

• *Victory at Ai*

1. The Israelites called to sweep away the vileness of pagan idolatry from the land of Canaan

• Four centuries of obscene and vile idolatry

• *Legitimate genocide for a situation of extreme depravity*

• *Jesus – a pioneer of religious toleration based on the separation of state and religion*

• *Determination to exterminate religious rivals still exists today amongst many*

2. Called to acknowledge written Scripture as its guide

The soldiers of Ai who are trapped between two Israelite armies are killed¹; then Ai and its remaining citizens are destroyed².

1. The Israelites were called to sweep away the vileness of pagan idolatry from the land of Canaan. Every aspect of the vile Canaanite culture is utterly exterminated¹. Some animals are kept, possibly to be used for food². Ai is made into a ‘ruin’ – which is the meaning of the word ‘Ai’³. Perhaps the name was given after the event to replace an earlier name. The king is executed by hanging but his body is taken down before sunset, as required by the law of Deuteronomy 21:22, 23. A memorial of the king’s defeat was still in existence at the time the book of Joshua was written⁴. Everything possible was done to blot out the existence of Canaanite religious obscenity. Punishment consisted of earthly annihilation. The king was deliberately disgraced and treated with disgust – for twenty-four hours.

Sometimes we tend to be a bit sympathetic to the Canaanites and wonder whether they really had to be exterminated. But such sympathy is misplaced. Canaanite idolatry had dominated the land ever since the days of Abraham. God had told Abraham that he would give them four centuries in which to repent¹ and only after four hundred - year generations would the land be given to Israel. During that time the iniquity of the Canaanites (or Amorites; they are the same people) had become full. Capital punishment for whole nations was not as unjust as one might think. They had fallen into all sorts of vileness including human sacrifice. If ever a piece of genocide was legitimate, it was the case of the Canaanites. Hell will be worse.

However it has to be noted that it was a temporary ruling that was unique to Israel. It was commanded in a situation of extreme depravity among the pagan nations. It was an approach to justice and righteousness that would be for ever abolished once the people of God ceased to be an earthly nation and instead became a spiritual people. Jesus was the pioneer of religious toleration. It was He who first spoke of rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what belongs to God. But no separation of religion and state was allowed in the ancient world. To allow a plurality of ideologies in one territory was an invention of Jesus! No nation ever practised such toleration before Jesus.

A relic of this kind of determination to exterminate religious rivals still exists in the thinking of many. Those in the twenty-first century who dislike the ‘slaughter of the Canaanites’ had best keep their eyes on the religion-and-state teaching of some of the world’s religions. The Mosaic law is abolished; no Christian wants to exterminate anybody. But pre-Christian, pre-Jesus, tyranny is part-and-parcel of a number of world religions.

2. The Israelites were called to acknowledge written Scripture as the guide for the nation. About twenty miles to the north of Ai there were two mountains, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. There is about a kilometre between them. They are both about 1000 metres above sea level; Ebal is slightly higher. The area also is a natural amphitheatre. A shout from one mountain can be heard on the other.

1 8:24
2 8:25

1 8:26
2 8:27
3 8:28

4 8:29

1 Genesis 15:16

• **Two mountains**

• **Mount Ebal stands for the curses on law breakers**

• **Mount Gerazim stands for the blessings on the obedient**

• **The public reading of the law of Moses**

• **The altar – provision for crossing over to the blessings**

• **'The law' for the Christian**

Joshua built an altar on Mount Ebal ^{□1} and wrote a copy of the law on large boulders ^{□2}. Mount Ebal stands for the curses that come upon law-breakers; Mount Gerizim stands for the blessings that come upon those who keep God's law given through Moses. Half the nation stand on Mount Ebal with the law, the ark and representatives of the priesthood in a prominent position ^{□3}. The other half stand on Mount Gerizim not far away. Those on Mount Ebal are standing on the place where there are curses but they can hear the blessings being shouted out from Gerizim. Those on Mount Gerizim are standing on the place which represents blessing but they can hear the curses being shouted out from Ebal.

Joshua reads the law of Moses ^{□1}, every word of it, to the assembled nation ^{□2}. They are now firmly established in the land. The public ceremony makes it clear that this is to be a land under the written word of God.

Blessing and curses come according to whether this law is kept or not. It is as if one group were being told, 'Stay where you are in obedience and you will be blessed; come over here to disobedience and you will be cursed'. The other group are being told 'Stay where you are in disobedience and you will be cursed; come over here to obedience and you will be blessed'.

The altar had to be made with stones simply taken from the countryside. No human cleverness was allowed to contribute anything to the sacrifice for sin that was provided by God.

Ebal was higher than Gerizim. The important thing was the altar, the means of atoning sacrifice. The curses would, as it were, be laid on the sacrifice, and the route for crossing over to blessing would be made open. 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse in our place' ^{□1}.

'The law' for the Christian is the leading of the Spirit confirmed and checked by the New Testament. The Holy Spirit must be obeyed. The altar was built on Ebal not on Gerizim. There was a way of atonement for those who were cursed because of disobedience. Those under a curse had a means of crossing over to the place of blessing: the atoning blood of sacrifice. For the Christian it speaks of Jesus. He is the one who was sacrificed to enable us to pass from curse to blessing. The cross was God's altar.

□1 8:30-31

□2 8:32

□3 8:33

□1 8:34

□2 8:35

□1 Galatians 3:13



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