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The Abandonment of Cult Places in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah as Acts of Cult Reform

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For many years archaeologists have tried to find evidence for the cult reforms mentioned in the Book of Kings. They assumed that the destruction of cult places (bamōt), the demolition of altars and smashed sacred pillars (massēbāת)—as the reforms are described in the Book of Kings—would have left traces which archaeologists should be able to identify in the excavated sites. So far, however, these efforts have not succeeded, and no archaeological evidence of intentional destruction and iconoclasm of the kind described in the histories of Hezekiah and Josiah have been found. Nevertheless, the termination of the sanctuary uncovered at Tel Arad and the elimination of the big horned altar discovered at Tel Beersheba have sometimes been associated with the cult reform conducted by King Hezekiah of Judah.

The evidence proposed by scholars for the assumed cult reforms conducted at Tel Arad and Tel Beersheba will be re-examined first, and will be followed by a short discussion about the abandonment of a few north Israelite cult sites. It is suggested that, on the one hand, there is no clear archaeological evidence for cult reforms of the kind described in the Book of Kings; and, on the other hand, that the intentional desertion of destroyed cultic sites in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah was part of the effort of rulers of the two kingdoms to centralize their rule by minimizing the number of cult places in their territories.

Tel Arad

The sanctuary of Arad was built in the northwestern corner of the fortress. It was constructed along an east-west axis and its main entrance was on the east. Its courtyard had an altar, and four stairs led from the courtyard to a raised cella (d’bir). Two limestone altars were found lying on the second stair, and a well-dressed, long (90 cm) limestone pillar (massēbāת), with traces of red pigment on it, was found in the cella.¹

no more speculative than Aharoni’s hypothesis of a royal order for cancellation that arrived from Jerusalem.

The date of the termination of Stratum III, including the altar, was established by Aharoni and the Tel Beersheba publication team on the basis of the biblical reference to Hezekiah’s cult reform (2 Kgs 18,4). They thus claimed to have found evidence for the cult reform mentioned in the Bible (Aharoni 1974, 6; 1975, 156; Herzog/Rainey/Moshkovitz 1977, 57–58; Rainey 1994, 349; Herzog 2001, 174–175; 2002, 67). The suggestion suffers from circular reasoning: on the basis of the reference in 2 Kgs 18,4 they establish the date of the elimination of the cult place, and then they suggest that the site supplies independent archaeological evidence for Hezekiah’s reform.

It goes without saying that uninscribed artifacts found in the excavations of Judaite sites cannot be dated to the reign of a certain Judaite king. All scholars agree that Stratum II was destroyed in the course of Sennacherib’s campaign of 701 BCE. Strata III and II in Tel Beersheba represent the same town, with minor changes during its lifetime, and their pottery is identical.9 This pottery is dated to the second half of the eighth century BCE, a more accurate date cannot be established (see Singer-Avitz 1999; 2002, 159–180). Thus, the end of Stratum III and the construction of Stratum II must be dated to this time. The altar must have ceased to function sometime before the construction of Stratum II, in the second half of the eighth century, and its stones were re-used for the building of the storehouse, just as the limestone altars were used as building material to block the entrance of the cella at Arad.

How then can we explain the discrepancy to the cancelled altars in the two sites? Altars, especially horned altars, have been found in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the late tenth–eighth centuries BCE, and most of them have not been found in cultic contexts (see Gitin 1989, 53*–57*, with earlier literature; 1993, 249–250). Of special importance are the 14 horned altars discovered in the excavations of the seventh century city of Tel Miqne / Ekron (Gitin 1989; 1993, 249–250). They were discovered in the industrial, domestic and elite zones of occupation and are not related to any central shrine or social class. Although they must have had some ritual function, no special treatment or care of these objects was noticed in the excavations. Given their utilization as building stones at Arad and Tel Beersheba, one wonders if altars continued to be regarded as sacred once they had lost their cultic function. This is not the place to enter into

