


Ancient Israelite Religion

For the first part of this lecture please read, watch or listen to the following presentation in one of the formats below. All three formats contain the same information. While this presentation was recorded for a different class, it covers the first half of the material for this lecture.

Transcription:	http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/1320Hist&Civ/chapters/11OT.htm
Audio:	http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/1320Hist&Civ/audio/Chapter-11-The-Old-Testament.mp3
Audio/Video:	http://www.usu.edu/markdamen/1320Hist&Civ/audio/Chapter-11-The-Old-Testament.mp4

Now that you've been through that presentation and understand how historians approach the question of the composition of the Old Testament and the evolution of Hebrew religion toward monotheism, let's dive deeper into some other issues which pertain to these matters, starting with how different or similar were the ancient Israelites from the peoples around them and with whom they shared land, language, culture, and history.

From a historical perspective there is no question that the ancient Israelites were part of the larger Mesopotamian civilization in which their society arose. As the Akkadians' way of life reflected the Sumerians' who preceded them, the Hebrews drew from the same well of culture as their neighbors, and indeed the closer geographically they were to a people, the greater the similarities between them. While the phrasing of words in Old Testament often sounds foreign and exotic to us even through translation, the archaeological discovery of texts from the states around Israel reveals how familiar that language would have been to anyone living in Canaan at the time.

<p>The Moabite Stone (the Mesha Stele)</p>		<h3>Text of the Moabite Stone</h3> <p>I am Mesha ... King of Moab, ... I made this high place for Chemosh in Qarhoh [...] because he saved me from all the kings and allowed me to triumph over all my adversaries. As for Omri, King of Israel, he had humbled Moab many years, for Chemosh was angry at his land (Moab). And his son (Ahab) followed him and he also said, "I will humble Moab." In my time he spoke (thus), but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while Israel has perished forever! . . . Then Chemosh said to me, "Go, take Nebo from Israel!"</p>
---	---	---

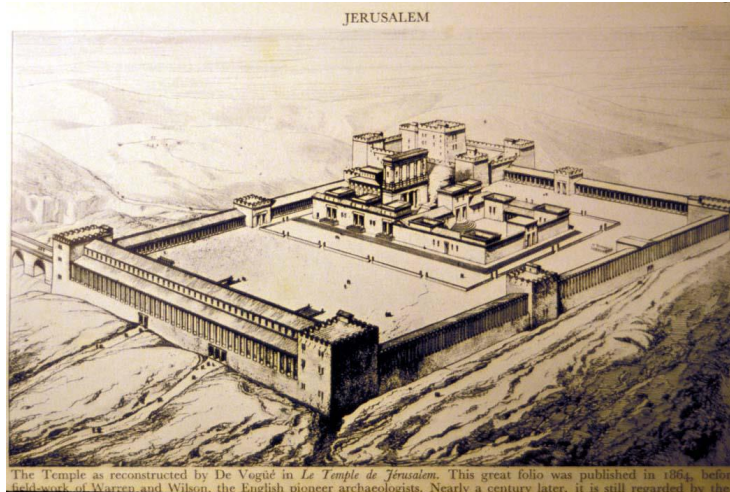
In 1868 a stone stele was discovered with an inscription recounting how Mesha, the king of Moab, defeated Ahab, the king of the Israelites, in battle (ca. 840 BCE). It's essentially a hymn of praise to the principal Moabite deity Chemosh erected in thanks for his divine support. The Bible recalls the same event, though very differently (2 Kings 3:4-8), but in terms of style the Old Testament is full of such paeans to Jahweh. But with this so-called Mesha Stele (or Moabite Stone), we get to flip the record over and hear the enemy gloat for once.

