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LOGOS

The C.N.E.R.S. Student Journal

Issue 1 – 2015/16

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Opening Remarks

JAYDEN C. LLOYD, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

With this issue, the Classical, Near Eastern and Religious Studies Student Association celebrates its inaugural publication of *LOGOS*, the CNERS student journal.

When Constantin Pietschmann, this year's CNERS Student Association President, proposed founding a journal as a part of his platform during the elections for the 2015/16 school year, I was immediately enthralled with the idea, and when the opportunity came to apply to be editor-in-chief, I jumped at the chance. In my graduating year at UBC, I saw it as a way to give just a little bit back to the department that has given me so much over the last four years.

Over the next few months, we began to search for editors, and fortunately for us, a fantastic group of people answered the call. We began to create a framework and timeline for the journal, establish our aims and begin our call for submissions. Once the publication process started in earnest, we discovered that our carefully laid out plans had holes, which the team met and overcame beyond my highest expectations. It was by no means always smooth sailing along the way; however, in the end, slightly later than planned, I believe that we have a journal that we can all be proud of, and have met our goal of publishing some of the fantastic work that the students in this department have to offer.

In this issue we are delighted to publish two outstanding papers. First, the undergraduate paper "Cloaked in Feathers, Moaning Like Doves" by Alexandra Fiege Ore examines the imagery and purpose of doves in Near Eastern mythological literature. Secondly, Courtney Innes, our featured graduate author, presents her interpretation of the function of cultic stands from the Philistine site of Yavneh, Israel in her paper, "Where there is Smoke, there is Fire: Attempting to Understand Philistine Cultic Stands at Yavneh."

For this publication there are several people to whom I must extend my appreciation. First and foremost, our Chief Submissions Officer, Jaymie Orchard, who, despite her busy schedule, has gone above and beyond to put in countless hours of her time to this project, and to whom I could not be more pleased to pass the torch as editor-in-chief for the 2016/17 publication. Elissa Morris, without whom none of the advertising this year would have been possible, and Sophie Mariano, the student association's VP Administration, for making sure the word got out to all of our members. Our faculty advisers, Drs. Alex McAuley, Lyn Rae, Melissa Funke, Michael Griffin and Sarah Milstein, who took the time to provide invaluable feedback for our authors and editorial team during the publication process. And of course, my eternal gratitude goes out to our editors, Chelsea Gardner, Chloe Martin-Cabanne, Constantin Pietschmann, Megan Barbieri, Elissa Morris, Amy Sky, Julie Sagram, Jacob Irwin, Angelique Coralie Kendall, Katlin Wright, Rodney Mackenzie, and Erin Pierik for their unending support, advice and patience over this last year.

And with this, I end my term as editor-in-chief of this publication, and look forward to following the journal and how it develops in future years.

Cloaked in Feathers, Moaning Like Doves

ALEXANDRA FIEGE ORE

Mythological literature in the ancient Near East is rife with rich symbolism of the natural world. One such image that crops up again and again in Israelite, Ugaritic, and Mesopotamian literature is that of game birds, specifically doves. These animals function as creatures that transgress and pass between different worlds and the spirits of the dead are like doves in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and in other prominent myths. In the Hebrew Bible, the underworld becomes a snare intended for game birds. This indicates birds' status as animals with the ability to move between the worlds of the living and of the dead. Birds were also treated as emissaries to the divine realms; the Israelites dedicated specific and detailed sacrificial methods to them, and Babylonian texts show that worshippers released doves in order to entreat the god Shamash. It seems that birds carried the connotation that they would be able to cross the boundaries of worlds. This essay explores these various similar representations of doves in ancient Near Eastern texts and uses them to explore the fluidity of these cultures and demonstrates the role of religion in making the unseen visible.

