

“WHAT DO THESE STONES MEAN?” THE RIDDLE OF DEUTERONOMY 27

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Deuteronomy 27 is a riddle at many levels.¹ First, it is a cultic riddle: Why this curious combination of prescribed rituals, and why this ritual inscription of the Torah on plastered stones? Second, it is a theological riddle: What is the significance of this ritual within the theology of Deuteronomy and the First Testament as a whole? Third, it is a literary riddle: What is this chapter doing here within the overall flow of the book? I shall address the last issue first.

I. DEUTERONOMY 27 IN ITS PRESENT LITERARY CONTEXT

The chapter consists of three speeches, successively attributed to Moses and the elders of Israel (vv. 1b–8), Moses and the Levitical priests (vv. 9b–10), and Moses alone (vv. 11–26). The threefold reference to Moses by name (vv. 1, 9, 11)² and the involvement of the elders and the Levitical priests in the addresses contrast with the lengthy first-person discourse of chapters 5–26. In style and content, this chapter is intrusive, interrupting what would otherwise have been a smooth transition from chapter 26 to chapter 28.³ It seems that in the oral delivery and in the transcription of Moses’ second address (31:9) Deuteronomy 28 followed immediately after chapter 26. Indeed, several factors suggest the speeches in chapter 27 fit best after 31:29.⁴ (1) The elders will be involved later in formal proceedings relating

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¹ This essay expands on my brief comments on Deut 27:1–8 in *Deuteronomy* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 623–29, and is an adaptation of a paper read at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in Milwaukee, WI, November 2012. I am grateful to my assistants Carmen Imes and Jordan Brown, who read earlier versions of this paper and offered many helpful suggestions for its improvement.

² We have read Moses’ name only eight times prior to this: Deut 1:1, 3, 5; 4:41, 44, 45, 46; 5:1.

³ Note the following links between Deuteronomy 26 and 28: (1) The vocabulary and motifs of 28:1 echo 26:16–19. In both, adherence to the revealed will of God as expressed in the laws and in Moses’ exposition thereof is characterized as “obeying his voice/the voice of YHWH your God” (*šāma’ bēqōl*). The idiom derives from Exod 19:5, where listening to YHWH’s voice is explicitly paired with keeping his covenant, but it appears often in Deuteronomy: 4:30; 8:20; 9:23; 13:4, 19 [E’T 18]; 15:5; 26:14, 17; 27:10; 28:1, 2, 15, 45, 62; 30:2, 8, 10, 20. (2) These are the only two instances in the book where Israel’s privileged status is characterized as being set high above all the nations (*nētānēkā ‘al kol haggōyīm*). (3) Echoes and allusions to 26:16–19 continue in the blessings outlined in 28:1–14. Deuteronomy 26:19 and 28:9 both speak of Israel as a holy people (*am qādōš*) belonging to YHWH; both link this status expressly with “keeping his commands” (*šāmar mišwôtāyw*) and “walking in his ways” (*hālak bid-rākāyw*); and both declare the effects this will have on the nations/peoples of the earth.

⁴ Eduard Nielsen suggests the cultic background for the present ceremony is to be found in Deut 31:9–13, that is, the 7th year Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel would hear the leaders recite the To-

to the ratification of the covenant (29:9–10 [10–11]).⁵ (2) Together with the Levitical priests they will function as custodians of the Torah of Moses (31:9). (3) Along with scribal officials (*šōtērīm*) they will later appear before Moses to hear the words of the Torah—with the heavens and the earth as witnesses (31:28). (4) The charge in 27:3 and 8 to transcribe “all the words of this Torah” (*kol dibrê hattôrâ hazzōt*) assumes a written copy of Moses’ speeches on the Plains of Moab, suggesting the speeches of this chapter were given after the speeches in chapter 31.

I grant that my reconstruction is speculative, but it seems the events behind the text might have transpired something like this. Having delivered his final pastoral addresses to his congregation on the Plains of Moab, Moses committed “this Torah” to writing. He handed the documents to the Levitical priests and elders and charged the former to read this entire Torah to the people every seventh year at the festival of booths (31:9–13). In the meantime, stored beside the Ark of the Covenant, this canonical Torah would be a permanent witness to the pact to which both YHWH and the people had committed themselves (31:24–26).⁶ Mindful of the people’s fickleness (31:27–29), before the elders Moses expressed his anxiety over their spiritual state once the restraining influence of his physical presence would be removed (31:27–29). Thereafter Moses and the elders returned to the people and instructed them in the final phase of the covenant renewal ceremonies, which would transpire inside the Promised Land. By involving the elders in these instructions Moses ensured continuity between the present proceedings and those that would subsequently take place at Mount Ebal.⁷

But why would the editor insert a speech here that belongs after 31:29? Some⁸ suggest that because chapter 27 is located before the covenant blessings and curses (chap. 28), it corresponds to the provision in second millennium BC Hittite treaties

rah. See “A Note on Zechariah 14,4–5,” in *In the Last Days: On Jewish and Christian Apocalyptic and Its Period* (ed. K. Jeppesen, K. Nielsen, and B. Rosendal; Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1994) 37.

⁵ The elders appear second in a list of participants that includes the heads of the tribes (*rāšē šēbāṭīm*), elders (*zēqēnīm*), scribal officials (*šōtērīm*), all the men of Israel (*kol ’anšē yišrā’el*), the children (*tap*), women (*nāšīm*), and the alien (*gūr*). In this and other respects as we shall see the event parallels the covenant making event at Horeb (5:23).

⁶ On which see Jean-Pierre Sonnet, *The Book within the Book: Writing in Deuteronomy* (Biblical Interpretation Series 14; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 142–46; David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origin of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 139.

⁷ Although the narrator does not mention Joshua here, several factors suggest that he would have been included among the elders: (1) he had previously served as Moses’ right hand general in military conflicts (Exod 17:8–14); (2) he had served as Moses’ assistant (*mēšārēt*) on Mount Horeb (Exod 24:13; 32:17; 33:11; cf. Num 11:28); (3) he had represented the tribe of Ephraim when the twelve men were sent to scout out the land of Canaan (Num 13:16; 14:6, 30, 38); (4) Moses had already ordained him as his successor (Num 27:18–23; Deut 31:1–8); (5) Joshua certainly qualified to be an elder, for he was one of the three oldest men present (in addition to Moses and Caleb); (6) although Josh 8:33 notes that elders, scribal officers, and Levitical priests were involved in the ritual at Ebal and Gerizim—as called for in Deut 31:24–29—Joshua was the “elder” who actually presided over the rituals prescribed in Deut 27:1–8). Based on these considerations, Joshua was surely included among the elders. This interpretation is reinforced by the genre of the speeches in this chapter. For the first time in the book the Mosaic speech act is introduced with *wayšaw*, from *šiwwā*, “to command, charge.”

⁸ See J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (IOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1974) 19.

for the production of written copies of the covenant.⁹ But this interpretation is unlikely. Whereas official Hittite versions were written on portable materials and deposited in the presence of the deity, here the text is copied from the official document to mundane rocks unrelated to a sanctuary and needing first to be plastered with lime (27:4). Furthermore, whereas the Hittite documents were retrieved and read aloud before the subordinate at stated intervals (like the “scrolled” Torah in 31:9–13), the present chapter anticipates a one-time event—at Ebal, shortly after the Israelites have crossed the Jordan.¹⁰ The text is silent on future repetition of this ritual.¹¹ Others suggest that the inscribed pillar called for in verses 2–8 functions as witnesses to a solemn treaty ceremony—in addition to the heavens and the earth (30:19) and the Song (32:1–42; cf. 31:19).¹²

The best clue to the reason for insertion of chapter 27 between 26:16–19 and chapter 28 is found in Deut 11:26–32. There Moses had anticipated this moment and had identified Mounts Gerizim and Ebal [in the vicinity of the oak of Moreh] by name as Israel’s destination beyond the Jordan. Indeed, the large block of material preserved in 26:16–28:69 [ET 29:1] exhibits a resumptive expository relationship to 11:26–32, though presenting the main issues in reverse order (Table 1).¹³

Table 1: The Relationship between
Deuteronomy 11:26–32 and 26:16–29:69 [ET 29:1]

11:26–32	26:16–28:68
The Announcement of the Blessing and the Curse (11:26–28)	The Appeal to Obedience (26:16–19)
The Ceremony on Gerizim and Ebal (11:29–31 or 29–30)	The Ceremony on Gerizim and Ebal (27:1–26)
The Appeal to Obedience (11:32 or 31–32)	The Announcements of the Blessing and the Curse (28:1–69 [29:1])

These two segments may be interpreted either as a frame around Moses’ exposition of the terms of the covenant, its decrees, judgments, and stipulations (12:1–26:15), or as the respective conclusions to the two major components of Moses’ second address (5:1b–11:32; 12:1–28:69 [ET 29:1]). The involvement of the

⁹ See for examples the treaty between Suppililiuma I of Hatti and Shattiwaza of Mitanni and the treaty between Muwatalli II of Hatti and Alaksandu of Wilusa, texts 6A §13 and 13 §16, respectively in Gary Beckman, *Hittite Diplomatic Texts* (2d ed.; SBLWAW 7; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999) 46–47 and 91. Remarkably, first millennium BC new-Assyrian treaty texts make no such provisions.

¹⁰ According to Josephus, Deuteronomy 27 required that the sacrifices were to be offered on the altar only once (*Ant.* 4.308). For a full discussion of Josephus’s treatment of Deuteronomy 27 and Josh 8:30–35, see C. Begg, “The Cisjordanian Altar(s) and their Associated Rites According to Josephus,” *BZ* 41 (1997) 192–211.

¹¹ Neither does Josh 8:30–35, which narrates Joshua’s fulfillment of the present charge, anticipate future repetition of the ritual.

¹² Thus Kenneth Kitchen, *Treaty, Law and Covenant in the Ancient Near East*, Part 3: *Overall Historical Survey* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2012) 120. Note also his later comment (p. 123), “[In] chapter 27, we find the command later to enact a *solemn ceremony*, verses 11–26..., including future *deposition of the text* on a stela ... (27:4–8), which is also a form of *witness*...; all three items feature in or with treaties...” (emphasis original).

