Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch

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to be available for aliens along with landowners' families, slaves, hirelings and animals (Lev 25:6; cf. Ex 23:11, where it is to be given to the poor generally and then the wild animals).

Thus Israelite law made special provision for resident aliens, along with orphans and widows, to safeguard their more vulnerable socioeconomic condition. Leviticus 19:34 takes the principle of Leviticus 19:18, to love one's neighbor as oneself, and extends it to the alien, specifying that the "alien [gēr] sojourning [gūr] with you" was to be treated just as the native-born (‘ezrah):

"You must love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am Yahweh your God!" Deuteronomy 10:18-19 then takes this concern to a profound theological level by identifying Yahweh as one who loves aliens by giving them food and clothing. Indeed, since Yahweh himself loves aliens, the Israelites were also to love them, remembering that they had been aliens in the land of Egypt. Thus loving aliens becomes a type of imitatio Dei—realizing our nature as being created in the *image of a loving God.

See also ISRAELITES; NATIONS OF CANAAN; ORPHAN; SABBATH, SABBATICAL YEAR, JUBILEE; SLAVE, SLAVERY, WIDOW.


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ALIENATION. See SIN, GUILT.

ALPHABET. See WRITING.

ALTAR OF INCENSE. See TABERNACLE.

ALTARS

Altars appear both in the narratives and cultic codes of the Pentateuch. Generally speaking, any place at which *sacrifices or offerings are made to a deity may be called an altar. The Hebrew equivalent, miṣbāḥ, derives from a verb that denotes the slaughter of animals or the offering of blood sacrifices, signifying the integral connection between the site and its function. The term is extended in the Pentateuch to include an edifice (crude or elaborate) on which any kind of offering is made. Because altars constitute central elements of the sacrificial cult, much of the priestly legislation in the Pentateuch is concerned with regulating activities associated with them. Within the narrative portions of the Pentateuch, altars assume a significance beyond marking places of sacrifice and serve as memorials and shrines. They may also acquire a metaphorical sense and appear at key points to mark transitions in social status or in human/divine relationships.

1. Types of Altars
2. Altars and Sacrifice
3. The Symbolic Significance of Altars

1. Types of Altars.

The altars mentioned in the Pentateuch may be divided into two categories: open-air altars and altars connected to the *tabernacle. Open-air altars stand alone, apart from other structures. Various individuals construct them throughout the Pentateuch as impromptu places of sacrifice and worship. *Noah builds an altar and offers sacrifice upon disembarking from the ark (Gen 8:20-22). *Abram constructs a series of altars in the land of Canaan, at Moreh (Gen 12:7; cf. Gen 22:2), between Bethel and Ai (Gen 12:8; cf. Gen 13:3-4) and at Mamre in the vicinity of Hebron (Gen 13:18). *Isaac and *Jacob follow suit and erect altars at Beer-sheba (Gen 26:25), Shechem (Gen 33:20) and Bethel (Gen 35:1-3, 7). *Moses

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also builds altars, one to mark Israel’s victory over the Amalekites (Ex 17:14-16) and another to ratify the *covenant at Sinai (Ex 24:4-8). In thematic counterpoint, *Balaam repeatedly directs that seven altars be constructed for the sacrifice of burnt offerings as requisites for the reception of divine oracles (Num 23:4-7a, 13-18a; 23:27—24:3). Taken together these instances reveal that a solitary altar could be constructed either to provide a location for a particular sacrificial act or to establish a permanent site of worship (cf. 1 Sam 14:33-35; 1 Kings 18:23-38).

The open-air altars mentioned in the Pentateuch seem generally to have been constructed from earth and stone and have much in common with those constructed throughout Syria and Palestine. Earthen altars are in evidence at Mari, and altars carved or fashioned from stone are widely attested (although most of these seem to have been located within temple enclosures). Altars at Megiddo, Hazor, Arad and Beer-sheba represent some of the better-known examples. An Iron I cultic site on Mount Ebal has been associated with the altar that Joshua constructed (Deut 27:1-9; Josh 8:30-35), but the identification has been disputed.

A series of three laws dictates how earthen and stone altars are to be constructed (Ex 20:24-26). The first law declares that altars made simply of earth may be constructed anywhere sacrifices are offered and Yahweh’s name is invoked (Ex 20:24). The second authorizes altars of stone but stipulates that the stones may not be cut by any implement, explaining that such a practice would profane the altar (Ex 20:25). The rationale behind the practice is not clear, although the context suggests a concern to differentiate the stone altars of Israel from those of the surrounding nations. The proscription against altar steps (Ex 20:26) may express a similar concern. The rationale, “that your nakedness not be exposed,” may intend to thwart any connection between sexuality and sacrifice, an association common in Canaanite cults (cf. Deut 12:27).