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The historical weight of past Ancient Near Eastern civilizations heavily influenced the writing and the compiling of the Hebrew Bible. Warfare and trade put the ancient Israelites in contact with the other cultures in the ancient Near East, notably the Assyrian and Babylonian cultures. In turn, the literature of the Levant, while adding its own images and interpretation, absorbed many elements of these cultures' literary canons. Naturally, the Hebrew Bible is concerned with the Israelites' worship of YHWH, but it also draws from many polytheistic and non-monolatrous sources for motifs and themes. One of the images used again and again in both the Hebrew Bible and many Mesopotamian texts is of game birds (particularly doves) and their role as liminal figures traversing the worlds of the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. One sees the images of birds connected with death and the underworld in many Ancient Near Eastern texts as well as passages from the Hebrew Bible. These birds also functioned as objects of sacrifice or tools of human supplication to a divine figure. The Israelites and their neighbors viewed birds (who lived both in the sky and on the ground) as creatures of many worlds; with their wings they could descend from this world to the land of the dead or, just as often, they could ascend and commune with the divine powers in the heavens. For these ancient peoples, the sacred stories and ritual trappings of their religions acted to make visual the unseen workings of the universe, and birds become potent symbols for liminality and transition.

Both Israelites and their Mesopotamian neighbors equated birds (and bird imagery) with the dead. In several famous descriptions of the Mesopotamian underworld the spirits of the dead appear as birds cloaked in feathers. This image has many parallels with certain parts of the Hebrew Bible. These spirits in the underworld are no longer fully human; they traverse the line between two worlds when they left their tangible and mortal forms behind. Thus their appearance as birds represents their liminal position, one that is between the states of existence and non-existence. Liminality is a transitional phase in the midst of a process; it is the moment on the threshold or hovering on the boundary. Birds are a liminal symbol in that they can exist on the ground but also flourish in the sky; they are not exclusively of one world or the other. They also come to encapsulate the shivering moment before death and the soul's traumatic journey

from this world to the next. In Tablet VII of the Akkadian-language *Epic of Gilgamesh* Enkidu, who is on his deathbed, experiences a terrifying vision of death as a monster that:

“...bound my arms like the wings of a bird, to lead me captive to the house of darkness, the seat of Irkalla:.... to the house whose residents are deprived of light, (where) soil is their sustenance and clay their food, (where) they are clad like birds in coats of feathers, and see no light, but dwell in darkness.”¹

The image of the spirits of the dead as birds confined in the earth is not unique to the *Epic*. In the account of Ishtar’s descent to the underworld, the dead are shown as birds with cloaks of feathers eating soil.² This depiction also appears in the Neo-Assyrian version of the myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal, where the dead “are clad like birds in feather garments” and “night and day they moan like doves.”³ It is revealing to compare this particular phrase to Isaiah 38:14. When King Hezekiah is recounting his debilitating illness and brush with death and the suffering that he endured, he says that he “piped like a swift or a swallow, [he] moaned like a dove.”⁴ As he gets closer to dying, Hezekiah takes on the attributes of, or

even becomes, a bird. Death means that the recognizable features of a human disappear in place of silence, but instead of simply becoming intangible the ghosts in these myths gain a new form: that of a bird.

These ancient cultures connected birds with breath and the human soul taking flight. Birds are a way to make visual the exhalation of a person’s last breath. It seems counter-intuitive that the dead (so often associated with earth, subterranean areas, and descent) should be described as bird-like, but it may have something to do with the disembodied, wind-like image of the human soul. In the Hebrew Bible it is the breath of YHWH that animates humans when he breathes life into them at their creation in Genesis 2:7. It is the removal of that breath that finally destroys them.⁵ In Ecclesiastes 12:7, the poet speaks of death as the moment when “the lifebreath returns to God/Who bestowed it.”⁶ Jean Bottéro asserts that other Ancient Near Eastern cultures have a similar concept of life as a breath given by the gods and that at the moment of death this breath must exit the body and take its leave.⁷ This visible exhalation of breath can be seen as a microcosm of a larger ‘breath’: the winds. In this case, birds are an apt visual metaphor for the dead: as animals who traverse the skies and seem to commune with the winds (it being very easy to associate the natural wind with gentle exhalation), they can be seen as a way to show this divine breath. When people die and go to the underworld, they take on the form of their original and divine animating force. In the form of this wind-borne bird, they can easily slip into the land of the dead and dwell there in a form

¹ Andrew George, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 61.

² E.A. Speiser, trans., *Ancient Near Eastern Text Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 107.

³ Note that the Standard Babylonian *issur* (‘bird’) may be taken to mean a demon with bird-like attributes and may not be intended to suggest actual “birdishness;” Simonetta Ponchia and Mikko Luukko, trans., *The Standard Babylonian Myth of Nergal and Ereshkigal*, (Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project and the Foundation for Finnish Assyriological Research, 2013), 26.