¹³ Similarly J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos Old Testament Commentaries 5; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 387.

elders here also creates an artful *inclusio* with 5:22–33, where Moses had last referred to the elders of his own generation.¹⁴ Their appearance with Moses in his final addresses not only adds weight to his exhortations, but attests to Moses' fidelity in carrying out the earlier request of the people (5:27) and the charge of YHWH (5:31).

II. THE LITERARY INTEGRITY OF DEUTERONOMY 27

Critical scholars tend to interpret Deuteronomy 27 as a collage of several ritual traditions. First, since Josh 4:19–5:12 reports that after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan they performed their first rituals at Gilgal, some suggest this text involves a Gilgal tradition. The erection of twelve stone pillars in Joshua 4:20 supposedly represents an alternative version of the present command to set up large stones on which to inscribe the Torah (Deut 27:2–3).¹⁵ Second, the location of the present ceremony at Ebal and Gerizim (vv. 4–7) and the blessing and curse ritual (vv. 11–13) point to a Shechem tradition, linked to the renewal of the covenant under the leadership of Joshua (Joshua 24).¹⁶ Third, the association of Levi with Simeon, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin on Gerizim in Deut 27:12 suggests an ancient tradition when Levi was still considered a “secular” tribe.¹⁷ Fourth, verses 14–26 complicate the matter further. Here the Levites are involved in a liturgical role reading only curses to the people, though verses 12–13 had called for both blessings and curses.¹⁸

Despite seemingly disparate features, the editor of Moses' speeches intentionally combined and juxtaposed them to create a single account. Arguing for a unified

¹⁴ There Moses describes the moment at Mount Horeb when the elders had approached him, pleading that YHWH stop talking directly with them or they would die. They requested that Moses alone appear before YHWH to receive his revelation and that he relay to the people all that God would say. YHWH agreed, declaring that from then on he would speak to Moses and Moses would teach the people and exhort them to obedience that they might prosper in the land.

¹⁵ Cf. A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 340–41; Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 316.

¹⁶ A. Cooper and B. R. Goldstein (“The Cult of the Dead and the Theme of Entry into the Land,” *BibInt* 3 [1993] 292), confuse Gilgal and Shechem when they write, “The stones are to be conveyed from the place of the Jordan crossing to Mt. Ebal (Shechem), where they are to be installed.”

¹⁷ Cf. O. Eissfeldt, “Gilgal or Shechem,” in *Proclamation and Presence* (ed. J. I. Durham and J. R. Porter; Richmond: John Knox, 1970) 90–101; H. Seebass, “Garazim und Ebal als Symbole von Segen und Fluch,” *Bib* 63 (1982) 22–31. For brief recent representation of this approach see Mark E. Biddle, *Deuteronomy* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2003) 395.

¹⁸ Critical scholars tend to begin their analysis of this unit by reconstruction its literary evolution. For example, R. P. Merendino (“Dt 27:1–8: Eine literarkritische und überlieferungsgeschichtliche Untersuchung,” *BZ* n.s. 24 [1980] 194–207) identifies three stages in the history of the text: (1) the original text, written in the time of Hezekiah, consisted of verses 1, 3b, 5a, 7; (2) verses 5b–6 represent a later addition; (3) verses 2b–3a and 8 derive from a Josianic rewriting; (4) verse 4 was added in a fourth stage; (5) the “deuteronomists” completed the present text by adding verse 1b and making a few minor additions elsewhere. For an equally complex reconstruction of the history of the text see E. Nielsen, *Deuteronomium* (HAT 6; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995) 244–46. N. Naʿaman argues that the entire chapter is exilic: “Shechem and Jerusalem in the Exilic and Restoration Period,” *Zion* 58 (1993) 7–32 (Hebrew); idem, “The Law of the Altar in Deuteronomy and the Cultic Site Near Shechem,” in *Rethinking the Foundations: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Bible* (ed. S. McKenzie and T. Römer (BZAW 294; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2000) 141–61.

text, Andrew E. Hill suggests this chapter is constructed after the model of a royal land grant ceremony symbolized and described on Babylonian boundary stone (*kudurrû*) inscriptions.¹⁹ Hill’s impulse is sound, though recent advances in the interpretation of these stones call for refinement of his thesis. This chapter actually involves several elements typically found in Babylonian Entitlement *narû* inscriptions, whose function was to “commemorate the acquisition or affirmation of an entitlement” to an on-going benefit within a “feudal system.”²⁰ Cast as a series of authoritative addresses by a representative of the divine landowner, like *narû* inscriptions Deuteronomy 27 commemorates Israel’s entitlement to the land Promised to the ancestors, calling for (1) erection of inscribed stones (vv. 2–4, 8); (2) construction of an altar and cultic activity before the deity (vv. 5–7);²¹ (3) inscription of the text of the entitlement, in this case granted by the divine owner (vv. 3, 8);²² (4) listing of witnesses (the twelve tribes, vv. 12–13);²³ (5) a culmination in imprecations for those who violate the inscription (vv. 15–26).²⁴ These features all make sense within the broader Near Eastern context of the events. However, as we shall see, as a unit the chapter presents a theology far greater than the sum of these conventional parts, and far greater than the Babylonian Entitlement *narû* inscriptions.²⁵

The cohesion of Deuteronomy 27 is communicated literarily as well. The three unequal parts²⁶ reflect an ABA pattern, the two larger outside parts (vv. 1–8; 11–26) sandwiching a short hortatory challenge in the middle (vv. 9–10; Table 2).

Table 2: The Structure of Deuteronomy 27

The Future Performative Ritual (vv. 1–8)	The Present Challenge (vv. 9–10)	The Future Verbal Ritual (vv. 11–26)
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While the outer rituals diverge, the accounts are linked in several ways. (1) As already noted, for the first time in the book the Mosaic speech act is characterized as “a command, charge” (*šiwwâ*, vv. 1, 11) suggesting a common genre.²⁷ (2) In con-

¹⁹ A. E. Hill, “The Ebal Ceremony as Hebrew Land Grant,” *JETS* 31 (1988) 399–406.

²⁰ Kathryn E. Slanski, *The Babylonian Entitlement narûs (kudurrus): A Study in their Form and Function* (ASOR Books 9; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2003) 151.

²¹ Verses 4–7. Compare the images of cultic scenes carved on the *narû* stones. *Ibid.* 141–43, 165–66. On the significance of the present altar see below.

²² On the text of Babylonian Entitlement *narûs*, see *ibid.* 169–74.

²³ In the Babylonian Entitlement *narû* inscriptions, gods are listed, but not as witnesses; the witnesses are human, drawn from the upper ranks of Babylonian governmental tones authorities. *Ibid.* 175–76.

²⁴ On the imprecations in Babylonian Entitlement *narûs*, see *ibid.* 176–79.

²⁵ Cf. the theological interpretation of the chapter as a whole by P. A. Barker, “The Theology of Deuteronomy 27,” *TynBul* 49 (1998) 277–303.

²⁶ Verses 1–8 (123 words); verses 9–10 (30 words); verses 11–26 (173 words).

²⁷ See note 7 above. This phenomenon occurs elsewhere in the book only in chapter 31, where the form appears three times (31:10, 23, 25). Although Moses appears as the subject of the verb *šiwwâ* more than thirty times, these are the only places where the narrator prepares the reader for a speech from Moses with this verb. The nearest analogues within Moses’ own speeches occur in 3:18, 21, and

trast to covenant renewal rituals transpiring on the Plains of Moab alluded to elsewhere in the book (11:26–28; 26:16–19; 29:1 [ET 2]–30:20; 31:24–29), the rituals prescribed in verses 1–8 and 11–26 are described as future actions to be performed in the Promised Land without Moses as presiding officer (vv. 2, 4, and 12). (3) Both rituals are to take place on Mount Ebal (vv. 4, 13), though the latter rituals also involve Mount Gerizim, located opposite Ebal (v. 12).²⁸ It seems best, therefore, to interpret this chapter as a literary unit. Our challenge is trying to understand the function of the parts in relation to each other and to the rest of the book. Time and space constraints demand that the remainder of this paper focus on verses 1–8.

III. COMMEMORATING THE BASIS OF ISRAEL'S CLAIM TO THE LAND

Deuteronomy 27:1–8

<p>וַיִּצַו מֹשֶׁה וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָעָם לֵאמֹר שָׁמֶר אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֲתֶכֶם הַיּוֹם:</p>	1	Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people: “Observe the entire charge that I am charging you today.
<p>וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבְרוּ אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ וְהִקְמַתְּ לָךְ אֲבָנִים גְּדוֹלוֹת וְשָׂדַתְתָּ אֹתָם בְּשֵׂיטִי:</p>	2	On the day you cross the Jordan into the land that YHWH your God is giving you, you shall erect large stones and plaster them with plaster.
<p>וְכָתַבְתָּ עֲלֵיהֶן אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּעֵבֶרְךָ לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר תִּבְאֵל אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ אָרֶץ זָבַת חֵלֶב וְדָבָשׁ כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־אַבְרָהָם לְדָוִד:</p>	3	And you shall write on them all the words of this Torah when you cross over to enter the land that YHWH your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, just as YHWH, the God of your fathers promised you.
<p>וְהָיָה בְּעֹבְרְכֶם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן תִּקְמוּ אֶת־הָאֲבָנִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֲתֶכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּהַר עֵיבָל וְשָׂדַתְתָּ אוֹתָם בְּשֵׂיטִי: וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים לֹא־תִנֶּהֱ עָלֵיהֶם בְּרֹזֶל: אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת־מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְהִעַלְתָּ עָלָיו עֹלוֹת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ:</p>	4	When you cross the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I have charged you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster.
<p>וְשָׂדַתְתָּ אוֹתָם בְּשֵׂיטִי: וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים לֹא־תִנֶּהֱ עָלֵיהֶם בְּרֹזֶל: אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת־מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְהִעַלְתָּ עָלָיו עֹלוֹת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ:</p>	5	There you shall construct an altar to YHWH your God, an altar of stones. You may not use any iron tool upon them.
<p>וְשָׂדַתְתָּ אוֹתָם בְּשֵׂיטִי: וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים לֹא־תִנֶּהֱ עָלֵיהֶם בְּרֹזֶל: אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת־מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְהִעַלְתָּ עָלָיו עֹלוֹת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ:</p>	6	With natural stones you must construct the altar of YHWH your God, and on it offer burnt offerings to YHWH your God.
<p>וְשָׂדַתְתָּ אוֹתָם בְּשֵׂיטִי: וּבְנִיתָ שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים לֹא־תִנֶּהֱ עָלֵיהֶם בְּרֹזֶל: אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת־מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ וְהִעַלְתָּ עָלָיו עֹלוֹת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ:</p>	7	There you shall sacrifice fellowship offerings,

15:11, where the first person form of the verb is followed by a speech cast as a direct quotation, and 2:4, where YHWH's command to Moses to “charge” the people is followed by a verbatim quotation of the charge.

