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The Altar of Joshua

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Dear Peter,

If there was a single excavation I would have chosen as a typical example of the political misuse of archaeology, it would have been the recent Israeli dig near the summit of Mount Ebal in the heart of the occupied West Bank. Strangely enough, the first time I heard of these excavations was not in a scientific periodical, but on the NBC Nightly News one evening last spring. It was only a 10- or 15-second item-- read by Tom Brokaw without comment-- about how a team of Israeli archaeologists had announced the discovery near Nablus of a stone altar of sacrifice constructed by Joshua soon after the entrance of the Children of Israel into the Promised Land.

The next morning the story appeared on the bottom of the front page of the New York Times with a few additional details. The leader of the expedition, an archaeologist named Adam Zertal (the name was unfamiliar to me), explained to the Times correspondent that the obvious cultic nature of the structure, the remains of sacrifices, the date of pottery found at the site, and certain Biblical passages made the identification with "Joshua's Altar" a reasonable hypothesis.

Reading this article, I got the same sort of feeling I get when I read the constantly recurring reports of the "discovery" in eastern Turkey of the remains of Noah's Ark. Archaeologists rarely try to link their finds to specific Biblical personalities, and when they do, there seems to be a religious or political point being made.

I remember that when I was working in the Department of Antiquities here in Jerusalem about 10 years ago, we received a neatly typed letter, accompanied by detailed maps, sent by a wealthy Texan who claimed that he'd been studying the Bible and knew precisely where the chariots of the Pharaoh that had been submerged by the sudden closing of the parted waters could be found on the Red Sea bed. Because of this discovery, he suggested that it would be a mistake for Israel to return Sinai to Egypt, and he offered to provide funds for the retrieval of the chariots (they were solid gold, he claimed), and to pay for the construction of a modern museum to house them-- a clear testimony to the world's unbelievers about the unerring accuracy of the Holy Writ.

Not all Biblical archaeological claims are as harmless as this one was; archaeology has, in fact, occasionally been used during the last decade as a confirmation of territorial claims and as a justification of the establishment of Jewish settlements on the West Bank. In the case of the recent settlement of Shiloh, near the putative site of the Israelites' first national cult center in the 11th century BC, archaeology was used in a practical manner: the first houses constructed there in the late 1970's were said to be for housing the staff of a proposed archaeological excavation-- an excavation that never took place.

So you can understand why I was skeptical of the news reports of the discovery of "Joshua's Altar" at a site on the West Bank between the isolated Jewish settlement of Elon Moreh and the implacably turbulent Arab city of Nablus. From my perspective in America last spring, I sensed that there was some politically-inspired archaeological wishful thinking behind the discovery.

Soon after my arrival here in Israel, though, my initial assumptions were suddenly undermined. In the course of renewing old archaeological contacts, I jokingly mentioned the discovery to Professor Moshe Dothan of the University of Haifa, an archaeologist whose experience and judgment I greatly respect. Dothan didn't seem to think that the excavations were such a laughing matter; Adam Zertal, the excavator, was one of his own graduate students, and because of this Dothan had visited the site several times during the excavations. "I would say that the identification with Joshua's Altar," Dothan told me, "is 90% sure."

Ellen and I had been in the country for only two days and we had not even begun to unpack our suitcases or look for an apartment. But when Professor Dothan invited us to go with him the next day to Nablus, to meet Adam Zertal and to see the dig for ourselves, I decided that our apartment hunting would just have to wait.

* * *

The city of Nablus is about 35 miles north of Jerusalem-- an hour's drive along a fairly winding road. Immediately beyond the Jerusalem city limits, the new Arab and Jewish neighborhoods are closely intertwined. I say new Arab as well as new Jewish, because it is evident from the cement mixers, piles of sand, and stacked building stones lining the road out of the city that a great deal of construction in both communities is still going on.

