as a *peshat* commentary. According to Shimon Shalem, in his comprehensive study of Alshekh's method, the commentator was guided by two principles: 1) words should be understood in their literal sense rather than metaphorically; 2) it is necessary to adhere closely to the text while taking its context into account. He considers a comment that adds extensive details to the text to remain within the category of *peshat* as long as it complies with these two principles.

He frequently prefaces his commentary on a passage with a list of problems in the text, which are then used to organize what follows.

Examples of literary insights that retain value to this day are his explanations of the following: repetition – e.g., Pharaoh's second dream brings out the meaning of the first dream (Gen 41:25); variations in how characters are referred to – e.g., Rehoboam vs. "the king" (1 Kgs 12:1, 6); and characters' motives – e.g., why Mordecai instructs Esther not to divulge her origins (Esth 2:11). Even where his comments strike us as homiletic, his questions are frequently valuable for understanding the *peshat*.

Bland points out that Alshekh's method differed from that of some of his contemporaries, including R. Moses Cordovero, for whom the biblical text undergoes a radical transformation and is perceived as a code of kabbalistic symbols rather than as an account of the deeds of human beings.

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Amos Frisch

Alt, Georg Albrecht

Georg Albrecht Alt (1883–1956) was born the son of a minister in Stübach, Frankish Bavaria, and pursued the study of Theology and Oriental Languages in Erlangen and Leipzig. In 1909, he finished his academic training in Greifswald and, in 1914, was offered an Old Testament professorship in Basel. In 1921, he was given a professorship in Halle and in the following year in Leipzig (succeeding R. Kittel). After 1908, he went on regular trips to Palestine. From 1919–1949 he presided over the *Deutscher Verein zur Erforschung Palästinas* (German Association for Palestine Research); and from 1921–1935 he was head of the *Deutsches evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaften des Heiligen Landes* (German Protestant Institute for Archaeology).

His scholarly research focused on the history of ancient Israel and its neighboring countries in Palestine from their beginnings up to the Roman and Byzantine period. He tried to link philological and historic-critical studies of biblical and non-biblical texts to topographical and archaeological research. Whatever the shortcomings of this approcach might have been, it led to numerous influential hypotheses about the image of pre-exilic Israel that held sway until the mid-20th century. Several late Nabatean Inscriptions and Palmyrene inscriptions helped Alt develop his thesis of "God of the Fathers" (*Der Gott der Väter*, 1929).

He did not reconstruct the conquest and settlement of Israel as the book of Joshua has it. Rather, by comparing the ratio of territories before and after the period, and by drawing on the analogy of transhumance as a mainly peaceful occurrence, he posited an alternative view of Israelite settlement in the land (*Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina*, 1925). He also construed the Davidic-Solomonic Empire as a union between Israel and Judah (*Die Staatenbildung der Israeliten in Palästina*, 1930), the constitution of which retained two very different types of kingship, which later marked the two domains after the division between north and south (*Das Königtum in den Reichen Israel und Juda*, 1951). Moreover, Alt considered the Israelite legal framework to originate from two differing systems: the genuinely Israelite and Yahwistic "apodictic" law on the one hand, and the common Near Eastern "casuistic" law on the other hand (*Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts*, 1934).

Despite living under two German dictatorships, Alt maintained his personal integrity. An impassioned scholar, he influenced and inspired generations of students and scholars, first and foremost M. Noth and G. von Rad. Both the methods and the results of his (and their) research appeared to advance knowledge of ancient Israel, particularly when compared to the earlier critical period marked by J. Wellhausen. However, criticism emerged especially from American scholars, who accused Alt (and even more so, Noth) of representing a far too negative approach. These days, criticism focuses on the opposite: to a large extent, Alt (and Noth) attributed far more historical credibility to the sources than is actually justifiable. In addition, the analogies proposed are often overly speculative.

