



2. Covenant Disobedience ([7:1–26](#))

The account in this chapter is organically bound up with that in the following chapter ([8:1–29](#)), so much so that many scholars subsume both chapters under one heading. The sin that Achan committed, its consequences for the nation, and the process of discovery and punishment of the sin are all related here. The defeat at the hands of the men of Ai here is followed by victory over these same men in chap. [8](#). The victory was made possible because of the cleansing of the nation that had been defiled by Achan's sin.

Several parallels exist between the accounts in [Joshua 2](#) and [7](#). In [Joshua 2](#), Rahab, a believing Canaanite, acted faithfully and, as a result, was promised deliverance from destruction. In effect, she became an Israelite. In [Joshua 7](#), Achan, a disbelieving Israelite, acted faithlessly and, as a result, was not delivered but destroyed. In effect, he became a Canaanite. Achan thus stands as a foil to Rahab, and the two characters embody striking contrasts.

(1) *The Sin* ([7:1](#))

¹But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things; Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took some of them. So the LORD's anger burned against Israel.

[7:1](#) This verse is a transition between the story of the conquest of Jericho and that of the defeat at Ai. It anticipates for the reader the information that emerges in more detail throughout the chapter, especially in vv. [20–21](#), where Achan admits the wrong that he had committed.

The positive state of affairs for the Israelites that existed after their taking of Jericho and that is indicated by the favorable comments of [6:27](#) was quickly shattered by sin. The specific sin was that Achan, who was from the favored tribe of Judah, took some of the things in Jericho that had been devoted to destruction. By doing so, he was violating the prohibition against taking these things that Joshua had uttered in [6:17–19](#). Apparently Achan acted alone, but the verse twice mentions the “Israelites” as the guilty party (i.e., the one man's sin infected the nation as a whole).

More generally, the sin was that Israel “acted unfaithfully” with regard to the things devoted to destruction. The term in question here (*m’l*) is used to describe a wife's adultery (see [Num 5:12–13](#)): it was a betrayal of a trust that existed between two parties. In almost every use of this term in the Bible, the trust broken is that between God and humans. So, in taking the devoted things, Achan was acting in a way that broke the fundamental covenantal relationship between God and Israel, and vv. [11](#) and [15](#) make that explicit: Israel had broken God's covenant. The damage was not repaired until the cause of the betrayal of trust had been removed from the nation (v. [26](#)); then God's anger abated. And, in its present position, the covenant renewal ceremony of [8:30–35](#) shows that shortly thereafter the damaged covenant was renewed and repaired.

¹David M. Howard, *New American Commentary – Volume 5: Joshua*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1998), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, 186-210.

The sin was more than simple theft (a violation of the Eighth Commandment, [Exod 20:15](#)), since the term *m'l*, “to act unfaithfully,” is used (and not *gnb*, “to steal”). The same term (*m'l*) is used seven times in [Joshua 22](#), where the tribes west of the Jordan accused the two and one-half Transjordan tribes of acting unfaithfully by building an altar they thought was a source of idolatry and false worship. These tribes accused the Transjordan tribes of acting in exactly the same way that Achan had (see [22:20](#)), even though the specific actions of Achan and these tribes were different. The point of continuity in both episodes is the betrayal of God's trust and the pursuing of some other object of affection. In this sense, Achan's sin was a violation of the First Commandment, which prohibited having any other gods before the Lord ([Exod 20:3](#)).

(2) *The Defeat* ([7:2–5](#))

²Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is near Beth Aven to the east of Bethel, and told them, “Go up and spy out the region.” So the men went up and spied out Ai.

³When they returned to Joshua, they said, “Not all the people will have to go up against Ai. Send two or three thousand men to take it and do not weary all the people, for only a few men are there.” ⁴So about three thousand men went up; but they were routed by the men of Ai, ⁵who killed about thirty-six of them. They chased the Israelites from the city gate as far as the stone quarries and struck them down on the slopes. At this the hearts of the people melted and became like water.

[7:2–5](#) After the spectacular success of the operations at Jericho, the Israelites turned their attention next to Ai. As he had in the case of Jericho, Joshua sent out spies again (v. [2](#)). The spies' report was optimistic (v. [3](#)), as had been the earlier spies' report, but with a difference. The earlier spies were confident that the Lord had given Jericho into Israel's hands, and they had stated that all the people were “melting” (*mwg*) in fear ([2:24](#)), which is what Rahab had told them ([2:9](#), [11](#)); in this case, however, God was not part of the equation at all. As a result of their spying expedition, the spies at Ai recommended two to three thousand men to engage in the operation. This was a small number compared to the much larger numbers available. For example, [Josh 4:13](#) mentions forty thousand armed men just from the two and one-half Transjordan tribes alone, and [Num 26:51](#) gives 601,730 as the total number of Israelite men twenty years old and older able to serve in its army shortly before the nation entered Canaan.

The spies' estimate was obviously inadequate, based on the results of the battle and also based on the number of people of Ai who fell in the destruction of the city: twelve thousand men and women ([8:25](#)).

The actual account of the Israelites' defeat at Ai is briefly told in vv. [4–5](#). The reversal of fortunes is told with a focus on the Israelites: “And about three thousand men from the people went up there, but they fled before the men of Ai!” Thirty six Israelites were killed—a very small number compared to the numbers of Israel's fighting forces, but it was thirty-six more than are recorded for the Jericho campaign—and the men of Ai gave chase for some distance. The attention here to the extended chase provides a backdrop for the Israelites' victory in the next chapter, where they laid an ambush and drew the men of Ai out of the city and this time were able to kill them all ([8:9–23](#)).

As a result of the defeat, the Israelites feared greatly: their hearts “melted” (*mwg*), and they became like water. The wordplay involving “melting” here—recalling Rahab's and the spies’ statements in [2:9](#), [11](#), [24](#)—is obvious: because of Achan's sin, Israel had now become like the Canaanites, alone, without any true god to protect them, and melting away with fear.

(3) *Joshua's Lament* ([7:6–9](#))

⁶Then Joshua tore his clothes and fell facedown to the ground before the ark of the LORD, remaining there till evening. The elders of Israel did the same, and sprinkled dust on their heads. ⁷And Joshua said, “Ah, Sovereign LORD, why did you ever bring this people across the Jordan to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us? If only we had been content to stay on the other side of the Jordan! ⁸O Lord, what can I say, now that Israel has been routed by its enemies? ⁹The Canaanites and the other people of the country will hear about this and they will surround us and wipe out our name from the earth. What then will you do for your own great name?”

[7:6](#) Joshua's reaction to the turn of events was dramatic. He mourned in the Lord's presence (before the ark), and the elders joined him (v. [6](#)). He then cried out to God, lamenting the present state of affairs (vv. [7–9](#)).

[7:7](#) Joshua's words were bitter ones, ones that echoed various complaints by the Israelites in the wilderness (see [Exod 16:3](#); [17:3](#); [Num 11:4–6](#); [14:2–3](#); [20:3–5](#)). Like the Israelites who questioned why God had brought them into the wilderness only to let them die (in their view), Joshua now questioned why God had brought them across the Jordan only to let them die at the hands of the Canaanites (v. [7a](#)). For both the Israelites and Joshua, the certainty of the past was preferable to the difficulties of the present and the uncertainty of the future. Joshua's desire to have remained east of the Jordan (v. [7b](#)) shows his selective memory, since God had shown himself to be very much on Israel's side in the case of Jericho. Conversely, the wilderness sojourn had not been without its many problems, and, indeed, when they were in the wilderness, the Israelites had longed to be back in slavery in Egypt rather than in the wilderness ([Num 11:4–6](#)). Joshua probably was thinking that east of the Jordan they had had two significant victories over the land's inhabitants, Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan ([Num 21:21–35](#)) and that now that Transjordan had been pacified, it would be a comfort to live there. He appears to have forgotten God's promises that no one would be able to withstand Israel and that he would be with his people ([1:5–9](#)). He concluded that God intended to destroy Israel, and he did not consider the possibility that there might be sin in the camp.

