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THE NEW BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARADIGM EL NUEVO PARADIGMA ARQUEOLÓGICO BÍBLICO

**BY: CARDOSO, FINKELSTEIN, FRIZZO, FUNARI, IZIDORO,
KAEFER, MENDONÇA, SCHIAVO, VIGIL, VILLAMAYOR.**

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**THE NEW
BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL PARADIGM**

EL NUEVO PARADIGMA ARQUEOLÓGICO BÍBLICO

VOICES

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Our cover:

Canaanite temple of worship area of the excavations in the ruins of Megiddo, declared in 2005 by UNESCO World Heritage. Located 90 km north of Jerusalem and 30 southeast of Haifa, it was an important city, whose name appears in Egyptian hieroglyphics and cuneiform writings in the Amarna Letters (XIV century BC). The stratigraphic archeology distinguishes in the ruins 26 layers of ancient settlements along different periods.

Picture courtesy of Silas Kein Cardoso

Templo cananeo en la zona de culto de las excavaciones en las ruinas de Megiddo, declaradas en 2005 por la UNESCO patrimonio de la humanidad. Situada a 90 km al norte de Jerusalén y 30 al sudeste de Haifa, fue una ciudad importante, cuyo nombre aparece en jeroglíficos egipcios y en escritura cuneiforme ya en las Cartas de El Amarna (siglo XIV a.C.). La arqueología estratigráfica distingue en sus ruinas 26 estratos de antiguos asentamientos de diferentes períodos.

Fotografía gentileza de Silas Klein Cardoso.

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Plurality and cultic boundaries

Creative religiosity and cult in Beth Shean

Silas KLEIN CARDOSO¹

São Paulo, Brazil

Translation: Priscila Klein CARDOSO

Abstract

The essay presents the new paradigm in the history of Israelite religion, emanating from recent archaeological findings. It is perceived the plural and syncretic characteristic of the ancient Israelite cult, which had welcoming and integration of different imaginaries as a pattern, that did not depend on the political and economical powers to gain acceptance. In order to present these proposals, a case study is performed on the archaeological site of Tel Beth Shean (Tell el-Husn), whose findings are interpreted iconographically.

Keywords: Beth Shean; Archaeology; Hermeneutics; Religious Visual Culture; Diachronic Pluralism.

Introduction

Until a few decades ago, Israelite religion was characterized as an "alien" religion. Including in the critical academic literature, the Hebrew cult description resembled a pauline dogmatic treaty, it was supported: one God, one cult, one chosen people, one religious practice/expression etc. Even those who adventured against the mainstream, would not stop with prejudiced language, defining practices consider unorthodox as "popular" religiosities and, consequently, "immoral", "idolatrous", and "impure". The distinction between "popular" and "official" was itself an almost deuteronomic prejudice against unauthorized practices². In case they were not considered popular, the heterodoxy was defined as "Canaanite" and so forth. Only monolatric practices were accepted, for these emphasized the Israelite moral superiority over its neighbors.

¹ Cardoso has a master and is a doctoral student in Sciences of Religion (UMESP). Email: silasklein@gmail.com

² For a critical view on the subject: STAVRAKOPOULOU, Francesca. "'Popular' Religion and 'Official' Religion: Practice, Perception, Portrayal". In: STAVRAKOPOULOU, Francesca; BARTON, John. *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013, p.37-58

All of this has changed in the last years. First, because the biblical history of Israel had primary concepts – Exodus, walk in the desert, conquest, period of judges, united monarchy, etc. – lost or reinvented³. Second, because the conceptions of Ancient Israel religion have changed. What it seems to have shaken the structures of what we knew was the discovery of a few vestiges in Kuntillet Ajrud, a site that would have survived for a short period of time, between 795 and 730/720 B.C. Two references mention, respectively, YHWH of Samaria and his Asherah and YHWH of Teman and his Asherah⁴. The presence of the divine consort and the image representation of the couple raised new questions, whose answers break with former consensual ideas, such as: the idea of a primitive biblical monotheism⁵; the idea of a cult without images representing gods/goddesses⁶; the idea of division between Canaanite and Israelite religious practices⁷; the idea of a cult centralization as a divine concept⁸, etc.

All of these modifications prevent us to speak nowadays of a monolithic and/or orthodox Israelite cult⁹. Thus, it is imperative to think about the impact and connection among different religiosities in

³ Cf. e.g. LIVERANI, Mario. *Para além da Bíblia: História antiga de Israel*. São Paulo: Paulus/Loyola, 2008; SCHMID, História da Literatura, p. 75s

⁴ Cf. e.g. CROATTO, José Severino. "La Diosa Asherá en el antiguo Israel, El aporte epigráfico de la arqueología". In: RIBLA 38. Available in: <www.claiweb.org/ribla/ribla38/la%20diosa%20ashera.html>. Access in: 15/03/2015.

