

THE *GILGALIM* AND JOSHUA'S CONQUEST

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The Children of Israel Crossing the Jordan,
colored lithograph after Paul Gustave Dore* (1832–1883)

Tradition holds that the ceremony described in Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8 took place on the slopes overlooking the town of Shechem, with Mount Gerizim to the south of Shechem and Mount Ebal to the north. But when Professor Adam Zertal discovered Joshua's altar in the 1980s, he encountered a problem: the site called "Mount Gerizim" is not visible from the location of that altar. If the tradition is correct, why did the Israelites choose to build the altar at a site *not overlooking Shechem*? The foot enclosure surrounding the altar site is one and a half miles away, on a remote slope *facing to the east* and facing a different hill, Mount Kabir.

As a result of the discovery of Joshua's altar, Zertal proposed that Mount Kabir had to be the *true* site of Mount Gerizim, and not the hill *called* "Mount Gerizim" that is located to the south of the altar. This idea would overturn 2,500 years of Samaritan tradition.¹

I would like to propose a solution to explain the decision to build Joshua's altar facing eastward.

WHERE TO?

If you ever saw a group of religious Jews about to start praying in an airport and wondered why they were shouting "Where to?" or pointing with their hands, you should know that a pre-prayer debate was going on as to the right direction to face while praying. Since the destruction of the Second Temple in AD 70, Jews all over the world have directed their intent toward the place where the house of God used to be located, in Jerusalem.

As a lover and reader of the Bible, I have always wondered what direction the ancient Israelites faced to worship and sacrifice *before* Jerusalem was established as the principal place of worship. And if there was an agreed direction for

worship, what was it at the time of the Conquest? Getting that answer required my visiting the earliest known worshipping sites of the Israelites, the *gilgalim* (foot structures) and the site of Joshua's altar on Mount Ebal.

THE HOLY COMPOUNDS

For fifteen years I have been part of the Manasseh Hill Country Survey (MHCS), which is the most extensive and significant archaeological research project of its kind within Samaria and the Jordan Valley. It was founded by the late Zertal but is headed today by Dr. Shay Bar. These areas have yielded hundreds of new sites that were unknown to archaeologists before the survey's work commenced.

My main interest is in the cultic sites from the Early Iron Age period that were found during the survey's meticulous work. They constitute the majority of cultic sites that were in use by Israelites during the time of Joshua, Judges, and 1 and 2 Samuel. Dr. Zertal and his crew discovered six compounds that are believed to be Israelite cultic sites:

1. Argaman
2. Masu'a
3. Yaft
4. Unuk, in the Tirzah/Far'a valley
5. Mount Ebal, surrounding Joshua's altar
6. Rimmonim

In his book *The Footsteps of God*, Zertal identifies these six oval footprint-shaped stone compounds as *gilgalim* and says that these were places of gathering for the Israelites during the initial stages of the Conquest period.² From Joshua to the Prophets, the Bible mentions *gilgalim* as places of worship,

sacrifice, circumcision, and war camps, and as sites for crowning kings. *Gilgalim* weren't just worship sites, but they were also places of national and tribal significance. According to the archaeological evidence, some of these compounds served the Israelites for hundreds of years and only ended with the Assyrian destruction of the ten northern tribes of Israel in 722 BC.

I highly recommend the work of Dr. Ralph Hawkins, who speaks at length on defining a cultic site and specifically characterizes these six unique structures as Israelite cultic sites.³ For the purpose of this article, I will move forward based on the understanding that these *gilgalim* are indeed Israelite cultic structures.

The importance of the recent discovery of the curse tablet on Mount Ebal and its origin within the Joshua's altar footprint structure cannot be overstated, as the discovery makes it even clearer that all six compounds belonged to the Israelite culture and theology. I will focus on the orientation of the worshippers at these *gilgal*/footprint structures.

DEAD END

Whenever Zertal presented the discovery of the foot enclosures, the audience always tried to look for common factors that focused on the enclosures themselves. Typical questions inquired about the locations of the enclosures, the orientation of each enclosure, or the enclosures' dimensions and architectural details or asked, "If the structures are foot-shaped, which foot is it—the right or left?" What is the significance of the foot shape? Is there significance in the enclosures' specific geographical locations?

