

PART V

ARCHAEOLOGY OF
WORLD RELIGIONS

CHAPTER 55

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RITUAL AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT ISRAEL AND THE LEVANT, AND THE ORIGINS OF JUDAISM

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1 INTRODUCTION

THERE has been no shortage of attempts to interpret the archaeological evidence for the rituals and religion of the Canaanites and Israelites over the last century (see Suggested Reading). Although in recent years studies in the archaeology of Israelite religion have begun to consider new questions and issues such as the role of women in Israelite religion and the existence of multiple traditions of Israelite religious practice, the results of many of these approaches remain fairly predictable. The greatest limitations of such studies have been the result of their overwhelming reliance on the use of the Hebrew Bible for interpreting Canaanite religious traditions and the varied conclusions that can be drawn from the archaeological evidence for Israelite religion. Studies of Israelite and Canaanite ritual and religion have, therefore, quite often engaged in circular argumentation with a reliance on the Hebrew Bible to interpret Canaanite religion and vice versa. Since ritual pertains to customs of regular occurrence, in this context pertaining to religious practices, this treatment of the origins of Israelite religion will address the places, artefacts, and symbols associated with what may be identified as the ideal type that characterized ritual and religious practices of the Israelites as they developed from their predecessors, the Amorites and Canaanites. In light of the limits of space it is perhaps most important to begin by articulating a discrete framework for interpreting the archaeological evidence that has contributed to our understanding of the development of Israelite ritual and religion, and hence to the origins of Judaism. Because of the general recognition by scholars of the Hebrew Bible and the archaeology of Israel that the term Judaism is reserved for reference to the Jewish religion during the Second Temple period (c.520 BC to AD 70), the reader is

referred to Chapter 56, 'The Archaeology of Judaism from the Persian Period to the Sixth Century AD', for these later developments. This chapter therefore addresses the development of Amorite and Canaanite religion through the end of Israelite religion, namely, the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BC.

1.1 Ethnic Terms

To begin with, it is necessary to define the ethnic terms that must be employed in this chapter to distinguish between the related rituals and religious practices of Amorites, Canaanites, Israelites, and Jews after the destruction of the First Temple. While these are certainly not all of the groups relevant to a discussion of the evolution of Canaanite and Israelite cult, these groups are those that significantly shaped the development of Israelite religion and provide a context for the consideration of the origins of Judaism. Nevertheless, to some extent, it is impossible not to make reference to discoveries related to the religion of Israel's neighbours during the Iron Age (c.1200–500 BC), which include the Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites, all of which can be included under the umbrella of Iron Age cults that continued Canaanite traditions. Virtually nothing is known, however, of Aramean cult practices, which were also most likely an outgrowth of earlier Amorite cult practices. The term Amorite is employed here to distinguish the cult practices of the inhabitants of the Levant (western Syria, Lebanon, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, and the Sinai) during the period prior to the emergence of Israel no later than the mid-thirteenth century BC. (For the primary historical text, demonstrating the emergence of Israel during the thirteenth century BC, see the Merneptah Stele in Hallo 2000.) The earliest phase that can be identified with Amorite religion extends from the beginning of the nineteenth century BC to the end of the thirteenth century BC, while the later phase, which we may identify with Canaanite religion, continues its development from the Iron Age through the early classical period and, in effect, parallels the development of Israelite religion, which for the reasons discussed in this work must be considered an outgrowth of Canaanite religion. Thus, both Canaanite and Israelite religions of the first millennium BC trace their origins to Amorite ritual and religious practices of the second millennium BC. It is possible to identify so-called 'ideal types' (i.e. standard patterns of ritual practice) in the archaeological evidence for Amorite ritual and religion during the second millennium BC that persist in the archaeology of Israelite religion (which also continue in early Judaism) and provide an important starting point for the consideration of Israelite ritual and religion.

