

JOSHUA 8

AI CAPTURED AND DESTROYED

Having failed to take the city at first (see Joshua 7:2–5), the Israelites attempted a second time to capture Ai, this time with the Lord’s assurance of their victory (8:1–2). This second time, Joshua devised a plan to feint a retreat in order to trick the army of Ai out of the city, thereby trapping it in an ambush (verses 3–9; compare verses 10–22). It is a classic military tactic that has been reportedly used throughout various engagements, perhaps most famously by William the Conqueror at the Battle of Hastings (AD 1066). Joshua’s holding out his spear towards Ai (verse 18) recalls the actions of Moses in Israel’s battle with Amalek (see Exodus 17:8–13).

The aftermath of the battle saw the third implementation of a *herem*, this one devoting the property of Ai’s inhabitants to the Lord and witnessing the massacre of its people (Joshua 8:23–29). One of the key differences this time, however, is that the Israelites were allowed to retain some of the confiscated booty (verse 27). Again the narrator briefly inserted himself into the story by noting in verse 28 how the site of Ai (the Hebrew word for “ruin” or “desolation”) is “an heap [Hebrew *tel*, “mound”] for ever, even a desolation unto this day,” indicating also that the story is describing the events some time afterwards.

The fate of the king of Ai—being hanged on a tree—recalls that of the notorious Gadianton leader Zemnarihah in the Book of Mormon (verse 29; compare 3 Nephi 4:28), and, perhaps, the latter’s execution was deliberately meant to mimic the former’s.¹ Joshua’s actions in taking the body of the king of Ai off the

¹ See Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did the People Cut Down the Tree after Hanging Zemnarihah? (3 Nephi 4:28),” *KnoWhy* #192 (September 21, 2016), online at <https://knowhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/knowhy/why-did-the-people-cut-down-the-tree-after-hanging-zemnarihah>.

tree after his execution were in keeping with the injunction of Deuteronomy 21:22–23, reinforcing the reading of the book of Joshua as part of the Deuteronomistic history.

The events narrated on Mount Ebal at the end of the chapter act as a narrative sequel or postscript (Joshua 8:30–35). Here the text specifies that Joshua led Israel in a covenant renewal ceremony. The building of an altar (for sacrifice) and the recitation of the “words of the law” of the book of Moses before the congregation of Israel make the ritual aspect of this scene unmistakable. The book of Moses in question is undoubtedly an early form of the book of Deuteronomy (or some portion of it), as the text explicitly paraphrases Deuteronomy 27:5 at Joshua 8:31 in its description of the altar built at the site.

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