⁵ Cf. SMITH, Mark S. *O memorial de Deus: História, memória e a experiência do divino no Antigo Israel*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2006; SMITH, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2ed. Michigan: Eerdmans/Dove, 2002; REIMER, Haroldo. *Inefável e sem forma: estudos sobre o monoteísmo hebraico*. São Leopoldo, Goiânia: Oikos, UCG, 2009, p. 40-52

⁶ TOORN, Karen Van Der. *The Image and the book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. Leuven: Peeters, 1997

⁷ Cf. NIEHR, H. "Israelite' and 'Canaanite' Religion". In: STAVRAKOPOULOU, Francesca; BARTON, John. *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*. London: T&T Clark, 2013. p. 23-36

⁸ FRIED, The High Places (*bamot*) and the Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah: An Archaeological Investigation. JAOS, Vol. 122, n. 3 (Jul/Set 2002), 452; EDELMAN, Diana V. "Cultic Sites and Complexes Beyond Jerusalem Temple". In: STAVRAKOPOULOU, Francesca; BARTON, John. *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013, p. 82-103

⁹ Examples of works that address the diversity of the Israelite cult: GERSTENBERGER, Erhard. *Teologias no Antigo Testamento: pluralidade e sincretismo da fé em Deus no Antigo Testamento*. São Leopoldo: Sinodal/EST/CEBI, 2007; STAVRAKOPOULOU, Francesca; BARTON, John. *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah*. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013. Book that indicate the cult diversity without breaking with former premises of Israel history: ALBERTZ, Rainer. *Historia de la religión de Israel en Tiempos del Antigo Testamento*. Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1999

the Southern Levant. This will be the focus of our essay, to consider the Canaanite-Israelite religious development of Beth Shean regarding the "foreign nations". We defend that, in the region, the cult was developed in a plural and syncretic way, mixing different imaginaries. In order to test such perspective, we will analyze the occupational history of Tel Beth Shean archaeological site. This site seems to demonstrate more clearly the vestiges of the cultic intersection, once it is located in a cultural border. Therefore, from the analysis of material and visual culture, appointments will be made on how this religion interaction may have worked in that region.

Discovering Tel Beth Shean

In the Babylonian Talmud (*Bavli Erubin*, i.20b), Reish Lakish said that if the gate of the Garden of Eden were in the Land of Israel, it would be located in Beth Shean¹⁰. The name itself, from the Hebrew, means *House of Silence or House of Serenity*. The definitions do not let the site main characteristic get away: the privileged location. And, if we think about the minimum requirement for settlement (land, water, defense, communication), there is a reason why it is called paradise. Beth Shean possesses: (1) **enough land**, with its 4ha of area; (2) **abundance of water**, through the supply of Harod and Asi Rivers; (3) **defensible position**, located in a prominent hill, leaning towards the northwest and embodying two ravines; and (4) **access to communication**, situated in the crossing of two main roads, the latitudinal is between Jezreel and Harod, towards the Jordan River and, the longitudinal is by the Jordan Valley, at the end of Via Maris, where is divided to Syria and to Transjordan. All these factors made it welcoming since the Chalcolithic (4500-3300 B.C.) and transformed it into one of the most populous cities of the region. For its long occupation history, Beth Shean has become a somewhat sociopolitical thermometer of the region, had been a reflex of several changes in the biblical lands.¹¹

¹⁰ There are different transliteration of the name of the site: Beth Shean, Bet Shan, Bet Sean, Bet-Seā, Betsā, etc. In Arabic, its denomination is Tell el-Husn. We opted to follow the form from the Jerusalem Bible, "Beth Shean".

¹¹ Informations from: MCGOVERN, P. E. "Beth-Shan (Place)" in FREEDMAN, Daniel Noel (org.). *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, v. 1. New York: Doubleday, 1992, p. 693; AHARONI, Yohanan. *The Land of the Bible: a historical geography*. Translation A. F. Rainey. 2ed. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1979, p. 53; MAZAR, Amihai. "The excavations at Tel Beth Shean during the years 1989-94". In: SILBERMAN, Neil Asher; SMALL, David. *The Archaeology of Israel: constructing the past, interpreting the present*. JSOT Supplement Series 237. Sheffield: Sheffield Press, 1997b, p. 144, 147; MAEIR, Aren M.; MULLINS, Robert A. "The Tell El-Yahudiya Ware from Tel Beth Shean" in ASTON, D.;

