

A TSUNAMI FROM MT. EBAL: CURSED BY THE GOD YAHU

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If the mountains surrounding ancient Shechem could talk, they would have quite a story to tell. Altogether, the Old Testament mentions Shechem 60 times. It was there that, at Elon Moreh, Abram cut covenant with God (Gn 12:6–7). There the Israelites buried Joseph’s bones, which they carried out of Egypt (Ex 13:19; Jos 24:32). There Jacob dug a well, which Jesus later used as a venue for his encounter with a Samaritan woman (Jn 4:5–26). There, after victories at Jericho and Ai, Joshua gathered the Israelites to renew the Abrahamic covenant (Jos 6–8) by pronouncing blessings from Mt. Gerizim and curses from Mt. Ebal (see Dt 27). Shechem separated the two mountains. As part of this complex ceremony, Joshua built an altar on Mt. Ebal: “At that time Joshua built an altar to the LORD, the God of Israel, on Mount Ebal” (Jos 8:30). This altar and the finds within it are the focus of this article. This area now lies within a hotly disputed region.

Excavating in the Middle East is fraught with challenges. Perhaps no area is more challenging than Judea and Samaria, often referred to as the West Bank. This nomenclature refers to the land west of the Jordan River that became disputed after Israel’s victory over a league of Arab nations, including Jordan, in the June 1967 Six-Day War. These nations simultaneously attacked Israel, but they had inaccurately assessed the military skill and resolve of the nascent nation, which was then only 20 years old. Following a decisive victory, Israel took control of Jerusalem and the West Bank (Judea and Samaria) from the Jordanians. Arabs living in the area, along with their Middle Eastern and European allies, strongly but unsuccessfully

advocated for a Palestinian state that would encompass Gaza, Judea and Samaria, and East Jerusalem. In 1993, the Oslo Accords divided the West Bank into three geopolitical zones.

Area A came completely under Arab, or “Palestinian,” control. The Arabs also had civil control in Area B, but Israel had military control there. Israel maintained complete control in Area C. Today, about 500,000 Jews live in communities within Area C, and about the same number of Arabs live in Areas A and B. Mt. Ebal now lies just inside the boundary of Area B. It is disputed territory within the disputed territories. Thus, archaeological sites in Area B are subject to constant vandalism, and it remains unclear who is in charge. The resulting defacement of ancient remains is especially evident at sites excavated prior to 1993.

HISTORY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON MT. EBAL

In 1979, archaeologist Adam Zertal began a comprehensive survey of the Manasseh hill country. His method was to divide the region into territories and then to subdivide these into landscape units. He assembled a team of people who, each day of the survey, would walk in an evenly spaced line over the land allotted for the day, combing the area for ancient sites or even just scattered pottery sherds. This process was repeated for every hill and valley in each landscape unit. Zertal carefully documented each archaeological site that the team discovered.¹ The Manasseh Hill Country Survey is still in progress, now led by Zertal’s successor, archaeologist Shay Bar from the University of Haifa. It is possibly the most thorough archaeological survey ever conducted in Israel.

*City of Nablus, formerly known as Shechem,
colored lithograph by Louis Haghe after David Roberts (1842)*

While surveying Landscape Unit 11 in 1980, Zertal discovered an archaeological site on the northeastern slopes of Mt. Ebal—Site 276. In 1982, he returned to the site and began an excavation that lasted eight seasons. His work revealed a foot-shaped enclosure of stone walls encompassing 14 dunams (ca. 3.5 acres). Within the enclosure was a smaller enclosure of 3.8 dunams (ca. 1 acre), and within that enclosure Zertal discovered a 9 × 7-meter rectangular structure with supporting architecture. It featured a ramp leading to its top and courtyards flanking the ramp. Ashes and bones filled the structure. Surrounding it were dozens of small round stone enclosures containing abundant broken pottery. In some of these rings, Zertal found jewelry such as bracelets and earrings of bronze, silver, and gold, and in one he found a scarab. He interpreted his discovery as an altar surrounded by offerings.²

As he continued to excavate the rectangular structure, Zertal discovered that it had been constructed directly atop an earlier, round structure that was two meters in diameter. This earlier structure sat on a leveled bedrock surface. A nearby pit at this level (Pit 250) contained numerous special finds, including a basalt chalice³ and a six-sided seal or die.⁴ Zertal believed that this earlier phase, which he classified as Stratum II, was cultic in nature, involving the sacrifice of animals.⁵

