

EXPLORATION: BIBLE

#12 Archeology of the Bible – JOSHUA'S ALTAR

By Chip Thompson

Joshua 8:30-31 says, “Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to Yahweh, the God of Israel, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the Israelites. Joshua built it according to what is written in the Book of the Law of Moses [Deuteronomy 27:1-8]—an altar of uncut stones, on which no iron tool had been used. On it they offered to Yahweh burnt offerings and sacrificed fellowship offerings.”

This passage, written 3,400 years ago, raises several questions – Where is this mountain? Is there archeology to authenticate the story? And why build an altar on this specific mountain?

First, we know the exact location of Mount Ebal. It is one of two mountains described in the Bible as being located on either side of the ancient city of Shechem.



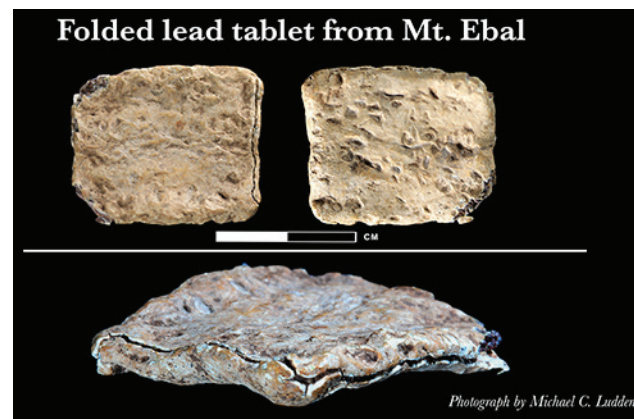
This is Shechem Valley with Mount Gerizim on the left and Mount Ebal on the right. Shechem is also associated with Jacob's well (John chapter 3) and Joseph's Tomb (Joshua 24:32). [Photo by Joel Kramer, Sourcefilx.com]

The Archeology connected to this biblical story is AMAZING. On Mount Ebal is an ancient altar originally excavated by Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal, in the 1980's. The altar structure dates to the time of Joshua, early 14th century B.C. The altar was built and used by Israelites, NOT Canaanites, because the only bones associated with the altar site are 'kosher animals' according to the law of Moses. The altar structure is made of uncut field stones—it is huge, 30' wide, 23' deep, and 13' tall. In the center, leading up to the altar, is a wide stone ramp. Inside the altar itself was a 5' deep layer of ash and kosher animal bones.



Joshua's Altar is located at the only place on Mount Ebal where a million or so Israelites could have gathered and worshipped Yahweh God. [photo by Joel Kramer, sourcefilx.com]

Finally, “Why was Joshua commanded to build an altar on this specific mountain?” The answer is that Mount Ebal was the ‘mountain of curses.’ In association with this story was an event where half of Israel gathered on Mount Gerizim and half on Mount Ebal. Those on Mt. Gerizim were to pronounce the blessings of obedience and those on Mt. Ebal were to pronounce the curses of disobedience [Deuteronomy chapters 27 & 28]. Yahweh God knew Israel was destined to sin, so from the beginning, God instructed Joshua to sacrifice lambs and offer the blood of atonement for the inevitable curse of Israel's sins. This altar represents God's grace toward sinners.



A “Curse Inscription” found at Joshua's altar site reads, “Cursed, cursed, cursed – cursed by the God YHW. You will die cursed. Cursed you will surely die, Cursed by YHW – cursed, cursed, cursed.” [Photo: Associates for Biblical Research, 2019, Fair Use Act: Section 107]

In 2019 an archeological team, led by Scott Stripling from Associates for Biblical Research, organized an expedition to Joshua's altar. As they examined the material previously excavated in the 1980's they found a small lead artifact. According to ABR, this lead tablet is a “Curse Inscription,” and is possibly one of the oldest Israelite inscriptions ever found. This claim is currently under peer review, but if ABR's interpretation holds true, this would be a monumental archeological find.

The truth is, we are ALL cursed, just like Israel. The Bible tells us, “There is none righteous no not one... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” [Romans 3:11, 23]. We know this is true because our world just seems to get worse and worse. You should read Romans chapter 3 which clearly explains sin's curse and God's solution. Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The solution for the curse of sin is Jesus, who died for our sins. In Romans 6:23 we learn, “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Jesus paid the ultimate price for our salvation. He died so we could receive the free gift of eternal life. Jesus himself said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that eternal life is a gift. It is NOT earned by keeping God's laws and making our selves righteous. “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). This concept is clarified in Galatians 2:21 which says, “I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!”

The gift of eternal life cost Christ everything, but receiving this gift is a matter of trust and faith for us—Romans 10:9-10, 13 says, “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation... 13 For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” Jesus is the only solution for sins curse. Salvation is offered to all who exercises faith in Christ's finished work on the cross. God's AMAZING GRACE is just that simple.