

**SHADOWS IN PROFUSION:
The Symbolism and Centrality
of the Hebrew Altar**

**Term Paper
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Among the physical instruments of worship employed by man throughout the ages, none has played a more essential role than the altar.¹ Students of antiquity confirm its presence and ponder its sacred functions in a wide variety of belief systems around the globe. The religions of the ancient Near East offer abundant proof of the altar's influence. For thousands of years the altar has claimed center stage in the elaborate and compelling rituals of these archaic faiths.²

The religion of the Hebrews was sacrificial in nature from its very beginnings, revolving directly around the altar. Deceptively simple in design and function, the Hebrew altar was enveloped in an exquisite matrix of symbols. The mission of this article is to explore the cosmic significance of the Hebrew altar, to probe into the subtle nuances of its symbolic meaning. Within the folds of this cloak of symbolism can be found the key to the altar's centrality in Hebrew thought and ritual.

METHODOLOGY AND TYPOLOGY

Two brief excursus must precede any discussion of the symbolism

¹ Menahem Haran, Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel, (Oxford, Eng.: Clarendon Press, 1977), p.17. Professor Haran observes, "The altar has an almost universal dispersion and is not unknown even in nomadic or semi-nomadic societies."

² For a comprehensive treatise on the typology and ritual significance of the altar in the great religions of the world see Karl-Martin Edsman, "Altar", The Encyclopedia of Religion, Mircea Eliade, Ed. (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1987), 1:222-5.

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of the altar in the Old Testament: 1. An explanation of the methodological framework of this study, and 2. A summary of the physical typology of the Hebrew altar in the Old Testament. Both detours are essential in establishing the direction and scope of the article.

First, a word about method. While there is much of worth in studies which focus on minute detail, the subject at hand demands a different approach. Employing the methods of the religious historian, I will attempt to present a sweeping view of the altar's significance in Hebrew thought in antiquity.³ This is not to imply that the altar's symbolic meaning was the same to Abraham as it was to the Talmudic rabbi; rather, it is an effort to promote a deeper appreciation for the rich legacy of meaning accumulated by the Hebrew altar through the ages. For the purposes of this paper, the term "Hebrew" will refer to Abraham and his descendants through the lineage of Isaac and Jacob. Special emphasis will be given to the traditions of the Jews as the principal heirs and custodians of the Hebrew heritage.

The second excursus involves the physical typology of the Hebrew altar. Although this article is concerned primarily with metaphysical issues, there is an essential concrete dimension to

³ A more extensive and scholarly discussion of this methodological approach is given by Jonathan Z. Smith in "Earth and Gods", in Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, Jacob Neusner, Ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978). p. 108.



be considered as well. That dimension is best introduced with a question: What can be learned about the altar's symbolic meaning from the physical structure of the altar itself?⁴ A brief survey of altar typology may open the way to an answer.

In his much-cited study of the altars of the Old Testament, Harold Wiener painstakingly sifts through myriad references to altar worship in the Hebrew canon.⁵ His survey yields three basic kinds of altars commonly used in the religion of Israel in Old Testament times: 1. Altars of sacrifice, 2. Memorial altars, and 3. Altars of incense.

Basing his observations on descriptions within the scriptural text, Wiener then discusses the typical composition of the three general altar types. First, he distinguishes two common designs for sacrificial altars: 1) The cairn altar - a heap of earth or

⁴ Discussing the importance of structural analysis as a key to symbolic meaning, Mircea Eliade argues that "when it is a question of interpreting a religious symbolism witnessed in a primitive society, the historian of religions must not only take into consideration all that the autochthones can say about this symbol, he must also question the structure of the symbol and what it reveals by itself." See Mircea Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism", in Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts, Diane Apostolos, Ed. (Cappadocia, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1965), p. 106. [Hereafter, Eliade (SAS)].

⁵ Harold M. Wiener, "The Altars of the Old Testament", Beigabe zur Orientalistische Literaturzeitung, (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1927), pp. 2,23. An absorbing archaeological typology of the altar in ancient Canaan is provided in Franz Josef Stendebach, "Altarformen im Kanaanisch-Israelitischen Raum", Biblische Zeitschrift 20(2):180-196.

stones; also, a single unhewn stone or boulder used 'in situ'⁶ (Exo. 20:24-26; Jud. 13:2-23), and 2. Wooden altars - sheathed in bronze or gold, these altars often featured horns (Exo. 27:1-2; 39:39).⁷

The memorial altar constructed by the Hebrews consisted of a small heap of uncut stones (Joshua 4:1-24; Gen. 31:44-55), or of a single undressed stone set upright as a memorial or witness (Joshua 24:26-27).

The final altar type, the altar of incense, was very similar to the second kind of sacrificial altar. Embellished with horns at its four corners, it consisted of a wooden frame sheathed in gold (Exo. 30:1-3). Unlike its sacrificial counterpart, which was filled with earth and stones, the incense altar featured a metal "crown" or roof.⁸

With these concrete images in mind, the question of the altar's symbolic meaning can now be taken up. In fact, the physical appearance of the altar suggests a point of beginning.

⁶ See also William Robertson Smith, The Religion of the Semites, 7th ed., (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), p. 203. In this landmark work, Smith establishes the cultic function of the pillar (Heb. massebah) "in the more ancient parts of the Old Testament."

⁷ Wiener, pp. 2-4.

⁸ Haran, p. 156.

1. The Altar as Symbol of the Holy Mountain

A careful study of sacred imagery reveals the pervasiveness of the "holy mountain" motif within many cultures of antiquity. In the study of archaic religion, this image is ubiquitous--a universal symbol of the vertical bridge between the human and transhuman spheres.⁹

In Israelite religion, Mount Sinai is often regarded as the prototype of this image.¹⁰ Many scholars point to the temple as the Hebrew recreation of that holy mountain, yet the altar has equally compelling connections to the mountain motif.¹¹ In fact,

⁹ A concise survey of the image of the cosmic mountain in a broad array of world religions can be found in Mircea Eliade, Patterns in Comparative Religion, (New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1958), pp. 99-101. [Hereafter, Eliade (PCR)].

