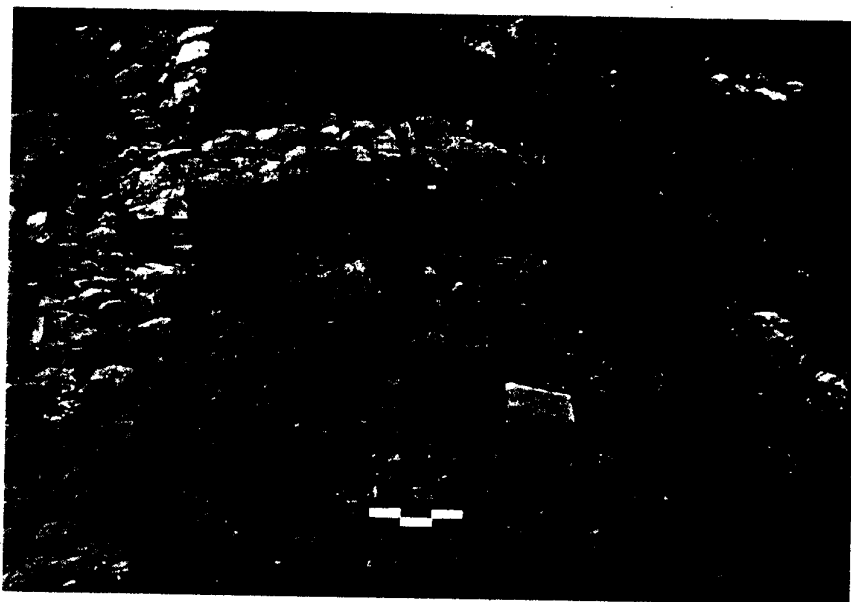


Hezekiah's Reforms and the Revolt against Assyria



The shrine room at Tell Halif (view from south) with the cultic paraphernalia in situ. An incense stand is flanked on each side by a white limestone block. A figurine head was found on the cobbled floor in front of the stand (above the meter stick). The house was destroyed at the end of the eighth century BCE. *Photograph by the Lahav Research Project.*

By Oded Borowski

Hezekiah enjoyed great wealth and fame. He built treasuries for silver, gold, precious stones, spices, shields, and other costly things; and barns for the harvests of grain, new wine, and oil; and stalls for various kinds of cattle, as well as sheepfolds. He amassed a great many flocks and herds; God had indeed given him vast riches (2 Chr 32:27-29).¹

The Bible treats Hezekiah very sympathetically. Why? How different was Hezekiah than other kings of the House of David?

On several occasions, the Bible mentions or describes the religious reforms instituted by Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4, 22; Isa 36:7; 2 Chr 29:15-19; 30:14; 31:1; 32:12). The record strongly indicates that the reforms were well planned and were not the result of impulsive action. As Miller and Hayes observe, the descriptions of Hezekiah's religious reforms clearly indicate:

a deliberate effort on the part of the Judean king to centralize worship in Jerusalem. Centralization of the cult would have been a drastic move, opposed by some, but intended to make the population dependent upon Jerusalem and thus upon Hezekiah and the capital city (Miller and Hayes 1986:357).

A second telling event in the reign of Hezekiah was his revolt against Assyria (2 Kgs 18:13-19:37; 2 Chr 32:1-23; see also Isa 36-37:37).² Were the two significant events at all related?

There are great difficulties in affixing the chronology of the reign of Hezekiah (727-698 BCE) and the precise order of events within it (Miller and Hayes 1986:350-51). However, while centralizing the cult could benefit the capital city, the religious reforms were most likely part of Hezekiah's grand scheme which included preparations for the revolt against Assyria to regain independence. Creating a new order through reforms placed Hezekiah in total control of the economy, the food supplies, and the other materials necessary for the upcoming revolt. Thus, Hezekiah's religious reforms must be examined in relation to his revolt against Assyria; they were only one element in his ambitious plan of returning to the glorious days of his ancestors.³

The turn of events in the fourth quarter of the eighth century BCE had taught Hezekiah a few lessons:

Among these must have been the recognition that unsuccessful revolts were costly enterprises, that unplanned, spur-of-the-moment rebellions were almost doomed from the beginning, and that help from Egypt could be counted upon only if that country possessed a stronger and better organized administration than had been the case with the Twenty-third and Twenty-fourth Dynasties (Miller and Hayes 1986:353).

