

Editorial

Archaeology of Ancient Israelite Religion(s): An Introduction

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Received: 28 May 2020; Accepted: 4 June 2020; Published: 15 June 2020



Keywords: archaeology; Israelite religion; Bible; biblical archaeology; Near Eastern archaeology; archaeology and religion; temples; cult

Israelite religion has always fascinated scholars. Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have attempted to shed light on its various aspects. Initial studies used the Bible as their main source of information and attempted to read it critically in order to learn about the religion of ancient Israel. With the advent of modern research in the Near East, mainly in Mesopotamia, more and more information on other Ancient Near Eastern religions was accumulated. The new data were initially used to illuminate Israelite religious practices as described in the Bible, but gradually led to the questioning of some of the accepted truisms that were based on the biblical narrative. Subsequently, new information was collected mainly through archaeological excavations, and archaeology, mainly in the land of Israel, had gradually become a major player in the study of ancient Israelite religion(s) and religious practices.¹

The accumulating material evidence opened new research vistas and changed the scholarly discourse. The biblical framework for the study of ancient Israelite religion was gradually deserted by many, not only giving rise to much more critical approaches but also resulting in the abandonment of the view that one can speak of an Israelite religion in the singular, and many today prefer to speak about Israelite religions.² Another important development was a broadening of the perspective, and the growing importance given to the local social context in which religious was practiced. Initially, studies focused on data that were (supposedly) directly related to religion and cult, like temples, figurines, etc. Many scholars, however, came to the understanding that Israelite society should be examined from broad, social perspectives. This view, initially strongly advocated by a number of biblical scholars (e.g., [Gottwald 1979, 1985, 1986](#); [Clements 1989](#))³ and later also advanced by archaeologists (e.g., [Faust 2005, 2012](#); [Dever 2012](#)), resulted in embedding the study of Israelite religion within a broader social framework. Thus, the various evidence, combined with modern and post-modern trends and interests, led to a proliferation of new research questions and scholarly approaches to the data. Among the questions discussed today are the difference between the “official” and “popular” expression of religion; between the “biblical” religion and the “real” one, as practiced during the Iron Age; the role of the common people in various forms of religions; the place of women in Israelite cults; the loci of religious expression (in temples or in other spaces); what objects were used for religious purposes (e.g., figurines); how and when did monotheism evolve, and which other gods or goddesses

¹ For the development of scholarship, and the growing role of archaeology, compare for example the following important contribution (none of which was written by an archaeologist) of ([Kaufmann 1960](#); [Ringgren 1966](#); [Fohrer 1972](#); [Albertz 1994](#); [Niditch 1997](#); [Zevit 2001](#); [Hess 2007](#); [Albertz and Schmitt 2012](#)).

² Cf., the terminology used in the titles of the following works, and its development: ([Kaufmann 1960](#); [Ringgren 1966](#); [Fohrer 1972](#); [Albertz 1994](#); [Niditch 1997](#); [Zevit 2001](#); [Hess 2007](#)). See also ([Dever 1996](#); [Mandell and Smoak 2019](#)).

³ While its popularity declined later, these approaches did not disappear among biblical scholars, and see for example ([Simkins and Cook 1999](#); [Olyan 2012](#)).

were worshiped in ancient Israel; did Israel's God (YHWH) have a spouse; similarities and differences between the religious practices in Israel and Judah and those of other Iron Age religions; the religions of Israel's neighbors; the influence of the Assyrian empire on Israelite religion; aspects of continuity and change between the Iron Age religion and those that developed during the Second Temple period; and many others (it is impossible to mention here even a fraction of the relevant publications, though see for example [Zwickel 1994](#); [Niditch 1997](#); [Zevit 2001](#); [Dever 2008](#); [Alberty and Schmitt 2012](#); [Alberty et al. 2014](#); [Hess 2007](#); [Nakhai 2001](#); [Meyers 2005](#); [Faust 2010](#); [Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2016](#); [Olyan 2012](#)).

As noted, the above concerns were to a large extent driven by the accumulating archaeological data. When considering the decrease in the historical value given to the biblical sources, it is no wonder that archaeologists and archaeological material came to dominate the discourse (see [Bunimovitz and Faust \(2010\)](#) for a summary of the development and a suggestion for future directions; see also [Mandell and Smoak \(2019\)](#)). Another result is the rise in the number of interdisciplinary studies and their significance (e.g., [Alberty et al. 2014](#)).

