OF CULTS AND CULTURES:
REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

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Two recent discoveries in Israel have been interpreted by their excavators as Israelite cultic installations from the early Iron Age. I wish first to summarize the evidence as it has been published, and then to offer some general comments on the criteria for such functional and political interpretations.

The 'Bull Site'
The first, in the central hill country c. 6 km. south-south-west of the modern town of Jenin, was brought to the attention of archaeologists by a soldier's discovery there of a bronze figurine of a young bull. (For details see Mazar 1982, 1983.) The find-spot of the figurine proved to be a small, shallow site on the bedrock of a ridge above (but not overlooking) the ancient road from Dothan to Tirzah; there are five other small unexcavated sites with Iron Age pottery within a 5 km. radius.

The preserved remains are scanty, and consist of portions of a circular enclosure wall with an entrance on the east; within this enclosure occupational debris was almost entirely eroded away except for a small area in the southeast corner. Here, in the soil between a number of stones, were found some bones, a typical domestic flint assemblage, an unidentified bronze object, and fragments of pottery; the latter consist of three bowl rims and five bowl (or jug) bases, one krater rim, one amphora rim, one pilgrim flask rim, two juglet bases, and three cooking pot rims, together with a base fragment to which we shall return. The ceramic evidence dates the site to the early Iron I period, and, although a very small sample (16 sherds published), represents a typical domestic repertoire. The base just mentioned is interpreted by Mazar as the fragment of a large cult object, either a model shrine or an incense burner, but since it is only a small fragment this is not compelling.

The architectural remains apart from the partially preserved enclosure wall and its entrance are extremely sparse, consisting of a few groupings of stones, which may or may not be in their original position, and one large rectangular stone, minimally dressed but more so than the others, lying on its long narrow side. Although interpreted by Mazar as a maṣṣāḥ or an altar, it could just as easily be a table, or a fallen pillar from a 'four-room house' typical of the period.

For Mazar, as the titles of his articles suggest, the site is an open-air Israelite cult place, a type of bāmā; this interpretation is open to question both functionally and politically. The only significant piece of evidence which cannot easily be interpreted as domestic is the bull figurine, and we shall return to it. The meager architectural remains can be understood in various ways; the enclosed area (c. 380 sq. m.) could have been a residence for a family and its livestock, or a corral for livestock with a dwelling for a shepherd. Since the bones are not identified in the published reports, they cannot be used, but the pottery and lithics are unexceptional, and fit best into a domestic context.

There remains the bull figurine. I agree with Mazar that it probably had a ritual function. Since its exact find-spot is apparently not certain, it is not necessarily associated with the large
flat stone; even if it were, this would not require that the site as a whole was cultic (and, by implication, public; throughout this essay I use ‘cultic’ in the sense of belonging to public ritual); it could just as easily have been used in some sort of private, domestic ritual. It is equally difficult, as Mazar suggests, to determine the deity associated with the bull; El (pace Mazar), Baal, and Yahweh are all possible.

The Mount Ebal Site

On the north-eastern slope of Mount Ebal, in the course of an intensive long-term survey of the tribal territory of Manasseh, Adam Zertal has uncovered the remains of an installation which he has interpreted as the altar described in Deut. 27:5-7 and Josh. 8:30-21 (Zertal 1985). There are not other Iron Age sites on the mountain; this site is therefore isolated, with Shechem (Tell Balâjah) the nearest major settlement.

The only full publication to date is a popular summary. From it we are able to ascertain that the site (el-Barnat) is a one-period, Iron I installation, with two distinct architectural phases. The major installation is located in the north-east quadrant of an area of c. 3,500 sq. m., formed by a low enclosure wall which had a stepped entry on one side. The central structure is rectangular (c. 7.5 × 9 m.) with walls 1.4 m. thick. Its centre is hollow, divided by two incomplete cross-walls, and filled with layers of stones, soil and ashes which contained pottery and the bones of young bulls, sheep and goats, and fallow deer. Under the fill were a number of stone installations also associated with ashly debris. Attached to the structure are two rectangular courtyards divided by a wall which may have served as a ramp leading to the top of the filled chamber. Within the enclosed area were a number of stone installations, some containing pottery, others ashes and animals bones.

