

Doctrine of the Altar

These studies are designed for believers in Jesus Christ only. If you have exercised faith in Christ, then you are in the right place. If you have not, then you need to heed the words of our Lord, Who said, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son, so that every [one] believing [or, trusting] in Him shall not perish, but shall be have eternal life! For God did not send His Son into the world so that He should judge the world, but so that the world shall be saved through Him. The one believing [or, trusting] in Him is not judged, but the one not believing has already been judged, because he has not believed in the Name of the only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son of God.” (John 3:16–18). “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life! No one comes to the Father except through [or, by means of] Me!” (John 14:6).

Every study of the Word of God ought to be preceded by a naming of your sins to God. This restores you to fellowship with God (1John 1:8–10). If we acknowledge our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1John 1:9). If there are people around, you would name these sins silently. If there is no one around, then it does not matter if you name them silently or whether you speak aloud.

Topics		
Definition and Hebrew Word	Abraham building altars	Altars in the book of Samuel
Charts, Graphics and Short Doctrines		
The Altars Built by Abram	The Bronze Altar (a graphic)	The Altar of Incense (a graphic)
Other Altars in Scripture	How the Altar Proclaims the Essence or Character of Jehovah	The Abbreviated Doctrine of the Altar

Preface: The altar is found throughout Scripture, going back to the time of Noah and Abraham; and was institutionalized in the Law of Moses.

1. The Open Bible: *An altar was a platform or elevated place on which a priest placed a sacrifice as an offering to God. The Hebrew word for altar means “a place of slaughter or sacrifice,” but the altars of the LORD were not limited to sacrificial purposes. Sometimes an altar was built as a testimony of one’s faith for future generations (Joshua 22:26–29).*¹
2. The Hebrew word for *altar* is *miz^ebêach* (מִזְבֵּחַ) [pronounced *miz-BAY-ahkh*], which may sometimes be translated *monument*, rather than *altar*. Strong’s #4196 BDB #258. This word occurs over 400 times in Scripture; therefore, we are not going to cover its every occurrence.
3. This is first found in Gen. 8 where Noah gets off the ark. He offers up some of the clean animals upon an altar. He built or constructed this altar, but there is no further information about this. Obviously, there must be some kind of structure in order for an animal to be offered as a burnt sacrifice. When the aroma reached the nose of God, He was propitiated. Gen. 8:20–21

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4. Abraham builds an altar as well, after coming into the Land of Promise, and offers up sacrifices to God in Shechem. This is where God appeared to Abraham. Abraham built another altar between Bethel and Ai. Although most translations read, "And there he called upon the name of the Lord;" this could also be understood as, "[And there, he proclaims the name of the LORD.](#)" Gen. 12:7–8
5. After traveling about, Abraham built another altar between Bethel and Ai, when he returned to that area. Abraham moves again and builds an altar in Hebron. So, it appears to be a thing with Abraham to move from place to place (as God had told him to do), but to build altars in these various places and proclaim the name of God there. Gen. 13:4, 18
6. The next altar which Abraham is said to build is on Mount Moriah where he would offer up his son. On all of these altars, there must be a place where the wood can be placed to burn and there must be a place above that where the animal can be fastened. Given the narrative that we find in Gen. 22, the animals apparently had their throats slit first, so that they were not burned alive. Gen. 22:9–10

This short doctrine was taken from [Gen. 13 \(HTML\)](#) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

Altogether, there are 4 altars which the Bible records that Abram builds. God the Holy Spirit communicates to us spiritual information through these 4 altars. On these altars, Abram would offer up an animal sacrifice (or several).

The altar is to the believers of the Old Testament as the cross is to believers in the New Testament. The altar looks forward in time to the cross. On the altar, an innocent animal, without spot or blemish, is offered up to God (which act goes all the way back to the Garden of Eden where the animal skins given to Adam and Eve, to cover their nakedness, had to have come from an animal sacrifice). In the same way, the innocent Jesus, Who was without sin, was offered up to God. This substitutionary death, the just for the unjust (1Peter 3:18), is both clearly represented by these altars, as it is in the manner of our Lord's arrest and trials. Jesus was clearly without fault, and yet, condemned by both the Jews and the Romans (who represent all Gentiles). So, even the system by which our Lord was put on the cross, represents the just being condemned because of the unjust. This is why these altars are important.

