

SACRIFICE AND CENTRALISATION IN THE PENTATEUCH

IS EXODUS 20:24-26 REALLY AT ODDS WITH DEUTERONOMY?

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Summary

Many scholars believe Exodus 20:24-26 and Deuteronomy 12:1-28 present contradictory regulations on how and where to sacrifice. Exodus 20:24-26 seems to imply that sacrificial altars can be built at any location throughout the country, while Deuteronomy appears to prohibit all sacrifice outside of the central place of worship. Scholars have dealt with this discrepancy in various ways. In this paper I show how none of these explanations hold up to closer scrutiny and argue that both texts simply address different types of sacrifices permitted in ancient Israel.

1. Introduction

One of the long-standing questions readers of the Pentateuch have had to address is how to interpret the seemingly contradictory viewpoints on sacrifice in Exodus 20:24-26 and Deuteronomy 12:1-28.¹ Indeed, when these texts are read side by side, the distance between them seems striking: Exodus 20:24-26 appears to authorise sacrifice at local altars throughout the country, whereas Deuteronomy 12:1-28 apparently restricts all sacrifice to the central sanctuary.

Since Wellhausen, the standard historical-critical explanation has been that these texts belong to separate sources, each containing its

¹ Julius Wellhausen dealt with this issue in the first chapter of his *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1878): 18-51.

own law collection,² each stemming from a different period in Israel's history. Exodus 20:24-26, according to Wellhausen, belongs to the tenth-century BC 'J' source. It permits sacrifice at multiple venues because at this stage in Israel's history 'The restriction of worship to a single selected place was unknown to any one even as a pious desire.'³ The Deuteronomic law code ('D'), in Wellhausen's view, was produced in the seventh century BC, developed out of J, and overturned some of its laws. The biggest innovation in D was the centralisation of Israel's worship to one location. The seemingly contradictory views on sacrifice and centralisation in the respective sources was a key plank in Wellhausen's view that J, E, D, P is the correct chronological sequence.⁴ He argued his case so powerfully that this theory (known as the Documentary Hypothesis) became the scholarly consensus for nearly a century.⁵

Since the 1970s, however, scholars have begun to challenge what were believed to be the assured results of historical criticism.⁶ One area of contention has been the conventional dating of the sources. Whereas many had believed J/E was the earliest source (10th century), some now re-date it (and much of the Pentateuch) to the late sixth century, or even to the post-exilic period.⁷ Moving in an opposite direction, others argue P is earlier than D, and comes from sometime between the reigns

² Most scholars identify four law collections: [1] the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant (Exod. 20:1-17; 20:22-23:33); [2] the Priestly Code (Exod. 25- Lev. 16); [3] the Holiness Code (Lev. 17-26); and [4] the laws of Deuteronomy (Deut. 12-26). For a general overview, see M. J. Selman, 'Law' in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003): 500-508.

³ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 22.

⁴ See Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 28-38.

⁵ For a recent example that applies this theory to the entire Pentateuch, see Richard Friedman, *The Secular Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). There is some diversity of opinion, however, among scholars following in Wellhausen's wake. For details, see R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987): 31-34.

⁶ I can only discuss this very briefly here. For a more thorough review, see Gordon J. Wenham, 'Pondering the Pentateuch: The Search for a New Paradigm' in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. David W. Baker and Bill T. Arnold (Leicester: Apollon, 1999): 116-44.

⁷ E.g., sixth century: Whybray, *Making of the Pentateuch*. Post-exilic period: John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994).

of Solomon and Hezekiah.⁸ Even the most solid anchor of the Documentary Hypothesis, namely the dating of D to the reign of Josiah in the seventh century BC,⁹ has been recently challenged from several angles. Some argue the content of Deuteronomy itself points away from a seventh-century backdrop;¹⁰ others oppose the conventional dating on historical grounds.¹¹

Beyond just the dating of the sources, the method of source-critical investigation has come under fire as well. Norman Whybray, for example, persuasively shows how some of the criteria for identifying the sources lack objectivity. For instance, J is identified by its use of 'Yahweh', and E and P by the epithet 'Elohim', but a close examination of the presumed sources shows an alarming lack of consistency: sometimes Yahweh is used in E, sometimes Elohim appears in J, and sometimes 'Yahweh Elohim' appears in all three sources.¹² The source-critical method also displays inconsistencies in its standard of style. On the one hand source critics presume the

⁸ E.g., Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960): 175-200; Avi Hurvitz, *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship Between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* (Paris: Gabalda, 1982); Menahem Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985): 146-47; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991): 3-35; Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972): 179-89.

⁹ Cf. Gordon J. Wenham, 'The Date of Deuteronomy: Linch-Pin of Old Testament Criticism,' *Themelios* 10/2 (1985): 15-20.

¹⁰ For example, McConville argues the model king in Deut. 17 looks nothing like Josiah, and the trajectory of Josiah's reform in Kings is different from the trajectory of Deuteronomy. This being the case, the historical backdrop of Josiah's reform is problematic: if the historical situation of Josiah's reform is different from that of Deuteronomy, how can it be appealed to as a convincing backdrop to the book? See J. Gordon McConville, 'Narrative and Meaning in the Book of Kings', *Biblica* 70/1 (1989): 31-48; J. Gordon McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Leicester: Apollos, 2002): esp. 21-40, 278-307; J. Gordon McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984); J. Gordon McConville and J. G. Millar, *Time and Place in Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994): 89-141.

¹¹ For example, the form of Deuteronomy matches more closely that of Hittite treaties from the thirteenth century than Assyrian treaties of the seventh century. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003): 283-94. Others also argue the 'name phraseology' of Deuteronomy points to the second millennium BC; see Jeffrey Niehaus, 'The Central Sanctuary: Where and When?', *TynBul* 43/1 (1992): 3-30.