²⁸ The Samaritan Pentateuch locates the prescribed altar of Deut 27:4–5 on Gerizim, rather than Ebal. On the sectarian tendencies of the Samaritan Pentateuch, see E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (3d ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012) 74–90, esp. 77–78 and 87–88.

וּבַחַת שְׁלָמִים	and you may eat [them] there,
וְאָכַלְתָּ שֵׁם	and you may celebrate in the presence of YHWH your
וְשִׂמַחְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:	God.
וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל־הָאֲבָנִים	8 And on the stones you shall transcribe
אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּאֵר הַיִּטֵּב:	all the words of this Torah to formalize it [the cove- nant].

The speech that makes up most of verses 1–8 divides into three parts: (1) a brief opening appeal to scrupulous adherence to the present prescriptions (v. 1b); (2) summary instructions regarding the prescribed ritual (vv. 2–3); (3) a more detailed description of the prescribed ritual (vv. 4–8). I am especially concerned about the rituals described in parts 2 and 3, which function as two panels of a diptych. Although they exhibit distinctive flavors and emphases, the repetition of key phrases and expressions points to a deliberately constructed and coherent whole. We may highlight the parallels and differences by juxtaposing the texts synoptically as follows:

27:2–3	27:4–8
וְהָיָה בַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲבֹרוּ אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן	וְהָיָה בְּעֵבְרְכֶם אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ נָתַן לְךָ	תְּקִימוּ אֶת־הָאֲבָנִים הָאֵלֶּה
וְהִקְמַתָּ לְךָ אֲבָנִים גְּדֹלוֹת	אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מַעֲזֶה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּהַר עֵיבָל
וְשָׂדַתְּ אִתָּם בְּשִׂיד:	וְשָׂדַתְּ אוֹתָם בְּשִׂיד:
	וּבְנִיתָ שֵׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִזְבֵּחַ אֲבָנִים
	לֹא־תִנִּיף עֲלֵיהֶם בְּרֹזֶל:
	אֲבָנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת תִּבְנֶה אֶת־מִזְבֵּחַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
	וְהָעֲלִיתָ עָלָיו עֹלֹת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:
	וּבַחַת שְׁלָמִים
	וְאָכַלְתָּ שֵׁם
	וְשִׂמַחְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ:
	וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל־הָאֲבָנִים
וְכָתַבְתָּ עָלֵיהֶן	אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת
אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת	בְּאֵר הַיִּטֵּב:
בְּעֵבְרֹךְ לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר תִּבְאֵ	
אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ נָתַן לְךָ	
אָרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וְדָבָשׁ	
כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי־אַבְתֵּיךָ לְךָ:	

<p><i>And it shall be [that]</i> ----- <i>on the day you cross over the Jordan</i> ----- <i>to the land that YHWH your God is giving you,</i> <i>you shall set up large stones,</i></p> <p><i>and you shall plaster them with plaster,</i> -----</p> <p><i>and you shall write on them</i> ----- <i>all the words of this Torah,</i> ----- <i>when you cross over to enter</i> <i>the land that YHWH your God is giving you,</i> <i>a land flowing with milk and honey,</i> <i>as YHWH, the God of your fathers, has promised you.</i></p>	<p><i>And it shall be [that]</i> <i>when you cross cross over the Jordan,</i></p> <p><i>you shall set up these stones,</i> <i>concerning which I command you today,</i> <i>on Mount Ebal,</i></p> <p><i>and you shall plaster them with plaster,</i> <i>and there</i> <i>you shall build an altar to YHWH your God,</i> <i>an altar of stones.</i> <i>You shall wield no iron tool on them;</i> <i>you shall build an altar to YHWH your God</i> <i>of uncut stones.</i> <i>And you shall offer burnt offerings on it</i> <i>to YHWH your God,</i> <i>and you shall sacrifice peace offerings</i> <i>and you shall eat there,</i> <i>and you shall rejoice before YHWH your God,</i></p> <p><i>and you shall write on the stones</i> <i>all the words of this Torah very plainly.”</i></p>
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Each segment commences with *wēhāyā*, “and it shall be,” followed by a temporal marker of the context when and where the ritual is to be performed:²⁹ when the Israelites have crossed the Jordan. Thereafter these panels share a common skeleton, consisting of three basic commands:

- You shall set up [large] stones,
- And you shall plaster them with plaster,
- And you shall write on them all the words of this Torah,

Each panel contains significant internal repetition. Emphasizing the context of the ritual, the first twice specifies the destination as “the land that YHWH your God is giving you.” Emphasizing the ritual itself, the second twice adds a fourth element to the triad of commands: “And you shall build an altar to YHWH your God.”

1. *Panel A (vv. 2–3)*. The three ritual commands in verses 2b–3a represent the heart of the first panel. Complex subordinate clauses at the beginning (v. 2a) and at the end (v. 3a) establish the context for the proceedings and frame the central core. Chronologically, they are to be performed “on the day” the Israelites cross the Jordan into the land that YHWH promised them. Obviously “day” does not mean within twenty-four hours of crossing the Jordan. It would have taken much longer than a day for all the Israelites and their possessions to cross the river and travel thirty miles to Mount Ebal. Just as *hayyôm* in 4:10 and 15 had focused attention on the *events* associated with YHWH’s revelation and covenant with Israel at Horeb, so here *hayyôm* means “in association with the event of crossing the Jordan River.”

²⁹ On the discourse function of *wēhāyā* see Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Biblical Languages: Hebrew 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004) 331.

That future day is distinct from “this day,” in verses 1 and 9–10, that is, the events associated with the convocation of the Israelites on the Plains of Moab.

Moses’ attention to the land sends an early clue concerning the significance of this ritual. First, with two identical clauses he declares that Israel is crossing over “to the land that YHWH is giving to them” (v. 2, 3). Second, he describes the land as desirable and spontaneously providing food for its inhabitants, employing an idiom repeated many times in the book: it “flows with milk and honey” (v. 3b).³⁰ Third, he adds, “just as YHWH the God of your ancestors promised you” (v. 3b). Together these three expressions highlight the conviction that the events that are imminent represent the completion of the mission on which Moses had embarked forty years earlier and YHWH’s fulfillment of his promises to the patriarchs.³¹ Because the previous generation had refused to receive the grant of land thirty-eight years earlier,³² they had perished in the desert. However, YHWH had not forgotten his promise. These rituals celebrate YHWH’s fidelity to his word, and when the Israelites leave this place these stones will remain as reminders of his covenant faithfulness to the patriarchs and to the Israelites.

Verses 2b–3a reduce the rituals to the barest details: erect large stones, plaster them with lime, and write on them all the words of this Torah. But what do these actions mean? Each element deserves separate comment.

a. *The stone monuments.* The verb *hēqûm*, “to erect, set up,” suggests that the stones in question were to be set up as vertical pillars. Ancient Near Easterners erected commemorative monuments for a variety of reasons: as memorials to military conquests,³³ political accomplishments,³⁴ treaties,³⁵ judicial achievements,³⁶ and religious devotion.³⁷ While pillars function similarly in the First Testament,³⁸ their

³⁰ Cf. Deut 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20.

³¹ At the time of Moses’ call and commission YHWH had promised to give the Israelites the land he had sworn to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exod 6:8; cf. Gen 17:8). Indeed, the characterization of the land as “a land flowing with milk and honey” derives from YHWH himself, who had used this idiom in his initial encounter with Moses (Exod 3:8) and reiterated it repeatedly on the journey (Exod 3:17; 13:5; 33:3; Lev 20:24). On the ancestors in Deuteronomy, see Jerry Hwang, *The Rhetoric of Remembrance: An Investigation of the “Fathers” in Deuteronomy* (Siphrut: Literature and Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

³² See Num 13:27; 14:8; 16:13, 14.

³³ E.g., the *Victory Stela* of Naram-Sin (2254–2218 BC), on which see Irene J. Winter, “Trees on the Mountain: Landscape and Territory on the Victory Stela of Naram Sin of Agade,” in *Landscapes: Territories, Frontiers and Horizons in the Ancient Near East* (Papers Presented to the XLIV Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Venezia, July 7–11, 1997, Part I; ed. L. Milano et al.; RAI 44; Padova: Sargon, 1999) 63–72. See also The Merneptah Stela celebrating his Asian conquests (1215 BC); *ANET* 376–78; for bibliography see Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005) 389–90.

³⁴ E.g., the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser of Assyria. For the image see *ANEP*², figs. 351–55; for a translation of the text see *ANET* 278–81.

³⁵ E.g., the eighth-century BC treaty between Bar-Ga’yah and Mati’el from Sefire. For the image see *ANEP*², figs. 659–61; for the text see *COS* 2.82.

³⁶ E.g., Hammurabi’s Law Code; for the image see *ANEP*, fig. 246; for the text see *ANET*, 163–80; *COS* 2.131.

³⁷ E.g., the 13th-century BC stela from Hazor, including one inscribed with hands upraised to the crescent moon. For illustration and brief discussion see Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*

most commonly attested use involved *maššēboṭ*, phallic symbols of Baal. Moses' earlier denunciations of such pillars (7:5; 22–26) and the elaboration in 27:4–8 obviously exclude this significance here.

