

Altar

- I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament
- II. Judaism
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I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

1. **Egypt.** In Egypt the typical altar is just a table or a stand to present offerings to a god or goddess (Bonnet 1971; Galling 1925). Such altars were not only used in temples, but also in daily life. The offerings include all kinds of vegetables, beer, wine, spices, as well as parts of animals. The altars were portable and could be set up anywhere an offering should take place. Every sanctuary had several of these stands, which, standing alongside one another, could have been in use during one offering ceremony. The presenting of foods on the altars had symbolic reasons; they were meant to be a type of nourishment for the gods. The presenting of offerings on an altar also is a typical decoration motif in sepulchers, and normally the owner of the tomb is shown presenting the offerings. It is also very likely that in some private households such altars were in use for the offering to a private god, but due to the fact that only a few private houses have been excavated thus far, the archaeological evidence is rather poor.

Permanently built up altars were often found in courtyards of some sepulchral temples and during the Old Kingdom even in some sanctuaries dedicated to the sun god. Throughout the New Kingdom sanctuaries dedicated to the God Re in Tell el-Amarna have had altars with their own staircases, which now seem remarkably high and in a prominent position in the temple area. These were rectangular in form which is an important aspect in regard to the later altars in the temple of Jerusalem.

Similar to the altars are offering plates, usually rectangular (seldom round) in form and showing an engraving of a selection of offerings on the upper part. The offering tables have also been used for libations of water. The libation offering (water, milk, wine) is typical for ancient Egypt. It was offered both on offering tables and on stands. The libation was considered a sort of nourishment for the gods, an act of purification and used to symbolize life. The libation is often associated with the incense offering, either in a hand-held censer, on a censer arm, or on a stand with a censer on top of it. The combination with the libation represents the purifying character of this offering, though the burning of incense was also a symbol of revival. The incense also served as a pleasant scent for the gods, which may not always have been the case for a burnt fat offering.

2. **Mesopotamia.** There are several types of altars represented in Mesopotamia. The stepped altar is usually made of clay. Such altars were found during the Bronze Age all over Mesopotamia (cf. Bretschneider, Muller). Iconographical representations confirm that cakes, breads, as well as other offerings were presented on this altar; also a censer is shown, and libations were poured out in front of the altar (Galling 1925: pl. 3). High vases in the form of an egg-timer were used as containers for plants (Galling 1925: pl. 4); libations were poured out into these vases. Sometimes the same vases were used as incense burners; in that case a bowl was put on the upper part of the stand for the burning material. These stands may have been placed on the lower part of a stepped altar, but mostly they are represented as freestanding altars in front of a praying and offering person. There were also several finds of tables with feet, either made of stone, wood, or metal. On top of those altars were mainly vases containing liquid offerings, but other kinds of offerings such as bread, parts of animals, and censers seem to have been placed upon it as well. In the Neo-Assyrian period altars with pinnacles on top seem to be representations in miniature of temples. Small, high incense altars were also found in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. The altars in Mesopotamia have been used to present foods for the gods, to ensure fertility (libation offerings), and to offer a pleasant scent to the gods in order to appease them.

3. **The Achaemenid Cult.** In the Achaemenid cult fire on the altar played an important role. We know of them from reliefs, but also by means of archaeological finds (cf. the fire altar at Pasargadae). These altars are comparable to the altar in Ezek 43: 13–17, since the altar consists of several steps; there is an assumption that the Persian and the biblical altars represent an altar type which developed in the late 8th century BCE in Syria, though this is a theory still to be proven by archaeological finds.

4. **The Southern Levant.** Methodological reasons make it necessary to separate the exegetical and terminological discussion from the presentation of archaeological finds in the Southern Levant. The scriptures of the ancient Near East do certainly not mention every type of altar that existed in ancient times. Especially the textual evidence is much more accurate about the official cult than about private cults. On the other hand there are several types of altars (or stands, burners etc.), which supposedly have been in use for cultic purposes, but this is just a proposal of modern archaeologists. For the Iron Age, the archaeological material should also be classified according to ethnic groups in this area.

a. **The Hebrew Bible.** In the Hebrew Bible and in the languages of the surrounding countries the typical altar is called *mizbeah*. This word stems from the verb *zhh* "to slaughter, to immolate, to sacrifice."