The pottery consisted of the characteristic Iron Age I collared-rim store jars (c. 70%), jugs and chalices (c. 20%), and miniature vessels; very few cooking pots were found.

This complex is unlike any other known from this period. In view of the absence of significant numbers of elements of the ordinary domestic ceramic repertoire and the presence of miniature vessels, the isolation of the site from contemporary settlements, and some of the parallels adduced by Zertal, I tentatively concur with his interpretation of the function of the site as cultic; confirmation or revision will have to await full publication.

CRITERIA FOR CULTIC INTERPRETATION

Implicit in my remarks on these two sites are criteria for assigning a cultic function to archaeological remains. It is an archaeological cliché that whenever excavators are unable to ascertain the function of a feature they conclude that it must have been cultic (see Shiloh 1979, 147; Fowler 1985, 25); to my knowledge no theoretical statement of the grounds for such interpretation exists. I wish therefore to propose four basic criteria which can be used in the absence of decisive written evidence.

1. Isolation. In most cultures there is a conscious separation between the holy and the profane. Architecturally this finds expression in a temenos wall which separates a holy place from its immediate context, whether natural or settled. In the Near East such dividing walls are well attested in both literary and archaeological sources; among the latter we may list as examples the Ein Gedi Chalcolithic shrine (see most recently Ussishkin 1980), the Megiddo complex in Area BB (Loud 1948), and Qasile Stratum X (Mazar 1980, 71).

2. Exotic Materials. The special function of cultic sites will normally result in the presence of material not typical of other contexts, such as miniature vessels (see notably the collection from
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Athienou [T. Dothan and Ben-Tor 1983, 53-110; unhappily, the structure associated with these vessels was incomplete]; also Nahariyyah [Ben-Dor 1959, 19-26; M. Dothan 1956, 19]; Qasile [Mazar 1980, 117-18; etc.], figurines, rare or expensive objects, and the like. (M. D. Fowler 1985) has recently shown that neither 'incense burners' nor figurines necessarily had a cultic function. Similar analysis needs to be done of other types of exotic objects.) If the cultic site was served by personnel on a regular basis, elements of normal repertoire, especially such domestic material as cooking pots, will also occur, but the proportion of normal exotic objects will differ significantly from that in other contexts. Similarly, we must allow for the existence of private ritual and the survival of its appurtenances; but again, the proportion of exotic objects used in a domestic context should be relatively small in comparison with non-ritual materials.

(3) Continuity. This criterion applies only to multi-period sites. Examples still in use include the Haram esh-Sharif (the Temple Mount) in Jerusalem, in virtually continuous use as a sanctuary for three millennia, and the Umayyad mosque in Damascus, whose history as a place of worship extends back for at least two millennia. Notable archaeological examples include the Megiddo BB complex, in use from EB I to Iron I; the successive sanctuaries at Beth Shan, from the Late Bronze and early Iron Ages; and the Fosse Temples at Lachish. This criterion may be applied either backwards or forwards in time; thus, one reason for arguing a cultic function for the complex in Area BB in Megiddo Stratum XIX is the continuing use of this area as sacred space.

(4) Parallels. Given religious, not to say human, conservatism, similar functions will entail similar forms, especially, but not only, when they are contemporary. Thus, building plans, altars, pedestals, and the like should show resemblance to cultic installations known from written or non-written sources.

None of these criteria, of course, is watertight; they overlap in some ways, and the absence of one or more (especially that of continuity for one-period sites) is not necessarily conclusive. But the higher the number of criteria present the more probable is the assignment of a cultic function.

This is not the place to present an exhaustive list of cultic installations in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine. Let me rather illustrate the application of the criteria by discussing a number of cases, some more obvious than others.

(1) The Chalcolithic Enclosure at Ein Gedi. As already mentioned, here the element of isolation is doubly present: the sanctuary itself is located in an enclosure separated from its immediate environment by a fence 0.5 m high and 0.7-0.9 m wide where preserved; in addition, the complex is far removed from any major settlement. The finds included a fragment of an alabaster vessel of Egyptian provenience, ceramic animal figurines, a variety of animal bones, a few flints, and a large pottery corpus. This pottery is significant for the proportions of vessel types attested: of a total of 1889 complete forms and fragments (excluding the figurines), 1316 (69.6%) were cornets, 421 (22.3%) were bowls, and 69 (3.7%) were bowls on fenestrated pedestals, while jars and holemouth jars accounted for the remaining 4.4% (Ussishkin 1980, 19). The proportion of cornets and bowls is remarkably high, and indicates specialized function: the bowls used for food offerings and the cornets for libations. The absence of cooking pots further suggests that the sanctuary was used only sporadically, i.e., that there was no group in continuous residence there.