The similarity in wording between the stele and the Bible is particularly notable. When Mesha quotes Omri as saying (literally) "Let us go, and I will *see my desire* upon him and his house," he uses a phrase almost identical to one in the Old Testament (*lîrôt achsênay*). The Moabite and Hebrew languages were mutually intelligible in the day. Indeed, very few words on the Moabite Stone are not attested in the Hebrew Bible. And it's not just the wording on the stele but the sentiments expressed there that are closely parallel to scripture. For instance, later in the inscription, Chemosh tells Mesha to "Go take Nebo from Israel!," echoing a command God gives David in the Bible: "And the Lord ... said, Arise go down to Keilah; for I will deliver the Philistines into thine hand" (1 Sam 23:4).

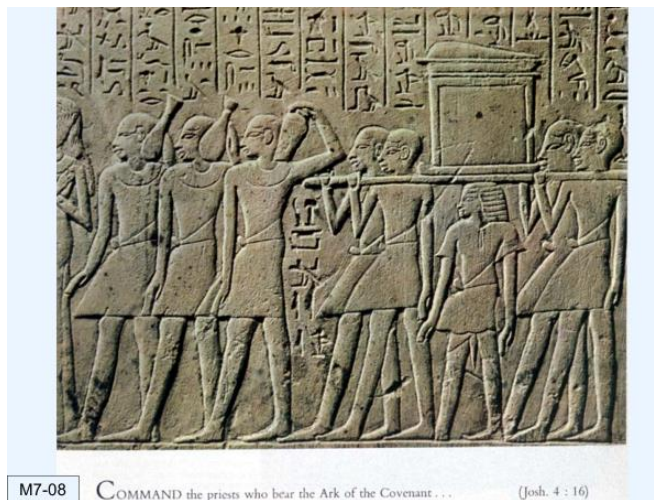
More telling, the inscription goes on to speak of Israel as "perishing forever" — or the text could read that Israel is boasting that Moab has perished forever. In either case, it's worth noting that, in the wake of what was in reality a minor skirmish, neither state "perished forever." This overblown celebration, this wishful word magic resembles Merneptah's claim on the Israel Stele that "Israel is seen no more." By this logic, the speaker believes that saying a foe is gone forever will make it come true. Curses work on the same principle.

But there are notable differences too between the Bible and the text of this inscription. While the stele states that Chemosh acts out of wrath much the same way Jahweh does so often in the Old Testament, it offers no explanation for the Moabite god's anger. The Bible, on the other hand, regularly seeks the reasons that underlie divine actions, which opens a path of discourse between earth and heaven. Put simply, the Israelites sought the rationale behind divine actions. The stele suggests there was no such compulsion among the Moabites.

In the end, the Mesha Stele shows how the ancient Israelites were both close to and distant from their neighbors in how they thought and worshiped. Their belief system was, as one scholar puts it, "both a part of and apart from" the religions around it. The same is true of their temples.



The main purpose of the First Temple in Jerusalem, also called Solomon's Temple, the center of worship for orthodox Israelites in antiquity, was to house the Ark of the Covenant, a box said to contain the tablets of the Ten Commandments.



But arks were not unique to Hebrew culture. The relief above shows Egyptians carrying an ark in a procession of some sort.

Temple of Hazor (ca. 14th c. BCE)

