

## EBAL AND GERIZIM

The Scriptures recount “for our learning” (Rom 15:4), the experiences of Israel’s children as they were led out from Egypt, brought through a 40 year sojourn in the desert, to the land which Yahweh promised that he would give them for an inheritance. It was their rebellion in the wilderness, that led to their extended period of wandering, as they waited for the rebels to die in order that the generation which followed might enter the Land (Num. 14:29). This was the generation that were to learn from their fathers’ example of unbelief, and who were to always have in remembrance the graciousness of Yahweh in suffering their manners in the wilderness, and in making provision for all their needs. And immediately prior to their entry into the land, this generation were warned that their prosperity depended entirely upon their faithfulness:

“it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of Yahweh thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that Yahweh thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: and all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of Yahweh thy God ...” (Deut 28:1-2).

Likewise, curses were promised should they fail to heed the words of their Redeemer:

“But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of Yahweh thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee ...” (Deut 28:15).

So it was, that Moses set before the people “life and good, and death and evil” (Deut 30:15), and it was their decision to determine which they would follow.

## BLESSING AND CURSING

Immediately upon their entry into the land, the people were to be reminded of these blessings and cursings, by enacting certain things upon the mountains of Ebal and Gerizim. These two mountains were selected to be memorials of the two ways which the people could choose, Mount Ebal speaking of cursing and Gerizim of blessing. So the commandment was given:

“There shall stand upon **mount Gerizim to bless** the people, when ye are come over Jordan; Simeon, and Levi, and Judah, and Issachar, and Joseph, and Benjamin: And these shall stand upon **mount Ebal to curse**; Reuben, Gad, and Asher, and Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali” (Deut 27:12,13).

The ark of the Covenant was to be placed in the middle (something we shall consider shortly), between the two mountains, with the Levites who carried it. The people were assembled either side, upon their respective standing points. Joshua chapter 8 describes how it was done:

“All Israel, and their elders and officers, and their judges, stood on this side the ark and on that side before the priests the Levites, which bare the ark of the covenant of Yahweh, as well the stranger, as he that was born among them; half of them over against mount Gerizim, and half of them over against Mount Ebal; as Moses the servant of Yahweh had commanded before, that they should bless the people of Israel.” (Josh 8:33).

12 cursings were pronounced, and the people were to give their assent to each one, by repeating the word “Amen”, culminating in the final words, “Cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them. And all the people shall say, Amen” (Deut 27:26). So it was, that all the people entered

into a national covenant with Yahweh to remember and to do all that had been commanded them, through His servant Moses.

The tragic events of history plainly declare the people's failure to hearken to the voice of Yahweh. Through persistent and incurable rebellion against their Maker, they brought themselves under the curse to which they had said "Amen" to, so that as Daniel declared in his prayer before the Almighty: "all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; *therefore the curse is poured upon us*, and the oath that is written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him" (Dan 9:11). Living under the law, they became cursed by the law – it could not save them, but instead condemned them to national destruction.

### **SETTING UP STONES**

Deuteronomy chapter 27 describes how stones were to be set up, and an altar erected upon mount Ebal:

"Therefore it shall be, when ye be gone over Jordan, that ye shall set up these stones, which I command you this day, in mount Ebal, and thou shalt plaster them with plaster, and there thou shalt built an Altar unto Yahweh thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them. Thou shalt build the altar of Yahweh of whole stones: and thou shalt offer burnt offerings thereon unto Yahweh thy God" (Deut. 27:6).

The setting up of stones was used in Old Testament times to serve as a memorial of particular covenants, or agreements that were made. Accordingly, Genesis 31 informs us that Jacob gathered a heap of stones together to cement an agreement with Laban. Laban declared "this heap **be witness**, and this pillar shall **be witness**, that I will not pass over this heap to thee, and that thou shalt not pass over this heap and this pillar unto me, for harm ..." (Gen. 31:52). Again, Joshua set up a large stone as a memorial of the people's vowed intent to worship Yahweh alone: "Joshua said unto all the people, Behold, **this stone shall be a witness** unto us: for it hath heard all the words of Yahweh which he spake unto us: it shall be therefore a witness unto you, lest ye deny your God" (Josh. 24:27).

In Deuteronomy 27 then, these stones were to be set up as a memorial of the people's expressed intention to obey the voice of their God. Also, in his first Epistle, the Apostle Peter speaks of how the believers are assembled as Living Stones, as a spiritual house (cp. Beth-El): "ye also, **as lively stones, are built up** a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 2:5).

### **UNHEWN STONES**

The stipulation was made that the stones used were to be as they were found, and not shaped in any way by man: "... **thou shalt not lift up any iron tool** upon them ..." (Deut. 27:5). Again, describing how Joshua fulfilled this command, it is written:

"then Joshua built an altar unto Yahweh God of Israel in mount Ebal. As Moses the servant of Yahweh commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the Law of Moses, an altar of whole stones, **over which no man hath lift up any iron**: and they offered thereon burnt offerings to Yahweh, and sacrificed peace offerings, and he wrote there upon the stones, a copy of the Law of Moses, which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel" (Josh. 8:30-32).