Despite Palestinian nationalist feelings and opposition to Israeli annexation of the occupied territories, the Muslim and Christian inhabitants of the neighborhoods just to the north of Jerusalem seem, like the Arabs of Jerusalem itself, to have resigned themselves to be in Israel for the long haul. They seem to be participating in the

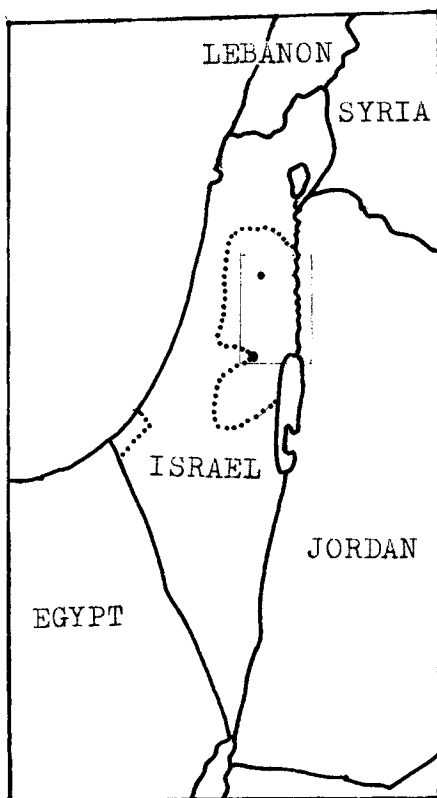
spending frenzy of the super-heated Israeli economy, building today in the uncertainty of what will come tomorrow-- a philosophy embodied in the dozens of new multi-storied apartment houses and villas, many of them with incongruously elaborate scale models of the Eiffel Tower rising from the flat surface of their roofs.

That's right. Eiffel Towers, some smaller than others, but even the smallest being at least 10 feet high, designed to support enormous TV antennas that, aesthetically at least, drastically dilute the Parisian effect. Some are painted in bright colors, some in a more conservative brown, but all are identical in conception-- an attempt to emphasize the external image of the homeowner's affluence.

North of the twin cities of Ramallah and El-Bireh, the density of building gradually thins out, and for the last 30 miles to Nablus, the road winds through mountains and valleys, marked by the scattered villages-- both old Arab and new Israeli-- perched on the rocky hill tops. The most obvious distinctions between them are the modern style of architecture and the high security fences of every Israeli settlement. One new settlement has even begun constructing rows of Swiss-style chalets with steeply pitched roofs, as if the flat roofs of the houses in the nearby Arab villages would be unseemly to imitate. Here and there along the main road a few young Israeli settlers can be seen waiting at bus-stops for a lift to somewhere else. And the names of their settlements are impeccably Biblical: Beth-El, Shiloh, Ari-el-- in contrast to the surrounding Arab names.

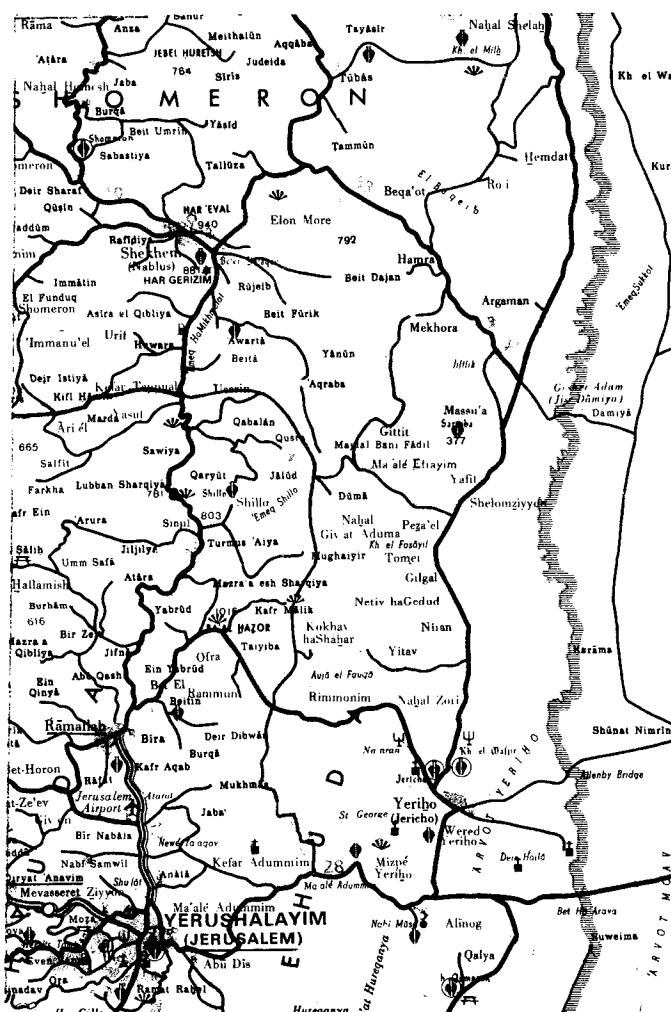
I hadn't been on the West Bank for almost 10 years, and forgetting all the demonstrations and occasional bloodshed that had gone on here in that time, I was impressed for most of the drive from Jerusalem to Nablus by the agricultural prosperity of the land. In the long stretches between the old villages and new settlements, at the bottoms of the ravines and steep valleys, thickly-planted olive groves were being harvested by family groups. Pickup trucks, sedans, and even a few taxis parked at the side of the road and bright colored blankets and pillows spread under the olive trees clearly marked each family's harvesting site.

