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The Presence of God and the Coherence of Exodus 20:22–26

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The Problem

Exod 20:22–26¹ has been the subject of an extensive scholarly literature addressing textual, exegetical, literary-critical, and especially religiohistorical questions.² Here I should like to address the question of the coherence of the passage. The altar laws in vv. 24–26 are preceded by two verses that have no obvious bearing on altars: an introductory verse (v. 22) and a prohibition on the manufacturing of idols (v. 23). While the pertinence of vv. 25–26 to v. 24 is clear,³ it is not obvious how vv. 22, 23, and 24 relate to each other. Despite this, the Masoretic and even the Samaritan⁴ text make all five verses a single unit. Although

1. These are the verse numbers according to Letteris and BHS. —For several ideas in this paper, particularly concerning vv. 22–23, I am indebted to a lecture given by Prof. Moshe Greenberg in 1965 as part of a course he taught to curriculum writers on behalf of the Melton Research Center of the Jewish Theological Seminary, and to an unpublished paper on the passage that he wrote a few years later and that he kindly showed me recently.

2. See, for example, the literature cited by C. Houtman, *Exodus* (3 vols.; Leuven: Peeters, 1993–2000) 3.99 and the studies cited below in n. 11.

3. Verse 24 is the basic altar law, while v. 25 is a subclause stating the conditions under which an alternative to the basic law may be resorted to; for similar basic laws and alternatives, see Exod 12:3–4; 13:13; Lev 5:7, 11; 12:8; Deut 22:2; 25:7. Since most of these alternatives are permitted when it is difficult or impossible to follow the main law, this may be the reason why a stone altar is permitted. Perhaps the clause has in mind locations where the soil is sandy and cannot be packed firmly enough to make an altar, but stones are available. Verse 26 is related to v. 24 simply because it, too, states a requirement concerning the structure of an altar.

4. Although the *parashiyot* in the MT are often quite long and include very diverse matter in a single *parashah*, the Samaritan Pentateuch subdivides the material into smaller



the altar laws have been dealt with frequently in modern scholarship, the role of vv. 22–23 and the inner coherence of the passage as a whole have attracted considerably less attention.

As I shall argue, the coherence of the passage revolves around the means of securing God's presence. Since the contrasting views of Deuteronomy and the Priestly Code about the presence of God is one of the many subjects clarified by Moshe Weinfeld in his prolific and seminal writings, I am happy to present this study here as an expression of my deep respect and affection for him.

The NJPSV renders Exod 20:22–26 as follows:

²²The Lord said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: ²³With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold.⁵ ²⁴Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place⁶ where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. ²⁵And if you make for Me an altar of stones, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them. ²⁶Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it.

Several translations divide this passage into two paragraphs, vv. 22–23 and 24–26, separating the introduction and the prohibition on idols from the laws about altars.⁷ Others, like the NJPSV, in agreement with the Masoretic and Samaritan texts, make the passage a single paragraph,⁸ some adding a heading, “Laws about Altars,”⁹ apparently implying (correctly, as we shall see) that the prohibition on idols (v. 23) and the introductory sentence (v. 22) are somehow related to the altar laws in vv. 24–26.

and more-numerous units. The fact that it did not separate vv. 22–23 from vv. 24–26 suggests a perceived unity that demands attention by the exegete.

5. This rendering of the verse deviates from the Masoretic accentuation but corresponds to the chiasmic parallelism of the words. See B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 446–47.

6. **בכל המקום = בכל מקום**. See particularly Gen 20:13 and Deut 11:24, as well as Exod 1:22; 15:26; Lev 11:27aβ, 43, 44; 15:26; 23:29; Deut 4:3; 15:19.

7. KJV, SB and JB, NAB, Contemporary English Version, and NIV Student Edition.

8. JPSV (1917), NJPSV, TEV (Nashville: Nelson, 1986), the Italian *La Bibbia di Gerusalemme* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1984), the Spanish *Biblia del Peregrino* (ed. L. Alonso Schökel [Bilbao: Mensajero, 1998]). The RSV makes vv. 21–26 a single paragraph.

9. TEV; likewise *Gerusalemme* (“Legge dell’altare”), *Peregrino* (“Ley sobre el altar”).

Modern Suggestions

Critical studies of the pericope—fueled by the dichotomy between God’s speaking from heaven (v. 22) and His “coming” to Israel (vv. 20 and 24) and the shift from second-person plural to second-person singular¹⁰—see vv. 24–26 as the original law, “extremely old and quite independent of its present setting,” and vv. 22–23 as redactional and therefore “without exegetical significance.”¹¹ Conservative commentaries, on the other hand, such as those of U. Cassuto and B. Jacob, see the entire passage as a single unit intrinsically connected to the events at Sinai. Brevard S. Childs faults both approaches for failing to carry out the exegetical task and insists that different levels in the text must be recognized, but “that the present position of the law within the Sinai narrative [must be] taken with the utmost seriousness.” To him, v. 22 is a redactional transition intended to join the Book of the Covenant (the present pericope plus Exodus 21–23) to the Sinai theophany (compare 20:22b with 19:4a and 20:19b). J. I. Durham (see below) adds that v. 22 thereby endows the Book of the Covenant with divine authority. Childs says that v. 23 is probably also redactional, serving to place the altar law under the rubric of the first commandment of the Decalogue, “You shall have no other gods before Me.” However, he does not explain what “plac[ing] the altar law under the rubric of the first commandment” means.

