

INTRODUCTION

The religion of the Old Testament is, in its historical setting, sacrificial in design and nature and has been from its beginning.¹ Sacrifice is as Hubert and Mauss point out, "the basic rite in the ancient (and primitive) religions" of the Near East.² Because sacrifice revolves around the altar and its precincts, the altar became one of the most important religious objects of early man.

In referring to the altar's importance Menahem Haran states that "there was probably no settlement without its altar"³ this statement he expanded to include even nomadic and semi-nomadic societies.⁴ It is the purpose of this paper to explore the significance of the altar, and discover what part it played in the setting of sacred scripture.

¹This is evident in Genesis 4:3-4, in that Cain brought the fruit of the ground as "an offering unto the Lord" and Abel brought the "firstlings of his flock and the fat thereof." It must be assumed that this was not "a first" or haphazard sacrifice for the following verse records that to "Cain and his offering" the Lord had no respect. Thus the writer gives us the impression that even at this early time there were rules and commandments governing sacrificial acts that had been instituted by God.

²Henry Hubert, Marcel Mauss, Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function (University of Chicago Press, 1964), intro. VII.

³Menahem Haran, Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 16.

⁴ibid. p. 17.

There seems to be an unwritten code of silence as to the origin of the altars of ancient Israel. Consequently the normal trend of the study of this subject begins with the Exodus and the Sinai Covenant.⁵ Yet the Old Testament records, without question, that the altar and the institution of sacrifice in the age of the patriarchs preceded the temple.⁶

Since this paper will discuss the symbolism of the altar we must do as Wiener suggests; that in "studying the subject of altars in the Old Testament the first necessity is to empty the mind of all preconceived ideas."⁷ With that in mind, or out of mind as the case may be we are ready to begin.

TYPES OF ALTARS

Wiener divides altars into three basic kinds: 1. Altars of sacrifice, 2. Memorial altars, and 3. Altars of incense.⁸ As altars of incense are non-existent in Genesis, this study will focus on that of sacrificial and memorial altars. Sacrificial

⁵George Buchanan Grey, Sacrifice in the Old Testament (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc, 1971), p. 114. Grey begins his discussion of the earlier history of the altar with the law of the altar in Ex. 20:24-26.

⁶Noah (Genesis 8:20); Abraham (Genesis 12:7,8); Isaac (Genesis 26:25); Jacob (Genesis 33:20; 35:1,3,7).

⁷Harold M. Wiener, "The Altars of the Old Testament", Beigabe zur Orientalistische Literaturzeitung (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1927), p. 1.

⁸ibid. pp.2-4

altars are considered by Wiener to be 'cairn' altars--a heap of earth or stones; or a single unhewn stone that was to be used in situ.⁹ Grey in his work on Sacrifice adds that, "not in all cases was the altar a structure; and it is probable that constructed altars were preceded by altars obtained by the simple selection of existing natural rock surfaces."¹⁰ The memorial altar was single uncut stone (*massebah*) that set upright or was moved into position, or a small heap of uncut stones, that was used as a witness or memorial. (Joshua 4, Genesis 31).¹¹

Sacrificial and memorial altars are the types of altars that will concern this discussion. It will be necessary then to consider the varied beliefs about altars to better understand the meaning and symbolism of them in the Hebrew context.

SYMBOLISM OF THE ALTAR

The question might arise, Did the altar have any symbolism? If so what was that symbolism? To the latter, this section is dedicated. To the former question it can only be answered with

⁹Wiener, pp. 2-4

¹¹Grey, p. 114. Grey also states that the unconstructed altar would probably continue "in use after the custom of constructing altars of earth or stone had arisen."

¹¹William Robertson Smith, The Religion of the Semites, (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 203. The use of the massebah according to Smith, indicate the "more ancient parts of the Old Testament." Z. W. Werblowsky, in The Encyclopedia of the Jewish Religion, p. 26, states that altars were built in order to mark a significant occasion, e.g., upon entering into a covenant with God.

another question: If there were no symbolism in the altar and its construction, would there be commandments and laws concerning it? Obviously to God and the narrator there was at least some hidden meaning that was intended to be kept. To the ancients, writes Woolsey, "the highest form of expression was symbolism."¹² There is meaning or symbolism in everything that man is required to do by deity, or feels obligated to do for his God. What then might that symbolism be?