1.2 Relevant Texts

The foregoing distinction between Amorite and Israelite religious traditions of the second and first millennia BC presumes a familiarity with the textual corpora of these traditions, which introduces the first major challenge to the study of the archaeology of Amorite, Canaanite, and Israelite cults. In this respect it is a long-established scholarly tradition to regard these texts as artefacts in and of themselves. That these texts are widely recognized as artefacts is clearly supported by their archaeological contexts. On the one hand, a corpus of cult and ritual texts written in Ugaritic on clay tablets, which were found in the so-called 'priest's house' at Ugarit in Syria and date to the end of the Late Bronze Age (c.1200),

provide the primary framework for understanding Ugaritic religion (Wyatt 1999). On the other hand, the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament among Christians), a collection of etiological stories, religious law, royal history, prophetic writings, and wisdom literature written in Hebrew and Aramaic which appear to have been canonized *c.*AD 90, serve as the starting point for our understanding of Israelite religion. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940s provides the strongest basis for the recognition of these texts as archaeological artefacts. However, archaeological discoveries, such as the Ketef Hinnom inscription dated to the late seventh century, tomb inscriptions, and a handful of other monumental inscriptions, lend support not only for the historical context of the Hebrew Bible and its recognition as an archaeological artefact but also the veracity of many details it records concerning the religion, culture, and history of Israel. Despite the usefulness of such corpora, both the Ugaritic texts and Hebrew Bible reflect limited phases in the development of their respective religious traditions, and they can provide only a few points of data within approximately 2,000 years of development in these religious traditions. For this very reason, therefore, archaeology continues to play a critical role in our interpretation of the relationship and the development of these traditions.

1.3 Archaeological Approaches

In light of the large corpus of archaeological data that exists for understanding Amorite and Israelite religions, and the fact that such textual corpora exist by which it is possible to check our interpretations, an historical–archaeological approach to the development of Israelite religion remains fundamental. In pursuing such an approach it is imperative that the aforementioned texts serve as data for the periods from which they derive, while attempting to avoid the circular argumentation that has plagued the study of the archaeology of Israelite religion. This circular argumentation usually begins with the assumption that Israelite ritual and religion is sufficiently well understood from biblical texts and later interpreters, and archaeology serves merely to illuminate this understanding. A second assumption is that Israelite religion primarily constituted a singular system of beliefs and practices, despite the fact the texts record considerable conflict within Israelite society concerning what was to be identified as acceptable, orthodox, or mainstream. With such assumptions in mind the archaeological evidence from the Bronze Age (*i.e.* prior to 1200 BC) in the Levant has only served to buttress interpretations of Israelite religion as reconstructed from the text of the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, to accurately understand the relationship between earlier Amorite religious traditions and later Israelite traditions during the first millennium BC it is essential to understand the origins and evolution of Amorite religious traditions during the second millennium BC independent of first millennium trajectories that grow out from it, which include both Israelite and Canaanite religions. The fact that this has only rarely been the case is underscored by the wholesale lack of a comprehensive archaeological analysis of Amorite religion without reference to Israelite religion.

For nearly every category of archaeological evidence that must be discussed in connection with the development of Israelite religion, its antecedents are to be found in the archaeological record of the Amorite and Canaanite (Amorites of the southern Levant) inhabitants of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (*c.*1900–1200 BC) in the Levant. The evidence represented by the archaeological remains includes temples and shrines, idols (*e.g.* statues and figurines), altars, cult paraphernalia (*e.g.* cult stands, ritual vessels),

standing stones (*massebôt*) and stele, votives and offerings, amulets, and tombs and cemeteries (royal and non-royal). The correlations are, however, more than those that are shared by ancient Near Eastern religions in general; the correlates are both categorical and functional. As is the case for the Iron Age, the material culture of Bronze Age ritual and religion can be divided into archaeological evidence, on the one hand, of state or tribal cult and, on the other hand, for personal piety. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, while such distinctions are helpful for categorizing the evidence, there is little support for the suggestion that religious views expressed in personal piety were qualitatively different than, or perceived to be in direct conflict with, those expressed at the level of the state or tribe. Simply put, insofar as these two categories were distinguished in antiquity, they are recognized as having met different needs: on the one hand, the needs of the state, and on the other, societal and individual needs.