If the hoard of objects from the 'Cave of the Treasure' at Nahal Mishmar (see Bar-Adon 1980) is included in the discussion, the exotic elements are dramatically increased. While I
agree with those who associate the hoard with the Ein Gedi complex (Ussishkin 1971; 1980, 39–40; Epstein 1978, 26; contrast Bar-Adon’s caution [1980, 202]), there is no direct evidence of such a connexion and so it is not used here. Furthermore, it is possible that the enclosure above the caves was a cult-place, but the remains there are extremely fragmentary (see Bar-Adon 1980, 12–13).

Other features uncharacteristic of non-cultic function include the circular installation in the centre of the courtyard, the altar opposite the doorway of the largest building, the three sets of benches, and the faēssae at both ends. Parallels to these features and to the architecture are attested at Megiddo Stratum XIX, and perhaps elsewhere; see further Wright 1970; Amiran 1981; Yeivin 1973; Ottosson 1980, 11–19. Since the site was only used during one period, continuity is not exhibited, but the clustering of other elements makes the identification of the complex as a sanctuary virtually certain.

(2) The Lachish Fosse Temples. In the ditched fosse of the Middle Bronze Age fortifications and outside the contemporary Late Bronze Age city of Lachish, three superimposed structures were found (Tuftnell et al. 1940). Their use covers the entire Late Bronze Age, from the early fifteenth century to the twelfth century (for the latter date see Ussishkin 1983, 168–170). All three buildings are asymmetrical in plan, with a combination podium (probably for statues of the deities worshipped) and altar as focus of the building screened from view from the outside by the lateral placement of the entrances. Other notable features, especially in the best preserved uppermost structure, are benches on which bowls were placed, and a large number of faēssae full of bones and pottery outside the structures. Exotic materials included a variety of carved ivory artifacts, faience, glass, and gold and bronze ornaments and statuettes, including several identified as the deity Resheph. There were also votive inscriptions on a bowl and on a ewer, the latter dedicated to the goddess ‘Elat (see Gross 1967, 16). The bones consisted largely of the right shoulders of young animals (cf. Lev. 7:32). The ‘astonishing profusion of pottery’ (Tuftnell 1940, 41) in the rooms and in the faēssae was predominantly bowls, which comprised 80% of the vessels from Structure I, 77% from Structure II, and 91% from Structure III (where the count was incomplete because of their overwhelming number). The first three criteria thus apply, but that of parallels is elusive. Ottosson (1980, 90–92) has recently proposed that the complex was a potter’s workshop rather than a temple, adumbrating similar structures at Hazor and Sarepta. Only some of the features, however, are parallel, and these only vaguely so. Moreover, the implication that the large quantity of vessels found in the pits outside the structures were wasters supposes an extraordinarily inept potter; finally a Late Bronze Age potter’s workshop was found in a cave to the north of the tell (Tuftnell 1940, 81). While it must be acknowledged that there are not exact parallels to the plans of the successive Lachish structures, a number of sanctuaries with the same general asymmetrical plan and similar placement of the altar are known. (For full discussion see Mazar 1980, 51–73 and Stern 1984, 31–36.) I conclude, with the vast majority of scholars, that these were indeed temples.