⁴ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), Isaiah 38:14. Henceforth all biblical citations will be from this translation unless specified.

⁵ Genesis 2:7.

⁶ Ecclesiastes 12:7.

⁷ Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*, trans. Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van De Mieroop (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 271.

utterly different from the one they had in life. This representation of birds is a way of showing how humans undergo a transmutation when they depart from this world and travel to the next. It illustrates birds' roles as go-betweens.

There is a freedom to the free-floating nature of the soul, one that the underworld curtails. Birds are symbols of the liminal state people enter when they die, and this liminal state gives one the ability to ignore the walls that separate the underworld from everyday reality and to descend to the underworld. At the moment of death, the soul is exhaled from the body and is at a point of potentiality outside of its appropriate vessel, existing in a moment of neither being properly alive nor dead. The underworld puts an end to this moment by snatching the soul and confining it under the ground, just like a hunter ensnares birds in traps. In many instances in the Hebrew Bible, a character on the verge of death is compared to a bird that is moments from being ensnared in a hunter's trap. Sheol (the Israelite underworld) is often compared to a snare and is shown trapping the living in its clutches; in 2 Samuel "the snares of Sheol encircled [David], The coils of Death engulfed [him]."⁸ In the reiteration of David's song in Psalm 18, the image of David being ensnared by death is repeated.⁹ This image probably comes from the appearance of an open grave and its similarities to a trap: Sheol also becomes a *pit*; one goes down into its *depths*, one *descends* to it. However, the hunting and hunter imagery adds to the liminal state of death; hunting would temporarily place the hunter in a position outside of society and in the wilds, and yet not fully a product of the wilderness itself.

⁸ 2 Samuel 22: 6.

⁹ Psalms 18: 6.

The image of someone on the verge of death as being like a bird about to be caught in the underworld's snare appears quite a few times in the Hebrew Bible. In Psalm 124 the author praises YHWH for protecting the Israelites so that "we [the Israelite people] are like a bird escaped from the fowler's trap; the trap broke and we escaped."¹⁰ In his advice to his son, the unnamed father figure in Proverbs 6:5 tells his son to avoid loans and "save yourself like a deer out of the hand [of a hunter], Like a bird out of the hand of the fowler."¹¹ In Proverbs 7:23 a fool being enticed by a harlot is compared to "a bird rushing into a trap,/not knowing his life is at stake."¹² Finally, in Ecclesiastes 9:12, the poet expresses his cynical worldview by saying that "as fishes are enmeshed in a fatal net, and as birds are trapped in a snare, so men are caught at the time of calamity."¹³ As Peter Machinist points out, 'calamity' may also be read as euphemism for death.¹⁴ Again, those somehow in close proximity to death or some life-threatening illness or disaster are equated with birds. This metaphor gestures to the liminal nature of the bird image, that it is appropriate to show the perilous and highly liminal transition from alive to dead using the image of a bird. If mankind takes on the nature of (and perhaps even the appearance of) a bird at the moment of death, then to show Sheol as a hunter's trap is legitimate.

These ancient Near Eastern cultures not only shared the imagery of birds mediating between life and death, but birds also mediated between the world of mankind and the world of gods. Birds could descend into

¹⁰ Ps. 124:7.

¹¹ Proverbs 6:5.

¹² Prov. 7:23.

¹³ Eccles. 9: 12.

¹⁴ Peter Machinist, "Ecclesiastes", Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, eds, *The Jewish Study Bible*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), note *h*.

the ground at the moment of death, but they also could ascend to the world of the gods. This attitude manifested itself in the use of birds for sacrifice and petitions to the higher powers. It seems that the concept of birds as things that could go betwixt worlds manifested itself in Ancient Near Eastern religious practice as well as myth. In Ugarit, the ancient culture that has many literary and cultural similarities to Israel, there are references to birds given as offerings on behalf of a family or individual. A badly damaged text records how many birds were given on behalf of the family of Bahlu and other unnamed people.¹⁵ While the text can be seen as a more secular record of the buying and selling of birds and animals, Dennis Pardee asserts that its formula is much more in line with a list of religious offerings than an economic text.¹⁶ Furthermore, there are multiple Babylonian texts that list and describe the release of doves in the course of religious appeals to the god Shamash. The formula is for the petitioner to take to doves and, along with other cultic actions, release them:

You release the fetters of the (two) doves. [.....Before [Shamash] you make a decision for them. [(You say) 'Samas'] you are [the judge of heaven and] earth, [the mighty fist] of god, king, prince or boss unclench for me!' You let [the male dove] fly [to the east], the female dove to the west.¹⁷

¹⁵ Dennis Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit*, ed. Theodore J. Lewis (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), 118.