The altars associated with the tabernacle display a much different character. Instead of stone or earth, these altars are carefully crafted out of wood and metal. Instructions for the tabernacle include directions that an altar for burnt offerings be constructed of acacia with bronze overlay and placed in the outer courtyard of the complex (Ex 27:1-8; 40:6-7). Also included are directions for a second, smaller altar that is to be fashioned out of acacia, but with gold overlay. Set inside the tent on the tabernacle's central axis, it was located in front of the curtain that marks off the most holy place where the ark of the covenant was located (Ex 30:1-10). Both the metals and placement of the two altars symbolized the gradation of sacred space that characterized the tabernacle complex. The sacrificial altar, associated with *blood and death, was made of a less precious metal and placed outside the tent, well out of view of the ark. The incense altar was covered with pure gold. It sent up a fragrant cloud that permeated the tent, and it was strategically placed to mark the transference of items from the courtyard into the holy place.

Unlike the open-air altars constructed elsewhere in the Pentateuch, the altars for burnt offering and incense were portable. Poles could be inserted into rings attached on opposite sides, ensuring that both could be quickly and easily transported (Ex 27:7; 30:4-5; 38:5-7; cf. Num 4:5-15). Those ministering before these altars also differed from those who served at open-air altars. Whereas ministry at the latter was undertaken by a variety of individuals, often on an occasional basis, ministry at the altars of the tabernacle was restricted to *Aaron and his sons (Num 18:1-7) and involved regular as well as occasional sacrifices (Ex 29:38-42). Because the offerings presented on these altars ascended to Yahweh, the altars themselves represented the unifying center of Israel’s religious and communal life.

Horns extended from the four corners of the bronze altar and incense altar. The purpose of the “horns of the altar” remains unclear, although the feature is common on Canaanite altars, and horns are present on a large sandstone block altar discovered at Beer-sheba. Whatever their function, the protuberances marked the extremities of the altar. Dabbing the blood of the sin offering on the horns purified the entire altar, just as dabbing blood on the earlobes, thumbs and big toes of the *priests purified the entire person (Lev 4:4, 7; 8:14-15, 22-24; cf. Ex 30:10). Grasping the horns of the altar provided sanctuary for fugitives, probably because the individual doing so participated in the *holiness of the altar and thus was not to be killed (Ex 29:37; compare, however, Ex 21:14; 1 Kings 1:49-53; 2:28-31).
2. Altars and Sacrifice.

Because they represented the locus of interaction between Israel and Yahweh, the altars of the tabernacle constituted the symbolic center of the priestly cult, and activity connected with them was strictly regulated. Only Aaron or his descendants were to approach these altars with offerings and then only in a state of ritual cleanliness. In addition, any of a number of physical abnormalities could disqualify a prospective priest (Lev 21:16-23). Offerings presented on the bronze altar followed a prescribed set of protocols. Aaron (and by extension those who would serve as high priest) wore an elaborate set of vestments, comprising an ephod of rich colors, a breastplate with precious stones (containing the Urim and Thummim), a blue embroidered robe, a turban with a blue cord and gold rosette, and a fringed tunic (Ex 28:1-39; see Priestly Clothing). Aaron’s sons (the priests) also wore special garb, consisting of tunics, sashes, headaddresses and linen undergarments (Ex 28:40-43).

Rituals for the various blood sacrifices followed prescribed rules and sequences. As was the case with priests, animals displaying physical abnormalities could not approach the altar (Lev 1:3; 3:1; 4:3; 5:15; 22:21-25; cf. Ex 30:9). Those bringing the sacrifice (lay or priest) slaughtered the animal, skinned it and cut it in pieces. The priest and his attendants tended the altar fire and burned designated portions, arranging them on the altar after the entrails and legs had been washed (Lev 1:1-9). In all forms of blood sacrifice, the blood of the victim, which had been collected in basins, was dashed against the sides of the altar (Lev 1:5; 3:2; 7:2; 17:6), although in the case of the purification offering the blood was applied only to the horns, with the remainder poured at the base of the altar (Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 34). After the sacrificial portion had been burned, the priest removed the ashes from the altar and dumped them in a ritually clean area (Lev 6:8-11 [MT 6:1-4]).

The laws defining the proper approach and procedures before the tabernacle altars were of the utmost importance. The seriousness of the laws is underscored throughout priestly literature by warnings that those who breach sacrificial protocols are subject to death (Ex 28:43; Lev 8:35; 16:1-5; Num 4:17-19; cf. Lev 10:1-7; see Nadab and Abihu). The warnings were deemed necessary in order to preserve the sanctity of the altars and their environs. The altars marked the intersection of the mystical and the material, a site where transitions and transactions could take place between the ordinary world of human experience and the holy sphere that marked the divine world. The incense altar and the altar for burnt offerings possessed an intense degree of holiness; both were designated “most holy” (Ex 30:10; 40:10).

