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ARCHAEOLOGY  
RECONSTRUCTS  
THE LOST BACKGROUND  
OF THE  
ISRAELITE CULT

MOST studies of the archaeological and historical background of early Israelite religion have suffered from two fundamental deficiencies. First, they have analyzed the two classes of pertinent data—textual and artifactual—in isolation from each other. Moreover, the exclusion or misapplication of the archaeological evidence and the overinterpretation of the literary evidence have produced a distorted picture. Thus we have many “Old Testament theologies” but no comprehensive “history of the religion of ancient Israel” that takes advantage of the potential of modern interdisciplinary inquiry—textual and theological studies coupled with archaeology, ethnology, and comparative religion. Second, previous studies have stressed the “uniqueness” of Israelite religion to the neglect of those features it shared with ancient oriental religions in general, and with Late Bronze Age Canaanite religion in particular. The resulting reconstructions have been arbitrary and ultimately unpersuasive.

I will here seek to redress the balance by giving precedence to the contribution of archaeology—conceived as a newer and independent, yet interrelated, discipline with unique explanatory potential—and by adopting a phenomenological or “functionalist” approach to the study of religion, relying more on sociological and anthropological models than on theological method, and more on material remains of the cult than on ideology.<sup>1</sup>

The specific questions I shall address, using the methodology outlined above, are the following: What was the actual nature of early Israelite religious practice? What was the social milieu in Late Bronze-Iron I Palestine in which it flourished? What were the specific factors in continuity with the Canaanite cultural sphere that may have played a formative role in shaping the early Israelite cult? And finally, what was distinctively “Israelite” in this religion?

The particular approach and methodology adopted here require the clearest possible definition of the terms to be used hereafter. First, for the purpose of the following discussion, I shall define *religion* as a set of symbolic thought forms and acts that relate human beings to the ultimate conditions of their existence, perceived as the Holy. Second, and consequently, religion will be considered here in two aspects. Its aspect of thought, or *theology*, will be defined as the intellectual and moral systema-

tization of religious belief. Its second aspect, and the primary concern of this discussion, is *cult*, or the individual and communal acting out of religious beliefs in worship and ritual—that is, the *practice* of religion. Archaeology, the remaining significant referent of this discussion, will continue to be defined as simply the science of material culture.

*General Problems and Methodologies  
in the Reconstruction of Israelite Religion*

We shall begin with the limitations of the textual evidence. What we have known until recently about Israelite religion (like Israelite history) comes almost exclusively from the Hebrew Bible, which preserves our only roughly contemporary literary data. To be sure, the rich corpus of fourteenth- to thirteenth-century B.C. cuneiform texts found in the 1920s and 1930s at ancient Ugarit on the coast of Syria has given us a fascinating glimpse into the heretofore mysterious and exotic world of Canaanite religion in the centuries immediately preceding Israel's emergence. More recently, archaeology has brought to light texts that illuminate the religions of Israel's neighbors, such as the Aramaeans, Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites.<sup>2</sup> But for Israel proper, the Bible itself has remained almost our sole textual witness. And the Hebrew Bible, despite its abundance of descriptions of Israelite belief and practice—indeed, its seeming preoccupation with religion—is severely limited as a historical source for several reasons.

First, the Biblical texts in their present form are often later—sometimes centuries later—than the events they purport to describe. For instance, the priestly legislation in Leviticus describing the sacrificial system appears to be set in the Mosaic period, but modern scholarship has shown that the literary form is archaizing and that in fact the book derives mostly from the post-Exilic period (nearly a millennium later), when the returnees from Babylon were attempting to restore their national identity by reinstating earlier temple practices. If this is the *Sitz im Leben*, or cultural setting, then Leviticus, even though it contains some older material, may tell us very little about conditions during the period of the

Judges or the Monarchy, much less the Mosaic era. Even the genuinely historical elements contained in Joshua, Judges, and Samuel-Kings, in their present form, mostly date no further back than the tenth or ninth century B.C., and the final redaction is from the seventh to fourth centuries.

Second, the Biblical texts, in part because of their lateness, present an idealized scheme of religion that has somewhat arbitrarily harmonized several differing elements in the picture. For instance, we know that there never was a single monolithic religion of all Israel. Rather, there existed, often side by side, various strands, such as the partly Canaanite cult of the period of the Judges; the "official" religion of the Jerusalem temple and the royal cultus in the Monarchy; a "popular" religion in the countryside that was often highly syncretistic; the "ethical monotheism" of the classical prophets; the "Mosaic reform" of the Deuteronomistic school; and, finally, the post-Exilic priestly school with its religion of "ritual purity" (the foundation of later Judaism). Yet these various stages of religious development all tend to be combined in the final, idealized version that we have in the Hebrew Bible—almost as though Israelite religion had been handed down to Moses as a finished creation and did not undergo any subsequent change. Fortunately, the reworking and editing of the written sources has not completely obscured earlier materials that preserve alternate traditions, as we shall see.

The lateness of these texts is a fundamental limitation to our inquiry, not simply because the Biblical texts are secondary and to some degree artificial, but also because they are elitist. That is the result, in the first place, of the fact that the Hebrew Bible is a highly sophisticated literary creation which was written by and for the intelligentsia, who preserved, transmitted, and finally edited it into its present form. Such a document may reveal very little about the actual religion of the masses. For instance, we revere the lofty moral tone and the elegant prose of the book of Isaiah, but that does not address the question, if an individual prophet of that name had preached such sermons in the villages of Judah in the eighth century B.C., how would he have been understood and received? In the second place, the Hebrew Bible in its final redaction is almost exclusively the product of the Jerusalem priestly establishment and the royal court;

its Judaeen "Davidic theology" was not typical of other traditions, such as that of northern Israel, for instance, much less of popular religion. We must always remember that what we happen to have preserved in the Bible is but a small residue of a much larger corpus of ancient Hebrew literature. It is obvious that the dominant literary school was royalist, not populist; and by and large only that tradition survives—though it was certainly not fully representative of ancient Israelite religious thought and practice. (Linguists have pointed out that even the language of the Bible preserves not the typical spoken Hebrew of the period, but largely the Judahite dialect, especially as it was cultivated in learned circles in Jerusalem.) As we shall see, however, archaeology brings to light other materials, both artifactual and written, that provide a fascinating comparison as well as a glimpse into popular religion.

Finally, the Hebrew Bible is limited as a historical source for reconstructing ancient Israelite religion in that much of it originates in priestly circles. Such circles are naturally concerned with portraying normative religion rather than actual religious practice—i.e., orthodoxy, not orthopraxy, much less heterodoxy. Not only is the resultant picture of Israelite religion a somewhat artificial reconstruction, but it tends to distort and even to suppress dissident theological views and religious practices condemned as deviant (if the latter are mentioned at all). In short, the Bible tells us a great deal about what, in the opinion of the Yahwistic writers, the ancient Israelites *ought* to have believed and practiced, and very little about what they actually did. Again, archaeology's greatest contribution to the study of Israelite religion lies in its potential for looking at the other side of the coin, at folk religion and the views of the counter-culture.<sup>3</sup>

Until recently scholars have been largely confined to the Hebrew Bible as the original source of information concerning Israelite religion, and this has naturally shaped the predominant views. There are three principal schools of thought, ways in which scholars have approached the material.

For more than a century now, the Biblical literature has been subjected to a minute and exhaustive analysis, using the tools of various modern schools of literary criticism. The earliest, *higher criticism*, or source and

redaction criticism, analyzed larger blocks of literary material with regard to authorship, written documents or other sources, date of composition, and later editing. *Form criticism* explored the social setting and function of the various literary types and the history of their transmission. *Tradition history* sought the process of the earlier transmission of both oral and written traditions, that is, the larger units isolated by form criticism. *Textual* or *lower criticism* dealt with the handing down of the Biblical text once it had reached its penultimate and final written form, largely through analysis and comparison of differing versions. Finally, *redaction history* attempted to illuminate the intentions of the redactors, or editors, especially the final ones.<sup>4</sup>

For purposes of reconstructing Israelite religion, however, all these purely literary-critical analyses had limited value. Fragmentation of the texts became excessive, causing scholars to get lost in minutiae. Worse still, analysis became an end in itself. Even when scholarly consensus could be reached (which was rare), the result was often merely a history of the literature *about* the religion of Israel, rather than the actual history of that religion.

Biblical theology, though it may make use of some of the results of modern literary criticism (at least in its non-Fundamentalist versions), regards the Bible more as Scripture. Indeed, some scholars would argue that this approach is essentially the way the Biblical writers themselves used older material in seeking to systematize religious and moral teachings for the church and synagogue. In this view, Biblical theology is not a modern construct forced upon the ancient texts, for both its categories and its content derive from the Bible itself. For this reason, Biblical theology is usually distinguished from systematic or dogmatic theology (and implicitly regarded by some as more "normative").

The question remains, however, whether there *is* any real "theology" in the Hebrew Bible, at least in the modern sense that is usually implied, of unifying themes. The voluminous literature on Biblical theology in the last two hundred years reveals persistent attempts to revive this discipline with new emphases, but it also documents how controversial and ultimately frustrating this approach is. For instance, the main themes of the recent Biblical theology movement would seem to lend themselves to our

inquiry concerning religion—especially its characteristic emphasis on the theological dimensions of the Bible, the religious uniqueness and relevance of ancient Israel, and the notion of the revelation of God in history. But upon reflection it becomes clear that most so-called “Old Testament theologies” are works of Christian apologetics; in the postwar era, they have been largely American, Protestant reactions to the classic Liberal Protestant theology of the earlier twentieth century. It is not without significance that virtually no Jewish scholars, and very few Roman Catholic scholars, have ever attempted to write a Biblical theology. The use of the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture, or even simply as a source book for modern theology and morality, may be legitimate. But we must separate very strictly the normative-theological task, which is a value judgment, from the more objective and basic descriptive-historical task, which is all that we are concerned with here, and all that archaeology can contribute. Biblical theology, like the literary-critical approach, may provide insights to guide research, but it is limited in apprehending ancient Israelite beliefs, much less actual religious practices, on their own terms.<sup>5</sup> What we seek to grasp if at all possible, is the *Ding an Sich*, the essential phenomenon, in its original context. We must postpone the question “What *does* Israelite religion mean?” until we first attempt to ascertain “What *did* it mean?,” that is, “What *was* it?”

That leads us finally to a third approach, that of *Religionsgeschichte* or the “history of religions” school, the modern discipline of comparative religion. This school, which developed only in the late 19th century as archaeology brought to light parallel textual data from the Ancient Near East, adopts a basically historical approach. But it also attempts to move toward a true “science of religion” insofar as it employs empirical methods. While stressing, of course, the need for empathy on the part of the observer who seeks to grasp and to portray the essence of any ancient religion, this school focuses more on the need for objectivity, dispassionate analysis of the data, and comparative evaluation in the light of both other contemporary religions and modern ethnographic parallels. *Religionsgeschichte* may be characterized as phenomenological in that it concentrates on ancient religion itself, rather than on its modern relevance; and as functional, in that it emphasizes not just theoretical belief but the overall role

religion plays in actually shaping society. Obviously, the *Religionsgeschichte* approach is much more compatible with archaeology than are the schools of literary criticism and Biblical theology when archaeology, as I shall demonstrate, seeks to illuminate ancient Israelite religious practice in its material and sociological setting.<sup>6</sup> I have attempted, in this study, to characterize modern archaeology as a parallel way of looking at the reality portrayed in the textual evidence. What specifically can archaeology contribute to an understanding of ancient Israelite religion, that texts cannot?<sup>7</sup>

First, archaeology alone supplies the general cultural background against which Israelite religion can be realistically portrayed, in particular the larger context in ancient Canaanite religion and culture in the second and first millennia B. C. This was the crucible in which Israel was forged, which shaped her distinctive life and institutions, without which she simply cannot be adequately understood. Yet it is only due to archaeological discoveries in this century that we have begun to resurrect the long-lost world of Canaanite history and culture—especially in the spectacular find of the library of fourteenth- to thirteenth-century B. C. cuneiform mythological texts from Ugarit. More recently, the systematic excavation of dozens of late Bronze Age sites in Israel, Jordan, and Syria has brought to light the rich and cosmopolitan material culture of Canaan in the two or three centuries just preceding the emergence of Israel. As shown in the previous chapter the entity we call “Israel” did not appear suddenly, or in a vacuum, but was born out of a long and bitter struggle with Canaanite culture that affected every aspect of life. The conflict between Ba‘al and Yahweh was no sham battle, with the triumph of the God of Israel assured, but a crisis that threatened Israel’s faith and indeed her very existence for centuries.<sup>8</sup>

Second, archaeology is uniquely equipped to illuminate actual religious practices, rather than simply the theological beliefs described in the texts, though admittedly some texts also deal with practice. Here, as previously, we must distinguish between normative religion—or what the orthodox establishment sought to enforce in the name of religion—and popular or folk religion, what the majority of people in fact believed and practiced. They are rarely the same, nor can we necessarily extrapolate one from the

other. I have already suggested that the Biblical texts tend to supply an "official" version of Israelite religion; archaeology more often than not complements this highly idealized and homogenized picture by illuminating the varieties of actual religious practices, whether mentioned in the Bible or not. Religion is certainly a symbolic system, but textual references tend to abstract religion from the larger cultural context by intellectualizing it unduly. Modern archaeology focuses not chiefly on thought (which is, in any case, mostly beyond the reach of its techniques), but rather on the material correlates of individual human behavior, that is, the material remains that may reflect social and cultural patterning. In this area the texts fall short—particularly if they are elitist, as I have argued above. In short, if religion is what people do—not simply what theologians think—then archaeology can offer a complementary and perhaps occasionally superior view.