The massive amount of information on the various sub-themes related to Israelite religions, the shifting trends in scholarship, the multiplicity of approaches, and the interdisciplinary nature of the field means that no single scholar can master all the data. Indeed, there is currently (2020) no good and updated book that covers all or even most aspects pertaining to Israelite religion(s).⁴

This volume is a very partial attempt to fill some of this lacuna.

Most of the studies in this issue were archaeologically oriented, and almost all were designed to offer broad overviews of the topics or questions they address. The aim was that each article would cover a certain sub-theme in the study of ancient Israelite religion(s) and serve as a convenient starting point for this topic or question. The papers were expected, first and foremost, to serve as an updated introduction to specific topics and as a wide overview aimed at enabling the readers to enter the complex topics they discuss with a solid understanding of these issues. Given the significance of the various sub-themes, however, and the up-to-date nature of the discussion, most papers not only summarized the debates but also offered new insights into these topics and introduced new approaches or conclusions. These broad papers are accompanied by a few that are more limited in outlook but which present a significant, even if focused, scholarly contribution to certain questions.

While many sub-themes in the study of the ways the Israelites practiced religion are inevitably not covered in this issue, I feel that this collection of essays does present the readers with a very broad and updated study of many interrelated sub-themes, all related to the study of ancient Israelite religions. Thus, while the value of each the papers is clear, I also hope that such a collection as a whole will be a good starting point for the study of Israelite religion(s).

The first paper is Yosef Garfinkel's and Madeleine Mumcuoglu's article on *The Temple of Solomon in Iron Age Context*. The paper discusses what is probably the most celebrated religious building of ancient Israel—the Jerusalem temple. While no archaeological remains of this building were naturally uncovered, the authors' study of 10th century archaeological features suggests that the description of this building in 1 Kings is likely authentic and that it preserves a long and detailed description of the construction of a temple and palace in Jerusalem by King Solomon in the 10th century BCE. While previous generations of scholars accepted this description as an authentic account, skeptical approaches concerning the early stages of the Kingdom of Israel/Judah, the biblical text, and the archaeological record came to be dominant in the late 20th century, and quite a few scholars doubt whether any temple was constructed in Jerusalem in the 10th century BCE. The authors' detailed study of recent discoveries like a 10th century BCE building model from Khirbet Qeiyafa and an actual temple building of the 9th century BCE that was partially excavated in Moza shed light on the biblical description and support its early date.

⁴ Even broad studies, for example ([Zevit 2001](#); [Alberty and Schmitt 2012](#); [Alberty et al. 2014](#)), cannot cover everything.

The Jerusalem temple is no doubt an extreme example of “state” religion. But does it exemplify how most of the people practiced their religion? This question is addressed by a number of studies.

My own contribution, *Israelite Temples: Where was Israelite Cult not practiced, and why*, critically reviews the loci of the Israelite cult, and claims that practicing the cult in temples—any temples—was an exception rather than a rule in ancient Israel. While most scholars in the late 20th and early 21st century believed that cultic activity in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah was practiced in various temples that were scattered throughout the kingdoms, a detailed study of the archaeological evidence reveals that Israelite cultic buildings were extremely rare, both in absolute terms and when compared to other ancient Near Eastern societies. Hence, the paper concludes that the evidence suggests that rather than viewing the few temples that were discovered by archaeologists, like these discovered at Arad, Dan, and recently apparently also in Moza, as exemplifying typical cultic activity, they should be viewed as exceptions that require a special explanation. After demonstrating this pattern, the article offers a possible explanation as to how such an outstanding practice was developed and adopted. One way or the other, this pattern suggests that cultic activity in temples was the exception rather than the norm and that the typical Israelite cult was practiced in the household and in other, non-temple settings, connecting us with the contributions of William Dever and Beth Alpert Nakhai.