To understand the relationship between the reforms and the revolt, it is important to look at 1) the nature of the reforms and their possible chronology; 2) the results of the reforms as gleaned from archaeology; and 3) the archaeological remains of Hezekiah's revolt against Assyria.

The Nature of the Reforms and Their Possible Chronology

Hezekiah initiated his reforms in the first year of his reign when he repaired the doors of the Temple, purified the Temple and its furnishings, and re-instituted the cult "according to the rule prescribed by David, by Gad the king's seer, and Nathan the prophet" (2 Chr 29:25). At that time, he could not have foreseen the extent of the reforms.

At a later date, as part of his overall scheme, Hezekiah extended an invitation to the inhabitants of the former Kingdom of Israel to join those of Judah in the celebration of Passover. Although the specific date is not given, this event could have happened only after the fall of the Northern Kingdom (722 BCE) and before the attack by Sennacherib (701 BCE).

Hezekiah sent word to all Israel and Judah, and also wrote letters to Ephraim and Manasseh, inviting them to come to the house of the LORD the God of Israel. The king and his officers and all the assembly in Jerusalem had agreed to keep the Passover in the second month (2 Chr 30:1-2).

This could not have been done if the Northern Kingdom still had its own king and shrines.

Assembling in Jerusalem encouraged the people to further Hezekiah's reforms:

It was a very large assembly that gathered in Jerusalem to keep the pilgrim-feast of Unleavened Bread in the second month. They began by removing the altars in Jerusalem, and the incense-altars they removed and threw into the wadi of the Kidron (2 Chr 30:13-14).

They were inspired by the Levites and the priests who worshipped with unrestrained fervor "to keep the feast for another seven days, and they kept it with general rejoicing" (30:23). Following that:

all the Israelites present went out into the towns and the cities of Judah and smashed the sacred pillars, hacked down the sacred poles, and demolished the shrines and

the altars throughout Judah and Benjamin, and in Ephraim and Manasseh, until they had made an end of them all (2 Chr 31:1).

This description makes it apparent that their actions were basically taken against all public places of worship.⁴

This reform must have happened before the revolt and the subsequent attack on Judah by Sennacherib. In Rabshakeh's speech to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, he argues that:

if you tell me that you are relying on the LORD your God, is he not the god whose shrines and altars Hezekiah has suppressed, telling Judah and Jerusalem they must worship at this altar in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18:22; also Isa 36:7; 2 Chr 32:12)?

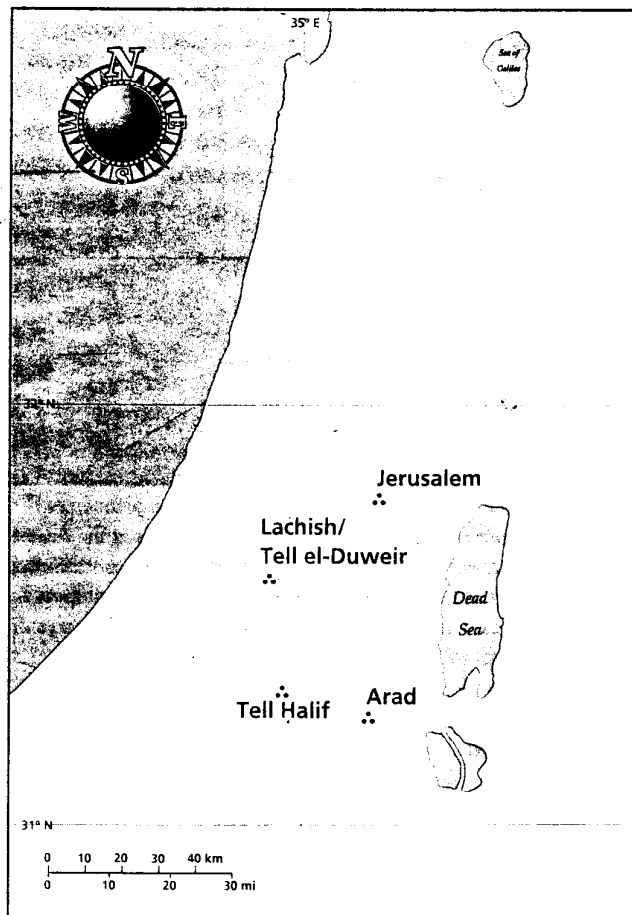
Following the destruction of the shrines by the impassioned Israelites and Judahites, they began to bring their offerings to Jerusalem:

As soon as the king's order was issued to the Israelites, they gave generously from the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, oil, and honey, all the produce of their land; they brought a full tithe of everything. The Israelites and Judeans living in the towns of Judah also brought a tithe of cattle and sheep, and a tithe of all the produce as offerings dedicated to the LORD their

God, and they stacked the produce in heaps. They began to deposit the heaps in the third month and completed them in the seventh (2 Chr 31:5-7).⁵

With this development, Hezekiah accomplished what he set out to do, namely concentrate the economic power, which previously was shared with the other shrines, in one place, Jerusalem.

To facilitate the accumulation and distribution of supplies, "Hezekiah gave orders for storerooms to be prepared in the house of the LORD, and when this was done the people faithfully brought in their contributions, the tithe, and their dedicated gifts" (2 Chr 31:11-12). Furthermore, to fend off opposition and secure the support of the priests and Levites, "Eden, Miniamin, Jeshua, Shemaiah, Amariah, and Shecaniah in the priestly cities and towns assisted him in the fair distribution of



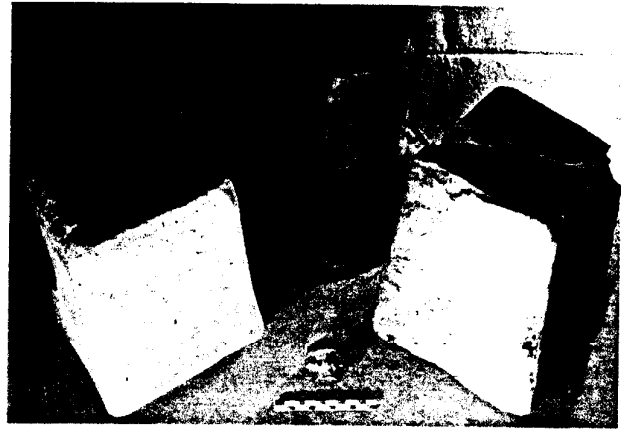
of this censer stood a rectangular, carved limestone block with beveled edges and smooth faces.¹⁴ Since no traces of burning were discerned on the narrow end of the blocks, the presumed top, it is possible that the blocks were either *massebot* or that bowl-like vessels, inside of which incense burning took place, were placed on top. Jacobs (1994a; 1994b) observes that a smooth, flat stone, splintered by heat, was found near the two blocks and might have served as an offering table. The location and character of this structure strongly suggest a private shrine belonging to the owners of the house in which it was found.¹⁵ The structure belongs to Stratum VIB which was terminated at the end of the eighth century BCE in a great conflagration, brought on by a military action as evident from the weapons (e.g. arrowheads and sling stones) found throughout the site. The ceramic repertoire is identical to Lachish III (see below) and forces the conclusion that the site was destroyed during Sennacherib's campaign in the region.¹⁶

The evidence shows that the shrine was in use until the destruction of the four-room house by military action. This means that Hezekiah's reforms did not interfere in its operation. Is it possible that because it was a private shrine the king did not consider it a threat to the centralization of the economy? Did the king allow the continuation of worship in shrines as long as incense burning, and not sacrifices, was involved?

Nineveh and Tell ed-Duweir

Additional evidence for this series of events comes to us from Mesopotamia. A set of reliefs found in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, now on display at the British Museum, describes the siege and fall of Lachish. The identification of the city shown in the relief with Lachish is unmistakable because it is made by an inscription, "Sennacherib, king of the world, king of Assyria, sat upon a nîmedu-throne and passed in review the booty (taken) from Lachish (La-ki-su)" (ANET:288). Sennacherib's reliefs can lend support to the idea that King Hezekiah allowed the continuation of cultic practices even in public places as long as only incense burning, not sacrifices, was carried out. In what is referred to as Segment IV of the reliefs (Ussishkin 1982:77, 84), two of the Assyrian soldiers carrying booty clearly hold sizable incense burners in their arms (Ussishkin 1982:107).¹⁷ If placed on the ground, these censers would reach above the hips of the soldiers carrying them. Their size and position in the depicted procession, together with other items of public or stately nature, strongly suggest that they were made for public use, most likely in the cult center at Lachish.¹⁸ If this assumption is correct, then it appears that incense burning was carried out at Lachish after Hezekiah's reforms and down to the last moments of the city's independence. This means that Hezekiah did not intend to abolish completely all worship outside Jerusalem, but wanted to curb it and limit its extent to the areas that did not involve contributions in kind.