2 STATE CULT

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Given the evidence for the establishment of large territorial kingdoms during the Middle Bronze Age (Burke 2008), it is appropriate to begin with the archaeological evidence for state cult during this period, which is associated with the establishment of Amorite dynasties. In the archaeological record state cult is particularly conspicuous in two forms of evidence: monumental temples and the royal mortuary cult. The most conspicuous evidence for state cult and ritual during the Middle and Late Bronze Age consisted of monumental temples of a single type, which are often identified as *migdôl* or tower temples (Figure 55.1; Mazar 1990: 211–12). This temple construction features an *in antis* plan, which based on the width of the walls probably supported a multi-storey structure (i.e. tower-like in appearance). This building type finds its precursor among so-called Antentempels of the mid-third millennium from northern Mesopotamia in the region to the east of the Euphrates bend (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003: 251). The cultural and temporal relationship between these two temple types, which are attested in neighbouring regions (northern Mesopotamia and the northern Levant), is now demonstrated at the northern Levantine site of Ebla, where a large *migdôl* temple dated to the last quarter of the third millennium BC has recently been identified. As the earliest example of this temple type it now appears that it is contemporary with the Antentempel type known in eastern Syria. During both the Middle and Late Bronze Age the *migdôl*-style temple was constructed throughout the Levant at sites such as Tilmen Höyük, Ugarit, Alalakh, Ebla, Hazor, Megiddo, Shechem, Tel Kitan, and Haror (Mazar 1992), and it is widely accepted that this temple style was the basis for the plan of several early Iron Age temples (e.g. ‘Ain Dara, Aleppo, Shechem) including the first Israelite temple, which according to the Book of Kings was built in Jerusalem during the tenth century BC (1 Kings 6: 1).

Aside from the fact that this temple type serves as evidence of political and cultural complexity, the cultic and ritual significance of these temples is that they were considered the dwellings of the chief deity or deities of the communities in which they were located. While there is a limited amount of evidence for the statues of the deities (e.g. Ugarit, Megiddo, Hazor), which were probably located at the rear of these temples (and thus

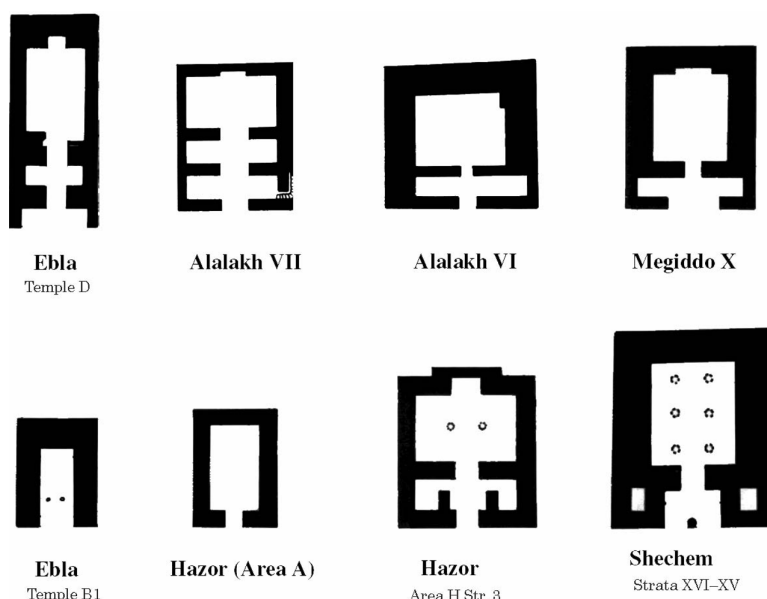


FIGURE 55.1 Migdôl-style temples during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages.

identified by archaeologists as the ‘holy of holies’, as with the first Israelite temple), the correlation between the iconography of these statues and the Ugaritic texts that describe the physical appearance of some Canaanite divinities suggests the identification of the venerated deities as most likely Ba‘al or possibly El; Dagon is suggested as the second deity for which a migdôl temple at Ugarit was constructed. It is quite clear that these temples were constructed primarily for the chief Canaanite deities and not for every deity venerated by the city’s inhabitants. While more than 300 divinities are attested in the Ugaritic texts from Late Bronze Age Ugarit, only two migdôl-style temples were constructed within the city. The pattern is similar, therefore, to that prevalent in Mesopotamia, where individual cities identified themselves as the subjects of a chief divinity, despite the existence of a pantheon that often included the chief gods of neighbouring kingdoms. By and large, in the Levant the chief deity appears to have been a manifestation of the Amorite deity Ba‘al-Hadad, while the worship of other major Amorite and Canaanite gods such as El, Dagon, Reshef, and Astarte/Anat was less prominent. For example, the so-called ‘Ceremonial Palace’ (Bonfil and Zarzecki-Peleg 2007; Ben-Tor 2008) that stands alone on the acropolis at Hazor and should be identified as a migdôl-style temple writ large (as argued primarily by Sharon Zuckerman), appears on the basis of the identification of a large metal statue to have been a temple to Ba‘al or Hadad. Smaller temples at Hazor in Area A and located in the lower city in Areas C, F, and H, probably served the cultic needs of non-royal residents of the city in their veneration of the city’s chief deity as well as the other major Canaanite deities worshipped at Hazor.

