Ancient Israel
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Chapter Nine

Altars

The altar is an essential element in a sanctuary; and in the stories about the Patriarchs, the phrase ‘setting up an altar’ means, in effect, founding a sanctuary (Gn 12: 7, 8; 13: 18; 26: 25; 33: 20). From the beginning, the priest’s office consisted in the ministry of the altar, and as time went on, his work became more and more restricted to this ministry; sacrifice, the principal rite in public worship, means the offering of a gift upon an altar. Before passing, then, from the study of the priesthood to the study of sacrifice and ritual, we must say something about altars.

The Hebrew word for an altar is mizbeah, from a verbal root meaning ‘to slaughter’, and therefore ‘to slaughter with a view to sacrifice’. The word took on a broader meaning when the ritual became more developed: in the Temple, victims other than birds were killed at some distance from the altar and then placed upon it; vegetable offerings were also placed on the altar; and the same word was used for the altar of incense. An altar, then, was a place where men offered sacrifices, whatever their nature.

1. Pre-Israelite altars in Palestine

In Palestine, sacrifice was offered on various types of altars: the altar might be just the natural surface of the rock, or a rock which had been hewn into a certain shape, or a piece of rock jutting up on its own; and there were, of course, man-made altars.

Excavations in Palestine have revealed many rocky surfaces which have been artificially hollowed out. It would be an exaggeration to say that everyone had some connection with worship. The majority of them could have served a profane purpose: for example, those which stand near a well or a cistern or a spring may have been used as watering-troughs for animals, and the largest of them may have been used to do the laundry; those which are near a press are obviously connected with the making of wine or of oil. And when they are found near tombs, they are to be explained by funeral rites, but not necessarily by sacrifices: the dead could be hungry and thirsty.¹

There are, however, examples in which other evidence proves that some of these hollowed rocks were used in connection with sacrifice. We shall

¹. Cf. p. 60.
speak in a moment of the rock altar at Sar'a; at Gezer, the hollows in the surface of the rock lead down to a cave where the bones of pigs offered in sacrifice were found. But where evidence of this kind is wanting, it is impossible to decide whether a surface of rock, with or without such hollows, was used as an altar. At least two passages in the Bible, Jg 6: 19–23 and 13: 19–20, indicate that the custom of using such rocks existed.

Everyone quotes, as examples of altars hewn out of the natural rock, those found at Petra and in the district around; the altars there are cut out of the surrounding rock, and steps are even hewn in front of them. Petra became an important Nabatean centre in Hellenistic times, but there is no reason why these installations should not be even older; on the other hand, it must not be forgotten that tombs and houses carved out of the rock are also a characteristic feature of Petra; it would be imprudent, then, to make generalizations about altars from observations which may not be valid outside this region.

A large stone or a detached piece of rock could serve as an altar. We shall cite only two examples: near Sar'a, a large, cubic piece of stone stands in a field; it is rough-shapen, about four feet three inches high, with steps near the top, and hollowed out on top in several places. It is called, without any proof, the altar of Manoah (Jg 13: 19–20). Recent excavations at Hazor have unearthed an enormous rectangular block weighing about five tons, with a basin hollowed out on one of its surfaces; the site in which it was found was a Canaanite temple of the 13th century B.C.

Lastly, we have man-made altars. Here we must recall what was said about the ‘high places’.

The bamah was a knoll or a mound upon which sacrifice was offered, but not every bamah had an altar erected upon it; the knoll itself could take the place of an altar. Platforms of large stones have been uncovered in the excavations at Megiddo, at Nahariyah near Haifa and at Hazor in Galilee.

In other pre-Israelite sanctuaries, altars have been discovered standing against the back wall, built of large stones and earthen mortar, or built in plain brick. Recent excavations have provided examples for all periods: at Megiddo, for the periods around 3000 B.C. and around 2000 B.C., at Et-Tell (Ai) for a period between 3000 and 2000 B.C., and at Tell ed-Duweir (Lakish) for the 14th–13th centuries B.C.

2. Israelite altars outside the main sanctuary

Examples of the different types of altars are found in the most ancient biblical texts. In Jg 6: 19–23, Gideon wanted to offer a goat and some unleavened bread to the Angel of Yahweh; the Angel ordered him to put the meat and the bread on a rock, where they were burnt up by a fire which shot

out of the rock; it was a sacrifice. In Jg 13: 19-20, Manoah, the father of Samson, offered up a goat as a whole-burnt offering to Yahweh; he offered it upon a rock, and in the following verse the rock is called an ‘altar’.