The name used of God in v. [7](#)—“Sovereign LORD” in the NIV and the NLT—is *’ădōnāy yhw̄h*, which is rendered in many versions as “the Lord GOD” (e.g., NASB, NKJV, NJPSV, NRSV). God is called most commonly by one of three names in the Old Testament: (1) *’ēlōhîm*, translated as “God”; (2) *yhw̄h*, “Yahweh,” rendered as “the LORD” (or, in ASV, “Jehovah”); and (3) *’ădōnāy*, translated as “the Lord.” As we noted at [1:1](#), “Yahweh” was God's personal name, and it was the subject of the Third Commandment: “You shall not misuse the name of the LORD [Yahweh] your God” ([Exod 20:7](#)). The reason that most modern versions render “Yahweh” as “the LORD” is that the Jews, fearful of violating the Third Commandment even by mispronouncing the holy Name of God, began substituting *’ădōnāy*, “Lord,” in oral reading—although not in writing—when they came to the name “Yahweh.” In time, this convention was taken into written translations into other languages. In most English versions, the convention has continued, but these versions (including the NIV) make distinctions by rendering the names differently. The Hebrew in the present passage in oral reading would have created a redundant-sounding *’ădōnāy ’ădōnāy*. In these special cases, the Jews substituted *’ēlōhîm* for “Yahweh” in their

oral reading, yielding the phrase *'ādōnāy 'elōhîm*. This term is used almost three hundred times of God in the Old Testament, and it expresses a special attitude of worship and respect for him, acknowledging the covenant-keeping, personal God of Israel (*yhwh*) as the Lord (*'ādōnāy*) who is sovereign over all.

7:8 The import of the rout that Israel suffered is seen in the words Joshua chose here to describe it. Instead of stating that Israel had “fled” (*nws*), for example (a more common and expected expression), he declared that Israel had (lit.) “turned the back of its neck before its enemies.” The word translated “turned” here (*hpk*) more usually is translated “overturned” and is a word indicating great turmoil. This is the only place in the Old Testament where this dramatic expression—“turned the back of its neck”—is used, and it vividly captures the shame and turmoil involved for Israel (see also v. [12](#), where the language is slightly different).

7:9 Joshua's concern took two tracks: he was concerned immediately for his own survival and the survival of the nation. However, he also was concerned for the Lord's reputation, which is indicated by his reference to the Lord's “great name.” He was conscious of Israel's status as Yahweh's chosen people, and he knew that Yahweh's reputation among the nations would be linked by them to the fortunes of his people. That the nations did look at Israel and judge it and its God by its fortunes is indicated by God's reference to the “reproach of Egypt” in [5:9](#) and by Moses' words in [Num 14:13–16](#).

The meaning of God's name, the way in which it revealed aspects of his character, the importance of people's bowing at the sound of his name and praising it, and its connection with God's reputation—these are all components of a great “name” theology in the Old Testament. Humans first began calling on the name of the Lord in [Gen 4:26](#), and the problem with the building of the tower of Babel was that its builders wanted to exalt their own name in the process, not God's ([Gen 11:4](#)). God revealed the meaning of his name to Moses at the burning bush ([Exod 3:14–15](#)). The psalmists often urged that Israel praise the name of the Lord (e.g., [Pss 113:1–3](#); [135:1–3](#); [148:5, 13](#)). Just as in English today, a reference in Hebrew to people's names referred to their reputation and their character (we speak of maintaining—or restoring—our good name, meaning our good reputation).

(4) *The Lord's Instructions* ([7:10–15](#))

¹⁰The LORD said to Joshua, “Stand up! What are you doing down on your face? ¹¹Israel has sinned; they have violated my covenant, which I commanded them to keep. They have taken some of the devoted things; they have stolen, they have lied, they have put them with their own possessions. ¹²That is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies; they turn their backs and run because they have been made liable to destruction. I will not be with you anymore unless you destroy whatever among you is devoted to destruction.

¹³“Go, consecrate the people. Tell them, ‘Consecrate yourselves in preparation for tomorrow; for this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: That which is devoted is among you, O Israel. You cannot stand against your enemies until you remove it.

¹⁴“ ‘In the morning, present yourselves tribe by tribe. The tribe that the LORD takes shall come forward clan by clan; the clan that the LORD takes shall come forward family by family; and the family that the LORD takes shall come forward man by man. ¹⁵He who is caught with the devoted things shall be destroyed by fire, along with all that belongs to him. He has violated the covenant of the LORD and has done a disgraceful thing in Israel!’ ”

The Lord's response to Joshua's and the elders' mourning was directed to Joshua alone, and it was a rebuke couched in holiness terms. *Israel* (not just Achan; see v. 1) had sinned, and God would not tolerate it. This passage shows that God was not open to the charge of a double standard with reference to his treatment of Israel and the Canaanites. He had ordered Israel to exterminate the Canaanites because of their sin, but here he allowed all Israel to be affected by the sin of one man. The overriding concern in all such episodes was his demand for holiness and obedience and the concern for purity of worship.

7:11 Despite the indication in **7:1** that only Achan had violated the instructions concerning the things banned, this verse extends the responsibility to the entire nation, in an example of what has been called “corporate solidarity.” This concept embraces at least the following ideas: (1) the entire group is treated as a unity; (2) sometimes the entire group is represented by a single individual; and (3) sometimes the individual and the group are merged. The third of these ideas is embodied here; the individual and the group are closely identified: the verse affirms that “Israel has sinned,” and yet later Achan confesses, “I have sinned” (v. 20).

This verse indicates the seriousness of the sin and God's outrage at it, because of the slow, climactic buildup of the language and the differing terms for sin, which become more specific with every word. First, the general word “sin” (*ḥāṭā*) is used. Next, the more specific term “violated” is used (*‘ābar*, lit., “crossed over [the line], transgressed”). Next, the specific sin is mentioned in two different ways: the Israelites had taken (*lāqah*) some of the devoted things and they had stolen (*gānab*). They had also lied (*kihāš*), and they had put (*šām*) the devoted things among their own things. Six verbs are thus used to describe Achan's (=Israel's) actions, four of which indicate sin in their own right and the other two do so in this context. The successive clauses are all linked by the word *gam*, usually translated “also.” Here, the linking of the verbs and clauses in this way indicate a progressive buildup of specificity and, in the process, they describe the totality of what Achan did.

Israel had violated God's covenant. The word “covenant” refers to many different dealings of God with his people at different times, but here the specific reference appears to be to the portion of the covenant he had made with his people through Moses that referred to the annihilation of the Canaanites (**Deut 20:10–20**).

7:12 The reason for Israel's defeat is now revealed: Israel itself—just as Jericho before it—was made liable to destruction because of *its* sin, and it had suffered a humiliating defeat because of this. What's more, God would no longer be with Israel, until they (the “you” is now plural) removed the sin from the camp. God's threatened withdrawal of his presence was a serious thing, since he had specifically promised to be with his people earlier in the book (**1:5, 9**). God's presence was withdrawn on two occasions in later times, with dire consequences: **1 Sam 4:19–22; 16:14**. This threat to withdraw emphasizes once again God's absolute standards and demands of holiness.

7:13–15 The sin needed to be dealt with, and vv. **13–15** detail God's instructions for this. In v. **13**, the instruction is again to Joshua: he was to sanctify the people in preparation for what God would do on the morrow. The language here echoes that of **3:5** in an ironic way, where Joshua ordered the people, “Consecrate yourselves, for tomorrow the LORD will do amazing things among you.” Here, the people also were to consecrate (*qdš*) themselves, but, in contrast with the “amazing things” (*nīplā’ôt*) that would be “among” (*bēqereb*) the Israelites, now the “devoted things” (*ḥērem*) were “among” (*bēqereb*) them. The need for purification was due to very different things in the two cases.

Verse [14](#), by its orderly instructions and by the verb used here, indicates that the Lord was in control of the entire process of identifying the culprit through the basic social units of society: tribe, clan, and family. Three times the verb “catches” or “captures” is used in v. [14](#) (*lqd*), again at the beginning of v. [15](#) and once each in vv. [16–18](#). The NIV translates it “takes” (as do most versions), but the idea indicated by “catches” is much more expressive, as well as accurate.

