

Bib. Typology on ALTAR.

ORGANS OWN TYPO.

ACTER

Pillar

ARK

HIGH PLACES.

Bruce PORTER

Of all the religious objects which have come through time, the altar is probably the most common, and appears in its modern form in almost all churches. The altar in its modern form takes the shape of the sacrament table.¹ The notion of the altar being a "table of communion between the Gods and their worshippers"² as H. Clay Trumbull says, is an idea of antiquity. Catholic altars are not only seen as a table for the Mass, the blood and body of the sacrificed Christ, but it also became as in Old Testament times a place of sanctuary.³ (I Kings 1:50-51) Stone altars of the Catholic Church are anointed with oil following the pattern of Jacob at Bethel.⁴ (Gen. 28:18,19).

Thus the modern altar becomes the altar of "the great and last sacrifice"⁵ (Alma 34:10), or the table of the emblems of Christ. The 'sacrament' table, or Christian altar is the place where "covenants are made between God and man."⁶ Sacred oaths were taken while those participating touched the altar.⁷ The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion states that altars were built "in order to mark a significant occasion, e.g., upon entering into a covenant with God."⁸

Altars have been and are now an integral part of worship, and in some cases, are an important part in the foundation of a religious society. In referring to the altar's importance Menahem Haran states that "there was probably no settlement without its altar;"⁹ he then broadens that to include even nomadic and semi nomadic societies.¹⁰ Communities that have no temple, almost always have, without exception, altars, as in the Hindu society.¹¹ However, when a temple was constructed there was within its con-

wooden sword to kill "the wicked one" and establish a sacred area. The altar by virtue of being a sacred object needed to be protected from the profane world and was enclosed within a large rectangular space that previously had been purified by fire, in other words, purified by the god himself.²²

Scholars agree that the earliest forms of altars were stones, trees, and thresholds.²³ The early sacred stones were not used for burnings but were usually used as a marker, and then anointed with oil or blood.²⁴ These sacred stones, or masseba²⁵ became the "prototype of the altar."²⁶

Altars, either require, or mark sanctified space as in the case of Jacob at Beth-el (Gen. 28:16-22). Here a theophany takes place, an altar, i.e., a pillar is built and anointed, then a covenant is made with God.

The Zohar maintains that a sacred stone or jewel upon which the Holy Name or tetragramaton was inscribed began the creation. The sacred stone was cast into the watery abyss, and from it rose the primordial mound or "altar" and thus the world was founded and creation began. This mound became the center of the world or the navel of the earth. This stone, says the Zohar, was the same stone that Jacob used as a pillow, and later stood upright as an altar.²⁷

The symbol of the 'Navel of the Earth' is always a stone,²⁸ and this white stone represents the center of the world.²⁹

Like the umbilical cord, the masseba or altar links heaven, earth, and the underworld together, and creates a place where "man can establish contact with other worlds."³⁰

See N. S. ...
on stones
The ...
down, pharaoh

Altars on Horeb
Horeb
Mountains

Altars are important in ancient and modern worship as can be seen by their complex symbolic meaning. This symbolic meaning was passed on to those sacred structures that housed the altar and its ritual.

In view of what has been said above about altars and what is about to be said, I would propose that the Ark of the Covenant was a most Holy and sacred, portable altar.

The Ark was not an altar in the sense that it was used for sacrifice, but as a har'el, or mountain of God, as Ezekiel calls the altar in Ezk. 43:15. The Ark became the portable Horeb, the 'Mountain of God' where the covenant was made.

Account of Horeb
Horeb

The altar, and the Ark needs to be compared to establish the symbolism behind the Ark of the Covenant. As a basis for comparison, I will use John Lundquist's Temple Typology.³¹

1. The altar and ark represent the embodiment of the Cosmic Mountain.
2. Which mountain represents the primordial hill-ock.³³

The idea of the altar representing the cosmic mountain, or the primordial hillock was partially discussed above in reference to the teachings of the Zohar. "The erection of the Vedic altar is conceived as the creation of the world. The water with which the clay was mixed was the same as the primeval waters: the clay forming the altar's foundation, the earth."³⁵ All altars, in some way represented mountain tops,³⁶ or high places.

This representation explains the 'Law of the Altar' (Ex. 20:24,25) inasmuch that it is to be made of 'earth and unhewn stone' in order to represent the cosmic mountain. "Related to this

notion of the Hill of Creation" writes Kristensen "the earth's height which came up out of the primeval waters was the place where the earth began to live." This he says is "where the altar was built" and it represented the "dwelling place of God."³⁷

Because there has been nothing said or written about the Ark being an altar I will rely on the Old Testament for most of my references.