¹² Whybray, *Making of the Pentateuch*, 63-72. As Whybray also notes, this criterion is applicable only to the book of Genesis and the first few chapters of Exodus anyway, since from that point onward 'Yahweh' is almost exclusively used for the divine name in all three sources (p. 64). See also Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983): 16-41.

redactor had no problem with repetitions or contradictions (these are left in the text), yet on the other they assume these could never be present in the same source.¹³ What is permitted to the redactor, therefore, is forbidden to the author. Lastly, the type of material attributed to each source is sometimes subjective,¹⁴ and differences in theology can often be accounted for in ways other than source division.¹⁵

Finally, one consideration frequently not given its proper weight in source-critical analysis is the historical and cultural world of the narratives. Stories purporting to have occurred early on in Israel's history yet assigned to a source dating to many years later (e.g., the patriarchal narratives) are often considered to be of little historical value. Whereas Wellhausen developed his theory before the rise of modern archaeology, scholars today have the benefit of nearly 100 years of scientific archaeological research at their disposal. Today, our knowledge of the cultural and historical setting of the Levant and the ancient Near East is much greater than it was in Wellhausen's day. Although the epigraphic, cultural, and archaeological findings do not always easily line up with the biblical narrative, serious enquiry into the historical and cultural background of the Pentateuch suggests it by and large reflects greater affinity with the second millennium BC than with the first millennium BC.¹⁶ Rejecting the narrative's historicity, therefore, is becoming increasingly more difficult.

In short, many of the assumptions of the Documentary Hypothesis have been brought into question over the past fifty years. As Averbeck

¹³ Whybray, *Making of the Pentateuch*, 72-91.

¹⁴ For one persuasive example, see Richard E. Averbeck, 'Pentateuchal Criticism and the Priestly Torah' in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith: A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture*, ed. James K. Hoffmeier and Dennis R. Magary (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012): 151-79.

¹⁵ Whybray, *Making of the Pentateuch*, 91-116.

¹⁶ See, for example, A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman, ed., *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980); Kenneth A. Kitchen, 'Genesis 12-50 in the Near Eastern World' in *He Swore an Oath: Biblical Themes from Genesis 12-50*, ed. Richard S. Hess, Gordon J. Wenham, and Philip E. Satterthwaite (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994): 67-92; Kenneth A. Kitchen, 'The Desert Tabernacle: Pure Fiction or Plausible Account?', *BR* 16/6 (2000); Kitchen, *Reliability*; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Newburgh, IN: Trinity Press, 1966); James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

notes, ‘The confused diversity of historical-critical opinion within the “scholarly consensus” is telling. There are so many different revisionist trails to follow, and so little agreement between them, that there is virtually no solid ground here.’¹⁷ The divergent scholarly views concerning the dating of the sources, the division of the sources, and even the existence of certain sources calls for a reconsideration of the centralisation texts of the Pentateuch within the contexts that they presently stand. This is a more objective approach, for, as Whybray rightly reminds us, ‘Whatever may have been the origins of the various laws and collections of laws in the Pentateuch, the significant fact is that they have all been brought into relationship with the making of the covenant at Sinai-Horeb and the person of Moses.’¹⁸ In recent years, scholars have tended to see more unity in the Pentateuch than older source critics did, and many scholars today would agree with the assessment of literary critics that the Pentateuch ‘is a well-constructed work, which shows that it is the work of an author, not the end product of a haphazard growth like the Midrash’.¹⁹ Regardless of what sources may have been used in its compilation, the Pentateuch as we have it is a literary unit and was intended to be read as such.²⁰ This being the case, a better question to ask is, how should Exodus 20:24-26 and Deuteronomy 12:1-28 be interpreted in their present contexts? More specifically, how do the contexts in which they currently appear shed light on how the final author or compiler understood these texts, and by extension wanted us to understand them?

In this essay I will show how Exodus 20:24-26 and Deuteronomy 12:1-28 can be harmonised through proper exegesis. Both texts, we will see, address different types of sacrifices permitted in ancient Israel. I start with Exodus 20:24-26, considering first some other interpretations of this law.

¹⁷ Averbeck, ‘Pentateuchal Criticism’, 156.

¹⁸ R. Norman Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 114.

¹⁹ Quotation from Gordon J. Wenham, ‘Pentateuchal Studies Today’, *Themelios* 22/1 (1996): 7, who summarises the conclusions of R. Alter and D. J. Clines.

²⁰ See, for example, D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2nd ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995); John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009).

2. The Altar Law in Exodus 20:24-26²¹

2.1 A Provisional Regulation

One possibility might be to read Exodus 20:24-26 as a temporary command intended to be in force only during the period of the wilderness between the giving of the Law and the construction of the bronze altar of the tabernacle.²² Once the central sanctuary was completed, the altar law of Exodus 20:24-26, according to this view, was no longer applicable.

Although this understanding may eliminate the tension between Deuteronomy and Exodus 20:24-26, it is problematic for several reasons. First, nothing in the text suggests it was intended to be read as a provisional regulation. If Exodus 20:24-26 was merely a sort of ‘emergency’ directive, why should other laws not be understood temporarily as well? Second, Yahweh promises in verse 24 to bless his people *in every place* where he causes his name to be remembered.²³ Within the context, this clearly is a reference to every place where the people build him a legitimate altar. According to the narrative, however, the law was given about ten months before the tabernacle was constructed and erected (cf. Exod. 19:1; 40:17). Since the narrative indicates the Israelites remained at Mount Sinai for the entire period between the giving of this law and the setting up of the tabernacle (cf. Exod. 40:17; Num. 10:11-13), Exodus 20:24-26 in its present context clearly looks beyond the Mount Sinai event.

²¹ Since some Hebrew editions write the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth commandment as one verse (v. 13), the versification from verse 14 onward differs in some editions. All the verse numbers in this study correspond to those found in BHS.

