

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 elicist, 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

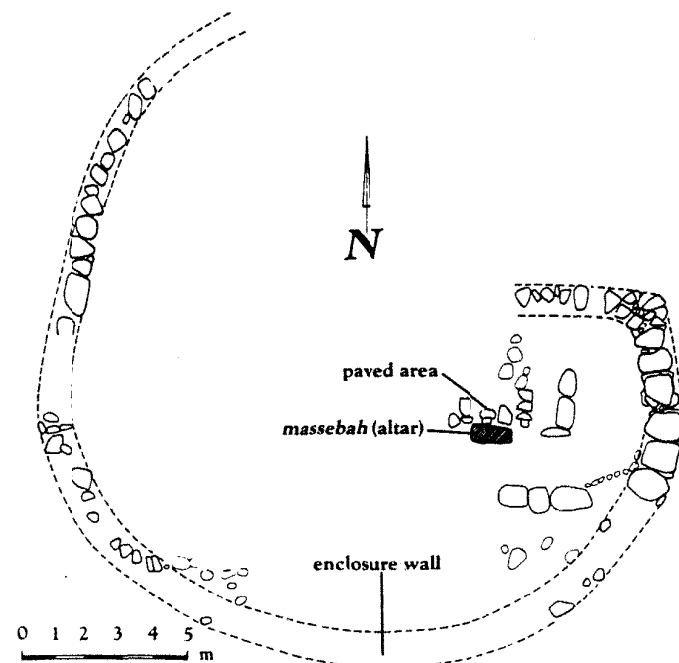


Figure 32. Plan of the "Bull Site" (twelfth century B.C.). From A. Mazar, *BASOR* 247, fig. 5.

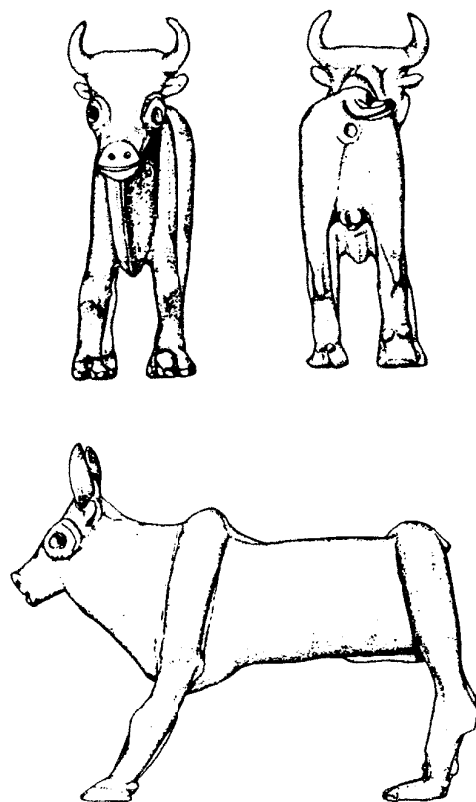


Figure 33. The bronze bull figurine from the early Israelite cult site.  
From A. Mazar, *BASOR* 247, fig. 2.

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-ʿolām, "El, the Eternal One"; El-shadday, "El, the Mountain One"; El-ʿelohē-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).

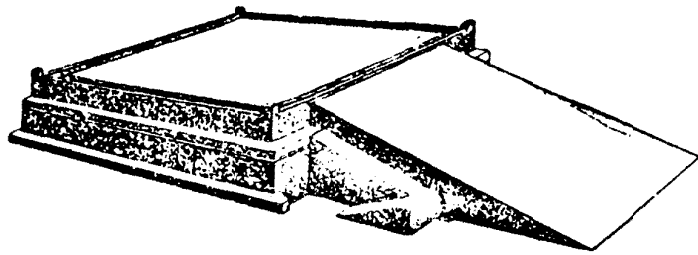


Figure 35. Schematic plan of the Mt. Ebal altar. From A. Zertal, *BAR* II, no. 1:36.