While the veneration of the chief Canaanite gods through the construction of centrally located migdôl-style temples during both the Middle and Late Bronze Age is a well-established observation, the cultural significance of this precedent is often inadequately acknowledged in discussions of Iron Age cult in ancient Israel. In short, it appears that

Amorite rituals and religious traditions that were centred around such temples during the Middle and Late Bronze Age established the ideal type to which Iron Age cult aspired, as among the Israelites. This pattern is not, however, one that can be borne out solely by the archaeological record, but rather requires a reliance on textual data, primarily from the Hebrew Bible since the first Israelite temple cannot be archaeologically reconstructed. The pattern described in the bible which is probably normative for Iron Age states in the Levant, as characterized by the description of the construction of the Israelite temple for Yahweh (who is characterized as the sole god of Israel by the biblical writers), is effectively identical: the largest example of a temple *in antis* was built within the capital city for the divinity that was intended to serve as the focal point of religious worship for the nation. Although smaller temples to other Canaanite deities are not preserved, it is again the biblical authors themselves who reveal that shrines were dedicated to these deities (e.g. II Kings 18: 4 and 23: 1–25) and an abundance of ritual paraphernalia suggest the reality of this scenario (see discussion below).

The consensus that has emerged around discussions of ancient Israelite religions leaves, therefore, ample room for the recognition of similarities between Israelite and earlier Amorite cults. Cult among Iron Age Levantine states was, for example, characterized by similarly diverse pantheons, which were largely made up of Canaanite deities already attested in Late Bronze Age sources, with a similar tendency toward the placement of emphasis on the veneration of a chief deity. Alongside the identification of Yahweh, for example, as the chief deity of Israel, biblical texts as well as ostraca (inscribed potsherds) permit the identification of Hadad, Molech, Kemosh, Qaus, and Ba'al as the chief divinities of the Aramaeans, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, and Canaanites (Phoenicians), respectively, with widespread acknowledgement that the 'sun, moon, and stars', all of which are identifiable as manifestations of Canaanite deities (i.e. Šapšu, Yarihu, Šahru, Šalimu), persisted to be venerated by the populations of Israel and Judah. None of this should be surprising, however, since for nearly two decades emphasis has been placed on the continuity of material culture and social customs that existed from the end of the Late Bronze Age into the Early Iron Age with the emergence of Israel. Thus, it may be asserted that a proclivity for politically entrenched henotheism marks the archaeological (and historical) record of the Levant from the Middle Bronze Age through the Iron Age, and that the shifting boundaries of the political territories under the 'hegemony' of principal deities reflected the political shifts that Levantine states underwent over more than 1,500 years. Smaller temples, especially during the Middle Bronze Age, marked lesser political centres and probably served as local focal points of worship of chief deities. This trend persisted in the Iron Age with the identification of alternate, although usually smaller, centres of worship such as Arad in Judah (Figure 55.2), and the establishment of multiple sanctuaries in the northern kingdom of Israel at Tel Dan and Bethel (I Kings 12: 28–33). Thus, the principle of the central role played by veneration of the kingdom's chief deity was retained from the Bronze Age through the Iron Age.