This leads to my third and final point: archaeology's unique contribution lies in its ability to illuminate certain aspects of the ancient cult, in particular popular piety and religious practice. Such folk religion may or may not correspond to the orthodox prescription preserved in the texts. But since it probably represents the majority opinion (or at least the prevalent expression in religious practice), it may be considered the true religion of ancient Israel—true, that is, from the phenomenological or functionalist perspective. I shall go on to discuss evidence that in a number of its features the so-called Israelite religion scarcely differed from the fertility religions of greater Canaan; and that in many quarters the cult of Yahweh was half pagan, not only in the period of the Judges but even until the end of the Monarchy.

*The Evidence from Archaeology:  
Material Remains of the Israelite Cult*

A summary of some specific archaeological discoveries may provide a supplementary or perhaps an alternate view. First, I shall survey discoveries of Israelite shrines, which consist of either large open-air cult places or small domestic and household installations. Until recently no open-air

sanctuaries had been discovered that were clearly identifiable as Israelite, although the numerous references in the Hebrew Bible to Canaanite "high places" suggested that we might expect to find parallel installations at Israelite sites of the twelfth and eleventh centuries B. C.

In 1981, Professor Amihai Mazar of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem followed up on the chance find of a magnificent bronze bull figurine and thus came to excavate a small isolated hilltop shrine five miles east of Dothan, in the heartland of Biblical Manasseh (see figure 15). The site featured only a large altar-like stone installation, with a few sherds of Iron I pottery and a tantalizing bronze fragment (figure 32). The "bull site," as it has come to be called, is almost certainly an Israelite open-air cult

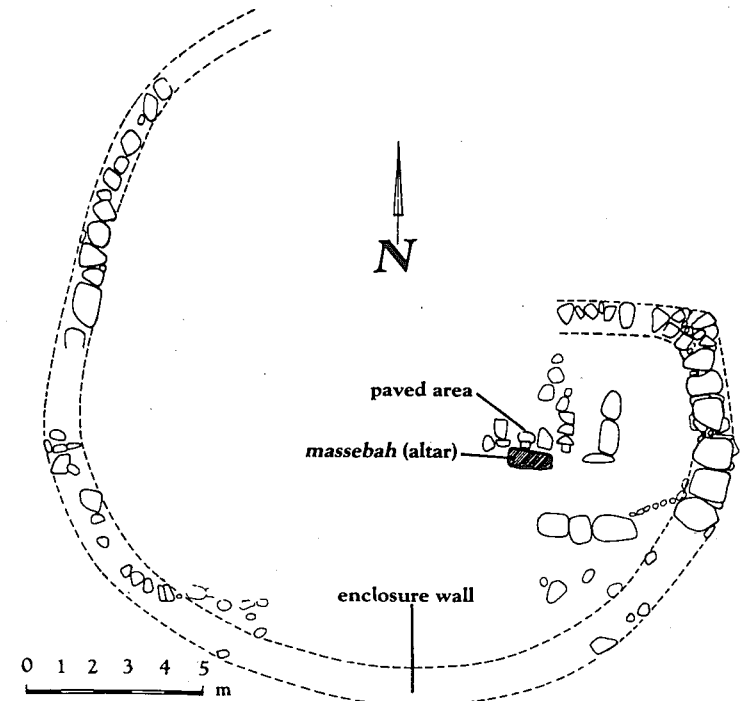


Figure 32. Plan of the "Bull Site" (twelfth century B. C.). From A. Mazar, *BASOR* 247, fig. 5.

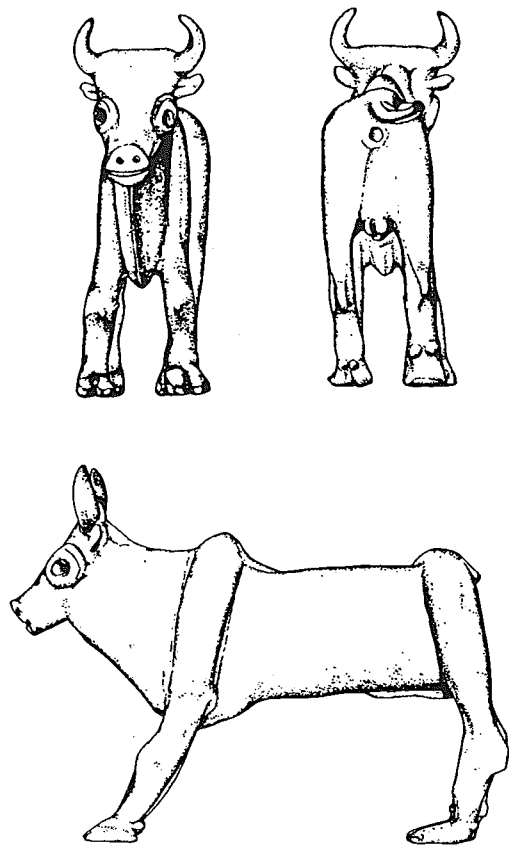


Figure 33. The bronze bull figurine from the early Israelite cult site.  
From A. Mazar, *BASOR* 247, fig. 2.

place, probably what the Hebrew Bible means by the phrase *bāmāb*, or Canaanite-style “high place.” As for the bull figurine itself (figure 33), it is irresistible to connect this with the worship of the god El, head of the Canaanite pantheon at Ugarit, whose principal epithet is “Bull” because of his fertility imagery (figure 34). This is the same El who appears in the oldest traditions in the Hebrew Bible (one of the two names for



Figure 34. Bronze statuettes of El, the chief Canaanite deity.

God, the other being Yahweh). He is seen especially in primitive name formulae in the patriarchal narratives, such as El-*olām*, “El, the Eternal One”; El-*shadday*, “El, the Mountain One”; El-*elohê-Israel*, “El, the god of Israel”; and the like. The discovery of the bull shrine lends strong support to the view of Prof. Frank Cross of Harvard, probably our foremost historian of early Israelite religion, that in the formative period Israelite Yahweh was still identified with El, the old high god of Canaan. As though to confirm that, the new Israelite bronze bull is almost identical to one excavated by Yadin some years ago at Hazor, from a Late Bronze Age Canaanite context some hundred to two hundred years earlier.<sup>9</sup>

By coincidence, the same year as the “bull site” was found, a second open-air shrine turned up, excavated (1982–84) by Adam Zertal of the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University. This shrine, located on Mt. Ebal just northwest of the Shechem pass, on the highest peak in northern Samaria, is dated by pottery fragments to the early Israelite (Iron I) period, ca. 1225–1100 B.C. The principal installation is a large, rectangular stone altar, approximately twenty-five by thirty feet, reached by an ascending ramp surrounded by a *temenos* (or enclosure wall) (figure 35).

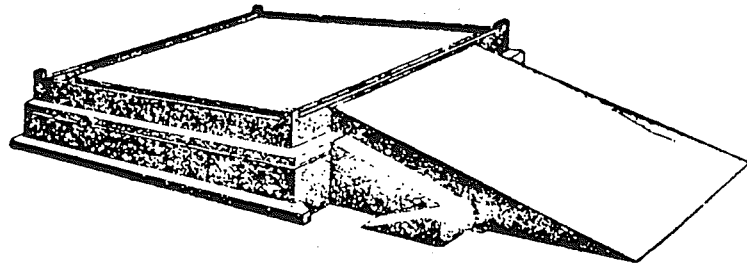


Figure 35. Schematic plan of the Mt. Ebal altar. From A. Zertal, *BAR* II, no. 1:36.

Around the altar, and also under it (from an earlier phase), were small circular stone installations with quantities of burnt animal bones—mostly sheep, goat, young bulls, and fallow deer—evidently the remains of sacrificial offerings. Outside the altar there were other stone circles, some similar, but others with pottery and no burnt bones or ashes (figure 36). The pottery included not only the distinctive collar-rim store jars, but also jugs, chalices, a bit of common domestic pottery, and a number of small handmade ritual or votive vessels. Not surprisingly, the excavator has suggested that this late thirteenth- early twelfth-century B.C. installation may be the very altar built on Mt. Ebal by Joshua, which is described in Joshua 8:30–35 as having been built of unhewn stones and featuring burnt offerings to Yahweh. If this interpretation is

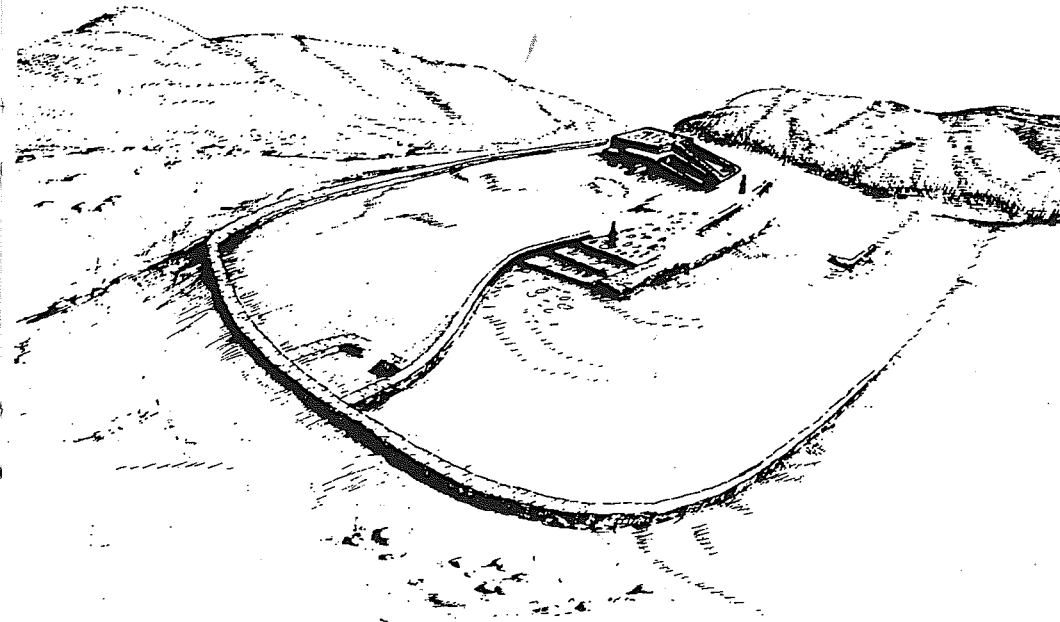


Figure 36. Overall plan of the Mt. Ebal sanctuary. From A. Zertal, *BAR* II, no. 1:35.

confirmed by more evidence, it will be a rare case of archaeology having turned up a long-lost cultic installation specifically mentioned in the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

