The Quest for the Historical Israel
Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel

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BRILL
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The Babylonian conquests of Philistia and Judah between 605 and 586 B.C.E. were even more devastating than the Assyrian ones. Violent conflagrations have been identified at Ashkelon, Ekron, Timnah (Tel Batash), Jerusalem, Lachish, and the rest of Judah. In Jerusalem, one of the burnt houses on the eastern slopes of the City of David contained a collection of fifty-three seal impressions on clay bullae that sealed folded papyrus documents. As elsewhere in Judah, most of the names end with the suffix -yahu, and one is a person known from the book of Jeremiah, namely, Gemaryahu son of Shaphan, the scribe in the court of Jehoiakim, king of Judah (see Jer 36:10). In his office, Baruch son of Neryah, Jeremiah’s assistant, read Jeremiah’s prophecy against Jerusalem. Another bulla with the name of a person known from the book of Jeremiah was recently found above the foundations of the large building northwest of the Stepped Stone Structure in the City of David in Jerusalem. It mentions Jehochal, son of Shlamyahu (Jer 38:1), one of the four officials who charged Jeremiah with crimes, resulting in his imprisonment in a cistern full of clay during the days of Zedekiah shortly before the fall of Jerusalem. The Lachish letters, eighteen ostraca found in the city gate of Lachish, tell the story of the last days of Judah. In one famous line the writer records: “we are watching for the [fire] signals of Lachish . . . for we cannot see Azekah.” This is considered by many to be a letter written during the last days before the fall of Lachish to the Babylonians and recalling Jer 34:7.

Following the Babylonian conquest, Jerusalem and most of the rest of Judah stood in ruins for several decades. Continuance of life during the Babylonian period can be attested only in the land of Benjamin north of Jerusalem. This is in accord with the biblical evidence related to Gedaliah son of Ahiqam and several references in the book of Jeremiah alluding to the continuance of the Judean population in this particular region.

**LONG-TERM PROCESSES: THE CASE OF ISRAELITE RELIGION**

This superficial survey indicates that the framework of the biblical narrative in regards to short-term historical events is fairly accurate and can either be corroborated by, or examined and corrected in light of, archaeological data. Yet, such short-term events and their archaeological record are just one aspect of the archaeological enterprise. Much of the research is dedicated to the reconstruction of long-term processes regarding various aspects of life. The social and economic aspects of ancient Israel and its neighbors during the Iron II period have become subjects of extensive research in recent years, resulting in a large number of studies referring to settlement history, agriculture, technology, urban planning and architecture, and many other aspects of life. Several recently published syntheses on some of these subjects (such as
religion, social structure, and daily life in ancient Israel) are based on wide-scale, extensive field research, which has recovered much new data. In the present context it is impossible even to touch briefly on these issues. I will confine myself to just one aspect, namely, the religions of Israel and Judah. This subject has been discussed at length in several recent studies, among them the comprehensive books by Ziony Zevit, Rainer Albertz, and William G. Dever.

Each Iron Age territorial state had its own major god: Milkom in Ammon, Kemosh in Moab, Qaus in Edom, and Yahweh in Israel and Judah. Private names found on seals, seal impressions, and other written documents in Judah (mostly from the eighth century B.C.E. and later) include in many cases the theophoric ending -yah, while in northern Israel the common ending is -ya. Both reflect belief in the god of Israel, Yahweh, the national god of both kingdoms. However, in northern Israel, where the older Canaanite legacy was stronger, we find also private names with Canaanite theophoric endings like Baal. Indeed, the population of the Northern Kingdom included many indigenous Canaanites, who inhabited the main northern valleys. In addition, Israel was heavily influenced by nearby Phoenicia.