¹⁰ See David Noel Freedman, "Temple Without Hands", in Temples and High Places in Biblical Times, (Jerusalem: Hebrew Union College, 1981), p. 21. While Sinai is generally regarded as the prototype of the "cosmic mountain" image in the Hebrew religion, apocryphal and pseudepigraphical sources indicate that the idea of a holy mountain may have been prominent long before the Exodus, in the days of the Patriarchs. See Joshua Schwarz, "Jubilees, Bethel, and the Temple of Jacob", Hebrew Union College Annual 56(1985):75; also, J.A. Fitzmyer, The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I-A Commentary, (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), pp. 58-9, 106.

¹¹ In fact, the altar is widely regarded as the forerunner and precursor of the temple in ancient Israel. Harold W. Turner explains that "there are indications that men returned to particular altars or places of previous revelations, thus pointing to the development of permanent sanctuaries..." See Harold W. Turner, From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology of Places of Worship, (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1979), p. 92. See also, Haran, p. 17: Speaking of the gradual evolution

the altar was perceived as the very peak of God's sacred mountain.¹²

Beyond the obvious visual association suggested by the altar's elevated structure, there are numerous references in Hebrew literature to the altar as a type of the holy mountain. The most explicit examples are found in the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah.

In his haunting description of the temple that would one day grace the capital of a reunited Israel, Ezekiel specifically refers to the third level of the temple altar as, "the mountain of God" (Heb.: hahar'el, see Ezek. 43:15, MT). In the same verse, Ezekiel refers to the altar by a slightly different term, "ari'el". Several scholars maintain that this mysterious word is derived from the Akkadian "arallu", meaning "world mountain".¹³

The term "ari'el" leads us indirectly to another compelling

of Israel's temple cult, Haran explains, "Yet the admittance of these institutions to Israel took place only gradually, with the altar preceding the temple." In Schwarz, pp. 81-82, the author discusses Rabbinic traditions which "saw the altar of Jacob at Bethel as a prefiguration of the great system of temple worship that would be established in Jerusalem." (Emphasis added)

¹² See James Hastings, "Altar", in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1951), 1:145-147. I am indebted to Bruce Porter for pointing me to this source.

¹³ See Victor P. Hamilton, "Ariel," in Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, 2 Vols., R. Laird Harris, Ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), p. 70. Additional confirmation is given by Jacob Milgrom, "Altar," in Encyclopedia Judaica, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 2:763.

connection between altar and mountain, this time in the book of Isaiah. In a harrowing oracle of impending destruction, Isaiah refers to Jerusalem as "Ariel", the identical Hebrew word used by Ezekiel to designate the altar of the eschatological temple (MT, Isa. 29:1-2,7; cf. Ezek. 43:15-16). The image of Jerusalem as a holy mountain is found throughout the Old Testament.¹⁴ Thus, Isaiah seems to blend Jerusalem's sacred heights with the sacrificial functions of the altar. One scholar interpreted Isaiah's imagery in these terms, "Israel shall become under the judgment of God, an Ariel, an altar hearth, that is, the scene of a holocaust. It will not be an animal that is burned, but Israel herself will be the victim."¹⁵

A final link between the altar and the holy mountain is suggested by the Exodus account of a richly symbolic altar constructed by Moses. Preparatory to inducting the Israelites into the covenant pronounced by YHWH from the heights of Sinai, Moses "built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and put up twelve sacred pillars, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel." (NEB, Exo. 24:4). In imitation of the hosts of Israel gathered around the holy mountain, the altar, with its surrounding pillars, was an apparent reflection of Sinai itself. Since the Israelites were not worthy to ascend the actual slopes and stand in YHWH's presence, the altar became a substitute for God's mountain throne

¹⁴ The most explicit reference is found in Daniel 9:16.

¹⁵ Hamilton, p. 70.

around which they could safely gather to seal their covenant with Him.

Once a tenable connection between the altar and the holy mountain has been established, two related issues demand treatment. Brief reference has already been made to the first: the role of the altar/mountain as a channel of communication between the three cosmic levels (underworld, earth, and heaven). The second issue involves the ancient view of the holy mountain as the cosmogonic center or foundation of creation. Each of these issues will be taken up in turn.

2. The Altar as Cosmic Conduit

The prominence of a tripartite division in the Hebrew perspective on the universe is readily apparent to any student of Hebrew religion, architecture, or philosophy.¹⁶ In the realm of cosmology, this conception divided space into three discrete levels: 1. The netherworld, 2. The world of man, and 3. The heavens. It is within this context that the altar's role as a cosmic channel can be examined.

¹⁶ Irving Friedman, "The Sacred Space of Judaism", in *Parabola* 3(1):22. Surveying the writings of the Talmudic rabbis, as well as the works of Josephus, Friedman discusses the Temple of Solomon with its outer court, holy place, and Holy of Holies. The tripartite division of the cosmos into "ocean, land, and heaven", together with the Jewish perception of the human body as a progression "from feet, to chest, to head" are also mentioned.

The Hebrew altar adheres closely to a universal theme of sacred space treated by Mircea Eliade, "Every consecrated space represents an opening towards the beyond, towards the transcendent...the sacred space is the place where communication is possible between this world and the other world, from the heights or from the depths, the world of the gods or the world of the dead."¹⁷ Harold Turner adds this perspective, "This place where other realms are met is also indicated by various forms representing a link or connection between the human and transhuman spheres, and usually set in a vertical dimension as ladders, poles, and pillars, trees and hills."¹⁸ (Emphasis added)

The applicability of these ideas to the Old Testament altar is confirmed by a variety of sources. Instances where communication with the heavens is preceded by construction of an altar multiply endlessly in the Hebrew Bible. "This is nowhere more evident," Jacob Milgrom observes, "than in Solomon's dedicatory prayer for the Temple, when he proclaims that even in a foreign land Israel's armies or exiles need but turn to the Temple and their prayer will travel to God along a trajectory that passes through their land, city, Temple and then, at the altar, turns heavenward (I Kings 8:44,48; cf. 31,38)."¹⁹ (Emphasis added).

