

Joshua 8: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Joshua chapter 8 And the Lord said to Joshua, Do not fear and do not be dismayed. Take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai. See, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land.

And you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king. Only its spoil and its livestock you shall take as plunder for yourselves. Lay an ambush against the city, behind it.

So Joshua and all the fighting men arose to go up to Ai. And Joshua chose thirty thousand mighty men of valour, and sent them out by night. And he commanded them, Behold, you shall lie in ambush against the city, behind it.

Do not go very far from the city, but all of you remain ready. And I and all the people who are with me will approach the city. And when they come out against us, just as before, we shall flee before them.

And they will come out after us, until we have drawn them away from the city. For they will say, They are fleeing from us, just as before. So we will flee before them. Then you shall rise up from the ambush, and seize the city.

[1 : 0 4] For the Lord your God will give it into your hand. And as soon as you have taken the city, you shall set the city on fire. You shall do according to the word of the Lord. See, I have commanded you.

So Joshua sent them out. And they went to the place of ambush, and lay between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai. But Joshua spent that night among the people. Joshua arose early in the morning, and mustered the people, and went up, he and the elders of Israel, before the people to Ai.

And all the fighting men who were with him went up, and drew near before the city, and encamped on the north side of Ai, with a ravine between them and Ai. He took about five thousand men, and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city.

So they stationed the forces, the main encampment that was north of the city, and its rear guard west of the city. But Joshua spent that night in the valley. And as soon as the king of Ai saw this, he and all his people, the men of the city, hurried and went out early to the appointed place, toward the Araba, to meet Israel in battle.

But he did not know that there was an ambush against him behind the city. And Joshua and all Israel pretended to be beaten before them, and fled in the direction of the wilderness. So all the people who were in the city were called together to pursue them.

[2 : 1 8] And as they pursued Joshua, they were drawn away from the city. Not a man was left in Ai, or Bethel, who did not go out after Israel. They left the city open, and pursued Israel.

Then the Lord said to Joshua, Stretch out the javelin that is in your hand toward Ai, for I will give it into your hand. And Joshua stretched out the javelin that was in his hand toward the city.

And the men in the ambush rose quickly out of their place. And as soon as he had stretched out his hand, they ran and entered the city and captured it. And they hurried to set the city on fire. So when the men of Ai looked back, behold, the smoke of the city went up to heaven.

And they had no power to flee this way or that. For the people who fled to the wilderness turned back against the pursuers. And when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had captured the city, and that the smoke of the city went up, then they turned back and struck down the men of Ai. And the others came out from the city against them. So they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side, and some on that side. And Israel struck them down until there was left none that survived or escaped.

[3 : 2 2] But the king of Ai they took alive and brought him near to Joshua. When Israel had finished killing all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them to

the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and struck it down with the edge of the sword.

And all who fell that day, both men and women, were twelve thousand, all the people of Ai. But Joshua did not draw back his hand with which he stretched out the javelin, until he had devoted all the inhabitants of Ai to destruction.

Only the livestock and the spoil of that city Israel took as their plunder, according to the word of the Lord that he commanded Joshua. So Joshua burnt Ai and made it forever a heap of ruins, as it is to this day.

And he hanged the king of Ai on a tree until evening. And at sunset Joshua commanded, and they took his body down from the tree, and threw it at the entrance of the gate of the city, and raised over it a great heap of stones, which stands there to this day.

At that time Joshua built an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of uncut stones, upon which no man has wielded an iron tool.

[4 : 38] And they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed peace offerings. And there, in the presence of the people of Israel, he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written. And all Israel, sojourner as well as native-born, with their elders and officers and their judges, stood on opposite sides of the ark before the Levitical priests, who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, half of them in front of Mount Gerizim, and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded at the first, to bless the people of Israel.

And 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. There was not a word of all that Moses commanded that Joshua did not read before all the assembly of Israel, and the women, and the little ones, and the sojourners who lived among them.

Joshua chapter 8 is a one piece with chapter 7, continuing the account of Ai. Israel suffered a humiliating defeat there as a result of Achan's sin, but Achan was destroyed with his family.

The evil in their midst now dealt with, Israel is in a position to go up and take the city. Joshua's strategy for taking Ai exploits the tactics of the men of Ai from the preceding chapter, when they had pursued Israel away from the town.

This is the lengthiest description of a battle in the book of Joshua. It's difficult to piece together the exact order and interrelation of the events in the battle. Were there two ambush forces sent out on different days, the first in verses 3-9, and the second in verses 11-13?

[6 : 10] Was one of the ambush forces 30,000 men strong? How would a force of such a great size hide? Were they hanging around for two and a half days before springing the trap?

