

WHY WAS MOUNT GERIZIM CHOSEN FOR THE BLESSING CEREMONY?

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When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess, you shall pronounce the blessing at Mount Gerizim and the curse at Mount Ebal (Deut. 11:29). After you have crossed the Jordan, the following shall stand on Mount Gerizim when the blessing for the people is spoken . . . For the curse, the following shall stand on Mount Ebal . . . (Deut. 27:12-13).

This general location for a religious ceremony solemnizing Israel's entry into the Land of Israel is very reasonable. It is centrally located at the intersection of the north-south and east-west roads. These mountains are on either side of Shechem, Abraham's first stop in Canaan (Gen. 12:6). In Shechem, God told him that this was the land that would be given to his descendants (Gen. 12:7).¹ However, it is not clear why Mount Gerizim was chosen as the site for the blessing ceremony and why Mount Ebal was chosen for the curse.

The first commentator who tried to find an explanation for choosing these particular mountains was Ramban. In his commentary to Deuteronomy 11:29 he explains that the symbolism probably has to do with the location of the two mountains. Mount Gerizim is to the south, which is the right side of a person who turns eastward facing the sunrise, the forward direction in the Bible. Mount Ebal is to the left, the north, which always has a negative connotation, as it is said, *Out of the north evil shall break forth* (Jer. 1:14). However, apart from their respective locations, Ramban does not ascribe any particular significance to the mountains themselves.

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in his commentary on the Torah (Deut. 11:29) published in 1878, suggests that the mountains are different in their nature: Mount Gerizim is wrapped in greenery and gardens covering its slope, while Mount Ebal is barren and desolate, hence they precisely illustrate the blessing and the curse. Although these two mountains share the same geographical conditions, Mount Gerizim blooms while Mount Ebal is deserted.

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This idea that Mount Gerizim blooms while Mount Ebal is desolate occurs in many early sources. *Midrash Talpiyyot*, an eighteenth-century work, notes that visitors would be astonished to find two mountains sharing the same geographical conditions, yet very different in their vegetation: "Mount Gerizim will forever flourish . . . Mount Ebal will forever be dry with no vegetation."² A similar description is found in *Tevu'ot ha-Aretz* by Yehoseph Schwarz (1804-1865),³ who wrote: "Mount Ebal is to the north of the city of Shechem and desolate, about 800 feet high, while Gerizim is south-west of the Valley of Nablus, blessed, fruitful, and higher than Mount Ebal."

However, the facts on the ground do not support this interpretation. For example, a photograph in the Library of Congress in Washington (dated 1890-1900) shows Mount Gerizim viewed from Mount Ebal, where Mt. Gerizim seems completely devoid of vegetation and very similar to Mt. Ebal in its desolation. Not only are both mountains desolate, but Yehoseph Schwartz erred when describing their height: Mt. Ebal is actually higher than Mt. Gerizim.⁴

It seems that these writers were not personally familiar with the appearance of the mountains and may have based themselves on the description recorded by Benjamin of Tudela, a twelfth-century traveler, who wrote: "On Mount Gerizim there are springs, gardens, and orchards. Mount Ebal is dry as stones and rocks, and between them in the valley lies the city of Shechem."⁵ Benjamin describes the springs of Mount Gerizim and its greenery was most likely located near them. Similarly, Rabbi Moses Basola (1480-1560), whose travelogue was published in Leghorn in 1785, reported: "On Mount Gerizim there are many trees and springs, while Mount Ebal is completely desolate." The descriptions of vegetation on Mount Gerizim actually refer to plants growing at the foot of the mountain near the springs.

The accumulation of water in the mountain aquifer from rainfall in the mountains of Samaria percolates through layers of rock to springs at the foot of Mount Gerizim in the Shechem area. There are ten springs, yielding two million cubic meters of water per annum. Five additional wells yield another six million cubic meters per annum.⁶ Thus, Mount Gerizim was always blessed with an abundance of water; in contrast, Mount Ebal was always dry.