²² This seems to be Stuart’s view: ‘The *initial* altar God wanted was very simple: made of dirt’ (emphasis added). In a footnote, however, he also seems open to the suggestion that Exod. 20:24-26 relates to the time prior to the building of the temple, whereas Deuteronomy regulates the worship thereafter. See Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006): 472.

²³ Although the construct **בְּכֹל־הַמְּקוֹם** (with the determinate singular) is less common, it is still grammatically sound: ‘Instead of the determinate plural [following בְּכֹל], one may have, with practically no change of meaning, the determinate singular of a noun of species of category.’ See Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (vol. II; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2003): 518 §139g.

2.2 *The Altar of the Central Sanctuary*

Some scholars take a cue from rabbinic sources and connect Exodus 20:24-26 to the bronze altar of the central sanctuary.²⁴ Vogt, for example, notes ‘It is not at all clear that the altar law in Exodus 20:24-25 envisions multiple altars.’²⁵ He suggests, rather, the passage refers to all the places where God will dwell – all the successive central places of worship.

Advocates of this theory usually offer one of two responses to the question of why the material of the central sanctuary altar is different from that of Exodus 20:24-26 (i.e., bronze vs. earth/stone). Some deduce that since the altar of the central sanctuary was made of acacia wood and panelled with bronze (Exod. 27:1-8), but had a hollow core (v. 8), Exodus 20:24-26 must relate to the fill inside the wooden frame.²⁶ Others interpret the earthen altar figuratively: the law simply means the altar is to be ‘connected’ to the earth.²⁷

Although this understanding closes the gap between Exodus 20, 27, and Deuteronomy 12, it fails to be convincing for several reasons. First, it does not explain why this regulation occurs at this point in the book. The blueprint for the tabernacle is recorded in Exodus 25–30 and its actual construction is narrated in 35:30–39:43. If Exodus 20:24–26 relates to the central sanctuary, why were these two lone verses placed here in the book, five chapters before the rest of the tabernacle instructions?²⁸

Second, Exodus 20:24-26 says the *altar* is to be built of earth or stone. Nothing in the passage suggests the earth or stones here are just the *fill* of the bronze altar described seven chapters later (or that ‘earth’

²⁴ For a discussion of the rabbinic passages, see Paul Heger, *The Three Biblical Altar Laws: Developments in the Sacrificial Cult, Political and Economic Background* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999): 27-29.

²⁵ Peter T. Vogt, ‘Centralization and Decentralization in Deuteronomy’ in *Interpreting Deuteronomy: Issues and Approaches* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012): 122. See also Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967): 256-57; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 220.

²⁶ Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 362. Cf. William H. Propp, *Exodus 19–40* (New York: Doubleday, 2006): 424.

²⁷ E.g., T. Neofiti, *B. Zebahim* 61b; see Heger, *Three Biblical Altar Laws*, 31-32 for discussion and references.

²⁸ For a good discussion on the literary placement of Exod. 20:22-26, see Pekka Pitkänen, *Central Sanctuary and Centralization of Worship in Ancient Israel: From the Settlement to the Building of Solomon’s Temple* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2003): 52-56.

[מִזְבֵּחַ] is meant to be taken figuratively). Moreover, since a prohibition against making steps for the altar is also mentioned (Exod. 20:26), it would be odd for the author to give instructions relating to the fill of the altar and the architecture around the altar, but then say nothing about the actual structure.²⁹

2.3 A Temporary Measure Until the Land Has Rest

Many scholars argue that the apparent conflict between the multiple altars allowed in Exodus 20:24-26 and the restriction of sacrifice to the central sanctuary in Deuteronomy is the result of a misunderstanding of Deuteronomy's centralisation laws. In their view, Deuteronomy calls for the centralisation of Israel's worship only *after* Yahweh has given his people rest from their enemies. Prior to this event, the people of Israel were permitted to build local altars throughout the land in the manner prescribed in Exodus 20:24-26. Since the altar law in Exodus 20:24-26 and the centralisation laws in Deuteronomy were never both in force at the same time, there is no contradiction between them.³⁰

This theory leans heavily on a sequential reading of Deuteronomy 12:10-11. As Pitkänen explains,

The promise in [Deut. 12] v. 10 about settlement, rest and safety is followed by the commandment in v. 11 that the people go and bring their offerings to the place Yahweh will choose. This then clearly suggests that the choice of the place, or at least bringing the offerings there is to happen *after* the people have settled, and have achieved rest and security.³¹

Pitkänen believes this understanding is supported by Deuteronomy 26:1-2, which if also read sequentially suggests the Israelites were to bring their tithes to the central place of worship only *once they had taken possession of the land* and lived in it. Prior to that period, or at any other time when Israel did not retain full possession of the land, the demand for centralised worship did not apply. Pitkänen argues further

²⁹ More evidence against this view can be found in Heger, *Three Biblical Altar Laws*, 191-94, although I find some of his arguments less convincing.

³⁰ E.g., R. E. Averbeck, 'Mizbeah', *NIDOTT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997); R. E. Averbeck, 'Sacrifices and Offerings' in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003): 728-32; Eugene H. Merrill, *Everlasting Dominion: A Theology of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006): 346-47; Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008): 552.

³¹ Pitkänen, *Central Sanctuary*, 99.

that the suspension of centralisation in periods of conflict makes sense from a practical point of view. How could the entire nation, he asks, be required to gather at the chosen place three times a year when the conditions were not peaceful?³²

Advocates of this view argue this interpretation is reflected in the historical books as well. According to Averbeck, although Yahweh gave the Israelites a ‘semblance of rest’ after the conquest, its complete occupation (‘rest’) was not fully accomplished until the days of David and Solomon. For this reason, Averbeck believes that ‘Before the time of David and Solomon the people legitimately offered sacrifices on solitary altars throughout the land.’³³ Pitkänen, however, takes a different view. He argues the laws of centralisation were in immediate effect after the conquest, but then ceased to be binding during the time of the judges since the latter was a period of turmoil.³⁴ Pitkänen’s understanding, therefore, is more cyclical – the centralisation requirement came and went with the political tide of the day.