The site of Tell ed-Duweir in the Shephelah in southern Judea is identified by most scholars as biblical Lachish. Archaeological work by two expeditions, one led by J. L. Starkey in the 1930s and the other by D. Ussishkin in the 1970s and 1980s uncovered remains that presently most scholars agree belong



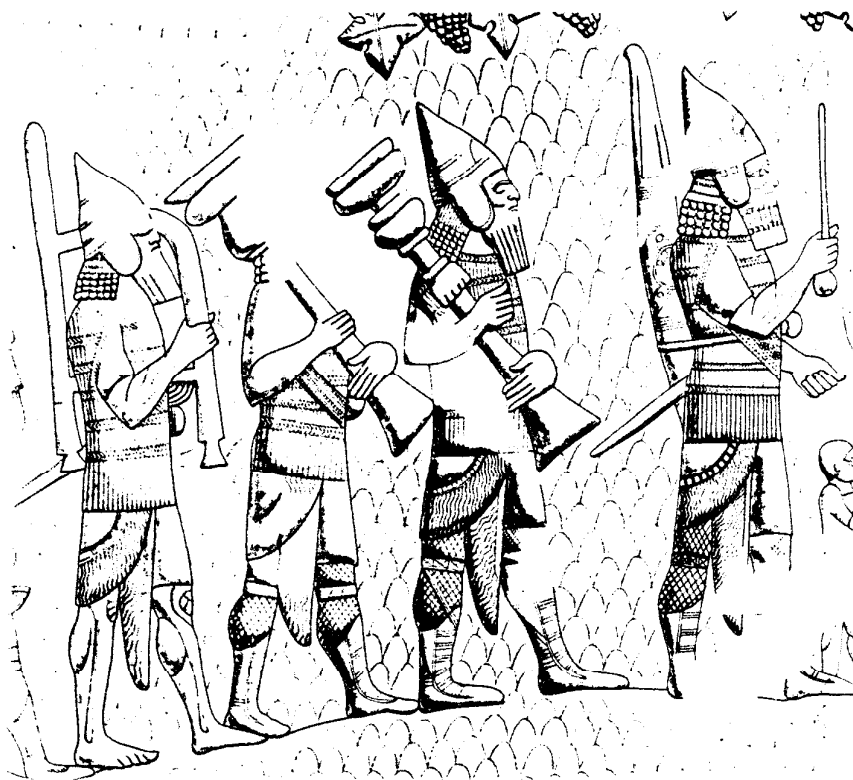
A detailed view of the cultic objects from the shrine room at Tell Halif. The fenestrated incense stand had a bowl attached to its top. The figurine head shows traces of white paint, while the well-dressed limestone blocks do not show any sign of burning on their tops. Photograph by the Lahav Research Project.

to the level destroyed by Sennacherib. This is a very important point, since the assemblage belonging to Level III at Lachish, the layer attributed to the 701 BCE destruction, is used as comparative material for other sites occupied and destroyed during that period. The material culture recovered at Lachish Level III helps date strata in the region, as for example at Beersheba, Arad, and Tell Halif, where levels containing a similar assemblage are now assigned the date 701 BCE for their destruction. This assemblage also helps delineate the area under Hezekiah's influence which was devastated by Sennacherib's army.

The Archaeological Remains of Hezekiah's Revolt Against Assyria

The reforms were only one aspect of the preparations for the revolt.¹⁹ By centralizing the cult in Jerusalem, Hezekiah achieved the concentration of economic power that provided food supplies which were collected by the central authority and were distributed to the participating cities and towns. The distribution of foodstuffs seems to be illustrated by the *lmk* (royal; belonging to the king) stamped jars found in many Judahite sites of the late eighth century BCE. For quite some time, an argument persisted concerning the date and purpose of the *lmk* stamps. The excavations at Lachish demonstrated conclusively that the *lmk* jars date to the time of Hezekiah (Ussishkin 1976). While their purpose is still not fully understood, most scholars agree that they must have been used in the distribution of supplies in preparation for the revolt. The same, or similar, vessels were possibly used in the distribution of supplies to deposed priests (see above).²⁰ Plotted on a map, the distribution of *lmk* stamped jar handles indicates the extent of Hezekiah's influence before the revolt (Na'aman 1991:23-33).

