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The Witness of Joshua's Altar

Joshua built an altar to the Lord on Mount Ebal as a place of worship and witness ([Josh. 8:30-31](#)). He constructed it using only uncut field stones, as Moses instructed (cf. [Dt. 27:4-6](#)). There Joshua and the priests conducted a covenant renewal ceremony with the new generation of Israelites who had not shared their parents' experience at Mount Sinai ([Josh. 8:32-35](#)).

In this ceremony, Joshua wrote a copy of the Mosaic Covenant; separated the congregation into equal groups on Mount Ebal and adjacent Mount Gerazim; and recited to them the blessing and cursing sections of the Law. The witness of the blessing was to be placed on Mount Gerazim and the cursing on Mt. Ebal ([Dt. 11:29](#)). This covenant ratification was important in ancient Israel's history, and this central site was of continued religious significance in the nation's life.

Despite this national importance, the site seems to have been abandoned after the First-Temple period. In modern times, critical scholars deemed the altar, like much of the Joshua account, legendary.

However, in 1980, Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal discovered on Mount Ebal a circular stone repository with an adjacent area containing hammerstones and a chalice.¹ Such areas were used to store sacred utensils no longer in use. Nearby were scattered hearths, potsherds, and large quantities of ash and animal bones.



Ariel view of the structure identified as Joshua's Altar on Mt. Ebal

The site had been remodeled in the Iron Age I (ca. 1200–1140 BC), including a structure of unhewn stones filled with layers of animal bones, ash, and Iron I pottery. On the southeastern side of the main structure, a ramp sat at a 22-degree incline. The biblical command required that a ramp, not steps, give access to a legitimate altar ([Ex. 20:26](#)).

An Egyptian scarab of Thutmose III found inside the ruins fixed a 15th-century B.C. date to the establishment of the site. This date accords with the biblical account that Joshua built the altar after the conquest of Jericho. Sometime later the entire site was deliberately covered over with stones, apparently to preserve it.

Zertal, who was secular, was confused by his discovery. Back at his kibbutz, he showed a sketch to a religious Jew who immediately recognized it as an ancient altar and showed him the biblical text where Joshua had built such an altar on Mount Ebal.

This revelation caused Zertal to take the biblical accounts seriously, perhaps for the first time. Based on the consistency of the archaeological evidence with the details from the Bible, he identified the structure as Joshua's altar. But his secular colleagues only challenged and ridiculed his claim because it argued for the historicity of Scripture.

After Zertal's death, a second witness from Joshua's altar was discovered in 2022 in the remains of his excavation: a small, engraved lead tablet bearing a curse inscription in very early script.² It is significant because:

1. It confirms Mount Ebal as the site where the Bible says curses were recited.

2. It contains one of the earliest forms of written language in Canaan, most likely by an Israelite who knew the significance of the site.

3. It has the oldest known use of the proper name of God (YHWH) in an ancient inscription. Some biblical critics have contended that this name only evolved at a much later time in the Israelite culture. This find argues for its early use by the Hebrews, which concurs with Scripture's account of Joshua writing the commandments on a stone for the renewal ceremony ([Josh. 8:32](#)).

In biblical times, Joshua's altar was a place of worship and a witness to the Word of God. Today it again serves this purpose and challenges critics and skeptics to reconsider the historicity of biblical events and the Person and power of Israel's God behind them.

ENDNOTES

1. "An Early Iron Age Cultic Site On Mount Ebal: Excavation seasons 1982–1987" (Preliminary report by Adam Zertal). See also Zertal, "Has Joshua's Altar Been Found on Mt. Ebal?" *Biblical Archaeological Review* (February, 1985).
2. "ABR Researchers Discover the Oldest Known Proto-Hebrew Inscription Ever Found," biblearchaeology.org (tinyurl.com/abrtablet).



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