¹⁶ Pardee, *Ritual and Cult*, 117.

¹⁷ A. Livingstone, "On the Organized Release of Doves to Secure Compliance of a Higher Authority," in *Wisdom, Gods and Literature: Studies in Assyriology in Honour of W.G. Lambert*, eds. A.R. George and I.L. Finkel, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 379.

These practices are certainly not unique to Mesopotamian.

The Hebrew Bible, particularly Leviticus, has a lot to say about sacrifices. If a person is sacrificing birds then the priest must drain its blood and remove its crop and wings and then "turn it into smoke on the altar."¹⁸ In Leviticus 14, YHWH gives Moses a (very long) ritual to cleanse a healed leper: one part involves acquiring two live birds, bathing one in the blood of its fellow, and then setting "the live bird free in the open country."¹⁹ The first passage refers to a *yonah* (dove) and the second to a *tor* (turtle-dove).²⁰ The image of the priest releasing one bird in the context of a religious ritual is similar to the Babylonian offering to Shamash. Both the Babylonian and Israelite instructions include the idea of connecting the avian sacrifice to the wind or the air, either by releasing the birds or by letting their ashes and smoke up into the sky.

Birds do not have a connection to death in this case, but they still function as beings that can go between worlds. Whereas in some other contexts the worlds in question are those of the living and the dead, here they are the land of mortals and the realm of the gods. Their role in Leviticus as burnt offerings means that, in the literal sense, their remains join the sky and go upwards, a motion that indicates they are intended to reach heaven. This motion is the same in the Mesopotamian purifying ritual in which the priest releases one bird into the skies. In many ways, sacrifices are things that attempt to break the silence between gods and men. They symbolize an interaction that humanity can never have, and their intent is to somehow reach and affect the godly realms.

¹⁸ Leviticus 14-17.

¹⁹ Lev. 14: 4-8.

²⁰ Oded Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1998), 151.

A sacrifice acts as a messenger that has the ability to experience a heavenly demesne that mere mortals cannot reach themselves. The cultures of the Ancient Near East sacrificed many animals, but the release of live doves, or the release of their smoke and ashes, seems to be a particularly symbolic action. The same nature that makes them ideal candidates to pass to the world of the dead (their wings and connection with flight and ease of movement) make them equally as suited to act as emissaries to the gods.

Visual images of gods (both in ancient art and literature) reinforce the representation of birds as symbols of otherworldliness. There is a visual connection between avian life and heavenly experiences. A common theme in Mesopotamian art depicts gods or spirits with wings, as if to denote their strange and non-human nature. For example, the 'Queen of Night' relief shows the goddess Ishtar with bird-like attributes: wings and scaly avian feet, flanked on either side by owls. The Assyrian relief features Marduk destroying his foe Tiamat and has both the god and the monster with large wings. Other common artistic motifs for the Mesopotamians include winged bulls and lions. The depiction of gods as winged is an interesting parallel to the divine beings that Isaiah see when he is called to prophesy. In his vision each of the seraphs that surround YHWH "had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his legs, and with two he would fly."²¹ This image has even filtered through Christianity and into modern depictions of angelic beings. But there is a certain significance in the way that the Mesopotamians and their Israelite neighbors visually depicted divinities with birdlike qualities. Birds, being something not quite of this earth, are an appropriate way to represent gods and divine figures, as

well as the spirits of the dead. These visual representations also attest to how widespread this image may have been; non-literate people would have been in contact with these images and would have interacted with them in a way that they might not have with literary texts. Bird imagery was common and shared and part of the everyday religious experience.