The punishment was severe and total: Achan and everything that belonged to him were to be burned with fire (v. [15](#)), a sentence that was carried out after stoning (v. [25](#)). Caleb's sin involved violating the Lord's covenant and doing a “disgraceful thing” (*nēbālâ*). The latter concept denotes “disorderly and unruly action in breaking a custom” or “behaving treacherously toward God.”

(5) *Discovery and Consequence* ([7:16–26](#))

¹⁶Early the next morning Joshua had Israel come forward by tribes, and Judah was taken. ¹⁷The clans of Judah came forward, and he took the Zerahites. He had the clan of the Zerahites come forward by families, and Zimri was taken. ¹⁸Joshua had his family come forward man by man, and Achan son of Carmi, the son of Zimri, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

¹⁹Then Joshua said to Achan, “My son, give glory to the LORD, the God of Israel, and give him the praise. Tell me what you have done; do not hide it from me.”

²⁰Achan replied, “It is true! I have sinned against the LORD, the God of Israel. This is what I have done: ²¹When I saw in the plunder a beautiful robe from Babylonia, two hundred shekels of silver and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. They are hidden in the ground inside my tent, with the silver underneath.”

²²So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent, and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver underneath. ²³They took the things from the tent, brought them to Joshua and all the Israelites and spread them out before the LORD.

²⁴Then Joshua, together with all Israel, took Achan son of Zerah, the silver, the robe, the gold wedge, his sons and daughters, his cattle, donkeys and sheep, his tent and all that he had, to the Valley of Achor. ²⁵Joshua said, “Why have you brought this trouble on us? The LORD will bring trouble on you today.”

Then all Israel stoned him, and after they had stoned the rest, they burned them. ²⁶Over Achan they heaped up a large pile of rocks, which remains to this day. Then the LORD turned from his fierce anger. Therefore that place has been called the Valley of Achor ever since.

Achan was found out for the sin he had committed, and he and his family were stoned and burned. Because he had violated God's command concerning the booty from Jericho, Achan found himself in the position of the inhabitants of Jericho: he himself was devoted to destruction. He in effect had become a Canaanite by his actions. This account masterfully builds, slowly and deliberately, to its climactic dénouement in v. [26](#).

[7:16–18](#) Chapter [3](#) is again echoed (see on [7:13](#)) here, since the first three words in Hebrew are identical to those in [3:1](#): “And Joshua arose early in the morning.” The first time, it was for a noble cause: to prepare the Israelites for entering the land. This time, it was for a far more grim cause: to identify and punish the one who had violated the covenant.

In vv. [16–18](#), Achan is methodically and inexorably identified by the process God specified in v. [14](#). The specific means by which he was identified is not indicated (by lot? by Urim and Thummim?), but the expressive vocabulary of v. [14](#) continues here: Achan was “caught” by the process.

[7:19](#) Joshua addressed Achan as “my son,” an indication of his assuming a leadership—even paternal—role in the incident. He issued four commands to Achan: “ascribe glory to the LORD,” “give him praise,” “tell me what you did,” and “do not hide it from me.” The first two clearly parallel each other, as do the second two. However, it would appear that the two sets of verbs also parallel each other. That is, the four actions commanded by Joshua are part and parcel of one event. By confessing (and not hiding) his sin, he was indeed glorifying and praising God. Joshua was not instructing Achan to indulge in a disengaged act of glorifying and praising God and *then* to confess his sin; rather, by his very confession, he was glorifying God. The same wording is found in [John 9:24](#), where the Pharisees spoke these words—“Give glory to God”—in urging a blind man whom Jesus had healed to tell the truth (and, in their minds, by doing so, he would have needed to confess his sin of lying when he claimed that Jesus had healed him).

[7:20–21](#) Achan immediately confessed that he was guilty (v. [20](#)) and gave the details of what he had done (v. [21](#)). He had taken plunder that was very valuable. The “beautiful robe from Babylonia” was literally “one beautiful garment of Shinar” (see the NIV text note). The land of Shinar is mentioned in [Gen 11:2](#) as the place where men built the Tower of Babel (i.e., the “Tower of Babylon”). The two hundred shekels of silver weighed more than eighty ounces, and the fifty-shekel “wedge” of gold weighed about twenty ounces.

Achan's actions, besides violating (1) the Eighth Commandment (about stealing: [Exod 20:15](#)), (2) God's instructions in [Deut 20:10–20](#) (see on v. [11](#)), (3) the injunction against lying ([Lev 19:11](#)), and (4) the First Commandment (about not having any other gods before the Lord: [Exod 20:3](#); see on v. [1](#)), also directly violated the Ninth Commandment (about coveting: [Exod 20:17](#)). A telling parallel to this passage is [Gen 3:6](#), where the same verbs are used of Eve: both she and Achan “saw” (*r’h*) and “desired” (or “coveted”) (*hmd*) and “took” (*lqh*) what was forbidden to them.

Achan attempted to hide his sin from the God from whom nothing could be hidden (see [Ps 139:7–12](#)). A subtle wordplay connects vv. [19](#) and [21](#): Joshua instructed Achan not to hide (*khd*) anything from him when he confessed (v. [19](#)), but Achan had hidden (*tmn*) the things he stole (v. [21](#)).

[7:22–26](#) This section brings the Achan incident to a brisk conclusion, in a continuous narrative stream. In v. [22](#), the veracity of Achan's words in his confession (v. [21](#)) is confirmed, since the wording concerning where the booty would be and how it was arranged (with the silver below) is identical in both verses. Achan now was indeed telling the truth and “glorifying” God (see v. [19](#)). In v. [23](#), the items of booty were “spread out” before the Lord. The word used here (*yʹsr*) is significant, since it is translated most commonly as “poured out,” referring to the use of oil in anointing and other religious contexts. The stolen items were “poured out” before the Lord, returning to him what belonged to him.

Achan was brought out to be stoned, not only with each of the items he had stolen, but also with all his possessions and his entire household, including his children (v. [24](#)). This was an extremely severe punishment (see the excursus on “Destruction and Devoted Things in Joshua” at the end of chap. [6](#)), but it illustrates again God's absolute demands of holiness. Achan's sin had infected the entire nation of Israel ([7:1](#)), and ridding Israel of the stain of this sin required the annihilation of everything with which he had had intimate contact. Ironically—and tragically—for Achan, God allowed the Israelites to take booty in the next victory, at the second battle of Ai ([8:2](#)). He could have had anything he wanted if he had only waited on God. Like Adam and Eve, he lost sight of the character of our generous God and thought that satisfaction required taking. Achan's greed was his downfall. Also ironically, it was Joshua

and “all Israel” who did this to Achan. Previously, all of Israel had been indicted because of Achan's sin (v. [1](#)), but now the nation was acting to purge itself of the contamination, and it could again move ahead confidently in the task of taking the land of Canaan. Achan's self-centered actions resulted in terrible consequences not only for himself but also for his family. This illustrates the principle that sin does have its consequences.

Joshua's question in v. [25](#)—“Why have you brought this trouble on us?”—is turned on its head by his next statement, an assertion that the Lord would now bring trouble on Achan. Joshua used the same word for “bringing trouble” here (*'kr*) that he had earlier used in warning the people against taking the devoted items, since doing so would “bring trouble” (*'kr*) on the entire camp ([6:18](#)). The story of Achan proves the veracity of Joshua's earlier words. Sin always would have its consequences. The root here (*'kr*) forms the basis for the name of the site in later times (“Achor,” vv. [24](#), [26](#)).

The punishment for Achan and his household was stoning and burning (v. [25b](#)). The exact sequence of events is not entirely clear. The text reads, literally, “And all Israel ‘stoned’ him [with] a stone, and they burned them with fire, and they ‘stoned’ them with stones.” The two verbs for stoning here are different, and the burning with fire seems to be misplaced (i.e., it would most likely have happened after—not before—the stoning of everyone: see NIV). The overall impression forged by the repetitions is one of completeness. It is possible that one of the words for stoning refers more properly to the heaping up of a pile of stones over Achan's corpse, a point made explicitly in v. [26](#).