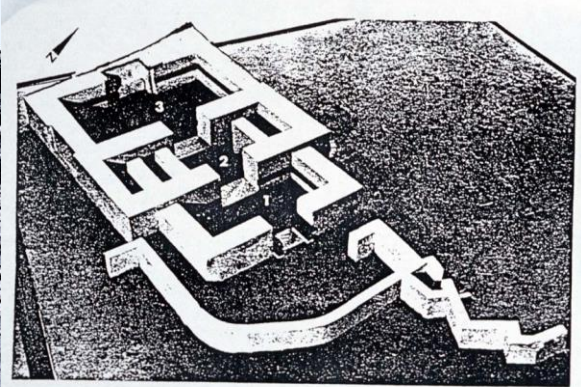
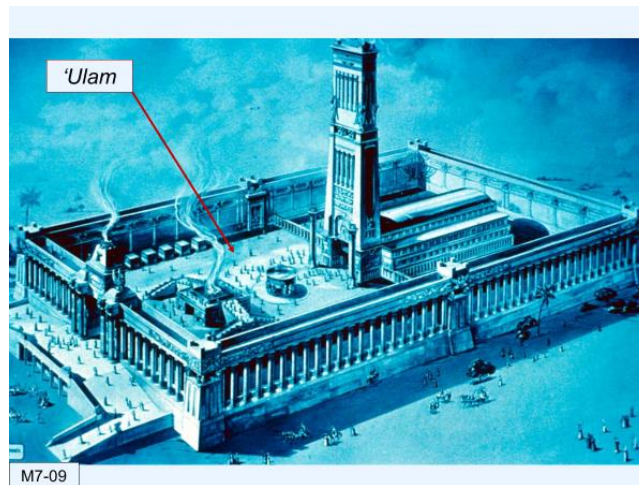
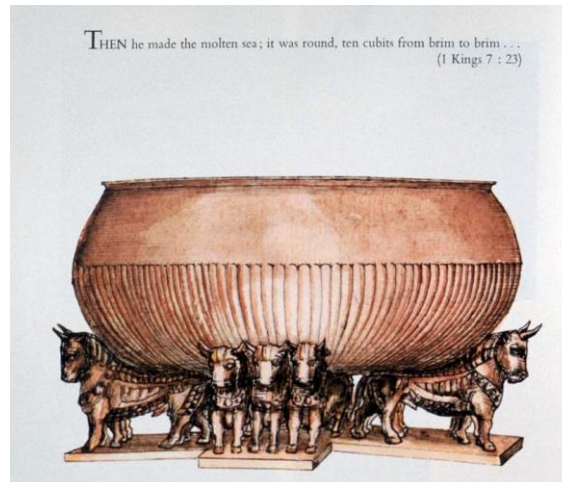


Figure 44: Model of Canaanite temple at Hazor, area H (14th cent. B.C.E.): (1) entrance hall (*ulam*); (2) main hall (*heikhul*); (3) Holy of Holies (*devir*)

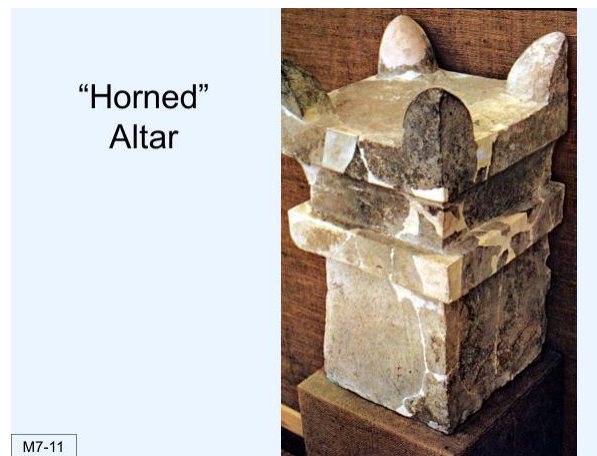
Nor is the structure of the Temple itself unprecedented. Its division into three regions called in Hebrew the *'ulam*, the *hekal* and the *devir* is seen in ancient Canaanite temples as well, like the one in Hazor.



The *'ulam* was the temple's outer courtyard. In it stood three notable structures, according to biblical texts (e.g. Ezekiel 40-47): a huge basin called "the molten or bronze sea"; a "horned" altar; and two pillars named Yachin and Boaz.

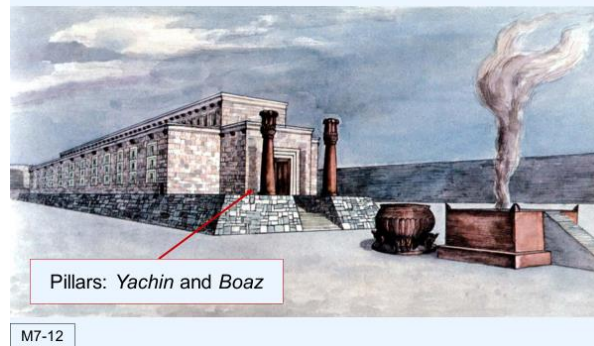


The basin was made of cast copper alloy and was used for ritual cleansing. It's worth noting that a large vat for storing water was also a regular feature in Babylonian temples where it was called "the sea" or "the cosmic deep." Recall that the Babylonian creation myth features a sea monster named Tiamat from whose corpse the world was made. The basin in the Jerusalem Temple rested on the backs of twelve yearling calves representing either the twelve months of the year or the twelve tribes of Israel, perhaps both.