Royal mortuary practices comprise the second manifestation of state cult in Levantine society. The existence of an Amorite royal cult during the Middle Bronze Age can be substantiated by the archaeological evidence for the burial complexes of Amorite kings. Perhaps the clearest evidence of the practices associated with the royal cult are to be found at Qatna, where a large burial complex (Figure 55.3) was recently discovered below the late Middle Bronze Age and Late Bronze Age palace (Pfälzner 2007: 55–9). The large complex



FIGURE 55.2 Arad temple, Late Iron Age.

consisted of a long corridor leading to a vertical shaft that gave access to a large central chamber, which was flanked by benches on all sides. This room provided ample evidence of ritual feasting, which included a large quantity of animal bones below the benches and a variety of feasting vessels that the excavators suggest may be connected with *kispum* rituals, as they are known in Mesopotamia. Opposite the entrance and in the left and right walls of the central chamber were entrances leading to three adjoining chambers, which served as the place of interment for the kings, and undoubtedly other members of Qatna's royal household. Although the findings derived from the discovery of the royal tomb at Qatna are quite remarkable for what they reveal concerning the burial practices of Amorite kings during the Middle Bronze Age, what is more remarkable is the fact that rituals associated with Amorite royal burial customs reflect the burial practices of Amorite communities throughout the Levant, which can be discussed within the context of popular cult and the relationship of these practices to later Iron Age burial customs.

3 POPULAR CULT

From the start of the Middle Bronze IIB (c.1700 BC) and throughout the Late Bronze Age the burial customs of Amorites and Canaanites consisted largely of family tombs dug into the bedrock, often constructed below the house (Gonen 1992b) or, if extramurally located,

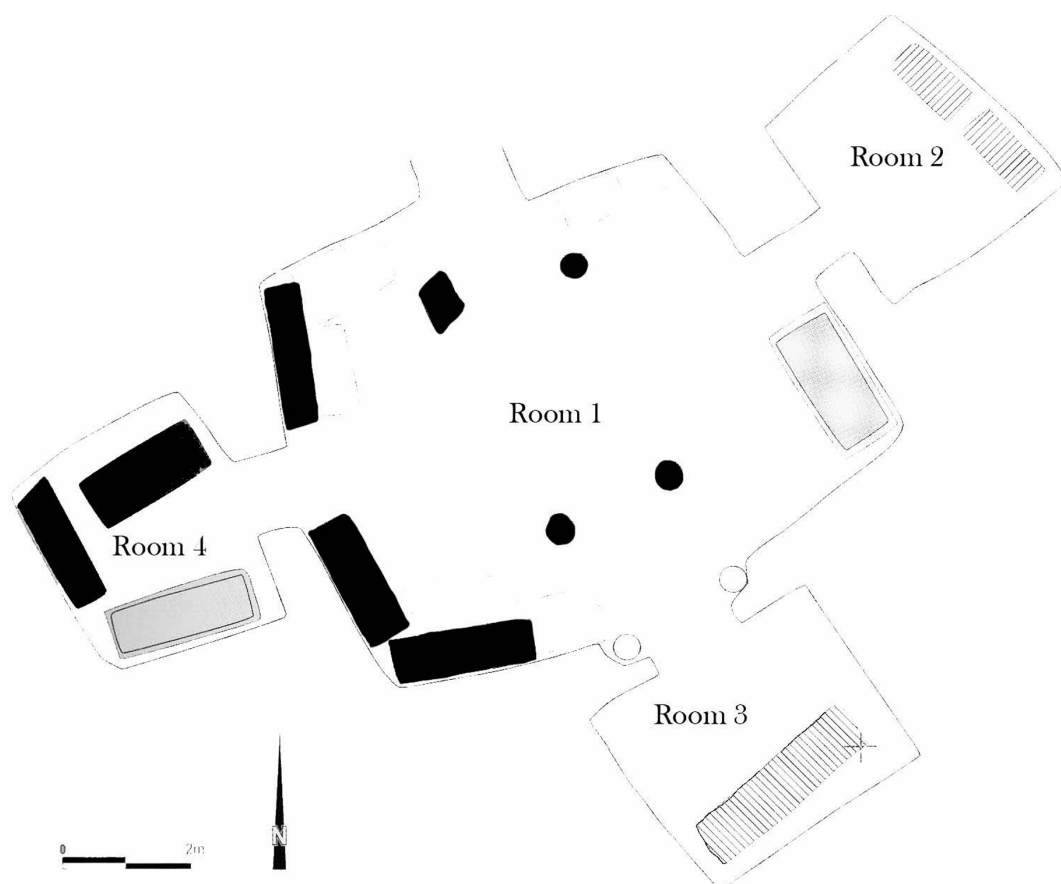


FIGURE 55.3 Plan of the Royal tomb of Qatna. Stone benches in black, sarcophagai in grey, and hatched wooden installations.