Although the plural *'ābānīm gēdōlōt*, “large stones,” in Deut 27:2 suggests the erection of more than one pillar, the text does state not how many were required. Based on the number of tribes involved in the liturgical imprecations in verses 12–13, twelve would seem appropriate, in which case the present ritual would echo part of the covenant ratification ceremony celebrated at Horeb forty years earlier (Exod 24:4). Although the function of the stones differed, remarkably after the Israelites had crossed the Jordan they set up a memorial consisting of twelve stones, “according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Israel” (Josh 4:1–9).³⁹ Based on the convention of later Greek colonizers erecting monuments to commemorate arrival at a destination, and Moses' charge to perform these rituals “on the day you cross the Jordan,” Moshe Weinfeld suggested these memorialize the conclusion of a journey.⁴⁰ By this interpretation, if the ritual involved twelve stones it signaled the end of the journey for all the tribes of Israel, including those who claimed land east of the Jordan.

b. *The plaster on the stone monuments.* The action involves plastering stones⁴¹ with a white alkaline compound consisting of water and calcium oxide derived from limestone that was readily available in the vicinity of Ebal and Gerizim. This plaster hardens as the water evaporates, leaving a smooth coating over the object.⁴² Plastering rough surfaces for artistic and literary purposes is well attested as early as the Chalcolithic paintings at Ghassul, but it is not clear how the Torah was to be written on these pillars. Had Moses called for inscribing the text with chisels the inscription would certainly have been more durable, but it would also have involved arduous work and required much more space than a smooth surface to contain the entire text. If it was etched with a sharp object the dark color of the rock beneath

10,000–586 B.C.E. (New York: Doubleday, 1990) 254. The excavations at Gezer have unearthed ten pillars, some three meters high, aligned in a north to south direction. See M. Avi-Yonah, “Gezer,” *EAEHL* 429–43, esp. 437.

³⁸ Memorials to (1) conquest: Ebenezer, “stone of help,” commemorating Israel's victory over the Philistines (1 Sam 7:12); David's memorial on the River Euphrates (1 Chr 18:3); (2) political achievements: Saul (1 Sam 15:12); cf. Absalom, who erected a monument because he had no son to keep the memory of his name alive (2 Sam 18:18); (3) treaties: between Jacob and Laban (Gen 31:45); (4) religious devotion: pillar (*maššēbā*) at Bethel (Gen 28:18, 22; 35:14); Joshua's pillar at Shechem (Josh 24:26–27).

³⁹ Cf. also Elijah's altar on Mount Carmel, which consisted of twelve stones “according to the number of the sons of Jacob” (1 Kgs 18:31).

⁴⁰ Moshe Weinfeld, “The Pattern of the Israelite Settlement in Canaan,” in *Congress Volume Jerusalem 1986* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988) 280.

⁴¹ The text represents a typical Hebrew construction, involving a verb and a noun from the same root: *wēšadtā 'ōtām baššīd*, literally, “and you shall plaster them with the plaster.” *šīd* is a denominative verb from the homonymous noun, which denotes “lime.” While the verb occurs only here (vv. 2, 4), the noun occurs elsewhere only in Isa 33:12 and Amos 2:1. Both contexts speak of the atrocious practice of burning human bones to produce lime.

⁴² While plaster is attested in the region from neolithic times, in the Iron Age it was commonly used to waterproof cisterns, and occasionally used by wealthier people to plaster the walls and floors of their houses. See further Larry G. Herr, “Plaster,” *ISBE* (rev. ed.) 3.883.

the plaster would constitute the text. However, it seems most likely that the Torah was written with ink or paint, something like the eighth-century BC “Balaam Text” at Deir ‘Alla in Jordan. However, unlike the latter, where the text was written on an inside wall, exposed to the elements, a legible text would not have survived long. Even without the text, the pillars could have stood for generations as lasting memorials to the present event. Conceivably, when Joshua assembled the tribes of Israel at Shechem for his last address and to renew the covenant (Joshua 24), they met at this very spot. Joshua had earlier erected the pillars himself (Josh 8:30–35), and they were probably still standing at the time of his last convocation of the tribes. Nevertheless, although the pillars may have been reused later as a rallying point, apparently Moses expected the texts inscribed thereon to be usable only this one time.

c. *The text of the Torah on the stones.* Although Moses had earlier charged the people to write his words on their hearts, the doorposts of their houses, and the gates of their towns (6:9; 11:20), and instructed the future king to write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll (17:18), these antecedents offer little aid in solving the riddle of this aspect of the ritual on Mount Ebal. The former inscriptions may have involved short texts, perhaps the Shema or the Decalogue,⁴³ but having the king copy “this Torah” in the presence of the Levitical priests apparently required the precise copying and reading of all of Moses’ present addresses. If the general population was forbidden from adding to or deleting from the Torah (4:2), how much less the king, who was to embody it.

If the speeches in chapter 27 were delivered in the context of the proceedings at the end of chapter 31, then “all the words of this Torah” involved the entirety of Moses’ farewell pastoral addresses preserved in Deuteronomy. This would have posed no logistical problem. By word count of English translations of the respective documents, Moses’ three speeches total are approximately twice as long as Hammurabi’s law code,⁴⁴ which takes up less than three-fourths of the surface area of the c. seven-foot stela of Hammurabi. The entire text of Moses’ speeches could easily have been transcribed on two six foot stelae. But if the present rituals involved twelve pillars, as I have suggested, then the average number of words on each pillar would have been fewer than 2,000 and the pillars themselves would have

⁴³ Though “these words” that Moses charged the people to put on their hearts/minds and recite constantly to their children probably involved the entire Torah, that is, his speeches in the book of Deuteronomy. On the possibility of memorizing such a large text, see Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart* 8–14.

⁴⁴ Ideally one should compare the lengths of these documents in their original form, the Babylonian version of the Law Code and the Hebrew version of Deuteronomy. However, since the Law Code is written in syllabic script and Deuteronomy was originally written only with a consonantal alphabet, it is difficult to establish a precise comparison. According to L. W. King’s translation (*The Code of Hammurabi*, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004; repr. of 1910 ed.) the Code has slightly more than 11,000 words. According to the ESV, the word count for the three speeches of Moses is slightly more than 23,000.

needed to be no taller than three feet.⁴⁵ Even so, for the moment the purpose of the inscription remains unspecified.

2. *Panel B (vv. 4–8)*. The second panel of this address is slightly longer than the first.⁴⁶ Whereas the first panel described the location of the prescribed ritual in general terms,⁴⁷ now Moses specifies *bēhar ʿēbāl*, “on Mount Ebal.” The choice of Ebal for this ceremony is logical on several counts. First, Mounts Ebal and Gerizim appear at the precise midpoint of a straight line plotted “from Dan to Beersheba,” the common stereotypical idiom for referring to the entire land of Israel from the northern to the southern border [Fig. 1].⁴⁸ Second, rising more than 3,000 feet above sea level and 1,200 feet above the surrounding terrain Mount Ebal is one of the highest mountains in the region; from its peak most of the Promised Land was visible, from Mount Hermon in the north to the Jerusalem highlands in the south, and from the Mediterranean Sea in the west to the hills of Gilead and Bashan across the Jordan River. Third, this was an extremely important site in Israel’s ancestral traditions. Although Genesis mentions neither Ebal nor Gerizim, Shechem, located between these mountains, was Abraham’s first recorded stopping point in the land to which YHWH had guided him. Here YHWH had appeared and declared explicitly that this was the land he was giving to him, to which Abraham responded by building an altar (Gen 12:6–7).⁴⁹ Decades later, when Jacob returned from Haran with his family, at Shechem he bought a piece of land, built an altar, and named it *ʿēl ʿēlōhē yiśrāʾēl*, “El, the God of Israel.” In so doing he acknowledged the providential conjoining of deity, subject, and land (Gen 33:18–20; cf. 35:4). By locating this ceremony at Ebal and Gerizim, Moses invites the nation to acknowledge God’s faithfulness in finally fulfilling the promise to the ancestors.

⁴⁵ Barker suggests plausibly that the use of the verb *bēʿer* in v. 8 creates an inclusio with 1:5, reinforcing the view that the texts written on the stones included all of Deuteronomy 1–26. See “Theology of Deuteronomy 27” 286.

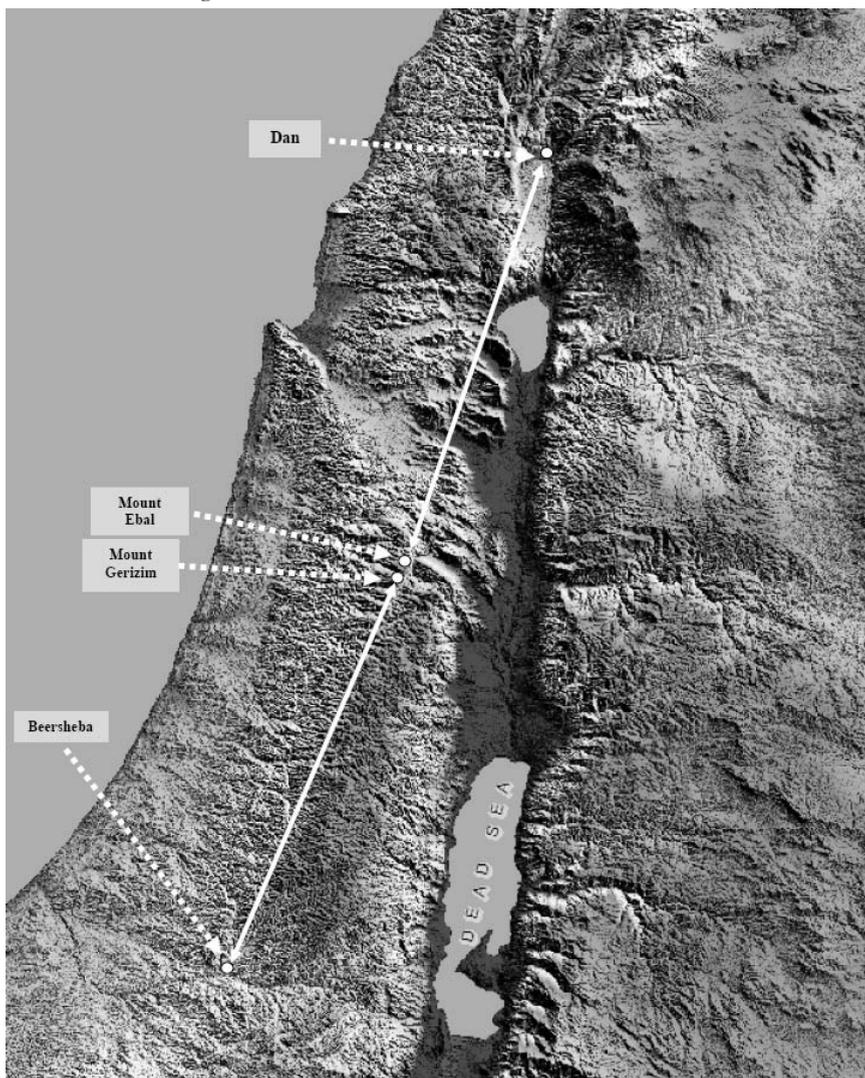
⁴⁶ Panel A has 48 words; panel B has 59. The framework (vv. 4, 8) repeats much of the essential information already presented in the first panel, though in greatly abbreviated form. Indeed, in verse 4 the characterization of the stones as *hāʿēbānūm hāʿēlleh*, “these stones,” and *ʿāšer ʿānōkī mēšawweh ʿetkem hayyôm*, “[about] which I am commanding you this day,” assumes the preceding.

