

Altars in the Bible

Significance, Purposes, and Types

Introduction

A key item which modern Christianity tends to overlook is the importance of the Sacrificial System of the TaNaKh (Hebrew Scriptures or Old Testament). Most modern Christians believe they are not “bound” or “under” the teachings therein due to centuries of “Replacement Theology” teachings. Known also as “Supersessionism” or “Fulfillment Theology”, this belief system posits that the Christian Church has “REPLACED” / superseded the Hebrew / Jewish people as the “Covenant People of God” and further asserts that the Teachings of Yeshua (described in the New Testament) fully replaces the Mosaic Covenant. I do not see evidence of this in the Bible itself (see Matthew 5:17 for a start), therefore I do NOT TEACH Supersessionism. On the contrary, Yeshua (in Matt 5:17) said “... Do not think that I have come to do away with the Law or Prophets...” By the terms “Law” and “Prophets” Yeshua was referring to the TaNaKh (ancient Hebrew Scriptures), which you read in all the Gospels Yeshua kept / followed. In the second portion of Matt 5:17 Yeshua said he came to Fill them Up, meaning to provide maximum meaning and purpose to what was already recorded in the Mosaic Law / Torah. This means that there must exist (minimally) some spiritual symbolism in that ancient Torah (meaning “Instructions”). Altars are part of that ancient Law / Practices in mankind interacting with God, so, in my mind, we need to understand everything possible about how the ancients interacted with God. I personally believe this is why the Bible has been miraculously preserved for us, even in the face of countless attempts to eradicate it. In my understanding of both the New and Old Testament teachings, one must first grasp the fundamental concepts of Altars before one can understand the Sacrifices that were offered on those Altars. Hence the reason for this article is a starting point to understand the totality of the Substitutionary Sacrificial System and the depth of what Yeshua Messiah accomplished through his Ultimate Sacrifice on our behalf.

However, in studying Altars in the TaNaKh, one immediately notices there are several Categories of Altars, with several differing (but related) Purposes. This teaching is meant to clarify all aspects of altars BEFORE trying to grasp the modern significance of the Sacrificial System that involves those very Altars.

Symbolism of Altars

One immediate point to clarify from reading about Altars in the Old Testament is they acknowledge **God's Ownership of His Creation**, in which we all live. God is the Creator of everything and everything technically belongs to Him. We may assemble / construct the Altar, but the underlying principle is clear – God is the owner of that Altar, since it was constructed from materials (usually, stone, earth, wood) that He provided. **Altars therefore symbolize Gods' Ownership of the world in which we live.**

When one “goes” to any Category of Altar, they are symbolically saying in their heart, I want to meet with the Creator-they desire “Fellowship” with God, and we know from reading the entire Bible that is exactly what the Creator wants from us as well. Look at the Garden Scene in Genesis chapter 3. At this point in the Creation Narrative, God had Constructed an amazingly rich and protected environment call “Gan Eden” (often translated as Garden of Eden, but Gan refers to a fruit-bearing tree arbor). Further, God had meticulously molded man from the very Dust He had created in this World. (see Gen 2:7 to understand both how God made the first man as well as the internal components He provided us (living Body, Soul, and a part of His Spirit – His very Breath). Then he placed the man in the “Gan Eden” to tend it and work it. Then in Gen 2:19, God created all the creatures of the earth and birds of the air and let man (Adaam) name them, but a suitable companion for man was not found in the created animals. Therefore, knowing that the man being alone was not “good”, he did surgery to remove a part of Adaam's side and created Woman. God, in this depiction, was focused on man's companionship in the physical – in the natural world. But man had a Spiritual component that only God could address, since that very Spirit (Ruach) came directly from God. Therefore, notice in Gen chapter 3, following the disobedience of Adaam and Hava (Eve), that they both “... heard the sound of I-A-U-A Elohim walking in the Garden in the cool of the evening...” (Gen 3:8). So apparently, God would visit with them in the “cool of the evening”, but this particular visit, something had changed – they had disobeyed a direct commandment of God. The judgement of God followed and from that point, **nothing in this physical earthly life would be the same as it was at the Beginning in Gan Eden (which was isolated from man's access).** Adaam and Eve's feeble attempt to cover what they perceived to be the major cause of embarrassment (their nakedness) using fig leaves, God corrected. He instituted the early sacrificial (substitutionary) system. Since they thought they needed clothing, he instructed them that vegetation was insufficient (**which was a symbol that their sin nature could not be “covered” / Atoned by their effort**). God shed the innocent blood of animals to “cover” both their nakedness properly AND their sin. POINT – Only God can forgive sins. The first sacrifice, with or without first constructing an altar, God did in demonstration that they had

