

THROUGH YEARS AND DENOMINATIONS
English Volume of the Conference of Junior Theologians
and Doctoral Students 2018-2021

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Editor:
Alexandra Mikó-Prém

Debrecen Reformed Theological University
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Through Years and Denominations.
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The Identity of the Samaritan Kingdom's Deity

Introduction

In view of sociological research principles, one can distinguish three levels of religiosity in the ancient Near East: official religion, regional religion and personal / family religion. While these forms of religiosity evidently intersect each other, they nonetheless embody different segments of the cultic life.¹ The official religion is in fact a cult empowered by the king. This cult, consisting of the honoring of the kingdom's supreme deity, the pantheon's supreme god, is beneficial for the people and for the kingdom as well. In some regions, however, different gods may be at the center of the religious life, depending on the economic / political profile of the area in question. For instance, in the coastal regions of a kingdom, the sea god can play a central role, even if the kingdom in question is worshipping another god as its supreme deity. When it comes to personal / family cult, the experiences and the religious belief of the ancestors play a major role in choosing a deity as the core of worship. In case of the king and the capital city, all three levels could – but need not – be linked to the same deity.

In the present study, we examine the first level, the official religion as depicted in Samaria and the Northern Kingdom, aiming to answer the following question: who was the main deity of the Samaritan cult?

From political, economic and social perspectives Israel, the Northern Kingdom is argued to have been more influential than the smaller neighboring Judah.² In contrast to this significance, however, when it comes to the historical sources, only a few of them are known in the case of Israel. Moreover, even the surviving annals of the kings of Israel and their chronicles were added to the Old Testament (OT) in the adaptation of the

1 Angelika Berlejung, "Geschichte und Religionsgeschichte des antiken Israel," in *Grundinformation Altes Testament*, ed. Jan Christian Gertz (Stuttgart: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 67–68.

2 See Israel Finkelstein, *Das vergessene Königreich: Israel und die verborgenen Ursprünge der Bibel* (München: C. H. Beck, 2014).

Judean editors of the *Deuteronomistic History* (DtrG). At the same time, the texts deriving from two prophets, Hosea and Amos, active in Israel in the 8th century and whose prophecies could be used as sources, were significantly revised by Judaeen redactors.

In the view of the Deuteronomistic movement, which according to M. Noth's classical writing reached its climax in the 6th century (together with the composition of the DtrG),³ there is only one legitimate form of religion, the worship of Yhwh, and one cultic place, namely in Jerusalem. Any other religious manifestation is interpreted as deflection, often depicted as some form of polytheism. The national religion, or we could even call it the official religion of the Northern Kingdom, is no exception from this general rule.

However, because of Israel's role in the history, it would be important to reconstruct the nature of this religion by means of a critical evaluation of the available sources.

Biblical sources

Regarding the biblical sources, mention should be made of the accounts of the DtrG, which includes – among others – a roughly abridged version of the annals of Israelite Kings (1Kgs 14:19; 15:31, etc.). In each case we ask the following question: what is the basic abstracted material and what is its Deuteronomistic evaluation?

However, this is not an easy task. According to 1Kgs 12:28-29, after the two kingdoms were separated, Jeroboam I made two golden calves and placed them at Dan and Bethel. As these cultic dispositions were ordered by the king, it is likely that one should view these measures as concerning the official, national religion. That is, according to 1Kgs 12:28-29, it seems that the image of the bull was related to the national religion. Of course, it would be difficult to decide whether the verses in question are only tendentious descriptions of the first northern king's reign, or whether they represent contemporary conditions. It is therefore necessary to analyze similar reports. Several OT passages contain descriptions of the veneration of bulls among Israelites. One of the most cited pericopes is the story of the golden calf, Ex 32, where Aaron himself prepares the object of worship, and everybody turns his back to Yhwh. The point of the story is that the sons of Israel worship a bull instead of Yhwh. This episode is referred to by Neh 9:18, which is mostly