cut into a hillside adjacent to the city (Mazar 1990: 213–14; Gonen 1992a). Such large communal tombs, which are known to have served extended patrimonial households, functioned for many generations, and in many instances continued to be used throughout the Late Bronze Age. For the most part, deviations from this burial practice reflect local adaptations to environmental conditions rather than substantive ideological or religious differences across the Levant. This is most clearly demonstrated by the Amorite burials of the late Middle Bronze Age (MB IIC, c.1640–1530 BC) excavated at Avaris in the eastern delta of Egypt (Bietak 1991) where mudbrick cists were constructed above ground. A similar strategy was, in fact, adopted during this period in the southern Levant in what appears to have been an attempt to accommodate additional burials in cemeteries after they had largely achieved their maximum size (e.g. Tell el-‘Ajjul, Jericho, Ashkelon). Offerings made within these tombs, although varied in their ornate character and thus suggesting a differentiation in social rank, are remarkably consistent for much of the population (e.g. Baker 2006). They often consist of foodstuffs contained in storage jars, small juglets that may have held perfumes or drink offerings, imported Cypriot and Aegean wares probably bearing expensive perfumes and unguents, and a ‘leg of lamb’ served on a platter. Scarabs,

amulets, and jewellery often adorned the body, but whether these were intended for a religious and/or decorative function can rarely be determined.

The ideal type of Levantine burial practice continued during the Iron Age throughout the southern Levant including in Israel and Judah. Although we possess no clear evidence of Iron Age royal burials belonging to the kings of Israel and Judah, references as in I Kings 2: 10 indicate that these burial practices were far more akin to Amorite and Canaanite burial practices, especially since Judean kings, for example, appear to have been interred within the city and below the palace. The remainder of the population, probably largely as a result of physical constraints on space within the city (although ritual purity is invoked in biblical tradition; Leviticus 19: 11–16), engaged in burial outside of the city walls in adjacent hillsides, which reflects the continuation of a tradition of extramural burial begun during the Middle Bronze Age.

Although during the Iron Age the construction of the finest of these tombs took on an unprecedented level of care for architectural detail (Bloch-Smith 1992), the ideal type remained: a central subterranean tomb complex intended for an extended family, featuring a central room off which smaller chambers opened to accommodate individual family members (Barkay 2000). Even though by the Iron Age there is no direct archaeological evidence for feasting in connection with the burial rites, following the deposition and decomposition of the body, the bones were similarly gathered within special repositories within the tomb, often below the benches upon which bodies could be laid. As during the Bronze Age, also during the Iron Age, the character of the burials varied among social strata as well as in proximity to the capital city, Jerusalem. Nevertheless, like their Amorite and Canaanite antecedents burials included ceramic vessels (presumably with their contents), amulets, and other items suggesting a range of interpretations from preparation and adornment of the body after death to the continuation of earlier beliefs about the needs of the individual in the afterlife. Given the range of Israelite religious perspectives that existed (as indicated in the biblical tradition), it is also likely that a range of interpretations concerning these practices persisted among Israelites and Judeans.

4 EVIDENCE FOR PARTICIPATION IN RITUAL

In addition to the evidence of popular cult that is attested among the burial customs discussed above, other lines of evidence suggest ritual activity on a local level beginning in the Middle Bronze Age and continuing through the Iron Age. Female cult figurines, usually identified with the Canaanite female goddesses Asherah or Astarte, are found throughout these periods, beginning with a large collection of metal figurines during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Negbi 1976: 60–105). Although they reveal changing styles of production, ceramic examples of these figurines (Kletter 1996) reveal what may have been the focus of female participation in Canaanite cult and the retention of such practices among many Israelites during the Iron Age. Shrines in veneration of Ba'al are also attested on the basis of metal figurines of the Middle and Late Bronze Ages (Negbi 1976: 8–59) and bull figurines from the Middle Bronze Age (Stager 2006, 2008) to the Iron I period (Mazar 1999), with the

adoption of the iconography of Ba'al for the chief deities within Iron Age pantheons, as attested for Yahweh in the biblical texts.

