



Deuteronomy - Chapter Twenty Seven

Summary of Chapter Twenty Seven

Moses commences his third and final major speech to the elders and the people. He starts by instructing them to build an altar on Mount Ebal when they enter the Promised Land on which to make burnt-offerings in thanksgiving to God. They are also to erect stone pillars covered with plaster inscribing the written law on them.

He then instructs the people to gather with six tribes on Mount Ebal and the other six on Mount Gerizim. The Levites on Mount Ebal then loudly proclaim twelve curses that will fall upon the nation if they disobey God.

IV. Deuteronomy 27:1-29:1 - Moses' Third Speech: Blessings and Curses

A new major section begins here since the laws having been completed. Along with Deuteronomy 11:26-32, this passage brackets the laws of Chapters 12-26.

Ancient covenant treaties had sections of blessings, the consequences of keeping the treaty stipulations; and curses, the consequences of not keeping the covenant stipulations. Chapter 27 details a ceremony and the fact of curses for lawbreakers. Chapter 28 details the content of the blessings and curses.

IV.a Deuteronomy 27:1-10 - The Inscribed Stones and Altar on Mount Ebal

Moses looks ahead to a covenant ceremony upon arrival in the land. Significantly, this ceremony is conducted at Shechem, the place where God first made the promise of land to Abram in Genesis 12:6-7.

The Israelites are given instruction as to how they are to prepare stones for both an altar on which to making offerings to God when they cross the Jordan River, and stone pillars on which the laws are to be inscribed.



¹ Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today. ² On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. ³ You shall write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over, to enter the land that the Lord your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

Deuteronomy 27:1-3

Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today. Moses finished his preaching to the people of Israel, so there was nothing more to say, other than the simple encouragement to do what God commanded. It is not enough for Israel to be hearers of the Word; they must also be doers of the Word.

On the day that you cross over the Jordan does not necessarily mean on the precise day but simply meaning at some point in time soon after they cross over into the Promised Land.

Cover them with plaster. White plaster provides a backdrop against which the writing may be seen clearly and distinctly. God's Word should not only be written and displayed clearly, it should also be spoken and lived out clearly for all to see.

You shall write on them all the words of this law. The writing of the law is in addition to the permanent written record: <<*When Moses had finished writing down in a book the words of this law to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord, saying, 'Take this book of the law and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God; let it remain there as a witness against you'*>> (Deuteronomy 31:24-26).

⁴ So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. ⁵ And you shall build an altar there

to the Lord your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool.

Deuteronomy 27:4-5

Mount Ebal is on the north side of Shechem; refer to Deuteronomy 11:29. This ceremony occurs on the mountain of curse (v.13) to show that the law functions as a witness against Israel because of its inevitable sin.

And you shall build an altar there to the Lord your God. When Israel came into the Promised Land, they were to build a special altar. It was to be made of natural stone, with no iron tool used to carve the stones. With these whole stones making up the altar, they were also to write very plainly on the stones all the words of this law. This was a special altar. It was clearly to be used for sacrifice, but it was also to be a memorial of the Law of Moses, and his great sermon to Israel in the Book of Deuteronomy.

This command was obeyed by Joshua: *<<Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, ‘an altar of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool has been used’; and they offered on it burnt-offerings to the Lord, and sacrificed offerings of well-being. And there, in the presence of the Israelites, Joshua wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written>> (Joshua 8:30-32). It seems most like that it was the summation of the law contained in the Ten Commandments that was actually written on these stone pillars.*

On which you have not used an iron tool. Israel’s altars were to be of unhewn stone: *<<But if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it>> (Exodus 20:25).* This was commanded because God did not want the glory of the stone carver to be the centre of attention at his altar. God, at his altar, will share glory with no man - the beauty and attractiveness would be found only in the provision of God, not in any fleshly display.

Excavations at Mount Ebal have uncovered a worship site with a large altar measuring 30x23 feet or 9.1x7m and constructed of unhewn stones, accessed by a gently sloping ramp. The pottery dates to the Israelite settlement. This perhaps is the altar that Joshua built or is built on top of Joshua’s altar.