Another possible case would be the ninth-century B.C. “high place” excavated in the 1970s by Avraham Biran at Tel Dan. According to 1 Kings 12:25–31, when Jeroboam seceded from Judah and the Jerusalem temple upon Solomon’s death, he established a new center for the separate kingdom of Israel at Dan, where he set up a rival sanctuary with a golden calf and “made houses on high places.” The latter expression, *beth bāmôt*, is enigmatic; but it may refer to some sort of structure built atop a *bāmāh*, i.e., on a platform or Canaanite-style high place of the sort mentioned in several Biblical passages. The Dan structure is a large, magnificent stone platform approximately sixty feet square, approached by a flight of



steps (figure 37). It may be interpreted as simply an open-air high place or platform, or alternatively as the foundation for either a tabernacle structure or a more permanent building, such as a temple. If the latter, then we may actually have located Jeroboam's "house [i.e., temple] on a high place." The cultic nature of the Dan structure is confirmed by finds made in the vicinity, including a miniature horned altar, a seven-spouted oil lamp, offering stands, bronze shovels and implements, human figurines, and an olive pressing installation similar to those found in other temple or shrine precincts (see figure 38 and below).<sup>11</sup>

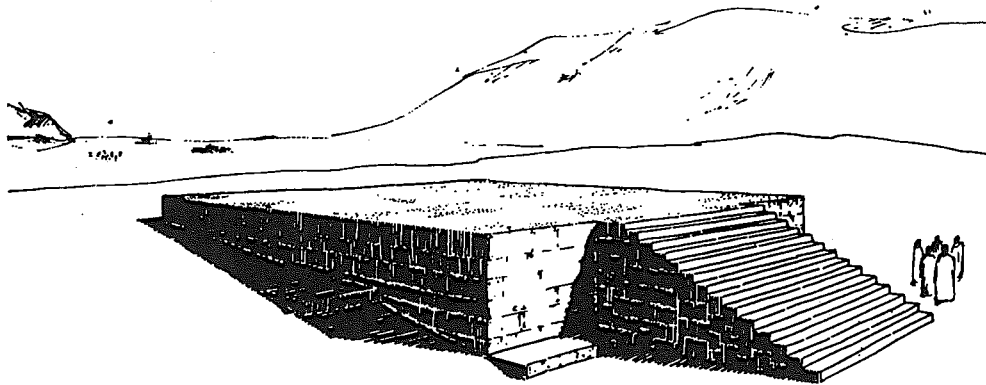


Figure 37. The "high place" at Dan (ninth century B.C.). From *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. I, p. 319.

We now have a number of smaller Israelite domestic area or household shrines, all intramural and perhaps for private or familial worship. Some have been known for some time, but only recently have they been correctly understood. A group of artifacts discovered in the 1930s in the courtyard of Building 2081 of Stratum VA at Megiddo from the time of Solomon, includes two stone horned altars, ceramic cultic stands, chalices, and other vessels. This is almost certainly an Israelite household shrine, where animal, other food and drink, and perhaps incense offerings were made.<sup>12</sup> At nearby Ta'anach, a contemporary cult installation was

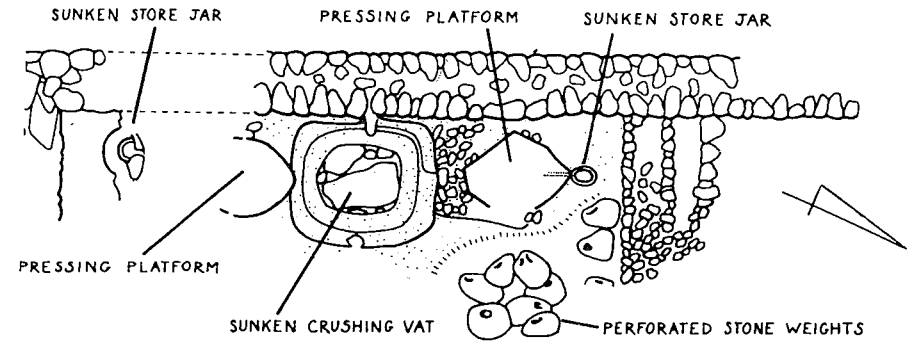


Figure 38. Plan of the olive-pressing installation in the temple precincts at Dan (ninth century B.C.?). From L. A. Stager and S. R. Wolff, *BASOR* 243, fig. 1.

found in the domestic quarter, with spectacular finds that are only now beginning to be fully appreciated. In the 1960s Paul W. Lapp excavated a "Cultic Structure," a tenth-century B.C. two-room building, whose main feature was another basin or oil press, like that at Dan (figure 39). From this building also came clear cultic artifacts, such as a mold for casting Asherah or Astarte Mother-Goddess figurines (see below); some sixty loom weights, evidence of weaving in temple precincts, such as that attested elsewhere and also in the Bible (cf. II Kings 23:7); and 140 sheep and goat astragali (knuckle bones), often found in cultic contexts. The most astonishing find was a large, square terra-cotta offering stand, closely resembling one found sixty years earlier by German excavators on the same spot. It features not only the sun disc and the sacred tree of life on the upper registers, but also a pair of lionesses; on the lower registers there are scenes of human-headed lionesses, and also a nude female grasping two lionesses by the ears (figure 40).<sup>13</sup>

Few scholars have commented on the remarkable iconography of this Israelite offering stand. But there is growing evidence that the female figure is none other than the Mother Goddess Asherah, consort of El and the great goddess of sex and fertility in Canaan, one of whose principal epithets was "the Lion Lady." In Egypt, she is often portrayed nude, astride a lion (figure 41). From Palestine, we have several twelfth- or

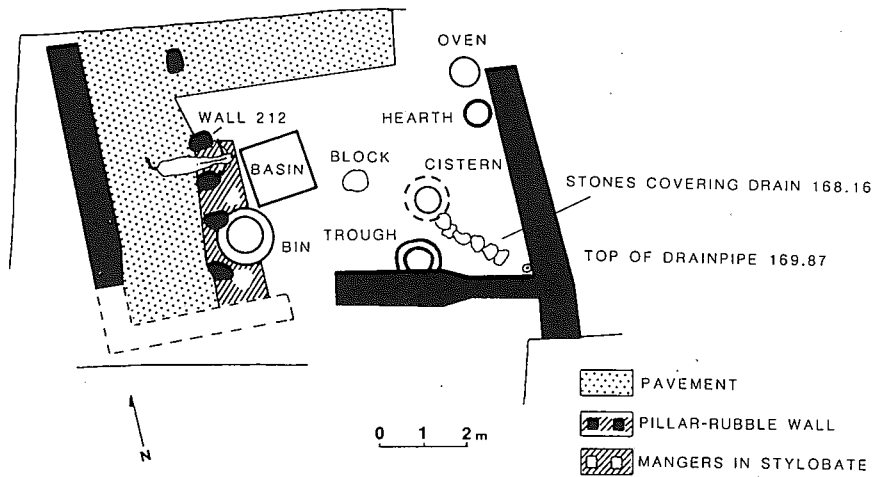


Figure 39. Plan of the Ta'anach "Cultic Structure" (tenth century B.C.).  
From P. W. Lapp, *BASOR* 173, fig. 12.

eleventh-century B.C. arrowheads, inscribed with the names of archers dedicated to "the Lion Lady." On the altar of an early Iron I temple at Jaffa there was found the perfectly preserved skull of a lioness, and at contemporary temples at nearby Tell Qasile several lion-headed masks and *rhyta* (drinking vessels) turned up. There is no doubt in my mind that just as Canaanite El could be worshipped in early Israel, so could his consort Asherah, often in the guise of Hathor or the "Lion Lady." Even more striking evidence from the period of the divided Monarchy will be discussed below.<sup>14</sup>

Another tenth-century B.C. Israelite domestic shrine was found at Tell el-Far'ah (N.), Biblical Tirzah, by the late Père Roland de Vaux in the 1950s. This is a small structure near the city gate, again featuring an oil pressing installation. This was not properly understood until 1981, when a brilliant article by Lawrence Stager and Samuel Wolff brought together all the above evidence and demonstrated that a particularly fine quality of olive oil for cultic use was often manufactured right in temple precincts, precisely as suggested in several Biblical passages.<sup>15</sup>

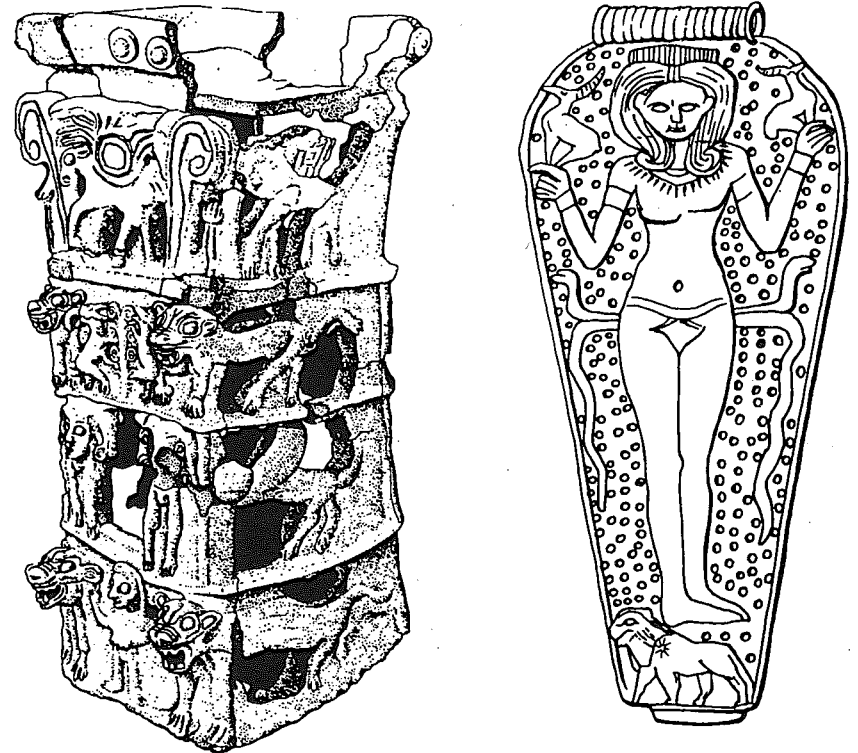


Figure 40. The Ta'anach ceramic offering stand (tenth century B.C.). From K. Galling, ed., *Biblisches Realexicon*, 2d edition, fig. 45.  
Figure 41. Gold plaque portraying a nude Asherah astride a lion; the goddess has the typical Hathor-wig and grasps an ibex (often a lotus or snake) in each hand (Late Bronze Age, fourteenth-thirteenth century B.C.). From O. Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal*, fig. 118.

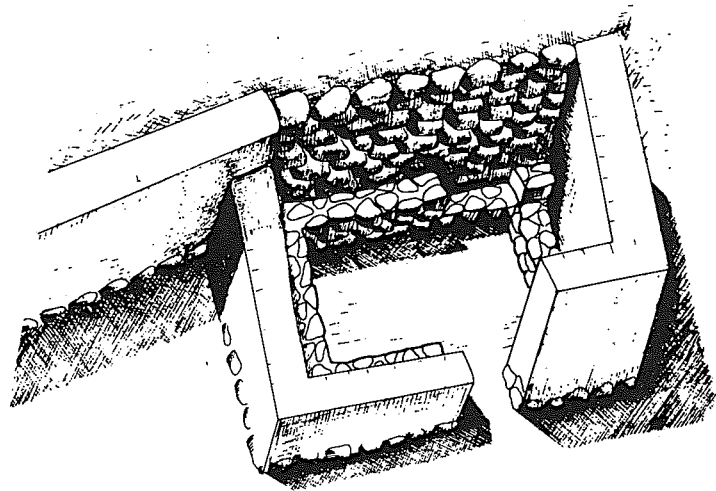


Figure 42. Plan of "Cult Room 49" at Lachish (tenth century B.C.).  
From Y. Aharoni et al., *Lachish V*, fig. 7.

Finally, in the 1960s, Yohanan Aharoni discovered at Judean Lachish a tenth-century B.C. Israelite shrine, Cult Room 49. This small single-room structure featured low benches for offerings around three walls. The contents included several small horned altars, ceramic stands, libation bowls, and other ceramic vessels (figure 42). Here we have another Israelite domestic or private cult installation, in which food or drink offerings were presented.<sup>16</sup>

It may be significant that all the public open-air or domestic-household shrines discovered thus far in Israel are early—twelfth- to tenth-century B.C., that is, dating only down to the time of the early Monarchy. According to the Biblical tradition, worship was then centralized in Jerusalem by Solomon, in connection with the construction of the great Temple and the establishment of the Jerusalem priesthood under royal patronage. While this policy of centralization was not universally enforced (as determined from archaeological discoveries which will be discussed below), the

relative lack of cult installations does suggest that many local shrines were suppressed in the late tenth century B.C. and thereafter.