¹⁷ Eliade (SAS), pp: 107-8.

¹⁸ Turner, p. 24.

¹⁹ Milgrom, p. 764. In the same passage, Professor Milgrom adds this compelling insight, "It is significant that later Judaism carried the tradition that the air space above the altar

The idea of the altar as a mountain-like point of contact with the heavenly powers is clearly expressed in Ezekiel's eschatological altar.²⁰ Drawing on Ezekiel 43:13-27, Moshe Greenberg explains, "The altar is a large structure at least 10 cubits high consisting of three blocks, each smaller than the one below it."²¹ The use of this architectonic device to symbolize man's journey into heaven was widespread in the cultural and historical milieu that surrounded ancient Israel.²²

The role of the altar as a cosmic channel is also evident in

 was an extension of its sanctity."

²⁰ Blending Ezekiel's structural description with its associated imagery, Kurt Gallig explains, "Seen as a whole, the description is consistent and clear, so that one can sketch a picture of this altar. First comes the "bosom of the earth," the foundation bed (a Babylonian term) as a depression into which the altar block is placed, so that all that remains of it is a gutter. Then follow the three socles (stages), which become smaller toward the top. The two lower ones are called "enclosures," or "incasings"; this recalls the Babylonian term "cover" for the burnt brick of the outer face of the tower of Babel. The uppermost socle is called "ari'el", which one may associate with the Babylonian word "arallu" (underworld and mountain of the gods)." See Kurt Gallig, "Altar," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 4 Vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:98

²¹ Moshe Greenberg, "The Design and Themes of Ezekiel's Program of Restoration," Interpretation 38(Apr 1984):194.

²² In his typology of the temple in the ancient Near East, John Lundquist points to the Babylonian ziggurat as the classic expression of the fact that "temples in their architectonic orientation express the idea of a successive ascension toward heaven." See Proposition 6 in John Lundquist, "What is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall, H.B. Huffmon, Ed. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983), p. 211.

the design instructions given by YHWH to Moses for the wilderness tabernacle (Exo. 30:6; 40:5), as well as in the blueprint for Solomon's Temple (I Kings 6:19-22). In both cases, a "gold altar of incense" was placed directly before the veil that guarded the entrance to the Holy of Holies. Pointing to these references, Harold Camacho argues, "This would seem to imply that the altar of incense is very closely associated to the communication with God spoken of in connection with that inner room."²³ Pursuing a similar line of reasoning, B.F. Westcott asserts that the "altar of incense bore the same relation to the Holy of Holies as the altar of burnt offering to the Holy Place. It furnished in some sense the means of approach to it."²⁴ Placing an eloquent seal on these ideas, Jacob Milgrom explains, "The altar, then, is the earthly terminus of a divine funnel for man's communion with God."²⁵

While the relationship of the altar to the heavenly sphere is deeply rooted in Hebrew tradition, our discussion of the altar as a mediator between the cosmic levels remains incomplete without reference to the netherworld. This issue, however, fits more snugly into the second function of the altar as a type of the

²³ Harold S. Camacho, "The Altar of Incense in Hebrews 9:3-4," Andrews University Seminary Studies 24(spr 1986):9. In an early Judeo-Christian application of this concept, John the Revelator associated the smoke of the incense altar with the ascending prayers of the saints. (Rev. 8:3-4)

²⁴ B.F. Westcott, cited in Camacho, p. 9.

²⁵ Milgrom, p. 764.

cosmic mountain.

3. The Altar as Stone of Foundation

Fundamental to the "cosmic mountain" motif is the idea that the peak of the mountain emerged from the boiling waters of chaos as the first creation of God. In the geometry of creation, this emerging peak becomes the center of the cosmos.²⁶ Yet, this center is not to be understood simply in crude spatial terms. Pulsing with vital power, it is the sacred channel that ties man to the transhuman worlds above and below the mortal realm.

Comparing these popular notions from archaic religion to the Hebrew tradition, Eliade observes,

The point of intersection between the three cosmic zones, the temple or the sacred city constituted by consequence a 'center of the world', because it is through there that the axis of the Universe, the 'axis mundi' passes. The rock upon which the Temple of Jerusalem was built was considered as being the umbilicus terrae. (Emphasis added).²⁷

It is important to note, at this juncture, that the Jewish myth of creation introduces a slight variation to the image of the emerging cosmic mountain. As John Lundquist explains, "There is

²⁶ Mircea Eliade articulated this concept in these words, "Following these traditions, the "Center" is not only the summit of the cosmic mountain, whose peak is the highest in the world, but also, we might say, the "oldest": because it is the point where creation began." See Eliade (SAS), p. 110.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 108-9.

a Jewish tradition that God threw a stone into tehom [Hebrew term for the chaotic waters of creation], thus making it the keystone of the earth and the foundation of the temple."²⁸ Speaking of this stone, Rabbi ben Gurion reverently explains, "...it was called the foundation stone of the Earth, which is to say the Earth's umbilicus, because it is from there that the entire Earth unfurled."²⁹

These statements contain stunning implications for the altar as a cosmic symbol in Hebrew tradition. Those implications come into sharp focus in J. Jeremias's enthralling work, "Golgotha und der heilige Felsen". Here, the stone of foundation is cast as the primal altar:

At the Stone of Foundation, which stands at the exact center of the cosmos, the waters of Tehom were blocked off on the first day; it was upon this Stone that YHWH stood when he created the world...on this Stone Adam offered the first sacrifice; upon this Stone Cain and Abel offered their fateful sacrifice; from under this Stone the flood waters came and under this Stone the floodwaters receded; upon this Stone Noah's ark landed and on this Stone Noah offered the first sacrifice of the renewed cosmos; upon this Stone Abraham was circumcised and upon this Stone he consumed the mystic meal with Melchizedek; upon this Stone Isaac was bound for

²⁸ John Lundquist, "Temple Symbolism in Isaiah," in Isaiah and the Prophets, Monte S. Nyman, Ed. (Provo, Ut.: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), p. 45. Introducing a broad survey of hierocentric imagery from many cultures, Eliade reveals that "the navel of the world is always realized in the form of a stone and this stone represents the center of the world." Eliade (PCR), pp. 229-33.