As is evident, the altar preceded the temple in the religion of the Old Testament.¹³ Sanctuaries did not exist in the pre-exodus period, yet the area immediately around the altars became a sacred place and would often precede a sanctuary. The Temple of Jerusalem was to be built at the place that Abraham had built an altar to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. The dream of Jacob and the stone of Bethel in the Rabbinic tradition became a prototype of the future temple of Israel.¹⁴ It is here in the sacred

¹²J.M. Woolsey, Symbolic Mythology, (New York: , 1917), 8-9. Woolsey expressed the idea that Priests introduced symbols to represent the attributes of the deity, p.25.

¹³Haran, p. 17. In speaking of the temple cult of Israel Haran states that it was gradual "with the altar preceding the temple."

¹⁴Harold W. Turner, From Temple to Meeting House: The Phenomenology of Places of Worship, (The Hague: Nounton Publishers, 1979), 92. Turner implies that "there are indications that men returned to particular altars or places of previous revelations, thus pointing to the development of permanent sanctuaries..." For Rabbinic traditions see Joshua Schwarz, "Jubilees, Bethel, and the Temple of Jacob", Hebrew Union College Annual, 56(1985):81-82, where he mentions that the altar of Jacob at Bethel was a "prefiguration of the great system

space of the altars of the patriarchs that the Old Testament religion and the origin of the temple begins.

John Lundquist in his 'Temple Typology' lists a number of propositions that he considered symbolic of temples.¹⁵ However if the altar preceded the temple in the Ancient Near East then the symbolism of the temple would be that of the altar. In short Lundquist's typology should have been carried one step beyond the temple to that of the altar. As mentioned above Haran stated that "there was probably no settlement without its altar."¹⁶ This statement however, does not imply that every settlement had a temple, but continues Haran, when a temple was constructed there was within its confines or complex an altar or altars.¹⁷ Thus an altar could exist without a temple, but a temple could not exist without an altar in some form or another.

In this study of the symbolism of the altar I will use as a guideline, Lundquist's Typology. If the hypothesis above is correct then the typology of the temple will be the typology of the altar. The different points of this typology will be

of temple worship that would be established in Jerusalem."

¹⁵John Lundquist, "What is a Temple? A Preliminary Typology," in The Quest for the Kingdom of God: Studies in Honor of George E. Mendenhall, H.B. Huffmon, Ed. (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983).

¹⁶Haran, p.16.

¹⁷Haran, p.16.

discussed as they pertain to the altar and it's significance in the ancient world.*

The Altar as the Embodiment of the Cosmic or Holy Mountain.

The prototype of the cosmic mountain, in the Israelite religion was Mount Sinai.¹⁸ The connection between the temple, Mount Zion, with the holy mountain, Mount Sinai is made by many scholars.¹⁹ The altar is at the same time considered to be the mountain top, or the very peak of God's sacred mountain.²⁰ Related to this notion of the cosmic mountain, writes Kristensen was that "the earth's height which came up out of the primeval waters was the place where the earth began to live." This he says is "where the altar was built" and it represented the "dwelling place of God."²¹

An interesting connection between the altar and mountain of

¹⁸David Noel Freedman, "Temple Without Hands", in Temples and High Places in Biblical Times, (Jerusalem: Hebrew Union College, 1981), 21. see Schwarz, p.75. For a complete discussion of this tradition and all it's underlying symbols see Jon D. Levenson, Sinai and Zion: An entry into the Jewish Bible, (Minneapolis, Mn.: Winston Press, 1985).

¹⁹Turner, p. 92.

²⁰See James Hastings, "Altar", in Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1951), 1:145-147.

²¹William Brede Kristensen, The Meaning of Religion, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971), 107. The altar according to Kristensen is the image of the high ground in which God reveals Himself, thus becoming the mountain of his presence or the Hebrew Sinai. p.389.