The famous Solomonic Temple in Jerusalem is described in copious detail in 1 Kings 6–7, as well as in Ezekiel's dream of the restored Temple (Ezekiel 40–43). Yet not a trace of this splendid building has been turned up in a century and a half of concentrated archaeological work in Jerusalem. Nor is it ever likely to, since the First Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587–86 B.C., and later razed to bedrock by Roman engineers for the construction of the Second Temple in Herodian times. And of course there is no possibility of scientific investigation at what is now the site of the Dome of the Rock and the al-Aqsa mosques—the third holiest shrine of Islam and an area proscribed for Orthodox Jews until the coming of the Messiah. Nonetheless, by studying archaeological discoveries at other sites, we can illustrate many details of the architectural plan and furnishings of the Solomonic Temple described in the Bible (cf. chapter 3).

Another significant shrine was discovered by the late Yohanan Aharoni during excavations of a small Israelite fortress at Arad, in the Negev desert northeast of Beersheba (1962–69). Here he found in Stratum XI a typical Solomonic casemate wall system enclosing an area whose principal architectural feature was a bipartite (two-room) temple. This is generally regarded as the only Israelite temple ever found by archaeologists. The plan goes back to local Canaanite prototypes of the early to mid-second millennium B.C., of which we now have several examples. The outer room at Arad was really a large open courtyard featuring a free-standing stone and mudbrick altar, around which were found burnt animal bones. Also found at the foot of the altar (in later Stratum X) were two shallow offering plates inscribed with the letters *qof kaf*, probably an abbreviation for *qōdes' kōhānīm*, "set apart for the priests."

The inner room (the *bekhal* of the Solomonic temple) had low benches for offerings around the walls and a niche at the back wall, reached by three steps. This niche, which was barely large enough to accommodate one person, differed from the inner chamber or "Holy of Holies" in the Solomonic temple, the *devîr* (where the High Priest entered once a year), by being much more accessible to the worshippers. Flanking this niche

at the entrance were two small stone altars with traces of an organic, incense-like substance, and at the back wall there was a smoothed stone stela or monolith. This temple continued in use, with certain alterations, into Stratum VIII of the late eighth century B. C., when it was abolished, perhaps in the well-known reforms of King Hezekiah, who attempted to reestablish centralized worship in Jerusalem.

The Arad temple has been surrounded by controversy from the beginning, partly because of questions of date and interpretation arising from inadequate excavation and publication. But there is more to it than that. A number of prominent archaeologists and Bible scholars have tried to minimize the structure's importance, regarding it as merely a local shrine (i.e., neither a real temple nor comparable to the plan of the Solomonic temple) or even denying that it is Israelite. Aharoni himself compared the Arad structure to the descriptions of the Biblical tabernacle, rather than to the Solomonic temple. But when all the stratigraphic difficulties, theological presuppositions, and semantic confusions of previous discussions are put aside, it is evident that we have at Arad a full-fledged local Israelite temple. It functioned in the tenth through eighth centuries B. C. with its own priesthood and sacrificial offering system—despite the Deuteronomistic historian's proscription of such temples, and despite the fact that they were anathema to reforming kings and prophets.<sup>17</sup>

A more recent and even more astonishing find is the small Israelite sanctuary at Kuntillet 'Ajrūd, excavated by Ze'ev Meshel (1976–78). This is an eighth-century B. C. caravanserai, or stopover station, near springs on the trade routes through the eastern Sinai desert, about halfway between the oasis at Kadesh-barnea and the gulf of Eilat (figure 43). The single hilltop structure is a composite fort-hostel, with shelter and provisions for travelers. At the entrance is a two-room structure with plastered benches and side repositories, evidently a small sanctuary (figure 44). Painted on the walls here and elsewhere were numerous Hebrew inscriptions, one of the largest collections ever found anywhere. Few have yet been published, but one read "May Yahweh favor." Another, however, read "Blessed by Ba'al in the day ——— [illegible] the name of El in the day ———," with Canaanite Ba'al and El in parallelism. A large stone

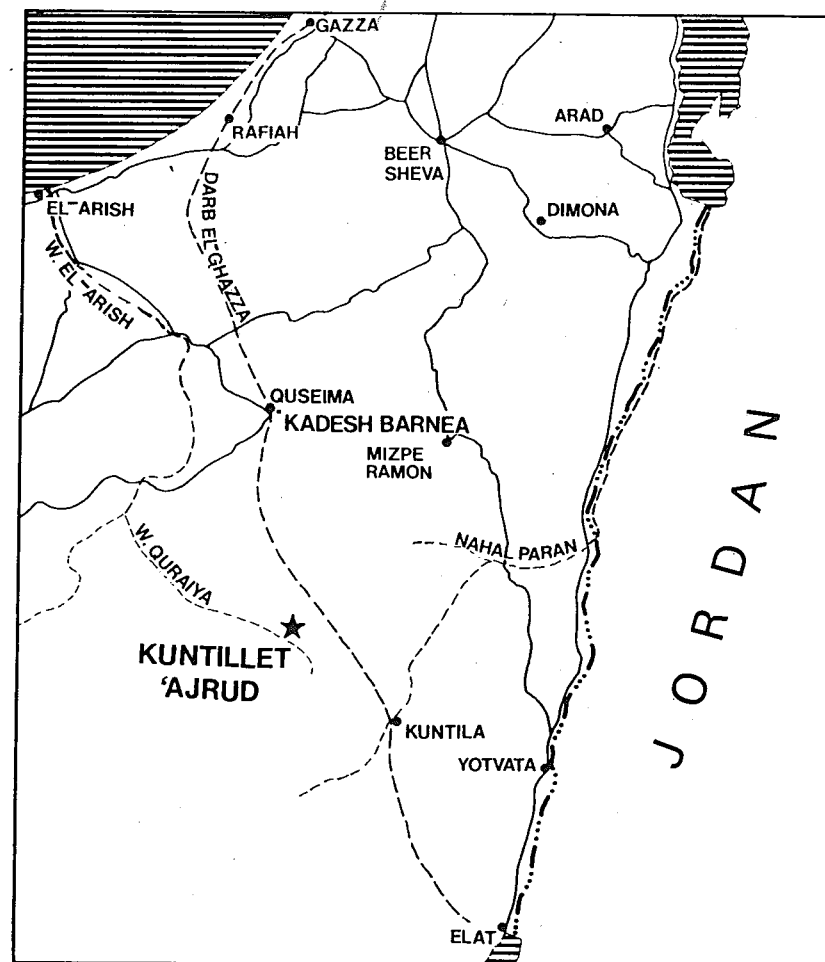


Figure 43. Map showing the location of Kuntillet 'Ajrūd (Horvat Teiman).  
From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 1.

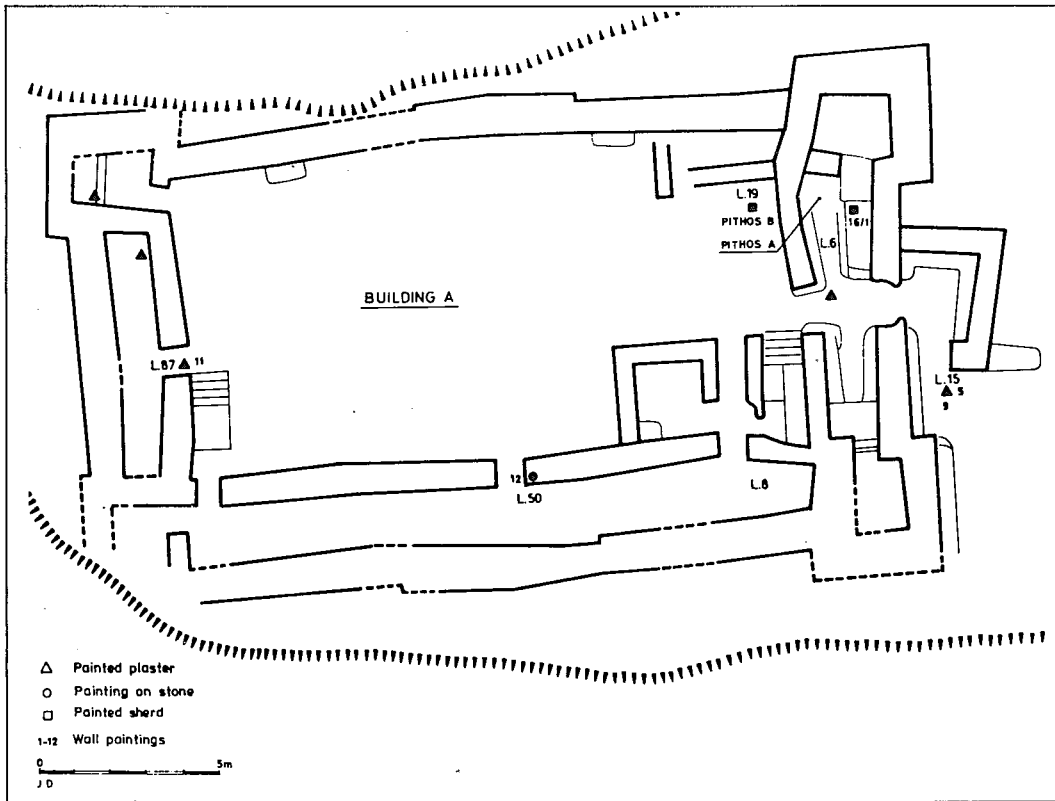


Figure 44. Plan of the fort at Kuntillet 'Ajrûd. From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 2.

votive bowl reads "Belonging to 'Ovadyau, son of 'Adnah. May he be blessed by Yahweh."<sup>18</sup>

These hints of syncretism in Israelite worship are mild, however, compared to the scenes painted on a number of large store jars. First, there are familiar Phoenician motifs such as the cow suckling her calf, the sacred tree of life, and lions—all common enough themes in Israelite iconography, as witnessed by ivory carvings and seals of the period (figure 45). There is also a strange processional scene showing worshippers approach-

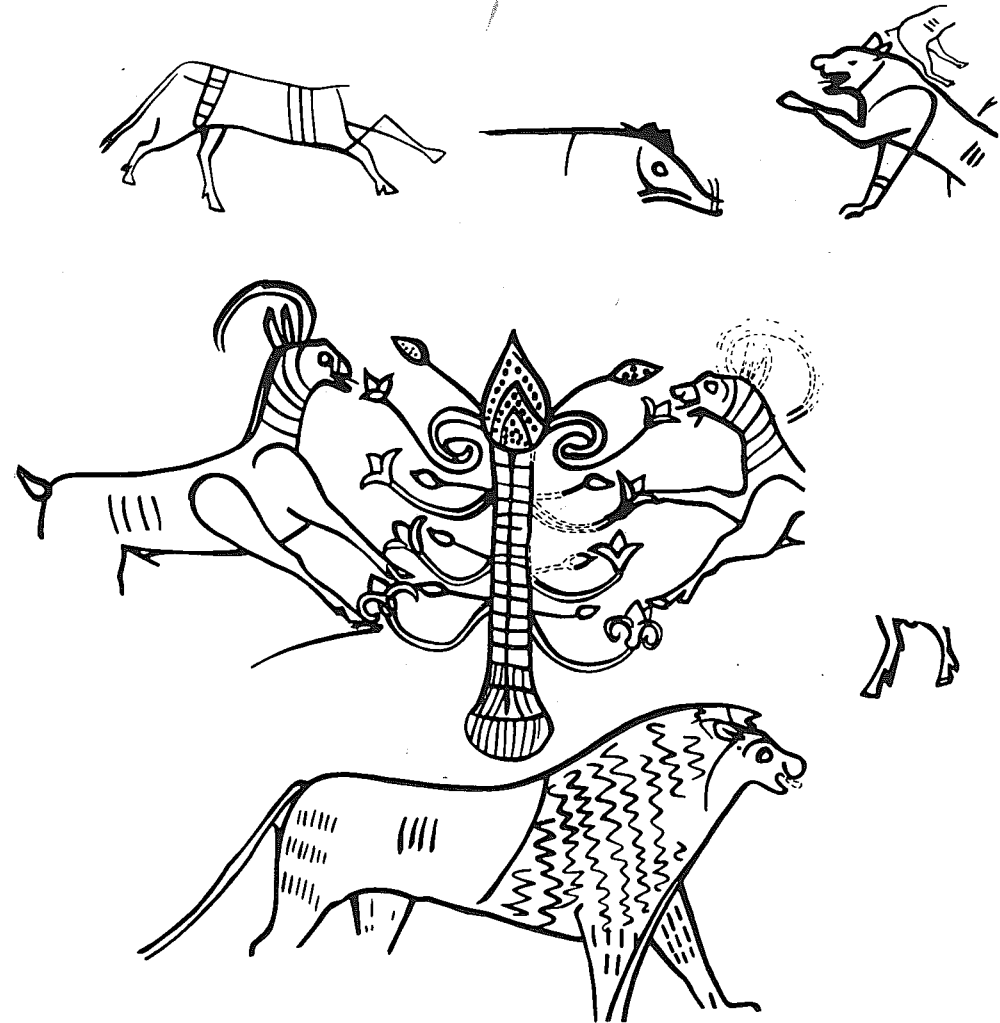


Figure 45. Scenes painted on one of the large 'Ajrûd storejars. From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 4.