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

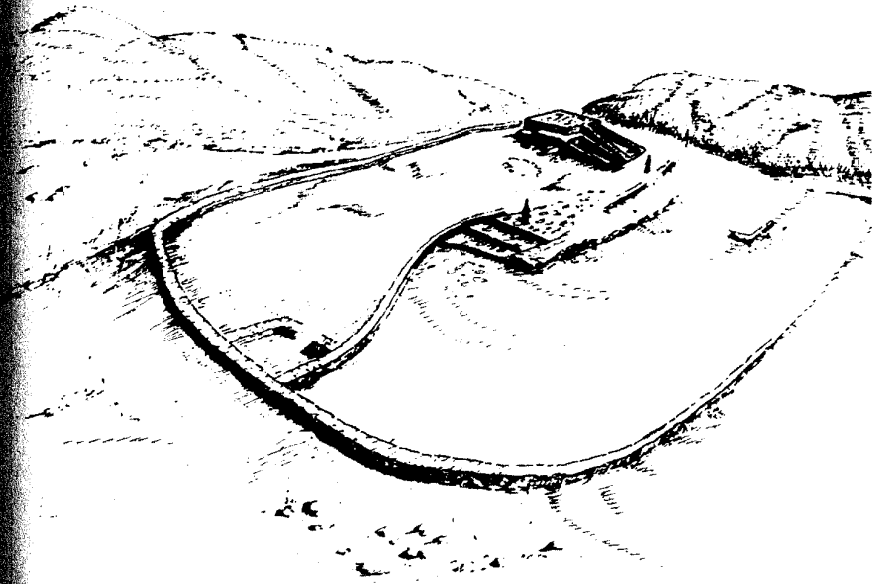


Figure 36. Overall plan of the Mt. Ebal sanctuary. From A. Zertal, *BAR* II, no. 1:36.

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>

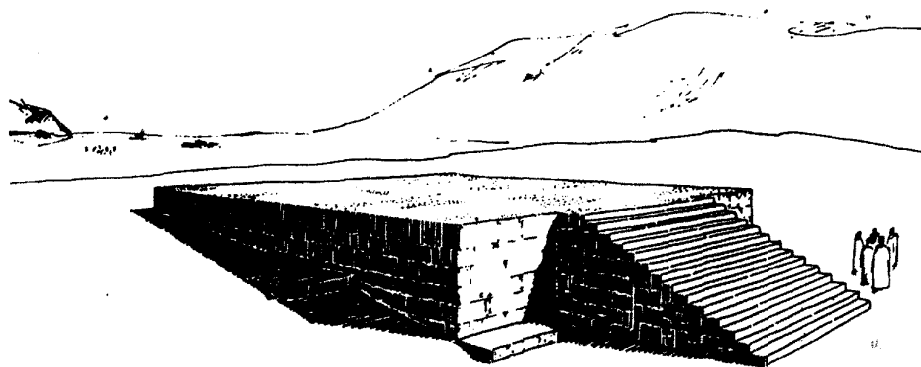


Figure 37. The "high place" at Dan (ninth century B.C.). From *Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. I, p. 319.

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

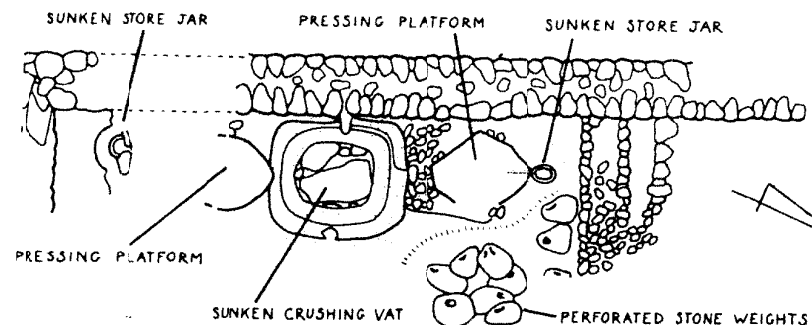


Figure 38. Plan of the olive-pressing installation in the temple precincts at Dan (ninth century B.C.). From L. A. Stager and S. R. Wolff, *BASOR* 243, fig. 1.

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

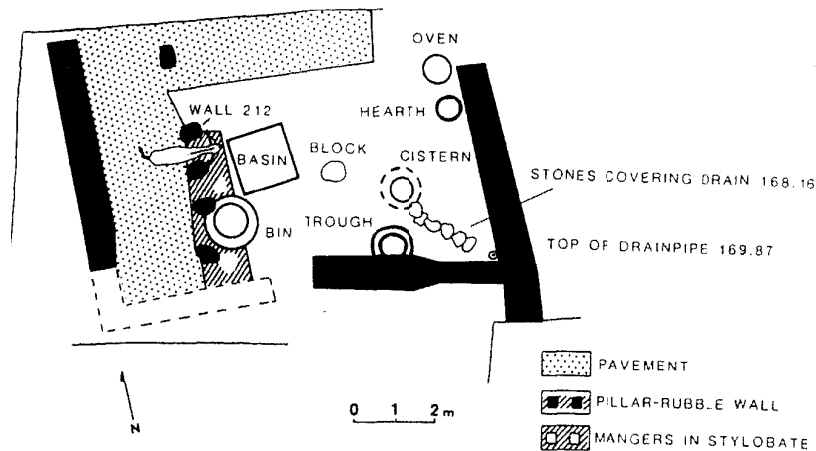


Figure 39. Plan of the Ta'anach "Cultic Structure" (tenth century B.C.).  
From P. W. Lapp, *BASOR* 173, fig. 12.