As seen above the altar represented the "dwelling place of God"³⁸ as was the pillar Jacob set up. The pillar marked the "gate of heaven" and the "House of God" (Gen. 28:17, 18). So also the Ark was considered the place of Jehovah's divine presence (Num. 10:35,36) his portable throne and the place where Jehovah will commune with Moses, a place of theophany (Ex. 25:22)³⁹

When the Ark was completed it took on the same terminology as did the "Mountain of God" (Ex. 3:11) or Horeb. The Ark became the Mountain of God, or the portable har'el.⁴⁰

W. F. Albright speaks of a copper kiyor, (II Chron. 6:12, 13) or small portable platform on which Solomon stood to pray with upraised hands.⁴¹ Albright compares this kiyor with like representations of the same found in Syria with the King or High Priest praying as Solomon with raised hands. These portable platforms appear to be a box or chest on which the King prays.⁴²

The familiar aspects of the Ark and the Kiyor need not be discussed here, but Albright gives an interesting and relevant meaning of the word, kiyor. It is found in sumerian texts with the meaning of "foundation platform" which he states is synonymous with "entrance to the underworld."⁴³ Albright maintains that the

meaning of the word kiyor in Hebrew is "foundation of the earth."⁴⁴

3. The Altar and Ark is often associated with the waters of life.

The waters of life will issue from under the Temple (Zech. 14:8; Ezk. 47:1; Joel 3:8) and more specifically from under the Holy of Holies.

4. The Altar and Ark is built on separate, sacred set apart space.

The vedic altar, as discussed above was placed in a purified rectangle and was only approachable by the priest⁴⁵ in behalf of the person or persons.

The altar in Ezekiel is surrounded by a pavement that became a boundary of the "Sacred altar area"⁴⁶ The place or location of the altar of the Temple mount was as Maimonides states "specifically defined and was never to be changed."⁴⁷ Earlier altars and pillars marked sacred areas, and accordingly when altars wer constructed the space around the altar became sacred.

The sacredness of the Ark of the Covenant need not be discussed here at length. The Ark was kept in the Holy of Holies, the most sacred space in the Israelite religion. The High Priest was allowed only once a year into the Holy of Holies, and only then after he had become purified, washed and clothed in special linen garments, a prerequisite to entering into the presence of God, behind the veil.⁴⁸

5. The Altar and Ark is oriented toward the four world regions or cardinal directions.

All altars according to the Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery faced the east.⁴⁹ The Ark of the Covenant was the only object in the temple of Israel that faced the veil which was east of the Ark.⁵⁰ The four horns ascribed to the altar represented the four cardinal directions.⁵¹ In Egypt the "horns of the Earth" referred to the "extreme points of south, north, east, and west."⁵²

6. The Altar and Ark express the idea of a successive ascension toward heaven.

The altar of Ezekiel⁴³ was built in three stages, the top-most level being called har el or ar el, the Mountain of God or the Underworld. The base of the altar set on the "bosom of the earth"⁵³ as did the ziggurat. This altar reflects the idea of the ziggurat being in three stages, these stages representing the different levels of creation, heaven, earth, and the underworld.⁵⁴

The "oldest temples" writes Hugh Nibley "were gigantic altars . . . to attract the attention of the powers above."⁵⁵ These gigantic altars or ziggurats were also topped with four horns as was the Israelite altar.⁵⁶

*Reference
F Nibley Notes*

The Ark, although not divided into levels, represented the highest heaven in the ascension, the dwelling place of Jehovah. The three stages are not only seen in the altar but are symbolically represented in the temple.

The temple as most temples in the ancient near east, was composed of three main divisions. The Ulam faced the east and was the least sacred part of the temple. It was separated from the Holy Place or Hechal by olive doors; the Hechal contained

the sacred Menorah, Altar of Incense and the Table of Shewbread. The Debir or Holy of Holies was approached by steps and secluded by a veil from the Hekhal. The Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of Jehovah and the covenant between the people and their God.⁵⁷

7. The plan and measurements of the Altar and Ark are revealed by God.

"Altars and sanctuaries were constructed according to traditional canons"⁵⁸ and by revelation from a God. Altars were to be constructed according to a plan given by God. (Ex 20:24-26; 27:1-8; Ezk. 43:12, 13).

The measurement of the Ark was also given by God in Ex. 25:10-22.

8. The Altar and Ark is the central, organizing, unifying institution in ancient near eastern society.

In reference to the altars and Ark the statement just made can be best explained in a historical setting. Religion has always been a unifying force behind any society or people. Jeroboam was wise enough to realize this concept when he became king over Israel. The two golden calves that were made were to take the place of the Ark as the embodiment of Jehovah (I Kings 12:28).

Perhaps the Ark could be best discussed in view of the sub-statements: A. The Ark is associated with abundance and prosperity, and B. The loss of the Ark is seen as a calamity and fatality to the community.

Both of these statements are true in light of the story of Eli and his two sons (I Sam. 4:1-18; II Sam. 6).