This shows that in an original understanding the *mizbēah* is not necessarily associated with the burning of meat (as the word altar, from lat. *adolere* “to burn”), but rather with the slaughter of an animal, which was eaten during the cultic feast by the family (*zbh*-offering) offering the animal. In an old tradition, which can be exposed by literary criticism and which maybe represents Late Bronze Age ideas, the altar has to be made of soil (Exod 20: 24*, 26*: “You need make for me an altar of earth sacrifice on it.” V. 26 “You shall not go up by steps to my altar”). According to the Old Testament in later periods, altars are also made of stones (Exod 20: 25; Deut 27: 5; Josh 8: 31; Isa 27: 9), or of wood (1 Kgs 8: 64) covered with copper (Exod 27: 1–8) or with gold (Exod 30: 1–10).

According to biblical traditions altars were built in open air sanctuaries such as Noah and the patriarchs reportedly had done (Noah: Gen 8: 20; Abraham: Gen 12: 7–8; 13: 4, 18; 22: 9; Isaac: 26: 25; Jacob: 33: 20; 35: 1, 3, 7). The building of an altar was a proof for the piety of the people, comparable to the donation of altars in Christian churches later on in Europe. But on the other hand, the building of an altar at an open air sanctuary (*bāmā*) with a tree, as it is always mentioned in context with the patriarchs, is typical for the Iron Age open air sanctuaries in Israel and Judah (except for very few temples e.g., in Jerusalem, Bethel, Gilgal or Dan), while in the Bronze Age altars (s. the chapter about archaeological finds) have always been associated with built-up temple houses. Similar stories about the donation and building of an altar as proof for the piety of important persons in the history of the Old Testament are reported about Joshua (Josh 8: 30–31), Gideon (Judg 6: 24–32), Samuel (1 Sam 7: 17), Saul (14: 35), and David (2 Sam 24: 18–25). Some of these remarks were incorporated by late redactors in order to demonstrate the piety of those people before the temple of Jerusalem was built (especially when burnt offerings are mentioned); though some remarks seem to be old, reliable traditions (Zwickel 1992) and seem to be a cultic foundation legend for some sanctuaries.

The burnt offering presented by Noah (Gen 8: 20; pre-P) after the flood – all other offerings were likely *zbh*-offerings – was for the appeasement of god. Also this burnt offering seems to have been presented on a simple altar or a big stone. The main focus of burning fats or animals on these altars was to present a pleasant scent or aroma to a god (Deut 33: 10) – and furthermore a symbolic kind of nourishment for the gods.

With the establishment of the temple of Jerusalem, offerings at open air sanctuaries were disregarded in Deuteronomic texts (1 Kgs 16: 32; 2 Kgs 18: 22; 21: 3–5; 23: 12, 15–17, 20). Instead of the founding of an altar, now the pious men were characterized in Deuteronomic texts by bringing offer-

ings to the altar in Jerusalem (1 Kgs 8: 22, 54, 64; 9: 25). Though in reality it was not an uncommon thing to build open air altars in the 9th century BCE; in fact this tradition lasted as late as into the 8th century BCE (1 Kgs 18: 20–40).

The Hebrew Bible tells more about the altar in the temple of Jerusalem in particular. In old traditions there does not seem to have been any larger altars in the temple of Solomon. According to 1 Kgs 7: 48, Solomon prepared an altar and a table for the temple. The table-altar was most likely constructed of wood (cf. 1 Kgs 6: 20), placed in the main room of the temple, and was used as a table for presenting goods (especially bread) to the deity, just as is found in Egypt or in Mesopotamia. The other altar was most likely made of stone and stood at the entrance of the temple (cf. 2 Kgs 12: 10). It was used for burning fats for the *zbh*-offerings, and, which seems to make sense, stood outside due to the rather unpleasant smell of the burnt material. On top of this altar glowing coals had been placed (Isa 6: 6).

A new altar for burnt offerings was built by King Ahaz, who had seen such an altar during his visit in Damascus (2 Kgs 16: 10–16*). This was, according to our sources, the first altar for burnt offerings in Jerusalem. This does not really seem to be surprising, since large altars were also untypical in the neighboring countries/empires and the burnt offering was just now starting to become a common way of offering. Until this period the *zbh*-offering was a normal offering, and burnt offerings were just used in specific situations to calm a goddess or to evoke the help of a god (cf. Gen 8: 20; 1 Sam 13: 7–15; 2 Kgs 3: 27). When an economic situation improved, as it was the case in the 8th century, priests were interested to enlarge the temple cult and to promote bigger offerings like the burnt offering. This new altar was most likely built up in several steps, comparable to a Mesopotamian ziqqurat; the description in Ezek 43: 13–17 serves as a good reminder of the elder tradition. This altar is estimated at about 8 meters in length and width, and about 5 meters in height.

