

Why is this an altar?

Large sacrifice altars existed, according to the Bible, on Mt. Ebal, Beth-El, Jerusalem, Gibeon, Dan and other places. Of these, none survived except the one at Ebal. The description of the altar of the First Temple in Ezekiel 43:13-19 is very similar to that at Ebal. Descriptions of Jerusalem's Second Temple altar appear in the Mishnah, tractate Middot, ch. 3.; in the Temple Scroll: in Josephus Flavius' writings and other sources. In all of those, feature found in Mt. Ebal are described, including a large elevated altar platform, a stone ramp adjacent to the main one. The architectural similarity suggests that the structure at Ebal was the prototype of the Israelite sacrificial altar, resulting in the similarity to the Second Temple altars. It is well known that sacred constructions maintained their traditional form due to their holiness. Where is Mt. Gerizim?

According to Joshua 8:33, both summits of Ebal and Gerizim should be visible from the altar. However, the present Gerizim cannot be observed from it, while Mt. Kabir is well in sight, matching Mt. Ebal. We assume, therefore that Mt. Gerizim of the Torah is Mt. Kabir. At a later stage, during the rift from the Jews, the Samaritans transferred the name to the present mountain south of Shechem.

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צילום: אהרן אשכנזי / שוקי ליון

The significance of the discovery and the site

The presence of an Israelite sacrificial altar on Mt. Ebal, dated to the beginning of the Israelite settlement, greatly influences our standpoint regarding the Bible as an historical source. The close correlation between the ancient texts of Deuteronomy and Joshua and reality supports both the antiquity and accuracy of the description. The discovery adds much weight to the historicity of the descriptions of early Israel in the Bible, the credibility of which is subject to severe controversy.

As Prof. Steiger, from Harvard University stated, "If an altar stood on Mt. Ebal, the effect on archaeology and Biblical studies will be revolutionary; we will all have to go back to kindergarten."

Commemorating the fifth anniversary of the passing of the late Prof. Adam Zertal (5th Cheshvan 5777, 15/10/2015)

We have restored the original information sheet written by Prof. Adam Zertal. We are full of gratitude and appreciation to the members of the Mount Menashe survey for the decades, thousands of days and tens of thousands of hours of research that has opened the door to the profundities of history.

Yair Almakayes

Director of the Samaria Tour and Study Center
Cheshvan 5771

To coordinate visits and tours to Joshua's Altar and other sites in northern Samaria [Narbata, El Ahwat (Harushat Hagoyim), Tel Dotan, Joseph's Pit and others]
You are welcome to contact the Samaria Tour and Study Center 09-8841359



העמותה
לסקר שומרון
ובקעת הירדן

Joshua's Altar on Mt. Ebal

Prof. Adam Zertal

צילום: צלמירי



Your visit to Mt. Ebal could be the most significant and moving tours of your lifetime. You are visiting the ancient Israelite altar built by Joshua at the order of Moses. In 1980 a small site from the early Iron Age (Israelite settlement) was discovered on the north-eastern shoulder of Mt. Ebal, the highest peak in the northern Samaria region (940m above sea level). The place provides a magnificent view – Nahal Tirzah, Mt. Kabir, the valleys of Shechem, Elon Moreh, eastern Samaria and the Gilead. This is the fascinating story of the site, its findings and their significance.



Map of Mt. Ebal and the Altar



The Altar site when discovered from the air

How we discovered the site

Back in 1978, a team of archeologists and volunteers began to explore the Samaria region and the Jordan Valley on foot, meter by meter. This 3,000 km² territory, very relevant for biblical history, has never been surveyed before. It belongs to the stage of history when the stories of Ancient Israel transpired: the crossing of the Jordan and the ceremonies at Mt. Ebal, Shechem and Shiloh. During the survey, more than 1,500 sites were found, changing many of the historical views about ancient Israel.



Map of the enclosures

What does the Bible say?

Mt. Ebal played a central role in Ancient Israel. The book of Deuteronomy speaks twice of the mountain: in Chapter 11:29-30, Moses tells the Israelites to go to Ebal and Gerizim for the great ceremony to come. In Chapter 27:1-10, he orders them to cross the Jordan and then to go directly to Mt. Ebal, in order to “become the people of God” (Deuteronomy 27:9). They should build an altar “Of unhewn stones, which no iron was raised upon” make sacrifices and rejoice “in the presence of all Israel.” Then in

Joshua 8:30-35, the construction of the altar and the assembly is described in detail.