The holiness of the altars was imparted through rituals of consecration. The altar for burnt offerings received particular attention and was anointed with a unique fragrant oil that was also used to anoint Aaron and his sons during their investiture as priests (Ex 30:22-33; 40:9-15). The application of oil and blood both to the altar and to Aaron, his sons and the vestments signified an integral and exclusive connection between the altar and those who were to attend it (Lev 8:10-30). Once the altar had been consecrated, a perpetual fire was kept burning on it, symbolizing the abiding and unchanging holiness that infused it (Lev 6:12-13 [MT 6:5-6]).

The holiness possessed by the altars could be communicated to anything that came into contact with them; whoever or whatever touched the altar became holy as well (Ex 29:35-37). This heightened degree of holiness, however, also made the altars particularly vulnerable to defilement. Contact with unclean objects or individuals or the presentation of unsuitable or inappropriate offerings could profane the altars, that is, rob them of their resident holiness. With the loss of holiness, they could not continue as portals to the sphere of the holy and thus were no longer suitable places for offerings to Yahweh. For this reason, one of the most important priestly tasks involved maintaining and guarding the boundaries around the altars.

Particular rituals were undertaken to purify the altar of any uncleanness that may have become attached to it. Blood from the sin offering, the sacrifice specifically devoted to purifying people and objects from inadvertent or prolonged uncleanness, was applied to the altar as well, cleansing it from any defilement that may have accrued from the sacrificial event. Part of the purification ritual for those who had become ritually unclean involved sprinkling blood seven times before the curtain of the sanctuary, dabbing blood on the horns of the incense altar (located in the holy place) and pouring the rest of the blood at the base of the altar of burnt offerings outside the tent of meeting (Lev 4:1—
5:13). The Day of *Atonement (Lev 16:1-34) also aimed at purifying the altars as well as the nation. During the day a goat was slaughtered and its blood was brought first into the holy place. The priest sprinkled its blood on and before the mercy seat, which purified the sanctuary of uncleanliness. The priest then brought blood back out to the sacrificial altar and applied its blood, along with the blood of a bull slaughtered earlier, to the horns of the altar. He concluded by sprinkling blood on the altar seven times, and with this action the purification of the altar was completed (Lev 16:16-19).

3. The Symbolic Significance of Altars.
Because they marked the intersection of existential boundaries, altars could assume a significance beyond their role as a place of sacrifice. The Pentateuch contains many references to the construction of altars that functioned more as memorials and shrines. The phrase “X built an altar there to Yahweh” occurs frequently, generally with no report that sacrifices were offered on it. Noah constructed an altar to Yahweh after the *flood and offered sacrifice on it as an act of thanksgiving and worship (Gen 8:20). However, there is no mention of sacrifice in the stories that report the construction of altars at Moreh (Gen 12:7), Mamre (Gen 13:18), Beer-sheba (Gen 26:25), Shechem (Gen 33:20) and at sites in the environs of Bethel (Gen 12:8; 35:7). Instead, the stories intimate that the altars were constructed for various purposes. Abram constructed the altars at Moreh and Mamre to confirm the divine blessings of descendants and land (Gen 12:7; 13:18). Isaac and Jacob built altars to mark the sites of theophanies (Gen 26:25; 35:7), and the stories connected with the events emphasize the transmission of the patriarchal *promises and blessings. Jacob erected an altar in the field of Hamor to establish possession of a plot of ground in Canaan (Gen 33:20), thereby marking his claim to it. Similarly, Moses commemorated Israel’s victory over the Amalekites by constructing an altar (Ex 17:15). These instances reveal that altars functioned in diverse ways beyond their association with sacrifice: as reminders of divine promises, claims to property, and memorials of divine encounters and great events.

Altars served as meeting places between God and human beings. The stories associated with the construction of altars display etiological concerns that demonstrate the continuing relevance of the sites as places of worship. (Explanations of a sanctuary’s origins would be of particular interest to those who worshiped there.) Bethel and its environs receive particular attention in the biblical text. Abram, after traveling the length of the Promised Land, returned to the altar between Bethel and Ai and called on the name of Yahweh there (Gen 13:3-4). Likewise, Yahweh commanded Jacob to return to Bethel, the site of an earlier theophany, and to erect an altar there (Gen 35:1). Jacob did so, and another theophany soon followed (Gen 35:5-15). Bethel would later become one of the most prominent shrines in Israel and, after the division of the Israelite kingdom, the primary sanctuary of the northern kingdom (cf. Amos 7:13).