This understanding also faces numerous difficulties. First, basing one’s interpretation of Exodus 20:24-26 on a sequential reading of Deuteronomy 12:10-11 is precarious. If the centralisation laws in Deuteronomy are contingent upon peace, why is there no evidence in Exodus 20:24-26 that this law is applicable only in times of turmoil? If the verses before (Ten Commandments, 20:3-17) and after (laws about slaves, 21:1-11) Exodus 20:24-26 were applicable throughout all of Israel’s history, there seems to be no reason why Exodus 20:24-26 should be any different.

Second, if the intent of Deuteronomy 12:10-11 is that centralised worship is required only when there is complete peace in the land of Israel, one might rightly ask why the remainder of Deuteronomy does not indicate this. Although Pitkänen argues this concept is present in Deuteronomy 26:1-2, the passage does not say this. ‘Rest’ (נוח) is not mentioned there, and the command to bring the tithes to the chosen place is tied to the Israelites’ taking possession of the land, not to the time when Israel will enjoy peace. Additionally, several times in Deuteronomy the author clarifies some of the centralisation

³² Pitkänen, *Central Sanctuary*, 99-100. He also believes that Exod. 34:23-24 recognises the practical necessity of security for centralisation.

³³ Averbeck, ‘Mizbeah’, 896.

³⁴ Pitkänen, *Central Sanctuary*, 154-57, 196-99.

requirements,³⁵ yet significantly none of these clarifications reiterate that the command to worship at the chosen place is put on hold when Israel is oppressed. Aside from the sequential *vehaya* (וַיְהִי) in Deuteronomy 12:11, nothing else in Deuteronomy indicates centralised worship is expected only once there is total peace in the land. Deuteronomy 16:5, for example, prohibits the Israelites from offering the Passover sacrifice in their local villages, but gives no hint that this prohibition will come into effect only once universal peace descends upon the land. Moreover, in Deuteronomy 12:3-5 the command to destroy the Asherim of the Canaanites and the injunction to worship at the central sanctuary are both part of the same package. If the centralisation requirements, therefore, are only applicable once complete rest is achieved, would not the same be true of the command to eradicate the Canaanite cults? More likely, ‘When you have rest from all your enemies’ (Deut. 12:10b) is Deuteronomy’s way of saying ‘When you come into the land.’³⁶ Deuteronomy 12:10-11, therefore, states that centralised worship is required when the Israelites enter the land.

Third, the idea that God granted the nation the concession of decentralised worship during times of turmoil runs against the grain of Deuteronomistic theology. According to the book, unrest (or oppression) in Israel was God’s punishment for the nation’s disobedience (e.g., Deut. 28:25, 29, 32-37, 41, 47-52, 64-68). Pitkänen misses this when he questions how God could expect the Israelites to gather at the chosen place of worship when ‘the conditions were not peaceful’. In Deuteronomy, obedience and peace are two sides of the same coin. Since God’s demand for obedience never changed, why would he grant his people the concession of decentralised worship during times of unrest when that unrest was the result of their disobedience?

Fourth, the historical books do not support this interpretation. Although the era of David and Solomon was marked by tranquillity (cf.

³⁵ For example, whereas Deut. 12:1-14 restricts sacrifice to the central sanctuary, 12:15-28 clarifies that animals may be slaughtered for food in the local villages. Deuteronomy 14:22-23 states that the tithes of the fields and flocks must be brought to the central sanctuary and presented to Yahweh there, but 14:24-26 explains that Israelites living far away from the central place of worship may exchange their produce and flock for silver and present this as an offering to Yahweh.

³⁶ Note that the first half of the verse mentions crossing the Jordan and living in the land.

imply this was not the understanding of the pre-monarchic Israelites. Immediately after crossing the Jordan the Israelites celebrated a major festival (Passover) at the central place of worship (Josh. 5:1-12) and throughout the period of the judges they continued to observe a yearly festival (though we are not told which one) at Shiloh, Israel's first 'permanent' central sanctuary (Judg. 21:19; 1 Sam. 1:3, 21; 2:18). The cult centre established at Dan in the period of the Judges (Judg. 17-18) is presented as a rival sanctuary to the chosen place, even though Yahweh was worshipped there (17:3; 18:6).⁴² Significantly, the nine tribes settling on the western side of the Jordan believed the altar built on the eastern bank by Reuben, Gad, and the half-tribe of Manasseh was meant to replace the altar of the tabernacle and therefore was illegitimate (Josh. 22:10-34). Had centralisation not yet come into effect, the Israelites' objection to the altar would be surprising. Averbeck believes this passage reflects 'the incipient sense of centralisation of altar worship even in those early days'.⁴³ But if the Israelites 'sensed' the demand for centralisation in Joshua's day, why should we conclude this belief was preliminary, or unfounded? In short, this view – that Israel's worship was never intended to be centralised until Yahweh granted his people rest from their enemies – also encounters serious obstacles upon closer examination.

2.4 Multiple Altars Permitted, Not Sanctuaries

The best interpretation is the simplest one: Exodus 20:24-26 regulates how local Yahweh altars should be built throughout the country.⁴⁴ This

⁴² Block correctly writes that one of the negative shadows cast on the Levite in Judg. 17:8-9 is that 'he does not serve at the place of Yahweh's choosing but at a place chosen by a man'. See Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999): 487.

⁴³ Averbeck, 'Mizbeah', 895.