There seemed to be no consistency. All the structures had the oval foot-shape design in common, but each structure had a slightly different internal architecture, so that some had procession roads, some had a cultic high place in the form of an altar or bamah, and some had inner divisions. But the main problem remained that they face different directions, which makes it unclear how to connect all six structures. There had to be something else. So, I decided to take another approach.

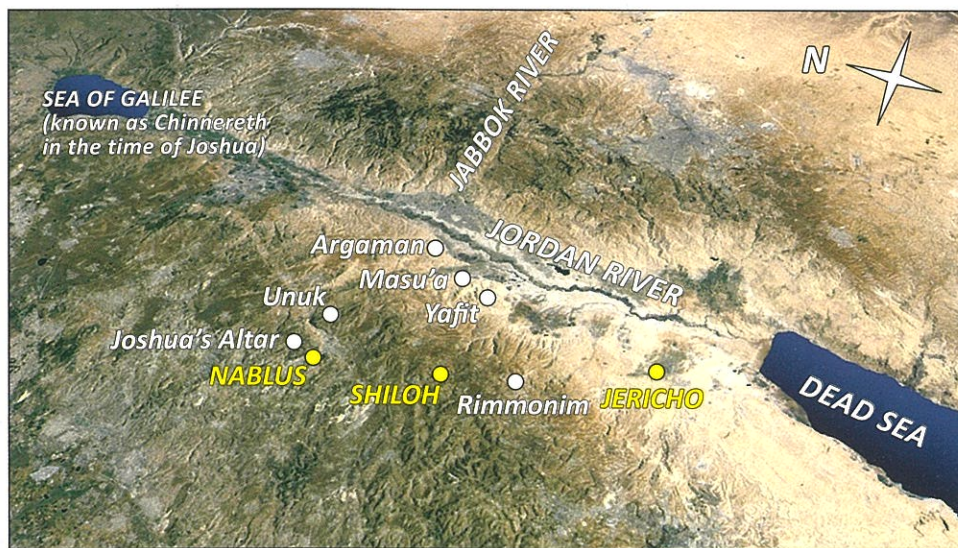
THE JORDAN VALLEY ENCLOSURES

Trying to solve the reason for the orientation of the altar on Mount Ebal, I considered the three enclosures that are located in the Jordan Valley and specifically around the geographical location at the opening of the Tirzah Valley (known in Arabic as Wadi al-Far'a): Yafit, Masu'a, and Argaman. Do they all face in the same direction, whether north, south, east, or west?

When I revisited these three sites in the Jordan Valley, it was evident that each enclosure structure had a different orientation. There was no common direction. Additionally, the Masu'a structure, unintentionally destroyed during the building of an industrial zone, was never properly excavated. The only knowledge I had of it was from the description and survey sketches taken down by the Manasseh Hill Country Survey. The unclear direction of the enclosure at Yafit wasn't very helpful either. To speak the truth, the shape doesn't really look like a foot in comparison to the Argaman foot structure. I remembered visiting the Argaman structure and trying to figure out how worship there might have looked thousands of years ago, but everything was just a guess. *I was stuck.*

As I sat on the mountain slope overlooking the Argaman foot structure and stared with frustration into the distance, I realized that we sometimes tend to focus on the wrong things. What I saw in the distance changed everything! Amazingly, the location to which each slope was directed suddenly became very clear to me.

I remembered that with each of these three Jordan Valley foot-shaped compounds, a naturally terraced slope overlooks the enclosure structure. That formation creates a natural amphitheater where the Israelites could have sat or stood to watch the ceremonies taking place in the foot enclosure below. *What if the orientation of the site was not dependent on the contents of the enclosure but on the direction that the Israelites faced while watching the ceremonies taking place below them?* The reason why I had never considered the adjacent slopes was that the enclosures themselves were always the focus of the research.



NASA Visible Earth



Above: The *gilgal* of Rimmonim, or Sha'ab Rumani.

I had to revisit the other two sites and check the orientations of their amphitheaters. If I did find a shared direction for all three Jordan Valley *gilgal* amphitheaters, I could then potentially connect them to the other enclosures.