In many ways religion is a system through which humans seek to reconcile the mundane realities of life with the powerful but intangible reality they feel is close by. Game birds are at once an ordinary sight and a strange one; they possess knowledge of places that humans, with their wingless limbs, can only ever dream of seeing. They can descend and see the vista of the underworld, something humans can only see once they have died. Thus the essence of a dying person sighs from them and goes downward to dwell as a dove in dust and in ashes, as is the fate of every man. They can also ascend and witness the glory of the heavens and commune with YHWH, or Shamash. Every bird released or burned in sacrifice achieved something that humankind, whose mundane world often seems heavy as clay, acted to briefly connect people to some other reality. For these ancient cultures – which had highly religious daily lives, a close proximity to death, and a complex relationship with a dangerous natural world – this divine and 'other' reality must have seemed very close. This great chasm between this world and the others can only be bridged at the moment of death or with a religious rite. Birds occupy a liminal position on earth as they pass from earth to sky, and they make an excellent envoy between states. Representations of the liminal nature of avian life are not limited to a few myths or even to one or two books of the Bible. The people of these disparate and yet interconnected cultures saw into the

²¹ Isaiah 6:2.

freedom and seemingly unimpeded nature of birds. While humans went about their daily toil, birds traversed the skies, delving into realms that mere mortals can never touch, representing the trapped breath of creation latent inside humans.

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Where there is Smoke, there is Fire

Attempting to Understand Philistine Cultic Stands at Yavneh

COURTNEY INNES

The Philistines boasted a reputation as being “soothsayers” in antiquity, at least according to the Bible. But what meaning is embedded in the word “soothsayers” and what can we understand, if anything, about Philistine religion that warranted such an epithet? In 2002, a repository pit consisting of thousands of vestiges of ritual objects, namely cultic stands, was unearthed from Yavneh, Israel. Abundant scholarly conjecture has focused on the possible functions of these cultic stands, but the exact function continues to remain nebulous. This paper proposes the hypotheses that: 1) Yavneh was a pilgrimage site dedicated to a goddess (Ptgyh or Asherah) where supplicants journeyed to seek her prophetic guidance via an incense-burning ritual; 2) The iconography, materiality, and ritual uses of the cultic stands were influenced by a myriad of cultures; and 3) The cultic stands were interred as votive offerings to the goddess subsequent to their span of service. The research focuses on contextualization of the geographical, historical, and orthographic orientation of Yavneh; interpreting the symbolism of the stands’ iconography; delineating the rationales behind the stands’ posited functions; and exploring the significance of the ceremonial burial of ritual items. This research concludes that the stands likely contributed to the “soothsayer” appellation of the Philistines.

INTRODUCTION

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On the cusp of the Assyrian captivity of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (c. 740 BCE), the Hebrew prophet Isaiah purportedly received revelation concerning the future of Judah and Jerusalem. He foretold of the deteriorated spiritual state that the House of Jacob would experience. He stated that the catalysts for the fallen national character of the Kingdom of Judah would be false divinations, corrupt practices, and the deleterious influences from

exogroups: “For you have forsaken the ways of your people, O house of Jacob. Indeed they are full of diviners from the east *and of soothsayers like the Philistines*, and they clasp hands with foreigners.”¹ Although the writings of Isaiah were allegedly compiled during the Babylonian bondage (c. 597 – 581 BCE), it is clear that the Philistines boasted a reputation as being “soothsayers” in antiquity, at least according to the Bible.²

The Hebrew word for “soothsayers” is עֲנַיִם; *oneniyim* is derived from the Hebrew word for “cloud,” עָנַן, *anan*.³ Scholars have explicated the semantic link between “soothsayers” and

¹ Isaiah 2:6. The English translations of canonical scripture passages are taken from the New Revised Standard Edition (1989).

² Edward J. Young, *Volume 2 of Book of Isaiah: the English Text, with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 516. See 1 Samuel 6:2 and 2 Kings 1:2 for more accounts attesting to the divination custom of the Philistines.

³ Edward Robinson in Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic: Coded with the Numbering System from Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2014), 777.

“cloud” by postulating that soothsayers utilized celestial bodies, including clouds, or flocks of birds as presaging mediums.⁴ Viable correlations, indeed; but perhaps the soothsayer-cloud relationship reflects not so much on an atmospheric cloud, but rather a cloud of incense/smoke that accompanied Philistine soothsaying techniques.