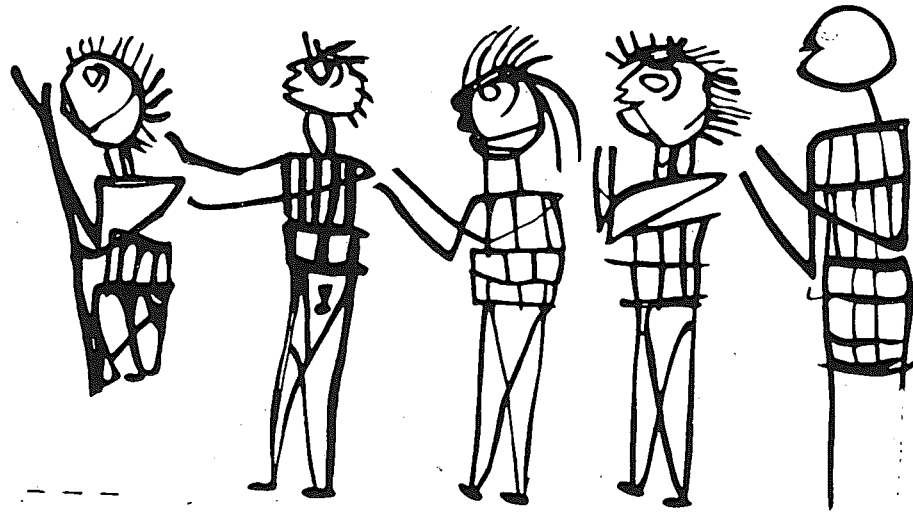


Figure 46. The 'Ajrûd processional scene. From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 6.

ing a deity, unfortunately not fully preserved on a broken store jar (figure 46). But the *pièce de résistance* is the scene on one large store jar which features, among other things, two representations of the Egyptian ithyphallic dwarf-god Bes, patron of music and dancing, guardian of the other gods, and in general an apotropaic or "good luck" deity. At the upper right there is a seated, half-nude female figure, holding a stringed lyre in her outstretched arms (figure 47). Who is she, our "Lady of 'Ajrûd"? The Hebrew inscription running across the top of the scene, which is perfectly legible, is another blessing formula, ending with the phrase "I bless you by Yahweh our guardian [or Yahweh of Samaria] and by his Asherah." In a recent article (cited below) I have pointed out that the female figure's chair is really a stylized lion-throne of the type often associated with kings and deities of the ancient Near East (figure 48) and, furthermore, that there are very close parallels to such seated female deities at Canaanite Ugarit (figure 49). Thus we should read the 'Ajrûd inscription literally: this actually is a representation of the Canaanite goddess, explicitly iden-



Figure 47. Hebrew inscription and scene on an 'Ajrûd storejar. From Z. Meshel, *Kuntillet 'Ajrûd*, fig. 12.

tified as Asherah, and possibly thought of as the consort of Yahweh, the god of Israel!

Now in the Ugaritic texts, Asherah is the consort of El, the head of the pantheon; she is a symbol of sex and fertility, the great "Mother Goddess" of Canaan. The term *asherah* occurs some forty times in the Hebrew Bible. There, however, the writers have in most occurrences softened its impact by construing the term not as the personal name of a Canaanite deity, but rather as merely a cult symbol—a wooden pole (phallic sym-

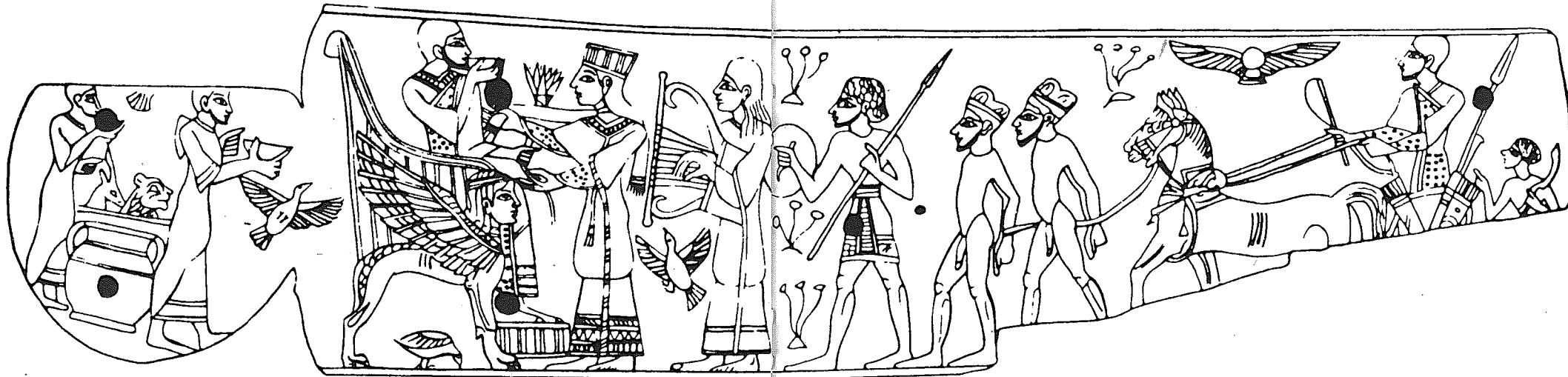


Figure 48. A Megiddo carved ivory panel with a processional before a lion-throne

(thirteenth-twelfth century B.C.). From G. Loud, *The Megiddo Ivories*, Plate 4:2b.

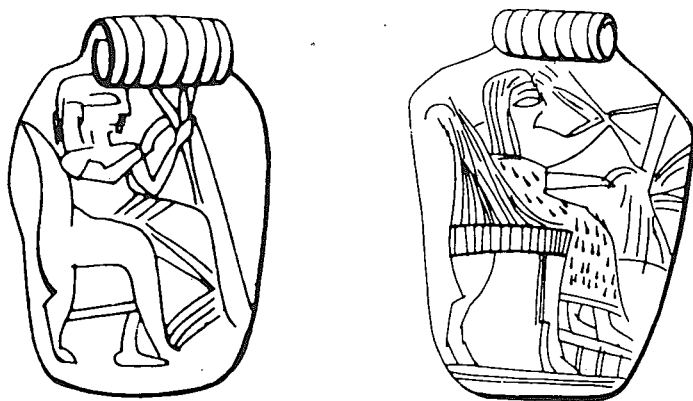


Figure 49. Two electrum pendants from Ugarit, showing a female deity sitting on a stylized lion-throne (fourteenth century B.C.). From C. F. A. Schaeffer, *Ugaritica* I, figs. 149:1, 4.

bol?) that the Israelites are said to have cut down and burnt as an abomination. Yet there are several texts mentioning "Ba'al and Asherah," in which the reference can only be to the Canaanite goddess herself. There are admissions in such passages as 2 Kings 21:7 and 23:7 that there were furnishings for Asherah in use even in the temple in Jerusalem. But the absence of extra-Biblical texts or archaeological evidence referring unequivocally to the goddess Asherah has rendered these texts without context, and therefore suspicious. My recent article concluded that

The "silence" regarding Asherah as the consort of Yahweh, successor to Canaanite El, may now be understood as the result of the near-total suppression of the cult by the eighth- to sixth-century reformers. As a result, references to "Asherah," while not actually expunged from the consonantal text of the OT, were misunderstood by later editors or reinterpreted to suggest merely the shadowy image of the goddess. In this "innocent deception," they were followed by the translators of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the

Targumim, and the King James and most other modern versions, including the Revised Standard. Indeed, by the time of the Mishna the original significance of the name "Asherah" had probably been forgotten, not to be recovered until the goddess emerged again in the texts recovered from Ugarit. Yet the very fact of the necessity for reform in ancient Israel reminds us that the worship of Asherah, the Mother Goddess, sometimes personified as the consort of Yahweh, was popular until the end of the Monarchy. The archaeological record has preserved for us an alternate version of events as portrayed in the received text—parallel, but not necessarily contradictory. Indeed, 'Ajrûd and el-Qôm enhance our appreciation of the prophetic message, for they provide for the first time a milieu in which we may understand just how crucial a threat the worship of the Canaanite fertility goddesses actually was.<sup>19</sup>

My interpretation of the 'Ajrûd evidence is, of course, somewhat controversial. All along Israeli scholars have been uncomfortable and have therefore taken a "minimalist" position, which in my opinion robs this rich material of its full significance. (Indeed, the scene on the store jar was not even published, or displayed clearly in the Israel Museum for a very long time.) Biblical scholars in Europe and America are only now beginning to confront the 'Ajrûd evidence, and they too seem reluctant to face the clear implication: that here at 'Ajrûd—far from the watchful eyes of the Jerusalem religious establishment and brought to light only by the accident of archaeological discovery—we have a half-pagan Israelite temple, where both Ba'al and Asherah could be worshipped alongside Yahweh.<sup>20</sup>

The new 'Ajrûd evidence really only confirms what was suspected fifteen years ago. In 1970 I published a badly defaced Hebrew inscription from an eighth-century B. C. Judean tomb that I had excavated at Kh. el-Qôm, west of Hebron. Although at the time only a handful of such inscriptions were known, it attracted little attention. Recently, however, thanks to the Asherah reference at 'Ajrûd, new meaning can be drawn from a previously misunderstood phrase in line three of the el-Qôm inscription (figure 50). There is today growing scholarly consensus that the phrase, "Blessed be 'Uriyahu by Yahweh, and from his enemies save him by his Asherah" must be interpreted exactly as at 'Ajrûd. Whether one accepts that these texts refer to the goddess herself, it is clear that someone or something

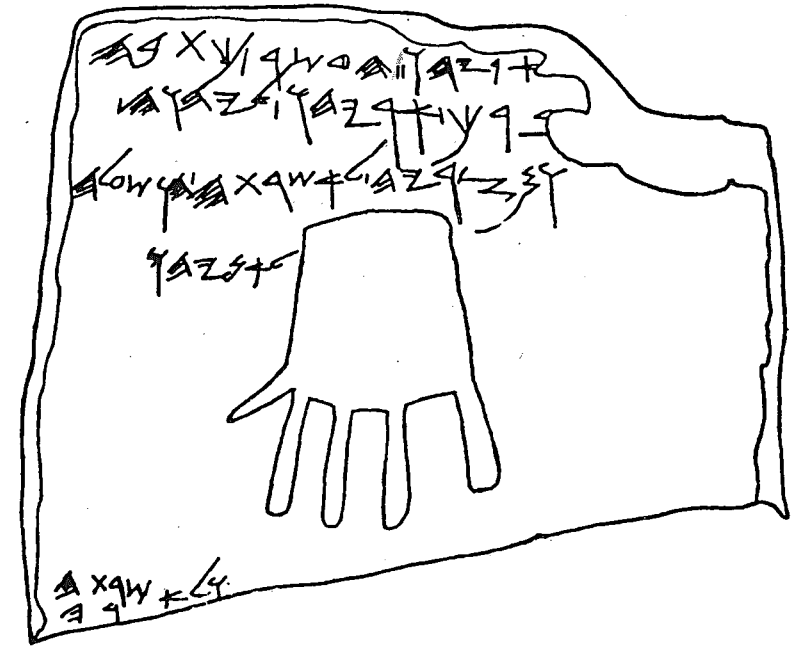


Figure 50. Inscription III from Kh. el-Qôm (eighth century B. C.).  
From A. Lemaire, *Revue biblique* 84, fig. 1.

called "asherah" could be invoked in ancient Israel as an agent of blessing, regularly and without embarrassment.<sup>21</sup> Yet without data obtained by modern archaeology, we would never have known that. The Bible had suppressed the evidence.