3 Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien: die sammelnden und bearbeitenden Geschichtswerke im Alten Testament* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1943).

a quotation of Ex 32:4.8. It is more than likely that these two texts are based on the tradition of 1Kgs 12:28.⁴

In the biblical presentation of the story of Israel, the story of the golden calf proleptically points to Jeroboam I, who honored bulls, and it also prepares the theological evaluation of his deeds, while the later text of Nehemiah summarizes the events. There is an important statement regarding the bull:

Behold your gods, Israel, which brought you up out of the land of Egypt.	1Kings 12:28 הַנְּה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֶיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!	Ex 32:4 אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֶיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
This is your God who brought you up out of Egypt.	Neh 9:18 זֶה אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלֶיךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם

4 Christoph Levin, *Der Jahwist* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 367. John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Kampen: Peeters Publishers, 1994), 295–301. Klaus Koenen, “Eherne Schlange und goldenes Kalb. Ein Vergleich der Überlieferungen,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 111 (1999): 367. Hans Christoph Schmitt, “Die Erzählung vom Goldenen Kalb Ex 32* und das Deuteronomistische Geschichtswerk,” in *Rethinking the Foundations. Historiography in the Ancient World and in the Bible*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie and Thomas Römer (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 2000), 238–240. Jan Christian Gertz, “Beobachtungen zu Komposition und Redaktion in Exodus 32–34,” in *Gottes Volk am Sinai. Untersuchungen zu Ex 32–34 und Dtn 9–10*, ed. Matthias Köckert and Erhard Blum (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), 91–95. Youn Ho Chung, *The Sin of the Calf: The Rise of the Bible's Negative Attitude toward the Golden Calf* (New York/ London: T & T Clark, 2010), 49–50. Frank Ueberschaer, *Vom Gründungsmythos zur Untergangssymphonie: Eine text- und literaturgeschichtliche Untersuchung zu 1Kön 11–14*. (Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 266–268. Joanne N. M. Wijngaards, *The Formulas of the Deuteronomistic Creed. (Dt 6/20-23: 26/5-9)* (Tilburg: Reijnen, 1963), 23. Herbert Donner, “Hier sind deine Götter, Israel!,” in *Aufsätze zum Alten Testament aus vier Jahrzehnten*. ed. Herbert Donner (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 68. Heinrich Pfeiffer, *Das Heiligtum von Bethel im Spiegel des Hoseabuches* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. 1999), 38. Klaus Dietrich Schunk, *Nehemia* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2009), 265.

The texts are almost entirely identical. Deviation occurs mainly in the number of gods who have brought the sons of Israel out of Egypt. Nehemiah is evidently speaking of one God, while Exodus clearly talks about more gods. Otherwise these texts depend on the original, providing explanations for it. But 1Kgs 12:28 is ambiguous. Both the noun *god* and the related verb are formally plural. This plural form can, however, be interpreted here as abstract plural (Gen 20:13; 35:7; 2Sam 7:23; 1Chron 19:2; 2Chron 32:15),⁵ in which case the text would still presuppose a single god and his act of salvation. Otherwise a single act of salvation attributed to several gods would be both logically confusing and unusual within a mythical world where an entire pantheon never manifests itself at the same time. If that is true, it would highlight a tradition in the OT connecting bull worship and the exodus from Egypt.

According to the current view of tradition criticism, the oldest document attesting the cult of the bull can be found in 1Kgs 12:28. We have good reasons to assume that this verse is an allusion to the official cult of the kingdom.

In the Book of Hosea, we read about the bull in several places. In Hos 8:5-6 there are plans regarding the destruction of the bull statues. God condemns his people, and the bulls are not exceptions to this. A similar topic appears in Hos 10:5, where the people and the priests are mourning the loss of the bull statue, while Hos 13:2 makes fun of those people, who worship the bull statue and “kiss calves.”