In opposition to the geographic prominence, biblically, Beth Shean is not recurring. Under such denomination, the city appears only in: Jsh 17.11, 16; Jdg 1.27; 1 Sam 31.10-12; 2 Sam 21.12; 1 Chr 7.29; 10.8-12; 1 Mac 5.52; 12.40-41. Afterwards, with the new name Scythopolis, we find it in: 2 Mac 12.29-31; Jdt 3.10. It is opportune to analyze briefly these appearances. In Joshua, the city arises among those which remain being a Canaanite population, under the questionable Israelite hegemony. In the book of Judges, the event reoccurs, and the book labels the city as being part of the valleys not conquered by Manasses, in a manner that is repeated in the First Book of the Chronicles. Such occurrences emphasize the ancient occupancy in the city, where there would have been a Canaanite people contrary to the Israelite power. Yet, in the books of Samuel and First Book of Chronicles place it in evidence in dark times, when Saul's deceased body is exposed on the walls of the city. Its privileged geography is proved in this context, when its political distinction is shown.

In a later period, the First Book of Kings places the city under the supervision of Banaah, son of Ahilud, one of the twelve Solomon's "mayors" (heb. *nasab*)¹², responsible for Taanach, Megiddo and all Beth Shean's taxes, cities who would have remain Canaanite, in the books do Judges and Joshua. In the First Book of Maccabees, the city is passage to Judah and battle field to Jonathan and Trypho, who ended up avoiding war, afraid of the multitude accompanying Jonathan. Under the Greek name Scythopolis, Beth Shean appears on the Second Book of Maccabees, to be part of another war that had not happened, this time for the good neighborhood between Scythopolitans and Jews. Finally, the city appears in the Book of Judith, as a resting place for the men of Holofernes. These later passages resemble a powerful and military strategic city, but that would have not collapse to war.

BEITAK, M. Tell el-Daba VIII: The Classification and Chronology of Tell el-Yahudiya Ware. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2011, p. 577; KAEFER, José Ademar. *Arqueologia das Terras da Bíblia*. São Paulo: Paulus, 2012, p. 45; AHARONI, Yohanan (et al.). Atlas Bíblico. Rio de Janeiro: CPAD, 1999, p. 17; MAZAR, Amihai. *Arqueologia na terra da Bíblia: 10.000-586 a.C.* São Paulo: Paulinas, 2003, p. 32; MAZAR, Amihai "Tel Beth Shean: History and Archaeology" in KRATZ, Reinhard G.; SPIECKERMANN, Hermann (ed.). *One God – One Cult – One Nation: Archaeological and Biblical Perspectives*. BZAW 405. Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010, p. 241

¹² Each of these twelve Solomon's *nāṣab* (mayors or supervisors) was responsible for one of the months of the year (1Kg 4.7). Noth believes that this district division would have endured until after the king's death, since it consists in Samaria Ostracon, dated from the Jeroboam II period. Cf. NOTH, Martin. *História de Israel*. Traducción Juan A. G. Larraya. Barcelona: Garriga, 1966, p. 202

Excavations History

Beth Shean was one of the most explored cities among the lands of Israel. The excavations began early in the XX century, starting with Clarence S. Fisher who, from 1921-1923, initiated the excavations at the site along with a big cemetery nearby¹³, under the auspices of the *University Museum of the Pennsylvania Expedition* (UME). In sequence, through the same university, Alan Rowe (1925-1928) and Gerald M. FitzGerald (1930-1931) pursued the work, which revealed eighteen successive occupations in the location¹⁴, from the Neolithic to the Medieval. This constitutes in one of the biggest archaeological finds previous to the First Great War. In the occasion, there were created three terraces: the taller, from Iron Age I; the medium terrace, from the fourth century; and the third terrace, from the Bronze Age III.

However, the first task work used an old methodology and, as a result, new visits to the site were organized. In 1983, Shulamit Geva and Yigael Yadin resume the excavations for three weeks, but in 1989 the site started to be examined more attentively. Between 1989 and 1996, from the three excavated terraces, at least seven seasons of excavations were conducted, each one with minimum of six weeks, guided by Amihai Mazar, under the *Institute of Archaeological of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem* (HU) and the *Beth Shean Archaeological Expedition* and sponsored by Israel Antiquities Authority and the already mentioned *Beth Shean Tourist Development Authority*. The purpose of the new excavations, according to Mazar himself¹⁵, was to recreate the site's history and solve problems from the previous excavations.



Image 1. Beth Shean view, early settlement at the top, and recent at the mount. Personal archive.

Occupational History

The site's history is extensive, due to its occupational history is housing approximately six thousand years. Of the initial stages, the Neolithic (5,000 B.C.) is represented by pits excavated in rock, while the Chalcolithic (4,000 B.C.) brings pottery. In Early Bronze Age, oval dwellings, polish pottery, and bronze axes were found, characteristic of this period (35-34 centuries B.C.)¹⁶. In this period a hall with fourteen wooden columns for a roof support was found, with benches along the walls and milling equipment, probably a warehouse. Mazar¹⁷ believes that, in the period, from the new agricultural irrigation and building in the center of the hill, a centralized and regulating authority for food storage and distribution may have been admitted.

