

Notes on Joshua 8

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Defeat of Ai – Joshua 8

Verses 1,2

1. Who instructed Joshua to capture Ai? What assurance did He give Joshua?
2. Who would receive the spoils this time?

God's promise regarding Ai

Since Israel had eliminated sin from its midst, God was ready to bless the nation again. He promised Joshua that there was no longer any reason for fear. The previous defeat at Ai may have given Joshua and the people great reason to be fearful and hesitant. But God here affirmed that, since the reason for the first defeat had been eliminated, He would give Ai and everything pertaining to it into Joshua's hand.

This time, however, they were not to send just two or three thousand men. They were to take the whole army against the city. God then promised that they would defeat Ai and its king as surely as they had defeated Jericho and its king.

He further added that this time the spoils would belong to the people. At Jericho the spoils had belonged to God, perhaps because it was the firstfruits of the land captured by Israel as earlier explained. It was this command that Achan had violated that led to defeat at Ai the first time. Whatever the reason for the change, God clearly said that the spoils of this city belonged to the people.

God gave some further instruction, however, about how the battle should be conducted. He said they were to lay an ambush behind the city. We will see how this worked as the story proceeds.

Note that, unlike the first attack on Ai, this time we are expressly told that Joshua was consulting God and God was instructing him regarding the conduct of the battle. Had Joshua so consulted God before the first attack on Ai, the previous defeat could have been avoided.

Verses 3-8

3. Describe the plan for attacking the city.

Plan of the battle

Further details are given here for the plan of the ambush. Joshua sent soldiers away by night to an area behind the city. They were to stay hidden but close to the city, ready to attack at Joshua's command.

Joshua would take other men and would attack the city like it had been attacked at the previous defeat. When the men of Ai came out to fight, Joshua and his men would then flee again as they had done the first time. This would draw the men of Ai away from the protection of their city. But this time as Israel fled, the men of ambush would enter the city and capture it and set it on fire.

This is what God commanded, so Joshua so commanded the people. He assured them this time they would be successful, because they had God's blessings and assurance of success.

Verses 9-12

4. Where did Joshua spend the night? Where did they camp?

The army moved into position

So Joshua sent them away, presumably referring to the 30,000 soldiers of v3. They placed an ambush on the west side of Ai, between Ai and Bethel. Presumably they went by night so the people of Ai would not know they had moved into ambush.

Joshua, however, stayed in the camp among the people. Then early the next morning, he and all the rest of the people went to the north of Ai and made camp there, with a valley between them and Ai.

We are then told about a group of 5000 men who were set in ambush between Bethel and Ai on the west side of Ai. This is somewhat confusing. This is where the 30,000 of vv 3-9 were sent. Why send these 5000 there?

I can think of only four possibilities. (1) Joshua decided the 30,000 were not enough, so he later sent still more. (2) He wanted two groups in the same area, perhaps to move in from slightly different directions, at different times, or to accomplish different goals. (3) The 30,000 were the whole group that would attack the city, including the 5000. The whole 30,000 had the plan explained to them, then 5000 were chosen to set the ambush. This latter explanation, however, does not seem to fit the language. Besides, the whole army was to attack Ai (vv 1,3), and that would include far more than 30,000 men (in Numbers 26:51 the men of war numbered over 600,000). (4) We will learn later that the men of Bethel joined the men of Ai in this battle. Perhaps the 5000 were to attack Bethel as the 30,000 attacked Ai. Or perhaps there is some other alternative I do not understand

Verses 13-17

5. What did the king of Ai and his men do to Joshua?

The battle begins.

After all the soldiers were in position, those on the west and those on the north, Joshua moved with his men into the valley at night. When the king of Ai saw this, he aroused his soldiers early the following morning for a battle in the plain. But he was still unaware of the ambush.

As planned, Joshua's men acted as though they were beaten, so they fled toward the wilderness. The people of Ai "took the bait" and followed them, clearly thinking they could defeat Israel like they had the first time. In fact, all the men of the city and of Bethel joined in the pursuit of Israel, so no one was left in the city at all. They left the city "open" – either undefended or perhaps even with the gates open.

Note that the men of Bethel joined in the pursuit. Perhaps they had been already in Ai with a treaty or agreement of some kind to join in the defense of Ai. They probably knew they were next, if Ai fell. So they had already entered Ai to join together in the fight.

Verses 18-23

6. How was the city captured?

7. What happened to the king of Ai and his army then?

The fall of Ai

God then commanded Joshua to stretch out his spear toward Ai. He promised He would then give the city to Joshua and Israel. So Joshua stretched out his spear as God had commanded.