The Altars Built by Abram

Location	Meaning	Commentary
The Oak of Moreh in Shechem.	Moreh means <i>teacher, fruitful</i> . Shechem means <i>back, shoulder</i> .	Abram leaves the land of his father and comes to Shechem, which is right in the middle of Israel between the two seas and west of the Jordan River, halfway to the Mediterranean. It is here where God first promised the land of Canaan to Abram's seed (Gen. 12:6–8). This promise is the basis for all promises of God to Abram; the basis for Abram being <i>taught</i> by God. These promises are made certain by the power of God (which is represented by <i>back, shoulder</i>).

The Altars Built by Abram

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The Oak of Moreh in Shechem (continued).		<p>Abram is in the heart of the land of Canaan, which is occupied by a number of different people, most of whom are degenerate idolaters. Building this altar in the middle of this land is akin to Abram planting his nation's flag into the ground (both fallen and elect angels would recognize this). Abram may not realize that is what he is doing, but God does. Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, Who had appeared to him (Gen. 12:7).</p> <p>Being given the land is analogous to positional truth. When we are saved, we are placed into Christ, and that is our eternal position (which guarantees our salvation). Abram is given this land eternally.</p>
Between Bethel and Ai.	Bethel means <i>house of God</i> and Ai means <i>ruins</i> .	<p>This is about 20+ miles south of Shechem. The altar indicates the choice that we have between the House of God and the place of ruins. Abram and Lot represent these two choices. Lot chooses the riches which he sees in the world; Abram chooses to follow God. Gen. 13:3–4. In this context, both Lot and Abram choose between the House of God and ruins. Lot would have moved in the direction of Ai. He envisioned vibrant, exciting cities; what he found were ruins. Sodom will become actual ruins in the future.</p>
The oaks of Mamre in Hebron.	Hebron means <i>alliance, confederacy;</i> and Mamre means <i>rebellious, bitter</i> .	<p>As believers in Jesus Christ, we have two directions in which we can go: toward an alliance with God (Abram was called the <i>friend of God</i>) or towards <i>rebelliousness</i> and <i>bitterness</i>. In other words, we can be in or out of fellowship after salvation. Gen. 13:18. In this context, God has promised Abram the land all around and that his seed would be like the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:15–17).</p>
Golgotha	Golgotha means <i>the skull</i> .	<p>This is where our Lord was sacrificed on the cross. Although the text does not specifically state where Abram was when he offered up his son, I will bet, given the text, that he ended up making this offering on Golgotha. When Abram was to offer up Isaac, his son, he was not allowed to just go to the nearest hill and make an offering. This will be discussed in more detail when we come to this passage (Gen. 22).</p>

Bear in mind the all of this was written about 2000 years before Christ (according to most conservative theologians and historians), and at least a millennium before Christ (according to liberal theologians who do not believe the Bible is the Word of God).

Chapter Outline

Charts, Graphics and Short Doctrines

7. Both Abraham's son Isaac and his grandson Jacob also built various altars as they moved about in the Land of Promise. Gen. 26:23–25 33:18–20 35:1–7
8. After this point, no more information is given about altars being built until the giving of the Law. Moses builds an altar to celebrate the military victory over Amalek in Gen. 17:13–16
9. Finally, in Gen. 20:24–26, specific instructions are given by God concerning the building of an altar: *An altar of earth you shall make for Me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause My name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. If you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones, for if you wield your tool on it you profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to My altar, that your nakedness be not exposed on it.*" (ESV, capitalized) In other words, these altars were not to be fancy works of art or great artistic structures, but very utilitarian, being build out of the earth and stones just as these things are found. This means that all of the emphasis is placed upon sacrifice and not upon the altar. Apply that to this day, the teaching of the Word of God should be what is important within the church auditorium; the structure and beauty of the church building is not supposed to be the focus.
10. One altar—called **the Bronze Altar**—was designed so that could be moved with the tabernacle, was to be constructed, and with some very specific directions. The acacia wood was to represent the humanity of Jesus Christ; the bronze overlay was to represent His Deity. This could only be touched and moved about by putting poles through these rings, so that man did not have direct contact with the altar, being that it is holy to God. Like all of the furniture for the Tabernacle, this had a specific meaning and was intended to be operable for some time. It was kept outside of the Tabernacle, near the entrance. Ex. 27:1–7

A detailed illustration of the Bronze Altar, a square structure with a perforated top and four poles for carrying it. The altar is shown in a perspective view, highlighting its three-dimensional form. The top surface is covered in a grid of small holes, and the sides are decorated with intricate patterns. The entire structure is made of a dark, metallic material, likely bronze, with a glowing light emanating from the center of the top surface.