In the study of Israelite shrines and temples, analysis of religious practice is largely limited to extrapolation from the basic architectural plan. But there is other archaeological evidence, perhaps more direct, in the furnishings and equipment, i.e., the religious paraphernalia found in these and other Israelite cultic contexts. Although some of this evidence has long been known, it has rarely been put together, much less adequately interpreted as reflecting Israelite religious practice. Here I can barely suggest the range and richness of this evidence.



I have already mentioned the small horned altars discovered at certain domestic shrines. There are, however, many other similar examples—so many that it is easy to conclude that small horned altars were common at Israelite sites from the tenth to the seventh century B.C. (figure 51). Horned altars are, in fact, mentioned in several Biblical texts, but the small altars previously unearthed did nothing to illuminate the peculiar Biblical descriptions of people “clinging to the horns of an altar” for safety. These texts made little sense until the first full-sized altar turned up, just a few years ago, during Aharoni’s excavations at Beersheba (figure 52). It measures approximately six feet square, and is constructed of

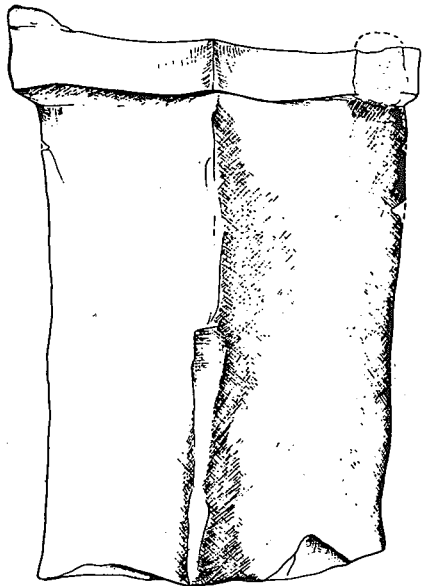


Figure 51. Small limestone “horned altar” from “Cult Room 49” at Lachish (tenth century B.C.). From Y. Aharoni, *Lachish V, The Sanctuary and Residency*, Plate 43:7.

well-dressed masonry with distinct carved horns at the four corners. This was the first archaeological confirmation of Biblical references to the legal custom by which people could claim sanctuary by “clinging to the horns” of a large altar, as Adonijah did in David’s sanctuary or as the Israelites are said to have done earlier in the “cities of refuge.” The masonry blocks of the Beersheba altar were actually found dismantled and incorporated into the rubble fill of a later building. As Aharoni suggested quite plausibly, the deliberate destruction of the Beersheba altar was possibly the work of King Hezekiah in the late eighth century B.C., among whose reform measures was an attempt to abolish the local sanctuaries, which



DAN COLE

Figure 52. The large “horned altar” from Beersheba, as reassembled (eighth or seventh century B.C.). From *BAR II*, no. 1:38.

had undoubtedly become partly pagan. Of Hezekiah it was said, "He removed the high places, and broke the pillars, and cut down the Asherah" (2 Kings 18:4).<sup>22</sup>

In addition to the evidence for monumental or other "horned" altars in ancient Israel, we also know of miniature limestone household altars, almost certainly for incense, some elaborately decorated. These are mostly rather late in date, beginning in the seventh century B. C. or so, and continuing in use in Israelite circles through at least the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

We have looked only briefly at the ceramic stands, of which we now have numerous Israelite examples (figure 53). These have usually been called "incense stands" because of the fenestrated column, through whose

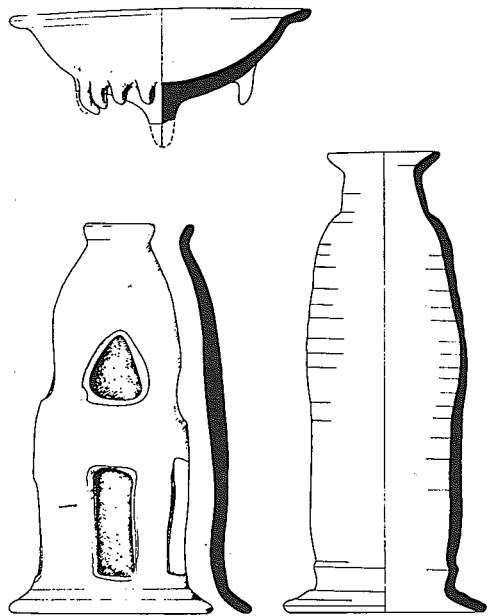


Figure 53. Ceramic cult stands and libation bowls from "Cult Room 49" at Lachish (tenth century B. C.). From Y. Aharoni, *Lachish V: The Sanctuary and the Residence*, plates 43:1-4.

openings one could imagine the smoke of incense wafting. Practically speaking, however, the stands are not really suitable for incense. A better interpretation would be that these are stands for libation offerings, as indeed the attached but removable bowls on some examples attest. Presumably, then, the stands were used for presenting wine, oil, or other liquid offerings, as prescribed in many Biblical passages. (They could, of course, be used for dry food offerings as well.) The fenestrations on other stands suggest not smoke vents but windows, and these stands may therefore belong to a class of "temple models" (see below), some of which are adorned with fantastic bas-reliefs of serpents, lions, the tree of life, and other symbols of the deities. The Ta'anach stand discussed above is certainly of this type (though of course the top of such a stand could also be used for gifts of food, drink, or even incense). Still other stands may be stylized versions of the familiar tree of life, one of the oldest and most widespread motifs in ancient Near Eastern art and iconography. In any case, it is clear that all these supposedly Israelite cult stands are borrowed, almost without alteration, from much older, pre-Israelite prototypes, of which we now have many examples; and further that they are mostly connected with the food and drink offerings typical of the Canaanite fertility cults.<sup>23</sup>

That there also existed a separate class of temple models, however, is now seen in a number of unpublished or recently published terra-cotta examples (figure 54). Some of these feature tree-of-life columns, doves, or lionesses (the latter, symbols connected with the goddess Asherah). A number of these house or temple models come from Trans-Jordan and are probably Moabite or Edomite. But recently an indisputably Israelite example from the ninth century B. C. was published from Tell el-Far'ah, Biblical Tirzah, which for a brief time was the capital of northern Israel. These temple models or miniature "houses of the gods" were no doubt household shrines, but exactly how they functioned we do not know.<sup>24</sup>

We come now to an intriguing class of "magic" vessels, small ceramic artifacts that are almost certainly cultic, but whose exact use is unknown. We have a number of ceramic "rattles," which may of course be only toys, but alternatively may have been used in the musical ceremonies that are well attested in both the Canaanite and Israelite cult. More interesting,

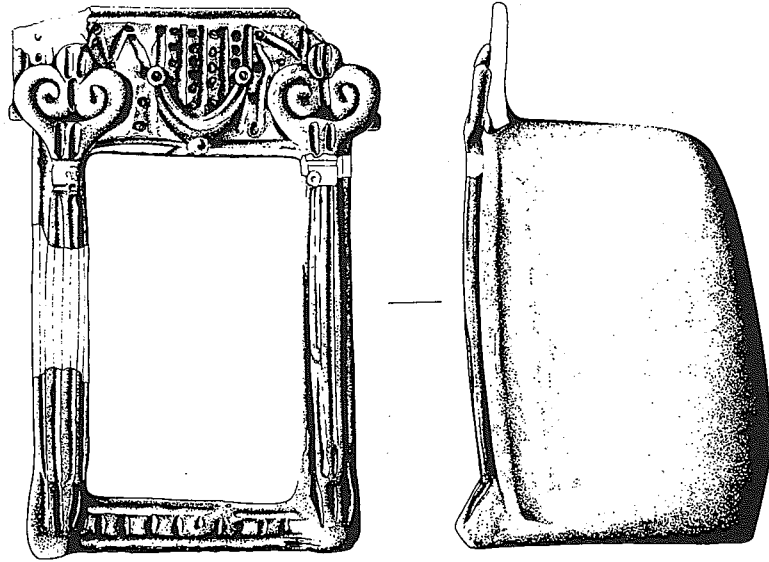


Figure 54. Terra-cotta temple model from (ca. Tell el-Far'ah (N.) ninth century B.C.). From A. Chambon, *Tel el-Far'ah 1: L'Age du Fer*, plate 66.

but also more mysterious, are the *kernoi*, or "trick vessels." These are small bowls that have a hollow rim, to which are attached one or more pouring spouts, usually in the shape of animal heads but sometimes models of pomegranates or other fruits (figure 55). These amusing vessels can be manipulated so as to pour liquids in various ways, but they are surely not simply toys and must have been used for libation offerings. Again, the several Israelite examples we have from the tenth to eighth centuries B.C. are derived from "foreign" prototypes—in this case twelfth- and eleventh-century B.C. Philistine examples. Behind these, in turn, lies a Cypriot tradition—not surprising since the Philistines were one of the groups of Sea Peoples who immigrated to the coast of Palestine in the early Iron Age, where they came into contact with the Israelites. Just why these *kernoi* were adopted by the Israelites, or how they functioned in the Israelite cult, is uncertain.<sup>25</sup>

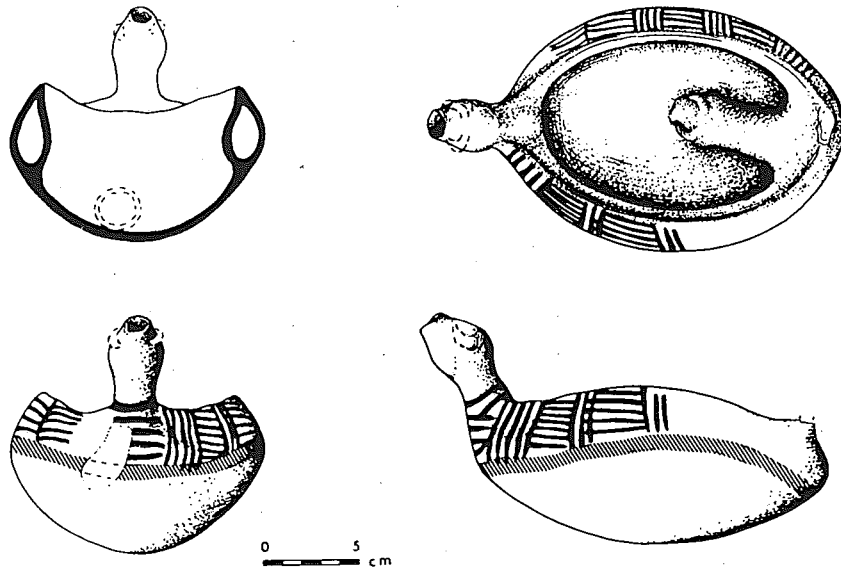
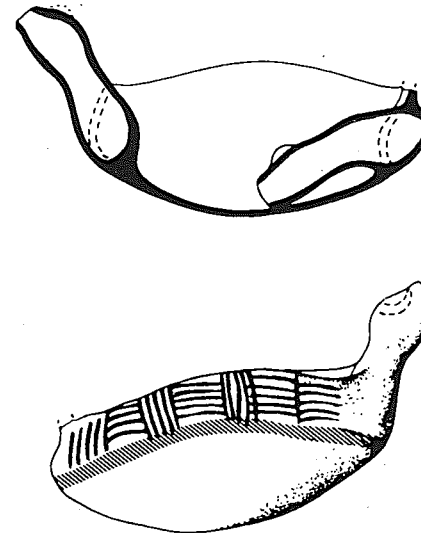


Figure 55. *Kernoi* from Tell Qasile (twelfth-eleventh century B.C.).