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>

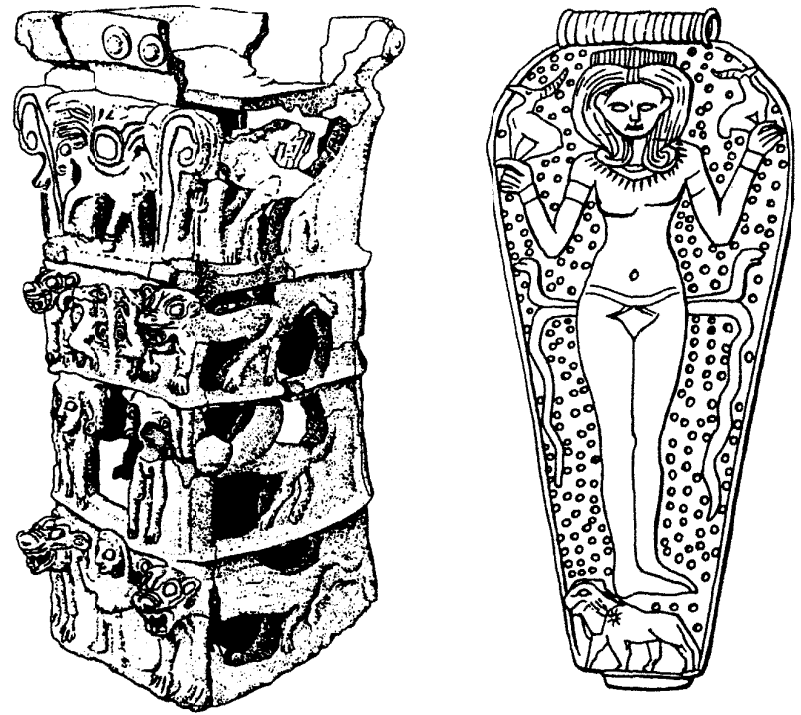


Figure 40. The Ta'anach ceramic offering stand (tenth century B.C.). From K. Galling, ed., *Biblisches Realexikon*, 2d edition, fig. 45.

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.

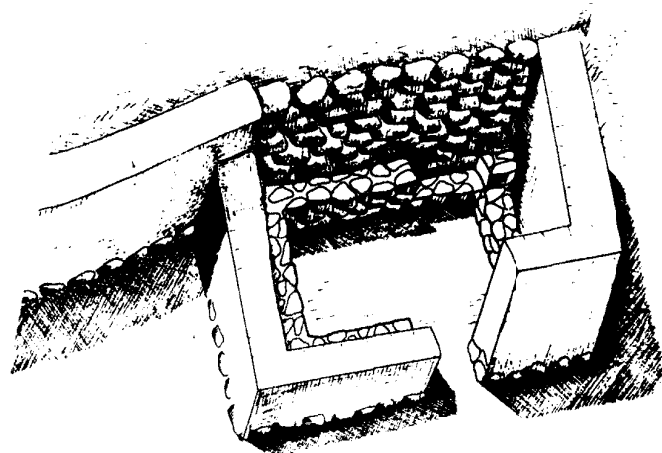


Figure 42. Plan of "Cult Room 49" at Lachish (tenth century B.C.).  
From Y. Aharoni et al., *Lachish V*, fig. 7.

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 *qōdēš kōhānīm*, "set apart for the priests."

The inner room (the *hekhal* 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 *devir* (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

