

Exodus 20:25

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.

Analysis

And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.

Even stone altars must be unhewn (לֹא־תִבְנֶה אֶתֶּהָן גָּזִית, lo-tivneh ethen gazit)—natural stones, untouched by human tools. Why? 'Lift up thy tool...polluted it' (הִנְפֹּתָ הַנִּפְחָלָהּ, henafta charbeka aleha vatechaleha)—human shaping defiles. The word for 'tool' is literally 'sword' (charbekha)—instruments of violence shouldn't touch God's altar. The altar receives blood for sin; adding human craftsmanship suggests we contribute to atonement. We don't. Salvation is God's work alone. Hewn stones represent human achievement; unhewn stones represent divine provision. The gospel is 'not by works of righteousness which we have done' (Titus 3:5). God provides the altar and the sacrifice.

Historical Context

Joshua later builds an altar of unhewn stones as commanded (Joshua 8:30-31). Solomon's temple used cut stones but the altar foundation was unhewn. The principle emphasizes God's sufficiency—human contribution doesn't improve divine provision.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. Why does human craftsmanship 'pollute' the altar—what does this teach about works-based religion?
2. How does the command for unhewn stones illustrate salvation by grace alone, apart from human works?

Interlinear Text

וְאִם H518	מִזְבֵּחַ H4196	אֲבָנִים H68	תַּעֲשֶׂה H6213	לֹא H0	לִי H3808
	me an altar	of stone	And if thou wilt make		
	תִּבְנֶה H1129	אֶתָּה H853	גִּזַּי יֵת H1496	כִּי H3588	חֲרֻבְךָ H2719
	thou shalt not build		it of hewn stone		thy tool
					for if thou lift up
עַל יָד H5921	וַתִּחַלְלֵהָ H2490				
	upon it thou hast polluted				

Additional Cross-References

Joshua 8:31 (Sacrifice): As Moses the servant of the LORD commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, an altar of whole stones, over which no man hath lift up any iron: and they offered thereon burnt offerings unto the LORD, and sacrificed peace offerings.