⁴⁴ Two additional comments on the Hebrew of this verse need to be made here (cf. n. 24 above for the construct בְּכֹל־הַמָּקוֹם). First, the form אֲזַבִּיר אֶת־שְׁמִי rather than מִי אֶת־שְׁמִי is not as problematic as some assert (e.g., Heger, *Three Biblical Altar Laws*, 28-31). As Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1993): vol. 1, 20, 58 and vol. 3, 98, 106-107, rightly notes (vol. 1, 20), the phrase refers to Yahweh making his presence known to the worshipper: 'YHWH reveals himself, presents himself, so that one may be sure that it is He.' Second, אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ is not the *conclusion* to בְּכֹל־הַמָּקוֹם (i.e., 'In every place where I reveal myself, [there] I will come to you and bless you'), but an *expansion* on בְּכֹל־הַמָּקוֹם (i.e., 'In every place where I reveal myself, come to you to bless you ...'). The final clause is an ellipsis and should be supplied from v. 24a. Thus, the second half of the verse should be translated as follows (from Houtman): 'At every place where I reveal myself, come to you to

interpretation is not new. As Wellhausen correctly commented long ago, ‘A choice of two kinds of material is ... given [in Exod. 20:24-26], which surely implies that the lawgiver thought of more than one altar; and not at *the* place, but at *every* place where he causes his name to be honoured.’⁴⁵ Wellhausen and his followers, however, took this one step too far. They concluded Exodus 20:24-26 is older than Deuteronomy, since the former permits the construction of multiple sanctuaries, whereas Deuteronomy ‘[limits] the sacrificial worship to the one chosen place’.⁴⁶ This conclusion, I believe, rests on two false assumptions. First, it supposes Exodus 20:24-26 permits the building of multiple sanctuaries. Second, it assumes Deuteronomy limits *all* sacrifice to the central place of worship. I will deal with the first point in this section and the second in the next.

It is important to recognise that only *altars* are permitted in Exodus 20:24-26, not sanctuaries or temples.⁴⁷ Nothing is said about sanctuary buildings, incense altars, priests, or other religious paraphernalia usually associated with cultic worship. Driver’s assertion, therefore,

bless you (you shall do that).’ Verse 24b, therefore, stipulates how a worshipper should (if desired) build an altar in response to a divine encounter or blessing.

⁴⁵ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 29-30.

⁴⁶ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 33.

⁴⁷ By ‘temple’ or ‘sanctuary’ I mean – along with Haran – a roofed building ‘considered to be a divine dwelling-place ... equipped with furnishings that would symbolize the divine presence in that house ... and with objects used in God’s service (such as the table of shewbread, a lampstand, an ephod)’. For more on the important distinction between altars and temples, see Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service*, 1-12, 15-17 (quote from p. 16); Menahem Haran, ‘Temples and Cultic Areas as Reflected in the Bible’ in *Temples and High Places in Biblical Times*, ed. Avraham Biran (Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 1981): 31-37. For a thorough discussion of Israelite temples found in archaeological excavations, see Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001): 123-266.

Some scholars argue Deuteronomy envisions several central (or regional) sanctuaries spread throughout the tribes, not one sole sanctuary. This theory rests mainly on translating בָּאֶחָד שְׁבֵטֶיךָ (Deut. 12:14) distributively (i.e., ‘Yahweh will choose *in* any of your tribes ...’). See, for example, Adam C. Welch, ‘The Problem of Deuteronomy’, *JBL* 48 (1929): 291-306; Baruch Halpern, ‘The Centralization Formula in Deuteronomy’, *VT* 31/1 (1981): 20-38; Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996): 168-70. Deuteronomy 12:5, however, makes this understanding untenable since the verse can only be translated ‘he will choose it *out* of all the tribes’ (הַמְּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִכָּל-שְׁבֵטֵיכֶם). Moreover, since the three pilgrimage festivals are national festivals that look back on the nation’s deliverance from Egypt, it is reasonable to assume they were celebrated corporately at one central location. See further G. J. Wenham, ‘Deuteronomy and the Central Sanctuary’, *TynBul* 22 (1971): 110-11.

that ‘both the sanctuaries and the sacrifices ... [are] justified by the present law’ goes beyond what the text says.⁴⁸

Exodus 20:25 explicitly states that wielding an iron tool on a stone meant to be used for these altars profanes the stone (תַּחֲלִילָהּ).⁴⁹ Since at least the Rabbinic period interpreters have speculated why dressed stones are forbidden.⁵⁰ This is not the place to address every suggestion, but when it is recognised that either unhewn stones *or earth* (v. 24) can be used, it seems that dressed stones are unfit because Yahweh wanted these altars to remain primitive and temporary. As Wellhausen rightly observed, ‘Earth and unhewn stones of the field can be found everywhere, and such an altar falls to pieces just as readily as it is built.’⁵¹

This raises an important question. Why are only crudely made altars allowed? Clearly the text gives no indication of any ideological qualms with quality craftsmanship. The tabernacle, for example, is said to have been built by professional artisans and beautified with the finest materials.⁵² More likely, these restrictions are given to diminish these altars’ significance. Notice that steps are also forbidden in verse 26.⁵³ Chavel rightly notes that ‘The prohibition on steps helps ensure the altar never grow to imply a particular potency ... and develop

⁴⁸ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953): 208. See also J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980): 225; Martin Noth, *The History of Israel* (2nd ed.; New York: Harper & Row, 1960): 176-77; Driver, *Exodus*, 206; Anthony Phillips, *Deuteronomy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 84; John I. Durham, *Exodus* (Waco, TX: Word, 1987): 319; Edward Robertson, ‘The Altar of Earth’, *JJS* 1/2 (1948): 12-21.

⁴⁹ Note the feminine pronominal suffixes (עֲלֶיהָ and תַּחֲלִילָהּ) refer not to the altar (מִזְבֵּחַ [m.]) but to the stone (אֶבֶן [f.]). Simeon Chavel’s suggestion (‘A Kingdom of Priests and Its Earthen Altars in Exodus 19-24’, *VT* 65 [2015]: 174 n. 11) that it refers to the implement (הַרְבֵּב [f.]) is unlikely, in my opinion.

⁵⁰ For a representative sampling see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974): 466.

⁵¹ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 29.

