

Joshua 8:30-35

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/josh/josh-8/joshua-830-35/>

After the Israelites' victory at Ai, Joshua climbs Mount Ebal, where the LORD renewed His covenant with His people inside the Promised Land. This was done in response to the command of Moses in Deuteronomy 27:1-13.

After the Israelites had conquered the town of Ai and secured the surrounding territory, *Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel* (v. 30). It was He who gave them the victory over their enemies (Joshua 8:1, 7). In response, what they needed to do was to obey Him fully (Joshua 8:8).

The altar was to be built *in* (possibly “at” or “on”) *Mount Ebal*. Mount Ebal is located over thirty miles north of Ai. See the map in the Maps and Charts section (courtesy of Thomas Constable’s notes on Joshua).

It is slightly over 3000 feet in elevation. It was first mentioned in Deuteronomy 11:29, where the LORD told Moses to put the curses found in the Law of Moses (including the ones found in Deuteronomy 28). It was in nearby Shechem (see the map above) that God had told Abraham that He would give him the Promised Land (Genesis 12:7). Later, Jacob buried his idols there (Genesis 35:2).

Joshua and the people of Israel built the altar on Mount Ebal because in Deuteronomy 27:4, *Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the sons of Israel* (v. 31) to do so. They built it to the specifications *written in the book of the law of Moses*, a reference to the instructions the LORD gave Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 20:25).

It was to be *an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron tool* (Deuteronomy 27:5). The reason for this was probably to prevent processed stones used in pagan worship from being used in the worship of the covenant LORD.

It was on this altar that the Israelites *offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings*. The *burnt offerings* were to atone for sin (Leviticus 1:3), and the *peace offerings* were given for forgiveness (Leviticus 4:31) and thanksgiving (Leviticus 7:11). The people had performed these sacrifices when the Law was first given to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:5, 32:6). By making the same sacrifices at this time, they performed a covenant renewal ceremony, this time in the Promised Land.

In addition to the sacrifices made in the previous verse, *Joshua wrote there on the stones a copy of the law of Moses* (v. 32). This was the Law *which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel*. This could mean that the Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, were written on the stones. The fact that all this was done “in the presence of the sons of Israel” means that no Israelite could use the excuse that they did not

know the Mosaic Law. In fact, it showed them that the Law that had ruled them during the exodus would also govern them when living in the Promised Land.

The next part of the covenant renewal ceremony took place when *all Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark* (v. 33). These people were at the top levels of Israelite society. The “elders” were leaders over various civic groups of Israelites. The “officers” (Hebrew “shōṭēr,” translated “foremen” in Exodus 5:6) were lower-level supervisors of the people, probably subordinate to the elders (Deuteronomy 31:28). The “judges” (lit. “those who judge”) refer to those who determined verdicts in mainly civil and domestic cases (Deuteronomy 1:16).

They were placed *before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord*. The “Levitical priests” were responsible for the maintenance of the tabernacle and its courtyard as well as the teaching and counseling of the people. During the exodus, they camped around the tabernacle and acted as a buffer between the tabernacle and the other tribes.

Along with those in leadership, the ceremony included the lowest and most vulnerable of Israelite society – *the stranger*. The “stranger” was a non-Israelite who became a believer in the LORD and lived among the Israelites. They, *as well as the native*, were required to be at the ceremony to renew the Mosaic Covenant.

The people were arranged according to what Moses had commanded before their entry into the Promised Land, which meant that *half of them stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, exactly as Moses the servant of the Lord had given command at first to bless the people of Israel* (see the detailed instructions for this ceremony in our commentary on [Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:11-13](#)).

Then, after building the altar on Mount Ebal (v. 31), writing the law of Moses on the stones (v. 32), and arranging the Israelites between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim (v. 33), Joshua *read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law* (v. 34). The “blessing and the curse” is probably a reference to Deuteronomy 28.

Joshua here is carrying out the ceremony ordered by Moses prior to his death, making it clear to Israel that it was now up to them whether they would experience the blessings God promised for walking in obedience to His law, or gain the cursings from disobeying the law. God makes clear the consequences of their choice, just as He did with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:16-17). Much of the blessing would be the practical positive results from a community choosing to love one another, working together in collaboration and cooperation, according to God’s Law. Similarly, if they chose to follow other gods, which provided moral justification for human exploitation, the negative result on society is also predictable.

Finally, Joshua’s total dedication to the LORD and to Moses can be seen in the fact that *there was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel* (v. 35). He was very precise in his obedience to what the LORD through Moses had commanded them to do once they enter the Promised Land.

To sum up, this covenant renewal ceremony established the LORD (Yahweh) as “the God of Israel” in the sight of the Canaanites as well as the Israelites. It showed the Canaanites that their land belonged to the LORD God of Israel and His covenant people. It also reinforced the importance of the Israelites’ total obedience to their covenant LORD, because their enjoyment of the land depended upon it.

Biblical Text

³⁰ Then Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, ³¹ just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the sons of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron *tool*; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. ³² He wrote there on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written, in the presence of the sons of Israel. ³³ All Israel with their elders and officers and their judges were standing on both sides of the ark before the Levitical priests who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, the stranger as well as the native. Half of them *stood* in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had given command at first to bless the people of Israel. ³⁴ Then afterward he read all the words of the law, the blessing and the curse, according to all that is written in the book of the law. ³⁵ There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones and the strangers who were living among them.