It was only when we entered the outskirts of the city of Nablus that we began to see the first signs of real poverty. On our right, we passed the Palestinian refugee camp of Balata, as seen from the road, a sea of tumble-down tin shacks, sunken into a valley just outside the city itself. The isolation of the camp's inhabitants began long before the Israeli occupation; ever since their arrival at the time of the establishment of Israel in 1948, the refugees at Balata have remained a community apart, confronting the Jordanians and now the Israelis with rage at their unchanging situation, in the form of sporadic rock-throwing, barricades of burning tires, and general strikes.



Above: map of region

Right: enlarged area of inset.



But on the day we drove through here, all was peaceful at least on the surface, and passing Balata, we turned up the main street of the city, past automobile garages, body shops, then groceries and dry goods stores, into the center of Nablus itself.

* * *

The Israelis call this city Shekhem (pronounced with a hard, guttural *kh*) from its name in the Bible where it appears prominently in connection with the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Hebrew patriarchs. Its modern Arabic name, Nablus, on the other hand, is derived from the name of the city in a later incarnation, the Roman Neapolis.

As we drove through the center of the city, Professor Dothan pointed out the recently discovered evidence of that Roman city, dug up by Israeli archaeologists in several adjoining vacant lots. In the shadows of some very deep pits cut into the dusty grey earth we could see huge stone blocks neatly fitted together in a graceful semicircle. This, Dothan explained, was the remains of the amphitheater of Neapolis, which had even been equipped with water conduits so that it could be flooded for the presentation of naumachia, the mock naval battles that were popular public entertainment in the great cities of the ancient Roman world.

In fact, it was the memory of the prosperity and lavishness of Roman Neapolis that encouraged its inhabitants to retain the Latin name of the city long after the conquest of Palestine by the Muslim caliph Umar in 638 AD. Neapolis/Nablus continued to be the most important city in the north of the country throughout the Middle Ages. And after the Ottoman conquest in 1517, it became second in importance only to Jerusalem, its governor being given jurisdiction over the eastern territories across the Jordan River-- today's Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

The strategic importance of the city of Nablus as a geographical crossroads is reinforced by its unique topography, nestled in a deep valley, protected by steep mountain slopes on both its southern and northern sides. To the south is the tree-covered Mount Gerizim (Hebrew: Har Gerizim), site of the altar of the tiny surviving sect of the Samaritans, where every spring at the time of the Samaritan passover, the community offers up its own archaic Biblical sacrifice of seven pure sheep. Opposite Mount Gerizim is the barren Mount Ebal (Hebrew: Har Eval), and taking a side road away from the city center, we climbed its slopes on a winding road above Nablus past suburban-style villas and an unfinished hotel to the summit where we had arranged to meet Adam Zertal.

The view from the top was truly spectacular; the summit of Mount Ebal, at 3077 feet above sea level, is the highest point in the central mountain range, more than 200 feet higher than the adjoining Mount Gerizim. Although the panorama was clouded by a dusty scirocco wind blowing in that day from the desert, we could still take in a view of most of the country by slowly turning around. To the south were the range of mountains leading towards Jerusalem; to the west, the foothills descending gradually toward Tel Aviv on the coastal plain. To the north was the continuation of the mountainous spine of the country, and most dramatic of all, to the east were the rounded, barren hills leading down to the Jordan Valley and to the Trans-jordanian highlands beyond.

While we were absorbed in the landscape, Adam Zertal arrived.