The Bronze Altar from Bible-history.com, accessed May 25, 2014
11. Believers could not be unclean when dealing with the altar. Ex. 28:43
12. An example of the actual usage of this altar is found in Ex. 29:11–25.
13. There would be a basin of bronze between the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and the Bronze Altar (also called the Altar of Burnt offering in Ex. 30:28); the priests who did various rituals here had to clean their hands, to indicate fellowship with God. Ex. 30:17–21 40:5–7, 29–30, 32
14. The Jews were also to designed an **altar of incense**, and this would be placed inside of the Tabernacle. The instructions given by God are as follows: *"You shall make an altar on which to burn incense; you shall make it of acacia wood. A cubit shall be its length, and a cubit its breadth. It shall be square, and two cubits shall be its height. Its horns shall be of one piece with it. You shall overlay it with pure gold, its top and around its sides and its horns. And you shall make a molding of gold around it. And you shall make two golden rings for it. Under its molding on two opposite sides of it you shall make them, and they shall be holders for poles with which to carry it. You shall make the poles of acacia wood and overlay them with gold. And you shall put it in front of the veil that is above the ark of the testimony, in front of the mercy seat that is above the*

testimony, where I will meet with you. And Aaron shall burn fragrant incense on it. Every morning when he dresses the lamps he shall burn it, and when Aaron sets up the lamps at twilight, he shall burn it, a regular incense offering before the LORD throughout your generations. You shall not offer unauthorized incense on it, or a burnt offering, or a grain offering, and you shall not pour a drink offering on it. Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year. With the blood of the sin offering of atonement he shall make atonement for it once in the year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD.” (Ex. 30:1–10; ESV, capitalized) The acacia wood overlain with gold refers to the 1st advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, where He was on earth in His humanity, but as God Himself. The gold is seen as His untarnished Deity; the bronze looks at the Lord more in His Hypostatic Union on the earth in the 1st advent, subject to various harms.



From our [Daily Bread Missions](#), accessed May 25, 2014.

15. These altars were to be built by craftsmen filled with the Holy Spirit. Ex. 31:6–11
16. A significant portion of the book of Leviticus deals with how the altars are to be used; or speaks of them actually being used. Lev. 1:5, 7-9, 11-13, 15-17 2:2, 8-9, 12 3:2, 5, 8, 11, 13, 16 etc.
17. The worship of the altar was not to be mixed in with the worship of foreign idols. Deut. 16:21 Joshua 22:19
18. There were other altars built throughout the land, but they were not to be done by artisans with great skill. Deut. 27:4–6 Joshua 8:30–31
19. Surprisingly enough, altars are not mentioned much in the book of Samuel.
 - 1) Samuel is said to build an altar in 1Sam. 7:17.
 - 2) King Saul, when he was younger and more aligned with the plan of God, built an altar in 1Sam. 14:35.
 - 3) David is only spoken of as building an altar in 2Sam. 24. This is because David was a type of Christ and David, in his psalms and by his life, taught us a great deal of Bible doctrine. Therefore, we learned to concentrate upon him and what he taught, rather than upon the symbolic nature of the altar and the animal sacrifices.
20. Pagan altars are spoken of in both testaments, and negatively. Deut. 12:2–3 Acts 17:23
21. Except with regards to the two altars built for the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), the altars were more designed for function, and represented, at most, the physical cross of Jesus Christ.
22. The altars were never to be objects of worship—even the two special altars for the Tabernacle.
23. After Jesus went to the cross, altars and animal sacrifice ceased to be methods of worship, since we had the real thing. Heb. 6:4–6 13:10
24. The altar and animal sacrifices are called types; Jesus on the cross is the antitype. We do not spend time using types to worship once the reality has come.
25. Having anything at the front of a church called an altar is, at best, misguided.