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Rudolf Smend

Altar

I. Ancient Near East and Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament

1. Egypt. In Egypt the typical altar is just a table or a stand to present offerings to a god or goddess (Bonnet ^{2}1971; Galling 1925). Such altars were not only used in temples, but also in daily life. The offerings include all kinds of vegetables, beer, wine, spices, as well as parts of animals. The altars were portable and could be set up anywhere an offering should take place. Every sanctuary had several of these stands, which, standing alongside one another, could have been in use during one offering ceremony. The presenting of foods on the altars had symbolic reasons; they were meant to be a type of nourishment for the gods. The presenting of offerings on an altar also is a typical decoration motif in sepulchers, and normally the owner of the tomb is shown presenting the offerings. It is also very likely that in some private households such altars were in use for the offering to a private god, but due to the fact that only a few private houses have been excavated thus far, the archaeological evidence is rather poor.

Permanently built up altars were often found in courtyards of some sepulchral temples and during the Old Kingdom even in some sanctuaries dedicated to the sun god. Throughout the New Kingdom sanctuaries dedicated to the God Re in Tell el-Amarna have had altars with their own staircases, which now seem remarkably high and in a prominent position in the temple area. These were rectangular in form which is an important aspect in regard to the later altars in the temple of Jerusalem.

Similar to the altars are offering plates, usually rectangular (seldom round) in form and showing an engraving of a selection of offerings on the upper part. The offering tables have also been used for libations of water. The libation offering (water, milk, wine) is typical for ancient Egypt. It was offered both on offering tables and on stands. The libation was considered a sort of nourishment for the gods, an act of purification and used to symbolize life. The libation is often associated with the incense offering, either in a hand-hold censer, on a censer arm, or on a stand with a censer on top of it. The combination with the libation represents the purifying character of this offering, though the burning of incense was also a symbol of revival. The incense also served as a pleasant scent for the gods, which may not always have been the case for a burnt fat offering.

2. Mesopotamia. There are several types of altars represented in Mesopotamia. The stepped altar is usually made of clay. Such altars were found during the Bronze Age all over Mesopotamia (cf. Bretschneider, Muller). Iconographical representations confirm that cakes, breads, as well as other offerings were presented on this altar; also a censer is shown, and libations were poured out in front of the altar (Galling 1925: pl. 3). High vases in the form of an egg-timer were used as containers for plants (Galling 1925: pl. 4); libations were poured out into these vases. Sometimes the same vases were used as incense burners; in that case a bowl was put on the upper part of the stand for the burning material. These stands may have been placed on the lower part of a stepped altar, but mostly they are represented as freestanding altars in front of a praying and offering person. There were also several finds of tables with feet, either made of stone, wood, or metal. On top of those altars were mainly vases containing liquid offerings, but other kinds of offerings such as bread, parts of animals, and censers seem to have been placed upon it as well. In the Neo-Assyrian period altars with pinnacles on top seem to be representations en miniature of temples. Small, high incense altars were also found in the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian periods. The altars in Mesopotamia have been used to present foods for the gods, to ensure fertility (libation offerings), and to offer a pleasant scent to the gods in order to appease them.

3. The Achaemenid Cult. In the Achaemenid cult fire on the altar played an important role. We know of them from reliefs, but also by means of archaeological finds (cf. the fire altar at Pasargadae). These altars are comparable to the altar in Ezek 43 : 13–17, since the altar consists of several steps; there is an assumption that the Persian and the biblical altars represent an altar type which developed in the late 8th century BCE in Syria, though this is a theory still to be proven by archaeological finds.

4. The Southern Levant. Methodological reasons make it necessary to separate the exegetical and terminological discussion from the presentation of archaeological finds in the Southern Levant. The scriptures of the ancient Near East do certainly not mention every type of altar that existed in ancient times. Especially the textual evidence is much more accurate about the official cult than about private cults. On the other hand there are several types of altars (or stands, burners etc.), which supposedly have been in use for cultic purposes, but this is just a proposal of modern archaeologists. For the Iron Age, the archaeological material should also be classified according to ethnic groups in this area.

a. The Hebrew Bible. In the Hebrew Bible and in the languages of the surrounding countries the typical altar is called *mizbēaḥ*. This word stems from the verb *zbḥ* "to slaughter, to immolate, to sacrifice."