Based on the pottery and scarabs that Zertal discovered from within the altars, he concluded that the altars were in use for no more than 100 to 120 years, beginning in the mid-13th century BC and ending in the mid-12th century BC. In 1985 he published a controversial article suggesting that he had found Joshua's altar on Mt. Ebal.⁶

Zertal's article elicited several responses from other scholars with alternate suggestions regarding the nature and function of the site. Kempinski suggested that the site was a village and that a watchtower later stood there.⁷ Fritz proposed that the site was a farmstead.⁸ Soggin and Na'aman identified the site with the Tower of Shechem mentioned in Judges 9:46–49.⁹ However, scholarly discussion regarding the site was limited because Zertal had not yet published his excavation results. In 1987, he published a preliminary excavation report, but he never published a final report before his death in 2015.

In 2007, archaeologist and Bible scholar Ralph Hawkins completed a PhD dissertation on the site that Zertal excavated on Mt. Ebal. He conducted a thorough study of the site and carefully analyzed Zertal's findings, comparing them with the conclusions of Zertal and others. He concluded that the site was dissimilar to other known villages, farmsteads, and towers and similar to other known cultic sites. Although he identified

Left and below left: Mount Ebal Dump Salvage (MEDS) team members Scott Stripling, director, and Cindi Steele processing the dump piles from Mt. Ebal.

Below: Abigail Leavitt (forefront) and Scott Stripling (far right) assisting Shay Bar (middle back) in surveying Mt. Kafir as part of the Manasseh Hill Country Survey.



Michael C. Luddeni



Abigail Leavitt



Courtesy of the Shomrim Al Hanetzach

Above: Remains of a 13th century BC altar on Mt. Ebal. The large rectangular altar was found to be covering a smaller round altar, six and a half feet in diameter.

Right: Depiction of the Mt. Ebal altars.



Melissa Barreiro, Courtesy of the Armstrong Institute of Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem Israel.

the rectangular structure as an Israelite altar, he cautiously abstained from identifying it as the altar mentioned in Joshua 8:30–35.¹⁰ Hawkins briefly mentioned the earlier, round installation, and seemed open to the possibility of it being an altar, but he did not devote much attention to it.¹¹

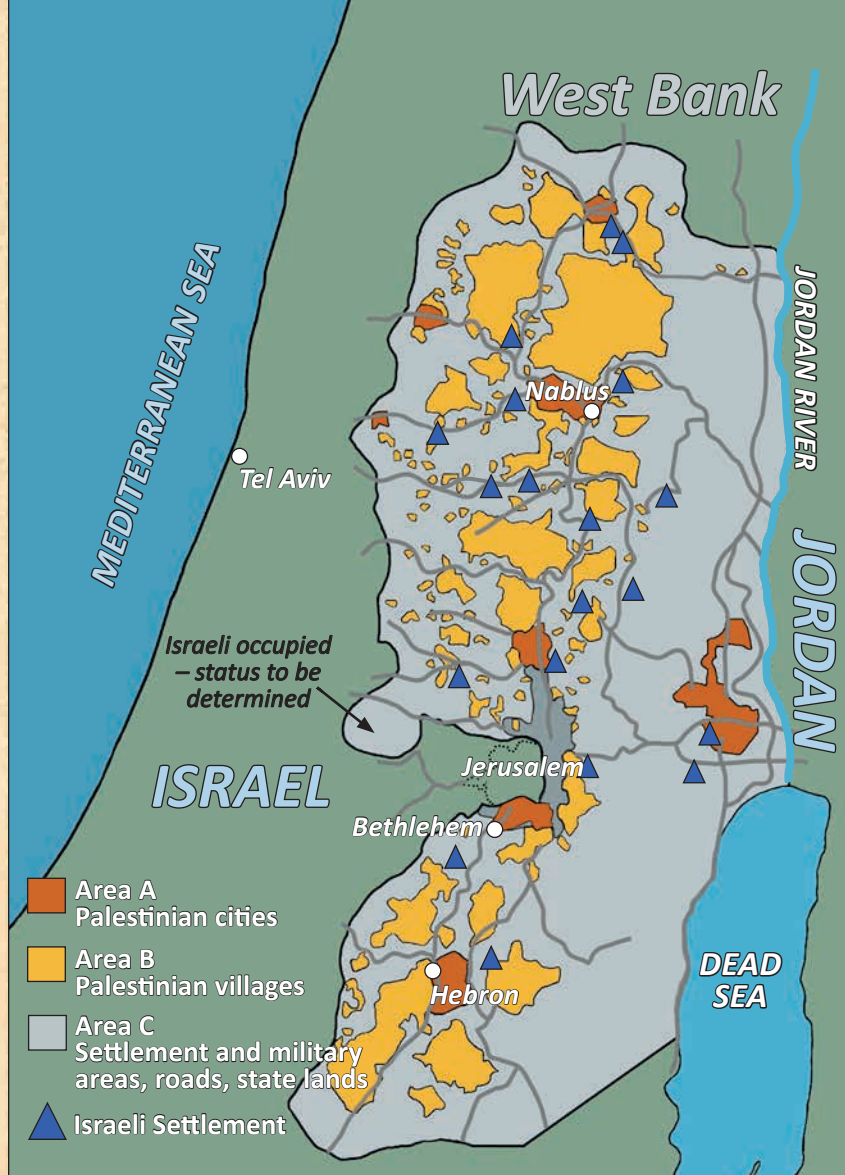
Coauthors Stripling and Leavitt compared the archaeological finds from the Mt. Ebal site with the biblical text describing Joshua's altar there.¹² They concluded that Israelites in the Judges period constructed the large rectangular altar after the time of Joshua, but that the smaller, round altar beneath it meets the qualifications of Joshua's altar. Coauthor van der Veen concurs with their assessment.