Durham concedes that v. 23 “is in logical sequence to the authentication [in v. 22] of the instructions that follow [i.e., the Book of the Covenant] as Yahweh’s instructions: these are *his* guiding principles for Israel and *he* is to be Israel’s only God” (emphasis original). He also grants that the verse may be a suitable introduction to the Book of the Covenant: “So obvious a summary of the first two commandments may have been placed at the beginning of the Book of the Covenant

10. The LXX and the Vulgate harmonize the verbs by translating all of them with plurals, but the Samaritan Pentateuch and Peshitta preserve the MT’s singular forms.

11. B. S. Childs’s characterization of the critical view (Childs, *Exodus*, 464–66). Hence, a series of studies that deal with the law independently of its context: J. J. Stamm, “Zum Altargesetz im Bundesbuch,” *TZ* 1 (1945) 304–6; D. Conrad, *Studien zum Altargesetz* (Ph.D. diss., Marburg, 1968); E. Robertson, “The Altar of Earth,” *JJS* 1 (1948–49) 12–21; Z. Zevit, “The Earthen Altar Laws of Exodus 20:24–26 and Related Sacrificial Restrictions in the Cultural Context,” in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. M. V. Fox et al.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1996) 53–62.



precisely because it was such a loosely organized miscellany.” However, he continues,

These altar instructions [vv. 24–26] are not appropriate prologue to what follows them, nor is there any reason why they should be linked to the two verses preceding them . . . any more than any other group of verses in the collection of laws in 20:24–23:19 should be so linked. The attempt to find a logical sequence in such covenantal-legal collections is at best frustrating, and at worst misleading.¹²

To Durham, then, there is no inherent connection between vv. 22–23 and the altar laws; whatever the implication of these two verses, it is for the entire Book of the Covenant.

Critical scholarship, then, as represented by Childs and Durham, leaves us with no understanding of the relationship, whether original or redactional, between vv. 22, 23, and 24. Childs makes one suggestion that is unclear, and to Durham vv. 22–23 have significance at best for the entire Book of the Covenant but no particular relationship with the altar laws.

It is certainly possible that v. 22 and especially v. 23 are redactional. Verses 23–26 or 24–26 could easily have once stood without an introduction.¹³ But the argument that vv. 22 and 23 are redactional is not entirely compelling. The grammatical inconsistency between them and vv. 24–26 is not a decisive consideration, since such inconsistencies are common in biblical and extrabiblical literature.¹⁴ More significant is the inconsistency, recognized at least since Tannaitic times¹⁵ and perhaps already in Deuteronomy (if 4:36 is an attempt to resolve it) between v. 22, which states that God spoke from heaven, and the statements that God

12. John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987) 318–19.

13. For laws comparable to v. 23, see Exod 34:17; Lev 26:1. For laws beginning with an accusative followed by a verb, see, for example, Exod 23:14, 19; 34:18; Deut 22:12.

14. Note, for example, the frequent shifts of grammatical number, even within the same verse, in Exod 22:20–23:19. See discussion and bibliography by A. Rofé, “The Strata of the Law about the Centralization of Worship,” *Congress Volume: Uppsala 1971* (VTSup 22; Leiden: Brill, 1972) 221–26; R. Sonsino, *Motive Clauses in Hebrew Law: Biblical Forms and Near Eastern Parallels* (SBLDS 45; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1980) 197; S. Kaufman, “The Structure of the Deuteronomic Law,” *Maarav* 1 (1979) 121–22 and 153 n. 62; cf. H. Cazelles, “Passages in the Singular within Discourses in the Plural of Dt. 1–4,” *CBQ* 29 (1967) 207–19; M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972; repr. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1992) 97 n. 4.

15. As noted by Weinfeld, *ibid.*, 206 n. 4.

descended onto Mount Sinai or “came” to Moses and the people (19:3, 9, 11, 18, 20, 21; 20:20) and His promise to “come” to Israel in the future (v. 24). Cassuto’s attempt to resolve the contradiction by arguing that “from heaven” means “from the top of the mountain, whose peak reaches heaven,” seems forced. Still, if a redactor added v. 22 to counter the anthropomorphic implications of the original narrative, why did he wait until so late in the narrative to do so, after the anthropomorphisms had been repeated without correction so many times that they were bound to leave an indelible impression on the reader? Granting that a redactor would not feel authorized to remove offending references but only to add wording that would neutralize them, why would he not have added a phrase about speaking from heaven in a more prominent location, such as Exod 19:9 or 20:1, where it could have shaped readers’ perceptions of the entire Sinai theophany from the outset?

In any case, whether vv. 22–23 are redactional or original, the exegetical task is to understand all of Exod 20:22–26 in its present, complete form. As Childs notes, the more conservative commentators do see a relationship of the passage to its larger context. To Jacob the relationship among the verses is a reflection of that larger context: if Israel wishes to celebrate God’s speaking to them from heaven (v. 22), they are to make no idols for use in such a ceremony (v. 23); all that is essential for sacrificial worship is an altar (v. 24). The ceremony, according to Jacob, is the ceremony of covenant and sacrifice narrated in chap. 24, and that is the festival to which all the earlier references in Exodus (3:12, 18; 5:1; 8:23; 10:25) point. This view founders on the fact that the text nowhere indicates that the sacrifices mentioned in v. 24 are a celebration of the Sinai theophany or that they belong to a one-time ceremony. In fact, the reference to “every place” indicates that the text has in mind many occasions of worship.¹⁶ To Cassuto, the connection between vv. 22 and 23 is that, since God spoke to the Israelites from heaven and they saw no visual image of Him, they should make no images. This is actually the argument of Deut 4:9–18,¹⁷ but the main

16. This law does not assume the Deuteronomic restriction of sacrifice to a single site. As Maimonides noted, it refers to “the time when the high-places were permitted” (*Sefer haMitzvot*, positive commandment #20, kindly called to my attention by M. Greenberg). So, too, H. Pineles, *Darkah shel Torah* (Vienna: Friedrich Förster & Brüder, 1861) 96 near end of §79.