(3) Tananir. The large rectangular structure south of Tell Balâṭah was identified by its first excavator, G. Welter, as a sanctuary; re-excavation by Boling in 1968 clarified the occupational history of the building. It is now clear that it was occupied during the MB III (MB II–C) period, and at least in the earliest phases there was another similar structure adjacent to it. The finds from the 1968 work include a normal domestic ceramic repertoire (‘all in common MB II wares and forms’ [Boling 1975, 51]), some buttons, a scarab, a piece of ivory inlay, and, from the fill of the foundation trench of one of the walls, a copper needle and parts of an alabaster jar; reports from the earlier excavation mention other objects such as a stone idol, incense stands, and a phallus. The building itself consists of rooms of various sizes surrounding a large
centrally located building which had a central pillar and a large platform in the south-east corner. Weiser and Boling agree on a cultic interpretation: the finds are exotic, the central pillar was a kind of *masjid*, the platform was an altar. At the time of excavation Albright (1960, 92) thought that the building was a large villa, similar in design to others from the same period, and Wright (1965, 29) agreed. With the discovery of a square building of similar design outside Amman in 1955 (re-excavated by Hennessy in 1966 and Herr in 1976; for details see Herr 1983), identified by many as a temple (including Wright; see Campbell and Wright 1969), the missing architectural parallel (Boling 1975, 33) seemed to have been found. But the Amman structure is late thirteenth century, and Herr has convincingly proposed that it was a mortuary; the alleged parallel thus is at best questionable. Furthermore, the building is not isolated, the central pillar was a roof support and the architectural parallels are thus weak, and the only published finds are consistent with a domestic interpretation. (Since none of the material from the earlier German excavations was published, it cannot be relied upon.) In other words, Albright’s intuition was correct, and the Tananir structure was the residence of a wealthy family.

(4) Shechem ‘Temple 7300’. In two brief salvage campaigns, W. G. Dever clarified the stratigraphy and structure of a complex on top of the Middle Bronze Age wall immediately adjacent to the north-west city gate at Shechem (Tell Balá`ah) (Dever 1974). The large building he uncovered consisted of three rooms: an outer chamber, a large central chamber with two column bases in the center and a raised platform on the back wall, and a small rear chamber. This tripartite design is well known in later periods for cultic structures; it should be noted, however, that in these buildings (such as Tell Ta`yinat; see Haines 1971, 53–55 and Pl. 103; the Solomonic temple; etc.) the rear room is the focal point of the sanctuary, whereas in the Shechem building the central room had the altar, while the rear room had only side access and was probably used for storage (for later parallels see Fosse Temple III [Rooms E and F] at Lachish [Tufnell et al. 1940, 42–43 and Pl. lxviii]; Qasile Statun X; etc.). The Shechem structure thus fits better into the period than Dever realized: it is essentially of the two-room type (see the parallels noted by Dever 1974, 43), with the addition of an extra room. The finds from the building included two miniature vessels and a number of bowls, kraters, store jars, etc. Application of the criteria results in the conclusion that Building 7300 at Shechem probably was a temple. While it was not formally isolated, this may be due to its specialized function as a royal chapel, since it was accessible only from an adjacent building which seems to have been a palace. Given the extremely limited evidence available, the presence of miniature vessels is probably significant, and there are relatively close parallels to the design. Finally, there is some evidence to suggest that the preceding architectural phase was also cultic in nature (Dever 1974, 41).

These examples illustrate the application of the criteria proposed above. When applied to the ‘Bull Site’ and the Mount Ebal complex first discussed, I conclude that a cultic function for the former is unlikely: apart from the bull figurine there are no exotic materials, and the architectural evidence is too fragmentary to adduce convincing parallels or to indicate isolation; for the latter such an interpretation is plausible: the site exhibits isolation from its immediate and its larger contexts, exotic material does occur, and convincing parallels can be made.

THE IDENTIFICATION OF POLITICAL AND ETHNIC GROUPS

Both Mazar and Zertal identify the builders and users of their sites as Israelites. The obvious reasons for such an identification are geographical and chronological: both sites are in areas
assigned to the tribe of Manasseh, and flourished during the early Iron Age, i.e., after the establishment of the Israelite confederation.

The problem of identification is, however, not so simple. The division of the land as described in Joshua is an ideal picture, as the early chapters of Judges make clear; this ideal is in many cases a recollection of later geopolitical realities. (For details and a useful summary see Wright *apud* Boling and Wright 1982, 70–71.) Therefore, the mere presence of a site within the ideal tribal boundaries does not mean that it was constructed or used by the members of the tribe.