In 2002, a *favissa* or *genizah*, repository pit, consisting of thousands of vestiges of ritual objects, namely cultic stands, was unearthed in Yavneh, Israel.⁵ Abundant scholarly conjecture has focused on the possible functions of these cultic stands. The explanations give rise to a gamut of theories, but the exact function continues to remain nebulous. Within the plethora of suppositions, room exists for consideration of the following hypotheses: 1) Yavneh was a pilgrimage site dedicated to a goddess (Ptgyh or Asherah) where supplicants journeyed to seek her prophetic guidance via an incense-burning ritual; 2) The iconography, materiality, and ritual uses of the cultic stands were influenced by a myriad of cultures (Canaanite, Mycenaean, Hittite, Israelites, etc); and 3) The cultic stands were interred as votive offerings to the goddess subsequent to their span of service. In essence, where there are a cache of cultic stands (smoke), there are probably religious/mystical beliefs (fire) associated with it, and I theorize that these stands were the pedestals for the clouds of incense emerging from soothsaying activities.

I will approach my arguments by: 1) contextualizing the geographical, historical,

and orthographic orientation of Yavneh; 2) interpreting the iconographical symbolism of the stands; 3) briefly delineating the rationales behind the posited functions of the stands; 4) exploring the significance of the ceremonial burial of ritual items; and finally, 5) concluding that the stands will remain clouded in mystery until more data is revealed, but that the stands likely contributed to the “soothsayer” appellation of the Philistine.

GEOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND ORTHOGRAPHIC ORIENTATION OF YAVNEH

Five substantial lordships oversaw Philistia, establishing the Pentapolis comprised of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Ekron, Gath, and Gaza, all Iron Age II cities.⁶

Despite the powerhouses of the Pentapolis, the majority of known Philistine cultic centers are curiously identified in minor locales such as the temples at Nahal Patish, Tel Qasile, and Yavneh.⁷ Two hundred meters north of Yavneh, a repository pit positioned on “Temple Hill” and measuring one and a half meters deep and two meters in diameter, contained a sizeable hoard of enigmatic stands.⁸

To better comprehend the *favissa*'s contexts and ultimately the role of the stands in Philistine religio-cultural society, I will present a brief assessment of the

⁴ Hugh Williamson, *Volume 1 of a Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1-27: Volume 20 of International critical commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments* (London and New York: A&C Black, 2006), 191-192.

⁵ Raz Kletter and Irit Ziffer, “Incense-Burning Rituals: From Philistine Fire Pans at Yavneh to the Improper Fire of Korah,” in *Source: Israel Exploration Journal* 60, no. 2 (2010), 166.

⁶ W. McLeod, *The Geography of Palestine, including Phoenicia and Philistia* (London: Longman, 1854), 80; see Joshua 13:3 and 1 Samuel 6:17 for more geographical details of Philistia's region.

⁷ Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 125.

⁸ Raz Kletter, Irit Ziffer, and Wolfgang Zwickel, “Cult Stands of the Philistines: A Genizah from Yavneh” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 69, no. 3-4 (2006), 149; Raz Kletter, “Yavneh, Pierre Menard and the Bible,” in *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, 148, ed. Martti Nissinen (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2012), 85.

geographical, historical, and orthographic orientation of Yavneh.

Yavneh's nexus upon the Syria-Palestine trade route, *Via Maris*, was an economic and social factor that drew inhabitants and travelers alike, including the Philistines.⁹ Naturally, Yavneh's location was continuously alluring to inhabitants, which engendered a rich history of diverse populations over the course of thousands of years.¹⁰

Notwithstanding Yavneh's physical and social-economic environment, Iron Age II inhabitation did not expand beyond the tell and Yavneh "was most likely a small 'daughter' to one of the cities forming the Philistine pentapolis, perhaps to Ashdod,"¹¹ or perhaps Ekron, only a mere 9.6 km away.

⁹ Christian Frevel, "Gifts to the Gods? Votives as Communication Markers in Sanctuaries and other Places in the Bronze and Iron Age in Palestine/Israel," in *'From Ebla to Stellenbosch.'* *Syro-Palestinian Religions and the Hebrew Bible*, eds. Izak Cornelius and Louis Jonker (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007), 34.

¹⁰ Perhaps Yavneh's most salient occupation was in the Hellenistic period following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple (70 CE), when rabbinic Judaism began burgeoning; A'haron Oppenheimer, *Between Rome and Babylon: Studies in Jewish Leadership and Society, 108 of Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 218. The Sanhedrin, the Jewish Supreme Court, was reestablished in Yavneh, where the epicenter for the canonization of the Hebrew Bible transpired in a putative event known as the Council of Jamina. Although Yavneh, then Jamina, became an eminent domain during rabbinism's nascence, it had long been recognized as a habitable settlement; Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Significance of Yavneh and Other Essays in Jewish Hellenism. Volume 136 of Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 144.