One more piece of archaeological evidence related to Hezekiah and his rebellion against Assyria owes its identifi-



Incense stands included in the sacking of Lachish. A detail from Sennacherib's relief depicting two Assyrian soldiers carrying large incense stands, the source of which might have been the Lachish sanctuary. Their inclusion in the booty suggests that incense burning continued in the local temple until the fall of Lachish in 701 BCE despite of Hezekiah's reforms. His reforms apparently concerned Jerusalem's claim on contributions in kind rather than the centralization of worship *in toto*. Drawing by J. Dekel from Ussishkin 1982.

cation and date in part to biblical references. 2 Kgs 20:20 reports that "he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city..." and 2 Chr 32:3-4 adds that

he planned with his officers and his mighty men to stop the water of the springs that were outside the city...and they stopped all the springs and the brook that flowed through the land, saying, "Why should the kings of Assyria come and find much water?"

It must have been quite a feat because in 2 Chr 32:30 states that, "This same Hezekiah closed the upper outlet of the waters of Gihon and directed them down to the west side of the city of David." Most scholars agree that this waterwork should be identified with the tunnel on the eastern side of the City of David which carries the water of the Gihon spring to a pool at its southern end. An inscription found near the outlet of the tunnel and dated paleographically to the eighth century BCE, strengthens the identification of the tunnel which is now known as Hezekiah's Tunnel.²¹

Some of what we do not know about the revolt from the biblical sources can be illuminated by Assyrian records, which mention this event in great detail. The most detailed Assyrian

account is contained in the Oriental Institute's Prism of Sennacherib which presents the final edition of the Annals of Sennacherib. In his account, Sennacherib describes not only Hezekiah's role in leading the rebellion, but also the punishment he inflicted upon him which included total destruction of vast parts of the kingdom.²² The destruction caused by the Assyrians is well attested in the archaeological record of several sites.

Summary

Hezekiah's religious reforms and his revolt against Assyria were part of a grand scheme to restore the glory of the old Davidic monarchy. In spite of it being well planned, Hezekiah's uprising or rebellion against Assyria was a disaster.²³ The reforms were only a prelude to the revolt; they were not an end but a means. They were accompanied by overtures to the inhabitants of the extinct Northern Kingdom, who by that time were without leadership, and by the distribution of supplies to defrocked priests, steps that were aimed at securing every possible support. Centralizing the cult in Jerusalem gave Hezekiah control over the economy, something that was badly needed for the success of the revolt. Storage facilities, *lmilk* stamped jar handles, and destruction layers, are all evidence

for the revolt and its devastating results as depicted in Sennacherib's reliefs and recorded in his Annals. Nevertheless, the Bible did not forget Hezekiah's attempts to restore the Davidic glory.

¹ Translation used is that of The Revised English Bible (REB).

² Other biblical references that are interpreted as describing this event or its aftermath appear in Micah 1.

³ Halpern (1991:20) suggests that Hezekiah started planning for the revolt "shortly after 712." It is possible that certain steps, such as securing aid from other political entities, were taken later in his reign, but the idea of gaining back full independence seems to have occurred to him upon ascending the throne.

⁴ As for what happened to private shrines, see below.

⁵ The Israelites started bringing in their agricultural contributions after Shabu'oth (Feast of First Fruit/Feast of Weeks=Pentecost) and completed after Succoth (Feast of Tabernacles), which is during the harvesting and ingathering season (see Borowski 1987:31-44).

⁶ The cult center of Beersheba is acknowledged by the eighth century prophet Amos (8:14). Fritz (1993) claims that the altar at Beersheba, as well as the one at Arad, was not used for animal sacrifices. Gadegaard (1978) also argues unconvincingly that the altar at Arad was never used for burnt offering.

To sacrifice an *ʿolâ*, one does not need an altar that can accommodate a whole animal as big as a bull. To lift and place a whole bull on the altar was technically impossible unless the animal was slaughtered on the altar itself. To slaughter an animal on the altar requires a restraining apparatus, something that is not mentioned or found anywhere.

⁷ Incidentally, a snake engraved on the altar is reminiscent of the bronze serpent, Nehushtan, that supposedly had been made by Moses (Num 21:4-9) and kept in the Temple until the serpent was destroyed by Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4).