17. Essentially the same argument, citing Deuteronomy 4, was made by Hazzekuni here.



point in Deuteronomy—that Israel saw no visual image—is not mentioned in the text of Exodus 20. While the argument of Exodus 20 is indeed similar to that of Deuteronomy 4, it is not identical to it. As far as v. 24 is concerned, Cassuto does not relate it to vv. 22–23 but only to the larger context: since the Israelites are now leaving Sinai, they might think that they will be distant from God, but the altar law shows that he will come to any place where he permits his worship. But here, too, there is no hint in the text of the main point of Cassuto’s interpretation—namely the concern that, in leaving Sinai, Israel will be leaving God.

Medieval Commentators on the Relationship among Verses 22–24

Several of the medieval commentators were more successful in discerning an ideational relationship among vv. 22–24: God’s speaking to Israel directly from heaven has shown the Israelites that they have no need of idols to serve as intermediary devices (אמצעיִים/אמצעים) to draw His presence to their midst and communicate with Him.¹⁸ Instead, they are to make a simple earthen altar for sacrifice, and wherever He authorizes them to call upon Him, He will personally (Ibn Ezra: בכבודי) come to them and bless them.¹⁹ In this view, v. 22 is the motive clause for v. 23, just as the first verse of the Decalogue is the motive clause for the first commandment: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: You shall have no other gods beside Me.”

The view of these commentators is informed by a fairly accurate perception of what ancient idolaters believed about idols.²⁰ In idolatry

18. Seforno: “to attract My providence (השגחתִי)”; Ibn Ezra: “to receive supernal power (כח עליונים)”; *Shemen Hatov* (see next note): “so that the emanation (שפע) would descend from the Primary Cause”; Abravanel: “to bring down the emanation/spirituality of the stars” (at Exod 20:15–23, answer 4).

19. See Ibn Ezra (both commentaries, though the short commentary adds a different twist as well); Nahmanides (citing Ibn Ezra without dissent); Abravanel at Exod 20:15–23, answers 4–5; Seforno; cf. Bekhor Shor. See also Shlomo Ohev, *Shemen Hatov* (Croatia, 16th century), cited by S. Y. Agnon, *Attem Re’item* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1959) 226 (Eng. trans. Michael Swirsky, *Present at Sinai* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994] 311).

20. See also *b. ‘Abod. Zar.* 41b; and S. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962) 126 n. 60; Ibn Ezra at Exod 20:5 and as cited by Radak at 1 Sam 19:13, end of comment; Maimonides, *Guide* 1.36, 63; 3.29; Radak at 1 Kgs 12:28 (עגל להשרות שכונה בו) and at Isa 40:21.

(I am using the term here in its literal sense and not in the extended sense of paganism or polytheism), the purpose of an idol is to draw the presence of a deity to itself and hence to the place where it stands. Idolatry assumes that, by a kind of sympathetic magic, like that connected with voodoo dolls, the representation somehow participates in the reality of the being represented; the latter is somehow present in its representation.²¹ In the ancient Near East, the manufacture of idols included special ceremonies to attract the deity from heaven to the idol. Once present in the idol, the deity would be accessible and available to benefit its worshipers. In Mesopotamia, although the god was thought to be transcendent and not to be equated with its cult statue, the statue itself was

a foreshadowing of and a stage in a divine presence, a theophany. Here the god can be found, can be approached. . . . [It is] the form of a god filling with its specific divine content . . . a mystic unity, the statue mystically becoming what it represents, the god, without, however, in any way limiting the god, who remains transcendent.²²

In Egypt, comparably, “the cult statue, once it was quickened by the Opening of the Mouth ritual, was thought permanently to contain some part of the living essence of the god.”²³

In Mesopotamia the “mouth-washing” and “mouth-opening” ritual that brings the deity from heaven to participate in its image is a multi-stage process. Of interest to us are the following steps, as summarized by Thorkild Jacobsen. After one of several mouth-washings and an incantation,

[t]he incantation priest then goes up to the statue and whispers in its right ear: “Ea has determined as your lot divinity and rule, walk around: You can move about, bless a blessing, make the gesture of blessing with your right hand! You are free! You are released!” . . . Lastly, the incantation

21. See W. G. Lambert, review of F. Gössmann, *Das Era-Epos*, in *AfO* 18 (1957–58) 398–400; Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild* (Berlin: Evangelische, 1956); G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962–65) 1.214; E. M. Curtis, *Man as the Image of God in Genesis in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Parallels* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1984) 97–142.

22. T. Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 22.

23. D. Lorton, “The Theology of Cult Statues in Ancient Egypt,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (ed. M. B. Dick; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999) 197.