broken close fellowship with God the Creator – they sinned – which technically required death, which involved the shedding of blood. But in God’s mercy, he setup the substitutionary sacrificial system by which man could be restored to “**at-one-ment**” (**atonement**) with God. By coming to God at an Altar, you are acknowledging His Supremacy and your need of fellowship with Him, and (even if I construct the Altar) it is from Materials He Provided therefore He Owns that Altar and all Creation – Full Stop.

And so, the need for an altar, on which to both Sacrifice (to Atone for sin) and meet with God began.

Significance of Altars

A second point to notice when studying Altars, is they Signify a **Meeting Place between the Divine Creator and His Creation**. In the Old testament, Altars were constructed to memorialize an encounter with the Creator, recall / remind later generations of a significant event, and to simply focus worship and praise at a location where one believed they were meeting with God. Let’s examine some Biblical examples ...

- After the Garden Scene, we see that Cain & Abel both brought Sacrifices before God. We are not told whether an Altar was involved, but it could have been. Cains “fruit of the ground” (vegetables and/or fruit) was not accepted. In some way, He failed to follow his father’s teaching on sacrifice (Adaam). Therefore, God did not look with “favor” on his offering. While we are on this particular sacrifice from two brothers, note that Abel brought from the “Flock” – that is a living animal with blood. Therefore, Abel had to shed its blood, which gives us a hint as to why God accepted Abel’s but not Cains (more on this in the “Sacrifices” teaching).
- The next time we directly read of an Altar, is following the flood, when Noah built an Altar and sacrificed on that Altar “Burnt Offerings” of dedication to God. More than any Sacrifice, the “Olah” or “burnt offering” demonstrates total devotion to God (either because of who He is or what he has done – such as saving Noah and his family). That Altar commemorated the place where God had brought the life-saving ark to rest on dry ground, so Noah wanted to honor his Protector-God by building an Alter and sacrificing clean animals to signify his (Noah’s) total dedication to God.
- Next, in Gen 12:7, after Abram (with his wife, Sarai and nephew Lot) obediently left their homeland (Haran) and traveled to Canaan, they arrived at the Oak / Terebinth Tree of Moreh, near the town of Shechem. Here, God “appeared to Abram and said, I will give this land to you and your posterity. So, Abram built an Altar there to I-A-U-

H, who had appeared to him”. This time Abram commemorated “meeting with God” by building an Altar.

- Abram continued his journey to “the mountain east of Bethel and pitched his tent”. Here, Abram built yet another Altar, but this one he used to specifically “... call on the name of I-A-U-H ...”. This Altar was less of a Memorial Altar and more of a functional Altar where Abram could “... call on the name of I-A-U-H...” – that is to communicate with God. This is of great significance, since apparently Abram fully believed God, and wanted to “Meet with God”, possibly on a regular basis, hence the Altar (see Gen 12:8).
- After leaving Egypt with Lot and his herds, Abram went back to the Altar he had built near Bethel (recall, that was the Altar he used to “...call on the name of I-A-U-H”). Again, Abram “... called on the name of I-A-U-H...” – he met with God. (see Gen 13:4). While here, with Lot now living near Sodom, God spoke to Abram and showed him all the land that He would give to him and his posterity. God told Abram to “... walk through the land...”
- Therefore (at God’s urging to “... walk through all the land...”) Abram traveled southward, to the oaks of Mamre near Hebron and built yet another Altar to I-A-U-H God (see Gen 13:8).
- The next Altar that Abram built was one of extreme devotion to God as well as a tremendous “foreshadowing” of God’s Plan of Salvation for mankind – the sending of His Son, Yeshua the Messiah. In Gen 22:9, after 3 days journey, Abram and his young adult son Isaac, journeyed to one of the mountains that God would show them for a Sacrifice. This mountain is believed to be either Mount Moriah or Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. There, Abram (as well as his son Isaac) demonstrated their faith in God the Creator, in that they were willing to let Abram sacrifice his only son on the Altar. Issac was a young man, symbolizing a young ram, which (by the way) was what God provided as a Substitutionary Sacrifice in Isaac’s place – a Ram caught in thicket. Clearly, this Altar was one of Sacrifice, but still showed two things which Abram and Isaac knew:
 - This was a Dedicatory Altar for a Burnt Offering – the sacrifice would not survive
 - God was the owner of the Altar which Abram built and the Creator to whom the Burnt Offering would be presented