William G. Dever’s *Archaeology and Folk or Family Religion in Ancient Israel* draws attention to the way most of the people in Israel and Judah practiced their religion(s). The distinction between the official religion, whether as viewed by the king (or the “state”) or as presented in the Bible, and the way most people practiced their cult, is an important one. While neglected until the late 20th century, the religious expressions of the common people are now at the center of lively discussion. Using a phenomenal approach, the paper summarizes and interprets archaeological data that may be used to illuminate religious practices in ancient Israel during the Iron Age. This picture, drawn on the archaeological evidence, is compared and contrasted with the one that is based on the biblical texts, leading to the identification of both convergences and significant differences between the two sets of data. Dever emphasizes the importance of archaeology in providing a real-life context for both artifact and texts, stressing also the limitations of the material evidence, which is mostly limited to religious practice, rather than belief. The stress on the local expression of religions fits nicely with my argument that actual temples were extremely rare in ancient Israel (above) as well as with Alpert Nakhai’s study of the role of women in cults (below).

Beth Alpert Nakhai’s paper, *Women in Israelite Religion: The State of Research is All New Research*, develops a theme that is fairly recent in scholarship, i.e., the place of women in Israelite cults. Historically, argues the paper, those studying Israelite religion have ignored the existence of women in Iron Age Israel, accounting neither for the religious beliefs of half of ancient Israel’s population nor for the responsibilities that women assumed for maintaining religious rituals and traditions. Only in the last four decades have scholars begun to explore women’s essential roles in Israel’s religious culture. The article utilizes textual (biblical) evidence and archaeological information from sites throughout Israel, arguing that that some women had roles even within the Jerusalem Temple. Most women, however, residing in towns and villages throughout the land, undertook responsibility in clan-based and community-based religious rituals and rites, including pilgrimage, seasonal festivals, rites of military victory, and rites of mourning. These women fulfilled essential roles within the sphere of domestic or household religion. At home, they provided medico-magical healing for all family members, as well as care for women and babies throughout pregnancy, childbirth, and beyond.

Jonathan Greer’s paper on *The Zooarchaeology of Israelite Religion: Methods and Practice* is somewhat different from most papers; beyond bringing fresh insights into some aspects of Israelite religion, its primary aim is to provide a methodological framework for the application of zooarchaeology to the study of Israelite religion for the purpose of providing an overview of this growing subfield for the non-specialist and for inviting further conversation among practitioners. Definitions of “zooarchaeology” and “Israelite religion” are explored, and the aim of reconstructing practices of Yahweh-centric religion is described. A methodology is suggested through a series of questions that may

be applied to explorations of faunal remains, including those related to context, excavation technique, and analysis, and engagement with the Hebrew Bible. The essay concludes with an illustration from Tel Dan and affirmation of integrated methodologies that critically engage archaeological and textual data to form new syntheses.

Zev Farber's *Israelite Festivals: From Cyclical Time Celebrations to Linear Time Commemorations* is again different from most other papers in this volume, in this case by focusing on a biblical theme, i.e., the festivals. While the Pentateuch and later Jewish tradition associates the key pilgrimage festivals with stories about Israel's past; these festivals all began as agricultural or seasonal festivals. Using comparative evidence from the ancient Near East, and looking at the Covenant Collection through a redaction critical lens, the paper attempts to uncover the early history of these festivals and to reconstruct how they developed in stages. A similar process is evident with the Sabbath, which appears to have begun as a moon festival, as per certain biblical references and from comparative evidence, but which eventually developed into the seventh day of rest as part of the institution of the week and then came to be associated with the story of God resting after creation. These developments, from celebrating agricultural and lunar cycles to celebrating mnemohistorical events, can be seen as part of two parallel processes: the coalescing of Israelite cultural memory and the institution of the linear calendar as the dominant conception of time.

Jeremy Smoak's and William Schniedewind's paper, *Religion at Kuntilat Ajrud*, discusses one of the sites that is most closely associated with Israelite religion, Kuntilat Ajrud, with surprising conclusions. The discovery of early Hebrew inscriptions at this site has generated considerable discussion among scholars over the past few decades. While the fact that the inscriptions contain explicitly religious themes led many to conclude that the site had a cultic function, the authors challenge this assumption and argue that the inscriptions with religious themes are embedded in daily life as religion converges with scribal curriculum in ancient Israel. The inscriptions, however, provide insights into conceptions of the Israelite pantheon, divine theophany, and theomachy in early Israelian religious ideology, and are therefore important for the study of Israelite religion.