We can readily see how this relates to the principles exhibited in our Lord Jesus Christ. Being unhewn stones, they were not formed by, or according to the will of man. Even so, our Lord Jesus Christ was not born after the will or workmanship of man, but by Divine intervention upon the womb of Mary. He was, as it were, an unhewn living stone, not carved out by men according to their preferred shape, but provided by as he was by Yahweh Himself.

## WRITING UPON THE STONES

Upon these stones, words from the Law were to be written: “... thou shalt write upon the stones all the words of this law **very plainly**” (Deut. 27:8). There was to be no doubt as to what the words spelled out: it’s message was to be “very plain” in it’s appearance. The prophet Habakuk was told to do likewise with the words of his prophecy:

“... Yahweh answered me, and said, Write the vision, and **make it plain upon tables**, that he may run that readeth it...” (Hab. 2:2).

And again, we read that the Word should be plainly written upon the believer’s heart “written, not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart” (2 Cor. 3:3).

The unhewn stones were to be covered with plaster, and the words were to be written upon that plaster. In other words, the commandments were not engraved directly into the stones, but were rather written by hand upon them.

“thou shalt set thee up great stones, and plaster them with plaster: **And thou shalt write upon them** all the words of this law, when thou art passed over ...” (Deut 27:2,3).

These unhewn stones then, were *under* the plaster upon which the Law was written, and foreshadow the situation regarding our Master:

“when the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, **made under the law**, to redeem them that were under the law ...” (Gal 4:5).

There are other principles that point our attention to Messiah: interestingly enough, the Altar thus described was not on the place of blessing as one might naturally assume, but was in Ebal, the place of cursing. How can it be said of the Christ-Altar that he was under a curse? Galatians 3 provides the answer:

“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the Law, **being made a curse for us**: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree ...” (Gal. 3:13)

Christ himself was cursed by the Law, despite being righteous and holy in every respect. He was an altar erected from unhewn stones in the place of cursing. Here was the place of sacrifice – not upon the mount of blessing, for that spoke of man’s obedience, and the rewards for faithfulness. But upon the mount of cursing, for that is the place where those who recognised the righteousness of the Law in cursing them belonged. They, being cursed, would be represented by the place of cursing - but in the place of sacrifice erected there, they would find mercy and forgiveness, for in that place mercy rejoiced against judgment. Though they rightly deserved cursing, they could obtain blessing through their sacrifices at the altar.

## BLESSED AND CURSED

At the time of our Master’s cursing, we find a most remarkable situation. At Ebal and Gerizim we noted earlier, the ark was placed in the very centre of things, with the mount of cursing on the one hand, and the mount of blessing on the other. Even so, at the time of our Master’s lifting up, we find on the one side a thief who remains cursed, and a thief who was blessed. So Luke records, “one of the malefactors which were hanged railed on him, saying, If thou be Christ, save thyself and us. But the other answering rebuked him, saying, Dost not thou fear God, seeing thou art **in the same**

**condemnation?** And we indeed justly; for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this man hath done nothing amiss" (Luke 23:39-41).

Here was a man who recognised that he rightly belonged under condemnation – in the mount of cursing. But there was One under the same condemnation as he – in the mount of cursing with him – who had done no sin. Here was the Christ-altar through whom acceptable worship might be offered – crucified outside the camp, and outside of the favour of men. Here was the greatest sacrifice of all being offered – under cursing, to redeem those who were under the curse. And through faith in him, one of the thieves who died under cursing with him found life and forgiveness.

There is another point similar to this: facing East, as per the practice of Israel of old, Ebal on the north, was on the left, and Gerizim in the south on the right. Interestingly, in his parable of the Sheep and the Goats, as recounted in Matthew chapter 25, it is those on the right hand that are favoured, but those on the left hand are cursed:

“... Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye **blessed** of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world ... then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye **cursed**, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mat. 25:34, 410).

Like the repentant thief, we are also among those who have died with the Lord Jesus Christ: as the Apostle declared: “I am crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20). Not literally of course, but symbolically through the waters of Baptism. In baptism, we are “buried with him ... into death” and “planted together in the likeness of his death,” that “we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection”. In baptism we make a covenant with our Maker to hearken unto the voice of His Word, knowing that at the appointed time, we shall come forth to give account of ourselves before him. Let us therefore repair unto the Christ-altar, that we may no longer live under condemnation, but by being partakers of the death of Christ, we might walk in newness of life in him. Let us give heed to the voice of Yahweh our Redeemer, hearkening to the warnings of Ebal and Gerizim, that we may receive blessing at his hand, as we offer upon the basis of his sacrifice the sacrifice of praise continually, even the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.

*Christopher Maddocks*