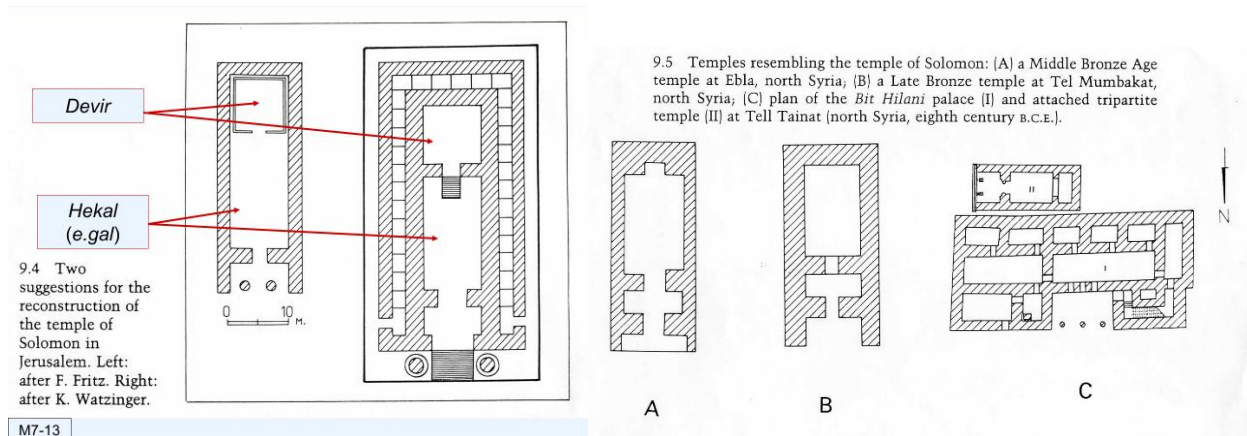


Also in the *'ulam*, and no doubt near the basin, was a "horned" altar. The horns refer to the pointed end-pieces at each of the altar's four corners. It's unclear what purpose the Hebrews understood these horns to serve, other than as a typical assertion of power. Think of Naram-Sin and his horned helmet which, of course, betokens not only his worldly authority but his divinity as well. The same horns are found on a Canaanite altar which was discovered by archaeologists (see above). A friend of mine suggested these horns might simply be hooks to hang a robe on, but I do not agree. A better clue to explain their presence might be that the altar was aligned with the cardinal points (north, east, south, west). Does it then represent the land, and the basin the sea, making the *'ulam* a symbolic depiction of the physical world as the Hebrews understood it?

Reconstruction of the First Temple



If so, that would help to explain the third feature of the *'ulam*, the two pillars inscribed with what are often taken to be the names Yachin and Boaz. But since Hebrew writing does not include vowels, meaning that the only things actually written there were the letters JHN and B'Z — it's as if we wrote NGD WTRST for “In God We Trust” — so, if you supply certain vowels, the inscription could also be construed as a sentence saying “He has founded (this) with strength.” So then, if the horned altar is the land and the basin is the sea, what do these columns symbolize? Perhaps the Bible tells us: “For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.” (1 Sam 2:8). The columns would then represent the strength of God which holds up the sky and keeps it apart from the earth and the sea. Thus, the *'ulam* contained images of the three parts of the world according to Hebrew thought: the sky (pillars), the land (altar) and the sea (basin).