God is seen in the description of the altar in Ezekiel. In chapter 43:15, Ezekiel describes the third level of the temple altar as, "The mountain of God" (Heb. hahar'el). He then refers to the altar as "ari'el". This word was derived from the Akkadian word "arallu" which means "world mountain" or "mountain of god."²²

Thus we see that the altar is intimately connected with the holy mountain or the "Cosmic Mountain" of Lundquist's typology. In reference to the Ancient Semitic way of thinking, Kristensen writes, "the temple and altar are identical...and the typical altar is the earth altar." This altar according to Exodus 20:25f, continues Kristensen "must be made of earth or of unhewn stones, crude stone, in order to represent the earth itself" and the mountain of God.²³

The Altar is Often Associated with the Waters of Life

The waters of life prophetically speaking will issue from

²²Victor P. Hamilton, "Ariel," Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, 2 Vols., R. Laird Harris, Ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 70. see William F. Albright, "The Babylonian Temple-Tower and the Altar of Burnt-Offering" in Journal of Biblical Literature, 39(1920) 137-142. Albright writes that har'el in Ezk. 43:15 means mountain of God, like Arallu. and that Ariel is the name of Mount Zion and is identical with Arallu, mountain of god. see also Jacob Milgrom, "Altar," in Encyclopedia Judaica, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1971), 2:763.

²³Kristensen, pp.107,470.

Jerusalem, Zechariah recorded, "And it shall be in that day, that living waters²⁴ shall go out from Jerusalem; half of them toward the former sea, and half of them toward the hinder sea: in summer and in winter shall it be." (Zech 14:8). Ezekiel adds more information, "Afterward he brought me again unto the door of the house; and behold, waters issued out from under the threshold of the house eastward: for the forefront of the house stood toward the east, and the waters came down from under from the right side of the house, at the south side of the altar." (Ezk. 47:1)²⁴ Evidence from the passages above indicate that the temple and the waters of life are intimately connected in the eschatological setting of the temple. How then is the altar related to the waters of life?

The cosmic mountain discussed above, was the mountain peak that was first to appear amidst the waters of chaos. It was on that peak that the gods descended and stood to finish the act of creation. This then became the most sacred spot on the new world, it was here that the altar #was built, this was the center, the "axis mundie."²⁵ This axis mundie was, explains

²⁴See Joel 3:18, "...a fountain shall come forth of the house of the LORD, and shall water the valley of Shittim."

²⁵Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism," in Symbolism, the Sacred, and the Arts. Diane Apostolos, Ed. (Cappodocia, New York: Crossroad, 1965) p.110. Eliade conveys this idea by stating, "the 'Center' is not only the summit of the cosmic mountain, whose peak is the highest in the world but also, we might say, the 'oldest': because it is the point where creation began." Kristensen observes that the notion of the "hill of creation," was where "life arose in the beginning" and the

Eliade, "the rock upon which the Temple of Jerusalem was built and was considered as being the umbilicus terrae."²⁶

There exists a Jewish tradition that God cast a stone into the watery abyss, and from this stone rose the primordial hillock, which then became the foundation stone of the temple.²⁷

This foundation stone, as the peak of the cosmic mountain became the first altar after the creation of the world, J. Jeremias writes:

At the Stone of Foundation, which stands at the exact center of the cosmos, the waters of Tehom were blocked off on the first day; it was upon this Stone that YHWH stood when he created the world...on this Stone Adam offered the first sacrifice; upon this Stone Cain and Abel offered their fateful sacrifice; from under this Stone the Flood waters came and under this Stone the flood waters receded; upon this Stone Noah's ark landed and on this Stone Noah offered the first sacrifice of the renewed cosmos; upon this stone Abraham was circumcised and upon this Stone he consumed the mystic meal with Melchizedek; upon this Stone Isaac was bound for sacrifice; this Stone served as the pillow for Jacob in the ladder vision, that vision of a vertical center, a ladder connecting heaven and earth.²⁸

"earth which came up out of the primeval waters was the place where the earth began to live." It was "here the altar was built, the altar which according to Ancient belief was sacred because it represented the dwelling of God, the altar which itself was the image of the high place." pp.106-107.