This was taken out of 1Sam. 14 ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

As was mentioned before, there were several altars built to God apart from the Brazen Altar of Ex. 38:1–7. This was to be the only altar of this nature built to God, as a civil war almost broke out over the eastern tribes building a non-functioning altar of their own (see Joshua 22:19–29).

Other Altars in Scripture

Saint (s)	Scripture	General Information About the Altar and Circumstances
Israel under Joshua	Deut. 27:4–7 Joshua 8:30–31	When Israel crossed over the Jordan, they were to set up uncut stones at Mount Ebal and offer sacrifices. This was to offer thanks to God for giving them the land.
The eastern tribes of Israel	Joshua 22:10–34	Those tribes east of the Jordan River erected a large altar, not to use, but to look upon, near the former city of Jericho. They would be able to see this altar from the eastern side of the Jordan River.
Gideon	Judges 6:24–27	It is unclear in this passage whether Gideon built one or two altars. It appears as though he built one altar in v. 24, and then, having torn down the adulterous altars of his father, built another in their place, offering an animal sacrifice on the new altar.
Manoah and his wife	Judges 13:16, 19–20	Manoah's wife was barren; the Angel of Jehovah (Jesus Christ) came to him and told them what to do when a son was born to Manoah's wife. Then they offered a sacrifice on a rock altar to God.
Eleven tribes of Israel	Judges 21:4	When eleven of the tribes of Israel realized that they had almost wiped out the tribe of Benjamin, they mourned and offered sacrifices to God.
Samuel	1Sam. 7:17	Although Samuel had a circuit of three cities in which he judged Israel, in his own hometown, Ramah, he built an altar to God.
Saul	1Sam. 14:35	When Israel defeated the Philistines, despite unseemly odds, the soldiers began to eat without any sort of acknowledgment of God. Saul built an altar and had the soldiers bring a sheep or an ox to sacrifice.
David	2Sam. 24:18–25 1Chron. 21:18–29	One of David's great sins was numbering the people (his motivation is the key to why this was a sin). He was told to erect an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. The Brazen Altar was up in the high places of Gibeon at that time.

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This short doctrine was taken from **Gen. 13** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

When it comes to an altar, we may understand that what occurs on that altar are blood sacrifices. Consistently, throughout the Old Testament, from the skins used to cover Adam and Eve up to the time of our Lord, there are lambs (and other animals), without spot or blemish, being sacrificed to God, their throats being slit open and their blood poured out upon the many altars. These blood sacrifices all looked forward to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins. Jesus offering Himself for our sins proclaims God’s love, righteousness, justice and fairness (which things are the essence or reputation or name of Jehovah).

How the Altar Proclaims the Essence or Character of Jehovah		
God’s Essence	Old Testament Approach	The Cross of Jesus Christ
Love	That one could sacrifice an animal and have his sin covered is a demonstration of God’s love.	For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).
Righteousness	God’s essence could not have anything to do with sin, so that sin has to be covered. You, God, love righteousness and hate wickedness (Psalm 45:7).	For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rm. 6:23). No man is justified by the law in the sight of God (Gal. 3:11a).
Justice	The penalty for the sin is symbolically transferred to the animal, as God’s justice must function. The soul who sins shall die (Ezek. 18:20a).	He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1Peter 2:24).
Fairness	There is no limitation upon who might take part in such a ritual.	For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16).

The altars upon which innocent animals were sacrificed both looked forward to the true payment of sins by Jesus Christ and simultaneously proclaimed the character of Jehovah Elohim.

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[Charts, Graphics and Short Doctrines](#)

This entire doctrine is found online here: [The Altar \(HTML\)](#) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

This abbreviated version is found in [Exodus 17 \(HTML\)](#) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)), [Deut. 27 \(HTML\)](#) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)) and [2Sam. 24 \(HTML\)](#) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

The Abbreviated Doctrine of the Altar

1. The Open Bible: *An altar was a platform or elevated place on which a priest placed a sacrifice as an offering to God. The Hebrew word for altar means “a place of slaughter or sacrifice,” but the altars of the LORD were not limited to sacrificial purposes. Sometimes an altar was built as*

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a testimony of one's faith for future generations (Joshua 22:26–29).¹

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