9. Inside the Temple images of deities as well as kings, Temple priests and worshippers are washed, anointed, clothed, fed, enthroned and symbolically initiated into the presence of the deity and thus into eternal life.

The early altar, or masseba, was considered to be a symbol of a deity⁵⁹ or house of a God. "The altar is an image of the universe" writes Kristensen, and because of this "it becomes apparent that the altar is sometimes identical with the God."⁶⁰

The Ark of Jehovah is undoubtedly the essence of the deity, and the place where he reveals himself.⁶¹

It would seem that the washings, anointings, and clothings that took place were preparatory ordinances or purification rites necessary for administering at the altar and Ark. Special purification rites and special clothing was used by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement. These clothes were to be worn only when he entered the presence of the LORD.⁶² The purification rites were extended for the High Priest on the Day of Atonement.⁶³

10. The Altar and Ark is associated with the realm of the dead.

The grave is often considered an altar to the dead, for it is here the dead must unite with the world above. The dead man's rebirth and resurrection is considered to be creation anew.⁶⁴ The most common grave is that of a tumulus and it becomes "identical in form with the hill of creation." As the altar represented communion with the Gods the grave represents eternal life with them.

As an altar the Ark becomes, or represents the primordial mound, a link with the underworld, the mortal world, and the

eternal world. The Ark then becomes the center, the navel of the Earth where time, space and life come together. This center⁶⁶ is where life begins and where it will continue after death.

11. Sacral, Communal meals are carried out in connection with the altar and Ark.

The communal meals are usually shared with the God,⁶⁷ and are almost always a 'covenant meal'⁶⁸ between God and Man.

The sacrifice was the major aspect of the covenant meal and was symbolic of the sacrifice of the God.⁶⁹ Through the covenant meal the people are reminded of the relationship they have with their God, and their commitments to him.

12. The tablets of destiny are consulted.

13. The Altar and Ark is perceived as the moving force behind the restating and codifying of basic legal principles.

The Ark of the Covenant contained the Tablets of the Law (Ex. 25:16; Heb. 9:4) which were to be read on a regular basis to Israel. (Deut. 31:10-13). The Laws would have been consulted often in order to correctly observe the Law with its sacrifices and Holy Days. With repetition comes stability.

14. The Altar and Ark is a place of sacrifice.

All sacrifices were offered on an altar, that altar symbolizing the primordial hillock or point of union between the three worlds. The Ark represents perhaps the Altar in heaven, the celestial model of the altar of sacrifice. The earthly altar is where the God dies for man, while the Ark is the altar where he now lives.

15. The Altar and Ark rituals are enshrouded in secrecy;

the secrecy relates to the sacred.

The most sacred rites pertain to the Ark of Jehovah which when viewed from the "outside" would seem secret.

The Altar of Sacrifices can only be administered to by a priest in behalf of the profane man.

The altar seems to be the focus of temple worship, in that all covenants between God and man take place at the altar. The most sacred covenant, that of Atonement on the LORD's part and acceptance on man's part took place at the celestial altar,⁷⁰ the Ark of the Covenant.

The rites and rituals performed at the altar of sacrifice is an earthly altar, one that is performed in the temple is too sacred for the profane world, and needed protection from the profane or temporal world. The temple, i.e., the building creates this sacred space for the most sacred ordinances of the religion. These ordinances are always performed at the altar.

The Ark as an altar has not been considered, to my knowledge, it has however, been compared to a temple or sanctuary.⁷¹ It is my opinion that the Altar, Ark and temple are equal in their symbolic representation of the creation; thus, becoming the throne and House of God.

NOTES

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2. Trumbull, H. Clay; The Blood Covenant; (Scribner & Sons: New York); pp. 167-168. See also Mal 1:6,7; Isa 65:11; Ezk. 41:22; 44:16.
3. A Catholic Dictionary of Theology, Vol. 1, (Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd.), p. 63.
4. Ibid.
5. Bruce McConkie, Mormon Doctrine, (Bookcraft, 1966), p. 660.
6. Ibid., p. 662.
7. A Catholic Dictionary of Theology, Vol. 1, (Thomas Nelson & Sons, Ltd.), p. 63.
8. Werblowsky, Z. W., Wigoder, Geoffrey, The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion, (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1966), p. 26.
9. Menachem, Haran, Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel; (Oxford, 1978), p. 16.
10. Ibid., p. 17.
11. Hubert, Henry; Mauss, Marcel. Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function (University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 26.
12. Menachem, p. 16.
13. Adam. (Moses 5:5-6); Noah. (Gen. 8:20); Abr. (Gen. 12:7,8); Isaac (Gen. 26:25); Jacob (Gen 33:20; 35:1, 3, 7).
14. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, (Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 505. Also Fohrer, Georg, History of Israelite Religion (Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 83.
15. Von Rad, Gerhard, Old Testament Theology, (Harper & Brothers, 1962), Vol. 1, p. 238.
16. Kraus, Hans-Joachim, Worship in Israel, (John Knox Press, 1966) pp. 126, 128.
17. de Vaux, Roland, Ancient Israel, (McGraw-Hill, 1961), pp. 297, 299, 302.