²⁹ Rabbi ben Gurion, cited in Eliade (SAS), p. 111. Peter Schafer offers an excellent discussion of the cosmogonic significance of the "stone of foundation" in Rabbinic lore. See Peter Schafer, "Tempel und Schopfung," Kairos 16(2):125-128.

sacrifice; this Stone served as the "pillow" for Jacob in the ladder vision, that vision of a vertical center, a ladder connecting heaven and earth...³⁰ (Emphasis added)

Jeremias's research reveals a treasury of cosmic images that link the altar to the primordial foundation stone. Three of these images warrant elaboration. The first involves the role of the altar as a capstone over the waters of Tehom. It is this concept that completes the altar's function as a conduit between the three cosmic levels. Not only does the altar facilitate communication with the heavens, but it also affords contact with the mysterious forces of the underworld. Explaining that Babylonian myth recounts the building of that city on "bab-apsi, 'the door of Apsu-apsu' designating the waters of Chaos before creation," Mircea Eliade points to "the same tradition among the Hebrews: the high rock of the Temple of Jerusalem penetrated deeply into the tehom (Hebrew equivalent of apsu)."³¹ Thus, the primeval altar-stone achieved contact with the subterranean realm, as well with the powers of heaven.

The second image that demands comment concerns the experience of Noah at the Stone. Rabbinic tradition asserts that the Stone of Foundation was used as an altar to celebrate "the renewed cosmos". This claim brings insight into the Jewish interpretation

³⁰ J. Jeremias, "Golgotha und der heilige Felsen," Angelos 2(1926):74-128. Translated and summarized in J.Z. Smith, p. 116.

³¹ Eliade (SAS), p. 108.

of Noah's altar-building in Genesis 8:20. In Jewish thought, the altar appears as a cosmic symbol for the reenactment of the cosmogony. According to Irving Friedman, "Terrestrial space had to be purified by a flood which returned it to its beginning in the waters."³² The reemergence of the altar-stone at the subsiding of the floodwaters signaled a new creation. In this context, it is significant that Noah's sacrifice likewise brought a renewal of God's covenant relationship with man (Gen. 8:20-21; 9:8-9).

Finally, Jeremias's survey suggests a third image of the "axis mundi" in Hebrew tradition that is also tied directly to the altar. In his study on sacred architecture and symbolism, Eliade explains, "As one would expect, the "Axis Mundi" was imagined many times in the form of a pillar which held up Heaven."³³ It is interesting to note that Jacob set up a pillar (Heb.: *massebah*), after his vision of the heavenly ladder with its angelic traffic, to mark what he called "the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:17-18). That this and later pillars functioned as ritual altars is evident from Genesis 28:18 and 35:14 where Jacob pours oil and a drink offering "upon the top of it". Thus, the idea of the altar as a cosmic axis in Hebrew tradition finds direct support within the Old Testament text itself.

The concept of the altar as a cosmic center is further

³² Friedman, p. 21.

³³ Eliade (SAS), p. 109.

substantiated by Midrashic and Talmudic writings. The prayer rules set down in the Palestinian Talmud dictate,

Those who stand and pray outside the land of Israel should turn their faces toward the land of Israel...Those in the land of Israel towards Jerusalem...those in Jerusalem towards the Temple Mount...Those on the Temple Mount...towards the Holy of Holies...In this way all Israel prays towards one place.³⁴

The Midrash Tanhuma explains the rationale for this practice in terms of a sacred center in which the altar stone plays an integral role,

Just as the navel is found at the center of a human being, so the land of Israel is found at the center of the world...and it is the foundation of the world. Jerusalem is at the center of the land of Israel, the Temple is at the center of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the center of the Temple, the Ark is at the center of the Holy of Holies and the Foundation Stone, is in front of the Ark, which spot is the foundation of the world. (Emphasis added).³⁵

Emphasizing the cosmic significance of the altar in the Second Temple period, Bialik Lerner states, "For building the altar for the Second Temple, prophetic testimony was needed to determine the exact required location (Zev. 62a)."³⁶

The image of the altar as the cosmic center takes on geometric reality in Ezekiel's eschatological temple. As he accompanied

³⁴ John Wilkinson, "Orientation, Jewish and Christian," Palestine Excavation Quarterly 116(Ja-Je 1984), p. 19.

³⁵ Midrash Tanhuma, Kedoshim 10, quoted in J.Z. Smith, p. 112.

³⁶ Bialik Myron Lerner, "Altar," in Encyclopedia Judaica, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 2:767.

his angelic guide on a measuring tour of the temple precincts, Ezekiel apparently saw the altar at the precise center of the temple court.³⁷ This view of the altar carries so much weight in Jewish tradition that Menahem Haran cites a group of scholars who "assume that the site of the outer altar [in the Mosaic tabernacle] would be the exact centre of the eastern square, with the kapporet and ark opposite in the center of the western square."³⁸ If this balanced juxtaposition of ark and altar is valid, it suggests a functional parallel between the altar and the holiest object in all Israel - the Ark of the Covenant. This fascinating implication will be considered more fully in the next section.

4. The Altar as Symbol of the Divine Presence

By far the most powerful symbol connected with the altar is the image of that structure as the token and seat of God's presence in Israel. Citing an undergirding principle of sanctuary-building among the Semitic peoples, W. Robertson Smith explains, "...the rule of Semitic worship is that the artificial symbol can only be set up in a place already consecrated by tokens of the divine presence."³⁹ The specific approach of the Hebrews to this concept

³⁷ Jacob Milgrom, "The Temple Scroll," Biblical Archaeologist 41(Sept. 1978):114.