⁴⁷ “When you cross over to enter the land that YHWH your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as YHWH, the God of your fathers, has promised you.”

⁴⁸ Judg 20:1; 1 Sam 3:20; 2 Sam 3:10; 17:11; 24:2, 15. Alternatively we could draw a line from Ijon, at the northernmost end of the Huleh valley (cf. 1 Kgs 15:20; 2 Kgs 15:29; 2 Chr 16:4), to Tamar and Ezem (exact locations unknown), but apparently southeast of Beersheba (Josh 15:29; 19:3; 1 Chr 4:29).

⁴⁹ In 11:30 Moses alluded to this event with his reference to the “oaks of Moreh.” Apart from this tradition, as an outsider he would probably not have been aware of the name Moreh, or of the distinctive association of this place with oaks.

Figure 1: The Locations of Mounts Ebal and Gerizim⁵⁰



The bulk of this panel is taken up with a new subject: instructions for constructing an altar (vv. 5–6a) and for celebrating rituals at the altar (vv. 6b–7).

3. *Instructions for constructing an altar at Ebal (vv. 5–6a).* Moses begins by calling for the construction of the altar “there” (*šām*), that is, at Mount Ebal, and then he adds that this altar must be built of natural stones, rather than of stones chiseled to shape⁵¹ with an iron tool.⁵² Although this altar will serve a one-time event, quite

⁵⁰ Base map adapted from Bible Works Maps.

⁵¹ The verb *hēnîp*, from *nîp*, “to raise,” in the hiphil stem means “to wield, to swing.”

distinct from the altar involved in regular worship at the tabernacle or temple, the proscription adapts Exod 20:25, “If you make an altar of stones for me, do not build it with dressed stones, for you will defile it if you wield (*hēnūp*) a tool against it.”⁵³ The present call for natural stones suits the ceremonial context. Just as animals to be sacrificed were to be “perfect” (*tāmūm*, e.g. Lev 1:3) and “without blemish” (*mūm*, Deut 15:21), so the stones to be used in the altar for sacrifices were to be “whole, complete” (*šēlēmā*). Apparently attempting to improve them with human effort and man-made tools would actually defile them.⁵⁴

According to verses 6b–7 the rituals to be performed at the altar included whole burnt offerings (*ōlōt*) to YHWH, fellowship/peace offerings (*zābah šēlāmūm*), eating “there” (*šām*), and celebrating (*sāmah*) in YHWH’s presence. This prescription recalls instructions for worship at the central sanctuary in 12:7 and 18, where Moses had invited Israelites to make regular pilgrimages to the place that YHWH would choose to establish his name, and there to present their whole burnt offerings (*ōlōt*) along with other offerings to YHWH (12:5, 11, 13–14, 21).⁵⁵ Verse 7 contains the only reference to *šēlāmūm* in the book. Since it is missing in the catalogue of gifts to be presented to YHWH in chapter 12, *zābah šēlāmūm*, “to sacrifice fellowship offerings,” is an umbrella expression for all offerings (*zēbāhūm*, cf. 12:6, 11, 27).⁵⁶ The combination of whole burnt offerings and fellowship offerings pre-

⁵² The expression *’ābānīm šēlēmōt*, literally “complete, healthy stones,” occurs elsewhere only in Josh 8:31, which is based on this text,” and in 1 Kgs 6:7, where the singular form, *’eben šēlēmā*, “natural stone,” applies to stones that were apparently pre-prepared at a quarry (*massā*), to prevent the sound of hammer, chisel, or any other iron tool from being heard at the site of the temple as it was being built.

⁵³ It is not clear how the involvement of human hands in shaping stones would defile (*hīlāl*) them. According to a speculative rabbinic tradition, “Iron was created to shorten man’s days, and the altar was created to lengthen man’s days; it is not proper that what shortens should be lifted against what lengthens” (*m. Mid.* 3:4).

⁵⁴ So also S. M. Olyan, “Why an Altar of Unfinished Stones? Some Thoughts on Ex 20,25 and Dtn 27,5–6,” *ZAW* 108 (1996) 161–71. Olyan applies to these stones Mary Douglas’s paradigmatic notion that “wholeness” and “completeness” which were to characterize priests and the bodies of sacrificial animals, are characteristic of holiness. See further M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge, 2002; repr. of 1966 ed.) 51–52.

Adam Zertal has discovered the remains of a large stone structure on the northern slope of Mount Ebal. Although its function is disputed, it is dated to the early Iron Age, and its framework was made of uncut stones and filled with soil, as prescribed here and in Exod 20:24–25. For preliminary discussion of the site, see Adam Zertal, “Ebal, Mount,” *ABD* 2.255–58; *idem*, “An Early Iron Age Cultic Site on Mount Ebal,” *TA* 13–14 (1986–1987) 105–65; *idem*, “Has Joshua’s Altar Been Found on Mount Ebal?” *BAR* 11 (1985) 26–44. For a detailed study of this site and this structure, see Ralph K. Hawkins, *The Iron Age Structure on Mt. Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (BBR Supplement 6; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012). For summary assessment of the evidence, see Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) 232–34.

⁵⁵ Except for 27:7 and 13:17 [16], which treats booty from a city that turns away from YHWH and is burned as an *’ōlā* to him, elsewhere in Deuteronomy whole burnt offerings are always prescribed for YHWH at the central sanctuary.

⁵⁶ The derivation of *šēlāmūm* from a root *šlm*, “to be whole, complete,” suggests these sacrifices were a divinely granted provision for celebrating the well-being worshippers experienced in relationship to the deity. Lev 7:11–18 applies the expression *šēlāmūm* to different types of joyful offerings: thanksgiving sacrifices (*tōdā*), vowed sacrifices (*neder*), freewill offerings (*nedēbā*).

sents a holistic view of sacrifice: sacrificial victims presented to God and consumed entirely by fire, and sacrifices that provided nourishment for the worshiper respectively.⁵⁷ Moses' invitation to eat the *šēlāmîm* with joy and celebration in the presence of YHWH is remarkable, since elsewhere in Deuteronomy *lipnê yhwh* (“in the presence of YHWH”), is usually associated with the central sanctuary where YHWH has chosen to establish his name. Apparently he conceived of Mount Ebal as a temporary residence of YHWH, a sequel to Horeb where the Israelites had ratified YHWH's covenant with them decades earlier.

In addition to linking our text to the altar law in Exod 20:24–26,⁵⁸ the combination of whole burnt and fellowship offerings also binds this ceremony even more tightly to the covenant ratification rituals in Exod 24:1–11. As in our text there (1) an altar was constructed at the foot of a mountain; (2) it was associated with whole burnt and fellowship offerings; (3) which symbolized YHWH's presence. However, the involvement of pillars in the rituals at both sites provides a concrete link between these two texts. Although in Exod 24:4 the narrator had noted that the Horeb ceremony had involved twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel, he did not explain their role in the ritual. Unlike our text, he expressly distinguished the pillars from the written documents involved in the covenant ratification procedure. Although the permanent copy to be deposited in the Ark of the Covenant had not yet been produced (Exod 24:12), apparently Moses had transcribed the “words” (*dēbārîm*) of that covenant, that is the Decalogue, and the stipulations (*mišpātîm*), that is “the covenant document” (*sēper habbērît*) on scrolls. Inasmuch as *sēper* [usually translated “book”], means simply “written document,” irrespective of the materials on which or with which the text was written,⁵⁹ Moses could conceivably have written the covenant stipulations on the twelve pillars. However, it is unlikely that the object Moses “took” (*lāqah*) in his hands and read before the people (Exod 24:7) was one or more of these pillars. For the narrator the pillars simply

⁵⁷ On the *šēlāmîm*, see Richard E. Averbeck, “שֶׁלֶם,” *NIDOTTE* 4.130–43; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB3; New York: Doubleday, 1991) 217–25; Gary A. Anderson, “Sacrifices and Sacrificial Offerings: Old Testament,” *ABD* 5.878–79. Baruch Levine (*In the Presence of YHWH* [Leiden: Brill, 1974] 3–54) interprets this as “an efficacious gift of greeting, offered “in the presence of YHWH.” Others have viewed the *šēlāmîm* variously as “communion offerings” (De Vaux, *Ancient Israel* 427), “restitution payments” (G. B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament* [New York: Ktav, 1971] 7), “peace offerings” (G. A. Cooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ezekiel* [ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936] 473), or “final offering” (Rolf Rendtorff, *Studien zur Geschichte des Opfers im alten Israel* [WMANT 24; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1967] 81–83). The high proportion (10%) of fallow deer remains among the sample of diagnostic bones discovered at the Mt. Ebal cult site is intriguing (Hawkins, *Iron Age Structure*, 64, 179–82). Whether or not this suggests that this site derives from a time when Israelites were not yet completely settled but somewhat dependent on wild game for their own diet, it reinforces my view that Israelite dietary boundaries (Deut 14:1–21) were linked to the sacrifices—the types of animal meats that YHWH accepted as offerings were approved for Israelite consumption—which strengthened the covenant bond between deity and people (hence the designation *šēlāmîm*).