Regarding the texts of Hosea, the main question is, whether they depict folk religiosity, or whether they have something to do with official religion. The latter is suggested by the fact that in Hos 8:6 the bulls are not simply presented, but they are called the calves of the capital city, Samaria (עֵגְלֵי שִׁמְרוֹן).

In addition, Hos 2 is based on a metaphor, in which the sons of Israel have to sue their own mothers. J. J. Schmitt and B. Kelle argue that this metaphorical mother is not the country or the people, but the capital city, Samaria.⁶ Their claim is based on the analysis of the metaphor of the woman and the mother in the Book of Hosea and outside of it. This means that Hosea

5 Wilhelm Gesenius, Emil Kautzsch and Gotthelf Bergsträsser, *Hebräische Grammatik* (Hildesheim: Olms Verlag, 2013) § 145 i

6 John J. Schmitt, “Yahweh’s Divorce in Hosea 2 – Who is that Woman?” in *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 9 (1995): 119–132. Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), passim.

does not necessarily focus on the folk but on the official religiosity which is connected with the bull cult as well.

It is striking, however, that the texts that speak about the bull do not call the deity by its name. This brings up the following question: which god was honoured in the image of the bull? In the Syro-Palestinian area, the teriomorphic image of the bull is primarily related to two deities: El and Baal. In the Ugaritic texts, El is always addressed as “bull El.”⁷ Therefore some scholars believe that in Israel as well the deity worshipped by the image of the bull can be associated with the supreme god of the Canaanites, El.⁸ But the bull is the symbol of the storm throughout the Near East, and we find many representations of the storm god riding a bull, pictures of a bull pulling the chariot of the storm god, or images in which the bull is the deity itself.⁹

Since the Canaanite region's storm god is Baal, many believe that the parts describing the bull cult of the Israelites speak about Baal.¹⁰ This identification is also supported by the OT texts which report the presence of the Baal cult in the monarchic period: for instance Hos 2:10, 15, 18, or the Elijah cycle

7 KTU 1.1 III 26; 1.2 I 16.33.36; III 16–17.19; 1.3 IV 54; V 10.35; 1.4 II 10; III 31; IV 1.39; 1.6 IV 10; 1.14 I 41; II 6.23–26; 1.16 IV 2; 1.17 I 23; 1.92 15.

8 Adrian H. W. Curtis: “Some Observations on ‘Bull’ Terminology in the Ugaritic Texts and the Old Testament,” in *In the Quest of the Past: Studies on Israelite Religion, Literature and Prophetism*, ed. A. S. Van Der Woude (Leiden/ New York/ København/ Köln: Brill, 1990), 17–31. Wesley I. Toews, *Monarchy and Religious Institution in Israel under Jeroboam I*. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1993), 41–69. Karel Van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden/ New York/ Köln: Brill, 1996), 321–328. David Tasker, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature and the Hebrew Scriptures about the Fatherhood of God* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 62–63. Nicolas Wyatt, *The Mythic Mind: Essays on Cosmology and Religion in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature* (London/ Oakville: Routledge, 2005), 79–91. R. Scott Chalmers, *The Struggle of Yahweh and El for Hosea's Israel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 42–51. John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 34–39. Stephen L. Herring, *Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 147–148.

9 Silvia Schroer, *Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient: Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern. 2. Die Mittelbronzezeit* (Bern: Fribourg Academic Press, 2008), 50. 232–241.

10 Gunnar Östborn, *Yahweh and Baal: Studies in the Book of Hosea and Related Documents* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1956), 23–26. Hans Walter Wolff, *Hosea* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1976), 179. Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman, *Hosea* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 493. Jules Francis Gomes, *The Sanctuary of Bethel and the Configuration of Israelite Identity* (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 2006), 163–165. Joy Philip Kakkanattu, *God's Enduring Love in the Book of Hosea: A Synchronic and Diachronic Analysis of Hosea 11,1–11* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 111–117. Chung, Sin, 108–166.

in 1Kgs 17–19. We can notice a strong polemic against Baal in these texts. The Baal cult was undoubtedly present in Israel. The question is whether it was practiced at a national level, or rather at a regional or familial level. Furthermore, we must find out whether the bull statues set up during the reign of Jeroboam had anything to do with the Baal cult? To put it simply: was the Baal cult the national religion of Samaria, or did the texts, written against Baal, intend to disgrace folk religiosity?

