

The Altar in Joshua and Judges*

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THE OBJECT of this paper was to study the evidence in the text on Israelite methods of building altars, and to consider what were the differences from Canaanite custom. Little is said directly in the text. The Law (Ex. xx. 24ff.) prescribes earth or rough stone altars, with the intention that they should be temporary, just as the earth filling of the tabernacle altar would leave no permanent memorial; this is borne out by the facts stated or implied in Judg. xx-xxi, while the permanent 'altars' on Ebal (Josh. viii 30ff.) and by Jordan (Josh. xxii . 10) were for different purposes.

* Summary of a paper read at the O.T. Study Group, July 1959

Some Canaanite altars may have been natural rock surfaces, but not all; the altar which Gideon had to pull down was substantial, and the words used for breaking it suggest an erected structure. No case can be made for an early Israelite custom of using natural altars; of the instances recorded (Judg. vi.20, xiii. 19; I Sam. xiv. 33), the first was almost unintentional and the other two took place under conditions of general difficulty and apathy. Gideon and Saul both erected altars for regular sacrifice almost immediately.

The absence of '*asherim*' ('groves') from orthodox Israelite altars is certain; and although the term *massebah* ('pillar') occurs, the context always makes it clear that there is no idolatrous connotation. (Judg. ix. 6 with Josh. xxiv. 26; cf. Ex. xxiv. 4)¹.

The debate continues on 'centralization' (which has become something of a catchword; we need to consider more carefully what it might mean in practice). Since the theory that Josiah's reforms were due to the discovery of Deuteronomy has been refuted (see Donald Robinson's monograph), much has been said against the associated view that the book 'demanded centralization'. If the text of Deuteronomy is not conclusive (though xxii. 5 seems hard to read otherwise than as meaning one sanctuary), there is no doubt that the affair of the altar '*Ed*' caused a great scandal. The sanctuary of the ark was unique, and we read how Elkanah paid yearly visits (quite apart from festivals). On the other hand it can be argued that the importance of ritual cleansing would have made local altars a necessity. This all bears on the question of how the invasion of Canaan fell short of the original idea.

¹ Apart from these features, the type of altar used does not seem to have been a principal point of opposition between Israelite and Canaanite religion.