In 2022, Bar began work on the long-awaited final publication of Zertal's excavations at the Mt. Ebal site. He plans to publish it within the next few years. For more on Bar's involvement in the Manasseh Hill Country Survey, see Leavitt's interview of Bar in this issue of *Bible and Spade* starting on page 16.

Meanwhile, even though Zertal concluded his excavation of the site in 1989, there was more to learn and discover. In December 2019, the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR) sent a team, led by Stripling and Leavitt, to wet-sift the dump piles from Zertal's excavation.

Wet sifting involves washing excavated material to remove the dirt and expose small artifacts that might otherwise remain undetected. ABR has used wet sifting with great success at Tel Shiloh since 2017. By wet-sifting the dump piles from Mt. Ebal, the team would not only find potentially important artifacts that Zertal had missed but would also demonstrate the value of wet-sifting archaeological material.

Stripling, with the assistance of Aaron Lipkin (see Lipkin's article starting on page 24 of this issue), arranged to have the material from Zertal's dump piles moved to a nearby settlement, Shavei Shomron. Here the team set up their equipment, including a specially constructed portable wet sifter (built by Steven Rudd), and went to work. As expected, they found numerous small items, including pottery sherds, small metal tools, and flint objects.



Left: Map showing the division of Judea and Samaria after the 1993 Oslo Accords. Based on maps from the Foundation for Middle East Peace.

in the images. Already experienced with using XCT measurements on other inscribed lead objects from later historical periods, the Czech team knew exactly what to look for. However, as the object is bent—which is especially evident by the large central fold (see below)—these darker contours were not clearly visible in all the scans, and therefore the object needed to be digitally flattened using specially developed software. This, of course, was a most daunting task, demanding great technical expertise.

Once this process was completed, Professor Daniela Urbanova, the Latin epigrapher assisting the Czech team, recognized what she believed could well be ancient writing. Stripling then invited West Semitic epigraphers Pieter Gert van der Veen of the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz and Gershon Galil of the University of Haifa to examine the freshly made scans. Both scholars likewise detected ancient writing, which soon was clearly recognized as second-millennium-BC proto-alphabetic script. Several dozens of letters appeared to be incised on what would soon be called the “Inner B” side of the tablet. The first words on which van der Veen and Galil agreed consisted of several archaic, proto-alphabetic letters that clearly preserved the forms of their

On December 18th, team member and small-finds expert Frankie Snyder discovered a flat, square-shaped object in her wet-sifting tray (see Snyder’s article on page 21 of this issue). As soon as she picked it up, she knew by the weight that it was made of lead. The object had a crease that ran around three of its edges, indicating that it was an oblong sheet of lead that had been carefully folded in half in antiquity. Snyder, along with Stripling and Leavitt, recognized it immediately as a *defixio*, a lead curse tablet.