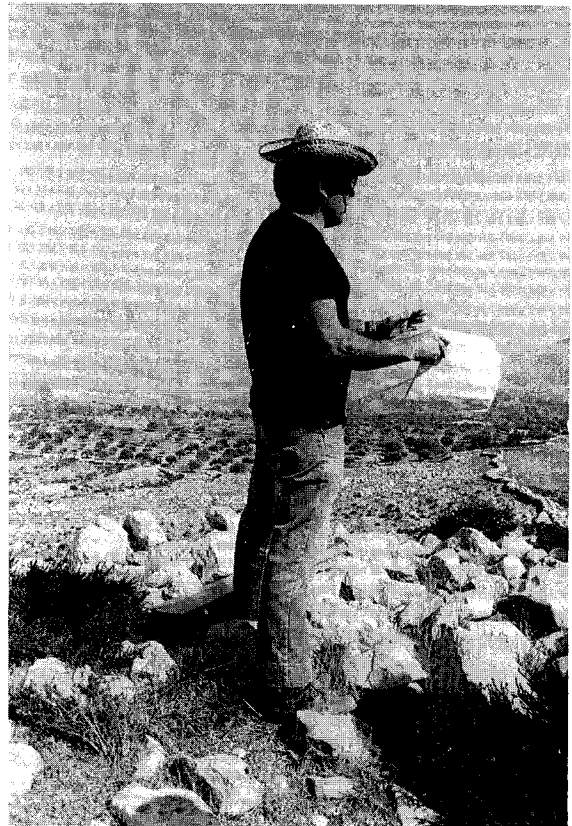
A husky, energetic man in his mid-40's, he impressed me as less of a typical scholar than a confident explorer, more at home hiking and climbing than framing esoteric archaeological footnotes. Professor Dothan made the formal introductions, and after taking the cameras and canteens out of the trunk of the car, we began the hike down to the site of "Joshua's Altar," which was not on the summit, but further down the eastern slope about a kilometer away.

The upper slopes of the mountain, though rocky and for the most part barren, were dampened by the recent first winter rains. The fact that agriculture was possible here was clear not only from the few groves of olive and date trees still cultivated, but also from the remnants of many ancient terraces all over the mountainside that had long been washed away.

After about 15 minutes of walking, we came to what Zertal called the second

"step" of the mountain, the second of four such natural plateaus by which the mountain descended to the eastern plain. About 50 yards away was an inconspicuous square structure, built of unhewn stones, disappointingly similar to the countless ruins that dot the hills throughout the West Bank. So this was "Joshua's Altar"--distinctly disappointing to me at first glance. And as we finally approached the unassuming structure, I braced myself for a bombastic speech and some dubious logic connecting this site with the famous Biblical shrine.

Surprisingly, though, Adam Zertal had not prepared a speech about territorial birthrights; he preferred to offer a geographical analysis instead. First of all, he pointed out, the view from this site, though impressive by normal standards, was completely



Adam Zertal, explaining the significance of the eastern approach to the site.



View of "Joshua's Altar" toward the northeast.

obstructed by the summit of Mount Ebal on both the south and the west. To the northeast there was a good view of the Arab villages of Talluza and Tubas, and to the southeast, of the new Israeli settlement of Elon Moreh. But the real focal point of the panorama, Zertal stressed to us, was the deep valley called Wadi Farah (Hebrew: Nahal Tirzah), one of the most convenient and natural routes of transport and communication between the Jordan Valley and the central mountain range. This geographical fact was obvious and as I would learn, it played an important part in the formulation of Zertal's ultimate conclusions about the nature of the site.

Zertal discovered the ruins themselves accidentally, he told us, during an archaeological survey of the immediate vicinity in 1978. Archaeological surveys are really nothing new in this country; for the last 30 years, Israeli archaeologists have been systematically exploring various areas, compiling lists and locations of ancient sites, in order to gain an understanding of ancient settlement patterns in the various periods of the country's long history. But since 1967, the West Bank has been of particular interest, not only because it was the area that was least explored. The archaeological question of the conquest and settlement of the Israelite tribes in the Promised Land is one of more than passing significance to the modern Israelis, now in the position of conquerors and settlers themselves.

The area of Zertal's survey was about 1500 square kilometers of rocky, hilly country-- essentially the northern third of the West Bank. He called the area "the mountains of Menasseh," using the name of the Hebrew tribe to which this territory was allotted in the Biblical text-- a choice of terminology that seemed to me to betray an obvious historical slant. The object of the survey, Zertal continued, was to plot the position of all ancient ruins encountered, to date the period of occupation, and to carry out limited excavations to clarify the layout and nature of any particularly interesting sites.