Other examples show that large stones were used as altars. When the Ark was being brought back from Beth-Shemesh, the wooden chariot and the cows which had drawn it were used for a whole-burnt offering on a ‘large stone’ which stood nearby (1 S 6: 14). In Saul’s war against the Philistines, the people began to slaughter the captured sheep on the ground itself; thereupon Saul intervened with the command ‘Roll a big stone over here towards me!’ and he insisted that the beasts should be slaughtered on the stone: the implication is that this was an altar, for all slaughtering of animals had a sacrificial character until the time of Deuteronomy (Dt 12: 20-25).

As a general rule, however, all the altars mentioned in the Bible (with the exception of those in the Temple) were altars built out of stone: e.g. those which the Patriarchs set up, those in the period of Josue (Jos 22: 10) and of the Judges (Jg 6: 24: the altar built on the rock where the meal prepared for the guests had been burnt up by fire from Yahweh, and 6: 26: a parallel tradition); this is true of all the altars down to the time when David built an altar on the site of the future Temple (2 S 24: 25). Elias restored the altar of Yahweh which had stood on Carmel and which had been demolished; then he laid on it the wood and the quarters of the victims which were to be sacrificed (1 K 18: 30 and 33). A gloss inspired by Ex 24: 4; Jos 4: 1-9 states (vv. 31-32a) that this altar was made of twelve stones to symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel.

Apart from this gloss, we are never told whether the altars were made of (plain) bricks or of stones. As we have seen, both kinds of material were used for pre-Israelite altars in Canaan, and both kinds are authorized by the law of Ex 20: 24-26: the altar must be of earth (i.e. plain bricks); if it is made of stone, the stone must not be trimmed with a chisel. Dt. 27: 5 repeats this command: an altar of stones untouched by any iron is to be erected on Ebal; the order was carried out by Josue, according to the Deuteronomic passage in Jos 8: 30-31. The rabbis found some very subtle explanations of this precept forbidding trimmed stones to be used for an altar: ‘The altar is for forgiving, and iron is for punishing’, or ‘The altar prolongs life, but iron cuts it short’. Ex 20 merely says that iron ‘desecrates’ stone; the meaning is that things should be used for the service of God only in their natural condition, before they have been interfered with in any way by man (cf. Nb 19: 2; Dt 21: 3-4; 1 S 6: 7, etc.); the principle reminds us of altars erected on rocks or upon a large unhewn stone. The law of Ex 20: 26 also forbids steps leading up to the altar. Some Canaanite altars had them, and later Israelite altars were approached by a series of steps or by a ramp. Ex 20: 26 gives modesty as the reason for this prohibition: a priest wearing only a loincloth might expose himself as he was stepping up to the altar; consequently, when in
later ages, the high altar was approached by a series of steps; another law was introduced by which the priests were obliged to wear a pair of drawers (Ex 28: 42-43). The explanation advanced in Ex 20: 26 does not seem to be the original one; the prohibition was originally based, it would appear, rather on the sacred character of the altar, which was to be as far removed as possible from anything profane: steps which touched the altar and upon which the priest trod would bring the altar into contact with the profane.

We shall discuss later the little movable altars which were used for offerings of incense.  

3. The altars used in the desert

According to the description of the desert sanctuary, the Tent or the Dwelling had two altars: one was the altar of holocausts which stood immediately in front of the entrance to the Dwelling (Ex 40: 6, 29; cf. Lv 4: 18), and the other was the altar of incense which stood inside the Dwelling, in front of the veil which cut off the rear part where the Ark was kept (Ex 30: 6; 40: 5, 26).

The altar of holocausts is described in Ex 27: 1-8 and 38: 1-7. It was constructed of planks of acacia-wood, five cubits long, five cubits wide and three cubits high. Bronze plates were fitted over these planks, and the altar is sometimes called 'the bronze altar'. It had a bronze grating (i.e. some kind of trellis work), a cornice or rim, and four rings for the bars by which it was carried. Also, it was hollow. This description is obscure; in particular, it is hard to see how the trellis work fits in with the rest, and very difficult indeed to see how victims could have been burnt on this wooden chest, even if it was covered in bronze. Some exegetes have suggested that the structure was filled with earth and with stones each time the people pitched camp, but this is not stated in the text and the grating would make it impossible. Finally, its height is given as four and a half feet; this means a step would have been needed, but the text does not mention one.