Equally important within personal veneration of Canaanite deities throughout the Bronze and Iron Age is the existence of a number of ritual items and vessels of limited production that are found in domestic contexts or otherwise removed from monumental temple complexes. Among these are ceramic model shrines (Muller 2002; Ziffer and Kletter 2007). These indicate the appearance of temples and shrines during these periods but also verify the identification of the deities venerated within them through the use of symbols associated with the different deities. Although exactly how these models functioned is unknown, they may have served as stand-ins for cult centres that could not be regularly visited by many individuals. Indeed the challenges posed for making ritual pilgrimages are illustrated by the traditional pilgrimages to Jerusalem reportedly made by Israelites during the Iron Age, a practice that was continued during the Second Temple period.

Objects of personal adornment also revealed aspects of individual religious conviction, although to what extent these reflected or were used in ritual activity is impossible to determine. During the end of the Middle, and throughout the Late Bronze Age, pendants adorned the bodies of buried females (McGovern 1985). The consistent depiction of a female goddess, not unlike the ceramic figurines, with emphasis on breasts and the pubic area (and adopting Egyptian artistic tradition associated with Hathor) suggest the identification of the goddess with Asherah or Astarte. A shift towards aniconism may be suggested in the absence of such pendants and the dearth of images of Ba'al during the Iron Age in Israel, as in the absence of any unequivocal evidence for the identification of iconography or statuary associated with Yahweh.

That throughout the Bronze and Iron Ages individuals burned incense and made personal sacrifices to their gods is suggested by incense stands and ritual vessels. While many exemplars of these are likely to have been metal and thus have not survived, a variety of painted vessels from the Middle and Late Bronze Ages serve as likely candidates for use in ritual, as also suggested by their contexts. These include bichrome ware of the late Middle Bronze and early Late Bronze Age (Epstein 1966) with a range of animal motifs that correlate with Canaanite deities: the bull (Ba'al), bird or dove (Asherah), fish (Lotan/Leviathan), and disc-wheel (Šapšu/Šemeš), and vessels decorated with various motifs, such as the tree-of-life throughout the Late Bronze Age (Amiran 1970: 161–5). In addition to ceramic cult stands, ritual vessels of the Iron Age include *kernoi*, circular ceramic rings with attached cups and spouts, the function of which is entirely enigmatic (Amiran 1970: 302–6). Ceramic incense stands were also accompanied by horned altars, which make their appearance in ancient Israel during the Iron Age continuing the tradition of burning incense to the gods, as depicted in Egyptian reliefs showing besieged Canaanite cities during the Late Bronze Age.

5 CONCLUSIONS

If any trends present themselves as characteristic of Israelite ritual and religion during the Iron Age, these are most evident by contrasting Israelite cult with that of the Amorites and Canaanites. Such an approach reveals that, at the level of state cult, limited change is

evident in the archaeological record, with increased centralization as perhaps the most evident change during the Iron Age. This occurred principally with nearly exclusive construction of monumental temples within capital cities such as Jerusalem during the Iron Age. Nevertheless, shrines and smaller temples, which may reflect attempts to retain local access to the central cult, continued to be built in keeping with the visibility of state cult that was characteristic during the Middle and Late Bronze Ages. Increased efforts to centralize cult may have contributed to the proliferation of artefacts associated with personal piety, such as cult stands, female goddess figurines, and ceramic cult vessels that are not described as part of orthodox Israelite religion in the Hebrew Bible.

SUGGESTED READING

Levantine archaeology (Steiner and Killebrew forthcoming; Mazar 1990; Stern 2001; Ben-Tor 1992); Israelite religion (Albertz 1992; Miller 2000); archaeology of Canaanite and Israelite religion (Zevit 2001; Nakhai 2001; Dever 2005); Canaanite myths (Cross 1973); Ugaritic religious texts: (1) Ba'al cycle (Pardee 1997b), Kirta epic (Pardee 1997c), and 'Aqhatu cycle (Pardee 1997a), (2) Ugaritic cult ritual texts (Pardee 2002), and technical discussions concerning the Canaanite sacrificial system, see del Olmo Lete (1999).

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