⁸ Yadin relies heavily on the phrase "from Geba to Beersheba" (2 Kgs 23:8) for dating the dismantling of the altar to the time of Josiah (Yadin 1976:8-9). This phrase could have been used in its formulaic sense to encompass all of Judah despite the lack of settlement at the site. However, Holladay (1987:256) suggests a possibly much earlier date for the altar, "late tenth-early ninth centuries."

⁹ See below for the role of the *mlk* jars in the preparation for the revolt.

¹⁰ The debate concerning the stratigraphy of Iron Age Arad has not been resolved yet (see for example Mazar and Netzer 1986 and Ussishkin 1993) and only a final publication of the results will clarify the sequence of events. Therefore, the remarks concerning the Arad shrine should be viewed with caution. Another debate concerns the function of "the sacrificial altar" (see above, note 6). According to Aharoni (1968:19) "many pits with burnt bones and the burnt skeleton of a young lamb, lacking the head" were found close to the Stratum XII altar, originally at the same location of the Stratum VIII altar. The principle of "continuity of sacred space" suggests that the latter altar served the same function.

¹¹ Not dismantling the incense altars is strange in light of what is said in 2 Chr 30:14. But see below for Tell Halif and Lachish. Haran (1993) claims that incense burning was practiced only in the Temple in Jerusalem and the so-called "incense altars" were used for other types of sacrifice, such as grain. His treatment of the subject is limited to stone altars and does not include clay "incense stands" or "censers." Gitin, who presented a corpus of these altars (1989), continues to refer to these objects as "incense altars" (1993) and convincingly argues (1992) that they were used for burning incense.

¹² For the definition of "shrine," see Holladay 1987:282, n. 1 and discussion on p. 268.

¹³ An Iron Age I shrine room was excavated in a similar location at Tell el-Umeiri (Clark 1994:146).

¹⁴ Dimension of the blocks are: (1) Object 2103: 14.5-20 cm wide, 26 cm high; (2) Object 2054: 16.2-17.5 cm wide, 25 cm high (Jacobs 1994a).

¹⁵ Although Holladay (1987:274) suggests that such paraphernalia is associated with "establishment" cult places. For a description of an early Israelite house shrine, its cult and rituals, see Judg 17; 18:3-6, 13-27, 31.

¹⁶ Two *mlk* stamped jar handles and many *mlk*-type jars found at Tell Halif serve as indicators for its participation in the revolt. See below.

¹⁷ In the caption to fig 83, Ussishkin (1982:107) refers to these objects as "chalices."

¹⁸ For the existence of a cult center in Lachish Stratum V, see Aharoni 1975b:26-32. Aharoni suggests that parts of the cult center were in use until, at least, the end of Stratum III. The Hellenistic temple discovered on the site of the earlier Israelite high place attests to the continuity of the sacred space.

¹⁹ For a description of the preparations for the revolt, see Halpern 1991:21-26.

²⁰ Halpern (1991:23-25) suggests that they were used for supplying the professional soldiers rather than any other element of the local population.

²¹ For the latest on the method of construction, see Gill (1994).



A *mlk* jar excavated from the storeroom adjacent to the Lachish Stratum III gate. The jars must have been involved in the distribution of supplies in preparation for the revolt against Assyria and possibly also to priests deposed in Hezekiah's reform.

²² See ANET:287-288.

²³ Although Hezekiah did not succeed in his attempt to regain complete independence and restore the "glorious old days," he planted this idea in the mind of Manasseh who also was unsuccessful. It was left to Josiah "to carry through the far reaching reforms for which Manasseh [and Hezekiah; my addition] had evidently begun to prepare the infrastructure" (Rainey 1993:162).

Bibliography

- Aharoni, Y.
1968 Arad: Its Inscriptions and Temple. *Biblical Archaeologist* 31:2-32.
1974 The Horned Altar at Beer-sheba. *Biblical Archaeologist* 37:1-6.
1975a Excavations at Tel Beer-sheba: Preliminary Report of the Fifth and Sixth Seasons 1973-1974. *Tel Aviv* 2:146-68.
1975b *Investigations at Lachish (Lachish V)*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University.
- ANET
1969 *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3rd edition with Supplement. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Borowski, O.
1987 *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

