

# Elements of Israel's Worship

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Joshua 8:30-35 records the historical event when Joshua led the nation of Israel up to the place that God designated for a covenant-renewal ceremony.

**Joshua 8:30-35** [NASB] <sup>30</sup> Then Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, in Mount Ebal, <sup>31</sup> 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. <sup>32</sup> 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. <sup>33</sup> 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. <sup>34</sup> 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. <sup>35</sup> 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.

When Joshua finished the victory at Ai, at the directive of God, he took them to the central hill country for a special worship ceremony to remember and re-commit themselves to covenantal obedience before Yahweh, their faithful, covenant-keeping God. ***In this text, nine elements of Israel's worship comes to light.***

## **1. Israel Built an Altar to Meet with God (v.30a)**

In Deuteronomy 27, God commanded Israel through the mouth of Moses that when they entered the Promised Land, they must travel to Mt. Ebal to recommit themselves to the Lord and to follow His Laws (27:2-8). The first thing that Joshua did was build an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel. He built an altar so that he might lead the people of God in the worship of God.

## **2. Israel Went to the Precise Location in Obedience to God (v.30b-31a)**

The precise location that God sovereignly designated for this ceremony to occur was not unspecified. God declared that they must read the Word on Mt. Ebal (Deut 27:4). God not only determined what they should do but *how* and *where* they must do it. God prescribes how His people should worship Him. Perhaps Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim were chosen because they stand in the middle of the Promised Land. From the tops of these hills, one could see the far recesses of the Promised Land. Regardless, Joshua led Israel to the precise location where God had decreed so that His people may worship Him.

## **3. Israel Used Uncut Stones Signifying an Unfiled Altar to God (v.31b)**

The altar that they constructed was according to the Book of the Law. It was an altar of uncut stones on which no man had wielded an iron tool (Ex 20:25). This eliminates any human boasting since all God requires is uncut stones. No human tool, instrument, or effort can add to what God requires. God does not need human hands to add to what He provides.

## **4. Israel Offered Burnt Offerings Since God Requires Death to Propitiate His Wrath (v. 31c)**

On the newly constructed altar, Joshua and Israel offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. The animals that they killed died to appease the anger of God. The animal that dies in the place of the sinner is accepted by God and it makes atonement on his behalf (Lev 1:4). Thus, Joshua recognized that God's wrath quickly kindles when

His people sin and thus blood must be spilt so as to appease God's righteous wrath. Joshua led Israel in this worship ceremony of substitutionary atonement.

### **5. Israel Wrote the Law on Stones Showing the Eternality of God's Truth (v.32a)**

Joshua took stones and wrote on them the law of Moses. He wrote it down in the presence of Israel for all to see. Joshua wrote down the law of Moses on stones because this is what God commanded (Deut 27:2-3) but it also shows that God's truth is as durable as a stone. It cannot be broken or altered. It is durable and unshakeable. In the Old Covenant, the Law of God was written on stone, but in the New Covenant believer, the Word of God is written in the believer's heart (2 Cor 3:3).

### **6. Israel Welcomed the Stranger and the Alien Since God's Love Welcomes All to Draw Near (v.33)**

All Israel came together for this time of worship with the elders, the officers, their judges, the priests and even the strangers and the natives. One expects the priests, the Israelites, the judges, the officers to stand there. But the strangers also found a place. What an expression of God's amazing kindness that the stranger could be with the people of Israel to hear the law of Moses read. Those who are far off are able to draw near by the grace of God (cf. Eph 2:13).

### **7. Israel Publicly Read All the Words of God's Book of the Law (v.34)**

While all the nation gathered before him, Joshua read all the words of the law — the blessings (Deut 28) and the curses (Deut 27-28). Joshua publicly, verbally, loudly proclaimed the law of God according to all that is written in the book of the Law. So important was the law of God that Joshua deemed it necessary to gather the entire congregation and publicly, verbally, carefully, and deliberately read all that God had to say to His people. Behold the importance of the public, corporate, verbal, intentional reading of God's Word to God's people.

### **8. Israel Read, Taught, and Declared All of God's Word (v.35a)**

As Joshua read the law of Moses to God's people, he read *all* the words of the law (v.34a). Then the text explicitly reiterates this when it states that there was not a word of all that Moses had commanded which Joshua did not read (v.35a). The emphasis here is upon the extent of what Joshua read. He read *all* that Moses had commanded in the Word. He read all of it. So much did he read that not even a word of all that Moses had commanded that he eliminated. All of God's Word must be read, taught, declared, and preached to God's people. God's leaders must declare the "whole counsel" of God (Acts 20:27). Note he read from both the blessings *and* the curses. All of God's Word must be read and brought to light for God's people to hear and apply.

### **9. Israel Included All Peoples of All Ages to Hear God's Word — Including Women and Young Children (v.35b)**

The final point worthy of mention here occurs as Joshua read from the law of Moses. He read the Scriptures before all the assembly of Israel with the women and the little ones (lit. *small children*) who were present to hear from God's truth. The same Word of God is needed for all the people of God. It is the same gospel that saves the oldest person and the youngest person. The same Word of God must be heard from the most mature or immature person. From the simplest child to the most scholarly academician, the same word of God must be read in their hearing. This shows the importance of permitting the children to be present in the corporate worship when the Word is read, taught, and applied. The little children must hear the word just like mature people must hear the word to be saved. There is no difference.