²⁶Ibid., pp.108-109

²⁷John Lundquist, "Temple Symbolism in Isaiah," in Isaiah and the Prophets, Monte S. Nyman, Ed. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1984), 45. In Patterns of Comparative Religion, (New York: New American Library, 1974), 229-231. Eliade writes that the "navel" or center of the world is always considered to be a stone.

²⁸J. Jeremias, "Golgotha und der heilige Felsen," Angelos 2(1926):74-128. This was translated and summarized in Jonathan Z. Smith, "Earth and Gods." In Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, Jacob Neusner, Ed. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1978), 116.

It can be seen in the above quote that the traditional first altar was considered to be the 'cap stone' over the waters of the underworld. Symbolically speaking the altar is intimately connected with the waters of life, which will according to Joel, come forth as "a fountain" from "the house of the LORD." (Joel 3:18).²⁹

The Altar is Built on Separate, Sacred, Set apart Space.

The theme of sacred space is universal and treated by Mircea Eliade, "Every consecrated space represents an opening towards the beyond, towards the transcendent...the sacred space is the place where communication is possible between this world and the other world, from the heights or from the depths, the world of the gods or the world of the dead."³⁰ Because of the sacred space the three worlds come together and are able to commune one with another. This concept is "nowhere more evident," writes

²⁹The Jewish myth of the Stone of Foundation caps the waters of life which will flow from the holy of Holies, in fulfillment of the prophetic words of Ezekiel. see Jacob Neusner, Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishna, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 152-153. This same thought is seen in the Midrash Tanhuma, Kedoshim 10, quoted in J. Z. Smith, p. 112, where it states, "Just as the navel is found at the center of a human being, so the land of Israel is found at the center of the world...and it is the foundation of the world. Jerusalem is at the center of the land of Israel, the Temple is at the center of Jerusalem, the Holy of Holies is at the center of the Temple, the Ark is at the center of the Holy of Holies and the Foundation Stone, is in front of the Ark which spot is the foundation of the world."

³⁰Eliade, "Sacred Architecture and Symbolism." 107-108.

Jacob Milgrom, "than in Solomon's dedicatory prayer for the Temple, when he proclaims that even in a foreign land Israel's armies or exiles need but turn to the Temple and their prayer will travel to God along a trajectory that passes through their land, city, Temple and then, at the altar, turns heavenward (#I Kings 8:44, 48; cf. 31, 38)."31

The altar in Ezekiel is surrounded by a pavement that became a boundary of the "sacred altar area."32 This space was considered to be so sacred that Maimonides stated that the location of the altar of the Temple mount was "specifically defined and was never to be changed."33 The sacredness of the altar is confirmed by a theophany, in Leviticus, "the presence of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the whole offering and the suet pieces on the altar. And all the people saw, and shouted, and fell on their faces" (Lev. 9: 23-24). Jacob Milgrom writes, that "it is an assumption common to biblical tradition that a sanctuary is not fully consecrated--or is not divinely sanctioned--unless it has a tradition of a theophany upon its altar (I Kings 18:38; II

31Milgrom, p.764. Milgrom adds "It is significant that later Judaism carried the tradition that the air space above the altar was an extension of its sanctity."

32Albright, pp.139-140. This boundary was necessary to mark the limit of the sacred space.

33Mendell Lewittes, The Code of Maimonides Book Eight The Book of Temple Service, (Yale University Press, 1957), 10-11.

Chron. 7:1), or that its altar is built on the site of one."³⁴ Verifying that the altar was constructed in sacred space, Milgrom states, "the altar, then, is the earthly terminus of a divine funnel for man's communion with god."³⁵

The Altar is Oriented Toward the Four World Regions

All altars, according to the Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery, were oriented toward the east.³⁶ With an orientation toward one direction sets the altar, in retrospect toward the other regions also. Kristensen indicates that the horns of the altar not only symbolized power and strength, but as in Egypt the term 'horns of the earth' was actually used to refer to the extreme points of south, north, east, and west."³⁷ There is not substantial evidence that would indicate that the altar was oriented toward the four directions. However the temple was constructed with an eastern orientation, and the altar was

³⁴Milgrom, p. 764.