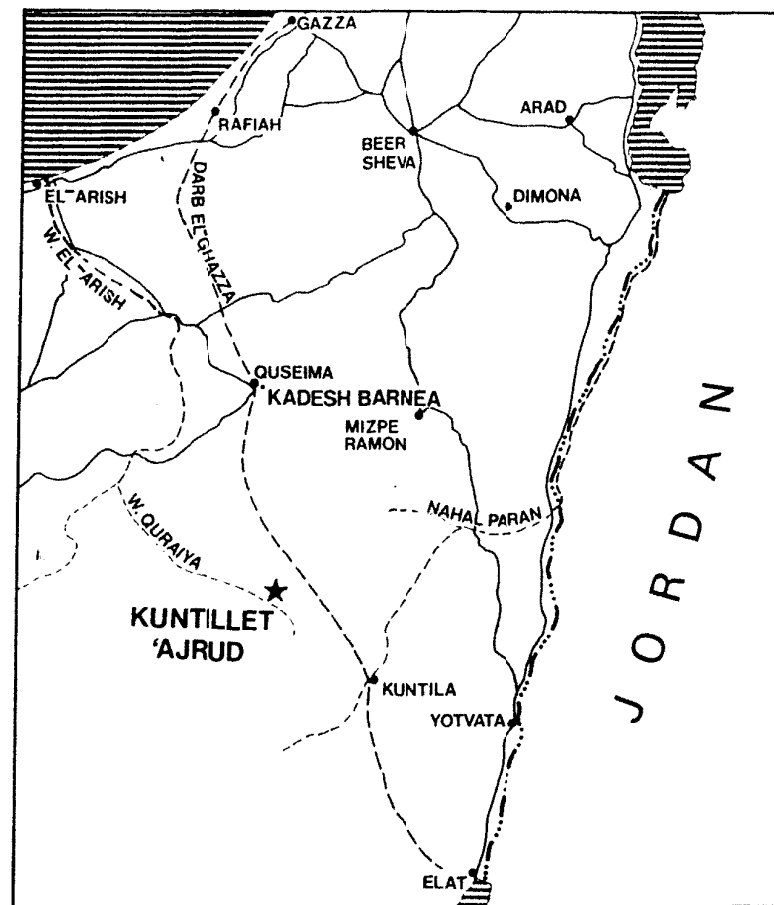


Figure 43. Map showing the location of Kuntillet 'Ajrūd (Horvat Teiman).  
From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 1.

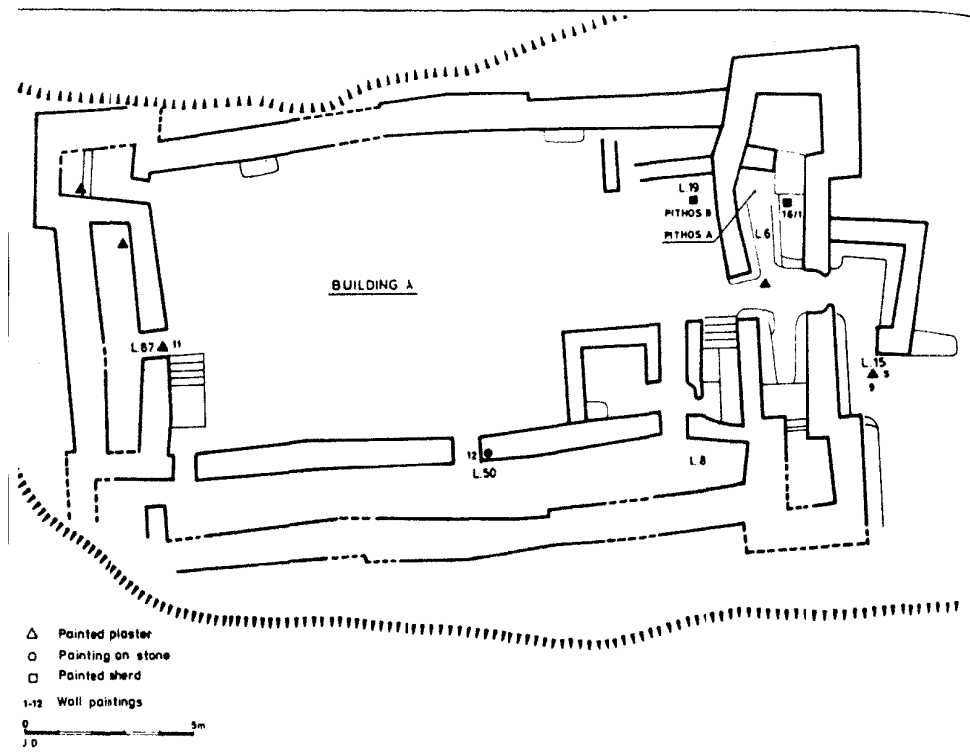


Figure 44. Plan of the fort at Kuntillet 'Ajrūd. From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 2.

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 'Ajrūd storejars. From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 4.