According to Deuteronomy, in accordance with the reform of Josiah, only the one altar in Jerusalem should survive (Deut 7: 5; 12: 3). This altar in Jerusalem is now called “the altar of YHWH” (Deut 12: 27; 16: 21; 26: 4; cf. other typical Deuteronomistic quotations of *mizbēah* YHWH as in Josh 9: 27; 22: 19, 28–29; 1 Kings 8: 22, 54).

The smaller altar standing in front of the temple, as well as the later burnt-offering altar were both typical four-horns-altars. This type of altar resembles a temple en miniature with four towers at the corners of the temple. So the construction of this type of altar should symbolize the shelter which is offered by the god who lives in the temple. This symbolic shelter was very important in real

life: If someone was accused to have killed somebody unintentionally, this person had the possibility to go to the temple, to touch the horns (Exod 21:13–14; 1 Kgs 1:50; 2:28–29) and to be free of the vendetta of the family of the person killed (cf. Houtman 1996).

In Exodus 27:1–8; 38:1–7 (P) a programmatic new proposal can be found for the altar for burnt offerings in the post-exilic period. The altar had to be 2.5 meters square and 1.5 meters high and constructed of wood, covered with copper. But this material cannot stand the heat of a burnt offering, so this was just a mere concept, though never possible in reality. According to Ezra 3:25 the post-exilic altar was built on the foundations of a former altar, so it most likely had the same size as in the pre-exilic period and was also made of stone. According to 2 Chr 4:1 the altar was 10 meters square and 5 meters high. After the desecration by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 168 BCE (1 Macc 1:57) the Maccabees built a new altar according to the old traditions (1 Macc 4:38, 44–47; 2 Macc 10:3). This altar was renewed by Herod the Great (Josephus *J. W.* 5:225 ff.; *mMid* 3:1–2; cf. Matt 23:35).

According to Ezek 30:1–10, a new altar for burning incense (not fat anymore!; cf. Exod 34:40–48) was in plan for the post-exilic temple. It was 50 centimeters square, 1 meter high, and covered with gold. Since the temperatures on an incense altar were not as high as on a burnt offering altar, this could have been practicable. This new altar stood in the main room of the temple. It was plundered by Antiochus IV (1 Macc 1:21), but replaced by the Maccabees (1 Macc 4:49–50; cf. Luke 1:11). There was also a table for showing breads (as a symbol of nourishment for the deity) in the post-exilic temple (Neh 10:34; 2 Macc 1:8; cf. Exod 24:5–9). This table was brought to Rome after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE and is represented on the famous Titus Arch.

b. Archaeological Proof of Altars. It is exceptionally difficult to give an exact definition what kinds of installations may be called an altar. It depends on the functional analysis of the finds and installations that have been excavated. It is still open to discussion, how a cult could be reconstructed and how several installations have been used. The following overview gives an impression of some installations and finds, which were associated with the cult and which served either for the deposition of offerings in front of a goddess/god or for a ritual associated with the offering to a god. Naturally one main problem in archaeology today is that only certain parts of the material have survived; installations made of wood and other organic matter disintegrate throughout time; it is something that we call erosion.

i. *Early Bronze Age Burnt Offering Altars.* On several sites of the Early Bronze Age (Megiddo, Arad,

Bab ed-Dra, Khirbet Zeiraqoun) large round or square altars have been found which were likely used for the burning of animals. Since only a few finds have been made, it is difficult to reconstruct the cult associated with these altars. This type of cult had been given up at the end of the Early Bronze Age, when nearly all Palestinian settlements were given up.



Fig. 20 Horned altar from Megiddo (ca. 1000 BCE)

ii. *Podiums and Deposit Benches.* Already in the Chalcolithic temple of En-Gedi, benches along the inner side of a wall also were some sort of installation serving the purpose to deposit offerings to a god. This architectural installation was a constant element of temple architecture until the Hellenistic period, although sometimes rather rare. Beginning with the Early Bronze Age a podium in the temple, built normally of soil (cf. Exod 20:24, 26) served as the most prominent part in the temple. It is not certain how this podium was used, but seems very probable that there was the figurine of a goddess presented to the participants of the cult, and the possibility was given to deposit some offerings. Usually a podium had some stairs in front or beside it, though the stairs were not necessarily used to climb the podium, but more likely as deposit places as well. In Tell Mevorakh (Late Bronze Age) a lot of items were found at these stairs; thus the theory of placing offerings on stairs is supported, if not proved, by the tedious work of archaeology. Although podiums were typical to mark the holiest place in a temple, they were pushed back during

the Middle Bronze Age. Instead of podiums, now a cultic niche became the typical installation to mark the holiest part of temples. This element was first introduced in Syria, but could not stand for a long time. Also for the Late Bronze Age, podiums seem to be part of the cult tradition due to a profusion of finds. In some places podiums have been found even in courtyards of a temple which likely had been used to deposit offerings there. In the Early Iron Age – a time with very few temples – such podiums with stairs were still found in Philistine temples (Tell Qasile). As for the Solomonic temple in Jerusalem and the Judean temple in Arad, such a podium did not exist in Iron Age II, but is found later on again in the Persian-Hellenistic temple of Mizpe Yamim in Galilee. So in conclusion it is clear that podiums were a constant element of Palestinian temple architecture throughout nearly 3,000 years.