THE MT. EBAL INSCRIPTION

As the small lead strip was folded and could not be opened without damaging it, Stripling, with the help of Zvi Koenigsberg, arranged for the laboratory team at the Institute of Theoretical and Applied Mechanics of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Telč, Czech Republic, to perform X-ray tomographic measurements (XCT) on the tablet to see if an inscription existed on the inside. The Czech scientists under the leadership of Dr. Daniel Vavrik produced multiple two-dimensional X-ray images, which, with the help of computed tomography, yielded three-dimensional planar slices of the inside of the object. Where the material density was lower, spots, scratches, and incisions appeared as darker contours

hieroglyphic prototypes, including *aleph* (resembling the head of an ox); a cross-shaped *taw*, terminating with curved prongs (this shape is already attested in proto-Sinaitic writing of the earlier second millennium BC); a horizontally oriented *mem* (representing water); *waw* (a mace-shaped letter); and *he*, a large, standing stick figure with upraised arms (this type of *he* also occurs alongside the more common seated variant in the proto-Sinaitic writings of Serabit el-Khadim).

Less deeply incised letters, partly intertwined with the aforementioned signs, were also detected, including *yod* (shaped in the form of an outstretched arm), *lamed* (depicted as a coiled rope), and a second, albeit more linearly shaped, *aleph*. In the scans (which show the mirror image of the inscription), the epigraphers now were able to read from right to left the words *tamut* (“you will die”), *El* (“God”), and *Yahu* (i.e., Yahweh, the God of Israel). Once these words were complemented by the subsequent discovery of two shallower *lameds*, the reading “by El-Yahu [or “by the God Yahu”], you will die” became evident. This sentence would soon prove to be only one line of a much longer inscription, which would be deciphered through a painstaking investigation involving several more months of work. Many more letters came to light in the upper, left, and lower right quadrants of the inside

inscription. The incised letters in those quadrants included an even more archaic-looking *aleph* (still retaining the ears and horns of the ox hieroglyph), *resh* (a character with a rhomboid-shaped human head placed on a neck), and several more *waws*, *mems*, and *taws*. It is possible that even more letters exist in the problematic central fold, which we previously mentioned. But as some of these could also possibly be mere scratches and cracks in the lead, the reading of this section remains tentative. Even so, there can be little doubt that some letters occur in the fold, but how many there are remains unclear.

Another factor that hampers the interpretation of the overall inscription is that the scribe did not use word dividers (unspaced words are common in proto-alphabetic inscriptions, making these inscriptions difficult to interpret) and often overlapped his letters. For this reason, we originally explored the possibility that the inscription was a palimpsest. However, it became clear that this was not the case when all the letters made perfect sense in the inscription's prosaic flow. Eventually, we recognized the writing as a curse formula, composed of the words *arur* ("cursed"), *atah* ("you"), and *tamut* ("you shall die") and the divine names *El* and *Yahu*. As the epigraphers shared the findings of their research with the rest of the collaborative team, we grew confident in the formula but struggled to understand the precise word order.

Despite these words of caution, the overall interpretation of the letter shapes was clearly confirmed by subsequent study by the Czech team of more than 100 high-resolution photographs of the outside (front and back) of the tablet, which were only shown to the epigraphers after they had deciphered the basic curse formula, as presented at the ABR press conference on March 23, 2022. These photographs proved to be extremely

helpful. For bulges of the letters that were incised on the inside by a stylus appeared on the back of the tablet due to the extreme thinness of the lead strip (ca. 0.4 mm). Moreover, the photographs revealed additional words on the tablet's front outside surface that featured the same forms detected in the scans of the inside of the tablet. The scribe had clearly incised these words with a stylus, as the scratches inside the letters reveal. The letters *aleph*, *mem*, *waw*, and *taw* appear on the outside of the tablet. Also, the word *tamut* occurs there, as does the divine name *Yahu*. A more in-depth study of the outside inscription will be presented in a separate article. The academic research on the tablet, as well as the reading of the inner text, recently appeared in *Heritage Science*.¹³