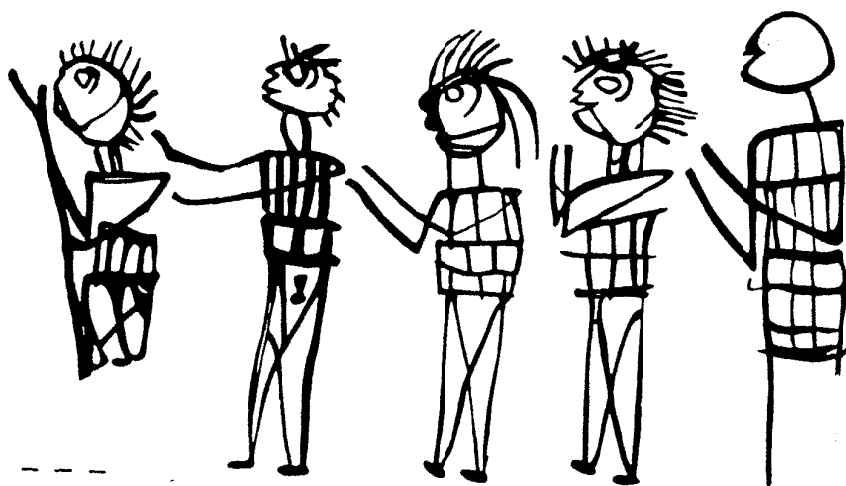


Figure 46. The 'Ajrûd processional scene. From P. Beck, *Tel Aviv* 9, fig. 6.

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-

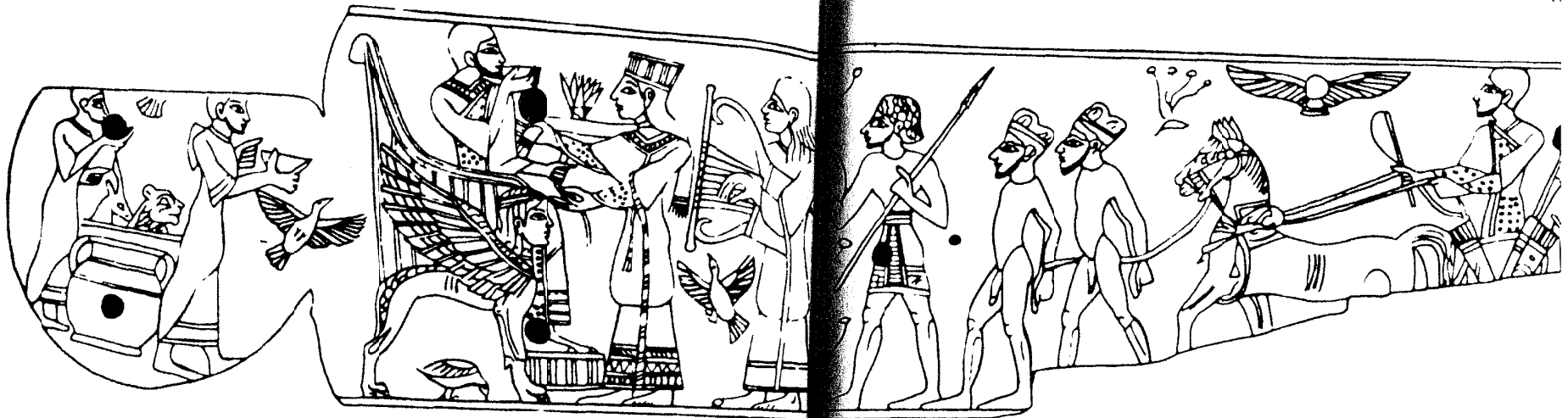


Figure 48. A Megiddo carved ivory panel with a processional before a lion-throne

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

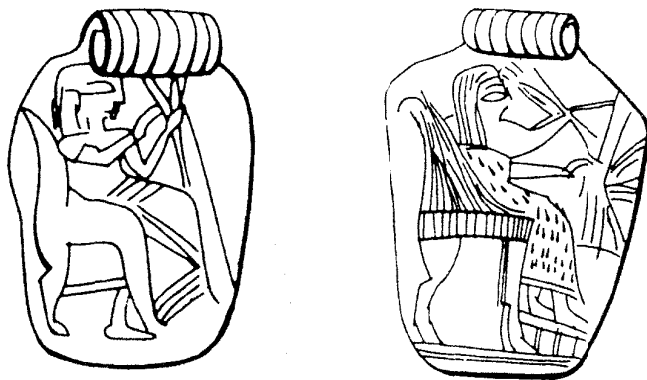


Figure 49. Two electrum pendants from Ugarit, showing a female deity sitting on a stylized lion-throne (fourteenth century B.C.). From C. F. A. Schaeffer, *Ugaritica I*, figs. 149:1, 4.