iii. *Free Standing Stone Altars (Horned and Un Horned) of the Late Bronze and Iron Age.* At the end of the Late Bronze Age a new type of altar appeared in Palestine. In Hazor, Beth-Shean and Tell Abu Hawam free-standing stones had been found which were used as altars. Typical in style, perhaps the most interesting is the one from Hazor (Zwickel 1990: 122–24). The outside of the altar resembles the risalit decoration of a temple; so the altar can be seen as a temple en miniature. Traces of burning on top of the altar show that it was used for burning incense or, more likely, fat. Similar is the decoration of the altar from Beth-Shean, though the top of this one was most likely used to deposit some other material, since there are no traces of burning and there is a decoration like a large X on top of the stone. The altar in Tell Abu Hawam (modern Haifa) seems to have been used for slaughtering animals, since there is a small notch on the top of one side, so blood could flow down.



Fig. 21 Altar from Khirbet Zeiraqoun in northern Jordan (3000–2200 BCE)

This type of altar became the typical one for the Iron Age II. Up to date there have been forty-four

of this type of altar found all made of stone (Dan: 6; Megiddo: 9; Kedesh: 1; Shechem: 2; Gezer: 1; Ekron: 19; Ashkelon: 3; Lachish: 1; Arad 2) and another two made of clay (Tell Rehov, Yavne). 35 of these are horned. They have a typical layout. The stand has a nearly square base. This base is surrounded by a band, which divides the altar in an upper and a lower part. On top of the upper part sits a roughly square platform with horns in the corners. Also, this type resembles a temple shrine with four towers in the corners. According to sources in the Old Testament, the lower part of the stand had been used to pour libations of animal blood on it. The upper platform had not always been used for burning fats or incense, since most of the altars show no signs of burning. Likely they were also used for the slaughtering of animals or for the deposition of goods for the gods. In Ekron the altars from the Iron Age II were not found in a temple, but in an industrial quarter. This shows that they were used for both private and for the official cults and could be used also for ensuring the economic basis of a town. Some new types of altars, most of them unpublished, were now found in the Moabite territory in Jordan (cf. as a preliminary report Daviau/Steiner 2000).

iv. *House Models as Temples En Miniature.* In the Bronze Age cultic stands with a platform on top are often found in Syria and Mesopotamia (cf. Bretschneider 1991; Muller 2002), and sometimes also in Palestine (e.g., Megiddo). During the Iron Age I (1200–1000 BCE) these stands were found on several sites in the Jezreel Valley and in the bay of Beth-Shean (Beth-Shean, Megiddo, Taanach, Pella). They clearly represent Late Bronze Age Syrian traditions, but are a new type in Palestine. The stands show some architectural elements, so they likely also represent temples en miniature. There is a platform on top of the stand, often surrounded by a rim. Therefore they may be used for libations or for presenting offerings on top of the stands. Some of those stands are decorated with symbols of fertility: A goddess presenting her breast, animals climbing the tree of life, sphinxes and lions. By carefully observing the decoration the archaeologist is able to deduce what had been expected from the honored goddess: to grant fertility and life to men, to their stock, and in their agriculture (cf. Zwickel 2006).

A very new find from the Philistine Yavne (cf. Ziffer/Kletter 2007) presents further 125 such smaller house models of the 9th/8th centuries BCE. They were found in a favissa, a pit filled up with more than 2,000 cultic items. Many of them show a similar style in decoration as the earlier examples. Some clearly represent houses, as can be seen due to windows and rooftops made of some sort of organic matter. The use of these architectural models is not quite certain. The roof has longish, oval or round

holes and openings. Maybe some pots, chalices or bowls were put on those roofs, or branches were set into the holes in order to represent the house-model as a house full of fertility and life.

v. *Burnt Offering Altars and Other Big Altars.* In Tell Qasile (Stratum X, early 10th century BCE) an installation was found in the courtyard (size: 1.5 m x 1.3 m) which had been interpreted by the excavators as a basis of an altar. Better preserved is a flat installation found in Dan (size: 1 x 1 m) with ashes on it. It can be dated to the late Iron Age II and could be an altar for burnt offerings. Also similar is an altar found in Tell Makmish with a square base of 1.5 meters (9th/8th centuries BCE). All those altars were at that period outside the traditional Israelite or Judahite, and it is still not quite proven if they were used for burnt offerings or not.