THE INSCRIPTION'S ORIGIN

What then can be said concerning the date of the inscription, the ethnic identity of the scribe, and his use of the divine name *Yahu*, the name of Israel's God? By scrutinizing the forms and stances of the proto-alphabetic letters on the lead tablet and by comparing them with other proto-alphabetic inscriptions from the second-millennium-BC Southern Levant (including Proto-Sinaitic and Proto-Canaanite inscriptions at Serabit el-Khadim, Lachish, Shechem, Gezer, and other places), we determined that the script belongs roughly to the period between 1600 and 1200 BC. While some letters preserve archaic features only found during the first half of the second millennium BC, most letters exhibit more developed forms. None of these forms, however, continue past about 1250 BC, a conclusion that is also substantiated by the ceramic evidence at the Mt. Ebal site. On average, the forms and stances (such as the linear bovine features of *aleph*, the virtually horizontal stance of *mem*, and the head-shaped *resh*) represent an intermediate paleographic stage, suggesting a date approximately during the late 15th to 14th centuries BC.

Although most words in the inscription occur in the West Semitic dialects of the Late Bronze Age, the divine name *Yahu* is completely absent from the Canaanite onomasticon during this period. It is only found as a geographical term related to the Shasu-Bedouin lands in southern Canaan in Egyptian topographical lists from the New Kingdom period (i.e., during the late 18th and 20th Dynasties). As precisely this abbreviated form (*Yahu* instead of *Yahweh*) of the divine name is also found in Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions at Kuntilet Ajrud from ca. 800 BC, there can be little doubt that the lead inscription was indeed incised by an Israelite (likely a Levite) scribe of the Late Bronze Age. It is the combination of the paleographic date and the divine name *Yahu* used within the curse formula on a lead tablet found at the altar of Mt. Ebal (the biblical "mountain of curses") that strongly suggests an ancient Israelite origin for the object, dated to the time of Joshua's Conquest of Canaan ca. 1400 BC. Thus, the tablet shows that the Israelites already worshipped "El-Yahu" as one and the same God several centuries earlier than many liberal scholars maintain.



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A view of Mount Ebal from Mount Gerizim ca. 1915.



Jaroslav Valach



Michael C. Luddeni

Top: Side Outer B (recto) of the *defixio*. The relative size of the *defixio* is shown in Scott Stripling's hand.

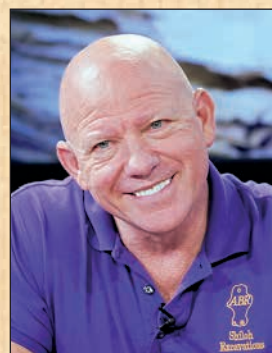
CONCLUSION

When properly interpreted, the archaeological remains on Mt. Ebal harmonize with the Joshua 8:30 account of an altar on Mt. Ebal dating to the Late Bronze Age IB/IIA horizon. The *defixio* discussed in this article is potentially the most important archaeological find of this generation. It reinforces the biblical date of the Conquest (ca. 1400 BC) and deconstructs religious, historical, and theological considerations concerning a variety of deities, including El and Yahu. Adherents of the Documentary Hypothesis have incorrectly proposed a syncretism between El and Yahu, where these deities merged to become Yahweh, the God of Israel and Judah, during the first millennium BC.¹⁴

Proto-alphabetic letters as they appear on the *defixio*

א				
ה				
ו				
י				
ל				
מ				
ר				
ת				

Pieter Gert van der Veen



Scott Stripling is the Director of Excavations for the Associates for Biblical Research (ABR) currently leading ABR's excavation at ancient Shiloh (2017 to present). Previously, Stripling directed the ABR excavations at Khirbet el-Maqatir, served as Field Supervisor at Tall el-Hammam in Jordan, and as a supervisor of the Temple Mount

Sifting Project in Jerusalem. Stripling serves as Provost and Director of the Archaeology Institute at The Bible Seminary in Katy, Texas. He did his graduate studies at the University of Texas (M.A.), Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (M.A.), and Veritas International University (Ph.D.). Stripling serves as President of the Board of Directors of the Near East Archaeological Society and has published widely in peer-reviewed journals, popular magazines, and books.

Abigail Leavitt: (See page 20)