Names ascribed to altars reinforced their role as memorials and places of worship. The altar at Bethel was given the name El-Bethel (“the God of Bethel”), that near Shechem was called El-Elohe-Israel (“God, the God of Israel”), and the altar built to commemorate the victory over the Amalekites was named Yahweh-Nissi (a title of uncertain meaning, often translated “Yahweh is my banner”). The divine elements in each of these names forged a conceptual link between the deity and the altar, intimating that the site itself was permeated with the holy.

Altars also function as metaphors in the narrative literature of the Pentateuch. Their significance as sites of transference and transformation make them powerful symbols for communicating cosmic and social transition. Such is the case with Noah, whose construction of an altar and offering of sacrifice signals a recreation and renewal of the earth after the flood. The construction of altars also marks the beginning and end of Abraham’s story. The biblical text places a report that Abram built altars in Canaan at the beginning of the narrative, shortly after the introduction of the divine promises (Gen 12:1-3, 7-8). The promises are reaffirmed near the end of his story after he nearly sacrifices Isaac on an altar he has constructed on Mount Moriah (a site reminiscent of Moreh, where he had initially constructed an altar; Gen 22:2, 9; cf. Gen 12:6-7). Jacob’s story also appropriates an altar as a framing metaphor. While fleeing to Paddan-aram, Jacob experienced a theophany at Bethel and erected a sacred pillar to mark the spot (Gen 28:1-22). On his return from Paddan-aram, God commanded him to build a altar at Shechem and dwell in the

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ter experiencing another theophany (Gen 35:5-15). Finally, the construction of an altar and the offering of sacrifices marked the transition of Israel from a nation of escaped slaves to the covenant people of Yahweh (Ex 24:4-8). A further transformation is anticipated by the command that the Israelites erect a stone altar after entering Canaan, thereby symbolizing their transition from a nomadic people to a landed nation (Deut 27:5-8).

See also Blood; Priests; Priesthood; Sacrifices and Offerings; Religion; Tabernacle.


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AMARNA TEXTS. See EXODUS, DATE OF.

AMMONITES. See LOT.

AMORITES. See NATIONS OF CANAAN.

ANACHRONISMS. See HISTORICAL CRITICISM.

ANCESTORS, VENERATION OF. See BURIAL AND MOURNING.

ANCESTRAL RELIGION. See RELIGION.

ANGEL OF THE LORD. See THEOPHANY.

ANIMAL HUSBANDRY. See AGRICULTURE.

ANIMALS. See ZOOLOGY.

APODITIC LAW. See DECALOGUE; FORM CRITICISM; LAW.

ARCHAEOLOGY

This article will survey the material and textual remains from the regions that played a major role in narratives of the Pentateuch. The regions that will be most discussed will be the Tigris-Euphrates Valley (i.e., Syro-Mesopotamia and southeast Turkey south of the Taurus Mountain range) and coastal Syria, where civilization began and the patriarchs originated, according to Genesis. The Egyptian Delta region, Sinai and Palestine (the coastal areas, inland and the other side of the Jordan) will be analyzed to a lesser extent. In terms of chronology, we will survey the Near East from the advent of urbanism in the eighth millennium B.C. to the end of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1200 B.C.), probably the latest possible date for the exodus and wilderness sojourn. This is a general survey of the archaeology of the ancient Near East. Many more specific links with the Pentateuch will be addressed in appropriate articles.

1. Introduction
2. Tigris-Euphrates Region
3. The Prehistoric Periods of the Near East
4. Early Bronze Age (c. 3000-2100 B.C.)
5. Middle Bronze Age (2100-1600 B.C.)
6. Late Bronze Age (1600-1200 B.C.)

1. Introduction.

For the ancient Near East, the historian is almost exclusively dependent upon archaeological investigation, unlike the later classical periods, which have a continuous literary tradition. Even Egypt has the dubious benefit of Manetho, an Egyptian priest living during Ptolemaic rule (third century B.C.), who has virtually formed our framework of Egyptian history. However, the works of his Mesopotamian equivalent, Berossos, survive only in a very fragmented form. Because of this, the potential contribution of archaeology to history in the remainder of the Near East is immense. For the ancient Greek, the term “archaeology” was synonymous with “ancient history.” Both Thucydides in his prologue (1.2-17) and Josephus in his title (Antiquities [or Archaeology] of the Jews) used the word to denote the study of texts and monuments or the study of antiquities (i.e., ancient history). Strangely enough, the term archaiologia did not pass into Latin and thus did not enter into Western Europe until it was “resurrected” by scholars in the seventeenth century, who modified the meaning somewhat. The word now designates the study of the material remains of an ancient civilization, while written sources, even if discovered in archaeological excavations, are usually the domain of the sciences of epigraphy or philology. Only recently have

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