“Tarry not in heaven” is recited, clearly an appeal to the god to descend from heaven where he was born and “participate” in the image. Two incantations speed the statue on its way, one beginning “May the foot at the ground traversed . . .” and the other, “After he has walked through the streets.” They are kept up until the statue arrives at the gate of its temple, where it receives greeting gifts. Then it is led in, and an incantation . . . is sung until it reaches the door of the cella. As it is enthroned in the cella [two more incantations are sung]. The priest then prepares offerings and performs a final mouth washing of the statue. An offering table for the god is prepared. . . .”Food of godhead” is then presented to the statue. [After a concluding rite, the] new cult statue has been installed in its temple ready for its divine duties and offices.²⁴

Notable for our purposes are the facts that the god is invited to descend from heaven to the statue, that once the statue is imbued with divinity it is asked to bless, apparently as the characteristic activity of the deity manifest in the statue, and is then escorted into the temple and welcomed with food offerings.

Since the goal of the idol is to bring the god to its worshipers are to receive its blessings, it is notable that bringing God near to bless His worshipers is also the goal of our passage. Its culmination is v. 24b: “I will come to you and bless you.”²⁵

24. T. Jacobsen, “The Graven Image,” 27–28.

25. Cf. Durham, *Exodus*, 319: “[T]he emphasis here, as in [chaps. 25–31], is on the Presence of Yahweh in the midst of His people, Israel; so there, the sequence on the media of worship is begun with reference to a מקדש ‘holy place’ where Yahweh is to ‘dwell, settle down in their midst’ (25:8), and here, the sequence of the ‘guiding decisions’ [משפטים] is begun with reference to the altar, the place where Israel came into closest contact with Yahweh, the source of the guiding decisions.” In view of the fact that v. 20 states that God “spoke” with Israel, one might expect the text to address the means of future oracular communication from God. The meaning would be that, since God spoke to Israel directly from heaven, Israel should not make idols as a means of receiving His messages in the future. The Bible mentions the pagan use of idols as oracular media in Ezek 21:26; Hab 2:18–19; Zech 10:2; cf. 1 Macc 3:48 according to JB and NEB. For oracular use of idols elsewhere in antiquity, see A. L. Oppenheim, “Sumerian *inim.gar*, Akkadian *egirru* = Greek *kleidon*,” *AfO* 17 (1954–56) 54; E. Bevan, *Holy Images* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1940) 25–26; M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion* (SBLMS 19; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1974) 57. However, since v. 24 speaks only of God’s coming and blessing the people, and in the larger context oracular communication is via Moses, it is evidently not at issue here.

Verse 24

Verse 24 explains how Israel is to achieve this goal. As the medievals also perceived, the relationship between v. 23 and v. 24 is one of contrast. This is indicated by the fourfold appearance of the verb ‘make’ (עשה) in vv. 23–25: “you shall not make . . . you shall not make . . . you shall make . . . and if you make. . .” This term is used twice negatively, with idols, and twice positively, with altars.²⁶ To capture the point of this sequence, vv. 23–24 should be understood as follows: “With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. Make for Me, rather, an altar of earth, and sacrifice on it.” In other words, v. 24 indicates what Israel is to do *instead* of making idols: it is to build an altar and offer sacrifices to the Lord.

Here we must pause to consider the reading of v. 24b α . According to the MT, the phrase reads **בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי**, usually rendered ‘in every place where I cause my name to be remembered’ (RSV) or ‘to be mentioned’ (NJPSV). This is usually taken to mean that Israel may erect altars and offer sacrifice only at places that God has sanctified by means of a theophany at the site or at places He has authorized or commanded for invoking Him. This understanding of the verse is problematic for several reasons. First, if it were correct, one would have expected the clauses to appear in a different order: “Make for Me an altar of earth in every [or: any] place where I cause My name to be mentioned; and sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen and I will come to you and bless you.” Furthermore, the presumed causative sense of **הזכיר שם** ‘to cause the name to be remembered/mentioned’ would be anomalous; elsewhere, it invariably means to ‘invoke, pronounce, or call someone’s name’.²⁷ Finally, in the context of sacrifice and altars, it is always the worshiper, not God, who invokes (הזכיר ב-, הזכיר) or calls upon (קרא ב-) God’s name.²⁸ All of these problems are obviated if we adopt the reading **תזכיר**

26. See also H. Cazelles, *Études sur le code de l’alliance* (Paris: Letouzy et Ané, 1946) ad loc.; A. Hakham, **ספר שמות** (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1991) ad loc.; Houtman, *Exodus*, 3.99–100.

27. See Exod 23:13 (cf. Josh 23:7; Hos 2:19; Zech 13:2); 2 Sam 18:18; Isa 26:13; 49:1; Ps 45:18.

28. See, in addition to the verses cited in the previous note, Amos 6:10; Isa 48:1; Ps 20:8; and Gen 12:8; 13:4; 21:33 (at a sacred tree); 26:25; 1 Kgs 18:24. In the context of sacrificial worship, **הזכיר שם** means to invite to the sacrifice, as in the Hadad (or



reflected in the Peshitta and some of the targums,²⁹ so that v. 24b means “In every place where you invoke My name, I will come to you and bless you,” which suits the context admirably.

According to this verse, then, in order to secure God’s presence and blessing, instead of using idols Israel is to build an altar to YHWH and offer sacrifices, in the course of which it will invoke God’s name.