From A. Mazar, *Excavations at Tel Qasile, Part I*, fig. 39.

Among the most common finds at Israelite sites are small terra-cotta figurines, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic. The representations of animals (figure 56) are mostly large quadrupeds, especially horses and young bulls, but one also finds smaller animals, in one case a delightful three-legged chicken. The horses are often shown with a bridle and sad-

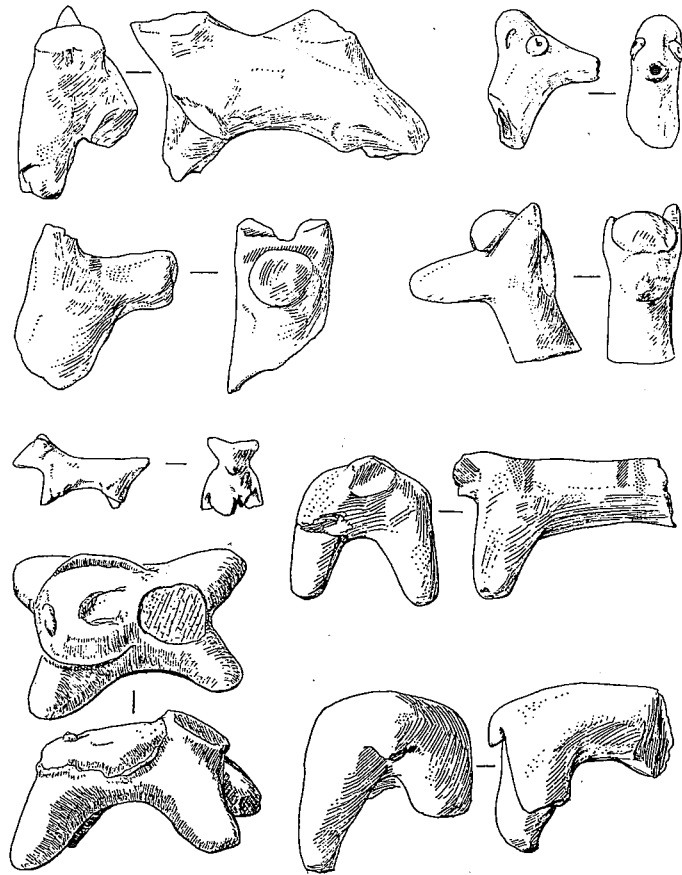


Figure 56. Zoomorphic figurines from Jerusalem (eighth-seventh century B.C.). From K. M. Kenyon, *Jerusalem. Excavating 3000 Years of History*, fig. 9.

dle, and many of them have a human mount. A high proportion of these Israelite zoomorphic vessels come from tombs, and many of them are hollow with filling and pouring devices similar to those of the *kernoi*. This would suggest that they, too, were used for libations, in this case perhaps offerings in connection with the burial of the dead. Other animal figurines are solid, mostly handmade and either crudely or very schematically modelled; some of these have what appears to be a solar disc on the head, reminiscent of the pagan sun-cult iconography of the period (cf. 2 Kings 23:11). I can offer no explanation of the reason for or the choice of the animal motifs, except to note that the Canaanite goddesses Asherah and 'Anat appear astride horses on plaques of the preceding Late Bronze period. However, in Israelite agricultural villages, the modeling of common farm animals in clay was probably a natural impulse, so not all of the zoomorphic figurines need be interpreted cultically.

The human figurines are also problematic. Thousands of these terra cottas have been found at Israelite sites, in all kinds of contexts: domestic, cultic, and funerary. The striking thing is that virtually all of these figurines are female; there is scarcely a single clear example of a male figurine, bronze or ceramic, from an Israelite site. It had been supposed all along that the so-called Astarte figurines are representations of the great Mother Goddess of Canaan, especially since most show the female form nude, with exaggerated breasts (figure 57); occasionally she is depicted pregnant or nursing a child. The features of these Iron Age *Dea Nutrix* figurines are very similar to those of the preceding Late Bronze Age, which are usually assumed to be representations of the Canaanite goddess of sex and fertility, Asherah, 'Anat, or Astarte. Now the more blatantly sexual motifs give way to the nursing mother. This suggests that here again we have evidence of the direct borrowing of features from the Canaanite cult of the Mother Goddess. The lack of any male figurines in Israel would then be explained by the explicit prohibition in the second commandment; modeling or invoking the familiar Mother Goddess might be permissible in a rite concerning conception, childbirth, or lactation, but portraying Yahweh himself in this fashion would be unthinkable.

Despite the obvious connection of the female figurines with the fertility cults of Canaan, many scholars have taken the "minimalist" view that no



Figure 57. "Astarte" (Asherah) figurine of the pillar-base type (eighth-seventh century B. C.). From N. Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem*, fig. 15.

particular deity can be identified in these figurines; that is, they are simply talismans that Israelite women used without necessarily being aware of the significance of the female representation. It had also been supposed that these figurines were typical only of folk religion and thus had little significance in the official Israelite cult. But the discovery of the 'Ajrūd sanctuary and the related textual evidence noted above demonstrates beyond reasonable doubt that Asherah could be named, and even worshipped, in ancient Israel. Thus there is no longer any reason in my mind to hesitate about identifying these as "Asherah figurines" (although be-

cause of the well-known coalescence of the three Canaanite fertility goddesses, they could also represent 'Anat or Astarte).<sup>26</sup> As for the notion that these figurines, whatever they signified, were uncommon in orthodox circles, the late Dame Kathleen Kenyon found a seventh-century B. C. "cult-cache" with more than three-hundred-fifty of them in a cave in Jerusalem, not a hundred yards from the Temple Mount (figure 58). It is tempting to see in these figurines dramatic evidence of the background of reforms

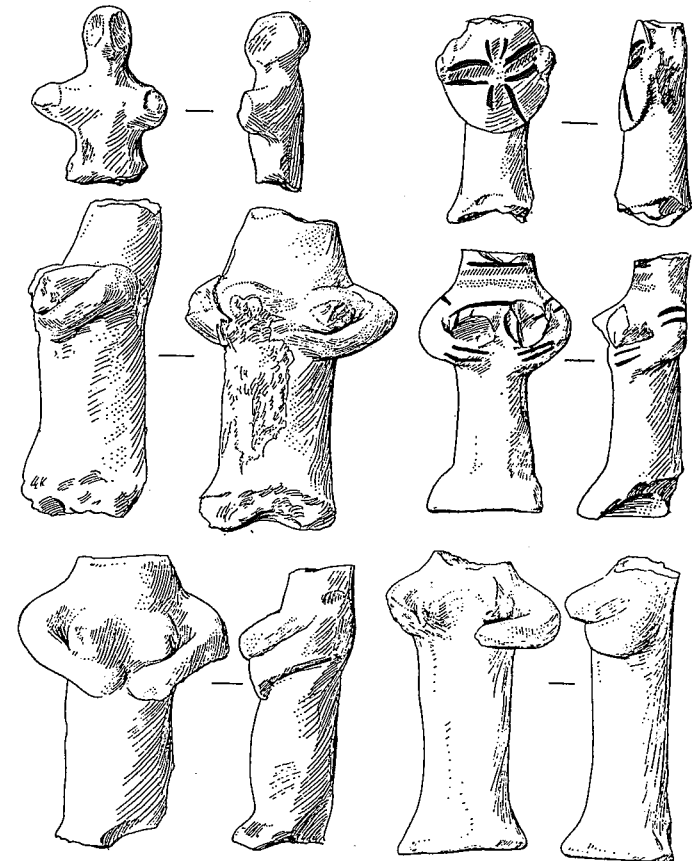


Figure 58. Female figurines from Kenyon's "cult-cache" in Jerusalem (seventh century B. C.). From K. M. Kenyon, *Jerusalem*, fig. 10.

such as that of King Josiah, who it is said in 2 Kings 23:4 "brought out of the temple of the Lord all the vessels made for Ba'al and for Asherah and . . . burned them outside Jerusalem."<sup>27</sup>

An almost entirely overlooked resource for reconstructing Israelite religion lies in the art and iconography of the period, most of which is clearly not secular. Our principal evidence for Israelite art comes from the Monarchy (ninth-seventh century B. C.), in the form of seals, or engraved gem stones for signet rings, and richly carved ivory inlays for fine furniture. There is so much material that in this survey I can only illustrate it briefly and hint at its significance. The hundreds of known Hebrew seals and seal impressions are of two classes: those with private name formulae, which are a rich source for the ancient Israelite onomasticon; and those with pictorial representations (figure 59). The latter are almost without exception in the Phoenician style, the hallmark of which is the combination of bungled Egyptian and Mesopotamian motifs. The favorite themes are scarabeus beetles, uraeus serpents, the tree of life, lions, and other animals; human representations are rare on Hebrew seals, and deities are unknown.<sup>28</sup>

The contemporary ivories are also mostly Phoenician in style, with many of the same motifs as the seals. In addition, however, they have many more standard Egyptian and Assyrian scenes, such as "the infant Horus sitting on a lotus blossom," the sphinx, the "cow suckling her calf," the "woman at the window," and especially various stylized trees of life. The best collection of these Phoenician-style ivories comes from the ruins of the palace of Ahab at the Israelite capital of Samaria (figure 60). This illustrates more than anything else how easily "pagan" art was incorporated into the "official" Israelite cult.<sup>29</sup>

It must be stressed that none of the seal or ivory motifs is distinctively "Israelite"; all are borrowed from surrounding cultures. We may argue, of course, that this artistic borrowing does not necessarily mean that the Israelites consciously adopted the religious symbolism of the iconography of these seals, much less the pagan deities of other cultures. It is obvious, however, that Israelite art—so expressive and reflective a medium of culture—was almost wholly derivative. This fact lends support to the



Figure 59. A selection of Israelite and Judean seals (eighth-seventh century B. C.)

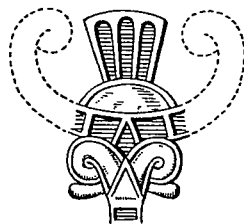
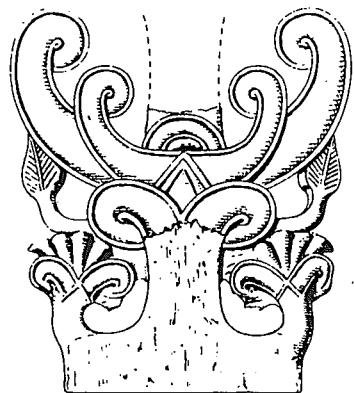


Figure 60. Carved ivory inlays from Ahab's palace at Samaria, in Phoenician style (ninth-eighth century B.C.). From J. W. Crowfoot, J. M. Crowfoot, and K. M. Kenyon, *Samaria-Sebaste II*, plates 5, 6, 17, 22.

general hypothesis that many aspects of Israelite religion were also borrowed. Even where possibly transformed by Yahwistic theology, these symbols and practices never quite lost their pagan connotations—especially in popular religion, where unsophisticated folk did not draw fine distinctions and so were always inclined to syncretism.

*On Reconstructing Ancient Israelite Religious  
Belief and Practice*

This brief survey can only hint at the rich archaeological resources now at our disposal for reconstructing ancient Israelite religious practice. Yet any survey of the standard treatments of Israelite history and religion during the past thirty years would show that Biblical scholars have made scant and largely inept use of the archaeological data. The ultimate irony is that even the Biblical archaeology movement, which sought to combine Palestinian archaeology and theological studies, made little contribution to the elucidation of Israelite religion—as witness the fact that Wright's own interpretation of an actual Israelite temple he excavated at the tribal league center of Shechem has been either rejected or, increasingly, ignored altogether.<sup>30</sup> In short, the archaeological revolution in Biblical studies predicted by Albright in the 1930s is not over: it has never really begun. How can one explain this curious failure of Biblical scholars to utilize archaeological discoveries—especially when the public is endlessly fascinated by these same discoveries?

The reasons are many. First, recent scholarly hesitation may be due in part to a reaction against the extremes of earlier Biblical archaeology, which labeled as "cultic" any archaeological feature that could not otherwise be explained. Thus every large standing stone became a *massēbāh*, every flat lying stone an altar. The popular handbooks are filled with such scandalous nonsense, which serious scholars rightly reject. Unfortunately, this amateurism and sensationalism have done so much lasting damage to our branch of archaeology that many Biblical historians want nothing more to do with it, even though Syro-Palestinian archaeology has now become quite professional. Second, there is the sheer difficulty that non-specialists, even when interested, face in keeping up with the fast-moving theoretical trends, the phenomenal accumulation of new data, and the proliferation of literature in archaeology. And the failure of archaeologists to interpret and publish adequately does not help.