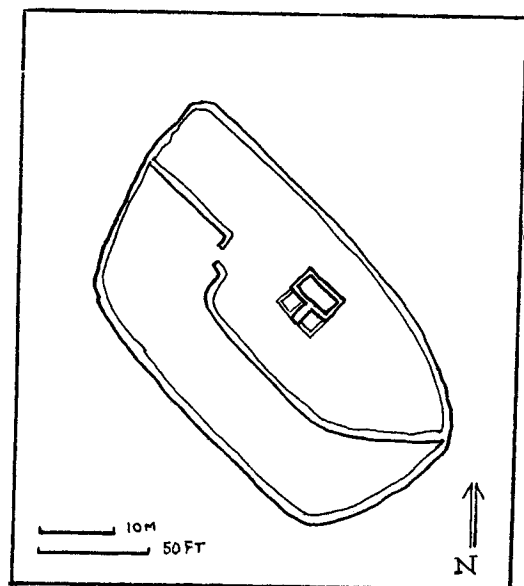
I suspected that "Israelite" could be easily substituted for "interesting" in Adam Zertal's lexicon, but as he went on with his explanation of the circumstances of the discovery, I began to sense that I was wrong. Zertal, I later learned, is a member of Kibbutz Ein Shemer, a stubbornly socialist-minded communal settlement on the coastal plain. And having, if anything, a political antipathy to the more conservative elements in Israeli society that are pushing for West Bank annexation, he proved himself to be extremely cautious--at least to us-- about making any Biblical claims.

"The strangest thing about my survey," Zertal told us, "was the fact that there were really so few Israelite remains. There was abundant proof of the agricultural prosperity of Roman Neapolis: of the 11 sites Zertal recorded in the immediate vicinity, 10 of them were all later than the Hellenistic Period (4th-2nd centuries BC) and most were occupied only in Late Roman and Byzantine times (2nd-7th centuries AD). "This was the only site that was earlier," he said, pointing to "Joshua's Altar," explaining that the Early Iron Age pottery fragments scattered all around it made it the only site that could be linked at least chronologically to the time of the settlement of the Israelite tribes.

The structure's appearance at the time of its discovery in March 1980 was that of a huge pile of boulders and fieldstones surrounded by a very rough enclosure wall. Zertal immediately assumed that it was an early Israelite farm or herdsman's enclosure, but unlike similar settlements that had previously been discovered, this one did not have the thick concentration of surrounding dwellings that was found at all the other sites.

So Zertal's next theory was that it must have been some sort of Israelite watchtower, but there were problems with this idea as well. First of all, the view from the site was mostly obstructed; second, no ancient highway was known to pass by this site. The main routes of antiquity (and of the modern era) by-pass the eastern slopes of Mount Ebal, turning south towards the city of Nablus/Shekhem. But the presence of pottery from the 12th century BC-- the generally accepted date for the final stages of the settlement of the Israelite tribes in the Promised Land-- was too intriguing to be ignored, and with what little money he had available to him from the remaining budget of the survey, Adam Zertal recruited a few volunteers from his kibbutz, cleared a path to the site from the summit of Mount Ebal, and began digging in September 1982.

While most of the Israeli public was concerned with recent developments in Lebanon, Zertal and his team were fully occupied with the mystery of ancient Israelite settlement on the West Bank. Lifting away the upper stones from the pile in the center of the ruins,



Schematic plan of the site.

they uncovered a strange, rectangular building about 23 x 26 feet in outer dimensions, with walls of unworked stones approximately 4 feet thick. To say that the building was strange is something of an understatement; not only were there no floors or entrances, but its corners were oriented to the cardinal points of the compass with an accuracy of within 1°.

As the excavations continued, Zertal completely cleared the inside of this building, stripping away four layers of bones, pottery, and ash. The bones, analyzed and identified by the Department of Zoology of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, were of four distinct species: cattle, sheep, goats, and a rare type of fallow deer. Some of the bones bore incisions, evidence of butchering, and all were charred by burning at a relatively low temperature-- not in an oven, but in an open fire.

On the southwestern side of the main structure were two separate walled courtyards, linked to the main structure by unusual retaining walls. Inside one of them, Zertal and his team discovered 7 stone silos filled with either ash and bones or complete pottery vessels, carefully deposited there at the time of the building's use and subsequently never disturbed. The forms of the complete pottery vessels gave an accurate date for the last use of the complex: around 1150 BC. And for the time of the construction of the main building, there was a precious chronological clue in the layers of fill, a tiny Egyptian scarab, dated on stylistic grounds to the second half of the reign of the reign of Pharaoh Ramesses II, who ruled from c. 1300 to c. 1227 BC.