- Clark, D. R.
1994 The Iron I Western Defense System at Tel El-'Umeiri, Jordan. *Biblical Archaeologist* 57:138-148.
- Fowler, M.D.
1982 The Excavation of Tell Beer-Sheba and the Biblical Record. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 114:7-11.
- Fritz, V.
1993 Open Cult Places in Israel in the Light of Parallels from Prehistoric Europe and Pre-Classical Greece. Pp. 182-187 in *Biblical Archaeology Today 1990*, edited by A. Biran and J. Aviram. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- Gadegaard, N. H.
1978 On the So-Called Burnt Offering Altar in the Old Testament. *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 110:35-45.
- Gill, D.
1994 How They Met: Geology Solves Long-Standing Mystery of Hezekiah's Tunnelers. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 20 (July / August):20-33, 64.
- Gitin, S.
1989 Incense Altars from Ekron, Israel and Judah: Context and Typology. Pp. 52*-76* in *Eretz-Israel 20*, edited by A. Ben-Tor, J. C. Greenfield, and A. Malamat. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
1992 New Incense Altars from Ekron: Context, Typology and Function. Pp. 43*-49* in *Eretz-Israel 23* edited by E. Stern and T. Levi. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society and Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.
1993 Seventh Century B.C.E. Cultic Elements at Ekron. Pp. 248-258 in *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990*, edited by A. Biran and J. Aviram. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- Halpern, B.
1991 Jerusalem and the Lineages in the Seventh Century BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability. Pp. 11-107 in *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel*, edited by B. Halpern and D. W. Hobson. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Haran, M.
1993 "Incense Altars"—Are They? Pp. 237-247 in *Biblical Archaeology Today 1990*, edited by A. Biran and J. Aviram. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society.
- Herzog, Z.
1981 Israelite Sanctuaries at Arad and Beer-sheba. Pp. 120-122 in *Temples and High Places in Biblical Times*, edited by A. Biran. Jerusalem: Hebrew Union College.
- Herzog, Z. et al.
1984 The Israelite Fortress at Arad. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 254:1-34.
- Herzog, Z., Aharoni, M., and Rainey, A. F.
1987 Arad—An Ancient Israelite Fortress with a Temple to Yahweh. *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13 (March/April):16-35.
- Holladay, J. S., Jr.
1987 Religion in Israel and Judah Under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archaeological Approach. Pp. 249-299 in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, edited by P. D. Miller, Jr., P. D. Hanson and S. D. McBride. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.
- Jacobs, P.
1994a The Shrine Room at Halif: Judahite Religion and Engendered Archaeology. Paper presented at SECSOR Annual Meeting in Atlanta.
1994b Judahite Religion and Engendered Space. Paper presented at the AAR/SBL/ASOR Annual Meeting, Chicago, IL.
- Jacobs, P. and Borowski, O.
1993 Notes and News: Tell Halif, 1992. *Israel Exploration Journal* 43:66-70.
- Mazar, A. and Netzer, E.
1986 On the Israelite Fortress at Arad. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 263:87-91.
- Miller, J. Maxwell and Hayes, John H.
1986 *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.
- Na'aman, N.
1991 The Kingdom of Judah under Josiah. *Tel Aviv* 18:3-71.
- Rainey, A. F.
1993 Manasseh, King of Judah, in the Whirlpool of the Seventh Century B.C.E. Pp. 147-164 in *Kinattutu sa darati: Raphael Kutscher Memorial Volume*, edited by A. F. Rainey. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, Institute of Archaeology.
- REB
1989 *The Revised English Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press.
- Ussishkin, D.
1976 Royal Judean Storage Jars and Private Seal Impressions. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 223:1-13.
1982 *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib*. Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, The Institute of Archaeology.
1988 The Date of the Judean Shrine at Arad. *Israel Exploration Journal* 38:142-57.
- Yadin, Y.
1976 Beer-sheba: The High Place Destroyed by King Josiah. *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 222:5-17.



Oded Borowski is an associate professor of Hebrew and biblical archaeology at Emory University in Atlanta, GA, where he serves as chair of the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Languages and Literatures. He has excavated at Tell Gezer (1971-73), Tell Dan (1974) and Tell Halif (since 1976) and is co-director of the Tell Halif Excavations Phase II. In 1988, he conducted a salvage excavation for the Israel Department of Antiquities (now IAA) at the Iron Age II cemetery of Tell Halif. He received his Ph.D. from The University of Michigan. He has published numerous articles and a book, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Eisenbrauns, 1987).