³⁸ Haran, p. 155. Among the scholars cited by Haran were "H. Holzinger, 'Exodus' (KHC, 1900), p. 133; also, Kennedy, DBiv. 657."

³⁹ W.R. Smith, p. 207.

is illuminated by Jacob Milgrom, "It is an assumption common to biblical tradition that a sanctuary is not fully consecrated-or is not divinely sanctioned-unless it has a tradition of a theophany upon its altar (I Kings 18:38; II Chron. 7:1), or that its altar is built on the site of one."⁴⁰ However, the altar did not simply "mark" the site of a theophany. In a very real sense, the altar was often seen as somehow containing God's presence. It was sometimes viewed as the actual abode of deity.

Frequent reference is made by scholars to the first altar established by Jacob at Bethel as an evidence of this phenomenon in Hebrew worship. Puzzling over the story of Jacob and the ladder in the Old Testament, Menahem Haran notes, "Deviating somewhat here from regular Biblical usage the text attaches the title bet'elohim, 'house of God', to the stone itself, regarding it as a kind of mysterious receptacle of divine powers, as a 'baitylos'."⁴¹

In an even more dramatic demonstration of this idea, Genesis 33:18-20 describes Jacob's construction of an altar at Shalom

⁴⁰ Milgrom, p. 764.

⁴¹ Haran, p. 52. Providing confirmation of this idea within the larger context of primitive religions, E.O. James affirms, "All these sacred objects were regarded as impregnated with divine life or as the abode of an indwelling divinity, often in the case of the menhir [sacred stone] used as an altar..." See E. O. James, The Tree of Life, An Archaeological Study, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), pp. 33-4.

which is given the very name of God.⁴²

Another clear expression of the concept is found in the words of YHWH himself (See Exo. 20:23-24). While proscribing the manufacture of His image in silver or gold, Israel's God commanded, "An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee." (vs. 24).

Theodor Obbink suggested still another evidence of this direct association between the altar and YHWH's presence in Hebrew worship. His argument revolves around the horns frequently found on the altars of Israel.

Speaking of this curious feature of the altar, Jacob Milgrom comments,

The most important feature of the bronze altar was its keranot or "horns". Refugees seeking asylum seized the altar horns. The altar was purified by daubing the blood of the haft'at, or "purification offering", on the altar horns (Exo. 30:12; Lev. 4:25-30). Horns were an essential element of all the altars in the Jerusalem Temple.⁴³

⁴² Additional examples of this curious phenomenon are found in Exodus 17:15 and Judges 6:24. In the former instance Moses built an altar to commemorate Israel's defeat of the Amalekites, calling it "Jehovah-nissi" or "the Lord is my banner." On a much later occasion, Gideon erected an altar which he named, "Jehovah-shalom," meaning, "the Lord is peace."

⁴³ Milgrom, p. 762.

Mervyn Fowler, in a recent study of Israelite incense altars, describes the horn motif as symbolic of strength, political power, and kingship.⁴⁴ Stanley Cook observes, "Horns were a symbol of strength, superhuman power, and deity. As emblems of divine rank they are found on gods, genii, and great kings; as many as four pairs of horns indicating special preeminence."⁴⁵

Pointing to this common depiction of gods with horns in the religious art of Israel's neighbors, Obbink argues, "Thus the altar was the symbol of the god; since the god was horned, therefore the altar too had to be horned."⁴⁶ This line of reasoning is strengthened by Psalm 18:2, in which YHWH is praised by the psalmist as "the horn of my salvation".⁴⁷ Additional support may be found in a number of recent studies that depict the horned

⁴⁴ Mervyn D. Fowler, "Excavated Incense Burners: A Case for Identifying a Site as Sacred?", Palestine Excavation Quarterly 117(Ja-Je 1985):27.

⁴⁵ Stanley A. Cook, The Religion of Ancient Palestine in the Second Millenium B.C., (London: A. Constable, 1908), p. 29.

⁴⁶ H. Th. Obbink, "The Horns of the Altar in the Semitic World, Especially in Jahwism," Journal of Biblical Literature 56:47.

⁴⁷ In his insightful work on Biblical symbolism, Othmar Keel refers to this passage in connection with the asylum function of the altar in ancient Israel (Exo. 21:13-14; cf. I Kings 1:50-53; 2:28). By grasping the horns of the altar, a fugitive (deliberate murderers excepted) could claim the personal protection of YHWH. See Othmar Keel, The Symbolism of the Biblical World, (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 146.

calf as a popular Israelite symbol for YHWH.⁴⁸

In light of this intimate relationship between the altar and the person of YHWH in early Hebrew worship, it is not surprising that extreme care was exercised in preserving the altar's sanctity. This was especially true in the tabernacle and temple cultus.

In the divine instructions for altar-building that follow the Decalogue, YHWH makes provision for altars of earth and stone; yet, in the latter case the command was "...thou shalt not build it of hewn stone for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it." (Exo. 20:25). Referring to this proscription, Kurt Galling believes that, "this could be directed against the luxury of square stones; but the idea that stone used in worship should not lose its special numinous quality by damaging hewing is probably also the basis of this practice." (Emphasis added)⁴⁹

This explanation meshes well with the idea that the altar was the

⁴⁸ See Hans-Joachim Kraus, Worship in Israel, (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1966), pp. 149-150. Additional material in this vein may be found in H. Th. Obbink, "Jahwebilder," Zeitschrift alttestamentlicher Wissenschaft 47(1929); O. Eissfeldt, "Lade und Stierbild," ZAW 57(1940/41):190ff.; also, L. Malten, "Der Stier in Kult und mythischen Bild," JDAI 43(1928):90ff.