So, I took a map that included the three Jordan Valley *gilgalim* / foot structures and drew three lines, starting them at the theaters of each *gilgal*, extending them through each *gilgal* enclosure, and continuing them straight out into the distance, as if people standing on each of the theater slopes were looking straight away into the distance from where they stood. Incredibly, all three lines crossed at the same location—the Jabbok River, which is in the plain of Adam.

During the Conquest period, the Jabbok River separated, in the area called Gilead, the tribal allotment of the tribe of Gad in the south from the allotment of the half tribe of Manasseh in the north. The area where the Jabbok flows into the Jordan is current-day Tel El Damia, understood to be the location of the ancient city of Adam. If all three theaters point in this direction, it is not likely that this is a coincidence. What is the missing clue?

What could make this area so significant in the eyes of the Israelites?

THE CROSSING

Archaeologists have long searched for evidence of a major Israelite crossing in the area of Jericho, as described in the Bible, assuming that the hundreds of thousands of Israelites that crossed the Jordan River would have left major archaeological traces in the area immediately around Jericho. Until very recently, such evidence had not been found, and minimalist archaeologists have used this “lack of proof” as an argument against the historicity of the events described in the book of Joshua.

This picture changed, however, when Professor Zertal and Dr. Shay Bar of the Manasseh Hill Country Survey discovered a major change of population in an area a few miles north of

Stone way: A type of two-faced low wall that was originally constructed at different enclosure sites to distinguish, in each case, between the holy area inside the enclosure (also known as a *temenos*) and the mundane area outside of it. Because this dividing construction is not high enough to serve as a wall, it is called a “way.” Each “stone way” was constructed with two rows of stones, the rows either being placed adjacent to each other or being placed far apart with a pavement in the middle to create a procession way or procession road. The route of each stone way follows a certain shape rather than the topography.

Holy Basin: An area with a concentration of several important holy sites. This term was coined by Israel and refers to Jerusalem and specifically to the area of the Old City.

Jericho during the shifting from the Late Bronze (LB) Age to the Early Iron Age. In that area, which was empty of human habitation during the Late Bronze period, we see hundreds of seminomadic encampments suddenly appearing as we move to the Early Iron Age.⁴ The center of these settlements seems to be in the triangle connecting the plain of Adam, the Jabbok River, and the area around Tirzah.

In regard to the waters of the Jordan River stopping to allow the Israelites to cross over, many think that this happened in the immediate area close to Jericho and that the passage over the river was relatively narrow. But what does the biblical account actually say? Looking closely at Joshua 3:16, we read, “The waters coming down from above stood *and rose up in a heap very far away, at Adam, the city that is beside Zarethan*, and those flowing down toward the Sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea, were completely cut off. And the people passed over opposite Jericho.” With the waters of the Jordan River being stopped so far away, the Israelites would have been able to cross at any and every point north of Jericho and up to Adam/Jabbok, which is located 17.5 miles north of Jericho. Thus, the passage across the Jordan River could have been done fairly quickly, and there would have been lots of room on the other side for the Israelites to spread out into their encampments.

So who crossed over opposite Jericho? Could it be that the Bible refers only to the fighting force or men of war among the Israelites, who eventually conquered Jericho and continued to Ai? The Manasseh Hill Country Survey shows that the majority of the Israelite camps (with their sheep, cattle, and other animals) appeared miles north of Jericho.⁵ Accordingly, I suggest that since the population of Canaanites at Jericho was obviously hostile toward the Israelite presence, the noncombatant Israelites simply crossed into an area empty of Canaanites—that is, the area north of Jericho and up to where the miracle of the Jordan River occurred at Jabbok (Joshua 3–4).

Is there any evidence in the Scriptures that points to a dominant fighting force in the area of Jericho? I believe so. Joshua 5:2–7 describes how, right after the crossing of the Jordan, the Israelite males are commanded to be circumcised.

The verses repeat that it is Joshua and possibly the “men of war” who are to undertake this important commandment.