There are a number of possibilities here. First, perhaps there were two separate ambush groups, with one of 30,000 men and one of 5,000 men. This is a bit strange though, because they're dealing with a town of only 12,000 people, from which most of the men would have departed.

Perhaps the extra men were stationed there to deal with enemies from Bethel. Perhaps there is a copyist error, and the 30,000 men are actually the same group as the 5,000.

Others have suggested that perhaps the numbers aren't as large as we think, and that it refers not to 30,000 and 5,000, but to 30 units and 5 units.

Perhaps the 30,000 men are the main fighting force with Joshua. This is the approach that I take. We could then read the narrative as follows. Verses 11-13 expand on verses 3-9, with verse 14 then resuming the narrative.

[7 : 13] The events play out in the following order. First, Joshua sends a group of 5,000 elite fighting men to ambush Ai to its west. Joshua goes with the main body of the 30,000 troops to the north of the city and spends the night there.

Then, going to the city in the morning, they are seen by the king of Ai, who brings out the men of Ai to meet them in battle. The Israelites pretend to flee, drawing the men of Ai, and the trap is sprung. Joshua then stretches out his javelin, and the 5,000 men take the city and burn it, taking the cattle and spoil for themselves, which they had been allowed to do this time. The king of Ai and his men then are defeated, and the king of Ai is killed and his body publicly humiliated, before it is buried under a heap of stones for a testimony.

This, it seems to me, is the best way of fitting all the information together. Joshua chapter 8 begins with an assurance to Joshua and Israel that the Lord is with them, and that he will give the city of Ai

into their hands.

After the events of the preceding chapter, they are to be encouraged, to take heart, not to be afraid. On this occasion, the Lord grants them the right to take the spoil for themselves from the city.

[8 : 24] This wasn't a right that they could just assume. The Lord gave it to them as a special dispensation on this occasion. The ambush forces situate themselves between Bethel and Ai, and we should have a thrill of remembrance at this point, as this place had been mentioned once before in Scripture, in Genesis 12 and 13, where it is the second place where Abraham goes to in the land.

In verses 6 to 8 of chapter 12, Abraham passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the Oak of Moreh. At that time, the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, To your offspring I will give this land.

So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country, on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.

And there he built an altar to the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord. He returns to this site in Genesis chapter 13, verses 3 to 4, and it seems that it is there that he parts ways from Lot, and the land is promised to him.

And he journeyed on from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abraham called upon the name of the Lord.

[9 : 37] So Israel is now treading on, and about to take land that had been promised to their father Abraham centuries before. The men of Ai are caught in Joshua's ruse, and they're joined by the men of Bethel, who presumably recognise that they need to fight with the men of Ai, as they are the next city in the Israelites' path.

Joshua is instructed by the Lord to stretch out the javelin in his hand towards Ai. The men in ambush rise up and overwhelm the city. And all of this is reminiscent of Exodus chapter 17, verses 8 to 13, when Israel fought against Amalek, and Moses held out his hand with the staff of the Lord in it.

Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. So Moses said to Joshua, Choose for us men, and go out and fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand.

So Joshua did as Moses told him, and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed.

But Moses' hands grew weary, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side.

[10 : 49] So his hands were steady until the going down of the sun, and Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the sword. But this story reminds me of one even more than that. It reminds me of the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea, in Exodus chapter 14, verses 22 to 28.

And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

And in the morning watched, the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily.

And the Egyptians said, Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians. Then the Lord said to Moses, Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.

So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea.

[11 : 58] The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen. Of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. In both of these cases, a force pursuing Israel, seemingly enjoying the upper hand, is tempted into a position of mortal danger.

The Lord instructs Moses to stretch out his hand bearing his staff over the sea, and it returns, overwhelming the Egyptians. The Lord instructs Joshua to stretch out his hand bearing his javelin,

and the ambush force overwhelms the city of Ai.

The fact that the Lord instructs Joshua to do this, as he instructed Moses concerning his hand bearing the staff, suggests that this is not just a clever military strategy, or a military signal on Joshua's part, but that something more is going on here.

Perhaps we could even connect the smoke of the city, sending the people of Ai into a panic, with the pillar of cloud and fire. As at the Red Sea, the entirety of the opposing force, no man excluded, is drawn into the trap.

Israel then strikes down all the people of Ai, men, women and children with the sword. Joshua continues to stretch out his hand until Ai is completely destroyed, much as Moses continued to hold up his hand with the staff until the Amalekites were defeated.

[13:13] The javelin then seems to function as more than simply a human signal. Rather, Joshua's javelin is an equivalent to Moses' rod. If Moses was the shepherd of Israel bearing a shepherd's rod, Joshua is the javelin bearing warrior.