⁵⁸ These two expressions are frequently combined: Exod 20:24; 24:5; 32:6; Num 10:10; 15:8; Josh 8:31; 22:23, 27; Judg 20:26; 21:4; 2 Sam 24:25; 1 Kgs 9:25; 1 Chr 16:1; 21:26; Ezek 43:27.

⁵⁹ Since books as we know them would not be invented until almost a millennium later, it is anachronistic and misleading to call this document “the Book of the Covenant.”

represented the twelve tribes of Israel, memorializing the inclusion of all of Jacob's descendants in the covenant that YHWH had originally made with Abraham and promised to his descendants (Gen 15:13–21; 17:4–8).

4. *Instructions for transcribing "this Torah" on the pillars* (v. 8). In verse 8 Moses returns to the matter of the text on the pillars, though he still does not explain directly why "all the words of this Torah" were to be written on them. Were they to be read aloud off the rocks to the assembly? This seems superfluous since the Levites already had the scroll that Moses had produced (31:9–13). Were they to be transcribed so future visitors to the site could be reminded of the principles of the covenant relationship outlined in the Torah? Or were they to be transcribed in anticipation of covenant renewal events like the event led by Joshua at Shechem. This is unlikely, since Joshua 24 mentions neither the pillars nor the Torah inscribed thereon. To the contrary, Joshua wrote his own words⁶⁰ in the document of the Torah of God (*bēsēper tôrat 'ēlōhîm*) and he erected his own "great stone" (*'eben gēdôlâ*) under the oak next to YHWH's sanctuary (*miqdāš yhw*). The narrator offers no hint of recollection of the earlier event described in Josh 8:30–35.

The last two words of the second panel, *ba'ēr hētēb* (v. 8), provide the best clue to the significance of the transcription of the Torah. Most translations and commentators read verse 8 as an appeal for meticulous copying of all the words of Torah on the erected stones.⁶¹ By this interpretation this statement reinforces Moses' earlier warning against adding to or subtracting from the Torah (4:2). Establishing the meaning of the phrase is frustrated by the fact that it occurs only here, though we have encountered the first word in the concluding clause of the preamble to the book: *hō'îl mōšeh bē'ēr 'et hattôrâ hazzō't* (1:5).⁶² Most translations render *hō'îl bē'ēr* here as "he began to expound" (NIV) or "he undertook to expound" (NRSV, NJPS) or "he undertook to explain" (ESV) the Torah, as if the phrase speaks of clarification and explanation.⁶³ Moses' addresses obviously expound on previous revelation, particularly the implications of the Israelite covenant for a people about to enter the land promised under the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gen 15:7–21; 26:3; Exod 6:2–8). However, this understanding neither exhausts the meaning of *hō'îl bē'ēr*, nor reflects its primary meaning. Recent scholarship suggests the expression speaks more to the *purpose* of Moses' address in 1:5 and the *purpose* of the inscription in 27:8 than to their content or their nature.

⁶⁰ Presumably the speech of 24:2–15, and perhaps the dialogue that transpired between him and the people in 24:16–24.

⁶¹ Cf. "very plainly" (ESV), or "very clearly" (NIV, NRSV), or "very distinctly" (NAS; cf. NJPS).

⁶² The verb *bē'ēr* occurs outside Deuteronomy only in Hab 2:2, where it refers to engraving words on a writing surface.

⁶³ In postbiblical Hebrew, the word means "to expound, provide exposition." See Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Babli, Yerushalmi and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Judaica, 1971) 135. Similarly Palestinian Aramaic, "to explain, write." See Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (2d ed.; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) 83.

The Hebrew form *bē'ēr* (D-stem) is related to Akkadian *burru*, “to confirm,” that is “put a legal document in force.”⁶⁴ From the perspective of speech-act theory, according to Deut 1:5 Moses’ locutionary oral act of proclaiming the Torah, along with the covenant renewal rituals alluded to in the book (e.g., 26:16–19; 29:8–17 [ET 9–18]), were driven by the illocutionary goal of legally binding this generation of Israelites to the covenant to which their parents had signed on at Horeb, and to which Abraham had signed on by accepting circumcision as the mark of the covenant. Correspondingly, in 27:2–8 the goal of the transcriptional locutionary act was not merely to transform the Torah on pillars of stone of Moses into a monument.⁶⁵ Rather, the written verbal action served the illocutionary goal of binding the land to YHWH and his people, thereby completing the tripartite covenant relationship, a subject that I shall now consider in greater detail. Perhaps these illocutionary goals are also reflected in the form of the transcription. Coming rains would wash the words off the pillars and they would be absorbed by the soil, thereby binding the land itself to the covenant reflected in the Torah, as well as to the people and the God whose relationship is expressed in the Torah.

IV. THE THEOLOGICAL AND LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE OF DEUTERONOMY 27

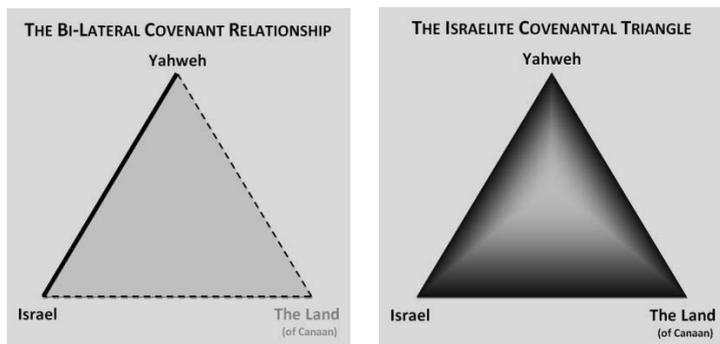
Whereas the ritual in Exod 24:1–11 had sealed the covenantal bond between Israel and YHWH, that event had not fulfilled the divine agenda declared to Moses at the time of his call (Exod 3:8) and reiterated many times thereafter (e.g. Exod 6:2–8). Indeed, Moses has repeatedly declared in his addresses to the people on the Plains of Moab that YHWH’s purpose in rescuing Israel from Egypt was that he might give his people the land he had sworn to the ancestors.⁶⁶ The Horeb event had sealed the covenant between two parties in what would ultimately be a tripartite relationship. According to plan the third member (the land) should have been incorporated into the scheme within a matter of months if not weeks after leaving Horeb. However, because of the people’s rebellion at Kadesh-Barnea the plan to complete the triangle had been on hold for thirty-eight years. By linking this ritual with the ceremony at Horeb Moses anticipates the long-awaited moment. The purpose of this ritual is to incorporate the land into this complex of covenantal relationships and to secure Israel’s title to that which YHWH had promised long

⁶⁴ Cf. CAD 2 (1965) 127. For fuller discussion, see J. Schaper, “The ‘Publication’ of Legal Texts in Ancient Judah,” in *The Pentateuch as Torah: New Models for Understanding Its Promulgation and Acceptance* (ed. G. N. Knoppers and B. M. Levinson; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2007) 230; G. Braulik and N. Lohfink, “Deuteronomium 1,5 באר אתהתורה הואת: ‘er verlieh dieser Tora Rechtskraft,’” in *Textarbeit: Studien zu Texten und ihrer Rezeption aus dem Alten Testament und der Umwelt Israels: Festschrift für Peter Weimar zur Vollendung seines 60. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen* (ed. K. Kiesow and T. Meurer; AOAT 294; Münster: Ugarit, 2003) 49.

⁶⁵ Thus Jan Assmann, “Altorientalische Fluchinschriften und das Problem performativer Schriftlichkeit. Vertrag und Monument als Allegorien des Lesens,” in *Schrift* (ed. H. U. Gumbrecht and K. L. Pfeiffer; Materialität der Zeichen A/12; Munich: Fink, 1993) 233–56.

⁶⁶ Deut 1:8, 35; 6:10, 18, 23; 7:13; 8:1; 10:11; 11:9, 21; 19:8; 26:3, 15; 28:11; 30:20; 31:7, 20, 21, 23.

ago and was now delivering into their hands.⁶⁷ This ritual commemorates the basis of Israel's claim to the land: it is YHWH's free gift to them as their *nahālā*. Within this context the transcription of the Torah onto the pillars would be a performative act whereby the land is formally incorporated into the covenant triangle.



If this interpretation of Deut 27:1–8 is correct, how are we to understand the cultural, theological, and literary significance of the event prescribed here? Biblical scholars generally and evangelical scholars in particular are extremely grateful to Sandra Richter, who has clarified the significance of “the place for YHWH’s name” magnificently.⁶⁸ Against those who argue that Deuteronomy’s “Name theology” represents a revolution in religious thinking, according to which YHWH is no longer perceived to be actually present in his temple, but is represented there in some hypostatic way by his Name, Richter argues convincingly that the phrases *šakkēn šēm* and *šim šēm*, “to set the name,” reflect a borrowed idiom represented in Akkadian as *šuma šakānu*, meaning “to inscribe/erect a monument bearing the name and proclaiming ownership and hegemony.”⁶⁹ Accordingly, the place that he chooses to establish his name is ultimately viewed as stamped with his name; this is the place he claims for himself and at which he has chosen to reside.⁷⁰ So far Richter’s work is very helpful. However, I am not so sure about her secondary proposal. It may be that for those responsible for compiling Deuteronomy 5–27, Mount Ebal was “the first locale where Yahweh had ‘placed his name,’”⁷¹ but her specific claim

⁶⁷ See further below.

⁶⁸ Sandra L. Richter, *The Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology: ʾšakkēn šēmō šām in the Bible and the Ancient Near East* (BZAW 318; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2002); *idem*, “The Place of the Name in Deuteronomy,” *VT* 57 (2007) 342–66.

⁶⁹ Accordingly, the first word in *šakkēn šēmō* is not a factitive D verb form (from *šakan*, to dwell), meaning “to cause his name to dwell,” as it is often understood.

⁷⁰ See further Daniel I. Block, “No Other Gods: Bearing the Name of YHWH in a Polytheistic World,” in *The Gospel according to Moses: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Book of Deuteronomy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012) 247–56.

⁷¹ Richter, *Deuteronomistic History and the Name Theology* 366.

that the pillars in 27:4–5 function as triumphal monuments⁷² inscribed with the words and “heroic acts of Yahweh”⁷³ is problematic on several grounds.⁷⁴

First, although the present ritual is to be performed “before YHWH” (*lipnê YHWH*, 27:7), neither 11:29–32, which anticipates, nor chapter 27, which prescribes the Mount Ebal ritual, mentions YHWH’s name (*šēm*) or speaks of YHWH choosing (*bāḥar*) this place.