⁵² Olyan’s argument that the command is rooted in the belief that physical alteration produced defilement breaks down here. Even if the temple altar was built of unhewn stones (as he believes, but is unlikely in my opinion), it still was plated in bronze (1 Kgs 8:64), a material whose natural elements have been altered. See Saul Olyan, ‘Why an Altar of Unfinished Stones? Some Thoughts on Ex 20,25 and Dtn 27,5-6’, *ZAW* 108 (1996): 161-71.

⁵³ The passage does not explicitly say there cannot be steps, but that one must not ascend any steps so as not to expose one’s nakedness. As most commentators realise, however, the command not to use steps is synonymous with a prohibition on building them. It would be odd for Yahweh to permit their construction but forbid the worshipper from using them.

permanence.⁵⁴ This interpretation, Chavel argues, is consistent with the immediate context, in which the author ‘shifts from the topic of metalworks [v. 23] to that of the earthen altar, precisely in order to ... highlight the contrast between the large-scale ... effort involved in the production of high-end sculpture and architecture and ... individuated household worship’.⁵⁵ It seems, therefore, that the command to keep local altars small and simple was intended to prevent them from turning into proper sanctuaries and thereby compete with, or replace, the central sanctuary. This is consistent with the rest of the Old Testament as well. Nowhere does the Old Testament authorise building local sanctuaries, incense altars, or cultic paraphernalia for private use.

Two considerations imply the altars in Exodus 20:24-26 were meant to be understood as having a different function from the altar of the central sanctuary. First, the location of this altar law in Exodus strongly indicates the sacrifices offered on these altars were not part of the Israelites’ regular worship. Exodus 20:24-26 does not appear near any of the legislation pertaining to Israel’s formal, official worship (e.g., Exod. 25-30; Lev. 1-8; 23; etc.); rather, it occurs in a collection of laws (the book of the covenant) that address the daily life of the community.⁵⁶ This implies the verses deal with special sacrifices offered in the local villages. Second, Exodus 20:24-26 is addressed to the entire nation, not just the priests.⁵⁷ This is clear from verse 26, where the worshippers are instructed not to ascend steps leading to the top of the altar, ‘that your nakedness be not exposed’.⁵⁸ This

⁵⁴ Chavel, ‘Kingdom of Priests’, 183.

⁵⁵ Chavel, ‘Kingdom of Priests’, 184-85. Chavel’s quote should not be taken to mean that exposing one’s nakedness is not also a concern. It clearly is – v. 26 explicitly states this. The point is, however, the prohibition on steps also ensures the altars remain simply and temporary, which is the thrust of the wider context.

⁵⁶ Durham, *Exodus*, 318. Some separate Exod. 20:22-26 from the book of the covenant, but, as Alexander notes, the Decalogue (immediately before these verses) deals with life in the community as well. See Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 83.

⁵⁷ This was observed already by William Robertson Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church: A Course of Lectures on Biblical Criticism* (2nd ed.; London: Adam & Charles Black, 1895): 358 n.1; Driver, *Exodus*, 206; and others. T. Neofiti and T. Pseudo-Jonathan, perhaps feeling uncomfortable with the broader audience presumed in the verse, add that it is the priests who are sacrificing on these altars.

⁵⁸ Heger argues the ban on building steps for the altar is intended to forbid the construction of a high altar, since when one ‘stands on top of the altar, one’s nakedness is still exposed, regardless of the way one reached the top’. Only when one stands on the ground to the side of the altar, he argues, is his nakedness not exposed. See Heger, *Three Biblical Altar Laws*, 66-79 (quote from p. 66).

prohibition clearly shows the law is directed to laypeople since Exodus 28:40-42 indicates priests wore linen garments ‘to protect their naked flesh’ when serving in the tabernacle. Thus, unlike the sacrifices offered in the tabernacle, the laity are assumed to be offering sacrifices on these altars.

Drawing all these strands together, Exodus 20:24-26 was intended to be read as a permanent regulation, effective throughout Israel’s history. The law permits the construction of local altars (though not a sanctuary proper) so long as they are small, simple, and temporary.⁵⁹ Such altars could be used by priests and laity alike, implying these sacrifices were not part of Israel’s formal sacrificial cult. Although Exodus 20:24-26 does not explain what these sacrifices were for, they apparently were offered on special occasions by non-priests. If this interpretation is correct, how does it compare to Deuteronomy, which many interpret as outlawing all sacrifice outside of the central sanctuary?

3. The Perspective of Deuteronomy

Deuteronomy 12:1-28 contains the most thorough legislation about sacrifice and centralisation and thus has taken centre stage in the discussion. Although many scholars miss this, a close look at the text reveals that while Deuteronomy 12 may outline general principles for ritual sacrificial practices, it should not be understood as prohibiting *all* sacrifices outside of the chosen place. The first indication of this is that exceptions to other stipulations sketched in these verses appear elsewhere in the book. Space permits me to highlight only two examples here.

1. *Deuteronomy 12:6, 17.* In Deuteronomy 12:6 the Israelites are instructed to bring all their tithes (מַעֲשֵׂר) to the central sanctuary, and verse 17 rephrases the command negatively: no Israelite can eat his tithe in the local villages. When 12:6 and 17 are read as a

⁵⁹ Although the temporary nature of such altars would make them less likely to be found in archaeological excavations, a fully preserved earthen altar was recently uncovered at Philistine Ashkelon. See Daniel M. Master and Adam J. Aja, ‘The House Shrine of Ashkelon’, *IEJ* 61/2 (2011): 136-42. For more archaeological context on the altars uncovered in excavations see Zevit, *Religions of Ancient Israel*, 298-314; Seymour Gitin, ‘The Four-Horned Altar and Sacred Space: An Archaeological Perspective’ in *Sacred Time, Sacred Space: Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002): 95-124.

comprehensive regulation with no exceptions, the emerging conclusion is that *all* tithes must be presented to God at the chosen place of worship. But this is not the case according to 14:28. At the end of every three years, the Israelites were to bring the tithe of their produce (כָּל-מַעֲשֵׂר תְּבוּאָתָךְ) to their villages (בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ) for local needs (cf. 26:12-15). Thus, although Deuteronomy 12 does not mention any exceptions to the tithing regulations, other texts in the book indicate there were.