However, in 3,000 B.C., it would have been abandoned, frequent characteristic of other sites in the period. The lack of evidence on the recurring abandonment led Mazar to consider two hypothesis: the first¹⁸, appoints to the result of population concentration in emergent cities of the period; and, the second, subsequently¹⁹, says that the communities established deliberately outside the previous locations, perhaps in a semi-nomadism. With recent pollen sample from the deep Sea of Galilee, Langgut, Finkelstein and Lit, signed that the emptying must not have happened due to the drought²⁰. Beth Shean remained vacant until the Middle Bronze, when a settlement was established, with a few dwellings. A great paved area with the presence of a central pit would also suggest public activities. Several jars from children funerals, as well as pits for young and adults, some with jewels, indicate an elevated status of some families in the settlement²¹. Still, fortifications of this time were not found.

¹³ Cf. MCGOVERN, *Beth-Shan (Place)*, p. 693

¹⁴ MAZAR, *The excavations at Tel Beth Shean during the years 1989-94*, p. 144

¹⁵ MAZAR, *Tel Beth-Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 243

¹⁶ MAZAR, Amihai. "Beth Shean". In: MEYERS, Eric (ed.). *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, v. I. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997a, p. 306

¹⁷ MAZAR, *The excavations at Tel Bath Shean during the years 1989-94*, p. 148

¹⁸ MAZAR, *Arqueologia na terra da Bíblia*, 2003, p. 109

¹⁹ MAZAR, *Tel Beth-Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 246-247

²⁰ The opposite occur later, in the transition of the Late Bronze Age and Iron I (1250-1100 B.C.). Cf. LANGGUT, Dafna; FINKELSTEIN, Israel; LITT, Thomas. "Climate and the Late Bronze Collapse: New Evidence from the Southern Levant". In: *Tel Aviv*, v. 40, 2013, p. 159

²¹ MAZAR, *Tel Beth-Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 241



Image 2. Temple location at Beth Shean. Personal archive.

Between the Early Bronze and Iron I, five temples arise in Beth Shean, at the same locality. The first, following the standard of the Canaanite asymmetrical temples, is a modest building of 38 x 47ft with staggered platform, where there was a round stone and a space for a wooden pillar, to which Mazar suggest to be for cultic practices, probably a *massebah* (Heb. standing stone) e a *Asberah*²². But the distinction of Beth Shean site to biblical studies has been for the Egyptian dominion, in the XIV-XII centuries B.C., under Thutmose III, who turned the city into the region administrative center, probably for its privileged location and for Beth Shean had not been a Canaanite city-state, which comply with the Egyptian policy of not usurp, on that time, such state²³.

In this regard, Beth Shean appears in Thutmose III's list in Karnak (n. 110) and in Amarna Letters (EA 289), where it says: "Gintikirmil belongs to Tagi, and men of Gintu are the garrison in Bitsanu. Are we to act like Labayu when he was giving the land of Šakmu to the Hapiru?"²⁴. While none Egyptian monument is found in the period of the eighteenth dynasty, there is a presence of Egyptian pottery locally produced, which could prove the Egyptian occupation already in the XV and XIV cent. B.C.

²² MAZAR, *Beth-Shean*, p. 306

²³ KAEFER, *Arqueologia das Terras da Biblia*, p. 46; MAZAR, *Tel Beth Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 248

²⁴ MORAN, W. L. *The Amarna Letters*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1992, EA 289

Nevertheless, the city would have been destroyed by fire in the mid-XIV cent. B.C., in the days of Amarna.

In the XIII century B.C., Beth Shean was rebuilt with new fortress, new government residence and an Egyptian headquarters, which design remained until the end of the Egyptian occupation²⁵. By XII B.C., beginning of the Iron I, the city expanded, following the general process previously used for the constructions, with the addition of some buildings and a house to a high rank Egyptian officer, with illustrated walls²⁶. In this period there is significant syncretism between Egyptian and Canaanite religion and iconography, with influences in architecture as well as in the Egyptian officers' cultic place²⁷. The garrison destruction would have occurred in the reigns of Ramesses IV and VI, possibly by the Canaanites neighbors or semi-nomads invaders, like the Midianites²⁸.