A great pile of stones was heaped over Achan, one that remained “to this day,” that is, until the time of the writing about this event (v. [26a](#)). This was also done to the king of Ai when Israel had finally defeated him ([8:29](#)), as well as to Absalom after he was dead ([2 Sam 18:17](#)); in each case, the wording is almost identical to that here. In [Josh 8:29](#), the wording is exactly the same, making the point clearly that God would not favor his own people when they blatantly disobeyed, any more than he would favor wicked Canaanites. Because of his sin, Achan was expelled from Israel and treated as a Canaanite. In this way, the Lord's anger was abated.

The connection between this pile of stones and the earlier set of twelve memorial stones that Joshua erected on the banks of the Jordan River is hard to ignore. The reason for each one was different, but both piles of stones remained in their place “until this day” ([4:9](#); [7:26](#); see also [10:27](#)). The first set was specifically to be a reminder to Israel of God's presence with them (see [4:7](#)). The pile of stones over Achan is not infused with the same meaning, but the very fact that it remained “until this day” shows us that it was a reminder to Israel of the story of Achan and the consequences of sin.

The name of the place—“Valley of Achor”—means “Valley of Trouble” (see NIV text note), undoubtedly given to it because of the events that transpired here. Achan's name in several places in the Greek translation of Joshua is “Achor,” which no doubt represents a fusing of the two names. It too had retained its name “to this day.”

3. The Destruction of Ai ([8:1–29](#))

The account of the destruction of Ai follows immediately upon the story in chap. [7](#) of Achan's sin, the resulting defeat at Ai, and the punishment of that sin (see the introductory comments to chap. [7](#)). In the larger perspective of the book, there should never have been any question concerning the Israelites' ability to take Ai, since Yahweh would be its warrior and guarantor of the land (cf. [1:2–9](#)). However, in the immediate context of Achan's sin, the defeat at Ai brought great distress: it caused Joshua and the people to fear and to raise questions of God ([7:5–9](#)).

The trauma was alleviated by Israel's rooting out the evil in its midst, the abatement of Yahweh's anger, and the great victory achieved after the events of chap. 7. God was no longer angry with Israel, since atonement had been made for its sin, and the task now was to get on with the conquest. Thus, he gave the city of Ai into the Israelites' hands: they captured it via an elaborate ambush. In chap. 8, that victory is described in some detail, more so than for any other battle in the book. It is the first true military victory recounted (since the taking of Jericho can hardly be called a "battle") and involved a military strategy for which the Lord gave instructions.

The chronology and geography in this chapter are difficult. The chapter seems to describe two ambush forces, sent out on two different days (vv. 3–9 and 10–13). However, this is not according to the Lord's instructions in v. 2, and it presents the particular difficulty of the first (improbably large) ambush force of thirty thousand men (v. 3) being forced to spend two nights and a day in hiding near Ai—a city with only twelve thousand inhabitants of its own, less than half of the numbers in ambush force—without being detected by its inhabitants.

More probably, there was just one ambush force and only one night involved. Verses 3–9 describe the main aspects of the preparations. Verse 10 describes the commencement of the battle the next morning. Then, vv. 11–13 contain a flashback, expanding upon the narrative of vv. 3–9. This is indicated by the syntax of vv. 11 and 14. Verse 11 begins with a disjunctive, circumstantial clause construction and thus introduces the retrospective account of vv. 11–13. The signal that this account is concluded—and that the main narrative is resuming—comes at the beginning of v. 14, which begins with the paragraph marker *wayēhi* ("and it happened"), followed by a stage-setting time reference in a subordinate clause ("when the king of Ai saw") and a normal resumptive verb form. This solution is not without its problems—the main one being the number "thirty thousand" in v. 3 (on which, see below)—but it fits best the syntax of the passage.

Thus, the sequence of events would be as follows. Joshua commissioned a group of men to lie in ambush west of Ai, as the Lord had instructed (vv. 3b–4, 12–13). He sent them out (v. 9a), then he went with the main fighting force to be stationed north of the city (vv. 3a, 11) and spent the night with this group (vv. 9b, 13b). He and the people went up to Ai the next morning (v. 10), which was seen by the king of Ai (v. 14), who mustered his people to meet Israel in battle. The Israelites put their ruse into effect, pretending to flee, drawing out of the city its entire population (vv. 15–17).

At the same time, the ambush force was arising (v. 19), and when Joshua stretched out his javelin toward Ai, they entered the city and set it ablaze (vv. 18–19). When the Aiites saw this, they realized that they were surrounded before and behind, and they succumbed to a slaughter that left none alive except their king (vv. 20–26). The Israelites took the cattle and booty as spoil (v. 27)—which had been authorized this time by God (v. 2)—and burned the city, exposing the body of its king in an act of humiliation before burying it under a great pile of stones (vv. 28–29).

(1) Instructions for Taking Ai (8:1–2)

¹Then the LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged. Take the whole army with you, and go up and attack Ai. For I have delivered into your hands the king of Ai, his people, his city and his land. ²You shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king, except that you may carry off their plunder and livestock for yourselves. Set an ambush behind the city."

8:1 Yahweh's words of encouragement to Joshua in **8:1** reinforce the statement of **7:26**, that he was no longer angry with Israel. Atonement had been made for the nation's sin, and the task at hand was to get on with the conquest. The encouragement consisted of two parts. The first—"Do not be afraid"—is found more than seventy times in the Old Testament, most commonly (but not exclusively) in battle contexts: see, for example, **Exod 14:13**; **Deut 1:21**; **3:2**; **7:18**; **20:1**; **31:8**; it is repeated in **Josh 10:8**, **25**; **11:6**. The second—"do not be discouraged"—is similar, and it echoes God's encouragement to Joshua in **1:9**. God's encouragement here is a fitting introduction to a battle narrative and represents a welcome promise from God, particularly in light of the previous problems. We should note that there were no words of promise, assurance, or guidance from God when Israel attacked Ai the first time, a significant contrast. He was not with them because of their sin. God's assurance that he had already given the king of Ai and all his people and their lands into Joshua's hand echoes the same past-time perspective we noted at **1:3**.

8:2 The Israelites were now to do to Ai just as they had done to Jericho, but now they could take and keep the spoils of war for themselves rather than devote them to the Lord (cf. **6:18–19**, **21**, **24**). This contrast with the previous instructions is indicated by the contrastive use of *raq*, "only" (see also v. **27**).

(2) Preparations for the Battle of Ai (**8:3–13**)

³So Joshua and the whole army moved out to attack Ai. He chose thirty thousand of his best fighting men and sent them out at night ⁴with these orders: "Listen carefully. You are to set an ambush behind the city. Don't go very far from it. All of you be on the alert. ⁵I and all those with me will advance on the city, and when the men come out against us, as they did before, we will flee from them. ⁶They will pursue us until we have lured them away from the city, for they will say, 'They are running away from us as they did before.' So when we flee from them, ⁷you are to rise up from ambush and take the city. The LORD your God will give it into your hand. ⁸When you have taken the city, set it on fire. Do what the LORD has commanded. See to it; you have my orders."

⁹Then Joshua sent them off, and they went to the place of ambush and lay in wait between Bethel and Ai, to the west of Ai—but Joshua spent that night with the people.

¹⁰Early the next morning Joshua mustered his men, and he and the leaders of Israel marched before them to Ai. ¹¹The entire force that was with him marched up and approached the city and arrived in front of it. They set up camp north of Ai, with the valley between them and the city. ¹²Joshua had taken about five thousand men and set them in ambush between Bethel and Ai, to the west of the city. ¹³They had the soldiers take up their positions—all those in the camp to the north of the city and the ambush to the west of it. That night Joshua went into the valley.

Joshua's detailed instructions for attacking Ai are given here (vv. **4–8**), along with other information leading up to the battle (vv. **3**, **9–13**). The chronology of the events is not completely clear, but vv. **11–13** appear to be a flashback, covering the same ground as vv. **3** and **10** (see the introduction to chap. **8**).