⁴⁹ Galling, p. 97. While much has been made of the assertion that iron implements would desecrate a stone altar because of their association with the metal of which weapons of war were fashioned, a much more significant rationale has been completely ignored. Since the altar was symbolic of the primordial "stone of foundation", it represented a pristine creation of YHWH himself. The use of man-made tools in the erection of an altar would have subverted this sublime symbolism, making the altar the handiwork of man instead.

abode of divine powers.

It is also significant that steps for Israelite altars were expressly forbidden: "Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon." (Exo 20:26). In a later revelation concerning the sons of Aaron who would officiate at the altar in the wilderness tabernacle, YHWH reinforced this precaution by mandating "linen breeches to cover their nakedness...that they bear not iniquity and die." (Exo. 28:42-43).

A final example of Israel's reverential attitude toward the altar is highlighted by Moshe Greenberg in his study of Ezekiel's eschatological vision. Greenberg emphasizes that "only descendants of Zadok, the hereditary priesthood of the Solomonic Temple, were to continue in the privilege of altar service."⁵⁰ Expounding on this strict separation within the house of Levi, Menahem Haran explains that "the Levites are distinguished from the priests, the sons of Zadok, who 'come near to Yahweh to serve him' and are

⁵⁰ Greenberg, pp. 195-6. Beyond this exclusive genealogical barrier, the extreme sanctity of the altar is further attested by the fact that even these elite Zadokites were forbidden access to the altar for two weeks should they incur corpse impurity from the body of an immediate family member (See Ezek. 44:25-27). If the impurity were incurred outside the immediate family circle, no provision is made at all for the priest's return to the temple altar.

called 'the keepers of the guard of the altar'...⁵¹

In spite of all the evidence cited above with regard to the altar's sanctity, there was another object that commanded even greater awe. The circumspection shown by the Israelites in their treatment of the altar was exceeded by their reverence for the Ark of the Covenant. Interestingly, it can be argued that the Ark itself was a kind of altar.

Unlike the outer altar of the tabernacle and temples of Israel that could be served by any ritually-clean priest, the inner incense altar and the Ark of the Covenant could be approached by only one man—the Aaronic high priest (Exo. 30:1-10). Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to enter the Holy of Holies and sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial animal on the "mercy seat" (Lev. 16:1-15).⁵² Beyond this sacrificial

⁵¹ Haran, p. 60. The direct connection between the altar and the person of YHWH is underscored by the story of Korah's blasphemy. The censers used by Korah and his company came into contact with the altar and immediately became holy like the altar itself; henceforth, this holiness could not be removed. Consequently, the censers were hammered into "sheets as plating for the altar." (See Num. 17:3).

⁵² That this ritual act of sprinkling blood on the "mercy seat" actually had a sacrificial, atoning function is confirmed by both the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Old Testament. The Hebrew word for this cherub-bedecked cover is "kapporeth", which apparently suggests a "seat of atonement". The Greek correspondent of this Hebrew word is given as "hilasterion" in the Septuagint. The etymology of this term was succinctly treated by William Barclay, "All Greek nouns which end in -erion mean "the place where something is done." "Dikasterion" means the place where "dike", justice is done, and therefore a law court...Therefore "hilasterion" can certainly mean the place where "hilasmos,"

function, the Ark shared other features with the altars of Israel. Like the altar, the Ark was conceived of as the throne of God (Lev. 16:2; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 37:16).⁵³ In a more abstract sense, both Ark and altar were viewed as sacrosanct repositories of the divine presence.⁵⁴ Finally, both Ark and altar functioned as divine witnesses to the covenants of men (Gen. 31:44-54; cf. Exo. 40:3).

5. The Altar as Table of Communion and Covenant

The word most often translated as "altar" in English versions,

expiation, is done and made." See William Barclay, The Mind of St. Paul, (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), pp. 87-8. It is significant that the altar once again plays an integral part in this holiest of all Israelite ceremonies. It was the smoking incense from the golden altar at the entrance to the Holy of Holies that flowed over the "seat of atonement" and shielded the high priest from the lethal power of YHWH's presence in the chamber. Thus, the altar provided the means of approach to the divine throne. See Camacho, p. 11; also, Julian Morgenstern, "The Fire Upon the Altar Once Again," Encounter 26(Spr 1965):217, 220.

⁵³ Gustaf Dalman summarized his extensive research with the observation that the Semitic altar is "the place where deity is present...the throne of deity. Altar and throne often are the very same. The altar itself is a bethel." Cited in Obbink, p. 47.

⁵⁴ Haran, pp. 201, 246. Interpreting II Samuel 7:6-7, Professor Haran underscores the explicit connection between the Ark and the personal presence of YHWH in Jewish tradition. Haran expands on this concept by examining the two popular approaches to the question of the Ark's nature and function. One scholarly school holds that the Ark was viewed primarily as a container of the divine presence (which radiated from the holy materials within it), while a "second school of thought holds that the ark was conceived of as the seat of God, as a sort of empty throne, 'Thron.'" Both of these views demonstrate the close functional relationship between the Ark and the Hebrew altar.

of the Old Testament is "mizbeah", which suggests a place of slaughtering. Undoubtedly, it is this image that first comes to mind in any discussion of the altar. The rationale behind animal sacrifice is fundamentally the same among archaic religions. As Andrew Jukes expressed it, "The altar is 'the table of the Lord': whatever was put upon it was 'the food of God.' The fire from heaven, emblem of God's holiness, consumes the offering; and it all ascends as sweet incense before Him."⁵⁵ Jacob Milgrom argues, however, that Israel was different in this regard,

Though temple services clearly originate in the notion of caring for and feeding the resident god, there is absolutely no trace of this notion in Israel. Only rare linguistic fossils survive, e.g., the sacrifices are called "God's food" (Lev. 22:25) and a "pleasing odor to the Lord" (Lev. 1:17). The altar is also called "the Lord's table" (Ezek. 41:22; 44:16; Mal. 1:7,12), but only in later texts, never in the early ones. Perhaps this is a result of the propaganda war fought in Israel's early history against the widespread pagan notion that the altar was the banquet table of the god; only a later generation could feel free to indulge in such a pagan metaphor.⁵⁶

If the Israelites did not literally view the altar as "God's table", what then was the meaning of their complex sacrifice ritual? Once again the answer seems to lie within the realm of symbolism, specifically the symbolism of blood in Hebrew tradition.