³⁵Milgrom, p.764. Milgrom states that the altar enables man through his worship to reach heaven.

³⁶Ad. deVries, Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery, (Amsterdam: North holland Publishing Co., 1976), p,11

³⁷Kristensen, p. 470. The horns, are according to Kristensen, "were attached to the altar to indicate its character. We find them in Israel, Crete, Greece, and Rome. By means of the horns, the altar was identified with the living earth." pp. 470-471. We must note here however that Milgrom speaking of the horns states that, "horns were an essential element of all the altars in the Jerusalem Temple. The origin of the horns is still unknown." Milgrom, p. 762

constructed with an orientation to the temple. As has been stated above the altar was considered to be the point where the three worlds meet, therefore creating an axis mundi, and a point where the six cardinal directions come together.³⁸

The Altar Expresses the Idea of Successive Ascension toward Heaven

This idea reflects the tripartite theme of the Hebrew perspective of the universe, which divides space into three levels: 1. The heavens, or world of the Gods. 2. The world of man, our temporal or terrestrial existence and 3. The underworld, or the world of the dead.³⁹ W. F. Albright writes that "the altar of burnt offering...reflects Mesopotamian cosmic ideas."⁴⁰ The temple resembled, according to Albright, a

³⁸Eliade, Patterns, 375.

³⁹Irving Friedman, "The Sacred Space of Judaism", in Parabola 3(1) :22. In this article Friedman discusses the Temple and its tripartite divisions into the outer court, holy place, and Holy of Holies. The cosmos he labels "Ocean, land, and heaven." Kurt Gallig in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 4 Vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 1:98, observes that the altar of Ezekiel was after the foundation stones, divided into three stages, which become smaller toward the top. The two lower ones are called "enclosures," or "incasing"; this recalls the Babylonian term "cover" for the burnt brick of the outer face of the tower of Babel. The uppermost stage is called ar'el, which one may associate with the Babylonian world Arallu (underworld and mountain of the gods). It is interesting to note that the top of the altar was ten cubits from the pavement, which would be equal in height to the floor of the Holy of Holies, the third level of the sanctuary.

⁴⁰William F. Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1942), 150.

"Babylonian temple-tower of three stories, and the altar of burnt-offering is practically a Babylonian temple-tower on a smaller scale, or rather, the temple-tower is, as it were, a huge altar."⁴¹ This temple-tower was a cosmic mountain, "a symbolic image of the cosmos" writes Eliade, and the different stages represented the different planetary heavens.⁴²

Just as the tripartite divisions in the Temple of Solomon progressed from the profane world to the sacred Holy of Holies. The altar of Ezekiel with its three stages or levels represented the successive ascension toward heaven, from the "bosom of the earth" to the "har'el" or mountain of God.

The Plan and Measurements of the Altar are revealed by God

Outside of Genesis the altar was to be constructed by way of

⁴¹Albright, "The Babylonian Temple-Tower and the Altar of Burnt-Offering", p. 139. see Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, pp. 150-152. The idea of the foundation of the altar as the 'bosom of the earth' and the top stage, or highest platform of the altar called 'ar'el or har'el' implies succession from the underworld to throne of God.