Furthermore, what distinguished the Israelites from their non-Israelite contemporaries was metaphysical, not physical: acceptance of Yahweh, the god of Israel, and concomitant allegiance to fellow Yahwists. The biblical record makes it clear that as Israel developed in Canaan it grew in part by the conversion of individuals and groups who had not been part of the original nucleus (however that may have been defined, whether by kinship or by shared experience); just as Israelites could commit apostasy by ‘taking themselves’ to such deities as Baal Peor (Num. 25:3; Ps. 106:28), so non-Yahwists could commit themselves to Yahweh and his adherents and join Israel. Notable examples include Rahab and her family (Josh. 2; 6:25), the Gibeonites (Josh. 9; 18:23), Ruth the Moabitite, and Hephner (compare Josh. 12:17 with 17:2).

The Benjaminite war described at the end of Judges, ironically the only recorded occasion when all the tribes united for military action, begins with the journey of the Levite and his entourage from Bethlehem back to his home in Ephraim:

> They were near Jebus, and the day was waning, so the servant said to his master, ‘Come, let us turn aside to this Jebusite city and spend the night there’. His master replied: ‘We should not turn aside to a foreigners’ city, who are not of the Israelites; let us go on to Gibeah.’ (Judg. 19:11–12)

As the continuation of the story makes clear, they should have stayed in Jebus (Jerusalem), but that is not the point here. Let us suppose that they had stayed in Jebus. Would the material culture there have differed significantly from that of Bethlehem or Gibeah? In some ways, presumably so, especially from a religious perspective. But if we were to excavate the remains of contemporary houses in Jebus, Bethlehem, and Gibeah, would we be able to ascertain from the surviving ruins which house was Israelite and which was ‘foreign’ (i.e., non-Israelite)? Without the presence of written remains identifying the owner of a house as Yahwistic I think not. Allowing for local variations and perhaps differences between city and town cultures, all three houses would have the same repertoire of pottery and artifacts, be built on essentially the same plan, and contain the same foodstuffs.

> In the absence of determinative written evidence, it is impossible in the early Iron Age to identify a particular artifact, script, house, feature, or site as Israelite. Several *rituals* which earlier scholars identified as characteristically early Israelite now prove to have a much wider distribution: this is especially true of the collared-rim store jar (see *Ibrahim* 1978) and the ‘four-room house’ (see most recently Ahlström 1984a, 1984b, and add to his examples Medeiyineh North and Medeiyineh South, in Jordan; see Sauer 1980, 18), both of which must now be seen as characteristic of the period throughout the larger region rather than isolated to one specific group. Given the demonstrable continuities between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age and the complicated biblical picture of the origins of Israel, it is methodologically questionable to label specific exemplars by a designation which is religious and political. Only toward the end of the Iron I period do distinct national cultures emerge; until then it would be wise to avoid labels such as Israelite or Canaanite unless there is conclusive evidence for using them.
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To return to the cases with which we began: neither the enclosure where the bull figurre
was found, nor the cultic installation on Mount Ebal, were necessarily Israelite,1 and it is
misleading and ultimately unhelpful for the larger historical task of biblical archaeologists (by
whatever title they may wish to be called) to presume that they were. That task, as I see it, is the
reconstruction, from all available evidence, of the life and thought of ancient peoples, and
especially the ancient Israelites. To be valid such reconstruction must avoid a facile correlation
of biblical and extra-biblical data, and must be methodologically self-conscious in the use of
descriptive and analytical categories.

NOTES

1 While the altar complex on Mount Ebal may be the
altar mentioned in the Bible, there are problems with too
fearful an identification. For example: the bull is not
mentioned as a sacrificial animal in biblical sources, as
Leroy (1983, 33) observes, and to suggest that since it was
sacrificial it may have been sacrificed is weak; the details of
construction — the rectangular shape, the ramp (which,
poorly preserved, is in Excav. 20,26) — do not have convincingly Israelite parallels; finally, the biblical text in
their plasma never suggests a new construction, whereas
there are phases in the Mount Ebal installation. On the
other hand, the coincidence of location may be significant,
and raises the possibility that this site was a local
Canaanite shrine which was also (or later) used by
Israelites, or at least that it was 'Israelized' in legal and
liturgical traditions. In any case, detailed analysis of both
archaeological and biblical data is necessary before such
an identification can be accepted.

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