THE ALTAR AT GILGAL: JOSHUA XXII 23-29

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The great problem of these verses is concerned with which side of the river Jordan was it that the two-and-a-half tribes built this altar.

Their claim, as it is set forth in the D-inspired Josh. xxii 21-34, was that they were as concerned as the rest of the tribes, those settled west of the Jordan, for the proper worship of JHVH at the appointed place (verse 29), and that they never intended to use the altar for whole-burnt-offerings or for a zebab. They said that the altar was intended to be a witness that both groups, east as well as west, together were to worship (la'ahod 'et-sabod: to do the serving of) JHVH in His presence with whole-offering and with zebahim and with selamim (verse 27). They said, according to this D-passage (verse 29), that they knew there could be no other altar for whole-offering, minhâ, and zebah apart from the altar which was in front of JHVH's Tabernacle. They said (verse 23) that to offer up (he'elâh) whole-offering and minhâ on this altar by the Jordan and to make ('âlah: prepare) on it zibhe selamim (peace-offerings) would be an act of rebellion or treachery against JHVH.

It is safe to assume that every statement reported in Josh. xxii is strictly correct according to Deuteronomic standards. This means that the 'âlah and the minhâ of verse 23 refer to the tâmid, the regular daily offering, which formed the basic element of the whole Temple ritual. The regular daily offering consisted of the whole-offering of an animal victim and the complete offering of a grain-offering, both of which were completely consumed on the altar, Num. xxviii 1-8 (P). It is also correct to use the verb 'âlah (make, prepare) of the zibhe selamim (peace offerings), since these were not offered up on the altar; the fat-pieces were offered up on the altar (as were all the fat-pieces of every animal slaughtered in temple rites), but not the flesh. The flesh, except for the perquisite of the officiating priest (the terumâ) and the perquisite of the priesthood (the tenûpâ), was all of it eaten by the worshipper and his friends. The peace-offering was held to be "prepared", when the fat-pieces had been burnt on the altar and when the
blood had been flung against (upon) the altar round about 1). See 1 Sam. ii 16, according to which the fat had to be burnt before the priest could take his share. Note that verse 27 reads "the whole-offering and the zebâhîm and the šelâmîm" which makes three sacrifices and not two, thus, in our judgement, indicating an original distinction between the zebâhîm and the šelâmîm.

Why should the two-and-a-half tribes build an altar, and then say it was never intended to be used as an altar? An altar was originally a place (in Israel, an unhewn stone) on which animals were slaughtered and offered up to God. Later, when the slaughter was done elsewhere (in the Second Temple to the north side of the altar, Lev. i 11; or at the entrance to "the Tent of the Presence" for the zebah, Lev. iii 2), the altar remained as the place where the offerings were burnt and sent up in smoke (qitîrâ; Orlinsky, "turn into smoke") to JHVH. The altar which was built on one of the banks of the Jordan makes no sense unless it was built as an altar and used as an altar by the two-and-a-half tribes. The Deuteronomist is doing his best in the interests of unity between north and south, west and east, to explain that the altar at Gilgal was legitimate even though the only proper place for sacrifice was Jerusalem and the Temple there.

Where was this altar? Was it on the west bank of the Jordan, or was it on the east bank of the Jordan? It is stated (verse 10) that, when the two-and-a-half tribes returned to their settlements east of the Jordan according to the agreement of Num. xxxii, they built an altar at Gellîloth-of-the-Jordan "which is in the land of Canaan". It was built (verse 11) "to the front of ('el-mul) the land of Canaan at Gellîloth-of-the-Jordan", and then there follows the phrase 'al-'êber bö̂ne yiîrâ'îl. It is this last phrase which has created the difficulty, since 'êber has usually been held to mean "across, on the other side". As a result of this, some have omitted the phrase "which is in the land of Canaan" as a gloss 2). This omission places the altar fairly and squarely on the west bank of the river (or does it?). The Vulgate just did not know where the altar was. It has in terra Chanaan, but then has super Iordanis

1) I am of the opinion that the zebah-šelâmîm of the Priestly Code was a combination of two pre-Deuteronomic rites: the zebah, which involved the sacred communal meal and which the people ate, and the šelâmîm, which consisted of the fat-pieces and were burnt on the altar. I hope to demonstrate this on another occasion.

2) E.g. M. Noth in BH³, the Jerusalem Bible, the New English Bible.