⁵⁵ Andrew Jukes, cited in G. A. Gaskell, Dictionary of All Scriptures and Myths, (New York: The Julian Press, 1960), p. 41.

⁵⁶ Milgrom, p. 763.

Beyond its practical function as a raised support for the sacrificial offering, the altar assumed a symbolic dimension as the table of mystical communion, atonement, and covenant between Israel and her God.⁵⁷ Blood, or its ritual equivalent, was the medium of exchange in this process of atonement.⁵⁸ Stressing the explicit scriptural connection between blood and life (see Gen. 9:4; Deut. 12:12), W. Robertson Smith asserts that this "conception of atonement, as the creation of a life-bond between the worshipper

⁵⁷ W. R. Smith, p. 265. Only within the context of ancient Semitic culture can the sublime implications of this aspect of altar worship be fully appreciated, "The ethical significance which thus appertains to the sacrificial meal, viewed as a social act, received particular emphasis from certain ancient customs and ideas connected with eating and drinking. According to antique ideas, those who eat and drink together are by this very act tied to one another by a bond of friendship and mutual obligation. Hence when we find that in ancient religions all the ordinary functions of worship are summed up in the sacrificial meal, and that the ordinary intercourse between gods and men has no other form, we are to remember that the act of eating and drinking together is the solemn and stated expression of the fact that all who share the meal are brethren, and that the duties of friendship and brotherhood are implicitly acknowledged in their common act. By admitting man to his table the god admits him to his friendship; but this favour is extended to no man in his mere private capacity; he is received as one of a community, to eat and drink along with his fellows, and in the same measure as the act of worship cements the bond between him and his god, it cements also the bond between him and his brethren in the common faith."

⁵⁸ While some Israelite sacrifices did not involve the actual blood of an animal, the substance of these offerings came from the basic, life-sustaining elements of the Hebrew diet. Citing Micah 6:7 and Leviticus 2:1, W. R. Smith explained, "Among the Hebrew offerings from the vegetable kingdom, meal, wine, and oil take the chief place, and these were also the chief vegetable constituents of man's daily food." See W. R. Smith, p. 219. The logic in the use of wine and oil as ritual substitutes for blood is clear. Introducing this argument, Smith asserts that "the libation of wine is in some sense an imitation of, and a surrogate for, the primitive blood-offering." The reason for this seems to lie in the concept of wine as "the blood of the grape." The same is true of oil, which represents the blood of the olive.

and his god, appears in the most primitive type of Semitic sacrifices, and that traces of it can still be found in many parts of the later ritual."⁵⁹

While Israel's sacrificial cult grew more complex with the introduction of the Mosaic law following the Exodus, the altar maintained its fundamental character for many centuries as the symbolic "table of reconciliation" between God and man. Lerner affirms, "The altar as a symbol of atonement recurs again and again in rabbinic literature (Tosef., BK 7:6)."⁶⁰ It is within this sacred context of God's covenant relationship with Israel that the next symbol can be best understood.

6. The Altar as a Symbol of Covenant Man

In Jewish tradition, the symbolic relationship between the altar and man begins with Adam himself. Bialik Lerner reveals, "According to one aggadic opinion, Adam was formed from earth taken from the site of the altar."⁶¹ The most interesting textual examples of this facet of altar symbolism are found in Joshua 4

⁵⁹ W. R. Smith, p. 348.

⁶⁰ Lerner, p. 770. In the eyes of Rabbi Johanan b. Zakkai, this facet of the altar's symbolism explained the prohibition in Exodus 20:25 against the use of tools in altar-building. The venerable rabbi saw the iron of the tools as a reflection of the sword, the bringer of catastrophe. Thus, the symbolism of the tool was directly antithetical to the idea of the altar as a place of atonement.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 770.

and I Kings 18. The former chapter involves a memorial altar, the latter a sacrificial one.

Joshua 4 records the Israelites' miraculous transit of the Jordan River as "the waters of Jordan were cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD." (vs. 7). After the people had reached safety on the west bank, Joshua was commanded by YHWH to send twelve men (one from each tribe) back into the riverbed. While the text is somewhat ambiguous about what happened next, it is apparent that at least one altar of twelve stones was erected by the Israelites at Gilgal to commemorate the rivercrossing. As he instructed the tribal representatives, Joshua explained, "...these stones shall be for a memorial unto the children of Israel forever." (vs. 7).

In I Kings 18 is found the enthralling tale of Elijah's encounter with the priests of Baal. Following the abortive and humiliating attempt by Baal's priests to call down the powers of heaven, Elijah began his own preparations by repairing "the altar of the LORD that was broken down. And Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of Jacob...and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD." (vs. 30-32). The ensuing fireworks from YHWH descended upon an altar that clearly symbolized the people of Israel.⁶²

⁶² Kurt Gallig views this story as an explicit analogue to the account of Moses' Sinaitic altar, with its twelve pillars representing the tribes of Israel (Exo. 24:4). See Gallig,

Also relevant to this discussion is the Israelite practice of erecting memorial pillars to the dead. The most striking instance is supplied by II Samuel 18. Lacking an heir, Absalom feared that his name would soon be forgotten. Consequently, "The pillar in the King's Vale had been set up by Absalom during his lifetime, for he said, 'I have no son to carry on my name.' He had named the pillar after himself; and to this day it is called Absalom's Monument." (NEB, II Sam. 18:18). At the death of his beloved Rachel, Jacob "set a pillar upon her grave." (Gen. 35:20). Combining such references with archaeological finds, W.F. Albright argued strenuously for the existence of an Israelite hero-worship cult involving the kind of memorial stelae described above.⁶³ This issue is still the object of vigorous discussion in scholarly circles.⁶⁴

7. The Altar as a Source of Life, Prosperity, and Rebirth

p. 97.