8:3 Initially, Joshua and the "whole army" set out to begin the attack on Ai. The language here and in v. **10** is slightly different: here, the activity was begun—the language reads, literally, "And Joshua and all the people arose *to go up* (to) Ai," that is, the *intent* was "to go up"—whereas in v. **10**, the next morning, they actually did go up.

The NIV's "whole army" translates an expression that literally reads "all the people [*am*] of war." The usual term is "men [*anšê*] of war" (21 times in the OT; see, e.g., **Num 31:28**, **49**; **Deut 2:14**, **16**; **Josh 5:4**, **6**; **6:3**; **10:24**). This phrase "all the people of war" is found in the Old Testament only in the Book of Joshua (**8:1**, **3**, **11**; **10:7**; **11:7**). These uses seem to emphasize the unity of the entire nation in doing battle (cf. the concern for unity in **1:12–15**), even though it was most likely only men who actually engaged in the battles.

The number of men here sent out for the ambush—thirty thousand— seems inordinately large. For a group of this size to hide itself west of a city of only twelve thousand inhabitants (v. [25](#)) would have been very difficult, if not impossible. In addition, v. [12](#) states that five thousand men were sent out for an ambush force. This was not likely another ambush force, but rather the same one, since we understand vv. [11–13](#) as a flashback (see above). Thus, if vv. [3](#) and [12](#) refer to the same ambush force, then one of the numbers is obviously incorrect, most likely the number here. That is, an early copyist's error would have erroneously changed “five thousand” to “thirty thousand” in v. [3](#).

[8:4–8](#) Joshua's instructions to the ambush force were straightforward. The ambush force was to hide “behind” the city (i.e., to its west; cf. v. [9](#)), not very far away from it and on the alert, and Joshua and those with him would advance in plain sight (vv. [4–5](#)). Joshua and the main force would be stationed north of the city (vv. [12–13](#)). The initial action would be reminiscent of the first battle: the men of Ai would come out and the Israelites would flee (v. [5](#)), just as they had done earlier ([7:4](#)). However, this time the Israelites' action was an intentional lure into a trap (v. [6](#)). When the Aiites took the bait and left the city in pursuit of the Israelites, the men lying in ambush were to arise and take the city, setting it on fire (vv. [7–8](#)).

In vv. [7–8](#), religious concerns are visible again. This time, Ai fell to the Israelites because God was involved, in contrast to the first time, when he was not (see on v. [1](#)). It was at God's command that Israel would take Ai (v. [8](#)) and with his help (v. [7](#)). The unfolding of the story in the rest of the chapter shows that the Israelites strictly obeyed God's commands this time.

[8:9–10](#) The ambush force obeyed Joshua and hid west of Ai, between Ai and Bethel (Ai was east of Bethel: [Gen 12:8](#); [Josh 7:2](#)). In the meantime, Joshua spent the night with the people (v. [9](#)).

Verse [10](#) introduces a new phase of the action by focusing on the new start on the new day. Joshua mustered the people, and he and the elders went up to Ai before the people. This last statement in the verse is reminiscent of the religious aspects of the crossing of the Jordan, where the priests carrying the ark were to go before the people ([3:3–4](#), [6](#), [11](#), [14](#)), and also of the taking of Jericho, where a similar procession preceded the people ([6:7–8](#)). Even in this account, where the military aspect is far more prominent than in any other battle in the book, there are still reminders such as this that, ultimately, religious concerns were paramount (see also vv. [7–8](#)).

The new phase of the action is obvious by virtue of the subject matter here and in later verses. It also is evident in the precise wording at the beginning of the verse—“And Joshua arose early in the morning”—which is identical to that in [3:1](#), where Joshua embarked on a new endeavor, leading the people as they left Shittim for the Jordan River.

[8:11–13](#) As we noted in the introduction to this chapter, these verses represent a flashback, adding more details to the events introduced already in vv. [3–10](#). While v. [3](#) states that Joshua began his preparations to go up to Ai and v. [10](#) states that he actually went up to Ai the next morning, v. [11](#) looks back to the day before and tells about the Israelite forces' movements after v. [3](#) and before v. [10](#). They had gone up and approached the city, arriving opposite it, and encamped north of the city, across the valley from it.

Verse [12](#) reiterates the information in v. [9](#), telling what Joshua had done with the ambush force of five thousand men. Verse [13](#) mentions “the people” setting up the camp, with the main force north of the city and the ambush force to the west. This continues the special emphasis on everyone—and not just the military forces—that we noted at v. [3](#). The term for “valley” in this verse (*‘ēmeq*) is different from the one in v. [11](#) (*gay[’]*). There is little difference between the two terms, but *‘ēmeq* seems to refer to a broader, wider geographical feature. The reason for the use of two different terms here may be to echo the term for “valley” in [7:24](#), [26](#) (“Valley of Achor”: *‘ēmeq ‘ākôr*), which was a term of approbation.

Here, the use of the same term may have been a subtle reminder that the city of Ai was itself worthy of approbation.

Concerning Joshua's night activity, as the text stands here, it would appear that Joshua spent the night with the people, across the valley from Ai (vv. [9](#), [11](#)), but late in the night he got up and went into the valley in preparation for the day's events (v. [13](#)). Alternatively (following readings in the Old Greek or Syriac versions), vv. [9](#) and [13](#) state that Joshua merely went into the valley (in the morning) but did not spend the night there.

(3) The Battle of Ai ([8:14–23](#))

¹⁴When the king of Ai saw this, he and all the men of the city hurried out early in the morning to meet Israel in battle at a certain place overlooking the Arabah. But he did not know that an ambush had been set against him behind the city. ¹⁵Joshua and all Israel let themselves be driven back before them, and they fled toward the desert. ¹⁶All the men of Ai were called to pursue them, and they pursued Joshua and were lured away from the city. ¹⁷Not a man remained in Ai or Bethel who did not go after Israel. They left the city open and went in pursuit of Israel.

¹⁸Then the LORD said to Joshua, “Hold out toward Ai the javelin that is in your hand, for into your hand I will deliver the city.” So Joshua held out his javelin toward Ai. ¹⁹As soon as he did this, the men in the ambush rose quickly from their position and rushed forward. They entered the city and captured it and quickly set it on fire.

²⁰The men of Ai looked back and saw the smoke of the city rising against the sky, but they had no chance to escape in any direction, for the Israelites who had been fleeing toward the desert had turned back against their pursuers. ²¹For when Joshua and all Israel saw that the ambush had taken the city and that smoke was going up from the city, they turned around and attacked the men of Ai. ²²The men of the ambush also came out of the city against them, so that they were caught in the middle, with Israelites on both sides. Israel cut them down, leaving them neither survivors nor fugitives. ²³But they took the king of Ai alive and brought him to Joshua.

The main narrative that was suspended in v. [10](#) resumes now, indicated by a new syntactical pattern. When the king of Ai saw that Joshua and his people had come out against him and his city (vv. [10](#), [14](#)), he mustered his people to meet Israel in battle (v. [14](#)). The Israelites put their ruse into effect, pretending to flee, drawing out of the city its entire population (vv. [15–17](#)). At the same time, the Israelite ambush force was arising (v. [19](#)), and when Joshua stretched out his spear toward Ai, they entered the city and set it ablaze (vv. [18–19](#)). When the Aiites saw this, they realized that they were surrounded before and behind, and they succumbed to a slaughter that left none alive except their king (vv. [20–23](#)).

[8:14–15](#) Two geographical terms are found in these verses. The Arabah (v. [14](#)) is the great Rift Valley in which Jericho, the Jordan River, and the Dead Sea are found, indicating that the view from the battle looked down into this depression, toward the east. The NIV's “the desert” in v. [15](#) is more properly “the way of the wilderness,” and this may have been the name of a particular road or escape route. However, no such route is known today for this area; in addition, the exact site of Ai is disputed. More probably, the phrase is more general, indicating merely that the men of Ai fled in disarray into the wilderness. The same phrase is found again in a similar context, where a coalition of Israelites set an ambush for the Benjaminites at Gibeah; and when they turned on the Benjaminites, they fled by “the way of the wilderness” ([Judg 20:42](#); NIV has “in the direction of the desert” here). The phrase occurs again only in [Exod 13:18](#), referring to the route the Israelites took out of Egypt through the desert.