Ramesses II is now generally considered to be the pharaoh mentioned in the Book of Exodus, but there was a much more convincing element yet to come. As we walked around the main structure, Zertal pointed out the main retaining wall that divided the two external courtyards and linked them to the main building itself.

"I'm always a little nervous when I start explaining this part of the building," Zertal admitted, and it soon became clear just why. The main wall, divided lengthwise, rose from the outside of the courtyards to the main wall of the building at a very easy grade of 22°.

It was obvious that this was a ramp to provide easy access to the top of the main structure, but at the time of the excavation, Zertal was puzzled about the purpose of the lengthwise division, the lower part of which turned to the left to wrap itself around the more northern courtyard. The answer to this mystery, he explained to us, did not come from any previous excavation of Israelite settlements, but from the description of the great altar of sacrifice in the Jerusalem Temple, preserved in the Mishnah, a codification of Jewish law and tradition, compiled around 200 AD.

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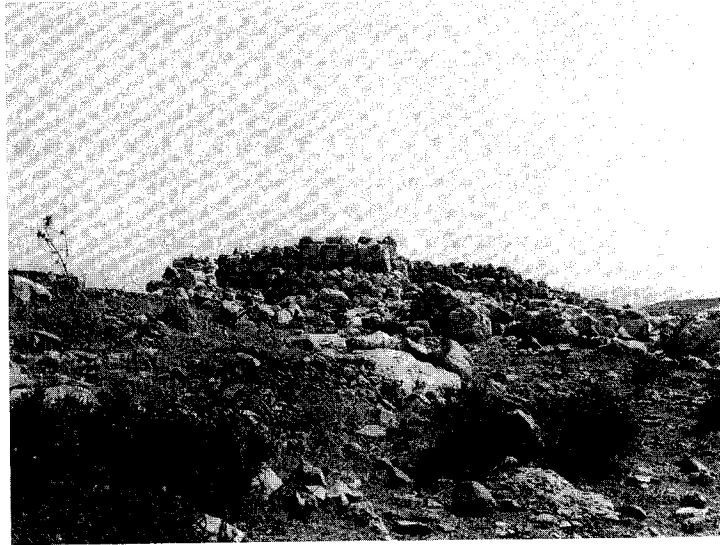
A great deal of mystical speculation-- some profound and esoteric, a great deal pure nonsense-- has centered on the dimensions and construction of the various buildings of the Temple in Jerusalem as it stood before the destructions by the Babylonians in 587 BC and by the Romans in 70 AD. The prophet Ezechiel devoted considerable detail to the dimensions of the various courts and altars, so did the separatist sect of Essenes of the 1st century AD in the recently published Dead Sea "Temple Scroll." So did the Crusading Order of Templars in the Middle Ages, and so still do the adherents of Freemasonry, whose elaborate rituals are attributed to their founder, Hiram the Phoenician architect and master-mason, who supposedly designed the Temple and its buildings for King Solomon himself.

The main problem with all these speculations for the modern student or scholar is that the actual remains of the Temple have been completely destroyed. Not only is the site of the Temple now occupied by the Muslim shrines of the Dome of the Rock and the el-Aqsa Mosque (much to the disappointment of various dangerous Jewish and Christian extremist groups), but the Temple itself stood in ruins from 70 AD to about 640 AD, during which time any remains that might have survived from the original structures were most probably carted away and re-used in the construction of the pagan Roman city of Aelia Capitolina, which rose from the rubble of the former Judean capital.

But at the same time that the Roman architects were planning and building their gleaming white marble city, the Jewish rabbis and sages who had survived the ill-fated revolts against the Roman Imperium were carefully preserving, at least in manuscript form, every detail and measurement of the structures that had once been the center of their cult. And in the section of the Mishnah, titled Midoth or "Measurements," there is a careful description of the main altar of sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple, including the measurements of the very strange ramp leading up to the top.

It was divided in half lengthwise, the lower portion of the ramp called the "Sovev" running around the outside of the main altar to the left. And just as in the structure on Mount Ebal, there was a

ledge running around the entire altar, to provide a place for the officiating priests to stand. Since no traces of the Jerusalem altar survived the Temple's destruction by the Romans, the accuracy of this Mishnaic description has remained a mere article of tradition and faith. Excavations in the 1920's at the earlier Israelite cult center at Shiloh (which was destroyed by the Philistines) failed to find much of anything that could be called cultic, certainly not the national altar of sacrifice. This structure at Mount Ebal, though, was never destroyed or even damaged simply because it was abandoned within 100 years of its construction-- around 1150 BC-- long before the Israelite confederacy, dwelling in the mountains of today's West Bank posed a threat to anyone else.