The altar of perfumes is described in Ex 30: 1-5 and 37: 25-28: its surface was one cubit square, its height two cubits. It was made of acacia wood, and the upper part was plated with gold; it had golden horns, and four golden rings by which it could be carried (hence it is sometimes called simply 'the golden altar'). The description is clear, but it seems that the mention of this altar as among the appurtenances of the desert sanctuary is a later insertion into the text. The altar is not mentioned among the furnishings of the Dwelling in Ex 25; nor is its siting indicated where one would expect it, in Ex 26: 33-37; instead, the altar itself, its site and its use are described in Ex 30: 1-10, which looks very like a passage out of context. Lastly, this altar is never mentioned in the stories about the desert: in the desert, offerings of perfume were made with a little incense-shovel (Nb 16: 6-7, 17-18; 17: 11-12).

Israelite tradition, then, was not certain that there had been an altar of perfumes in the desert sanctuary, and only included it among the furnishings of the Tent in order to make the Tent a copy of the Temple of Jerusalem. Indeed, the altar of holocausts itself is a movable replica of the altar in the Temple. Thus we reach the same conclusion from examining the priestly description of it.¹

4. The altars in Solomon's Temple

Like the Tent, Solomon's Temple had two altars, standing in the same position to each other as the two altars in the Tent: the altar of holocausts stood in front of the Temple (2 K 16: 14), and the altar of perfumes stood in the Hekal, in front of the Debir (1 K 6: 20-21). (The exact position of the altar of holocausts on the modern Haram esh-Sherif depends on the view one takes about the general site of the Temple.)²

(a) The altar of holocausts. One curious fact to be noticed is that the altar of holocausts is never once mentioned in the long description of the Temple and its furniture (1 K: 6-7). There are allusions to it in 1 K 8: 22 and 54 (which are part of the Deuteronomic redaction) and also in 1 K 8: 64 and 9: 25 (which are older texts). Several explanations have been given for this strange silence. It is not likely that Solomon simply transferred into his Temple the altar which David had built (2 S 24: 25), for he had a habit of ordering new and costly things. It is more likely that he installed a new altar, which (according to 1 K 8: 64 and 2 K 16: 15) was called a bronze altar and which (according to 2 K 16: 14) was movable: it would then be a large grille upon which sacrifices could be burnt. Possibly the editor of 1 K 6-7 suppressed the description of this altar because it was not the kind of altar demanded by the customs and laws of Israel (Ex 20: 24-26); it was, in fact, a type used by the Phoenicians, as two inscriptions tell us. The Chronicler has made good this omission by attributing to Solomon the construction of a bronze altar ten cubits square and five cubits high (2 Ch 4: 1): the measurements he gives, however, seem to be more in accord with the altar built by Achaz, or with the one which must have existed in the Chronicler's own day.

In the time of Achaz, Solomon's altar was replaced by a new one modelled on an altar the king had seen at Damascus when he went there to take an oath of fealty to Tiglath-Pileser (2 K 16: 10-16). In all probability, the model Achaz copied was Syrian, not Assyrian (though many writers defend the latter view): the new altar was of imposing dimensions (v. 15) and it was approached either by steps or by a ramp (v. 12); it was a copy of the large altar in the temple of Hadad-Rimmon at Damascus (cf. 2 K 5: 18). The old bronze altar was moved a little to the north, and Achaz kept it so that he could use it in examining victims for omens: this interpretation of the final

¹ Cf. p. 396.
² Cf. pp. 119-119.
phrase in v. 15 is quite possible, for the verb bigger could have this meaning. In spite of its origin, which was not above suspicion, the new altar remained in use until the Exile, and the altar in the second Temple was apparently of the same shape, though perhaps larger.

(b) The altar of perfumes. Some authors have denied, though without convincing arguments, that there ever was an altar of perfumes in Solomon’s Temple. There is a reference to it in the overloaded and confused text of 1 K 6: 20-21, which may be reconstructed thus with the help of Greek texts: ‘He made an altar of cedar < > in front of the Debir, and covered it with gold’. It is referred to as the ‘golden altar’ in 1 K 7: 48. Moreover, in the inaugural vision of Isaias (where the Temple either is, or is imagined to be, the place where Yahweh speaks to him) one of the Seraphim takes a piece of burning coal from an altar: and since the altar is inside the Temple, it can only be the altar of perfumes. The last reference occurs in 2 Ch 26: 16: Ozias tried to offer incense on the altar of perfumes, inside the Hekal.