[8:16–17](#) At first glance, the activity here (v. [16](#)) is identical to that in chap. [7](#): the men of Ai were pursuing the Israelites (the verb “pursue” [*rdp*] is the same here and in [7:5](#)). However, in the first instance, the Aiites’ success was real; in this instance, of course, it was merely an illusion, since the Israelites had planned an ambush.

The Aiites were completely fooled by the Israelites’ ruse: not one man was left in either Ai or Bethel who did not come out of their cities to pursue the Israelites (v. [17](#)). They left their city wide open in their pursuit (*rdp*) of Israel.

The reference to Bethel in v. [17](#) in connection with the encounter with Ai is a little surprising. Bethel was an important city in its own right in biblical times. It had a fine pedigree that went back to patriarchal times, when Abraham offered a sacrifice to God there ([Gen 12:8](#); [13:3](#)) and Jacob had a dream from God there ([Gen 28:10–22](#)). It had been a Canaanite city in the centuries preceding the Israelites’ arrival in the land. Bethel was near Ai, to the west ([Gen 12:8](#); [Josh 7:2](#)), although its exact location is uncertain. Here, the inhabitants of Bethel came out of their city to help the men of Ai. Since the Israelite ambush was stationed between Bethel and Ai ([8:9](#), [12](#)), the inhabitants of Bethel may have felt threatened by the Israelites as well. Or Ai may have been a small outpost for the larger city of Bethel (see [7:3](#), which shows the spies’ estimate of Ai as a small, insignificant city), and an attack on Ai was understood to be an attack on Bethel as well. The reference to Bethel here is somewhat puzzling, however, since it is not mentioned again in the chapter. No record of its defeat is found, although its king is listed as among those conquered by Joshua in [12:16](#). It may be that, in the defeat of Ai, readers of the Book of Joshua understood that Bethel also was defeated, and no further reference was needed.

[8:18–19](#) Joshua was to hold out the weapon in his hand as a signal for the ambush force to begin their attack on Ai. God’s provision was evident here, as we can see in a play on the words “your hand”: Joshua was to stretch out the weapon “in your hand” (*bēyadkā*) because God was going to give the city “into your hand” (*bēyadkā*). The weapon itself was not going to win the victory; God was going to give it.

As soon as Joshua did this, the ambush force accomplished their task, setting the city on fire. Just as was Jericho’s fate ([6:24](#)), so also Ai was torched. After this, only one other city is mentioned as having been burned with fire (Hazor: [11:11](#)).

The nature of the signal is not clear. It is difficult to imagine, if Joshua and the people were fleeing away from Ai and if the men hiding in ambush were on the other side of the city, that they were able to see clearly Joshua’s outstretched arm; we may imagine perhaps that this signal was relayed in some way to those lying in wait. The term for Joshua’s weapon here (*kîdôn*)—rendered by NIV, NASB, and RSV as “javelin”—is not the usual word for “spear” (*hānîṭ*); it may actually have been a short sword of some type. In addition to its use as a signal, it was a symbol of God’s presence and sovereignty (see on v. [26](#)). It remained a sign for the duration of the battle because Joshua kept it outstretched until the entire population of Ai had been killed (vv. [25–26](#)).

[8:20–23](#) The battle’s climax came quickly. The ambush worked to perfection, and the men of Ai were caught between the ambush force, which now came out of the city and attacked the Aiites, and the main force, which turned back and also attacked the Aiites. The destruction was complete: there were neither survivors nor fugitives remaining (v. [22](#)).

The language in v. [22](#) vividly captures the Aiites’ predicament. It begins by highlighting the men of the ambush, who now came out of the city to attack the Aiites, just as v. [21](#) had highlighted Joshua and all those with him. The focus here, then, is on the two forces that surrounded the Aiites. However, the reason for this focus is to emphasize the predicament that the Aiites found themselves in: they were (lit.)

“in the midst of Israel—these over here and these over there,” that is, they were completely surrounded by the two Israelite forces.

The Israelites took the king of Ai alive. God had commanded them to treat the king of Ai exactly as they had the king of Jericho (8:2). Chapter 6 does not specify what they did to the king of Jericho, but we can infer from 8:29 that they killed him and exposed his body in a humiliating way (see also on 8:27).

(4) *Aftermath of the Battle of Ai (8:24–29)*

²⁴When Israel had finished killing all the men of Ai in the fields and in the desert where they had chased them, and when every one of them had been put to the sword, all the Israelites returned to Ai and killed those who were in it. ²⁵Twelve thousand men and women fell that day—all the people of Ai. ²⁶For Joshua did not draw back the hand that held out his javelin until he had destroyed all who lived in Ai. ²⁷But Israel did carry off for themselves the livestock and plunder of this city, as the LORD had instructed Joshua.

²⁸So Joshua burned Ai and made it a permanent heap of ruins, a desolate place to this day. ²⁹He hung the king of Ai on a tree and left him there until evening. At sunset, Joshua ordered them to take his body from the tree and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate. And they raised a large pile of rocks over it, which remains to this day.

A new phase of the narrative is signaled by the syntactical pattern here, the same as in v. 14. After the Israelites had killed all the men who had come out of the city, they then returned to Ai and killed its inhabitants (vv. 24–26), taking only their livestock and possessions as booty (v. 27). This taking of booty had been explicitly authorized this time by God (v. 2), in contrast to the explicit prohibition against such at Jericho (6:17–19). The Israelites finished burning the city, exposing the body of its king in an act of humiliation before burying it under a great pile of stones (vv. 28–29).

8:24–25 The destruction was complete: it included both those who had chased the Israelites and those who remained in the city, a total of twelve thousand men and women. Those remaining in the city must have been only women and children, since vv. 16–17 state that every man left the city in pursuit of the Israelites. This is the only battle in the book for which a numerical total is given for the dead, consistent with the detailed description of all parts of the battle.

8:26 Joshua maintained his arm outstretched, with his sword in his hand, until the defeat of Ai was complete. This shows that the outstretched sword was more than a signal to start the battle (see on v. 18): it was also a symbol of God's presence and help in the battle. This confirms God's promise of his presence, indicated in v. 1.

The episode closely echoes that in [Exod 17:8–16](#), where the Israelites battled the Amalekites and Moses stretched out his hand with “the rod of God” in it (v. 9). Moses' outstretched hand also was a symbol of God's presence because the battle went in Israel's favor when Moses' hands were up, and it went against Israel when he tired and dropped his hands. Undoubtedly this episode in Joshua was included in the book to show yet another way in which Joshua was the worthy successor to Moses (see the commentary on [1:1, 5; 24:29](#)). Joshua had been the military leader carrying the battle to the Amalekites when Moses stretched out his hand ([Exod 17:9–10](#)), and now Joshua was in Moses' position, while others carried the battle to the Aiites.

A subtle reminder that Joshua was Israel's leader comes in the indicator that “he” destroyed all who lived in Ai. He certainly did not do this single-handedly (see the plural verbs of destruction in vv. 22, 24), and he may not have personally killed anyone if he was standing with an outstretched sword throughout the battle. However, he was Israel's leader, and the statement here that “he had destroyed all who lived in Ai” reminds us of the uniqueness and importance of his position.

8:27 This time, the Israelites were careful to obey the word of the Lord. He had specified earlier that the Israelites could take of the city's possessions and livestock, but nothing else (v. [2](#)), and this verse indicates that they carried out his instructions to the letter.