At that time the LORD said to Joshua, “Make flint knives and circumcise the sons of Israel a second time.” So Joshua made flint knives and circumcised the sons of Israel at Gibeath-haaraloth. And this is the reason why Joshua circumcised them: all the males of the people who came out of Egypt, *all the men of war*, had died in the wilderness....For the people of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, until all the nation, *the men of war* who came out of Egypt, perished, because they did not obey the voice of the LORD... (5:2–4A, 5:6A)

Could it be possible that the orientation of the sites of the foot-shaped enclosures commemorates the Jordan River miracle at Adam/Jabbok and the crossing of the civilian Israelite population north of Jericho?

Is it possible to find more biblical events to confirm that this area might have become a sort of “Holy Basin”? Although this area is rarely mentioned in the Bible, there are several events worth mentioning that could have increased the sacredness of the region in the eyes of the Israelites.

THE PATRIARCHAL TRADITIONS⁶

It can be hard for Bible readers to get into the mind of an Israelite in the year 1400 BC. Israelites would have cherished the accounts of the miracles of the Exodus. They would have also remembered their ancient heritage of the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac and especially Jacob, the father of the twelve tribes and the Israelite nation.

In Genesis we read of two heavenly revelations to Jacob that occurred near the Jabbok River. The first is found in Genesis 32:1–2: “Jacob went on his way, and the angels of God met him. And when Jacob saw them he said, ‘This is God’s camp!’ So he called the name of that place Mahanaim [camps].” The second reference is found in Genesis 32:22–31:

The same night he arose and took his two wives, his two female servants, and his eleven children, and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. He took them and sent them across the stream, and everything else that he had. And Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the name of the place Peniel [the face of God], saying, “For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has

been delivered.” The sun rose upon him as he passed Peniel, limping because of his hip.

The angelic revelation at Mahanaim (Tel Edh-Dahab al-Gharbi on the western bank of the Jabbok River) and the more important revelation at Peniel (Tel Edh-Dahab al-Sharki on the eastern bank) are two crucial events that add to this area in the Jordan Valley becoming a center of spiritual and national worship to which the Israelites were oriented.

There is another relevant site related to Jacob, 6.6 miles northeast of the Jabbok pass. Genesis 33:17 records that Jacob built a permanent house (not a tent) and erected booths for his flocks in a place he named Sukkot (Succoth: booths), which later became part of the allotment to the tribe of Gad. Archaeologically, Sukkot is identified with Tel Deir Alla.

It therefore is becoming apparent that the Jordan Valley *gilgalim* / foot structures could have been a way for the Israelites to commemorate a number of important historical and cultural events recorded in Genesis 32–33:

1. Theology: Jacob’s connection with the God of Abraham and Isaac
2. Ethnicity: The transformation of Jacob from an individual (Jacob) to a people (Israel)
3. Redemption: Jacob’s passage westward over the Jordan River, which is similar to the return of the Israelites from the exile in Egypt
4. Conquest: The victory over Esau, who left Canaan and handed it to Jacob, as a precursor to the Israelite conquest of Canaan by Joshua

THE CITY OF ADAM AND THE ALTAR OF THE EASTERN TRIBES

Can we find any references in the Bible attesting to the holiness of this area?

In his book *The Footsteps of God*, Zertal references a verse in Psalm 78 that I am presenting here from the Orthodox Jewish Bible (OJB), which preserves the original Hebrew: “So that He forsook the Mishkan [dwelling place] of Shiloh, the Ohel [tent] which He placed among adam (men)” (Ps 78:60). Bible scholars, including Zertal, believe that this verse describes the destruction of the tabernacle at Shiloh and its being relocated elsewhere. But because this verse is built as two parallel phrases, “Shiloh” parallels “adam,” and therefore “adam” should not be translated as “men” but as the city of Adam.

Another biblical reference that could show the significance of the city of Adam and the Jordan Valley area in general is the account of the altar built by the tribes of Israel that were located east of the Jordan River (Jos 22). After these tribes fulfilled their promise to Moses that they would continue to fight west of the Jordan along with the other tribes as part of the Conquest (see Nm 32), they returned to their tribal lands. Before crossing the Jordan, they decided to build an altar on the western side of the river at a place called “Gelilot.” Again,

the OJB translation is needed to better unlock the meaning: “And when they came unto the Gelilot of the Yarden [Jordan], that is in erez Kena’an [the land of Canaan], the Bnei Reuven [sons of Reuben] and the Bnei Gad [sons of Gad] and the half-tribe of Menasheh built there a mizbe’ach [altar] by the Yarden, a mizbe’ach gadol [a large altar] in appearance” (Jos 22:10).