View of "Joshua's Altar" toward the southeast, with ramp descending to the right.

So now we finally got around to the reading of the relevant Biblical passages, whose connection with this site I had initially discounted. Once again Adam Zertal emphasized to us the topographical orientation of the site toward the Jordan Valley, and then taking out a pocket edition of the Bible that he had conveniently brought with him, he began to read the words of Moses to the Children of Israel from the Book of Deuteronomy:

"... And when you have passed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, concerning which I command you this day, on Mount Ebal, and you shall plaster them with plaster. And there you shall build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones; you shall lift up no iron tool upon them. You shall build an altar to the Lord your God of unhewn stones; and you shall offer burnt offerings upon it to the Lord your God..." (Deut. 27:4-6)

That was only the commandment, but in another part of the Bible, in the Book of Joshua, Zertal read the passage that described how the commandment was fulfilled:

"...Then Joshua built an altar in Mount Ebal to the Lord, God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the people of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, 'an altar of unhewn stones, upon which no man has lifted an iron tool'; and they offered on it burnt offerings to the Lord..." (Josh. 8:30-31)

The dating of these passages, like much of the Biblical text, is, of course, problematical, but they seem to reflect a memory of the first national shrine of the Israelite tribes. And the fact that nothing more is heard of this early religious center seems to match perfectly the archaeological findings: abandonment after a relatively brief period of use.

In fact, there just seemed to be too many correspondences to discount the identification with "Joshua's Altar" as sheer coincidence. The view toward the Jordan, across which Joshua supposedly led the Israelites into Canaan; the date of the pottery, perfectly matching the accepted date for the conquest and settlement of the Israelite tribes; and finally, the form of the altar itself seemed to be an uncanny prototype for the form of later Hebrew altars of sacrifice.

So, as we left the site, hiked back up the slopes, and got into the car for the ride back to Jerusalem, I had quite a bit to think about. Adam Zertal had confronted me with a very intriguing problem: what if an archaeological discovery did in fact seem to confirm the religious and territorial dogma of the extreme Israeli right wing?

* * *

In the week that followed our visit to Mount Ebal, I learned two very interesting things, the first concerning Adam Zertal and the second about his dig. Zertal, despite his present fitness, had been severely wounded in the 1973 war and had spent more than a year in the hospital regaining the use of his legs. It was during this time that he completed the course work for a BA degree in archaeology, and after he completed his rehabilitation, he decided to make archaeology his career.

The discovery of "Joshua's Altar" was the astounding complement to his doctoral dissertation, which dealt with the archaeological problems of early Israelite settlement. And Zertal has found lavish support for the continuation of the excavations on Mount Ebal, in

which he hopes to uncover completely the altar, adjoining courtyards, and surrounding area. Archaeology, like politics, sometimes makes strange bedfellows; Zertal, a member of the leftist, anti-annexationist Shomer HaTzair, or "Young Guard," kibbutz movement, is now the recipient of the largess of the extreme right-wing Tehiya, or "Renaissance," Party, among the loudest and most powerful supporters of the Israeli annexation of the West Bank.

During the week that followed our trip to Mount Ebal, Ellen and I also managed to find ourselves an apartment and began to settle into a routine. One evening I was invited to a reception at the British School of Archaeology here in Jerusalem, and in the course of the evening, I happened to speak with another Israeli archaeologist about the importance of Adam Zertal's dig.

I explained that I was impressed with the finds and with the plausible connection to Joshua, or at least to the early Israelites. I also expressed my apprehension that the discovery might be used politically-- in light of the source of the excavation's new-found financial support. My partner in conversation, though, stubbornly disagreed.

"Those excavations have absolutely no political significance," he told me, "They have more to do with the career plans of an ambitious man like Adam Zertal. Do you know what he told the Israeli press when he announced the discovery of the site? He told them that this was the second most important archaeological discovery in history-- second only to Pompeii!"

"No," he repeated even more adamantly, "The excavations on Mount Ebal have absolutely no political significance."

I listened politely and nodded, but I still wasn't totally convinced.

Best Regards from Jerusalem,

Neil

Received in Hanover 11/14/84