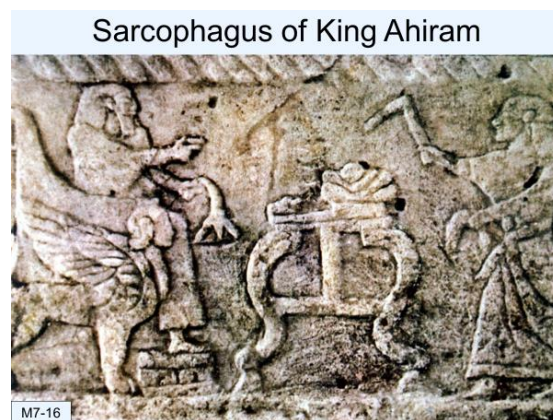


Inside the Temple itself were two rooms, the *hekal* and the *devir*. The term *hekal* is cognate with an Akkadian word *ekallu*, meaning “big house.” That word was in turn derived from a Sumerian term *e.gal* (“big house”). Remember *lugal* (“big man”)? In the *hekal* was a table and an incense burner, along with ten lampstands holding candelabras, five on each side. These lampstands were shaped like trees with candle-cups that resembled almond blossoms. The Mesopotamian love of fertility imagery pervaded the space.

Further inside the temple was the *devir*, the holy of holies, an inner sanctum where people could have direct contact with God. It has the feel of an Akkadian palace and the complex path that must be taken before meeting the king. And like the inner shrine of Amun temples in Egypt where the god's image is hidden from the public, the *devir* was a space where only a privileged few could enter. The Bible tells us that at the center of the room was a throne decorated with cherubs (1 Kings 8:7). Today we think of cherubs as chubby, rosy-cheeked toddlers with wings, but that's a modern conception. In the Bible they are very different. Cherubs are scary winged creatures often armed with fiery swords. They are the ferocious protectors of holy places like Eden. The name "cherub" is related to the Babylonian word *karibu*, meaning "to ward off evil." Biblical text suggests that, in the *devir* of the Jerusalem Temple, these cherubs were posed so that their wings spread out over the Ark of the Covenant, guarding it.



An artifact found in northern Israel supports this hypothesis. The so-called "Megiddo Ivory" shows a king seated on a throne whose sides represent a winged lion with a human head, most likely an image meant to depict a cherub.



From a different Canaanite site comes a sarcophagus which displays much the same, a king sitting in a cherub throne. In the Jerusalem Temple the cherubs appear to have been posed in

much the same way so that their wings in extending over the Ark of the Covenant formed a sort of seat, a throne for God, a place where he was imagined to sit. Recall the bible: "... the Lord of hosts who is enthroned on the cherubs" (1 Sam 4:4; cf. 2 Sam 6:2, 2 Kings 19:15, Psalms 80:1, 99:1).

And the Ark? What purpose did it serve? Look at the images above. Both kings sit with their feet resting on footstools. Was the Ark of the Covenant imagined then to be God's footstool? The Bible certainly speaks of it that way. David calls the Ark "the footstool of our God" (1 Chron 28:2). Psalms 99:5 says "Worship at [the Lord's] footstool." Psalms 132:7 encourages the Israelites to "go to his dwelling place [and] worship at this footstool." At Isaiah 66:1 God refers to the earth as his footstool. While in crafting the Ark as God's footstool the Hebrews are employing a widely attested image of royal power, they have given it new meaning in their unique religion.

In sum, the Israelites did not construct their vision of the world or even their religion out of whole cloth, but nor did they borrow it from their neighbors. They did what all the people around them did, desperately search for meaning amidst the political and social and even ecological chaos that saturated the world as they knew it. To form that vision, they took the legacy of language, narrative and imagery they had inherited as members of the Mesopotamian community and wove from it a new way of looking at life and death, at heaven and earth. And that's why it's so important for those who prize the tradition they left us to understand the history and culture that formed the matrix of Hebrew civilization. Not to know that is to see only the surface, not the deep roots feeding the ancient Israelites' beliefs and scripture.