The first option seems to be supported by 1Kgs 16:32, according to which Ahab set up an altar for Baal in the Temple of Baal, which he built in Samaria. According to this passage, there was a Baal temple in the capital city, Samaria, which was built by the king. However, it is worth taking a closer look at the text because it sounds quite cumbersome in both English and Hebrew:

He set up an altar for Baal <i>in</i> the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria.	וַיִּקַּם מִזְבֵּחַ לְבַעַל בֵּית הַבַּעַל אֲשֶׁר בָּנָה בְּשֶׁמְרוֹן
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It is remarkable that in the MT the “temple of Baal” is not preceded by a preposition. We have three options to explain the current text: (1) The phrase “temple of Baal” includes an implicit בְּ preposition.¹¹ (2) We are dealing here with an apposition, identifying the altar and the temple.¹² (3) The text is either deteriorated, or intentionally modified.

Assuming that the text presents a case of apposition would, however, be problematic in view of the subordinate clause starting with אֲשֶׁר , which contradicts the logical flow of the sentence.¹³ Beside the syntactical problems, it still remains a question why the text would equate the altar and the temple, while in the ancient Near East the altar is evidently an object of the temple and not the temple itself. Therefore, additional, more likely options must be searched for.

11 See for instance KJV: “And he reared up an altar for Baal *in* the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria.”

12 “And he erected a place of sacrifice to Baal, *even* the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria.” Cf. John Gray, *I-II Kings* (Philadelphia, Westminster John Knox Press, 1963), 333.

13 Cf. Paul Joüon and Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991) § 131.

Concerning the textual history of the Book of Kings, comprehensive studies have led to the conclusion that in most cases of textual discrepancy between the MT and the LXX, the Greek version offers an older reading.¹⁴ In the LXX variant of 1Kgs 16:32, the noun which stands for the word “temple” (οἶκος) appears with the ἐν preposition. But in the Greek translation it is not the house/temple of Baal, but the temple of his idol / god:

<p>And he set an altar for Baal in the house of his offences which he built in Samaria. (NETS)</p>	<p>καὶ ἔστησεν θυσιαστήριον τῷ Βααλ ἐν οἴκῳ τῶν προσοχθισμάτων αὐτοῦ ὃν ᾠκοδόμησεν ἐν Σαμαρείᾳ</p>
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The Greek text is clearer than the MT. It is also striking that the Greek version does not name the god for whom he set up an altar in the temple, it is only referred to as προσόχθισμα. The LXX thus translates the neutral word בֵּית־אֱלֹהִים (1Kgs 11:33) or the polemic פִּגְרֵשׁ (Deut 7:26; 2Kgs 23:13; 24), but never Baal’s name. It is possible therefore that the presumably older version of 1Kgs 16:32 provided by the LXX was later transformed by the MT into a polemic against Baal. On the one hand, this solution fits into the general model of textual reconstruction regarding the Book of Kings, and on the other hand it offers an explanation for the problems regarding the Greek and Hebrew texts of 1Kgs 16:32.

According to the presumably original reading reconstructed based on the LXX, Ahab set up a Baal altar in the temple of his god. Some researchers assume that the temple was not primarily Baal’s temple, but Ahab took Baal into an already existing temple during a reform, where he came to be honored together with another god as *theos synnaos*.¹⁵ We can draw three

14 Cf. Adrian Schenker, *Älteste Textgeschichte der Königsbücher: Die hebräische Vorlage der ursprünglichen Septuaginta als älteste Textform der Königsbücher* (Freiburg/Göttingen: Academic Press Fribourg/ Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