Abram was willing, because God asked him (in previous verses) to sacrifice his only son. Once God stayed Abram’s hand from following through with the sacrifice of his son, Isaac, imagine how joyful this entire journey and meeting with God, on this mountain, when the Ram was substituted as the burnt

offering in his Son's place. A Joyful meeting place indeed. Abram named that place, "I-A-U-H I-R-A-H or Yahuwe Yirah – The Lord Will Provide". Whether Mount Moriah (where the 2 ancient Temples stood) or Mount of Olives (where many believe Yeshua was sacrificed and from whence, he will return), it is clear Yeshua is foreshadowed here. What a glorious prophecy as well.

- Isaac, at Beersheba, built an Altar and called on God's Name after God spoke to him about the Promises to his father (Abram) being passed to him (Isaac) – another "meeting place" between Isaac and I-A-U-H God (just like his father, Abram) (see Gen 26:25).
- Near Shechem, Jacob / Israel bought a piece of land and built an Altar which he named "El-Elohe-Israel – God, the God of Israel". This represents yet another "memorial", following in his ancestors (Isaac and Abram) footsteps.
 - Next, in Gen 35, God instructs Jacob to go to Bethel and build an altar, since God had appeared to him there after he fled from his brother Esau, who sought his life.
- The next Altar mention is in Exodus 17:15 where Moses builds an Altar and called it "I-A-U-H N-S-I – yahuwe nissi – God is my Banner", in the wilderness.
- In Exodus 20:24, something changes. God Himself provides some instructions on When and How to build Altars to Himself. As a prelude in Exodus 20:22, God says, "... You have seen for yourselves that I have talked to you from Heaven...", meaning while all the Assembly was at the base of Mount Sinai. Then in verse 22, He instructs the building of Altars (for sacrifice) in every place where "...I record my Name and cause it to be remember..." . Two points are clear from v 20-22::
 - God will speak to us, if we seek Him from Heaven
 - Where do we seek Him? Where He says to put His Name – a Memorial location – a meeting place between God and His people.

More instructions from God on Altars and their Construction appear in Exodus chapter 20.

- Then we come to specific Altars God prescribed as "furnishings" for the "Mish kan (tabernacle)". From Exodus 27 through 30, God provides instructions on the Brazen Altar of Sacrifice, the Golden Altar of incense and how these Altars are to be used by His representative Priesthood (Aaron & his sons). Exodus 38 and 39 provide the details of how the skilled craftsmen made all the tabernacle's furnishings then finally in Exodus Chapter 40, Moses assembles the Tabernacle and its furnishings (including the 2 Altars) and the Presence of God comes down as acknowledgement of proper construction, assembly, and process to "Meet with God".

In summary for this section, ALL of the Altars were **Meeting Places for God and His People**, whether collectively or personally.

Categories of Altars

Next, we examine the Categories (or Types) of Altars depicted in the Bible. Studies reveal there are Four fundamental Categories:

1. Altars for **Worship**
2. Altars for **Sacrifice**
3. Altars for **Communication** between Divine and Human
4. Altars that **Memorialize** a great work of God

As an example, the Altar built by Abram at the Oaks of Moreh (near Shechem or modern Nablus) was (at a minimum) a Memorial Altar since God had appeared to Abram at that place. We don't know if it was used for any other purposes, but the next Altar Abram was asked to build (the Altar that was East of Bethel) was a Communication Altar – he built it to call on the Name of I-A-U-A. Altars could also simultaneously be of two categories. Take the Brazen Altar of Sacrifice (Ex 20) as an example, in which Sacrifices were offered on this altar to Atone for sins, which (as I describe in the article on “Worship”) IS a FORM of Worship. The Altar of Stone built by Joshua on Mount Ebal following the defeat of the City of Ai (see Josh 8:30-31) would be an example of both Spontaneous Worship and a Memorial Altar. In the New Testament, the Priest Zachariah was serving in the Temple, which was his daily, priestly service according to the division of Abia. It fell to Zachariah (by lot) that he would be the priest to enter the Temple and burn incense (See Luke 1:9). While serving before the Golden Altar of Incense, and Angel of God communicated with him and informed him he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a son and he was to be named Yohanan (John, as in John the Baptist). Therefore, even in the New Testament, Altars were a place of communication between the Divine and Humans.