8:28 This verse states that Joshua burned the city, which is probably to be understood in the same way as the statement in v. [26](#) that he destroyed everyone in Ai (see on v. [26](#)). The men in the Israelite ambush force had already set the city on fire (v. [19](#)). The verb in v. [19](#) properly means “to kindle, set on fire” (*yṣt*), whereas the verb here (*śrp*) is more general, meaning simply “to burn,” so v. [28](#) looks at the accomplished fact (the city was burned up) while v. [19](#) focuses on the initial lighting of the fire.

The NIV's “heap of ruins” translates Hebrew *tēl*. Ancient cities usually were built on high points of land near water supplies; and, when a city was destroyed, the new city was built on the same site, atop the packed and settled debris from the former city. Thus, over time, high mounds arose, topped by the current city. Ai was not rebuilt, and it remained a heap of ruins. This word is found only at [Deut 13:16](#)[Hb. [17](#)]; [Josh 8:28](#); [11:13](#); [Jer 30:18](#); [49:2](#); and it survives in such place names in the Bible as Tel Abib ([Ezek 3:15](#)) or Tel Melah and Tel Harsha ([Ezra 2:59](#)). The Arabic word is “tell,” and it survives today in the names of many sites in Israel.

The ruin was “permanent” and “a desolate place” visible “to this day,” that is, at the time of the writing of the book. The totality of the destruction of Ai is again emphasized here.

8:29 Joshua executed the king of Ai and hung his body on a tree, just as he would do later to the five kings of the Amorite coalition ([10:26](#)). This practice of exposure is known in both Assyria and Egypt as a wartime practice; it is found in the Bible here and in connection with criminal penalties as well ([Deut 21:22](#)). The king's body was taken down at sundown, in accordance with the injunction in Deuteronomy that a body could not remain exposed overnight ([Deut 21:22–23](#)). Here again, Joshua was observing the law as closely as possible (cf. v. [27](#)).

The Israelites' encounter with Ai had begun at the city gate ([7:5](#)); at its conclusion, the king's body was dumped at that very spot, and a pile of stones was erected over it. Just as the city, now a heap of ruins, was a sign “until this day” (v. [28](#)), so also its king's body, under a heap of stones, was a sign “until this day.”

The king's fate here was exactly the same as Achan's fate in [7:26](#) (where the words are exactly the same: “They erected over him a large pile of stones, [which is there] until this day”). This makes the point clearly that God would not favor his own people when they blatantly disobeyed any more than he would favor wicked Canaanites; Achan was expelled from Israel and treated as a Canaanite.

With this verse ends the first phase of Israel's taking the land. The victory at Jericho and the defeat and subsequent victory at Ai were significant events in Israel's taking the land, since they were all “firsts.” Most later victories (see chaps. [10–11](#)), while certainly just as dramatic, receive very little individual attention in the telling compared to that devoted to Jericho and Ai. The lessons about God's standards of holiness and obedience were dramatic: at Jericho, the city fell to Israel in a ritual event, but one man, Achan, violated God's commands. Thus, Israel as a nation suffered a defeat, and Achan and his family paid with their lives, all for one contaminating act of disobedience. In the end, however, Ai also paid dearly for its resistance to Israel's God: not only was it completely annihilated, but its ruin and the heap of stones over its dead king stood as mute reminders of this for decades, if not for centuries (“to this day”: vv. [28–29](#)). The symmetry between Achan and the people of Ai is underscored at many points, not the least of which is that both he and their king were buried under great piles of stones ([7:26](#); [8:29](#)).

4. Covenant Affirmations ([8:30–35](#))

³⁰Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, ³¹as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. He built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to the LORD burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings. ³²There, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua copied on stones the law of Moses, which he had written. ³³All Israel, aliens and citizens alike, with their elders, officials and judges, were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of the LORD, facing those who carried it—the priests, who were Levites. Half of the people stood in front of Mount Gerizim and half of them in front of Mount Ebal, as Moses the servant of the LORD had formerly commanded when he gave instructions to bless the people of Israel.

³⁴Afterward, Joshua read all the words of the law—the blessings and the curses—just as it is written in the Book of the Law. ³⁵There was not a word of all that Moses had commanded that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel, including the women and children, and the aliens who lived among them.

Before taking Jericho and Ai, Israel had paused at Gilgal to memorialize its crossing ([chap. 4](#)) and to observe various rituals of purification ([chap. 5](#)). Now, after these victories (as well as a defeat) and before further encounters with the Canaanites, Israel again paused, to confess and to celebrate with sacrifices and covenant renewal at a different place, Mount Ebal. After the sin of Achan and the defeat at Ai, the nation again needed a ceremonial reminder of its relationship with God. First, the cause of the sin and the defeat was removed ([7:25–26](#)), and then victory was secured ([8:1–29](#)). But, before proceeding further, sacrifices and a renewal of the nation's covenant obligations were in order.

Israel had violated the Lord's covenant ([7:11, 15](#)), and it was now more fitting than ever that the nation reaffirm that covenant. So, the Israelites interrupted their campaign to take the land and traveled some distance from where they were in order to renew the covenant at Mounts Ebal and Gerizim (vv. [30, 33](#)). From the standpoint of military strategy and Israel's location near Ai, the journey northward through Canaanite territory to Mounts Ebal and Gerizim does not make good sense. This region was about twenty miles from the region of Ai and Bethel, and a major city—Shechem—was situated between the two mountains. Yet, the imperatives for Israel of getting back on track with its God, of obedience to the law of Moses, necessitated such an interruption.

The location chosen was significant. In the first place, Mount Ebal was the place where Moses had commanded the Israelites that they should build an altar when they entered the land ([Deut 27:4–5](#)). In the second place, Mounts Ebal and Gerizim were the location where the twelve tribes were to stand—six tribes on each mountain—for the pronouncing of blessings and curses in connection with renewing of the covenant ([Deut 11:26–32; 27:12–13](#)). In addition, the city of Shechem was located between the two mountains, Ebal to the north and Gerizim to the south. The city is not mentioned by name until the boundary lists in [chap. 17](#), but it was the site of the important covenant-renewal ceremony with which the book ends ([24:1](#)). Shechem had an ancient tradition of religious significance and covenant making in Israel that went back to Abraham. For example, Abraham built an altar to the Lord after the Lord had appeared to him there ([Gen 12:6–7](#)). Jacob bought land there, he too erected an altar there ([Gen 33:18–20](#)), and the city eventually became the family's home ([Gen 35:4; 37:12–14](#)).

As we noted in the introduction to chap. 5 (after 5:1), the episode found here (vv. 30–35) is located in three different places in manuscript traditions, such that it sometimes is called a “floating pericope.” In the MT, it is found here, just following the victory at Ai. At Qumran, it is found just before the observances of circumcision and Passover, between 5:1 and 5:2. In the Old Greek, it is found just after the notice of a Canaanite coalition that came against the Israelites, after 9:2. We can see, then, that this account is not too firmly anchored in its present position. Syntactically, the episode is set off from its surroundings as well. It begins with a disjunctive adverb, *’āz*, “then” (8:30), and it is followed by an episode-initial construction in 9:1, so it is clearly demarcated as a self-contained unit.

Because of these considerations, many scholars have seen this account as a (fictional) “Deuteronomistic” addition, added many years after the writing of the rest of the book. Most such scholars associate the episode with the covenant renewal ceremony described in chap. 24. Indeed, one scholar relocates these verses immediately after the account of that ceremony, after 24:27, even though there is no manuscript tradition supporting this.

Despite the uncertainty concerning the account's location in the text, in its present position it shows the importance of covenant affirmation, sacrifice, and reading of the law at a critical juncture in the nation's history. It had just won two victories over individual cities, but it had suffered a defeat due to its sin. Furthermore, it would soon face challenges of a very different sort: not from individual cities, but from powerful coalitions of cities (9:1–2; 10:1–5). In light of these considerations, the need for the observances here was very great indeed.

The overarching theme in this section is obedience to God through observance of the Mosaic law. Four different times, the text states that an action was taken in accordance with Moses' commands (vv. 31[2x], 33, 35). Also, the actions themselves were rooted in the instructions in the law. Almost every statement in this passage has roots in the Pentateuch. The most important passages are Deut 27:2–13 and 31:9–12, but many others also figure here. The passage shows the importance to Israel of the Pentateuchal legislation, and it shows Israel's concern to obey.