²⁵ MAZAR, Amihai "The Egyptian Garrison Town at Beth Shean" in BAR, S.; KHAN, D.; SHIRLEY, J. J. (eds). *Egypt, Canaan and Israel: History, Imperialism, Ideology and Literature: Proceedings of a Conference at the University of Haifa*. Leiden: Brill, 2011, p. 153

²⁶ The illustrated walls indicates an Egyptian need to take over the friendly space, denoting a longer stay in for higher officers. Cf. MAZAR, *Tel Beth Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 253

²⁷ McGovern indicates that there were Egyptians deities like Hathor, Bes, Taurt and Sekmet, altogether with Palestinian deities. MCGOVERN, *Beth Shan (Place)*. p. 694

²⁸ MAZAR, *Tel Beth Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 258-259; MAZAR, *The Egyptian Garrison Town at Beth Shean*, p. 171

Image 3. Egyptian governor house. Personal archive.



In this matter, Mazar shows that citations on the Israelite non-dominion of the city (cf. Jsh 17.11,16; Jdg 1.27-32) are possible, however, the story about Saul hanging cannot be prove archaeologically, since that there are no evidence (Philistine pottery) of occupation by the people of the sea during the time²⁹. On the other hand, Israel Finkelstein indicates that none Philistine city had enough strength for a battle so far in the North as the one portrayed at the end of the book of Samuel. For the archaeologist, Saul's presence in so deep in the North is confusing, once his government center would be on the plateau of Gibaon-Bethel. For Finkelstein, a plausible explanation would be the intervention of Pharaoh Sheshong I – biblical Sheshak – against the Saulide polity. The Philistine presence would be a reprojection of the biblical text writing time³⁰. So, Saul's body presence in Beth Shean in this manner would be more plausible on the scene imagined by Finkelstein.

The most publicized findings of Beth Shean are from the Egyptian domination period, as the stele of Seti I and of Ramesses II. Seti's I stele, similar to Thutmose II document, mentions the Apiru: "The Apiru of Mount Yarmuta, with Teyer..., [have ari]sen in attack upon the Asiatics of Rehem. Then [his majesty] said: How can these wretched Asiatics think [of taking] their [arms] for further disorder?"³¹. These people would not have citizenship that attacked every once in a while city-states or were associated with mercenaries. Such association has been considered one of great value from Tel findings, under the hypothesis that associates the Apiru mentioned to the Israelite nation formative group, with the *shasu*.

Other important inference from the two steles is that both suggest a rout passing by Beth Shean, also confirmed by Shishak list, which makes reference to the "valley" (of Beth Shean), that had Beth Shean, Rehov, Shunem, Taanach and Meggido. Thus, the site provided findings that detailed commercial routs and its ramifications. In this aspect, Beth Shean would be an important "ocean path" rout ramification, named *Via Maris*. Besides this, it is possible to see the political relevance of the garrison through Egyptian registry and signs with real names, four been "Ramesses" and five been "Merneptah", and a cylinder seal that has Ramesses II shooting an arrow in a target.

²⁹ MAZAR, *The excavations at Tel Beth Shean during the years 1989-94*, p. 162; MAZAR, *Tel Beth-Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 261-262

³⁰ FINKELSTEIN, *The Forgotten Kingdom*, p. 59-61

³¹ PRITCHARD, James B. (ed). *Ancient Near Eastern Texts: Relating to the Old Testament*. Third Edition with Supplement. Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969, p. 255

In the tenth century B.C., the city presents administrative center characteristics, due to a structure of gate and two buildings with pillars, that would have been destroyed in a fire, by Jezreel and Tel Rehov time³². It is a crucial step, for it is in a biblical text (1 Kg 4.12), and also, later, it appears in Shishak lists in Karnak, for instance the cities conquered after the monarchy division. There are later traces of destruction, supposedly by Tiglath-Pileser III in 732 B.C., and rebuilding in VIII B.C. The characteristic of this site, proving Tiglath-Pileser III campaigns, also contributes to the biblical studies, demonstrating the coming of Assyrian power to Galilee, in 722 B.C., and the sign of the Northern realm fall. In the Persian period, Beth Shean would be risen again to a category of cultic place, as the cultic images at Tel affirm.

In the Hellenistic Period, they found a Tetradrachm, besides a posterior occupation in the period of the Hasmoneans³³. The conquest is portrayed in Flavio Josefo's *Jewish Wars* and *Antiquities*³⁴. Many pottery objects imported from Greece and East Mediterranean, and also Tyro's coins were found. In this period, the city turned into Greek *polis* and received the name Scythopolis, after that it was transfer to the mountain, facilitating the access to commerce, essential in the Hellenistic period. With Antioch IV the city was named Nisa, a tribute to Dionysus, name also used for the city's currency. From the Roman period, a great Theater was built, with a column street, a hippodrome, a village with floral mosaic, besides a cemetery with vases, adorned pottery and even a sarcophagus of stone with Antiochus's name, son of Phalion, who is thought to be cousin of Herod the Great. By this period, in 63 B.C., Pompeus conquered the city, associating it to the Decapolis, turning it into the only³⁵ city in the Decapolis in Israelite territory³⁶.