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

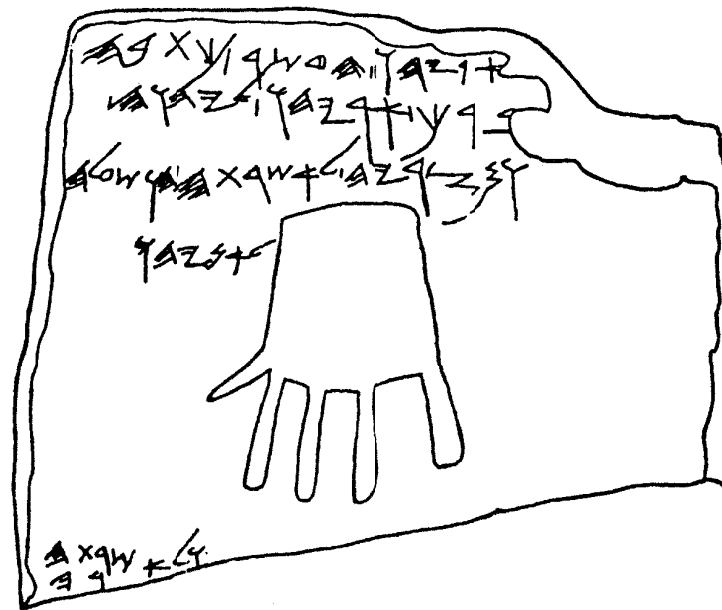


Figure 50. Inscription III from Kh. el-Qôm (eighth century B. C.).  
From A. Lemaire, *Revue biblique* 84, fig. 1.

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

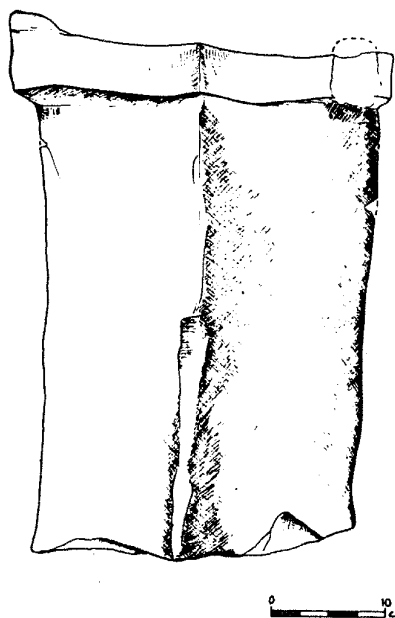


Figure 51. Small limestone “horned altar” from “Cult Room 49” at Lachish (tenth century B.C.). From Y. Aharoni, *Lachish V, The Sanctuary and Residency*, Plate 43:7.

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

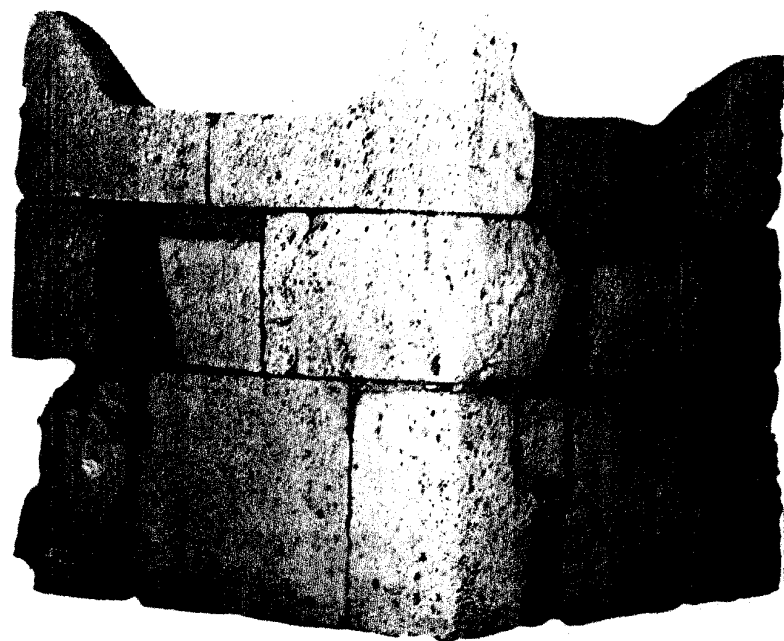


Figure 52. The large “horned altar” from Beersheba, as reassembled (eighth or seventh century B.C.). From *BAR* II, no. 1:38.