2. *Deuteronomy 12:6, 11, 13*. These verses are frequently understood to mean the only legitimate venue that any sacrifice can be offered to Yahweh is at the chosen place. However, if 12:6, 11, 13 are understood as categorically prohibiting *all* sacrifice outside of the central place of worship, problems arise when trying to understand these verses in light of 27:1-8, wherein Moses commands the people to build an altar on Mount Ebal and sacrifice burnt (עֹלֹת) and peace (שְׁלָמִים) offerings on it.⁶⁰ Some believe Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8 and 24 imply the central place of worship was at Shechem.⁶¹ But this cannot be the case. First, neither Shechem or Mount Ebal are ever called ‘the place’, nor is the tabernacle ever said to have been set up there.⁶² Second, Moses tells the people to build the altar out of unhewn

⁶⁰ The example in this paragraph is from Wenham, ‘Central Sanctuary’, 114-15. Several studies have shown that Deut. 27 is integral to the book of Deuteronomy as a whole; see p. 104 n. 8 in Wenham’s article for further details.

⁶¹ E.g., Noth, *The History of Israel*, 92-93; McConville, *Deuteronomy*, 389-90. This seems to be the view of Peter T. Vogt, *Deuteronomistic Theology and the Significance of Torah: A Reappraisal* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006): 178-79, though his position is not entirely clear.

⁶² Josh. 24:26 mentions a ‘holy place’ (מִקְדָּשׁ), the word frequently used for the tabernacle. The term מִקְדָּשׁ, however, is not always synonymous with ‘tabernacle’. In Jer. 51:51, for example, the prophet laments that the Babylonians have come into the holy places of the temple (בְּיַד יְהוָה) בית יְהוָה. Since the word ‘temple’ also appears in the verse, מִקְדָּשׁ refers to a location (the ‘holy places’), not the building itself. Two related reasons suggest this is the best way to understand the word in Josh. 24:26 (cf. NIV). First, the ceremony at Shechem was a special event. It is unlikely the Israelites would have moved the tabernacle from Shiloh to Shechem just for this occasion. Second, the ceremony in Josh. 24 was clearly a repetition of what the Israelites had done at the beginning of the conquest (Josh. 8:30-35): both observances occurred at the same place, and both were a recommitment to the covenant that included writing down the law (Josh. 8:32; 24:26). Since the tabernacle clearly was not moved to Shechem for the first covenant renewal, there is no reason to believe it was fetched for this ceremony at the end of the conquest. Most likely, then, the ‘holy place’ mentioned in Josh. 24:26 was the area where the ceremony occurred. In the ancient world, sacrifices were typically part of covenant ceremonies (e.g., Gen. 8:20-9:17; 15:7-21; Exod. 24:3-8), and since they are specifically mentioned in Josh. 8:31, the Israelites most likely

stones (Deut. 27:5-6; Josh. 8:31), clearly alluding to the altar law in Exodus 20:24-26.⁶³ Since this was not the altar of the central sanctuary, Deuteronomy itself demonstrates that sacrifices could be made outside of the chosen place on special occasions. Deuteronomy 12, however, gives no indication of this allowance.

Deuteronomy 12 is also incomplete in some of its legislation. The only sacrifice mentioned in this chapter is the burnt offering (עֹלָה – Deut. 12:6, 11, 13, 27; cf. 13:16; 27:6; 33:10). Grain (מִנְחָה), peace (שָׁלֵם), sin (חַטָּאת), and guilt (אָשָׁם) offerings are not listed.⁶⁴ A rigid interpretation of this chapter, therefore, leads to the conclusion that only burnt offerings (עֹלָה) need to be brought to the central place of worship. But as nearly all commentators recognise, such an overly literal understanding is absurd. Deuteronomy 12 records general principles for formal ritual sacrifices and offerings. It is not an exhaustive manual.⁶⁵

With this in mind, the entire chapter should not be pushed too far in either direction. If there are omissions in its regulations of formal ritual worship (which is the focus of the chapter), why should one suppose there are no exceptions to its sacrificial guidelines, especially in circumstances *not* relating to formal worship (which are not the focus of the chapter)?⁶⁶

Finally, two other texts in Deuteronomy imply the book does not limit all sacrifice to the central place of worship. The first is Deuteronomy 16:2, which reads ‘You shall not plant for yourself any tree as an Asherah beside the altar of the Lord your God, *which you make for yourself*’ (my translation, emphasis added). Although some believe the bronze altar of the central sanctuary is in view here,

offered sacrifices in Josh. 24 as well. The ‘holy place’, therefore, was probably the area around the altar where Joshua and the other leaders stood.

⁶³ Although the language is not identical (גִּזְיִת in Exod. 20:25; אֲבִנִים שְׁלֵמוֹת in Deut. 27:6; Josh. 8:31), most recognise Deut. 27:6 and Josh. 8:31 are based on Exod. 20:25; e.g., Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996): 249.

⁶⁴ Aside from the peace offering, mentioned only in Deut. 27:7, these offerings are not discussed at all in Deuteronomy.

⁶⁵ McConville, in *Deuteronomy*, 222-23, correctly writes ‘The omission of certain sacrifices from the list ... is not surprising ... since Deuteronomy does not aim to be a comprehensive guide to ritual worship.’

⁶⁶ Although Vogt reaches a different conclusion, he rightly observes ‘The issue of the number of altars is not the primary emphasis of the chapter’ (*Deuteronomic Theology*, 174).