Purposes of Altars

The question for today's believers in Yeshua remains, is there a purpose to an Altar. After all, according to Mosaic Law, without a Temple and Brazen Altar of Sacrifice where God chose to “Place His Name”, we (nor the Jews) can do any Sacrifices – the Temple and its Altars were fully raised by the Romans in 70 CE.

Although the above statements are correct (there is no Temple in Jerusalem – where God put His Name – nor is there a Brazen or Golden Altar) does not mean an Altar does not exist. Let's review Romans 12:1:

“Therefore, brothers, I call on you through the compassions of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service.” – LITV Translation

Although there is no physical Altar, there is (I believe) an internal, Spiritual Altar for each and every one of us. Note the following Scripture:

Jer 31:31 = **“Behold, the days come, says Jehovah, that I will cut a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”** – LITV

The word which we translate into English as “new” is the Hebrew word “Chadash”, from the Hebrew root word which means to RENEW or repair.

Now let's look at Jer 31:33:

“But this shall be the covenant that I will cut with the house of Israel: After those days, declares Jehovah, I will put My Law in their inward parts, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.”

Both verses foresaw, from Jeremiah's time (following the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem ~ 586 BCE), the coming of Messiah, and Him filling up Full the meaning of the Levitical Sacrifices. Verse 33 goes on to say that God will put his Law (Hebrew = “Torah” or Teachings) into our “HEARTS”. This clearly tells me that my “Heart” (spoken of over 830 times in the Bible) and what I allow to enter therein is of great importance to God, since He wants His Torah / Teachings in there to guide my Thoughts, Deeds, and Opinions. Many Scriptures (especially in Proverbs and Psalms) urge us to guard our hearts, meaning, protect what you allow to be used in your fundamental decision making.

Going further, and by the symbology of the Tabernacle itself, mankind (at least from the Creator's perspective) is modeled in the Tabernacle / Temple. Note 1 Cor 3:16:

“Do you not know that you are a sanctuary of God, and the Spirit of God dwells in you?”
LITV

So where, assuming I ask God, does His Spirit dwell inside of me. I believe He Dwells in the internal component of you He designed for Himself – Your Spirit. That which Gen 2:7 says he “Breathed into” the original man (and therefore us). I further believe, carrying the model of the Tabernacle / Temple into this discussion, that our Spirit is equated to the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle where the very Presence of God Himself resided, above the Mercy

Seat on the Ark of the Covenant. I further believe that the sum total of your mind, will, emotions, and memories are modeled to conform (at least with belief, study and attention) to the Holy Place, where the Table of Showbread, the Menorah (Lights), and the Golden Altar existed – all depicting the place where the Priests entered to perform their duties daily. With the above Scriptures and the modeling of the Tabernacle / Temple in mind, I maintain Jeremiah's Prophecy of the "RENEWED COVENT" and God placing His "Torah / Teachings" in our spiritual Hearts justifies this modeling of every human being. You see, if you don't put God in the place He designed for Himself inside you (your Spirit), then either YOU are in there or some other False God is in there. And what is between you entering either the Holy Place or the Holy of Holies – ANSWER – an Altar. To enter the Holy Place to serve whatever deity you have inside your Holy of Holies, you must deal with 2 furnishings – the Brazen Altar of Sacrifice (which is in the outer court, which represents our physical bodies) and the Golden Altar of Incense which stands before the Holy of Holies. POINT – both are Altars. So in Rom 12, Paul really did mean that we present ourselves daily / dedicate ourselves daily to God through our High Priest, helping us do proper service in the Holy Place and interceding with prayers at the Golden Altar of Incense.

This is the Purpose of an Altar – to :

1. Worship God
2. Sacrifice our Will to His
3. Meet / Fellowship with God
4. Memorialize God in our Hearts