An analysis of the biblical sources as well as the archaeological remains shows that Israelite religion passed through several stages of development. The worship of Yahweh alongside a consort named Asherah is known from the inscriptions at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, a fortified citadel-like structure in the eastern Sinai desert dated to about 800 B.C.E. This unusual and remote site, located on the main highway between Gaza and the Red Sea, seems to have been used as a roadside station, but was also a place of religious activity. It seems to have been utilized by people from both Israel and Judah, as can be detected by pottery types that represent both kingdoms. Ink inscriptions and paintings found on the white plaster of the walls, as well as on large pottery containers and a stone trough, contain dedications, prayers, and blessings. The most revealing is a dedication or prayer to Yahweh and "his Asherah." A similar combination of Yahweh and Asherah appears also on an inscription from a cave at Khirbet el-Kom (biblical Makedah?) in the Shephelah. This combination probably reflects a theology that is substantially different from the pure monotheistic religion as it is preserved for us in the Hebrew Bible. This evidence indicates a strong continuity with Canaanite religion, where El was the head of the pantheon and Asherah was his consort. While the worship of Asherah was condemned by the Jerusalem prophets, they probably represent the new theology that was emerging towards the end of the monarchy among the Jerusalem intellectual elite, while the popular religion embraced by the common folk was much more traditional, preserving indigenous ideas and beliefs rooted in Canaanite religion.
The stately citadel of Arad in the northern Negev guarded the desert border and the roads leading to Edom from the ninth century onwards. It contained the only Judean temple recovered so far. The temple comprised a broad hall with a niche, in which were two standing stones (*masseboth*), one larger than the other, with two incense altars at their front. In the courtyard in front of the hall there was a sacrificial altar. The two standing stones and related incense altars may signify the worship of Yahweh and his consort Asherah, as in the case of the inscriptions mentioned above. The excavator, Yohanan Aharoni, dated the temple at Arad to the tenth through seventh centuries and proposed that it was damaged during Hezekiah's religious reform and fell out of use during Josiah's religious reform in the late-seventh century. This was thought to be a prime example of archaeological fieldwork illustrating famous biblical passages. But alas, a more recent analysis of the Arad stratigraphy and chronology has led Zeev Herzog to doubt these correlations; he now suggests that the temple existed prior to the time of Hezekiah and went out of use even before his time. This conclusion, which deconstructed Aharoni's biblical correlations, must be evaluated eventually against a detailed (yet unpublished) excavation report.

The only public, monumental temple excavated so far in northern Israel is the one discovered at Tel Dan. It was identified by its excavator, Avraham Biran, as the temple (or *byt bamot*) erected by Jeroboam I at the end of the tenth century B.C.E. and as one of two religious centers intended to counterbalance the Jerusalem temple (1 Kgs 12:28–31). Even if this precise foundation date of the temple at Tel Dan may be questioned, the existence of a major temple at Dan during the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. is beyond question. The temple enclosure features a podium built of ashlar stones that probably supported a shrine, which might have contained the "golden calf" mentioned in 1 Kgs 12:29. In a spacious courtyard at the front of the temple, there was a large sacrificial altar with four horns, the latter being an essential part of the altar in the Bible. Subsidiary rooms at the side of the enclosure were used for ritual and other cultic functions. A similar four-horned altar constructed of ashlar stones from Beer-sheba was in use sometime during the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. Later, perhaps during Hezekiah's time, it was dismantled and its stones used as building material. This indicates that similar ashlar altars were common to both Israel and Judah in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E. It is interesting to note that in both cases, the altars were constructed of well-cut stones, in contrast to the biblical law, which requires that an altar be built from unhewn stones.

The golden calves, which the Bible mentions as the main cult object at Dan and Bethel, can be compared to the cherubim in the Jerusalem Temple. They probably symbolized the pedestal of the unseen god of Israel, similar
to Canaanite and Aramean depictions of the storm god standing on a bull. As noted in part 2, a young bull appears in a cultic site, the "Bull Site," of the twelfth century from northern Samaria. The tenth-century pottery altar (known as a "cult stand") from Taanach mentioned above shows a bull or a calf below a winged sun disk at the top of a four-tier depiction. At the lower tier there is a naked goddess. Some suggested that the scene shows a combination of the god of Israel (symbolized by the winged disk and the calf) and Asherah.