Note the similarity between this and other events. Moses stretched forth his rod to begin various plagues on Egypt (Ex. 8:6,16). Later Moses held out the staff so the Red Sea would open to Israel (Ex. 14:16). In Joshua's first battle against the Amalekites, he was victorious so long as Moses held up his hands with his staff (Ex. 17:8-16). This was simply a symbol God assigned to show that the result was occurring by the power of God through the appointed leader.

In this case, when the men in ambush saw Joshua stretch forth his spear, they left their hiding places and ran into the city to set it on fire. Having done that, they left the city to attack the people of Ai from the rear. When the army that had been fleeing with Joshua saw the smoke of the city, they turned back to also attack the enemy. The men of Ai also saw the smoke of the city and realized what had happened. They were encircled by the enemy with nowhere to flee.

The result was that the soldiers of Ai were all slain except the king, who was brought to Joshua.

Verses 24-29

8. Describe the final outcome of the battle. What happened to the king and people of Ai?
9. What happened to the city and the spoils?

The outcome of the battle

Israel's victory was complete. They slew all the soldiers who came to fight against them. Then they entered the city and destroyed everyone there, men and women, as God had commanded. 12,000 people were slain in all.

We are told that Joshua did not draw back the hand with which he held the spear till all the people were consumed. This seems to have been a sign to the men of Israel to continue the attack (see on v18). It was similar to Moses' holding up his hands in the battle against Amalek (see reference above), but in that case Moses' hands also determined who prevailed in the battle.

The people then took the spoils of the city for themselves, just as God had said they could (see v2). The city itself was burned and made a desolate heap. This continued even till the time the book was written.

The king of Ai was captured in the battle and hung on a tree. At evening Joshua commanded the king's body to be taken down. It was then cast into the entrance gate of the city and covered with a great heap of stones. That heap also remained until the time the book was written.

Nothing more is said about further battles in the central part of Canaan, though presumably there were others. Jericho and Ai must have been the major battles. After that whatever opposition Israel faced must have been relatively little, so we are told nothing about it.

An Altar Built and the Law Read – 8:30-35

Verses 30-32

10. Where did Israel go next? What did Joshua build there, and what did he write on it?
11. Who had instructed them to do this? Give **b/c/v**.

The altar

The story then describes a period of worship and study of the law that Israel conducted at two mountains in central Canaan: Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. These are twin peaks found near Shechem (see MAP). This was the place where God promised Abraham that He would give him the land of Canaan. Abraham built an altar there (Gen. 12:6,7). Since the Israelites had now entered the land in fulfillment of the promise God made to Abraham at Shechem, it was appropriate for God to choose this as the place for the people to spend a special time of worship.

While Israel had still been east of Jordan, God had commanded Moses what to do to remind the people of God's law. See Deut. 27:1-13.

First they were to build an altar on Mt. Ebal made of whole stones that had not been engraved by man with any tool. See Deut. 27:2-8 (cf. Ex. 20:25). They were to offer sacrifices to God on the altar, and they were to plaster the stones with plaster and write God's law on them. This is exactly what Joshua had the people do as recorded here, exactly as Moses had commanded them.

No doubt this was to remind the people of God's law, and to impress deeply on their minds that God had given them this land. Since it was given them by God's blessing, they should serve Him faithfully in the land.

Verses 33-35

12. Where did the people stand, and what did Joshua do then?

The reading of the blessings and the curse

Moses had commanded them to read the blessings and the curses after they entered the land. Six tribes were named who should stand on Mt. Gerizim to receive the record of the blessing and six were to stand on Mt. Ebal to receive the record of the curses. See Deut. 11:26-32; 27:11-14.

The blessing was the record of God's goodness that He would bring on the people if they would serve Him faithfully. See Deut. 28:1-14. The curse was the record of God's punishments that He would bring on the land if they did not serve Him. See Deut. 27:15-26; 28:15-68.

This is what Joshua had read to the people here, exactly as Moses had commanded. Furthermore, the whole law was read to the people, with no exceptions. The assembly that heard this was all the people, including men, women, children, and strangers among them. All were to hear the whole law read.

Note that the people had been given the land because God had promised it to their fathers (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.). But whether or not they remained in the land would depend on the nation itself, whether or not they were faithful to God's covenant. This was made clear in the law that was read to them, even in the blessings and the curse. See Deut. 4:25-27,40; 5:33; 28:36,37; 29:22-28. They were reminded of this even as they were taking possession of the land.

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