

Lauding the Law
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Josh 8:30

(BHS)

אָז יבְּנֶה יְהוֹשֻׁעַ מִזְבֵּחַ
לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּהַר עֵיבָל:

(NLT)

Then Joshua built an altar
to the LORD, the God of Israel,
on Mount Ebal.

You should be able to identify Joshua, Yahweh, God, Israel, and Ebal.

Also, “Then,” “built,” “altar,” “mount,” and the inseparable prepositions are all first-year vocabulary words. Easy, right?

This verse begins the pericope of 8:30 – 35, which is where Joshua built an altar, offered sacrifices, and chiseled on the altar’s stones the whole Law of Moses. Everyone stood there to be blessed, including sojourners. He read Torah aloud before them. Amen! Go ahead and read about it now, before we proceed.

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So ... the people of Israel historically left the battlefield of Ai, traveled way up north into enemy territory, had a revival meeting, then returned way down south again to resume the war? Huh. And who were the “sojourners”? Were sojourners even allowed during the cleansing of Canaan? This scene seems displaced in time, dischronolized. But why is it in such an awkward place?

I think its placement is intended to make a spiritual point. Israel had just learned a costly lesson. In the aftermath of the Achan debacle and the long drawn-out battle following, they paused to rededicate themselves to Yahweh and to remember their calling. Then they resumed the southern Conquest. So

the placement of 8:30 – 35 in the Masoretic Text (MT) makes this theological point: the way of blessing is to attend to God’s Word. Amen!

When I teach Joshua, we do chapter 4 as a unit up through 5:1. Then I ask my class, “Historically, what happens next?” They naturally turn to the next verse, 5:2, for the answer. But I say to them, “Not so fast!” You see, the Dead Sea Scroll version of Joshua (4QJosh^a) places 8:30 – 35 between 5:1 and 5:2 (the verses become 5:1a, b, c, d, e, and f). Why would 4QJosh^a place the event right after Israel crossed the Jordan and even before they took Jericho? This is more bizarre than MT’s placement!

It’s because 4QJosh^a puts commitment to Yahweh at the very start. Before any city was taken, Israel had already set apart time to dedicate themselves to covenant fidelity. This theme continues through chapter 5, which is all about cultic purity (circumcision, Passover, etc.). Only after putting first things first does the Conquest really begin. Amen to that!

Okay ... but what about Old Greek Joshua (the Septuagint, LXX)? There, our pericope is placed after 9:1 – 2, when the nations historically had gathered against Israel. We call these verses 9:2α, β, γ, δ, ε, and ζ. Joshua’s response to the threat was to reassert the power and authority of the Word at a Bible conference. In the face of a great and menacing challenge, chiseling out the Law was the most important thing to do. Then the war could go forward with confidence. Another great placement! Kudos to the Greek translators!

Josephus placed it after chapter 12, that is, after the Conquest was completed ([Antiquities V ¶19](#)). Thus the event was a celebration of the final victory over Canaan but historically before the land was divided into tribal

territories. Various rabbis suggested other placements. For example, R. Ishmael (1st century) put it after Joshua 24; the event is the climax to the whole history of Joshua. Good stuff!

MT	LXX	4QJosh ^a	Josephus	R. Ishmael
8:30	9:2 α	5:1a	12:25	24:34
31	β	b	26	35
32	γ	c	27	36
33	δ	d	28	37
34	ϵ	e	29	38
35	ζ	f	30	39

The fact is, like some other passages of Scripture, this pericope is a floater. Ancient editors put it in various locations, in multiple different circumstances when Israel might have paused to remember God and his covenant with Israel. Thus many different theological lessons follow.

Jesus personally embodied the passionate desire to put the things of God first in his life. He said of the Father, “I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (John 8:29). Every moment of every day, Jesus lived out the lessons of Josh 8:30 – 35. And he sets the pattern for us.

Joshua wrote the Law on stone; Jesus on our hearts. So the question is: when do you devote time to God and his Word? After a significant and costly setback and spiritual failure (per the MT)? When you face a terrifying situation (per the Septuagint)? Before you embark on a new venture (per 4QJosh^a)? After a great accomplishment (per Josephus)? At the end of your life, when you are old and your work is done (per the Rabbi)?

Or, perhaps, all of the above are needful?