Furthermore, Joshua's role as a leader also emerges in this account, in that he built the altar (v. 30–31), he copied the law onto stones from a copy he had written (v. 32), and he read the law in the people's hearing (vv. 34–35). He is once again portrayed as a worthy successor to Moses and one who prefigured the kings to come, who were to write in a book a (personal) copy of the law (Deut 17:18–19).

At least five separate activities were involved here: (1) Joshua built an altar (v. 30); (2) the people offered burnt offerings (v. 31); (3) the people sacrificed fellowship offerings (v. 31); (4) Joshua wrote the words of the law on stones (v. 32); and (5) Joshua read the words of the law in public, before all the people (vv. 34–35).

8:30 After the events of 8:1–29, Joshua and the people went to Mount Ebal, some distance to the north, and there Joshua built an altar to the Lord. Mount Ebal is only mentioned in Deuteronomy (11:29; 27:4, 13) and here (vv. 30, 33). It—along with Mount Gerizim, directly south of it—was the site to be used in proclaiming blessings and curses when the Israelites came into the land; specifically, it was to be the site of the curses (Deut 11:29; 27:13).

8:31 The altar that Joshua built was done just as Moses had commanded. Deuteronomy 27:5–6 states that Israel was to build such an altar when it entered the land. The stones were uncut fieldstones, just as Moses had instructed, which was in accord with God's earlier instructions about making altars (Exod 20:25).

The ceremony included two different types of sacrifices, offered on the altar that Joshua built: burnt offerings and fellowship offerings. Burnt offerings were sacrifices that entirely consumed the animals, and they were offered as “an aroma pleasing to the Lord” ([Exod 29:18](#); [Lev 1:9, 13, 17](#)) to atone for the sacrificers’ sins ([Lev 1:4](#)). The fact that these offerings were made indicates that one function of the activities at Mount Ebal was to atone for the nation's sins.

Another function was indicated by the fellowship offerings (sometimes called “peace offerings”; see KJV, NASB, NLT). These were joyful offerings in which portions of the sacrificial animals were to be eaten by the ones presenting them ([Lev 3:1–17](#); [7:11–21](#)), and fellowship with God and others was at their core. The fact that these were offered indicates that another function of the activities was to reestablish a sense of relationship and well-being with God.

8:32 Joshua wrote a copy of the law on stones, which echoes the instructions for a king in [Deut 17:18](#). While Joshua was not a king, several indications in the book show him in a “kingly” light, acting with the authority of a king and in ways in which kings were supposed to act (cp. [Josh 1:5–9](#); [Deut 17:14–20](#)).

The stones may have been those of the altar (v. [31](#)) or other stones, such as the two stone tablets given to Moses ([Exod 32:15](#)), the twelve stones set up to confirm the Sinai covenant, one for each tribe of Israel ([Exod 24:4](#)), or the large stone set up as a witness of the covenant renewal ([Josh 24:26–27](#)). The most natural reading grammatically would suggest that these stones were the altar stones. However, a careful reading of the instructions in [Deuteronomy 27](#) reveals that there were two sets of stones in view: plaster-covered stones to be set up for writing the words of the law on (vv. [2–4, 8](#)), and uncut stones to be set up as an altar for sacrifices (vv. [5–7](#)). Thus, if, as is evident throughout this passage, the instructions in Deuteronomy were being followed closely, we must understand the writing stones to be different from the altar stones, a possibility that is allowed by the grammar.

The last clause in the NIV (“which he had written”) suggests that Joshua was copying the law onto the stones from a copy of the law that he himself had written earlier, and this is possible grammatically. On the other hand, the NJPSV understands him to have copied from something Moses had written (“he inscribed a copy of the teaching that Moses had written”), which is also possible grammatically. [Deuteronomy 17:18–19](#) instructs that the king was to write for himself a copy of the law and that it was to stay with him all the days of his life, so the former is certainly possible. However, we cannot be sure from whom (Moses? Joshua?) the copy came that Joshua used. The Old Greek omits the clause altogether; if it was not part of the original Hebrew text, then the question disappears altogether, and presumably the copy Joshua used was one from Moses.

8:33 The list of participants in this verse makes it clear that the entire nation was involved. Both the alien and the native-born citizen were included. The word here for “alien” (*gēr*) refers to those foreigners who lived as permanent residents within Israel. These were different from “foreigners” (*noḳrîm*), who came into incidental contact with Israel, such as travelers or traders, and who had few rights within Israel (e.g., [Exod 12:43](#); [Lev 22:25](#); [Deut 14:21](#); [15:3](#)). Resident aliens, on the other hand, did enjoy certain rights in Israel, even though they were not Israelites by birth. They were allowed to take gleanings from the fields ([Lev 19:10](#); [23:22](#)), and the Israelites were repeatedly instructed to give special care to them, along with the poor, the widow, and the orphan ([Exod 22:21](#); [23:9](#); [Deut 10:17–22](#); [24:17–18](#)). This special concern for aliens within Israel's borders was rooted in Israel's own alien status in Egypt, which they were to remember in perpetuity ([Exod 22:21](#); [23:9](#); [Deut 10:17–22](#); [23:7](#)). Most strikingly, the aliens could participate in Israel's festivals, such as the Passover ([Exod 12:43–49](#)), the Sabbath ([20:10](#)), the Feast of Weeks ([Deut 16:10–12](#)) and Tabernacles ([16:13–14](#)), and the celebration of the firstfruits ([Deut 26:10–11](#)). These celebrations appear to have been open to them so long as they

were circumcised ([Exod 12:43–49](#)). In this sense, these aliens were true “converts” to faith in Israel's God. Indeed, the Old Greek translates the Hebrew term here with the Greek word *prosēlutos*, which forms the basis of the English word “proselyte” (i.e., one who converts). This shows—as does the story of Rahab—that Israel's faith was not a closed system: it was open to outsiders. In the case of its aliens, Israel was to treat those within its own borders in such a way that they would be desirous of entering fully into a relationship with Israel's God. This is how Christians should relate to those outside the faith as well: Jesus instructed his disciples that they should be a light to the world, conducting themselves in a manner that would point people to their Lord ([Matt 5:14–16](#)). Here in [Joshua 8](#), these aliens are participating right along with the rest of the Israelites in the covenant affirmation ceremony.

The people were surrounding the ark on both sides, opposite (*neged*) the Levitical priests carrying it, and divided into two groups. Half of them were in front of (*mûl*) Mount Ebal and half in front of Mount Gerizim, just as Moses had commanded they should do ([Deut 27:12–13](#)). A slight change in wording from the instructions in Deuteronomy occurs here. There, the people were to be “on top of” (*‘al*) the mountains, whereas here they were “in front of” them. Since the people were scrupulously keeping to the instructions that Moses had given, it may be that they were indeed on top of the two mountains and that those on Mount Gerizim were considered those to be “in front of Mount Ebal” and vice versa.

The text does not state that the people did anything except line themselves up in this way. The next verse states that “after this,” Joshua read the law, including blessing and curse. In [Deut 27:12–13](#), the people were to participate in reciting the blessing and curse, but if they were so involved here, the text does not state it.

[8:34–35](#) Joshua read the entire book of the law to the people—this is stated explicitly twice in these two verses—but the blessing and the curse are specifically singled out in v. [34](#). This undoubtedly was to highlight the degree of obedience to the instructions of [Deuteronomy 27](#) that the Israelites were practicing. This was the first public reading of the law mentioned after Moses' death.

Joshua read the law to the entire assembly (*qāhāl*) of Israel, including women, children, and aliens (v. [35](#)). The mention of aliens again reinforces their importance for Israel (see comments on v. [33](#)). The term “assembly” of Israel is often used to denote Israel gathered as a congregation for worship or other religious functions (e.g., [Lev 16:17](#); [Deut 31:30](#); [1 Kgs 8:14](#); [Ezra 10:1](#); [Ps 22:22](#); etc.), but this is its only use in the Book of Joshua.

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