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

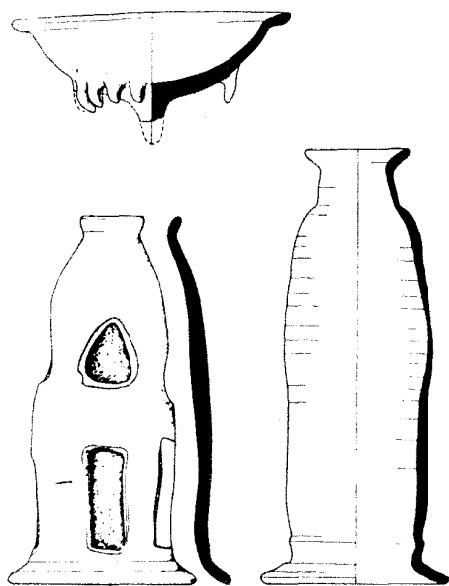


Figure 53. Ceramic cult stands and libation bowls from "Cult Room 49" at Lachish (tenth century B.C.). From Y. Aharoni, *Lachish V: The Sanctuary and the Residence*, plates 43:1-4.

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,

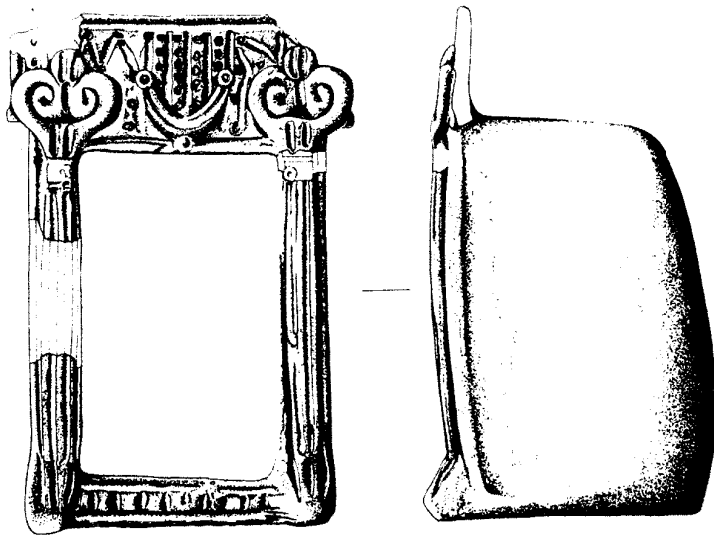


Figure 54. Terra-cotta temple model from (ca. Tell el-Far'ah (N.) ninth century B.C.). From A. Chambon, *Tel el-Far'ah 1: L'Age du Fer*, plate 66.

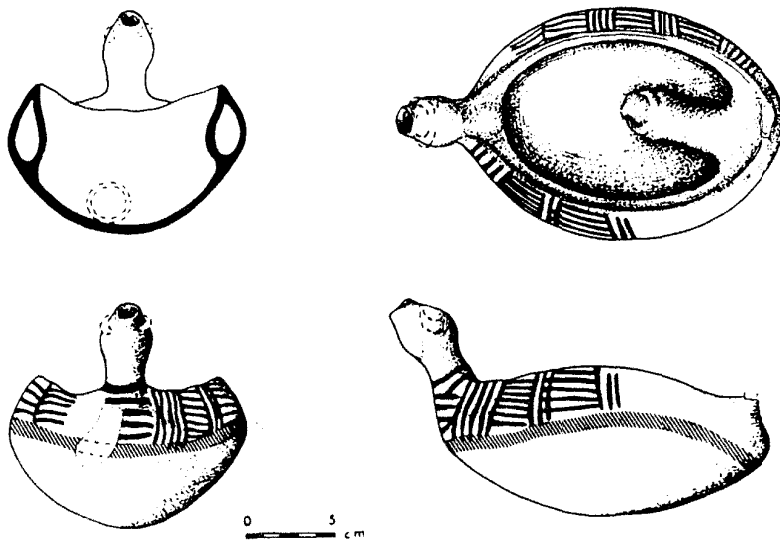


Figure 55. *Kernos* from Tell Qasile (twelfth-eleventh century B.C.).

but also more mysterious, are the *kernos*, 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 *kernos* were adopted by the Israelites, or how they functioned in the Israelite cult, is uncertain.<sup>25</sup>