Although these three actions form a single ritual complex in which all three are necessary, only the first of them, the construction of the altar, is commanded with the same verb, עָשָׂה, with which the idols are forbidden in v. 23. This seems to indicate a focus primarily on the altar as the replacement for idols. The writer was not obligated to limit the

Panamu I) inscription (KAI 214), lines 16–17, 21–22, like *šumam zakāru* in comparable Akkadian contexts (see *BWL* 38:13 and Lambert’s comment on 289 ad loc., and *KAR* 55:15, cited by Lambert and in *CAD* Z 18a). See J. C. Greenfield, “Un rite religieux araméen et ses parallèles,” *RB* 80 (1973) 46–52; and J. J. Finkelstein, “The Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty,” *JCS* 20 (1966) 114–15. Compare the summonses to the sacrifice in the Akkadian incantation to Marduk (*KAR* 25 ii 21–22f) in W. G. Lambert, “The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon: A Study in Sophisticated Polytheism,” in *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (ed. H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) 198; and in Hittite prayers, cited by M. Greenberg, “Hittite Royal Prayers and Biblical Petitionary Psalms,” in *Neue Wege der Psalmenforschung* (ed. K. Seybold and E. Zenger; Freiburg: Herder, 1994) 16. As Greenberg notes, “The Bible retains something of the idea that God is drawn to the sacrificial altar” (citing *Exod* 20:24), though it dismisses the notion that He eats the sacrifice.

29. *Targum Neofiti* and the *Fragmentary Targum* MSS 440 and 264. A perception that the context calls for the meaning תִּזְכִּיר is reflected in the interpretation of the verse by means of a transposition of clauses in *Midrash Hagadol*: “In every place where I come to you, there you shall mention (תִּזְכִּיר) My name . . .” (*Midrash Hagadol*, Exodus [ed. M. Margalio; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1967] 444: lines 18–19; cf. *Sipre Num.* sec. 39 [*Siphre d’be Rab . . . Numeros . . .*, ed. H. S. Horovitz; Jerusalem: Wahrman, 1966] 43: lines 6–9; *Tosafot* to *b. Soṭah* 38a s.v. הָרִי הוּא אֹמֵר). Horovitz also notes the midrashic explanation based on the interpretation of the MT’s אֹכִיר as *atbash* writing for תִּזְכִּיר (Ritva [= R. Yom Tov ben Avraham Ishbili, ca. 1250–1330], cited from *Midrash Samuel* [Warsaw: Goldman, 1876; repr. Jerusalem: n.d.] 51b on *ʿAbot* 3:7 [thus read!]) and calls attention to the perceptive discussion by Pineles, *Darkah shel Torah*, §79, pp. 94–96. The change from תִּזְכִּיר to אֹכִיר could be due to a simple scribal error. For confusion of *ʾalep* and *taw* in the old Hebrew script, see F. Perles, *Analekten zur Textkritik des Alten Testaments* (Munich: Theodor Ackermann, 1895) 50; *Analekten zur Textkritik des Alten Testaments*, n.s. (Leipzig: Gustav Engel, 1922) 34; E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 244–45. But the change could also be a tendentious one to leave the choice of places up to God, in the spirit of of Deuteronomy 12, esp. vv. 4–5, 11, 13–14 (Greenberg, “Hittite Royal Prayers,” 16 n. 7).

use of עשה to the altar. Had he wished to highlight offering sacrifices as the replacement for idols,³⁰ he could have commanded them by using the verb ועשית instead of וזבחת.³¹ Admittedly, there was no idiomatic Hebrew way for him to refer to invoking God's name by using עשה, but it seems clear that he was not highlighting this aspect of the ritual in any case, since it is not a commanded action like the other two in the verse. It is the altar that the verse seems to highlight as the material counterpart to idols and the means by which Israel will achieve the goal that idolatry seeks by means of idols: God will come to them and bless them. The altar, then, rather than idols, is the locus and symbol of God's presence.³²

This is not the inference that one would draw if v. 24 were not preceded by v. 23. By itself v. 24 seems to mean simply that the altar is the place of sacrifice, just as the temple is in Hittite prayers that summon the gods to the sacrifice in their temples.³³ It is the juxtaposition with v. 23 (whether original or redactorial) and the contrasting use of עשה that lends this meaning to v. 24.

The Significance of the Altar

This view of the altar as the locus and symbol of God's presence is supported by Exod 24:4–8.³⁴ There Moses mediates the covenant between God and Israel by sprinkling half of the sacrificial blood on the altar and half on the people. Clearly, the altar represents God.³⁵ The

30. As held by Ibn Ezra, short commentary, and צפנת פענח, ad loc. (D. Herzog, *Joseph Bonfils [Tobh 'Elem] und sein Werk Sophnath Pane'ah* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1911).

31. See, for example, Exod 10:25; Lev 9:22; 16:24; 17:9; Num 29:2; Josh 22:23; Judg 13:16; 1 Kgs 8:64; 2 Kgs 5:17; Jer 33:18.

32. If the text is rejecting idols as the means of attracting God's presence, it implies an awareness that the idol and the deity are not the same thing. This passage is therefore an exception to the Bible's general failure to distinguish between the two. This was noted by M. Greenberg with reference to the similar argument put forth in Deut 4:9–20, where the distinction is again implied. See Greenberg, *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995) 292.

33. See the examples cited by Greenberg, "Hittite Royal Prayers," 16.

34. This passage is generally assigned to the same Pentateuchal source (E) as 20:22(or 23)–26 (see S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911); A. H. McNeile, *The Book of Exodus* (London: Methuen, 1931); M. Noth, *Exodus* [OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962] 173).