Could *gelilot* and *gilgal* refer to something similar? The book of Joshua describes when the boundaries were being drawn that became the northern border of Judah and the southern border of Benjamin. In the description of the establishment of the boundaries for the tribe of Benjamin, we read, “And [the boundary] ran from the north, and went to Ein Shemesh, and went toward Gelilot, which is opposite the ascent of Adummim, and descended to the Even Bohan ben Reuven [the stone of Bohan, son of Reuben]” (Jos 18:17; OJB). And Joshua 15:7, describing the boundaries for the tribe of Judah, reads, “And the boundary went up toward Devir from the Achor Valley, and so northward, looking toward Gilgal, which faces Ma’aleh-Adummim, which is on the south side of the wadi; and the boundary passed toward the Ein-Shemesh Spring, and ended at Ein Rogel” (OJB). It becomes apparent that the names “Gelilot” and “Gilgal” have the same meaning.

So why did so much tension develop when the sons of Reuben, the sons of Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh came to the *gelilot* to build an altar there (Jos 22:10–20)? Is it possible that the eastern tribes built an altar at an existing *gilgal* in the Jabbok area? The Bible records that the Israelites under the leadership of the high priest Phinehas viewed the building of the altar by the eastern tribes as a threat to the centrality of the Shiloh tabernacle, and thus as something so outrageous that it could provoke civil war between the tribes. After all, Shiloh had a strong patriarchal connection to Jacob, appearing in his blessing to his son Judah: “The shevet (sceptre) shall not depart from Yehudah [Judah], nor a Mekhokek (Lawgiver) from between his raglayim [feet], until Shiloh come; and unto him shall be the obedience of the amim (peoples, nations)” (Gn 49:10; OJB). Is it possible that the western Israelite tribes, headed by Phinehas, already viewed the Jabbok/Tirzah Basin as a possible rival to Shiloh because of its centrality to the shared Israelite heritage?

When confronted by Phinehas, the eastern tribes explained that they were fearful of their future exclusion from the covenant with the Lord by the descendants of the western tribes. By building an altar in the area of the Jabbok River and the Tirzah Valley, they intended to send a clear message that they were all part of one family, the sons of Jacob, and that they were all in covenant with the Lord (Jos 22:21–29).

UNUK AND RIMMONIM

What about the other enclosures at Unuk and Rimmonim? Can we learn anything from their theater orientations? The Unuk site, in the Tirzah Valley and not far from Shechem, is on the highest point of the valley and has a collapsed wall that could have once been used as a fortification. This

does not follow the “stone way” pattern that appears at the other enclosures. Also, the Unuk enclosure does not have an adjacent slope that could have served as a theater. The Rimmonim enclosure doesn’t have a clear theater either and is far away from the central Samaria and Jordan Valley Israelite region. It is my understanding that these enclosures are not connected with the three Jordan Valley enclosures and the Mount Ebal enclosure.

THE VERDICT

It was time to check my theory at Mount Ebal by again asking, What if the orientation of the site was not dependent on the contents of the enclosure but on the direction that the Israelites faced while watching the ceremonies taking place below them? If I was right, the mountains of modern-day Jordan should be visible from the adjacent slope-theater of Ebal. To my surprise, not only are they visible from the higher elevation of the theater, but they are also visible from the altar itself, which lies lower than the slope.

I believe that the construction of the altar compound on Mount Ebal and its theater orientation show the site to correspond with the Jordan Valley compounds. On Mount Ebal, the Israelites faced the Jabbok crossing site, which is visible to the east of the altar, just behind the Kabir ridge. The Jabbok pass is not visible from the Shechem valley, and therefore a location in that valley could not have served the cultic purpose that the Israelites intended for the altar that Moses commanded them to build. If I am correct, the Israelites wanted to worship their God at a place that would also connect the altar ceremony with their patriarchal heritage and the miracle of the Jordan River crossing.

“God has spoken in his holiness: ‘With exultation I will divide up Shechem and portion out the Vale of Succoth’” (Ps 60:6).



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