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-

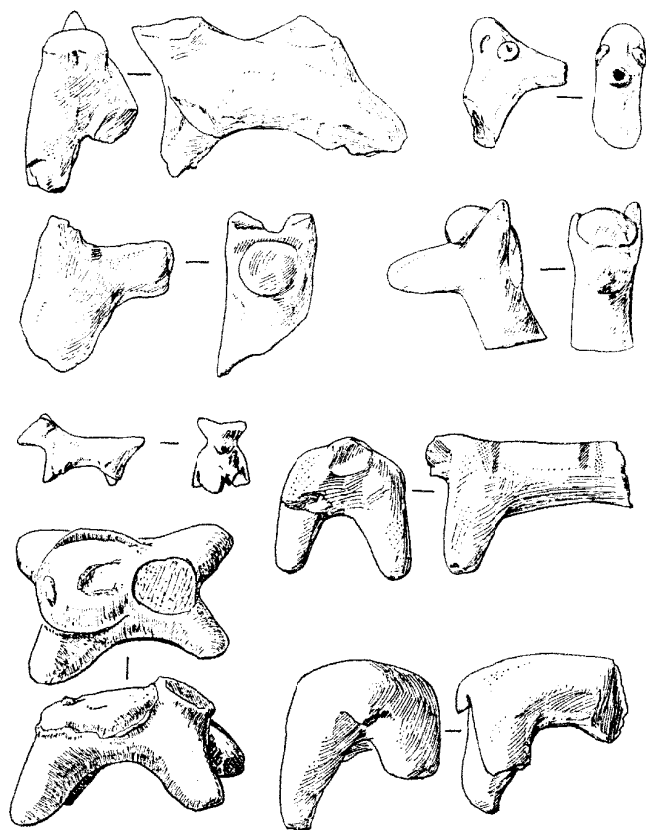


Figure 56. Zoomorphic figurines from Jerusalem (eighth-seventh century B.C.). From K. M. Kenyon, *Jerusalem. Excavating 3000 Years of History*, fig. 9.

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 King: 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 'Ajrûd 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

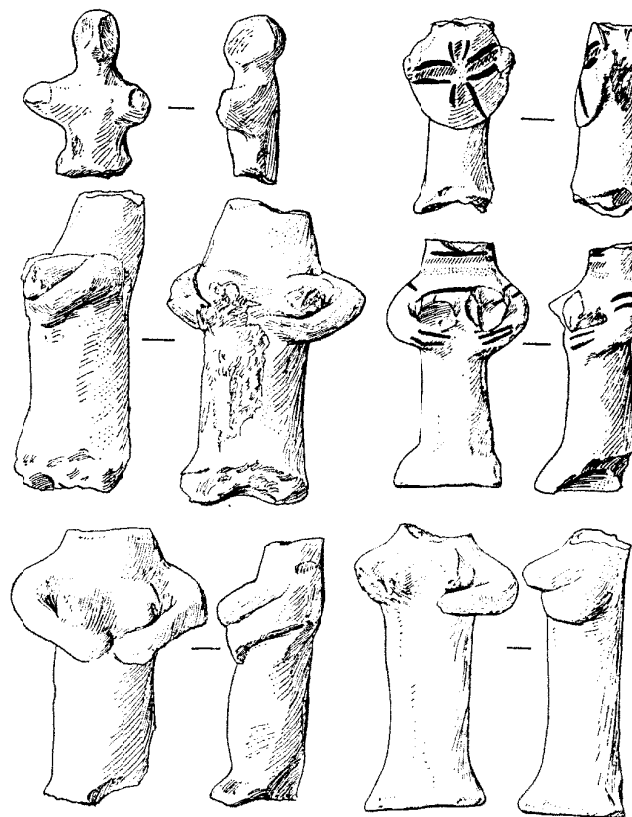


Figure 58. Female figurines from Kenyon's "cult-cache" in Jerusalem (seventh century B.C.). From K. M. Kenyon, *Jerusalem*, fig. 10.



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

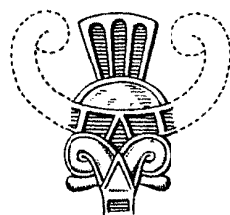
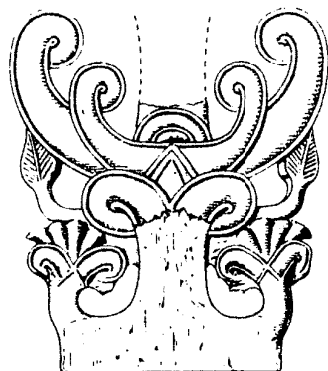


Figure 60. Carved ivory inlays from Ahab's palace at Samaria, in Phoenician style (ninth-eighth century B.C.). From J. W. Crowfoot, J. M. Crowfoot, and K. M. Kenyon, *Samaria-Sebaste II*, plates 5, 6, 17, 22.

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