18. Hubert, pp. 22-23. "One does not venture to approach sacred things directly and alone; . . . an intermediary (priest) or at the very least a guide is necessary . . ." This Guide "prevents the sacrificer from committing errors. . . he stands on the threshold of the sacred and the profane world and represents them both at one and the same time they are linked in him." (The Guide).

19. Eliade, Mircea, The Sacred and the Profane, (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), p. 26.

20. Eliade, Mircea, Patterns in Comparative Religion; (New American Library, 1958), p. 370. Eliade Quotes Robertson Smith's Lectures on The Religion of the Semites, p. 436. "All sanctuaries are consecrated by a Theophany."

21. Ibid. pp. 370-371. See also Hastings, James, Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (Scribners & Sons, 1951), Vol. I, pp. 145-147.

22. Hubert, pp. 26-27.

23. Hastings, p. 334.

24. Ibid., p. 333. Also, Reik, pp. 356-358.

25. Gesenius, Hebrew And Chaldee Lexicon, (Erdmans, 1976), p. 500; also, Wilson, William, Old Testament Word Studies, (Kregel Publications, 1978), p. 310; "Masseba," means pillar, image, monument or memorial of the dead.

26. Reik, pp. 356-358.

27. Waite, Arthur Edward, The Secret Doctrine in Israel, (William Rider & Sons, LTD., 1913), pp. 62, 63. Compare Eliade, Mircea, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New American Library, 1974), pp. 229-233.

28. Ibid., Eliade, pp. 331-334.

29. Ibid., p. 231.

30. Nibley, Hugh, What is a Temple, (BYU Press, 1963), p. 4.

31. Lundquist, John, What is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology.

32. Ibid.

33. I have here combined points one and two of Lundquist's typology.

34. Waite, pp. 62-63.

35. Eliade, pp. 372-373.
36. Hastings, p. 350.
37. Kristensen, Brede W., The Meaning of Religion, (Martinus Nijhoff/ The Hague, 1971), pp. 106, 107, 389, 469-471.
38. Ibid., p. 469.
39. Ibid., p. 357. See also May, H. G. The Ark - A Miniature Temple, (The American Journal of Semitic Languages & Literatures), Vol. II, 1936, #4, p. 215.
40. Herbert, A. S., Worship in Ancient Israel, (John Knox Press), p. 27.
41. Ibid., p. 152.
42. Ibid., p. 153.
43. Ibid., p. 154.
44. Ibid., p. 154.
45. Hubert, pp. 22-27.
46. Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 39, 1920, (Yale University Press, 1920), pp. 139, 140. See also Hastings, p. 313.
47. Lewittes, Mendell, The Code of Maimonides Book Eight The Book of Temple Service, (Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 10-11.
48. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, (Abingdon Press, 1962), Vol. I, pp. 313-316.
49. de Vries, Ad., Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery, (North Holland Publishing Co.), p. 11.
50. Mazar, Benjamin, The Mountain of the Lord, (Doubleday, 1975), p. 101.
51. de Vries, pp. 257, 258.
52. Kristensen, Brede, The Meaning of Religion, (Martinus Nijhoff/ The Hague, 1971), p. 470.
53. Albright, W. F. Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, (John Hopkins Press, 1942), p. 150.
54. Nibley, p. 3. See also Eliade, Mircea, The Myth of The Eternal Return, (Princeton University Press, 1954), p. 13.
55. Ibid., p. 5.

56. Albright, p. 152.
57. Mazar, p. 100.
58. Eliade, Mircea, Patterns in Comparative Religion (New American Library, 1974), p. 371.
59. Journal of Biblical Literature, Vol. 39, 1920, (Yale University Press, 1920), p. 141.
60. Kristensen, p. 471.
61. Ibid., p.357.
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63. Dancy, Herbert, The Mishnah, (Oxford, 1974), pp. 162-172.
For an expanded explanation of purification rites, see Hubert, pp. 19-60.
64. Kristensen, pp. 472, 473.
65. Ibid., 472, 473.
66. Neusner, Jacob, Judaism, The Evidence of the Mishnah, (The University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 152-153.
67. The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, (Abingdon Press, 1981), pp. 152-153.
68. Kraus, p. 120.
69. Kristensen, p. 485.
70. Gray, George Buchanan, Sacrifice in the Old Testament, (KTAV., 1971), pp. 167, 168.
71. Kraus, p. 125. See also, The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, Vol, LII July 1936, #4, pp. 215-234.
The Ark - A Miniature Temple.

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