CHAPTER 4

JOSHUA'S FIRST ALTAR IN THE PROMISED LAND

WHICH SACRED CENTER in ancient Israel's traditions had the privilege of being the place designated by Moses for the first altar to be built in the newly entered promised land? Some fragments of 4QJosh offer a surprising alternative to the traditional textus receptus and provide new illumination concerning the redactional history of the book. Frank Moore Cross identified the remnants of 4QJosh and classified its script as Hasmonaean, thus dating it probably in the second half of the second century or the first half of the first century B.C.E.¹ It is the oldest extant witness to the Book of Joshua in any language, and so its contents and textual character deserve careful attention. Indeed it teaches us new and eye-opening things about this fascinating book.² Insofar as the interpretation below is correct, the manuscript is significant in that it preserves a sequence of the narrative that is at variance with, and probably prior and preferable to, that found in the received text of Joshua: it narrates that the first altar built by Joshua in the newly entered land was built at Gilgal immediately after the crossing of the Jordan (after Joshua 4), not later on Mount Gerizim (as commanded at Deut 27:4 in the SP) or on Mount Ebal (as commanded at Deut 27:4 and carried out at Josh 8:30-35 in the MT, or as carried out in the LXXB at 9:2a-1).³

The question of the locality of the first altar exposes an issue that may well have been polemically debated.⁴ There now appear to be three different rivals for that honor.


³ Ed Noort ("4QJosh and the History of Tradition in the Book of Joshua," *JNSL* 24/2 [1998], 127-44, esp. 129) endorses as "a generally accepted proposition" Trent Butler's statement (*Joshua*; WBC 7 [Waco, Tex.: Word Books, 1983], 94) that Josh 8:30-35 in the MT "does not fit the present geographical, chronological, or narrative context." Noort (p. 135) deserves kudos for perceiving, even before the publication of this scroll, that "There would be an ideal place for Joshua 8:30-35 for this going together of writing down and reciting the law: Joshua 5. There the stopping of the manna, keeping the Passover and the circumcision of the people describe an ideal people in an ideal land with an ideal beginning of a life coram deo in the promised land." He quotes from his *Een plek om te zijn: over de theologie van het land aan de hand van Jozua 8:30-35* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993), 15.

⁴ An additional incident to remember concerning altar polemics is the excessive defensiveness stirred by the building of the altar by the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh in Joshua 22. Moreover, examining the Chronicler's work, Gary Knoppers ("Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Zion: A Study in the Early History of the Samaritans and Jews," *SR* 34 [2005]: 309-38, esp. p. 320) convincingly states that "the
Tantalizing bits of evidence from 4QJosh, the MT, a new scroll fragment (discussed below), the SP, the LXX, the OL, Josephus, Pseudo-Philo, and rabbinic sources weave an intriguing pattern of textual variants regarding that first altar. Some of the variants appear to be intentional, aimed at favoring or demoting one of the contenders. The pieces of the puzzle fit most cogently, in my view, according to the following three-stage schema, which I will sketch briefly and then attempt to demonstrate.

At an early stage, the mixed and highly repetitious set of commands concerning this altar in Deuteronomy 27 may not yet have mentioned a specific place for that first altar (see especially vv. 2-3a); Israel was simply to set up the stones and inscribe the law “on the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land” (v. 2), which would logically be immediately near Gilgal. The report of the proclamation of the Torah at Gilgal and presumably the report of the prior building of the altar on which its words were written was narrated at the end of Joshua 4, after the crossing of the Jordan and before the circumcision and Passover passages in Joshua 5. These three religious observances serve to prepare for the military conquest that starts in Joshua 6.

Then at a second stage, some unknown person or group inserted “on Mount Gerizim” in the repetitious set of commands concerning this altar in Deuteronomy 27. This is documented in the SP and other texts. The question is whether it originated in the specifically Samaritan or in the common Judean-Samaritan (see Ch. 14) text. This reading arose either in conjunction with the insertions in the common text at Deut 11:29 and 27:11-13 regarding the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal, or, more likely, due to later northern concerns to promote Mount Gerizim. The passage about the altar (now in the MT at Josh 8:30-35 and in LXX B at 9:2a-f) was transposed from after the crossing of the Jordan in Joshua 4 to after the destruction of Ai (8:29). That rearranged placement may have taken place in conjunction with the addition of “on Mount Gerizim” or “on Mount Ebal” in Deut 27:4.

Chronicler’s allusions and appeal to institutions associated with Israel’s national beginnings are best understood as reflecting a time in which there were multiple discrepant and competing claims to the nation’s past.

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7 The temporal clause “on the day you cross over” need not be taken in its narrow literal sense (see Josh 6:10, where כ י means not “day” but “time/moment”), but the literal sense does fit naturally here. The more general sense, “when you cross over,” is equally likely and would also presumably indicate Gilgal. Noort (“4QJosh and the History of Tradition,” 141) starts his analysis with Deut 27:4, 8, 5-7 as in the MT (including “Mount Ebal”) as the earliest parts of the narrative and thus ends with four mountains and “a mystery for exegetes.” But starting more logically with Deut 27:2, one discovers a plausible three-stage literary history regarding the first altar in the newly entered promised land (see II.C below).