

92 Mount Ebal

Names (also known as)

Modern – Sitti Salamivah

Etymology

Strong’s – H5858 – “bare”, “bald”, “stone”, “bare mountain”.

Location/Description



Ebal is a mountain in Samaria, in Central Israel with a height of 3,077 feet (938 metres) and approximately 18 square km.

It is one of the highest peaks in the West Bank about 194 feet (159 metres) higher than Mt. Gerizim.

Ebal is located on the north side of ancient Shechem (Mt. Gerizim is to the south of ancient Shechem). Ebal and Gerizim form the sides of the fertile valley of Nablus (ancient Shechem).

Scriptural references

Old Testament

Deut. 11:29; 27:4,13; Josh. 8:30,33

New Testament

None



Brief history

Adam Zertal has conducted a series of eight excavations (1982-1989) on this site for the University of Haifa and the Israel Exploration Society. It was part of a survey of 540 sq km of the hill country of Manasseh begun in 1978.

An unassuming pile of stones was located, located 150 m (492 ft) below the summit of Mount Ebal, which is called “El Burnat”, meaning “the hat” in Arabic – this is considered by some to be the altar that was built there by Joshua according to the instruction of Deut. 11:29; 27:4,13, constructed from uncut natural stones.

An incense burner was found along with a 13th century Egyptian scarab, just north of the altar. This essentially proves that the altar dates to the time of the 13th century B.C.

The people of Israel split into two groups, one on Mt. Ebal to pronounce curses, and one on Mt. Gerizim to pronounce blessings.

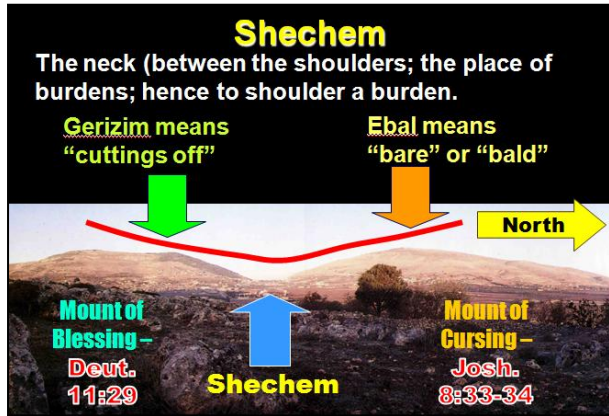
“Investigations have indicated that the acoustical qualities of that site are excellent for such a ceremony.” (Woudstra references J. de Groot in a German work [Woudstra 1981: 149]).

Accordingly, the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali remained on Ebal.

On Mt. Ebal, great stones were to be set up, covered with plaster, and the law written on them. This practice was previously known from Egypt, but it has now been seen in 8th century wall inscriptions at Tel Deir Alla. “The stones on which a copy of the law was written were probably not the stones of the altar.” (Woudstra 1981: 147).

Then, an altar of unhewn stones was built and sacrifices offered.

The extent of the law that was to be written is not specified. It could have been the ten commandments, or it could be the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 28. The Jews believed that the written law contained the 613 commands (Woudstra 1981: 148).



There are 12 curses listed (Deut. 27:13-26) with the word ‘curse’ appearing 13 times in the record (13 being the number of rebellion). The curses were pronounced by the Levites and answered by the people (‘Amen’). “In unmistakably clear symbolism the reader is told that the right of possessing the promised land is tied to the proclamation of, and subjection to, God’s covenant claims upon his people” (Woudstra 1981: 144).

Mt. Ebal’s barren appearance contrasted with the covered Mt. Gerizim – this difference was highlighted in the account of Joshua 8 when the blessings and cursing were pronounced. Joshua read all the words of the Law (every single one) – the blessings to those who obey God, the curses to those who disobey.

Israel was cursed through the disobedience of Achan and felt the effects of that curse at Ai. But finally, after the defeat of Ai, Joshua built an altar of unhewn stones on Ebal and made peace offerings to memorialise their reconciliation with Yahweh (Josh. 8:30-35).

“The words of blessing and cursing are not to be conceived of as mere words. Within the Biblical context they are true vehicles of power, not in a magical sense but because they were uttered on behalf of Him whose Word is powerful (Ps. 33:9). To bless is to ‘put’ the ‘name’ of the Lord upon the people (Num. 6:27). To curse is to invoke that name by way of self-malediction or in order to curse others” (Woudstra 1981: 150).

Sources:

Ungers Bible Dictionary

Daily Bible Study – www.keyway.ca
 Woudstra, M. H. – 1981 The Book of Joshua. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. L. Hubbard, Jr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans
 Bro. Jim Cowie Study Day Notes
www.biblicalarchaeology.org - Adam Zertal Excavations



Looking west from Mt Ebal towards Tel Aviv

(Compiler – Stephen Macfarlane)