Before proclaiming the blessings and curses in Deuteronomy, the Torah commands the people of Israel to erect large stones on Mount Ebal and coat

them with plaster: *As soon as you have crossed the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones. Coat them with plaster and inscribe upon them all the words of this Teaching* (Deut. 27:2). Since plaster can only last in a dry climate, it makes no sense to coat stones with the material in an area with any rainfall, as the plaster is likely to be washed away. This is an indication from the Torah itself that there was very little rainfall in the vicinity of Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal.⁷

Water from the springs at the foot of Mount Gerizim supplied the city of Shechem and irrigated the valley for generations. There lies the blessing of Mount Gerizim. I have not come across Bible scholars who mention the water blessing, but have found two sources which support this connection. A disciple of the Ramban from the fourteenth century wrote: "Mount Gerizim is all gardens, orchards and vineyards; seventy springs flow from it, and it is called the blessed mountain. Mount Ebal is very dry, not a drop of water issues from it, and it is known as the cursed mountain. Perhaps the blessings and curses [of the Torah] are so named because of this."⁸ The archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni (1919-1976) writes: "Mount Gerizim was chosen to be Mount Blessing thanks to the abundant springs arising at its feet; and as it is located on the right, south of Shechem is the blessed side."⁹ This explanation gets to the core difference between two mountains.

Moreover, the Semitic languages apparently display an etymological connection between blessings and pools of water. These words have the same *b-r-kh* root: blessing (*berakhah*) and pool (*berekhah*),¹⁰ further connecting the mountain of springs to a place for blessings.

There is an idea in the Bible that something that is blessed will bring further blessing. For example, in the story of the prophet Elisha and the wife of one of the sons of the prophets, the blessing came in the form of oil from a jug of oil she had left at home (II Kgs. 4:2). From this small vessel (the source of the blessing) she was able to fill many pots with oil, thereby saving her children from enslavement.

This idea is echoed in the Talmud, "Everyone who blesses will be blessed" (TB *Sotah* 38b). Mount Gerizim, a place always blessed with springs of water, is naturally chosen to be the mountain where the blessings will be given in the symbolic center of Israel.

NOTES

1. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996) p. 249.
2. Elijah ha-Kohen, *Midrash Talpiyyot* (Smyrna, 1736; Warsaw: 1873) p. 111.
3. The English title of his book is *A Descriptive Geography and Brief Historical Sketch of Palestine*. The Hebrew first edition of this book was published in 1845, the English edition in 1850, and the German edition in 1852.
4. Mount Ebal is the highest mountain in the vicinity. Mount Gerizim stands 881 meters above sea level, while Mount Ebal is 59 meters higher.
5. J. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar Massa'ot* (Tel Aviv: 1969) p. 29
6. Haim Gvirtzman, "*Mifalei ha-Mayim bi-Yehudah ve-Shomron*", in *Mehkarei Yehudah ve-Shomron*, ed. Y. Eshel, vol. 15 (Ariel: 2005) pp. 329-352.
7. My thanks to Ya'akov Stein, who called my attention to plaster usage supporting the idea of a dry area.
8. Abraham Yaari, *Massa'ot Eretz Israel shel Olim Yehudiyim, Kibtzam u-Vi'aram* (Tel Aviv: World Zionist Organization Youth Department, 1946) p. 83.
9. Menahem Solieli and Moshe Barkuz, eds., *Lexikon Mikra'i* (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1965) p. 206.
10. See the Hebrew, Arabic, Ethiopic, and Ugaritic examples in: Ernest Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language* (New York: Macmillan, 1987) p. 85. Klein himself has not expressed an opinion regarding an etymological connection between the two. See also G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975) p. 280: "To these must be added the noun *berekhah*, which the lexicons render by 'pool, water reservoir, basin' . . . but whose relationship to *brk* I or *brk* II is debated."



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