Second, Richter’s reading of the stelae of 27:4–5 as triumphal monuments inscribed with the words and “heroic acts of Yahweh” does not match the contours of the text. Deuteronomy 27 suggests this was to be the Israelites’ first cultic observance after they crossed the Jordan, *preceding* the conquest of the land, rather than a commemoration of conquests already achieved. Furthermore, chapter 27 is devoid of any military features. Rather than reciting YHWH’s heroic acts, this inscription involves “all the words of this Torah” (*kol dibrê hattôrâ hazzōt*), that is, some version of Moses’ exposition of covenant relationship as presented in chapters 5–26.

Third, whereas victory monuments were typically made of stone with inscriptions chiseled into the rock so they would endure, these stelae consisted of natural stones plastered over, and then apparently inscribed with some sort of ink. Unlike the Deir ‘Allah plaster inscriptions, which endured a long time because they were on inside walls,⁷⁵ these stelae were out in the open, which meant the inscriptions would be effaced by natural weathering processes in a very short time, thereby diminishing their monumental significance.

Fourth, speaking on behalf of YHWH, Moses has repeatedly invited the Israelites to come regularly to the place where YHWH stamps his name for worship—not military celebrations. The rituals prescribed in Deuteronomy 27 involve a one-time event.

Fifth, the closest analogue to the ritual on Mount Ebal is found, not in extra-biblical accounts of the erection of victory or votive stelae, but in the inner-biblical Sinai narrative. The association of whole burnt offerings and peace offerings and covenantal texts with stelae links this event with Exod 24:1–11. However, the fact that the earlier ratification ceremonies transpired far away from the Promised Land necessitated a sequel involving the land. By eating the covenant meal in the presence of Yahweh *in the land he has given them* (27:7), the Israelites will celebrate the completion of the triangle.

As noted above, the function of this ritual is suggested by the expression, *ba’ēr hêtēb*. Moses does not require the Levites to read the Torah before the people in this ritual, as they would regularly at Sukkoth (Festival of Booths; 31:9–13), or

⁷² Ibid. 361.

⁷³ Ibid. 347.

⁷⁴ For a helpful critique of Richter, see Michael Hundley, “To Be or Not to Be: A Reexamination of the Name Language in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History,” *VT* 59 (2009) 533–55.

⁷⁵ On the Deir ‘Allah inscriptions, see Jean Hofstijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir ‘Allah* (Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui 19; Leiden: Brill, 1976); *idem*, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allah Re-evaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium Held at Leiden 21–24 August 1989* (Leiden: Brill, 1991); JoAnn Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allah* (HSM 19; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1984).

even as he had done with the “Covenant Document” at Horeb (Exod 24:1–11). As a literary rather than oral speech act this event formalizes the covenant relationship binding YHWH, Israel, and the land. Whereas Moses’ oral proclamation of the Torah (1:5) had bound this generation of Israelites to the covenant ratified at Horeb, apparently this part of the ritual would proceed silently. Plastering the rock and writing the text, rather than chiseling the inscription coheres with the erection of the altar of uncut stones, and with Moses’ call for silence (*haskēt*) in verse 9.

But why was it necessary to inscribe the Torah on the pillars, if the text was not to be read to the people? It is clear from 27:11–26 that the ritual at Ebal and Gerizim would include loud oral proclamation, but that proclamation would not include reading the Torah. For whose benefit then would these ritual actions be performed? To be sure, the people will have been moved when Joshua fulfilled these prescriptions in Joshua 8, because this ceremony concretized their claim to the land on which the soles of their feet now stood (cf. 11:24–25; Josh 1:3; 14:9). However, apparently this ceremony was also for the land’s benefit. In Deuteronomy the land is often portrayed as animate, a vital and responsive partner in this covenant relationship.⁷⁶ Through the transcription of the Torah on the pillars the land is stamped not only with the name of YHWH, but also with his covenant. From now on the land will be held accountable for how it responds to its covenantal mandate and how it treats Israel. Furthermore, it now becomes a witness to the covenantal privileges and responsibilities to which YHWH and the Israelites have committed themselves.

This interpretation may explain the verbal acts that follow in the remainder of chapter 27. In verses 9–10 Moses reiterates his challenge to the people before him to demonstrate fidelity to YHWH by living according to the covenant stipulations, but with the imprecations of verses 11–26 he casts his gaze to the land beyond the Jordan and to Israel’s future there. As noted above, the liturgy prescribed in verses 11–26 is entirely verbal and oral. The text divides stylistically and substantively into two parts. In verses 11–13 the Levites participate as a group alongside the rest of the tribes; in verses 14–26 they are at the center of the action pronouncing the curses. The first part anticipates the proclamation of blessings and curses, while the second reports only the latter. Apparently these two segments represent two phases of a complex ritual involving the recitation of both blessings and curses as part of a covenant renewal ceremony (some version of chapter 28²). Like the imprecations inscribed on Babylonian Entitlement *narûs*, the speech act involving the curses in verses 14–26 seems to have had an entirely different illocutionary goal. The movement from verses 12–13 to 14 suggests the ritual of verses 15–26 is intended as a

⁷⁶ The land is often portrayed as personal. In Deuteronomy the land yields (*nātan*) fruit (11:17), flows with milk and honey (6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15), and is blessed (33:13). Indeed it is Israel’s allotted territory is a land for which YHWH cares (11:12; *dāraš*, “to seek,” is shorthand for “whose welfare [*šālôm*] he seeks”). But this portrayal is common elsewhere: the land faints (Gen 47:13); disgorges its inhabitants (Lev 18:25, 28; 20:22); devours them (Lev 26:38; Num 13:32); mourns (Isa 33:9; Jer 12:4, 11; etc.); languishes (Isa 33:9); acts as a prostitute (Lev 19:29; Hos 1:2); sins (Ezek 14:13); feels shame (Jer 51:47); hears (Jer 22:29); enjoys its sabbaths (Lev 26:34, 43); opens its mouth (Gen 4:11; Num 16:30); swallows (Num 16:30); fears (Joel 2:21); is dismayed (Jer 14:4); gives strength (Gen 4:12).

response to the blessings and curses recited—presumably by leading Levites as liturgical leaders. The size of the assembly and the role of the mountains as witnesses require the Levites to declare the curses loudly.⁷⁷ Hearing the declarations reinforces the incorporation of the mountains (as metonymy for the land) in the deity-nation-land covenantal triangle, and their role as witnesses to the oath under which the Israelites place themselves. In so doing they recognize that should the people prove unfaithful, Moses is not the one who curses them; they have invoked the curse on themselves.

V. CONCLUSION

I return to the question I raised at the beginning: why did the narrator break up Moses' second address and insert chapter 27 here? Since the narrator provides no rationale for what he has done, we are free to speculate. Here are a few preliminary thoughts.

First, given the special interest of 26:16–19 and 28:1–14 in Israel's place in the world, the narrator may have been concerned to bring the image of Israel back to earth. YHWH did not only set Israel high above the nations (26:16; 28:1) and stamp this people with his name (28:1, 9–10), but he also stamped the land with his name.⁷⁸ YHWH's claim to ownership of the land antedates the Israelites' arrival (Lev 25:23), but this ritual sends a signal that that claim will now take effect, inasmuch as the people bearing his name have arrived, and the land itself has received the imprint of the covenant.

Second, psychologically, analogous to the intermission in a dramatic performance, this chapter offers readers and hearers a chance to pause and catch their breath, before they encounter head-on the blessings and curses that end the second address, and the horrors of their fulfillment at the beginning of the third address. For twenty-two chapters (two hours if read orally with expository emphasis),⁷⁹ we have been listening to Israel's first pastor celebrate the grace of God in salvation, covenant, revelation, and the gift of land. In chapter 28, after verse 14 his tone will change drastically. Not only does chapter 27 give hearers an opportunity to catch their breath; the imprecations at the end set the stage for what is to come. Ultimately, if Israel experiences the curse, they have knowingly brought it on themselves.

Finally, it is interesting to note not only where but also when the rituals prescribed here were to be performed. Repeatedly Moses has placed this ceremony at the top of the agenda after the Israelites cross the Jordan (vv. 2, 3, 4, 12), creating the impression that as soon as Joshua has led them across the river, they are to

⁷⁷ The expression *qôl rām*, “high voice,” occurs only here. Elsewhere *qôl gādôl*, “big voice,” is preferred: Gen 39:14; Deut 5:22; 1 Sam 7:10; 28:12; etc.

⁷⁸ See further Daniel I. Block, “No Other Gods: Bearing the Name of YHWH in a Polytheistic World,” in *Gospel according to Moses* 247–62.

⁷⁹ On expository reading of Scripture, see Daniel I. Block, “‘That They May Hear’: Biblical Foundations for the Oral Reading of Scripture in Worship,” *Journal for Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 5 (2012) 5–23.

head for Ebal. YHWH hints at the threat Jericho poses to Israel's possession of the land in 32:49, but Moses seems oblivious to the fact that this city represents a significant obstacle to the journey toward Ebal. Nor does he seem aware of the need for certain other ritual performances that Joshua will supervise at Gilgal as soon as the Israelites have crossed the river: erecting memorials to commemorate the crossing (Josh 4:1–24), circumcising all males (5:1–9), and celebrating the Passover (5:10–12). In this chapter his mind is focused on Ebal.

But why can Ebal not wait until after the conquest of the land? Would it not have made more sense to defeat the Canaanites and occupy the land before it was integrated into the covenant? Apparently not. Apparently before Israel commenced the official campaign of conquest, their claim to the land had to be formally legitimized and the land itself brought into the equation. This was the function of the rituals prescribed in Deuteronomy 27.