There are different hypothesis about the formation of this group of cities. Some say they are political unit from Pompeus days, others affirm that only the Hellenistic characteristic form a pattern in these cities. However, it is important to remember that, even with the presence of an

³² MAZAR, *Tel Beth-Shean: History and Archaeology*, p. 264

³³ MAZAR, *Beth-Shean*, p. 308

³⁴ GALIL, Gershon; WEINFELD, Moshe (eds.). *Studies in Historical Geography & Biblical Historiography: Presented to Zecharia Kallai*. Leiden: Brill, 2010, p. 72

³⁵ The reasons to the choice for Decapolis are not fully understood. Lester Grabbe points out that the only recurrent pattern among all those cities is its Hellenistic characteristic. In any case, in the following period (III cent. BC.), a big populating inhabited the region, except in Filoteria. Cf. GRABBE, Lester, L. *A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period: volume 2: The Early Hellenistic Period (335-175 BCE)*. Library of Second Temple Studies 68. New York, T&T Clark, 2008, p 188.

³⁶ KAEFER, *Arqueologia das Terras da Bíblia*, p. 46

important city and other *polis*, called Filoteria, apparently there was not a significantly populating in Northern Israel on the third century before the Christian Age. Pompeus conquest is also portrayed by Josefo in *Jewish Wars* and, after the destruction in the hasmonean period, there would have been a time of important constructions.

With the Byzantine Empire, Beth Shean got a circular church, with baptistry, and well built houses. The elite dwelt at the peak of the mountain and the common people at the suburbs³⁷. From the Roman and Byzantine periods, the memory of abundance in textile production remains. A synagogue, that would have been constructed between centuries V and VII A.D., with mosaics with images of the ark of testimony covered by curtains, ritual vase and a menorah with Greek and Samaritan inscriptions³⁸. In the VIII century A.D., the Byzantine architecture was replaced by new buildings, maybe because of the earthquake that hit the city in 749 A.D., a little over one century after the muslims conquered it (614 A.D.). During the Medieval period, Beth Shean turned into private propriety, with walls surrounding it, some unfinished dated to XII A.D., period of the Crusades³⁹.

Plural Cult in Beth Shean

Important vestiges were found in Beth Shean for cultural and biblical texts studies. However, it seems to be emphasized by the biblical academy, sociopolitical findings, of which was already highlighted Seti I and Ramesses II steles, real name inscriptions, cylindrical seal of Ramesses II shooting an arrow and the Decapolis membership in the time of Pompeus. However, we want to mention other recurring issue in the archaeological site that may help biblical studies, findings referring to cult. In here we highlight two characteristics from the Old Testament: (1) the transitional characteristic of cult in the site; and (2) its Egyptian-Canaanite syncretic characteristic.

Regarding the first, we emphasize the cult in the Canaanite period, its shapes and practices. On this aspect, the many temples found from the Early Bronze and Iron I transition are highlighted. These temples have common aspects with other Canaanite asymmetrical temples, such as Fosse Temple of Laquish, Mevorackh Temple, and the Temples of Tel Qasile. Nonetheless, the Beth Shean Temple has unique characteristics. Firstly, its tripartite format, having: (1) entrance hall; (2) central hall with

³⁷ MAZAR, The excavations at Tel Beth Shean during the years 1989-94, p. 164

³⁸ MCGOVERN, Beth-Shan (Place), p. 695

³⁹ MAZAR, Beth-Shean, p. 309

benches and elevated platform; and (3) an inside sanctuary, whose walls align with the benches. Besides the unique format, the Beth Shean 38 x 48ft temple is the oldest Canaanite asymmetrical temple found, reinforcing the theory that Beth Shean would be a transitional place for the Canaanite cult.

Likewise, under the same aspect, a platform was found where, on the top, there was that basalt circular stone column, of 1.64ft tall that could be a *massebah* (Heb. standing stone) and, just over a meter away, a basalt pedestal for a wooden pillar (*image 4*). The pedestal has two possible interpretations: the first, being an *aserah*, proper of the region cult; and the second, that the pedestal served for a Mekal image, monument dedicated by an Egyptian officer in his father's memory. The stone position suggests a transition from the Canaanite iconic cult, centered in deities anthropomorphic images (Mekal stele), to aniconic⁴⁰, with objects representing the deity (*massebah*). The massebah local format and pedestal are also revealing, standing in a platform at the sanctuary entrance, in an open space, that was characteristic of the High Places (Heb. *bamot*). With this evidence, Rowe affirmed the Beth Shean would have transitional marking of cult in high places and temples⁴¹.