⁶ You must build the altar of the Lord your God of unhewn stones. Then offer up burnt-offerings on it to the Lord your God, ⁷ make sacrifices of well-being, and eat them there, rejoicing before the Lord your God.

⁸ You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly.

Deuteronomy 27:6-8

Burnt-offerings were the basic sacrifices dealing with sin as detailed in Leviticus Chapter 1. The law written on the plastered stones exposes Israel's sin, so that burnt-offerings are required. After their sins are atoned for, sacrifices of well-being or peace-offerings celebrate fellowship with God; for details of these refer to Leviticus Chapter 3.

⁹ Then Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God. ¹⁰ Therefore obey the Lord your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today.

Deuteronomy 27:9-10

Then Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel. Much of the Book of Deuteronomy is written after the same pattern as ancient agreements between kings and their subjects. Here, the idea is clear: God is the king, and the people of Israel are his subjects. He has told them what he expects of them, and what they may expect from him.

This very day you have become the people of the Lord your God. The covenant relationship is being renewed rather than initiated. The covenant of Horeb is renewed at Moab through the words of Deuteronomy, especially Chapters 29-30. Then, after the conquest, it will be renewed at Shechem (Joshua Chapter 24).

Therefore obey the Lord your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today. If the Lord is accepted as the king, then it is fitting that his subjects obey him this way. Moses and all the leadership of Israel simply declared a fact that was obvious to everyone.

IV.b Deuteronomy 27:11-26 - Twelve Curses

Instruction is given by Moses for the peoples of six tribes to gather on Mount Gerizim and the other six tribes on Mount Ebal. It is from the latter that the Levites are then to pronounce twelve curses on those who break the covenantal laws and the people are to acknowledge their acceptance of such curses.

¹¹ The same day Moses charged the people as follows: ¹² When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim for the blessing of the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. ¹³ And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali.

Deuteronomy 27:11-13



Mount Gerizim is to the south side of Shechem, Shechem being on the shoulder of the two mountains, Gerizim and Ebal. These verses describe a ceremony in which Israel hears blessings and curses concerning the law. In this chapter, however, there are only the curses to be read by the Levites. Refer Joshua 8:30-35 for the carrying out of these instructions.

Mount Gerizim was the site of the Samaritan Temple built to honour God and is the location referred to by the woman at the well: <<*Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem*>> (John 4:20).

Looking ahead to the day when the Israelites would occupy Canaan, Moses commanded the people to renew the covenant after they

entered the land by placing a new copy of the terms of the covenant on Mount Ebal and reciting the blessings and curses to each other on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.

¹⁴ Then the Levites shall declare in a loud voice to all the Israelites:

Deuteronomy 27:14

The Levites must refer to the Levitical priests, since the rest of the tribe of Levi would be on Mount Gerizim. This would make a remarkable impression. The Levites are to declare curses upon those who break the covenant, and people shall answer 'Amen!' to every declaration.

¹⁵ 'Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image, anything abhorrent to the Lord, the work of an artisan, and sets it up in secret.' All the people shall respond, saying, 'Amen!'

Deuteronomy 27:15

Cursed be anyone. The Levites declare, and all the people are to agree to, curses upon those who break God's law.

Anyone who makes an idol or casts an image. This would be a direct transgression of the second commandment: <<*You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth*>> (Exodus 20:4).

Sets it up in secret. This list of twelve curses lifts the level of punishment for disobedience to the law from human to divine jurisdiction. As in v.24, the theme of secrecy shows that even if a person's crime remains undetected, that person will still come under God's curse.

It is being reminded that the word Amen means something. It means 'so be it.' Every Amen was a conscious agreement with the declaration of a curse. The same applies when Christians say Amen to another's prayer or declaration to God.

¹⁶ 'Cursed be anyone who dishonours father or mother.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Deuteronomy 27:16

Anyone who dishonours father or mother is in direct contravention to the fifth commandment: <<*Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you*>> (Exodus 20:12).

