

Found: First Altar Ancient Hebrews Ever Built in Israel

Zvi Koenigsberg does not come from the world of academia, but he witnessed one of the most remarkable stories in archaeology: the discovery of the first altar the Hebrews built in the land of Israel. This discovery has gone largely unheralded, and some archaeologists have even gone to great lengths to deny the obvious.

In 1981, Koenigsberg was the chairman of the local governing council of Shavei Shomron. Adam Zertal, a student of archaeology at the time, came to the town to give a lecture about an archaeological survey that involved walking systematically over a given area and recording every surface find. Koenigsberg met Zertal and they immediately struck up a friendship that lasted until the archaeologist passed away in 2015. Zertal introduced him to a site that he had discovered 18 months previous to their meeting on Mount Ebal and that he very much wanted to excavate. Known as El-Burnat, Arabic for “the hat,” the mound of stones was situated in a naturally occurring amphitheater 880 meters above sea level, and 60 meters below the summit. The site was dominated by a mound of stones.

Koenigsberg, motivated by friendship for Zertal and curiosity, helped set up the logistics of the dig. Koenigsberg was familiar with the region and helped procure necessary resources unavailable to the young archaeologist.

Zertal discovered the remains of a rectangular structure, nine meters by seven meters, built of unhewn stones. Internal walls seemed to be designed for people to walk on top of the structure. A seven-meter ramp—set at 22 degrees—ascended to the top of the structure. Pottery shards were present in the entire vicinity in huge quantities, almost all dating to a

single period in the early Iron Age, approximately the 13th Century BCE.

During one of their discussions concerning the dig, Zertal sketched the square platform and its adjacent ramp. Zertal, raised on a secular kibbutz that discouraged the study of Jewish traditional texts of all kinds, had no idea what the platform was. Koenigsberg, who had a yeshiva education, immediately recognized the image for what it was: a stone altar almost exactly matching the description in the Mishnah of the Second Temple altar in Jerusalem.

“Therefore, when you cross over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. There you must build an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones. You must not use any iron tool on them” (Deut. 27:4-5).

Koenigsberg introduced Zertal to all of the literature, biblical and rabbinic, concerning the construction of the altar and about the altar on Mount Ebal in particular. One of the books, a Mishnah (tractate Middot), contained a drawing almost identical to Zertal’s sketch.

“Zertal was excited,” Koenigsberg told *Breaking Israel News*. “He was convinced that this is what stood at Ebal.”

Other aspects of the dig seemed to confirm that this was the site of a Jewish altar. Among the stones was a large quantity of ash and more than 3,000 animal bones. These bones had been burnt on an open flame, and many had butcher marks, implying that at least parts of them had been eaten. These bones were all from animals that the Torah declares to be pure; the overwhelming percentage of the specimens were year-old male cattle, sheep and goats, all sacrificial animals according to biblical law.

To confirm his theory, Zertal asked Koenigsberg to bring Benjamin Mazar, a pioneering Israeli historian who was

recognized as the “dean” of biblical archaeologists, to the site. Mazar arrived, Bible in hand. Mazar was visibly shaken by the experience though he was not ready to confirm their theory that this was the site of the biblical altar.

Since the site now appeared to have biblical relevance, they turned to Rabbi Yoel Bin-nun, a brilliant Bible scholar and one of the founders of Yeshivat Har Etzion, who did a complete study of the site and compared it to the Jewish laws concerning altars. Though the site did not conform to previous beliefs that the altar stood near Shechem in between Mount Ebal and Mount Bracha, the structure on Ebal fulfilled all the requirements for an altar.

An altar must be constructed of uncut field stones. Stairs may not be used and a ramp is needed to access the top of the altar. The structure is surrounded on three sides by a ledge, which would allow anyone walking upon it to access the top of the structure. The two inner walls would allow priests access to the middle of the structure, which they lead to on either side. Rabbinic literature refers to a circular mound in the middle of an altar called the *Tapuah*.

Rabbi Bin-nun studied anew all of the relevant verses describing the location of the altar and concluded that they did not, in fact, necessarily refer to the city of Shechem. The rabbi was convinced that the site being studied by Zertal was indeed the altar.

The ritual complex was built around 1250 BCE and existed for less than a century, after which it was deliberately covered with stones. Zertal dated the final days of the altar site when it was intentionally covered in stones, to around 1140 BCE.

“This was likely done to both decommission the site and to protect it from being looted or reused,” Koenigsberg conjectured.

It is important to note that the covering of the site on Ebal precisely corresponded to the rise of the site in Shiloh which has been identified as the location of the Tabernacle after Mount Ebal.

Koenigsberg relates this change in location to an enigmatic section of the Bible. When Joseph brought his two sons to his father, Jacob, for a blessing, he presents the older son, Menashe, on Jacob's right. But Jacob crosses his arms, blessing the younger, Ephraim, with his right hand.

"He blessed them that day, saying, 'By you Israel will bless, saying, "May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh."' So he set Ephraim before Manasseh" (Gen. 48:20).

Koenigsberg explained that implicit in this blessing was a hint that the central cultic site of Israel would stand first in Ebal, in the territory belonging to the tribe of Menashe, before being transferred to Shiloh, in the territory of Ephraim.

Zertal's findings were hotly contested by other archaeologists and he became a controversial figure in the academic world.

"We had horrible encounters with academics who refused to accept that this is what he had found," Koenigsberg said. "Zertal dug at the site for eight years and not one of his academic advisers ever acknowledged that the site was the altar from the time of Joshua."

Dr. Yitzhaki Paz, a senior archaeologist at the Israel Antiquities Authorities refuted Zertal's conclusion.

"There is a hypothesis that these ruins are the ruins of the base of a guard tower. In any case, archaeology isn't an exact science, and there is no way to prove the connection between this archaeological site and Yehoshua Ben Nun from the Bible 100 percent."

Zertal eventually published his findings in *Biblical Archaeology Review*, but many archaeologists criticized his conclusions.

“The real issue was less with the idea that the structure was an altar, and more with the corollary to his claim,” Koenigsberg stated in an article about the site. “Zertal was not merely saying that this was an ancient Israelite altar, but that this was a specific altar, one described in detail twice in the Bible.”

In his article, Koenigsberg dismissed these claims.

“Not only does El-Burnat date to this period (early Iron Age I), but it is the only site on all of Mount Ebal that does,” Koenigsberg wrote.

Koenigsberg’s remarkable story about the altar at Mount Ebal is recorded in his book, *The Lost Temple of Israel*. {eoa}

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