⁴²Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return: or cosmos and History, (Princeton University Press, 1954), 13. The idea of the altar representing the cosmic mountain where, in the words of Eliade, "heaven and earth meet--is situated at the center of the world" and it is here that "hell, the center of the earth, and the 'gate' of the sky are, then, situated on the same axis, and it is along this axis that passage from one cosmic region to another was effected." Myth, pp. 12-14. The summit of the cosmic mountain (i.e. the altar) is, according to Eliade, "not only the highest point of the earth; it is also the earth's navel, the point at which the Creation began." p.16

commandment and canon. This cannot be disputed in light of the "law of the altar" in Exodus 20:24-26, "An altar of earth thou shalt make unto me, and shalt sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, and thy peace offerings, thy sheep, and thine oxen: in all places where I record my name I will come unto thee, and I will bless thee. And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it. Neither shalt thou go up by steps unto mine altar, that thy nakedness be not discovered thereon."⁴³

Altars and sanctuaries were constructed, maintains Eliade, "according to the traditional canons" and were "based on a primeval revelation #which disclosed the archetype of the sacred space."⁴⁴ This "archetype" continues Eliade, "was indefinitely copied and copied again with the erection of every new altar, temple or sanctuary."⁴⁵ This idea is verified by Grey in his work on Sacrifice where he states that "the altar is to be made wherever Yahweh manifests his presence...for where Yahweh has once manifested his presence, there will he make a practice of doing so in the future."⁴⁶

⁴³See also Exodus 27:1-8; Ezekiel 43: 13-17.

⁴⁴Eliade, Patterns, p.371-372.

⁴⁵ibid. p.372.

⁴⁶Grey, p.114.

The construction of the altar was based on law or canon given by God, and the sacredness of tradition. This created an immediate sanctity, the manifested will of the divine, to build the altar as God would want and in the place that he had designated.

The Altar Represents the Divine Presence

The altar, because of its connection with the cosmic mountain, came to represent the "dwelling place of God" and was in itself the "image of the high place," or the throne of Deity.⁴⁷ The most familiar example of this idea is the account of Jacob at Bethel: "And Jacob went out from Beer-sheba, and went toward Haran. And he lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took of the stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep." (Genesis 28:10-11). It is at this time that Jacob participates in a theophany, that seems to be more real than just a dream: "And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew it not. And he was afraid, and said, How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven." (Genesis 28:16-17). Jacob then sets up the stone pillar and anoints it, and then declares: "And this stone, which I have

⁴⁷Kristensen, p. 107. To continue Kristensen states that the altar is the image of the high ground in which God reveals Himself, p. 389.

set for a pillar, shall be God's house..." (Genesis 28:22).⁴⁸

Jacob, in verse 22 of Genesis 28, names the pillar, Bethel indicating that there was at that place in that stone the divine presence. Likewise in Genesis 33:20, Jacob at Shalem erected an altar and called "it" (the altar) El-elohe-Israel, the name of God. It was again at Bethel that Jacob Built an altar, and God appeared to him again. (Genesis 35:6-15).

It would do well at this point to quote Grey again, in that "the altar is to be made wherever Yahweh manifests his presence...for where Yahweh has once manifested his presence there will he make a practice of doing so in the future."⁴⁹ From the examples above it is conclusive that the altar represents the Divine Presence. Consequently the altar like the temple becomes a place where man communes with his God.

The Altar is Associated with the Realm of the Dead

The altar is often linked with the grave. This idea is explained on the basis that the dead man receives his food at the

⁴⁸Writing of the significance of the Pillar, Eichrodt states that they "were receptacles of Holy power and signs of Gods abiding presence." see Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament, 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 1:116.

⁴⁹Grey, p. 114.

place where he is buried, thus the grave then becomes an altar.⁵⁰ As the altar represents the axis mundi, that is the place where the three worlds meet, the grave symbolically is then in contact with the different realms. The tomb, writes Eliade is seen "as a point of contact between the world of the living and of the gods"⁵¹

The grave (altar) represented the place where the life of the earth and men rises anew. The grave-altar then, is the place where the dead man has attained his divine life.⁵² The early grave marker was the familiar tumulus, a mound of earth above the grave. The cosmic significance of the grave mound is that it is identical with the hill of creation or the cosmic mountain. It was from this hill that life arose in the beginning, and it is from this tumulus, that new will rise again.⁵³ As the altar represented communion with the Gods in this life, the grave

⁵⁰Kristensen, p. 472. Kristensen, in a less than clear statement says: "As the dwelling of the dead man, the grave is comparable with the dwelling of the living man. Thus the grave becomes an altar and the altar to the dead is a grave."