It is not consensual today, the “open sky” characteristic of High Places⁴². References as 1Kg 14; 17 are incomplete and edifications as those of Edom (Horvat Qitmit, Horvat Uza) and Hasor only receive the terminology for the search happens by the confused description of



⁴⁰ According to Mettinger definition, these are cults where there is no anthropomorphic or theriomorphic representation as a cult centralized symbol, but are centralized in a aniconic image or empty space. They would be the "indicating" sign of Pierce's theory and would oppose to "iconic" cults, that would have anthropomorphic and theriomorphic representation as a cult centralized symbol. METTINGER, Tryggve. *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context*. CB 42. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1997, p. 19

⁴¹ METTINGER, *No Graven Image?*, p. 189-190

⁴² Cf. CARDOSO, Silas Klein. *A imagem se fez livro: a materialidade da Torá e a invenção do aniconismo pós-exílico*. São Bernardo do Campo: Umesp, 2015. Dissertação (Mestrado em Ciências da Religião), Faculdade de Humanidades e Direito, Universidade Metodista de São Paulo (UMESP)

Image 4. Pedestal and massebah in Beth Shean. METTINGER, *No graven image?*, p. 190.

"platform with cultic use"⁴³. Tel Arad, that emerge as a temple of similar structure to Jerusalem, for instance, it is not denominated "high place", even appearing in this way on the biblical text⁴⁴. For what we have we could think about "high places" as complex buildings – and maybe urban-like – of cult, as we see in a more complete biblical description, 1 Sm 9.11-25, and in the Mesha Estele, only extra-biblical citation of *bamah* (cf. Is 15.2; 16.2)⁴⁵. Therefore, High Places, would be a heterodoxy label to sanctuaries that would have been destroyed⁴⁶. Either way, despite the, maybe, mistaken terminology of Rowe, his perception seems to remain accurate on the transitional cult issue in Beth Shean, which changed its design due to new cultic tendencies of the period.

The second remarkable cult characteristic in the site on the Old Testament period comes from the Egyptian dominion time, relative to the syncretism between the Canaanite and Egyptian religions. Just like in Tel Laquish, there is solid mixed representation on the imaginaries of both cultic traditions. However, in Beth Shean, besides the simple representation in terracotta, there are monumental representations indicating the presence of elite⁴⁷. The representation in Straum IX (XV-XIV B.C.) ima-

⁴³ Cf. the frustrating characterizing attempts in BARRICK, W. Boyd. "High Place". In: FREEDMAN, David Noel. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992, v3, p. 196

⁴⁴ FRIED, The High Places, 452. On Tel Arad also cf. BLOCH-SMITH, Elizabeth. "Question about Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Between Archaeology and Texts". In: JISMOR 9, 2014, p. 20-28

⁴⁵ About the Moabite *bamah*, cf. FRIED, *The High Places*, 441-442

⁴⁶ In this, believes, for example, FRIED, *The High Places*, 437-465

⁴⁷ KEEL, Othmar; UEHLINGER; Christoph. *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*. Transl. Thomas Trapp. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 82

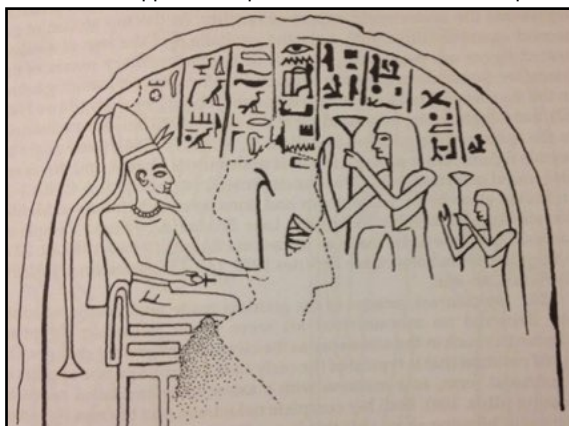


Image 5. Mekal stele. GGG, img. 120

ges, the lion and the dog, for example, show Egyptian themes and style, with little influence of the Semitic northeast. But, in Mekal stele (*img. 5*), created by Egyptian architect Amenemopet, even with the Egyptian style, the theme transfers to a local deity, Mekal, God of Beth Shean and shows the architect family bowing to the local God, in a purely Egyptian way, demonstrating the assimilation to the new cultic practice by the, so said, dominators of the region⁴⁸.