15 Stephan Timm, *Die Dynastie Omri. Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Israels im 9. Jahrhundert vor Christus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982), 35. Herbert Niehr, “The Rise of YHWH in Judahite and Israelite Religion: Methodological and Religion-Historical Aspects,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwism to Judaism*, ed. Diana Vikander Edelman (Kampen: Pharos, 1995), 56. Matthias Köckert, “YHWH in the Northern and Southern Kingdom,” in *One God – One Cult – One Nation: Archeological and Biblical Perspectives*, ed. Reinhard Kratz and Hermann Spieckermann (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 365. Israel Finkelstein and Thomas Römer, “Comments on the Historical Background of the Jacob Narrative in Genesis,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 126 (2014): 329–330.

conclusions from these observations and reconstructions: (1) There was a temple in Samaria; (2) this temple was dedicated to the god of Ahab; (3) The worship of Baal was brought into the temple only secondarily. It is interesting that this text like others avoids naming the god for whom the temple was built, and we still do not know whether El, Baal or perhaps another deity was originally honored in the capital city. Who could have been the god of Ahab?

The first pieces of evidence that can help us solve this mystery are the theophoric names of the kings of Israel. A closer look reveals that the theophoric names of Israelite kings predominantly contain the name Y(H)W/ YH element, and they give Yahwistic names to their children as well: אֶחָזִיָּהוּ; הַיֹּרָם; הַנּוֹא; הַיֹּאָחָז; הַיֹּאָשָׁ; יִזְבֵּד; זְבַדִּיָּהוּ; זְבַדִּיָּהוּ. One of the sons of Ahab is named אֶחָזִיָּהוּ, which means that “Yhwh has grasped”, meaning that he offers protection; and his other son is called הַיֹּרָם, which can be translated as “Yhwh is exalted”. This is very striking insofar as the Book of Kings aims to make king Ahab responsible for spreading the Baal cult.¹⁶

The Yahwistic names of Ahab and his family does not go well with the image of a king honoring Baal, as he is represented in the Deuteronomistic History. The names of Ahab’s sons show the commitment of the king towards Yhwh which suggest that he, rather than Baal could have been the god worshipped by Ahab in Samaria.

This view harmonizes with the three other texts about the golden calves (1Kgs 12:28-29; Ex 32; Neh 9:18), in which the deity is not named explicitly. As noted, these texts prove that the deity worshipped in Israel was depicted as a calf and that this was the god of the exodus, who brought Israel out of the land of Egypt. According to the core of the OT, the exodus tradition is clearly the work of Yhwh. Of course, these texts do not talk about him as embodied by the calf.¹⁷

16 The DtrG strikingly preserved in this place the Yahwistic names of Ahab’s sons, in contrast to other cases in 1-2 Chronicles and 1-2 Samuel, where some of the original names are changed. For instance: 2Sam 2:10 changes Eshbaal’s name (1Chron 8:33) which means “man of Baal”, to Ish-bosheth, which means “man of shame.” Other examples: Merib-baal (1Chron 8:34) / Mephibosheth (2Sam 4:4); Beeliada (1Chron 14:7) / Eliada (2Sam 5:16). Cf. Gray: *Yahweh*, 71–72. The fact that these Yahwistic names appear in DtrG attests to their reliability.

17 Cf. Rainer Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit. 1.* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 212–226. Van der Toorn, *Religion*, 287–315. Köckert: “YHWH,” 369–371. Erhard Blum, “Der historische Mose und die Frühgeschichte Israels,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 1 (2012): 42–49. Finkelstein and Römer: “Comments,” 329.

Concludingly, the official religion of the Northern Kingdom – by which we mean the religion endorsed by the king, not the folk religion – was the cult of Yhwh. Yhwh was venerated in the image of a calf.

There are two more problems that need to be clarified: the obvious presence of controversy and the symbol of the calf. The first is certainly the result of the Deuteronomistic movement, which challenged the legitimacy of every cult that was not practiced in Jerusalem, i.e. on the place chosen by the Yhwh (Deut 12 passim). Therefore, worship was considered as erroneous primarily because of its place and not because of its object or its form.