¹¹ Raz Kletter, Irit Ziffer, and Wolfgang Zwickel, *Yavneh I: The Excavation of the 'Temple Hill' Repository Pit and the Cult Stands. Volume 30 of Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* (Saint-Paul, Switzerland: Academic Press Fribourg, 2005), 192.

This raises the question of whether the place was simply a small city or if it was intentionally designated to satisfy the religio-cultural needs of the Philistines?

An onomastic investigation of the toponym "Yavneh" may echo back to the nature of the city. While "Yavneh" is veritably a Hebrew place name rather than the name used by the native inhabitants, the Philistines likely had their own name for Yavneh. The Hebrew name may encapsulate an ancient memory of Yavneh's character, among the Israelites at least.

In Joshua 15:11-12, "Yavneel," יַבְנֵאֵל, is inserted. The term can be dissected into three morphemes: 1) the letter *yod* (י) is indicative of a third person masculine imperfect prefix; 2) the letters *bet* (ב) and *nun* (נ) constitute part of the root letters for words concerning building concepts, *bet*, *nun*, *hey* (בנה), the III *hey* expectedly dropping out when juxtaposed with a suffix; and 3) the *aleph* and *lamed* (אל) make up the suffix expressing one of the many titles of the Hebrew god, El, shortened for Elohim. Because the verb typically precedes the subject in Hebrew, the toponym could be rendered as "God Will Build." On the other hand, if we accept that the name actually incorporates two separate persons, it may be rendered: "He Will Build God." Alternatively, Hebrew orthography frequently affixes a *yod* to proper names, which in this case, would result in the following rendition: "Building of God."¹²

Though semantically similar, such nuances provide strikingly diverse connotations. "God Will Build" would suggest an active divinity engaging in a building process for whatever reason. This phrase, however, seems incomplete, lacking

¹² David Noel Freedman, A. Dean Forbes, and Francis I. Anderson, *Studies in Hebrew and Aramaic Orthography Volume 2 of Biblical and Judaic Studies* (Warsaw, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 142.

a direct object – *what will God build?* For this reason, it does not seem like the proper interpretation. The “He Will Build God” rendering is brazenly provocative from an Israelite perspective as it implies that mankind is capable of producing a god, severely undermining the supremacy of Elohim. It is unlikely that the Israelites would acknowledge such a blasphemous title unless it was a pejorative and condescending term highlighting the construction of idols, e.g. the cultic stands, in this area. However, the likeliest etymology of *Yavneel* is the rendering “Building of God” since this orthographic pattern is prevalent in Semitic toponyms, e.g. Babel means “Gate of God” in Akkadian. The “Building of God” bolsters the notion that a sanctuary of sorts was once located here. If a temple is meant, it is interesting that the scribe did not use the expression denoting a temple, *Bet Mikdash*, בית מקדש, house of holiness. The accounts in Joshua predate the construction of the Jerusalem Temple (c. 957 BCE) so an official temple title may not have been vernacular yet, but this is difficult to reason in light of the probable later dating of the Joshua writings (6th century BCE).¹³ Thus, the “Building of God” likely describes a local worship center, e.g. a sanctuary of sorts for travelers and nearby residents.

Reference to Yavneh, *Yabneh*, יַבְנֵה, is found in II Chronicles 26:6. An extensive orthographic assessment is not necessary as the name maintains the same basic structure as *Yavneel* except for the obvious omission of El. Why would the divine reference be excluded in this case? Bearing in mind that the II Chronicle passage explicitly ties

Yavneh to the Philistines, scribes may have redacted the name to sever any relationship between the Philistines and the Israelite El. As Joshua 15:11 indicates, Yavneh was located in the border region between the territories of Judah on the south and Dan to the north. In some instances, border towns were claimed by both tribes because the border line was not clearly defined in all locations.¹⁴ With the deliberate expunging of El from the name, it is reasonable to conceive that Yavneh was originally an Israelite holy place prior to the Philistine occupation. Once the Philistines constituted the majority of Yavneh’s population, the Israelites likely relocated, consecrating a new space elsewhere for their god in the process. Revered sacred spaces often transcend the oscillating nature of populations though.¹⁵ The Philistines may have perpetuated the sacred atmosphere and appropriated Yavneh’s Israelite worship location for their own rituals, which would explain why a cultic center thrived here despite being a minor Philistine settlement.