35. As noted by Driver, Cassuto, and Noth at Exod 24:6; O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (New York: Seabury, 1978; repr., Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns,



scene is comparable to the Covenant between the Pieces in Gen 15:17, where a torch and smoking oven represent God³⁶ (since the animals slaughtered there are not sacrificed, there is no place for an altar in the ceremony).

Various other passages likewise seem to reflect the idea that the altar is the locus of God's presence, or at least symbolizes it. In Psalms 42–43, the psalmist's longing to "come to appear before God" (42:3)³⁷ culminates in the hope that he "may come to the altar of God . . ." (43:4). People sometimes prayed to God standing or bowing before the altar (1 Kgs 8:22, 54; 2 Kgs 18:22 and parallels; cf. Deut 26:4–10). According to 1 Kgs 8:31, a judicial imprecation (אלה) would be pronounced before the altar. That this was regarded as pronouncing the imprecation *in the presence* of God is suggested by the fact that the 'oath of imprecation' (שבועת האלה) of the suspected adulteress is described as being administered "before the Lord" in Num 5:16, 18, 30,³⁸ and taking an exculpatory oath is described as 'deposing before God' (ונקרב בעל הבית אל האלהים) in Exod 22:7 (an admittedly difficult passage;³⁹ its meaning may be illustrated by the Mesopotamian practice of hearing testimony and oaths before symbols of the gods).⁴⁰ The altar as a symbol of God is also mentioned as part of Isaiah's eschatological prophecy of an altar to

1997) 145; M. Malul at Exod 24:4–6 in שמות: עולם התנ"ך (ed. G. Galil; Tel Aviv: Davidzon-Iti, 1993) 148. See also Lev 8:24 and the comment of B. A. Levine, *Leviticus* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) ad loc.

36. See Rashi at Gen 15:10. For fire and smoke as symbols of God, N. M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) ad loc., compares Exod 19:18; 20:15; Isa 4:5; 31:9.

37. The original reading was doubtless "see God," a reading found in some Hebrew manuscripts and in an early printing (Naples, 1486–87) but already reflected in the Targum and Peshitta (C. D. Ginsburg, *The Old Testament* [London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1926] 4.85). See Luzzatto at Isa 1:12.

38. Num 5:24–26 suggests that the accused woman is near the altar during the entire ceremony (cf. J. Milgrom [JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990] ad loc.), unless we assume that when the priest "elevates the meal offering before the Lord and sacrifices it on the altar" and then makes the woman drink the potion, the text is passing over in silence the fact that he has left her in the sanctuary courtyard and then returned to her.

39. See S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (VTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 1970) 89–91; cf. 51 n. 2.

40. See J. J. Finkelstein, "Documents from the Practice of Law," in *ANET*³ 543, no. 7 (text A) 544f. no. 9, and 545 no. 12, and references to oaths before symbols of gods in CAD Š/3 345.

the Lord in the midst of Egypt and a pillar to Him at its border, which will “serve as a symbol and a witness (לאות ולעד) of the Lord” (Isa 19:19)—that is, as a symbol of the Lord’s sovereignty over Egypt.⁴¹ The function of the altar as localizing or symbolizing God may also be reflected in the fact that in some of the lists of the Canaanite cultic equipment that Israel is to destroy, altars are listed alongside idols as well as pillars and asherim, all of which at least sometimes represent deities (Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3).⁴²

41. Thus the NJPSV, ad loc., note i, following E. J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (2 vols.; Dublin: Brown & Nolan, 1960) 1. ad loc. This prophecy may have been inspired by the practice of “Assyrian emperors who erected commemorative monuments at the farthest limits of their dominions . . .,” symbolizing their sovereignty (H. Tadmor, “Fragments of an Assyrian Stele of Sargon II,” *Ashdod* 2–3 [*Atiqot*, English Series 9–10 (1971)] 193–94; see also Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 56–60 and fig. 3; P. Machinist, “Assyria and Its Image in First Isaiah,” *JAOS* 103 [1983] 731). Close to Judah, such steles have been found in Ashdod and Samaria (see Machinist). Inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III indicate that he set up a stele on the brook of Egypt (H. Tadmor, *The Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III, King of Assyria* [Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994] 138–39, 177–79, 188–89, 223–25; H. L. Ginsberg suggested that this stele could have been the inspiration behind Isa 19:19–20 [“Isaiah,” *EncJud* 9.58 top]). For a discussion of the relationship between these steles and altars sometimes found within their vicinity, see Cogan. Just how pertinent Isa 19:19–20 is to our discussion is uncertain because it is not clear whether its altar is to be used for sacrifice like the altar in Exod 20:24 (it is not clear that the sacrifices of Isa 19:21 will be offered at the altar of v. 19). The same uncertainty applies to the various named altars in Gen 33:20; Exod 17:15; Judg 6:24; and perhaps Gen 35:7. The named altar of Joshua 22 is explicitly said to be only a “witness” and not for sacrifice (Josh 22:23, 26, 28; for its name [missing in the MT but probably עד ‘witness’], see v. 24 and notes and comments of Rashi, Radak, BHS, C. D. Ginsburg, *The Old Testament* [London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1926], and S. Ahituv, *יהושע* [Tel Aviv: Am Oved / Jerusalem: Magnes, 1995]). All but the altar in Joshua 22 bear Yahwistic names, and it is certainly plausible that they were thought to symbolize or provide a locus for YHWH’s presence the same way that the pillar named יד אבשלום functioned for the deceased Absalom (see my *Deuteronomy* [JPSTC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996] 482). The same reasoning would not necessarily apply to sacrificial altars that are unnamed in the Bible, unless they were all thought to be implicitly called מזבח ה’.