Irit Ziffer's paper on *Moon, Rain, Womb, Mercy: The Imagery of The Shrine Model from Tell el-Far'ah North—Biblical Tirzah* focuses on the imagery of the shrine model found at Tell el-Far'ah North, identified with biblical Tirzah which was the seat of the ruling dynasty of the northern kingdom in the early days of the northern kingdom. Using the find as a starting point, the paper examines the multiplicity of connotations, changeability, and ambiguity in the representation of the lunar crescent image in the figurative language of the ancient Near East. The article then offers a reconstruction of the model's place within the cult of the late 10th–early 9th century BCE.

The various expressions of Israelite religions, or of religious expressions in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, cannot be divorced from their background, and a number of papers examine the religions of Israel's neighbors (in space and time), providing a context within which Israelite practices can be examined and with which they can be compared and contrasted.

Aaron Greener's paper on *Archaeology and Religion in Late Bronze Age Canaan* reviews some aspects of religion in the Late Bronze Age and the dozens of temples that were excavated in the Canaanite city-states of this era. These temples were the focal points for the Canaanites' cultic activities, mainly sacrifices and ceremonial feasting. Numerous poetic and ritual texts from the contemporary city of Ugarit reveal the rich pantheon of Canaanite gods and goddesses that were worshiped in the region. Archaeological remains of these rites include burnt animal bones and many other cultic items, such as figurines and votive vessels, which were discovered within the temples and sanctuaries. These demonstrate the diverse and receptive character of the Canaanite religion and ritual practices. The paper points to the increased Egyptian presence in Canaan towards the end of the period as influencing the local belief system and rituals in some areas, a fact that is demonstrated by the syncretic architectural plans of several of the temples, as well as by glyptic and votive items. Indeed, Late Bronze Age religious and cultic practices have attracted much attention from biblical scholars and researchers

of the religion of Ancient Israel who are searching for the similarities and influences between the Late Bronze Age and the following Iron Age.

David Ben-Shlomo's paper, *Philistine Cult and Religion according to the Archaeological Evidence*, reviews and discusses the updated archaeological evidence for a Philistine cult and religion, and for a cult and religion in area of Philistia during the Iron Age. The evidence can be related to a public or official cult, represented in temple and shrine structures, and to that coming from households, representing possibly more popular religion. The evidence of a public cult, so far mostly from peripheral sites, includes largely cultural elements linked with the local Canaanite cult and religion, yet within households at the Philistine cities there is more evidence for cultic elements of Aegean affinity during Iron Age I.

Margreet L. Steiner's paper on *Iron Age Cultic Sites in Transjordan* reviews a number of Iron Age structures identified as cultic that have been excavated in Transjordan, from the territories of some of Israel's neighbors. This paper presents the evidence as published and discusses the relevance of the cultic identification of the structures, leading to a better understanding of the religious practices of Israel's neighbors to the east.

Craig W. Tyson's *The Religion of the Ammonites: A Specimen of Levantine Religion from the Iron Age* (ca. 1000–5000 BCE) zooms in on one of the least known of Israel's neighbors—the Ammonites, who lived in the region around Amman, Jordan. The paper investigates the religious traditions of the Ammonites through an analysis of the extant archaeological and textual sources. The analysis leads to the conclusion that the religious tradition of the Ammonites is an example of the broader religious tradition of the Iron Age II Levant. One distinguishing feature of Ammonite religion is the state god Milkom, whose name is probably an epithet for the god 'El, and who appears to be represented in a tradition of stone sculptures that have been found in the vicinity of Amman. The rest of the non-physical realm was understood to be inhabited by gods, goddesses, a variety of other non-human beings, and dead ancestors. Also visible in the extant evidence is a blending of local and foreign elements, especially those from Mesopotamia. Unique in this respect is the probable temple to the moon god at Rujm al-Kursi, which most likely reflects a local tradition of lunar worship influenced by the iconography of the Mesopotamian moon god Sin.

While each article is important in its own right, and despite some obvious lacunae in the overall coverage of the volume, I hope that this book, on the whole, will serve as a good starting point for anyone who is interested in ancient Israelite religion(s), or the religions of Israel's neighbours, the context of the Bible, and the intersection between archaeology and religion at large.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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