Evidence for local cult places and places of worship near city gates or in open areas inside the city has been found at several sites, such as Dan, Tel Rehov, Megiddo, Samaria, and Lachish. The use of standing stones, or biblical *masseboth*, has been detected at several of these places, for example, the city gates of Dan and Bethsaida (a large Aramean [Geshurite?] city north of the Sea of Galilee). Like Asherah, the *masseboth* were opposed by the prophets as symbols of a foreign (Canaanite) cult; however their presence at these sites indicates that these standing stones were popular in both Israel and Judah.

Hundreds of clay figurines found in both Israel and Judah representing naked women are probably related to the popular cult of Asherah. In the Northern Kingdom, as well as in Philistia, the depictions are naturalistic, the sexual elements are emphasized and the artistic style is rooted in Canaanite art and probably inspired by contemporary Phoenician art. In Judah, the figurines that were popular during the eighth and seventh centuries were more stylized. While the molded head is naturalistic, the body is depicted as a schematic pillar, perhaps as the trunk of a tree, which symbolizes Asherah. It also has two hands usually supporting protruding breasts. Hundreds of fragments of such figurines were found in Jerusalem in houses dated from the eighth to early-sixth centuries B.C.E., indicating that while the prophets of Jerusalem preached against the worship of Asherah, her cult was popular in the city as well as elsewhere in Judah. Naked female figurines are also the main decorative motif on clay altars from the tenth to ninth centuries found at Tel Rehov (fig. 9) and Pella. These altars often have four horns, like the similar stone altars found at several sites. Such altars were used for burning incense or for making small sacrifices in residential cult corners, and they should be seen as part of the popular religion of the time. In a few other cases, such altars were more elaborately decorated, like the two tenth-century pottery altars found at Taanach, which yielded rich iconography rooted in the Canaanite art.

This brief survey reveals that during most of the monarchical period, Israelite religion, though centered on the national god Yahweh, was based on Canaanite myths, beliefs, and cult practices, and a great goddess was worshipped alongside the main male god. A major change took place during the late-eighth and the seventh centuries B.C.E. in and around Jerusalem, with the
centralization of cult at the temple of Jerusalem. The inscriptions and artifacts related to cultic practices show that Israelite monotheism was a product of a long and gradual process. Jerusalem during Josiah’s reign is considered by many as the time and place when Judahite religion consolidated and became the foundation for further development into monotheistic Judaism as we know it, a development that further crystallized during the exilic and post-exilic periods.

Archaeology can supply only hints to the vigorous flourishing of religious, theological, and literary activities of the seventh century B.C.E. The only biblical texts actually to have been found in excavations and that date to this time are two copies of the priestly benediction (Num 6:24–25), one of the most important Jewish prayers to this day. They were found by Gabriel Barkay incised in miniature letters on small silver amulets, which were among the rich
finds in a burial cave in the Hinnom Valley of Jerusalem. These indicate that such texts were well known in Jerusalem towards the end of the monarchy. In addition, a Hebrew letter found at the coastal fort of Metsad Hashavyahu is based on first-hand knowledge of the social laws in Deut 24:12–13, which prohibits taking from the poor his last piece of clothing. Thus, the Torah laws were well known and utilized in practical life in the seventh century B.C.E.

Epilogue

I have limited myself in this brief survey to a few subjects, yet archaeology of the Iron II period has much more to offer relating to society, daily life, economy and technology, international relations, art, and many other issues relating to the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, as well as to their neighbors, the Philistines, Phoenicians, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites. Much more has become known of the Assyrian and Babylonian presence in the country. The discoveries from recent years relating to these topics are manifold and sometimes breathtaking, like the seventh-century royal inscription found in the temple of Ekron (Tel Miqne), mentioning five generations of kings, as well as the name of the chief goddess of this late-Philistine city, (probably to be read as Ptgyh).