42. See *ibid.*, 86, 360, at 7:5, nn. 15, 16. Whether asherim and cultic pillars always represent deities is debated. See T. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (ConBOT 42. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995) and the reviews by T. J. Lewis, “Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel,” *JAOS* 118 (1998) 40–42; V. Hurowitz, “Picturing Imageless Deities: Iconography in the Ancient Near East,” *BAR* 23 (May/June, 1997) 46–51, 68–69. The altar is personified in *m. Sukkah* 4:5 and *t. Sukkah* 3.1, but it is mentioned alongside God and therefore is not



Many of the above passages are not explicit enough for us to determine whether they refer to the altar as the locus of God's presence or as his symbol. It is not clear whether the ancients would have made such a distinction. It is clear in any case that, in Exod 20:24, God promises that when Israel sacrifices at an altar and calls upon His name, He will come to them—that is, He will be present. If we are right in taking the altar as a locus or symbol of God's presence, it would represent a form of "material aniconism," that is a nonanthropomorphic, nontheriomorphic object that represents the deity. It would be a counterpart of the "empty-seat" aniconism represented by the Ark in the Sanctuary and Temple.⁴³

If the altar does play this role, then the medieval commentators were not entirely correct in saying that the passage rules out any intermediary device in Israel's relationship with God. Given the widespread (in the biblical view, universal) use of idols to invoke the presence of deities in the ancient Near East, what was striking about God's direct communication with Israel was the absence of idols in particular, not the fact that no device of any sort was involved (though none was). What vv. 22–23 seem to be saying implicitly is that, since God spoke to Israel directly from heaven without the use of idols, Israel was not to use *idols* for invoking his presence. God then goes on to state that there is an acceptable device for invoking his presence: an earthen sacrificial altar. The altar is in some sense an intermediary device but without the objectionable characteristics of idols. Why it is unobjectionable is not stated;⁴⁴ we might conjecture that it was because its nonanthropomorphic, nonzoomorphic form made it much less likely to be confused with the deity. But we cannot be certain. There is no clear rationale for the fact that certain cultic objects and practices, such as cherubs and, originally, the brazen serpent, pillars, and asherahs, were permitted, while molten calves and other images were not. As Kaufmann noted,

The prescribed forms of biblical religion . . . [were] selected intuitively and gropingly rather than systematically and consciously. . . . It is only

a symbol of him. See my "Second Temple Parallel to the Blessings from Kuntillet Ajrud," *IEJ* 40 (1990) 218. On the other hand, the hypostatization of altars by some West Semites—if the evidence truly supports that conclusion (see C. Dohmen, "מזבֵּחַ" *TDOT* 8.211, §4)—would be a further development of the thinking that led to viewing the altar as a symbol of the deity.

43. See Mettinger, *No Graven Image*.

44. Rashbam and Hazzekuni hold that, since the altar is to be made of earth or uncut stones, the Israelites will not be able to sculpt figures of deities on it.

dogma that makes the biblical selection of forms non-idolatrous. The historian can readily find even in the Bible itself several “idolatrous” elements—shells that have lost their content. That certain of these shells were sanctified and others not seems at times to have been due to mere historical accident.⁴⁵

How the altar came to serve as the locus or symbol of God’s presence is a matter of conjecture. Earlier scholars claimed that the rocks of the oldest altars, “like every striking natural feature, rock, tree, stream or well, [was] the home of a presiding numen or deity” and were thought to have numinous qualities.⁴⁶ A more likely view is that, since most of the altars built in narratives about the Israelites’ ancestors commemorate theophanies and miracles, this may have suggested that altars contained a permanent residue of the theophany.⁴⁷ Perhaps most likely is that the altar came to symbolize God’s presence through metonymy. As we have seen, many activities directed toward God were performed at the altar. It is among the sanctuary items described as being “before the Lord” (Lev 4:7, 8; 6:7; 16:18). Altars were built “to the Lord” (Gen 8:20; 12:7, 8; Deut 27:5; etc.). They are called “the Lord’s altar” (Lev 17:6; Deut 12:27; and passim) and in divine speech “My altar” (Exod 21:14; 1 Sam 2:28; etc.). As the place of sacrifice, the altar was God’s “table” (Ezek 44:16; Mal 1:7, 12).⁴⁸ Away from permanent sanctuaries, at popular outdoor cult sites, in an aniconic religion (the type demanded by Exod 20:23) whose basic ritual was sacrifice, the altar was the one essential item and hence the one item that marked the site as a sacred place⁴⁹ where man communicated with God. That it eventually came to be seen as the place where God was present was evidently a natural, almost inevitable development.

45. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (trans. M. Greenberg; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) 136–37.

46. McNeile, *Exodus*, 125–26; R. D. Haak, “Altar,” *ABD* 1.163c, citing K. Galling, “Altar,” *IDB* 1.97b. Against this view, see M. Haran, “מזבח,” *EncBib* 4.763–64.

