

MATZEBOT

CULTURAL INSIGHT

Matzebot (singular, *matzebah*) is the Hebrew term for standing stones used for religious purposes in the ancient Levant. This term is often translated in the King James Version as “pillars” or “images,” even though a *matzebah* does need to be carved. There is evidence from the biblical text and from archaeology that at periods in Israelite history, these were seen as appropriate symbols for Jehovah and His presence. After Jacob had his vision of Jehovah in Beth-el, he set up a *matzebah* and poured oil on it in an act of consecration (Genesis 28:18–22). Jehovah specifically mentioned this standing stone when He commanded Jacob to return to Canaan (Genesis 31:13). When Jacob and Laban made a covenant of peace, Jacob set up a *matzebah* as a witness of that covenant (Genesis 31:43–53). When Moses built an altar as part of the covenant-making ceremony at Mt. Sinai, he erected twelve *matzebot* as symbols of the twelve tribes (Exodus 24:4).

Although *matzebot* are associated positively with Jacob and other individuals who worship Jehovah, in other portions of the Old Testament, they are associated with the worship of gods besides the God of Israel. In Exodus 34:13, the Israelites are commanded to destroy the *matzebot* of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan (it is translated as “idols” in the King James Version). In a related law in Leviticus 26:1, the Israelites are specifically commanded *not* to erect *matzebot* (King James Version: “standing image”), presumably because of their association with Canaanite ritual practices. The king of Israel Jehoram tore down a *matzebah* dedicated to Baal that his father had erected (2 Kings 3:2).

The ambiguity continues in the prophetic books, which sometimes describe *matzebot* as symbols of Jehovah and sometimes as foreign symbols. Isaiah describes a standing stone dedicated to Jehovah as a symbol to the redemption of Egypt (Isaiah 19:19). On the other hand, Jeremiah describes Jehovah destroying

the *matzebot* of the city of Bet-Shemesh (Hebrew “house of the sun”; Jeremiah 43:13). Hosea largely presents them as a positive thing, suggesting in chapter 3, verse 4 that they are part of the blessings that will be restored when Jehovah restores Israel.

These standing stones are a perfect example of the changing religious landscape we can sometimes see in the Old Testament. As Latter-day Saints, this should be unsurprising to us since we know that continuing revelation is one of the ways in which the Lord blesses His people.

Related verses

Genesis 28:18–22

Genesis 31:13, 43–53

Genesis 35:9–20

Exodus 24:4

Exodus 34:13

Leviticus 26:1

Deuteronomy 7:5

Deuteronomy 16:22

2 Samuel 18:18

1 Kings 14:23

2 Kings 3:2

2 Kings 10:24–27

Isaiah 19:19

Jeremiah 43:13

Hosea 3:4

Hosea 10:1–2

Micah 5:13

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