⁶³ W. F. Albright, "The High Place in Ancient Palestine," Vetus Testamentum, supplement IV, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1957), p. 252.

⁶⁴ While many of Albright's ideas have been refuted by W. Boyd Barrick, the latter admits that II Samuel 18:18 offers "undeniable evidence for the Israelite practice of commemorating deceased persons with memorial pillars." See W. Boyd Barrick, "The Funerary Character of 'High Places' in Ancient Palestine: A Reassessment," Vetus Testamentum 25(July 1975):591-2.

A final aspect of the altar's symbolism that warrants careful consideration is the image of the altar as the wellspring of life and wellbeing. This image is, at least in part, the result of a conceptual blending of the altar with another popular symbol—the tree of life. In his landmark work on the tree of life, E.O. James traced the stylistic evolution of this symbol in Semitic worship,

So potent was the sacred tree that in becoming the centre of a cultus its powers were manifested in its branches and foliage and extended to groves and plantations, while the trunk of the leafless tree developed into a sacred pole or post familiar in the form of 'asherahs' in Semitic sanctuaries, frequently in association with sacred pillars. (Emphasis added)⁶⁵

James identifies the altar-stone set up by Jacob in Genesis 28:18 as a clear reflection of the primeval tree of life.⁶⁶

This Jewish conception of the altar as a source of life assumes another dimension through the prophetic traditions regarding the "waters of life". A.J. Wensinck has uncovered the deeply rooted notion in Jewish and Muslim tradition that Jerusalem is "the origin of all sweet waters on the earth."⁶⁷ With a prophetic eye toward the glorious coming of the Lord, Zechariah declared that "living waters shall go out from Jerusalem." (Zech.14:8).

⁶⁵ James, p. 32.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

⁶⁷ A.J. Wensinck, cited in Lundquist (TSII), p. 51.

In the eschatological context introduced by this statement of Zechariah, the image of "living waters" is inextricably tied to the temple. Perhaps the most dramatic treatment of this theme is found in Ezekiel 47:1-12. Moshe Greenberg points out that "this vision specifically connects Temple and fertility and singles out for transformation the most barren tract of land—the wilderness of Judah—and the body of water most inhospitable to life, the Dead Sea, a dramatic exhibition of God's beneficent presence in the temple."⁶⁸

The role of the altar in this scenario is founded on the Jewish myth of the Stone of Foundation. Citing Mishnaic tradition, Jacob Neusner explains that the prophesied waters of life will flow from the Holy of Holies.⁶⁹ The prototype of the altar, the "eben shetiyya" or stone of foundation, is the specific source of the waters of life within the Holy of Holies.⁷⁰ As the primordial cap placed by God over the waters of chaos, the foundation stone

⁶⁸ Greenberg, p. 199.

⁶⁹ Jacob Neusner, Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishna, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 152-3. I am indebted to Bruce Porter for pointing me to this source.

⁷⁰ Henri Frankfort offers this transcultural view of the primordial mound, providing a context for understanding the role of the "even shetiyya" in Jewish thought, "Everywhere the site of creation, the first land to emerge from chaos was thought to have been charged with vital power..." See Henri Frankfort, Kingship and the Gods, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 151-2. (I am grateful to Dr. Hugh Nibley for making me aware of this source.) The image of the stone of foundation as the fountain of living waters fits comfortably into this context.

was also seen in Rabbinic tradition as the wellspring of the vivifying, -fructifying waters of life.⁷¹ This tradition of the foundation stone may help to explain the tremendous cosmic significance attached by the Jews to the altar-service of the temple. Jonathan Smith concludes,

The Temple and its ritual serve as the cosmic pillars or the "sacred pole" supporting the world. If its service is interrupted or broken, if an error is made, then the world, the blessing, the fertility, indeed all of creation that flows from the Center, will likewise be disrupted."⁷²

CONCLUSION.

The Hebrew altar, a deceptively simple instrument of worship, bears witness to the profound implications of the ritual acts of man. Whether in the form of a single large stone or a heap of smaller stones, the establishment of an altar cast a profusion of shadows on the hearts and minds of these ancient people.

The altar was the holy mountain, recreated in miniature, as

⁷¹ Peter Schafer crafted an articulate summary of this concept, explaining that the rabbis regarded the cultic function of the "even shetiyya" as consisting in, "einerseits die Urflut zuruckzuhalten und daran zu hindern, die Welt zu zerstoren, andererseits aber auch durch seine Verbindung mit der Urflut das rechte MaB der Feuchtigkeit und Bewasserung der Erde zu ermöglichen. Dies bedeutet, daB sowohl die Entstehung als auch die Erhaltung der Welt vom Grundstein (ebhen schetiyya) und dem Vollzug des Kultes am bzw. durch den Grundstein abhangig ist." See Schafer, pp. 127-8.

⁷² J.Z. Smith, p. 118.

the quintessential meeting place of God and man. Rooted firmly in the earth yet reaching up into the heavens, the altar was a marvelous conduit between the cosmic levels. A symbol of the primordial stone cast by God into the foaming waters of creation, the altar reminded Israel that YHWH brought order out of chaos.

As the physical receptacle of divine powers, the altar whispered not only of God's transcendence but also of His imminence. The altar was a place of contrition and atonement, the "table of YHWH", where a humbled Israel sought renewal of fellowship and blessing. Strong, stable, and built up unto the Lord, the altar was a symbol of His covenant people. Finally, the altar harked back to the primeval tree of life and the stone of foundation, symbolizing the fountainhead of God's vital power.

In each of these roles, the altar touched the deepest chords in the heart of Israel. The altar reminded her of her beginnings and of the God who chose her as His own.

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