For centuries, the Ebal story was considered late, “Deuteronomistic” (from the time of King Josiah, 7th century B.C.E. 600 years after the event!) and non-historical. This is why the discovery was a great surprise, and even a shock, for the scholarly world and also for the general public.



The reconstructed altar

The excavations: what was found?

When discovered, the place was fully covered by stones. This has been understood as a sacred burial (“genizah”), which was performed before the final abandonment. The altar site was excavated over eight years (1982-1989), by the universities of Tel-Aviv and Haifa, directed by the author. The high place itself consists of the enclosures and the altar.

Dating

The local pottery, radiocarbon analysis and two scarab seals of Pharaoh Ramesses II (ca. 1282-1220 BCE) – all point to 1200 BCE, the time when the Israelite tribes crossed the Jordan into Canaan, as the date of the construction and use of the altar.

The enclosures

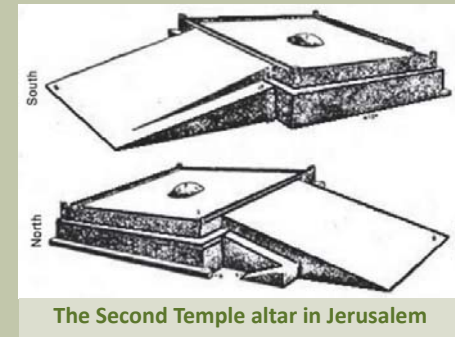
The altar is located within a double enclosure: a large (external) and small (internal). They were built to emphasize the division between the outer (non-sacred) and inner (holy) areas. In Joshua 8:33, Israel is divided into three groups: the common people; the judges, elders and policemen; and the priests and Levites, bearers of the Ark of the Covenant. It was suggested that this division matched that at the site.



A scarab-seal of Ramesses II

The altar

This is a construction (7x9m and 4m high), built of large, un-sculpted stones. It is ascended by a double stone ramp (see Exodus 20:23). In front of the altar and connected to it there are two courtyards, each about 8x6m, with offering-installations and stone slabs, presumably for the preparation of sacrifices. A porch-like wall, 1m wide, surrounds the altar on three sides. In the Mishnah (Middot, chapter 3) it is called “surround” or sovev in Hebrew. Inside the altar and below the upper pavement there was a layer of ash containing nearly 1,000 animal bones. The upper pavement was used for walking, though the High Priest used to walk mainly on top of the walls.



The Second Temple altar in Jerusalem

The bones

Within the entire site, some 3,000 animal bones, (including those inside the altar) were found: of cattle, sheep, goats and fallow-deer. Surprising is the great number of bones charred by fire (sacrifice), and the gender and age of the animals: young males. This find matches the rules of sacrifice in the Torah (especially in the book of Leviticus). It is exceptional also due to the absence of other common animals (horse, mule, donkey, dog, etc.), abundant in the period’s domesticated livestock. The fallow-deer appears as a kosher animal in Deuteronomy 14:5.

The offering installations

About a hundred stone structures have been found around the altar, containing ceramic vessels, jewelry, two scarabs and other finds. The bringing of offerings to the holy site is mentioned in I Samuel 1:24 and elsewhere in the Bible.



The die for future-telling

The scarabs and the die

The scarabs bear a very great archeological importance for the dating of the site and its relationship with Egypt. Similar scarabs have been found in Egypt, Canaan and Cyprus. Nearby,

an engraved and pierced limestone die was unearthed. It was used as a “pour” a die for seeing into the future. Similar dice have been found in the Land of Israel and Mesopotamia.



Jar handles with indentations, for tithes

The ceramic inventory

The abundance of shards represents a catalogue of the early Israelite ceramic ware. Especially outstanding are the jars with handles marked with different patterns of indentations. In our opinion, these markings indicate the sending of tithes and contributions to the holy place. This custom continued during the era of the Second Temple, possibly an indication of ancient Israelite identity.