47. Gen 12:7; 13:18; 26:25; 35:3, 7; Exod 17:15; Judg 6:24.

48. Although these references are late, one of the Sumero-Akkadian terms for altar is the god’s ‘table’ (*banšur/paššuru*).

49. Note that “[w]hat was essential for the Greek cult was the altar alone, constituting a ‘sacred spot’” (I. Malkin, “*Temenos*,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary* [3d ed.; ed. S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996] 1481).



Relationship to Other Passages

As noted above, the reasoning of Exod 20:22–23 resembles, though it is not identical to, that of Deut 4:9–18, which states that Israel should make no images because they saw none when God spoke to them at Sinai (Horeb). These are the only two passages in the Torah that explain the prohibition on idols. Just as the Exodus passage begins with a reference to what Israel saw (“You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens”), Deut 4:9–18 begins with an appeal to Israel not to “forget the things that you saw with your own eyes” (v. 9) and proceeds to explain that, because Israel saw no image at Sinai, it must make no images. But there is a subtle difference between the passages. Deuteronomy makes the nonvisual character of the experience explicit and central to its argument. It begins, ironically, by urging Israel not to forget what it *saw*, but it means that Israel should not forget what it did *not* see (vv. 12, 15).⁵⁰ In addition to these three occurrences in vv. 9–18, the verb “see” occurs five more times in Deut 4:1–10 (vv. 3, 19, 28, 34, 36) and is clearly a leitmotif of the chapter. But in Exodus, the theme of seeing is not developed further; Exodus neither states that the theophany was nonvisual nor indicates that the visual character of idols is what renders them objectionable. As we have argued, it is the fact that idols played no role in the divine-human encounter that disqualified them.⁵¹

The juxtaposition of idols and altars in Exod 20:23 and 24 is reminiscent of Deut 12:2–6, which likewise contrasts forbidden, idolatrous means of worship with permitted ones at a proper cult site—in the case of Deuteronomy, of course, at a single site. The wording of the two passages is close enough to suggest a literary relationship. Just as Exod 20:23 begins with a prohibition on making idols (**לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אֹתִי אֱלֹהִים**), Deut 12:2–4 begins by commanding Israel to destroy the Canaanites’ many cult sites and religious artifacts, in-

50. The reference to what Israel did not see as what it saw is striking enough to make one wonder if it is a conscious allusion to “you yourselves saw” in Exod 20:22. But what Israel “saw” is a frequent enough motif in Deuteronomy that the text could have been worded this way even without the inspiration of Exod 20:22 (see Deut 1:19, 20, 31; 3:21; 4:3; 7:19; 10:21; 11:7; 29:2).

51. As M. Greenberg notes, it was the argument of Deuteronomy that developed into the prophetic critique of idols that we find in Isa 40:18, “To whom, then, can you liken God, What form compare to Him?” See his *Studies in the Bible and Jewish Thought* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1995) 292.

cluding idols, and commands Israel not to worship the Lord in the same manner (לא תעשון כן לה' אלהיכם). Each passage then identifies the permissible place of sacrifice (the altar and the chosen place, respectively) and commands that burnt offerings and other sacrifices be offered there (וזבחת עליו את-עלתיך ואת-שלמיך את-צאנך ואת-בקרך) in Exod 20:24, והבאתם שמה עלתיכם וזבחיכם . . . ובכרת בקרכם וצאנכם in Deut 12:6). Even verses that are not each other's counterparts in the two passages resemble each other. Thus, in Exod 20:24b God declares (in the MT), "in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you," while in Deut 12:5 He commands Israel to come and sacrifice only at "the place that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there."⁵²

The fact that both the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomistic Code are introduced with passages contrasting forbidden, pagan means of worship with permitted ones at a proper place of worship was pointed out by S. M. Paul, who also noted that the Laws of Holiness (Leviticus 17) begin similarly.⁵³ In fact, the Priestly laws also begin essentially the same way, though they present what is permissible before what is forbidden. They begin with the rules for constructing the Tabernacle (Exodus 25–31) and then relate the Golden Calf episode (Exodus 32–34). This sequence contrasts the proper means of securing God's presence within Israel, by means of the Tabernacle and the Ark (see Exod 25:8), with improper, idolatrous means (see Exod 32:1).⁵⁴ All four of the Bible's main legal corpora thus begin the same way, contrasting the forbidden (in three of the four cases, idols) and the permitted (in all cases, at an altar or sanctuary of YHWH). Exod 20:22–26 takes its place as E's equivalent to its counterparts in H, P, and D.

52. S. Dean McBride suggests that the Deuteronomistic formula of "the place which the Lord will choose to establish His name" was modeled on the phrase כל המקום אשר יאמר יי' אלהיך אוזכיר את שמי in Exodus (*The Deuteronomistic Name Theology* [Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1969] 209; my thanks to Prof. McBride for providing me with a copy of his dissertation). If Exodus 20 inspired Deuteronomy 12, the similarity of these two phrases could imply that the corruption of תזכיר to אוזכיר had already taken place prior to the composition of Deuteronomy 12. However, it remains possible that the change to אוזכיר took place later, intentionally, with the aim of harmonizing Exodus 20 with Deuteronomy (see above, n. 29).

53. S. M. Paul, *Studies in the Book of the Covenant in the Light of Cuneiform and Biblical Law* (VTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 1970) 34–35.

54. Cf. M. Greenberg, "Exodus, Book of," *EncJud* 6.1061; N. M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986) 191, 217.