Joshua is the one holding out the javelin, rather than directly participating in the fighting, is Joshua taking on the role that Moses played in Exodus chapter 17, when Joshua was the one leading the people in the actual fighting of the battle.

Ai was burned and reduced to rubble, and the king of Ai was exposed by hanging, then taken down by sunset, according to the instruction of Deuteronomy chapter 21, verses 22 to 23.

Like Achan, the body of the king of Ai is then covered up by a heap of stones. The symmetry between the two men and between Achan and the city of Ai itself is important.

The victory at Ai is one in which Israel is more directly active than they were in the defeat of Jericho, when the Lord brought the walls down. We might pause here to reflect for a moment upon the troubling character of the complete destruction that the Lord brought upon the Canaanites.

[14:19] This was a destruction that wasn't only a complete destruction of the men, but also included the women and the children. The Lord declared that the sins of the Canaanites were especially heinous.

They were guilty of abominable sexual sins such as incest and bestiality, ritual prostitution, and they also performed child sacrifice to their false gods. The Lord did not bring destruction upon them immediately in the days of Abraham.

He allowed centuries to pass for their sins to reach their full height without repentance before they were cut off. Israel had to wait for a long time before the Lord sent them to destroy the Canaanites and when he did it was very clear that the sort of warfare they were called to in the case of the Canaanites was categorically different from that which they were to practice elsewhere.

As with Pharaoh, the Lord also hardened the Canaanites' hearts so that they stubbornly sought to make war with Israel to their own doom. In Joshua chapter 11 verses 19 to 20, The Canaanites knew well in advance that Israel was coming.

They had heard about the events in Egypt. They knew that the Most High God was with them and they presumably knew that as a result they were facing judgment for their sins and they could have learned all of this from paying attention to Egypt.

[15:54] Some Canaanites did respond. Rahab turned to assist Israel and became part of the nation. The Gibeonites in the following chapter sought to deceive Israel and ended up being spared.

There are some societies that have given themselves over to such great evil and to such a great extent that they place themselves in jeopardy of a general death sentence. While we should very rightly question whether for instance firebombing Dresden or the dropping of the atom bombs on Japan were justified actions on the Allied Nations part, it is arguable to believe that nations that had collectively given themselves over to such extreme evil called down a holocaust upon themselves and all their members, men, women and children, nations that give themselves to such wickedness put themselves in a terrifying position.

As before the flood, evil can be so rampant that destruction is general. This is certainly the sort of way in which scripture frames matters concerning the Canaanites. The absolute destruction of the Canaanites is a judicial action of the Holy God, an act of dread justice, a death sentence upon a culture, with Israel as the law's instrument.

It is not provoked by the mere ethnic identity of the people of the land, but solely on account of their moral character and their continued wickedness without repentance. Canaanites could join Israel if they repented.

We read of characters like Rahab, Uriah the Hittite and Ornan the Jebusite as righteous people in the land, people living among Israel. Conversely, Israelites and Israelite cities who gave themselves over to the way of the Canaanites suffered every bit as devastating a fate as the Canaanites themselves, as we see in the example of Achan.

[17 : 38] It is also imperative to notice that Israel did not take this right of judgment upon themselves. Rather, the Lord required it of them and punished them when they fell short of it. The destruction of the Canaanites then was not merely for Israel's national self-interest.

It was for the will of God with Israel as the Lord's servant. Joshua chapter 8 ends with the performance of a covenant ceremony that Moses had instructed Israel to perform back in Deuteronomy chapter 27 verses 1 to 8 and 11 to 13.

Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people saying, Keep the whole commandment that I command you today. And on the day you cross over the Jordan to the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and plaster them with plaster.

And you shall write on them all the words of this law when you cross over to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your fathers, has promised you.

And when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones concerning which I command you today on Mount Ebal. And you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones.

[18 : 48] You shall wield no iron tool on them. You shall build an altar to the Lord your God of uncut stones. And you shall offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God. And you shall sacrifice peace offerings and shall eat there.

And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God. And you shall write on the stones all the words of this law very plainly. That day, Moses charged the people, saying, When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin.

And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse, Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. This ritual was performed near Shechem, between the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. The blessing and the curse were then declared, the blessing from Gerizim and the curse from Ebal, as Deuteronomy chapter 11 verse 29 prescribed. This was a general covenant ritual.

It was not just for the men of the assembly, but for the entire body of the people, including women, children, and sojourners. The whole nation was to commit themselves to the Lord as they entered into the land.

[19 : 58] After they had won these great initial victories at Jericho and Ai, they were to commit themselves as the covenant people of God. These were the terms on which they would live faithfully within the land.

A question to consider. What might have been some of the significance of the site of Shechem for the performance of the covenant renewal ritual?