As for the symbol of the calf, we have several texts that bear upon the issue. In ancient theophany texts, which are considered to be the oldest parts of the OT (Jud 5; Hab 3; Deut 33; Ps 68), the appearance of Yhwh is accompanied by lightning, thunder, wind, and clouds. This suggests that Yhwh may have been originally a storm god.¹⁸ This observation harmonizes well with the fact noted earlier, namely that in the ancient Near East the storm god was often symbolized by the bull. The calf imagery and the representation of Yhwh in ancient poetry merge into an original picture of Yhwh as a storm god. We may conclude therefore that in Samaria Yhwh was honored as a storm god, being depicted as a bull.

Non-biblical sources

The imagery of the bull has been present in the Near Eastern region from the Middle and the Late Bronze Ages,¹⁹ as confirmed by statues, cult objects, seals, and decorations found on different objects. However, they are difficult to identify with divinities because none of these objects contain the name of the deity they represent. Therefore a clear classification is impossible. The analysis above hints at that two storm gods were honored in Israel: Baal and Yhwh. The former was probably dominant at the level of folk religiosity, while the other was probably dominant at a national level, until the syncretism

18 Manfred Weippert, "Jahwe," in *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* V. (Berlin/ New York: De Gruyter, 1976–1980), 246–253. Albertz: *Religionsgeschichte*, 80–85. Pfeiffer, *Heiligtum*, passim. Köckert, "YHWH," 81–126. Martin Leuenberger, "Jhwhs Herkunft aus dem Süden. Archäologische Befunde – biblische Überlieferungen – historische Korrelationen," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 122 (2010): 1–19.

19 Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* (Freiburg: Herder, 2010), 215–219. Angelika Berlejung, "Die Anfänge und Ursprünge der Jahweverehrung. Der ikonographische Befund," *Berliner Theologische Zeitschrift* 30 (2013): 152–153.

of the two took place sometimes during the era of the kingdom. With this in mind, and taking the methodological constraints into account, let us take a look at Samaria's archeology.

Unfortunately, in terms of excavations, we possess little evidence regarding the cultic life of Samaria, yet some interesting pieces of information emerge that are relevant for both the temple of Samaria and the bull symbolism. Archeologists found five objects representing bulls on the Samaritan acropolis: a lapis lazuli scaraboid, two seals, and two bullheads.²⁰ Although these are not clearly cultic objects, they certainly prove that the symbol of the bull was present in Samaria. In addition, a reinforced building was discovered outside the city wall, where archaeologist found 120 depictions of animals, and 23 depictions of females, 2 riding figures and a cult stand. It can be concluded that the building was a cult place, and it was presumably used by the ordinary people.²¹

Archaeologist did not find any evidence for a cultic place on the acropolis, but they came across an imposing building, presumably the remnants of the royal palace, which had a room which could have served as a cultic place for the aristocracy.²² We must also note that in the ancient Near East the cult was always linked to a cult place, and the thought of a temple-free religion for an already settled community would be uncommon. The cult always manifested itself in a place, which was especially established for this purpose. Of course, we should not think about impressive, enormous temples, because in most cases the cult took place in small booths situated at the entrance to the chamber gates, where the travelers could ask for the gods' blessing. There were also smaller cult places within the city.

20 Othmar Keel, *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel: Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit* (Freiburg/ Göttingen: Academic Press Fribourg/ Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1995), 70. Keel and Uehlinger: *Göttinnen*, 216–218. John Winter Crowfoot, Grace Mary Crowfoot and Kathleen Mary Kenyon, *The Objects from Samaria* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1957), 81. Nr. 34.; 37.

21 John S. Holladay Jr., "Religion in Israel and Judah under the Monarchy: An Explicitly Archeological Approach," in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. Patrick Miller Jr., Paul D. Hanson and Samuel Dean McBride (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 249, Richard Hess, *Israelite Religion: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 298–314. Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmidt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 466–470.