⁵¹Eliade, Patterns, p. 232. Eliade equates the tomb with the sacred stone, or omphalos. This omphalos (i.e. navel of the earth) or center is the place where communication could be made between the world of the dead and that of the gods of the underworld and was consecrated as a connecting link between the different levels of the universe. it was here where time, space and life come together. This center is where life begins and were it will continue after death.

⁵²Kristensen, p. 476.

⁵³Ibid. p.473. for a complete discussion of the grave mound and its symbolism to the altar see Kristensen pp.472-476.

symbolized eternal life with them. Thus many grave markers or "head stones" are pointed or rounded at the top to symbolize the cosmic mountain. Tombs bothe ancient and modern are in the shape of an altar-bed or a stylized temple with doors and pillars indicating the communion and entrance into the presence of God.

Sacrifice and Sacral Meals are Carried out on the Altar

When one thinks of altars the mind automatically visualizes the sacrifice of animals. The term most often translated "altar" in the Old Testament is mizbeah, which means, or has the connotation of slaughter. The word sacrifice, "sacri-ficium" was to consecrate or make sacred, and may or may not involve the shedding of blood. By means of Sacrifice, "the abiding divine life of the cosmos, of the earth, and of men in particular, is recognized and actualized. What comes from God is given back to God."⁵⁴ Sacrifice by the shedding of blood is an "act of sanctification" and must take place according to the correct rules and regulations.⁵⁵ The altar is without need of evidence a place of sacrifice.

The idea of the sacral or communal meal, was according to W. R. Smith, the cultic rite whereby the religious character of the

⁵⁴Ibid. p. 480. Kristensen explains that the "religio-magical act of sacrifice expresses faith in God's life."

⁵⁵Ibid. p. 481

society was repeatedly actualized; the social order was a sacred community.⁵⁶ The ancients believed that the communal meal signified a communion of life. Kristensen writes that "the entire act of sacrifice, means a participation in divine life. It is a religio-magical or mystical act which takes place outside the finite realm. The sacrificer (i.e., the one who offers the sacrifice, and not solely the priest), leaves the finite world, or he steps out of the world of men and into the world of the gods. This is an actual theoretical formulation of the meaning of participation in divine life at the sacrificial meal."⁵⁷

The Altar is the Central, Organizing, Unifying Institution

The altar as a religious object had no equal in Israel, except for the temple. It was around the early altars of the patriarchal period that Noah, Abraham, and Jacob obtained their promises from God. Around Mount Sinai the children of Israel

⁵⁶Smith, p. 265. The communal meal was of primary importance to man because the social order was a sacred community. "The ethical significance which this appertains to the sacrificial meal, viewed as a social act, received particular emphasis from certain ancient customs and ideas connected with eating and drinking....Hence when we find that in ancient religions all the ordinary functions of worship are summed up in the sacrificial meal and that the ordinary intercourse between gods and men has no other form, we are to remember that the act of eating and drinking together is the solemn and stated expression of the fact that all who share the meal are brethren..."

⁵⁷Kristensen pp.485-486. On page 487 Kristensen writes that "the positive effect of the sacrificial rite thus concerns human life, not the life of nature; it is man's sacramental participation in abiding, divine life."

gathered to meet the God of their Fathers, it was at the altars of later times that Israel was able to commune with deity. The sacrificial rites that were imposed upon Israel, were always carried out at the altars of the sanctuary. And surrounding these sacred places of divine manifestation the community would grow, the prime example, Jerusalem.

Conclusion

The Altar played an important role in the religion of Israel. It preceded the development of the sanctuary, and was there that the foundations of Israel's belief in God was born. We have seen that, in comparing Lundquist's typology of the temple to the altar, the latter appears to be the proto-type of the temple. It was at the altar that the fathers of Judaism made their covenants with their God, and around this sacred space they would gather in supplication to converse with the Lord.

It was the goal of this paper to compare the symbolism of altar to that of the temple. It would be foolish to assume that the symbolism presented here is complete, conclusive or totally correct, since we will never know the "mind of ancient man."