8 On the relations of Strata II and III at Tel Beersheba Aharoni (1973, 107) wrote as follows: “Strata III and II are actually two phases of the same city. Virtually all excavated buildings continued to exist during both strata with only structural changes evident in many of them. In most instances the people of Stratum II re-used the floors of Stratum III […] We cannot exclude the possibility that Stratum III is actually not a true stratum […] but merely includes different phases of remodeling which took place in various buildings […] Whenever clear Stratum III floors were detected they contained homogenous material of the eighth century B. C. E., similar to the material of Stratum II.” See also Aharoni 1973, 5; 1975, 157.

9 For the history of the excavations in the area of the ‘Tempelburg’ and the various interpretations of building 338 suggested by the archaeologists who worked at Megiddo, see Ussishkin 1989, 151–154.

10 Ussishkin’s interpretation for building 338 was accepted by Mettinger 1995, 157–161. For criticism of the suggestion, see Stern 1990.

The Abandonment of Cult Places in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah

The abandonment of the Arad sanctuary in Stratum VII and the possible desertion of the cult place at Tel Beersheba in Stratum II may be compared to sites that were destroyed and not restored in the Kingdom of Israel in the ninth century BCE. In what follows I will first present the available data from the Northern Kingdom and then discuss the problem of the abandonment of cult places in the two neighbouring kingdoms.

1. Schumacher (1908, 110–124 and plates 35–39) excavated a large building complex at Megiddo which he labelled ‘die Tempelburg’ and interpreted it as a sanctuary.9 Ussishkin (1989, 149–170), upon re-examining the ‘Tempelburg’ complex, later labelled ‘Building 338,’ suggested that it was a palace containing a shrine that following its destruction was deliberately buried.10 He further suggests that Building 2081 at Megiddo was also a shrine and was destroyed and partly buried at the same time (Ussishkin 1989, 170–172; see Mettinger 1995, 162–163). The two buildings are dated to Stratum VA–IVB, which was probably destroyed by the Arameans in the second half of the ninth century BCE (for the date, see Finkelstein 1996, 182–185; 1998a, 169–170). We may safely assume that the destruction of the two shrines took place in the second half of the ninth century BCE.

2. A cultic structure was unearthed at Tannach, although its plan remains unclear (Sellin 1904, 75; Lapp 1964, 26–32; 1967, 19–23; 1969, 42–44; Glock
1993, 1431–1432). Beck (1994, 379–381) has suggested that the two cult stands unearthed at the site were used as seats for the statues of the god and goddess of the shrine. Like the shrines at Megiddo, the cultic site at Taanach was destroyed by the Arameans and its sacred objects buried under the ruins (Finkelstein 1998b).

3. A small shrine was unearthed at Tel 'Ama, east of Beth-shean, and was published in a preliminary report (Levy and Edelman 1972, 329, 338–340, 341–343, 362–363, and plates XIX, XXI). The identification of the structure as ‘cultic’ is due to the proliferation of artifacts with cultic associations (stone ‘trepid’ full of ashes, basins, chalices, bowls, etc.). It was probably destroyed by the Arameans and its sacred artifacts buried under the ruins of the building (Na'aman 1997, 127).

The destruction of the three north Israelite sites, all located in the Jezreel and Beth-shean plains, probably took place in the course of the campaigns of Hazael, king of Aram, in the 40th–20th of the ninth century BCE (Na'aman 1997, 125–127). The above data indicates that the destroyed shrines in the three sites (Megiddo, Taanach and Tell 'Ama) were not restored in the late ninth–early eighth century BCE.

The desertion of cult places and temples in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah calls for an explanation. I suggest that it was a royal decision not to restore the sacred sites, which reflected the efforts of rulers to centralize power in their hands and to strengthen their hold over the districts and towns of their kingdoms.11 Local shrines must have enjoyed prestige, achieved a certain degree of independence and competed with the royal court for economic gains. The king was considered responsible for their maintenance and restoration and had reasons for trying to reduce their number. But as closing down local sanctuaries in a peaceful situation might have provoked hostility towards the central government,12 Israelite and Judahite rulers took advantage of the destruction of cult places and avoided restoring them.