22 Timm, *Dynastie*, 149–156. Albertz, *Religionsgeschichte*, 135. Niehr, "Rise," 55–58. Köckert, "YHWH," 365. Finkelstein and Römer, "Comments," 328–329. Detlef Jericke, *Regionaler Kult und lokaler Kult. Studien zur Kult- und Religionsgeschichte Israels und Judas im 9. und 8. Jahrhundert v.Chr.* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), 47–57.

In the 9-8th centuries archeologists revealed some ruins that are to be interpreted as cult places, in the following locations: Tel Dan, Megiddo, Taanach, Jerusalem, Lachisch, Ḥirbet el'Āseq, Tell Abū Qudēs, Tell el'Aṣī; Tell eṣ-Ṣārem, Makmiš, 'Ain al-Ḥuṣb.²³ If there are tangible pieces of evidence regarding cultic activities in so many cities, there must have been some kind of cultural arrangement in the capital city as well.

Finally, we should take a closer look at the non-biblical theophoric nomenclature, dating from Iron Age II. A total of 33 artefacts with names written on them, were found in Samaria: 16 with the name of Yhwh, 9 with Baal's name, 3 with El's name, and 5 other names ending in theophoric elements.²⁴ A comparison of these numbers clearly shows the dominance of Yhwh: 50 percent of the theophoric names are Yahwistic. If we take into account the fact that both Baal and El can be used as common names – which could simply mean “lord” or “god”, thus referring to Yhwh – the ratio might be even higher. The record also highlights Yhwh's prominence compared to other gods in Samaria.

The 41st Samaria ostrakon deserves even greater attention, as it contains the name *יגל*, which means “Yhwh's bull”. This name not only contains the name of Yhwh but also connects it with the image of the bull. The possible concept in the background of this name is that the bull is the bearer of the person to whom it refers, that is, the bearer of Yhwh.²⁵ But at the same time the name contains the well-known topos of the storm god often shown as riding a bull. This fits well the other biblical and non-biblical sources which present Yhwh as storm god, represented by a bull.

Summary

The data available for the reconstruction of the national religion of the Northern Kingdom, Israel, is limited. Texts deriving from the north were included into the OT in versions revised in Judah, and a strong polemic can be observed against the religious manifestations of Israel. Ever since the Deuteronomistic movement, all cult practiced outside Jerusalem was

23 Jericke: *Kult*, 75–101

24 Mitka Golub, “The Distribution of Personal Names in the Land of Israel and Transjordan during the Iron II Period,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 134 (2014): 621–641.

25 Jeaneane D. Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew: A Comparative Study* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 120. Keel and Uehlinger, *Göttinnen*, 219.

considered illegitimate, and this view was imposed retrospectively as well. However, the contour of the original religion still pervades these texts.

According to several OT texts, the god of Israel was conceived as a bull, which is a characteristic description for the storm god. Even if those biblical texts do not name the god, he is nevertheless functionally depicted in relation to the exodus. This is the first step towards the identification of the deity with Yhwh, who led his people out of Egypt. It is also striking that the theophoric names of the Samarian kings and their children, who are assumed to have worshipped calves, predominantly include the element Yhwh in their onomastics.

1Kgs 16:32 also reveals that honouring Baal in Israel's national cult is the result of a later syncretistic religious reform. But Baal was not originally the addressee of the cult of Israel. In addition, the earliest texts of the OT describe Yhwh as a deity whose appearance is accompanied by theophany, characteristic for the storm god.

The bull symbolism was present in the region of Israel from the Late Bronze Age, including on five objects from the acropolis of Samaria. The nomenclature also strengthens Yhwh's prominence over other gods in the area. If we take into account the frequency of the bull representations and Yhwh's priority with respect to other divinities, the prominence of Yhwh above Baal is obvious, though this latter was certainly present as well. Both the biblical and the non-biblical sources endorse the view that Israel's national god was the storm god, Yhwh.

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