McDonald has conclusively shown this understanding is indefensible.⁶⁷ Local altars are envisioned in this text.⁶⁸ Second, Deuteronomy 33:19 also implies sacrifices were permitted outside of the chosen place. Blessing Zebulun and Issachar, Moses foretells ‘They will call peoples to a mountain, and there they shall offer sacrifices of righteousness’ (my translation). Although some parts of this verse are unclear, what cannot be missed is Moses’ positive reference to offering righteous sacrifices on a mountain somewhere in Zebulun and/or Issachar.⁶⁹ Since the central sanctuary was never in either of those tribes, the verse reveals that sacrifices – at least certain types – could legitimately be offered up at locations other than the chosen place.

In summary, Deuteronomy 12:1-28 is a general statement about formal ritual worship. The chapter is not a comprehensive manual addressing all instances of sacrifice. The book itself admits sacrifices can be offered at local altars on special occasions and thus the common assertion that Deuteronomy centralises all sacrifice to the chosen site is not consistent with the book as a whole.⁷⁰

4. Conclusion

I began my argument by briefly outlining how older source-critical views have increasingly given way to newer theories on the formation of the Pentateuch. Although many of the assumptions of historical criticism have been challenged over the past fifty years, still nothing near a consensus concerning the division and dating of the presumed sources has been reached among Pentateuchal scholars. My method, therefore, has been to analyse the texts within their present contexts. This approach provides insight into how the final compiler (or author) understood the texts and wanted us to read them.

The central argument of this study can be boiled down to two main points. One, the altar law of Exodus 20:24-26 is a permanent regulation

⁶⁷ See Richard McDonald, ‘The “Altar of the Lord Your God” in Deuteronomy 16.21: Central Altar or Local Altars?’, *JSOT* 37/4 (2013): 453-72.

⁶⁸ Note planting an Asherah is forbidden, not the construction of an altar.

⁶⁹ Scholars debate whether Mount Tabor, Mount Carmel, or another hilltop in the region is envisioned. Cf. Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10–34:12* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002): 853.

⁷⁰ See also Harold Wiener, *The Altars of the Old Testament* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1927): 18, who arrives at the same conclusion but through different arguments.

and relates to sacrifices offered by the people (including non-priests) on special occasions outside of the central sanctuary. Two, the book of Deuteronomy does not prohibit sacrifices offered on special occasions; its centralisation laws apply to sacrifices offered as part of the formal, official cult.

This interpretation is based on four key observations. First, Exodus 20:24-26 sanctions the construction of local *altars*, not formal, organised worship with priests, incense altars, and other religious paraphernalia. This distinction (missed by most scholars) is critical since altars were often built for purposes other than for formal, organised worship (e.g., in response to a theophany [Judg. 13:19], in supplication [1 Kgs 18:30], to seek the Lord's favour for battle [1 Sam. 13:12], to avert disaster [2 Sam 24:25], to show the superiority of Yahweh over other gods [Judg. 6:25-26]).

Second, the altar law in Exodus 20:24-26 appears five chapters before the tabernacle instructions, totally removed from the formal sacrificial regulations. Its presence in a series laws dealing with daily life implies it relates to altars built for reasons other than for formal worship.

Third, this suspicion is confirmed by the fact that the altars in Exodus 20:24-26 differ in appearance and function from the bronze altar of the central sanctuary. Constructed out of earth or unworked stones, Exodus 20:24-26 stipulates these local altars were to be unimposing and temporary. The command not to ascend the altar steps, 'that your nakedness may not be exposed', makes it clear the text authorises the laity to sacrifice on these altars. But rather than postulate that Exodus 20:24-26 stems from an earlier period in Israel's history, a time prior to the development of the priestly class,⁷¹ the passage is better understood as a regulation for local sacrifices offered on special occasions. Evidently, since these sacrifices were not part of the formal cult, they did not require priests. This understanding fits well with the

⁷¹ Cf. Norman Whybray's insightful comment in *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995): 126: 'An even more important point is that Wellhausen did not take into account – and was in fact not able to take into account at the time when he wrote – the mass of documents from the ancient Near East which shows that the priestly laws of sacrifice were not a late Jewish invention but are in many respects characteristic of ancient Near eastern practice many centuries older than the Old Testament. The complexity and meticulous attention to detail of sacrificial legislation were central features of the ancient Near East of which Israel was a part. That the significance of this has only recently been realized, and only by a few scholars, is surprising.'

evidence of the historical literature. At least four non-priests in the historical books legitimately offer sacrifices outside of the central place of worship.⁷² All of these sacrifices were offered on special occasions and were not part of the formal cult. Elijah's sacrifice is particularly telling since it shows these types of sacrifices continued after the construction of the temple (see 1 Kgs 18:33; 19:10, 14). Any reconstruction of Israel's worship that fails to distinguish between ritual, formal sacrifices offered at the central sanctuary and those offered at local altars on special occasions is not sound methodologically and ultimately leads to misunderstanding.⁷³

Fourth, the book of Deuteronomy also distinguishes between ritual sacrifices presented at the central sanctuary and those offered in special instances. Although the book calls for centralised formal worship (e.g., Deut. 12), it also recognises that special sacrifices can and will be offered outside of the chosen place (e.g., Deut. 16:2; 33:19; 27:1-8).

⁷² Gideon (Judg. 6:25-27); Manoah (Judg. 13:23); David (2 Sam. 24:25); Elijah (1 Kgs 18:38).

⁷³ Averbeck in 'Mizbeah', 893-94, for example, states: 'The problem with the traditional view is that the OT seems to indicate that there were numerous cases in which other altars (i.e., solitary altars of the Exod. 20 type) seem to have been legitimately used for burnt offerings and sacrifices after the occupation of the land (e.g., Judg. 6:26; 13:19-20; 21:4; 1 Sam. 7:17; 14:35; 2 Sam. 24:25 and 1 Kgs 18:30-38; 1 Chr. 21:26).' All his examples refer to sacrifices offered on special occasions.