But there are more significant intellectual reasons why the subject of archaeology and the cult is neglected. One is that many of the Protestant

Biblical scholars, both European and American, who have dominated the field of Old Testament studies and Palestinian archaeology apparently have had a profound bias against the very notion of "cult." The whole Reformation orientation was toward the proclamation of the Word of God, rather than the Sacraments, with the result that these Protestant scholars turned naturally to intellectual formulations, rather than ritual or symbol—to theology, not the practice of religion. A close examination of the vast literature on Old Testament theology will show, I believe, not only neglect of the Israelite cult, but a certain repugnance—even for the term "cult," which is often used negatively. The same repugnance, however, is seen in much modern Jewish scholarship, even Orthodoxy, which after all has abolished the ancient Israelite sacrificial cult. Archaeology, however, with its emphasis on actual religious practice, provides a healthy corrective to this fastidiousness, this over-intellectualization of religion that may rob it of its true power and vitality. In any case, such an approach lacks the empathy to bring us close enough to understand the ancient Israelite cult.

Recent archaeological discoveries have cast particularly interesting and surprising light on the identification of various deities and rituals in ancient Israel. Yahweh, the god of Israel, was unattested outside the Bible until modern research and excavation placed this deity in the context of ancient Near Eastern history and religion through parallel textual discoveries, including the first actual occurrence of the name "Yahweh" in Hebrew inscriptions only a few years ago. But archaeology now confirms (as the Bible hints) that other deities, specifically Canaanite fertility gods, were revered in ancient Israel. Chief among them were the "Mother Goddess" Asherah, as we saw above, and the "Storm God" Ba'al, whom the Israelites apparently regarded as her consort. (Anat, Ba'al's consort at Ugarit, plays a minor role in the Hebrew Bible; although she is mentioned, and indeed she is attested in archaeology as well.) Thus it is clear that in ancient Israel, until the Exile, Asherah and Ba'al were not shadowy numina, dead and discredited gods of old Canaan. Rather, the pair were potent rivals of Yahweh himself, and for the masses their cult, with its promise of integration with the very life-giving forces of Nature, remained an attractive alternative to the more austere religion and ethical demands of Yahwism.

Archaeological illumination of the pervasiveness of the Canaanite fertility cults in Israel is not revolutionary; actually, it merely confirms what the Bible suggests—but downplays. Indeed, archaeology only brings to the surface a strong undercurrent throughout the Hebrew Bible: the eloquent prophetic protest against the ever-present threat of idolatry. Archaeology supplies the social and religious context of the period. In short, it demonstrates that the prophets knew what they were talking about.

It has long been suspected that the early Israelite cult was monolatrous, but certainly not monotheistic in the philosophical sense. This syncretistic cult can now be illustrated directly by archaeological finds that antedate most of the Biblical texts, and therefore constitute primary evidence. A summary of the discoveries discussed above, taken together with the texts in Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, shows that the primary features of the pre-Monarchic Israelite cult were as follows: (1.) Worship was a localized affair, with open-air sanctuaries or even simple household shrines serving most ordinary folk in everyday practice. There were few, if any, actual temples, and no centralized worship. (2.) In the rarity of elaborate clerical or priestly institutions, any individual Israelites (males at least) could officiate in worship. Anyone could build an altar, plant a sacred tree, erect a stela, or offer sacrifices—the characteristic (and probably exclusive) cultic activities. (3.) The most prominent rituals were simply the frequent presentation of food and drink offerings—grains, cereals, olive oil, wine and sacrifices of sheep or goats—the principal agricultural products of Canaan centuries before the appearance of the Israelites. (4.) There may have been more periodic public festivals; the ones that we know of were also borrowed from Canaan and followed the Canaanite agricultural year. These were: the spring pastoral feast, when lambs were slaughtered, identified quite naturally by Israelites with the Passover (or Pesach), when their first-born were spared in Egypt; the early summer agriculture feast, coinciding with the grain harvest, or "Weeks/Pentecost" (Shavuoth), when food offerings were brought to Yahweh; and the fall festival, or "Booths" (Succoth), when fruits and other produce were ripe, and whole families camped in "booths" in the fields to complete the joyful harvest at year's end, followed shortly by the onset of the winter rains and the beginning of the new year (Rosh ha-Shanah, followed by Yom Kippur



and rites of atonement). It is true that all of these festivals may later have been demythologized to some extent, in keeping with Israel's characteristic historicizing tendencies—i.e., incorporated into the recitation of Yahweh's saving acts in her own history. But their Canaanite origins and connections remained clear to many, especially in early Israel.<sup>31</sup>

Later, in the Monarchy, the Israelite cult was of course more highly centralized and institutionalized by the Jerusalem priesthood. But, as we have seen, the official version of Israelite religion enshrined in the Hebrew Bible produced by these circles is sometimes more pious fiction than fact. The archaeological discoveries we have surveyed make it indisputably clear that local shrines and even rival temples continued in use after Solomon, and that Ba'al and Asherah were commonly worshipped down to the very end of the Monarchy. Monotheistic Judaism was a product of the Exile, not earlier, as both the Bible itself and Jewish tradition strongly suggest. Until then, the ancient fertility cults of Canaan held powerful sway; indeed, all the old gods and goddesses of Canaan survived into Persian and Phoenician times, finally reincarnated in the familiar deities of Greece and Rome: El is Kronos, Ba'al is Zeus, Asherah is Aphrodite, 'Anat is Athena, and so on.<sup>32</sup>

The similarities of Israelite religion to the religions of greater Canaan have long been known, and indeed are assumed by one strand of the tradition in the Hebrew Bible. But the degree of affinity and of actual continuity with Canaan have been minimized by scholars, both Jewish and Christian, to emphasize the uniqueness of ancient Israel. Recent archaeological discoveries redress the balance by showing that in terms of material culture and the behavior it reflects, there was very little distinction between Canaanite and Israelite religion, at least in practice. The rituals were virtually the same, even if one assumes that Israel's Yahwistic theology was an innovation—and that is not always evident.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

AN agreement concerning the proper relation of archaeology to Biblical studies requires a serious and objective understanding of what the Bible is and what it is not. In these chapters I have attempted to demonstrate how textual facts, artifacts, and ecofacts combine to illuminate the world of the Bible, and how archaeology contributes by creating a setting in which the Bible may become more credible for many. Ultimately, however, the Bible is not history, but rather an account of God's miraculous intervention in human history. Whether one accepts this premise, the Bible's central claim is a personal, not a scholarly matter. It is a choice that may be based on social conditioning, personal predilection, or individual experience—but it is not a rational choice based on irrefutable proof of specific historical events.

In my judgment, there is little authentic religion or piety in the populist notion of "Biblical archaeology." At its best—in the work of conscientious and sincere researchers—it is too Bibliocentric to offer an adequate perspective on ancient oriental history and religion in general. At its worst, it is hypocritical. Some of its staunchest supporters are not themselves believers—in the Biblical sense—but only Bibliophiles. In this respect, secular historians and archaeologists are more honest, and in the long run their research may be truer to the spirit of the Bible. In any case, the distortions rampant in Biblical archaeology are perversions both of Biblical faith and of archaeology as serious, scholarly inquiry.

Archaeology never sought to make a convert of a nonbeliever, nor surely ever did so. It could even be argued that the partial rationale offered by archaeology provides the very antithesis of faith for those who consider such justifications an *apologia pro fidei sua*. Nothing could be clearer evidence of the modern lack of faith than our exaggerated expectations and demands for archaeological "proof." It is perhaps misleading to insist that we have asked too much of archaeology. Rather, we have been asking the wrong questions. (Ironically, much of the public's fascination with recent excavations may be due to the fact that archaeology has become a secular surrogate for religion, a nostalgic search for history and a sense of identity that formerly derived from religion. This explanation certainly is consistent with the archaeological craze in Israel today, an increasingly secular society in which pursuing the latest find is a national pastime.)

In Richard M. Weaver's book *The Ethics of Rhetoric*, a treatment of Greek philosophy, he points out that

it is a matter of curious interest that a warning against literal reading occurs at an early stage of the *Phaedrus*. Here in the opening pages, appearing as if to set the key of the theme, comes an allusion to the myth of Boreas and Oreithyia. . . . Does Socrates believe that this tale is really true? Or is he in favor of a scientific explanation of what the myth alleges? . . . The answer of Socrates is that many tales are open to this kind of rationalization, but that the result is tedious and actually irrelevant. It is irrelevant because our chief concern is with the nature of the man, and it is beside the point to probe into such matters while we are yet ignorant of ourselves. The scientific criticism of Greek mythology, which may be likened to the scientific criticism of the myths of the Bible in our own day, produces at best "a boorish sort of wisdom." It is a limitation to suppose that the truth of the story lies in its historicity. The "boorish sort of wisdom" seeks to supplant poetic allegation with fact, just as an archaeologist might look for the foundations of the Garden of Eden. But while this sort of search goes on the truth flies off, on wings of imagination, and is not recoverable until the searcher attains a higher level of pursuit.<sup>1</sup>

In the same way, a mechanical, literalistic reading of the Bible, as though it were mere history, misses the point.

It is my purpose and hope to point toward a middle way that is both more realistic and more conducive to a real understanding of what happened in history, and what it can mean to us today.<sup>2</sup> The new archaeology can, in my view, surpass the task of mere verification—valuable though that may be—and in so doing lay the foundation for an altogether new approach to the study of Israelite religion.

The first key to this truly radical approach lies in the capacity of modern archaeology to document the "ecology of change": that is, its potential—only beginning to be realized—to reconstruct the cultural and material setting for historical events. In this way Israel's emergence in Canaan can be elucidated as a distinctive social and economic reality, rather than being observed as merely a religious movement or assumed to be supernatural. I quote Norman Gottwald's recent *Tribes of Yahweh*, whose approach is so congenial to many modern archaeologists:

Yahweh and "his" people Israel must be demystified, deromanticized, dedogmatized and deidolized. Only as we carry through this sociological demythologization of Yahwistic faith, and of its Jewish and Christian derivatives, will those of us who have been formed and nurtured by those curiously ambiguous Jewish and Christian symbols be able to align heart and head, to combine theory and practice.<sup>3</sup>

Second, modern archaeology begins to give Israelite "ethnicity" a real definition, both in terms of distinctive material culture traits and in terms of the patterns of behavior they reflect. Religious practice is, of course, significant among these traits and patterns. In this area, archaeological research is only in its infancy, but a promising beginning has been made in the first surveys of early Israelite villages, as discussed in this book.

Yet the limitations of inquiry by means of archaeological investigation alone must be kept constantly in mind. As an illustration, and a concluding example, imagine that a certain Canaanite site in central Palestine could be positively identified as one of the principal cities said by the Book of Joshua to have been destroyed by the incoming Israelites. Excavations there reveal a heavy destruction layer that dates indisputably to ca. 1200 B. C. Immediately above these ruins there is a new occupation level, entirely different in its style of houses and pottery, burial customs, and other aspects of material culture—clear evidence of the appearance of a new ethnic group. Finally, imagine that excavations are crowned by the discovery of a victory stela in this newly established town, inscribed in early Hebrew, documenting in detail the conquest of the site and specifically naming Joshua and the Israelites.

Is this concrete evidence of the historicity of the Book of Joshua? Is this the long-sought proof that "the Bible is true"? Not at all. The significant message of the Bible is not, after all, that the Israelites *took* Canaan by military might. Its essential claim is that that God miraculously *gave* them the land of Canaan as an unforgettable sign that he had chosen Israel as his own special people. That is a theological claim—not a documentation of events, but an interpretation of them.

We may or may not someday be able to demonstrate that all the events recorded in the Bible did or did not take place, but in the end it matters

very little. Religious consciousness leaps beyond event to meaning. Claims for truth of a higher order are simply not amenable to historical or archaeological investigation; nor do they benefit by historical or archaeological confirmation. They are matters of faith.

*Notes*