In 1 K 7: 48, this altar is called simply ‘the golden’ one (zahab), and the same term is sometimes used for the corresponding altar in the desert Tent. A new explanation of this name has recently been put forward: in Southern Arabia dhb was used both for ‘gold’ and for ‘perfume’, and the word has been discovered in an engraving on a small perfume-brazier, along with the names of other aromatic perfumes. It is suggested, therefore, that the ‘golden altar’ (mizbeah hazzahab) of 1 K 7: 48 should be translated ‘altar of perfumes’. The rendering is certainly possible, but if it is accepted, one must admit that the original meaning was very soon lost: both 1 K 6: 20-21 (describing the altar in Solomon’s Temple) and Ex 30: 1-5 (describing the altar in the Tent) lay great stress on its covering of precious metal in order to justify its name (mizbeah hazzahab); and all the Greek texts, biblical or non-biblical, in referring to it speak of it as ‘golden’ altar.

Palestinian archaeology enables us to trace the development of this kind of altar. The Canaanites used cylindrical or rectangular objects made out of baked earth in order to burn perfumes. From the beginning of the Israelite monarchy, limestone altars are found, shaped like square pillars; usually, they have four horns on the top corners. (Examples of this type have been unearthed at Shechem and at Megiddo.) This is the shape of the altar of perfumes described in Ex 30: 1-5, but the specimens found in excavations are not as big as that described in this text. One specimen of a very tiny altar of the same type, dating from the eleventh century, was found at Tell Beit Mirsim, and a large group of similar small ones, dating from the Persian period, was found at Lakish. The use of these altars outside the central sanctuary was eventually condemned, but an altar of the same type, only more imposing, must have stood in the Temple from the time of Solomon.

5. The altar of Ezechiel

Yet we should note that when Ezechiel is describing the future temple, he makes no mention of the altar of perfumes. Ez 41: 21-22, which is often cited in this connection, refers to the table of shewbread. By contrast, the altar of holocausts is described in minute detail (Ez 43: 13-17), but this description (with the later insertion about the consecration of the altar, Ez 43: 18-27) seems to have been added at a later date; it certainly does not stand in its original context. The altar described by Ezechiel had three tiers, and seems to be a small-scale model of the many-storied tower (the ziggurat) 1; the terms used for its different parts are evidently taken from a Babylonian background. The base is called ḫeq ha’āres, i.e. ‘bosom of the earth’, which is a translation of the Akkadian irat ērṣīt, the name given to foundations of a temple or ziggurat. The upper part is called ’ari‘el; or har‘el; the word har‘el means ‘mountain of God’, and is a Hebrew interpretation of the Akkadian term arallu, which stands both for the world underneath the earth and for the mountain of the gods. The top platform had horns at the four corners, and was approached by a flight of steps on its eastern side.

Ezechiel planned that this new altar should be ten cubits high, and from eighteen to twenty cubits square at the base: this is more or less the size of the altar in Solomon’s Temple, according to 2 Ch 4: 1. Ezechiel may have been thinking of the altar in the first Temple, for he had himself seen it, but the shape of the new altar and the names given to its parts are of Babylonian inspiration, as is the symbolism which results. There is no evidence whatever that the altar built after the Return was modelled on the description given by the prophet.

6. The altars in the second Temple

We have already stated that Chronicles refers to Solomon’s altar (2 Ch 4: 1) and to the altar of perfumes (2 Ch 26: 16): these two references may preserve information about the first Temple, or they may have been inspired by what the Chronicler saw in the second Temple, but otherwise we have no information in the Hebrew Bible about the altars in the post-exilic Temple. Two non-biblical texts are extant, both dating from the Hellenistic period. According to the Pseudo-Hecataeus (cited by Josephus, C. Apionem I 198), there stood in the Temple enclosure a square altar, twenty cubits wide and ten cubits high, built of untrimmed stones. Beside it there was a building containing a golden altar and a golden chandelier. This text confirms the existence of two altars, one for whole-burnt offerings and one for perfumes; the dimensions of the altar of holocausts are those given by 2 Ch 4: 1, and it is presented as if it had been built in accordance with the law of Ex 20: 25. This perfect harmony with the biblical texts is, however, disconcerting.

rather than probative, for the Pseudo-Hecataeus is a work of Jewish propaganda written at Alexandria shortly after 200 B.C. The second text, in the Letter of Aristeas, comes from the same place, and from almost the same period: it says, quite simply, that 'the size of the altar's structure was in proportion to the place where it stood, and to the victims burnt upon it: it was approached by a ramp of similar proportions. The place had a slope, for the sake of propriety'. All these facts, too, are an echo of biblical texts.