In Israel it was probably Joash and Jeroboam II, in the first half of the eighth century, who began restoring cities destroyed in the course of Sennacherib’s campaign. A full-blown state developed in the Kingdom of Israel in the first half of the ninth century BCE, whereas the Kingdom of Judah started its rise in the second half of the ninth century and reached a full-blown statehood in the first half of the eighth century (see Finkelstein 1999; 2001). It is therefore only natural that efforts to centralize power and economic activity in the royal court of Samaria also antedated by about a century.

The Books of Deuteronomy and Kings emphasize the religious and ideological motives of cult reforms and leave out the governmental and administrative aspects of these steps. Thus, for example, assuming that a certain king’s cultic policy was motivated by political, administrative, or economic objects, the author of the Book of Kings would interpret his own motives according to his historiographic objectives and would have transformed them into a religiously-motivated act.

As noted in the introduction, there is as yet no clear archaeological evidence of cult reforms of the kind expected according to the Book of Deuteronomy and implemented according to the histories of Hezekiah and Josiah. While the lack of positive evidence does not indicate that they did not occur, scholars must be aware of the fact that the Bible remains our main source for these reforms and that positive evidence has yet to be found. Only when such evidence is discovered will we be able to speak with confidence about the historicity of the cult reforms attributed to Judahite kings in the Book of Kings.14

Appendix: Two Inscribed Offering Bowls from the Temple of Arad

Two inscribed bowls with straight walls and a disk base have been discovered at the foot of the sacrificial altar at Arad. Aharoni assigned them to Stratum X and defined them as offering dishes. Each bowl has two letters, and Aharoni read the first as the letter qop and the second as an unknown symbol, noting that the qop is an abbreviation, probably of Hebrew qedesh (“holy”) (Aharoni 1975, 117–119; 1981, 116–119). Cross (1979), on the other hand, interpreted the letters as Phoenician qop and shin and dated them palaeographically to the seventh century. His suggestion was rejected by Rainey (in Herzog et al. 1984, 12, 32–33) who identified the first letter as qop and the second as archaic kap, and interpreted...

11 For the relations between royal administration and cultic measures, see Althistorian 1982, 65–74; Claburn 1973; Hjelm 1999. Weinfeld (1964) suggested that Hezekiah destroyed the cult places and outlying sanctuaries so as to bind the people closer to the Jerusalem sanctuary at the time of the rebellion against Assyria. However, the disruption of social and religious stability within Judah might have caused hostility rather than unity. Halpern (1991, 21–29) suggested that the reform was part of Hezekiah’s military strategy to abandon the countryside to the Assyrians and concentrate the rural population inside fortresses. However, Tel Beersheba and Tel Arad were fortified settlements, thus contradicting rather than supporting Halpern’s suggestion.

12 As correctly noted by Cogan and Tadmor (1988, 219): “At a time when efforts were being directed toward the physical fortification and provisioning for war, wise counsel would not have recommend cult reforms.”

13 According to Finkelstein (2001, 106), “Judah reached full-blown statehood only in the late-eighth century BCE, about a century and a half later than the Northern Kingdom.”

14 In my opinion, Josiah’s cult reform is a historical event and the account of the cultic measures taken in Jerusalem, Bethel and possibly also in the Kingdom of Judah (but not in Samaria) reflects the historical reality of his time. The text mainly refers to the purification of the cult in Jerusalem and the destruction of the cult place of Bethel, and these measures cannot be verified by archaeology. See Na’aman 1995b, 466–470; 2002, 55–60. For the ancient Near Eastern background of the reform, see Spieckermann 1982, 227–381; Uehlinger 1995, 71–81, with earlier literature.