In a layer of the 9th century BCE in Dan, a large horn (43 cm high) of an altar had been found, which was most likely part of an older large altar. In Tell es-Seba several stones were found reused in a building of the 7th century BCE, which belonged in former times to a square altar with a length of 1.5 meters and a height of 1.57 meters. Some of the stones show traces of burning, so the altar was likely used for burning parts of animals. All those altars are much smaller than the burnt offering altar in the Old Testament.

An altar found in the courtyard of the temple in Arad was definitely not used for burnt offerings, but to slaughter animals (Gadegaards 1978). The soil of this altar is not burnt. This should be the case if fire had been made on top of the altar. There is also a groove on top of this altar, which was likely used for collecting the blood of the slaughtered animals.

A construction found on Mount Ebal dating back into the Early Iron Age seemed to be an altar though has been proven not to be one after all; this one was brought in association by the excavator who had found the altar built by Joshua (Josh 8:30–35). The supposed altar is in reality a small house with a watchtower built in the next stratum. Also the so-called altar of Menoach (cf. Jdg 13), found in the surrounding area of the biblical site Zorah, is not an altar from biblical times, but more likely from the Byzantine period.

vi. *Stands of Metal and Lavers.* Metal stands were often found in Cyprus, but they were also used in Israel and Judah. We have only little archaeological evidence of these artifacts since they were normally melted down again due to the value of the metal. In these metal stands metal bowls were set. Maybe there were some branches of trees in the water, which would make them a symbolic presentation of fertility to the visitors of the temple. Another possible interpretation is that they were used to pour libations into.

vii. *Incense Cups and Small Cuboid Incense Boxes.* For the private cult small items have often been

used to burn incense or similar material that would give off a certain scent. The eldest of those items are bowls with holes in them to secure airflow. These stood on three legs. The oldest examples have been found in Lebanon in the Late Bronze Age (Tell Ghassil, Kamid el-Loz). In the 10th century BCE this type of small altar had been found in the Northern Kingdom at several places, a little bit later in Judah as well as in Ammon, Moab, Edom and in the Philistine area. The last ones were used at the end of Iron Age II (about 586 BCE). A new type of small altar appeared in Israel at around 700 BCE: the small cuboid stone altar, which was also used to burn spices. The origin of this altar is in Babylonia and Turkey of the 3rd millennium BCE. Altars of this type were primarily found in Palestine, in Judah to be more precise; though they also seemed to be spread around in Edom, Ammon and in the Philistine region. Very few examples are from northern Israel. Incense cups and incense boxes are a typical proof for the private cult in those days (cf. Zwickel 1990). A new (still unpublished) type of incense burner was found in the above mentioned favissa of Yavne. It is a kind of large spoon. This type has parallels in Cyprus. Also in Yavne a lot of chalices with strong traces of burning at the rim were found. They seem to have been used for burning oil.

viii. *Stands of Different Types.* Beside all the artifacts mentioned above there are several types of stands made of clay or stone which were mainly found in temples, some were found in private rooms and that took over the function of altars. There is a great variety concerning these types which are rather difficult to summarize and to categorize. Sometimes, as in Tell Qasile, bowls were on top of the stands, into which water or other liquids could be poured. Other examples were used to burn incense on top of them. Some stands, partly made of metal, were used as incense burners; an exceptionally beautiful one has been found in Umm Udheina in Jordan. These incense burners are sometimes also presented in the iconography in the Phoenician region. An inscribed incense altar in a new shape has been found some years ago in the Moabite area (Dion/Daviau 2000). In the Edomite site of En Hazeva some anthropomorphic stands used for libations or burning incense have been found. All over the country there are also lots of chalices which may have been used for pouring libations or for burning spices. Unfortunately, to date there has been no special analysis of all these artifacts, which should be collected in the future in order to present more information about this type of cult.

ix. *Summary.* According to the archaeology there is no proof that a larger altar is a necessary element of temples in the Bronze and Iron Ages in Palestine. Those big altars were only typical for the Early

Bronze Age and for the Late Iron Age. But there have always been some installations for presenting goods to a variety of gods either burnt or unprepared in order to grant a certain deity nourishment. This idea of making altars to serve a god or a goddess has been put into practice all over the ancient Near East, and Israel/Judah was no exception; in fact, the people of this region took part in these cultural practices and habits and made them to be their very own cultic ideas.

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