Shortly after these propaganda works were written, Antiochus Epiphanes launched his persecution, and the altars in the Temple did not escape. In 169 B.C., Antiochus plundered the Temple and took away the golden altar, i.e. the altar of perfumes (1 M 1:21); in December, 167, he erected an altar to Zeus Olympios over the altar of holocausts, and had sacrifices to Zeus offered there (1 M 1:54, 59; 2 M 6:2, 3). The pagan altar is 'the abomination of desolation' referred to in 1 M 1:54 and Dn 9:27.

As soon as the Maccabees had regained freedom for the Jews to practise their religion, they made away with this scandal: a new altar was built, and the stones of the old one, which had been desecrated by the pagan worship performed over it, were put away in a side-building of the Temple (1 M 4:44-47; 2 M 10:3). A new altar of perfumes was also put in the Temple (1 M 4:49).

7. The religious significance of altars

In Israel, the altar had the same significance as in other ancient religions, but with appreciable nuances. The altar is only rarely referred to as the table of Yahweh (Ez 44:16; Mi 1:7, 12), and never in ancient texts: conversely, the table of shewbread is said to be 'like an altar' in Ez 41:21-22. This distrust of the word 'table' is based on a reaction against the idea that a sacrifice provided the god with a banquet (cf. Is 65:11 and the satire in Dn 14:1-22).

Since the Temple was the house of God, it had to have a hearth, and the altar was this hearth. The idea is not expressed in explicit terms, for the 'ari'el of Ez 43:13-17 does not mean (as we have seen above) a 'hearth', though many writers have thought so. The idea is expressed in another way: a fire must always be burning upon the altar (Lv 6:5-6; cf. 2 M 1:18-36), just as the lamp must always be kept alight in the Temple (Ex 27:20-21; Lv 24:2-4).

The altar was the sign of God's presence. In the earliest period of Israel's history, it commemorated a theophany (Gn 12:7; 26:24-25) or was called by some name which reminded men of God: Jacob called the altar he erected at Shechem 'El, God of Israel', and Moses called the altar he erected after the defeat of the Amalekites 'Yahweh-Nissi', 'Yahweh is my rallying-standard'. Later on, the altar was specially consecrated, and purified each
year on the Day of Atonement: it thus acquired an altogether exceptional holiness (Ex 29: 36-37; 30: 10; Lv 8: 15; 16: 18-19).

This holiness was connected in a particular way with the ‘horns’ of the altar, those four parts which stuck out at the top corners of the altar of holocausts and of the altar of perfumes. The blood of victims was rubbed on them to consecrate the altar, or in rites of expiation to make atonement (Ex 29: 12; 30: 10; Lv 4 passim; 8: 15; 9: 9; 16: 18; Ez 43: 20). A fugitive claiming asylum would grasp the horns of the altar (1 K 2: 28). It is not quite clear what these horns stand for: in the Bible, a horn is a symbol for power, but this interpretation is inadequate in the present context; nor is it likely that these horns represent the horns of the victims slaughtered, like the bucrane often found on Roman altars. Possibly they took the place of little steles, i.e. of small massebot, which had once been placed on the altar as emblems of the divinity; possibly they are just visible symbols emphasizing the special importance and holiness of the extremities of the altar. The extremities of a priest’s body (the lobe of his ear, his thumb and his big toe) were rubbed with blood in the late ritual for investing a priest in his office (Ex 29: 20), and the same parts were rubbed with blood and anointed with oil in the rite for the purification of a leper (Lv 14: 14-17).

Lastly, the altar was used as an instrument of mediation. The offerings of men were placed upon it and there burnt: by this ceremony, the offerings were taken out of man’s domain and given to God, and God replied by bestowing blessings (Ex 20: 24). Thus the Covenant itself between God and his people was maintained in force, or re-established, upon the altar of sacrifice.