ADDENDUM: A NOTE ON THE SEQUENCE OF EVENTS IN JOSHUA

The destruction of Jericho would result in Joshua's fame spread throughout the land (Josh 6:27). However, the Canaanite kings would not take the Israelite presence seriously until they had completed the rituals prescribed in Deuteronomy 27 (Josh 8:30–35). Although most translations fill in the lacuna after the verbal opening of 9:1, *wayēhî kišmōā'*, "When all the kings across the Jordan heard," with something like "of this" (NRSV, NJPS, ESV) or "of these things" (NIV), the verb actually lacks an object. Some suggest that reports of Israel's defeat at Ai had emboldened the kings to marshal their forces against them (cf. 7:9).⁸⁰ However, this interpretation overlooks the fact that the forces of Ai had actually been annihilated and the town had been torched. In fact, the smoke rising to the sky would have been seen for miles around, and the body of the king will have been hanged on a tree for the world to see (8:1–29). The response of the Gibeonites to Ai's demise seems most natural (9:3–21).

Furthermore, the narrator has explicitly separated the defeat of Ai (8:1–29) from the Canaanite kings' reaction in 9:1–2 by locating the account of Israel's convocation at Ebal and Gerizim between these events. Although the first part of the ritual could have proceeded quietly (8:30–32), the second part is entirely aural (vv. 33–35): the tribes stood on Mounts Gerizim and Ebal and heard the blessings and the curses precisely as Moses had prescribed (8:33). Thereafter, apparently introducing a new element, but as prescribed in the Torah itself Joshua read all the words of the Torah, including the blessings and the curses, presumably from the Torah scrolls themselves, rather than from the inscribed pillars. The narrator fails to report explicitly the imprecations listed in Deut 27:14–26. However, he since he emphasizes that the aural part of the ritual was carried out exactly as Moses had prescribed (Josh 8:33, 35), the Levites must have recited the imprecations "with a loud voice" (*qōl rām*, Deut 27:14). After each curse the tribes apparently responded

⁸⁰ Thus Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996) 175–76.

in unison with “Amen!” (vv. 15–26), the sound of which will have reverberated throughout the valley between Ebal and Gerizim and beyond.

Through these rituals the newcomers shamelessly declared their claim to the land and cast themselves on YHWH to deliver it into their hands. This is what seems to have galvanized the Canaanites (9:1–2). But their decision may also have been influenced by what observers would have seen: this was not an assembly of warriors, but a gathering of worshipers, including women, children, and the non-Israelites among them—they should have been an easy target.

The narrator of Joshua notes expressly that Adoni-zedek’s appeal to other southern kings was grounded in his intense fear because Gibeon, which was greater than Ai, had joined the enemy (10:1–5). In response to the attack of this alliance on Gibeon and with the blessing of YHWH, Joshua took the initiative and launched the southern campaign of conquest (10:6–43).

If this campaign was timed to follow the covenantal rituals at Ebal and Gerizim, how do the defeats of Jericho and Ai fit into the picture? The first is easier to answer than the second. Having crossed the Jordan, Jericho represented the gateway to the land. Not only was this one of the strongest cities in Canaan, but it controlled the traffic lanes up and down the Jordan and into the interior of the land. Perhaps this was why the divine strategy for conquering this city differed from the rest. Compared to the other battles, as in the defeat of the Egyptians at the Red Sea, in this event the Israelites were relatively passive. By a supernatural and divine act, after they had obeyed YHWH’s ridiculous orders to march around the city in religious (rather than military) procession the walls had come crashing down, after which the Israelites carried out their mopping up operations. The battles of conquest that followed were much more synergistic in nature. To be sure, the Israelites marched out in response to divine orders, but they marched out, and attacked, and YHWH gave them the victory.

But how did Ai fit the strategy of conquest? Ai was not a suburb of Jericho, so this was not an automatic or even natural second step in the conquest of the land. Joshua 7:1 explicitly links the Israelite fiasco at Ai with Achan’s violation of the law of *herem*. Although YHWH also emphasized Achan’s sin as the cause of the defeat (7:11b–13), remarkably he began his response to Joshua’s prayer of confession with a general statement: “Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant, which I commanded them [to keep]” (7:11a). But should this charge be restricted to Achan’s offense?

Many have noted Joshua’s failure to consult with YHWH the Commander-in-Chief before sending his scouts out to Ai (7:2–3), but no one to my knowledge has noticed the contradiction between Joshua’s orders and Moses’ instructions in Deuteronomy 27. Three times Moses had declared that as soon as the Israelites crossed (*‘ābar*) the Jordan they were to head for Mount Ebal (27:2, 4, 12). One could get to Ebal via Ai, but Ai is not on the most direct route, and in Joshua 7 Ebal does not seem to be on Joshua’s mind. More seriously, choosing to go via Ai contradicts Moses’ specific instructions in Deut 11:29–32 both chronologically and geographically. Regarding the former Joshua did not head for Ai immediately after crossing the Jordan and opening the gates to the Promised Land by conquering Jericho.

Regarding the latter, Moses gave rather specific directions in 11:30, though on first sight they actually seem quite ambiguous:

הלא־המהּ בְּעֵבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן	Are they [Mounts Gerizim and Ebal] not beyond the Jordan,
אַחֲרֵי דְרֹךְ מְבוֹא הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ	westward toward the setting sun,
בְּאַרְצֵי הַכְּנַעֲנִי הַיֹּשֵׁב בְּעֶרְבָה	in the territory of the Canaanites who live in the Arabah,
מוֹל הַגִּלְגַּל	near Gilgal,
אַצְלֵי אֵלוֹנֵי מֹרֶה:	beside the oak of Moreh?

Moses' rhetorical question⁸¹ offers three significant details about the location of the mountains where the ceremonies were to take place. First, and most obviously it was across the Jordan.⁸² Second, it was off to the west. The phrase *'ahārē derek mēbō' haššemeš* translates literally "beyond the way of the setting of the sun."⁸³ Since roads are typically named according to the destination to which they lead, this apparently refers to a road that leads west from the Jordan River to Shechem, which lay between Gerizim and Ebal,⁸⁴ due north of Ai and north north west of Jericho. Third, it is in the land of the Canaanites, who live in the Arabah in the vicinity of Gilgal, north of Jericho, next to the oaks of Moreh. The Arabah refers to the Jordan Valley gorge that runs from the Sea of Galilee in the north to the Red Sea in the south. The meaning of the rest of the verse is uncertain. We may assume that Gilgal is the well-known site north of Jericho (cf. Josh 4:19–5:12), and the "oaks/terebinths of Moreh" a prominent grove in the vicinity of Shechem, where YHWH had met with Abraham and Jacob (cf. Gen 12:6). The expression, *ahārē derek mēbō' haššemeš*, "behind the way of the coming of the sun," especially distinguishes this route from "the way of the desert" (*derek hammidbār*; Josh 8:15), which Joshua's forces seem to have taken. Moses seems to have in mind a route running north parallel to the Jordan, until it meets up with "Sunset Boulevard"⁸⁵ (perhaps up Wadi Farah), which heads west to Gerizim and Ebal. This route would be especially advantageous because there were no major settlements that might interfere with the Israelites' travel. The incongruity between Moses' instructions and Joshua's actions suggest that the conquest of Ai was not on YHWH's agenda for Joshua until after the Ebal ritual had been performed [Fig. 2].⁸⁶

⁸¹ The present comment is cast in the same form as the earlier reference to Og's bed in Rabbah (3:11). On "Are they not...?" as idiomatic for "Surely they are...," see M. L. Brown, "Is It Not? or 'Indeed!': HL in Northwest Semitic," *Maarav* 4 (1987) 201–19.

⁸² As in 3:20, 25, Moses' perspective in 11:30–31 differs from that of the narrator, for whom "beyond the Jordan" is east of the river: 1:1, 5; 4:41, 46–47.

⁸³ On *'ahārē derek* meaning "beyond," see *DCH* 1.199.

⁸⁴ Possible routes are suggested by Map 12, in D. A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 172.

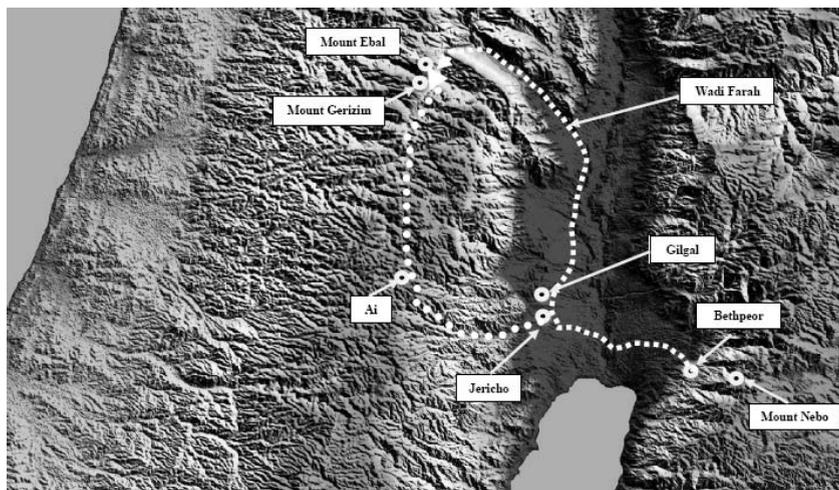
⁸⁵ Thus Tigay, *Deuteronomy* 116.

⁸⁶ Since the Gibeonite ruse was a direct response to the defeat of Ai, had Joshua taken the Israelites directly to Ebal this embarrassing episode would also have been avoided.

It is striking that in the narrative scheme of the book of Joshua as soon as the Israelites had completed the ceremonies, the Canaanites rose to defend their land. Why did this not happen after the destruction of Jericho? It is possible to interpret this as the work of God, signaling the time to launch the attacks (cf. Josh 10:8), and leading ultimately to the defeat of all the Canaanite kings south of the territory assigned to Benjamin (10:1–43). In 10:42 the narrator summarizes the results: “Joshua captured all these kings and their land at one time, because YHWH, the God of Israel, fought for Israel.” This southern campaign was followed by a series of battles against an alliance of northern kings, headed by King Jabin of Hazor (11:1–15). In 11:20 the narrator offers his theological explanation for Israel’s successes:

For YHWH was behind these events, hardening their [the Canaanites’] hearts so they would attack Israel in battle, so that they might be utterly and mercilessly destroyed (*heherîm*) and exterminated (*hišmîd*), just as YHWH had commanded Moses.

Figure 2: The Right (■ ■ ■ ■) and Wrong (● ● ● ●) Roads to Ebal⁸⁷



⁸⁷ Base map adapted from BibleWorks Maps.