a vow (Leviticus 7:11–18). The Passover lamb was a peace offering, symbolizing Jesus's death bringing peace between God and humanity (Romans 5:1). This offering was presented sometime after the burnt offering, symbolizing God's fellowship with His covenant people.

Thus, as the Israelites presented the *burnt offerings* and the *peace offerings* on the altar, they were asked to *eat there and rejoice before the LORD their God*.

Entering the land was to be a time of celebration. Even though many battles lay ahead, they were to *rejoice* that God had brought them this far, and given them this amazing opportunity to trust Him, and take possession of that which He had granted (Ephesians 2:10).

Moses concluded this section by emphasizing what was stated earlier in v. 3. He told Israel again that they were to *write on the stones all the words of this law* (v. 8). Here, he added that *the words* were to be written *very distinctly*. The word translated as *very distinctly* occur also in Deuteronomy 1:5, where Moses said that he undertook to *expound* the law—that is, to make it plain and easy to understand. The words of God’s law were to be written very clearly on the limewashed stones so that anyone could read and understand them. This indicates that literacy was expected to be widespread in God’s new nation.

The command to make an altar and to offer sacrifices on it here in Deuteronomy served to remind the Israelites of God’s earlier command in the book of Exodus. There, the Suzerain God commanded the people, saying,

“You shall make an altar of earth for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you. If you make an altar of stone for Me, you shall not build it of cut stones, for if you wield your tool on it, you will profane it.”

(Exodus 20:24–25)

Biblical Text:

¹Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people, saying, “Keep all the commandments which I command you today. ²So it shall be on the day when you cross the Jordan to the land which the Lord your God gives you, that you shall set up for yourself large stones and coat them with lime ³and write on them all the words of this law, when you cross over, so that you may enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, promised you. ⁴So it shall be when you cross the Jordan, you shall set up on Mount Ebal, these stones, as I am commanding you today, and you shall coat them with lime. ⁵Moreover, you shall build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall not wield an iron *tool* on them. ⁶You shall build the altar of the Lord your God of uncut stones, and you shall offer on it burnt offerings to

the Lord your God; ⁷and you shall sacrifice peace offerings and eat there, and rejoice before the Lord your God. ⁸You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very distinctly.”