Besides that, fertility Goddesses breastfeeding their babies with amulets and rings were found in the area and, even though they possess similarity with the Egyptian cult images, such as the cult to Isis-Horus, found in Egyptian amulets, they appear naked, a typical characterization of the Canaanite Goddesses. Another characteristic patent is the blessing sign, perpetuated by the Goddesses icons (*img. 6*). Although they are under Egyptian form, both nudity and the blessing sign are only found in the local Goddesses. These Goddesses identity were researched by Keel and Uehlinger, who got to the hypothesis of being Goddess Anat representation, worshiped by the Amorites in 3,000 B.C. and, maybe, associated with Hanat city⁴⁹. There are three main reasons for these inferences:



Img. 6. Goddess. GGG, *img.* 106

(1) by the inscriptions “Mistress of Heaven, Mistress of the Gods” in a couple of other finds (in Tanis and on a stele from the *British Museum*) with the *atef*-crown; (2) the relation between this *atef*-crown with the inscriptions above mentioned; and (3) by its warrior appearance in some pictures, that would make justice to some images found in distinct locations of the biblical lands⁵⁰. However, it is difficult to stick with identifications, once in different locations and times, symbols are attributed to different deities⁵¹. Either way, we have

⁴⁸ KEEL; UEHLINGER, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God*, p. 84.

⁴⁹ Maier, Walter A. III. "Anath (Deity)". In FREEDMAN, David Noel. *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

⁵⁰ KEEL; UEHLINGER, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God*, p. 86-88.

⁵¹ KEEL, Othmar. *Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 38.

evidence that prove a syncretic cult between Canaanites and Egyptian deities in Beth Shean.

Conclusive Perspectives

Afonso Ligorio Soares once said that “the syncretism always had and remains present in the historical relations between religions. Even those who reject it, do it, in general, from a religion that is also, to some extent, syncretic”⁵². Indeed is hard to accept the alterity and alienists historical descriptions of the Ancient Israel cult against other religions from the Ancient Near East. Beth Shean study case demonstrates, in our view, throughout its extent history, the syncretic characteristic of the Ancient Near East cult, in the recombination of cultic imaginaries. Such syncretic-religious imagetic reformulation, or *creative religiosity*, occurred in the imaginative (re)creation that synthesized social memory and personal experience of the follower⁵³. Of this pattern, two characteristics are evidenced in Beth Shean:

First, Beth Shean *creative religiosity* does not respect political status. Although it is common to associate the religious production to dominant layers, in Beth Shean we find opposite setting. In the Fertility Goddesses example, the imaginary that remains is the Canaanite, of Anat, which is redesign by Egyptian mold. It is not the dominant entity that imposes its imaginary to the weakest, but the weakest imposes its imaginary to the dominant, which rereads from its own language: the Egyptian esthetics. The imagetic predominance occurs by the geographic proximity from the cult center and not by the military-political power.

Second, Beth Shean *creative religiosity* does not respect political status. It is perceptible, in the site iconography, that the local cultic imaginary acceptance does not occur only in the layers called “popular”, but also in the elite present in the site, as we have saw in the governor house and Mekal stele. It is interesting to notice that the opposite movement happened in Laquish, where the different social spheres suffer different religious impacts, resulting in distinct practices. It is not easy to determine the reason for such discrepancy. Maybe it is related to the historical site itself, which had a religious role more evident.

⁵² Text translated from Portuguese: “o sincretismo sempre esteve e permanece presente nas relações históricas entre as religiões. Até quem o rejeita, em geral o faz a partir de uma religião que também é, em alguma medida, sincrética.” SOARES, Afonso Maria Ligorio. “Valor teológico do sincretismo numa perspectiva de teologia pluralista”. In: *Ciberteologia: Revista de Teologia & Cultura*, Ano VI, n. 30, p. 29.

⁵³ On the mimetic learning in ritual and visual perspective, cf. WULF. Christoph. *Homo Pictor: imaginação, ritual e aprendizado mimético no mundo globalizado*. São Paulo: Hedra, 2013.

Finally, we believe that the site *creative religiosity* had empowered by its location in a cultural frontier: an Egyptian garrison near a Canaanite political unit. The cultural border territory⁵⁴ receives the impact of two distinct cultural compositions, having the role of interpret them mutually. Thus, in the translation between two cultures, new experiences and practices are created. Consequently, new religiosities are created: systems are recreated and imaginaries recombined. So, in cultural borders such as of Beth Shean, these alterations are noticed in a more sensitive way and reveal, in a special manner, that the Canaanite-Israelite religiosity worked, in long-term, in a plural and syncretic fashion.

⁵⁴ We were inspired by the concepts of Iuri Lotman, Culture Semiotics. Borders, in his theory, are the bilingual mechanism that would translate the external messages (of not-culture) to the internal language (of culture). Cf. LOTMAN, Yuri. *The Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. London: Taurus & Co, 1990. For an application of "cultural borders" concept to the sciences of religion, Cf. NOGUEIRA, Paulo A. S. "Religião como texto: contribuições da semiótica da cultura". In: NOGUEIRA, P. A. S. (org.). *Linguagens da Religião: desafios, métodos e conceitos centrais*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2012, p. 22-23