¹⁷ 'Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour's boundary marker.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Deuteronomy 27:17

The command not to move a neighbour's boundary marker was given in Deuteronomy 19:14. This is tantamount to the theft of his land and thus breaks the eighth commandment: <<*You shall not steal*>> (Exodus 20:15).

¹⁸ 'Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road.' All the people shall say, 'Amen!'

Deuteronomy 27:18

Anyone who misleads a blind person on the road. There is no previous mention of this specific command although: <<*You shall not revile the deaf or put a stumbling-block before the blind; you shall fear your God: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 19:14) may apply here. However, there are many which do command the people to care for the weak and vulnerable. To act in this way would certainly not

demonstrate love for a neighbour, which Jesus would later state was one of the two greatest commandments of all. The first is to love God: <<*And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*>> (Matthew 22:39-40).

¹⁹ ‘Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:19

Anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice. There are many laws and commands that instruct the Israelites as to how they should treat these three groups of people. Any failure to treat them fairly would deprive them of the justice they are entitled to as the people of God.

²⁰ ‘Cursed be anyone who lies with his father’s wife, because he has violated his father’s rights.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:20

Anyone who lies with his father’s wife. This command relates to a step-mother rather than a biological mother, although that too would be an abomination. This command was first given in Leviticus 18:8.

²¹ ‘Cursed be anyone who lies with any animal.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:21

Anyone who lies with any animal. Bestiality was abhorrent to God and was commanded against in: <<*Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death*>> (Exodus 22:19).

²² ‘Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:22

Anyone who lies with his sister. This law applies even to a half sister despite the fact that Abraham and Sarah, from whom the entire nation came, were related in this way. Apart from issues of morality, consideration must also be given to the issue of a shared gene pool and the disabilities it can lead to. This was first commanded against in: <<*You shall not uncover the nakedness of your sister, your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter, whether born at home or born abroad*>> (Leviticus 18:9).

²³ ‘Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:23

Anyone who lies with his mother-in-law. This would degrade the marriage as it would be abhorrent to both the wife and to God: <<*If a man takes a wife and her mother also, it is depravity; they shall be burned to death, both he and they, that there may be no depravity among you*>> (Leviticus 20:14).

²⁴ ‘Cursed be anyone who strikes down a neighbour in secret.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:24

Anyone who strikes down a neighbour in secret. The issue here again is secrecy, for the laws on murder are quite clear: <<*Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*>> (Deuteronomy 19:21). The murderer may have escaped justice for the crime but will still fall under God’s curse, a fate worse than capital punishment: <<*I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*>> (Luke 12:4-5).

²⁵ ‘Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:25

Anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood. Those who sit in judgement are required to uphold the law and not to take bribes and let the perpetrators of murder go free. Those who fail in their duties in court will be cursed: <<*You shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right*>> (Exodus 23:8), <<*Surely oppression makes the wise foolish, and a bribe corrupts the heart*>> (Ecclesiastes 7:7), <<*Ah, you who are heroes in drinking wine and valiant at mixing drink, who acquit the guilty for a bribe, and deprive the innocent of their rights!*>> (Isaiah 5:22-23), <<*For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins – you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate*>> (Amos 5:12), and: <<*Their hands are skilled to do evil; the official and the judge ask for a bribe, and the powerful dictate what they desire; thus they pervert justice*>> (Micah 7:3).

²⁶ ‘Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them.’ All the people shall say, ‘Amen!’

Deuteronomy 27:26

Anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them. This is a final summary statement to show that anyone who fails to keep any of God's laws will be cursed and ultimately punished for their lawlessness: <<*You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments*>> (Psalm 119:21), <<*You shall say to them, Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Cursed be anyone who does not heed the words of this covenant, which I commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the iron-smelter, saying, Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God, that I may perform the oath that I swore to your ancestors, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey, as at this day. Then I answered, 'So be it, Lord'*>> (Jeremiah 11:3-5), and: <<*For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law'*>> (Galatians 3:10).