The overarching similarity among the proposed various translations for the interpretation of Yavneh is their allusion to a religious building. Regardless of the exact understanding, Yavneh has been attributed to a cultic complex. Was this “Building of God” a sanctuary, temple, or an assemblage of cultic model homes?

¹³ Michael David Coogan, et al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

¹⁴ Claude R. Conder, “The Site of Gath: Topographical Considerations,” in *Palestine Exploration Fund: Quarterly Statement for 1879* (London: Palestine Exploration Fund, 1879), 219.

¹⁵ Aryeh Kofsky, “Mamre: A Case for a Regional Cult?” in *Sharing the Sacred. Religious Contracts and Conflicts in the Holy Land, 1st-15th Century*, eds. Aryeh Kofsky and Guy Gedalyah Stroumsa (Ben Zvi Institute 1989), 19-30.

ICONOGRAPHY

Based on the sheer quantity of ceramic sherds belonging to cult stands, a horned altar, juglets, bowls, chalices, and other vessels, the archaeologists surmised that they were dealing with a nearby temple's commodity.¹⁶ At first glance, the premise of the excavators is sensible, but the fact of the matter is that any physical evidence for a temple complex remains undiscovered. That is not to say that the absence of a temple should dictate our understanding of the stands since such a conclusion based on an absence of contrary evidence is fraught with counterarguments; a lack of time and resources may have impeded a structure's detection; the cache, as the archaeologists suggest, may be from a temple beyond Yavneh's immediate purlieu, etc. Therefore, in order to evaluate the archaeologists' correlation of the stands and associated regalia to a temple, the iconography of the stands must be consulted.

Typology of the pottery has provided the assemblage's date to c. 850-750 BCE.¹⁷ This date casts the items in a period wherein the region was occupied by a diverse milieu of nationalities, e.g. Israelites, Canaanites, Phoenician, Philistine, etc. Thus, the intricate cultural atmosphere that enveloped the region resulted in a fusion of artistic expressions.

David Ben-Shlomo approaches the Yavneh iconography prudently and navigates through its complexities proficiently. He has extensively reviewed the prevalent iconography of Philistia artifacts in his *Philistine Iconography. A Wealth of Style and Symbolism* (2010). Accordingly, his research provides the

¹⁶ Raz Kletter and Irit Ziffer, *In the Field of the Philistines. Cult Furnishing from the Favissa of a Yavneh Temple* (Tel Aviv: Eretz-Israel Museum, 2007).

¹⁷ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwickle, *Yavneh I*, IX.

framework for much of this discussion. Because the goal of this paper is to theorize how the stands fit into Philistine ritual customs, and is not solely focused on the iconography of the stands, I will concisely delineate the foremost motifs (female, bovine, lion, and palm tree) of the stands to uphold a synthesis of a myriad of cultural influences, which will lay the foundation on which to construe further hypotheses.

Female Figures

The prevailing iconography of the Yavneh stands includes a nude female figure, ranging from 9-14 cm in height.¹⁸ While she is depicted in various postures, the preponderant pose is her clutching her exposed breasts with both hands.¹⁹ This portrayal manifests a divine fertility mien akin to the Near Eastern goddesses, Asherah.²⁰ The Ugaritic stone tablet CTA 23, *The Birth of the Gracious Gods*, recounts Asherah as a mother of the gods: "I call upon the gracious gods of the day who suck the tip of Asherah's breast."²¹ She was the epitome of procreation and matriarchy in ancient Semitic cultures insomuch that Asherah pillar-figurines became rife in Judean and Canaanite cults.²² The accentuations of the breasts of Yavneh's female figurines coincide with Asherah's emblem of fertility.

¹⁸ Ibid, 66.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 37.

²¹ CTA 23.23-24 as cited in Tilde Binger, *Asherah: Goddesses in Ugarit, Israel and the Old Testament, Volume 2 of Copenhagen International Seminar, Issue 232 of JSOTS Series* (Sheffield: A&C Black, 1997), 46.

²² Raz Kletter, *The Judean Pillar-Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah. Volume 636 of BAR International Series* (Oxford: Tempus Reparatum, 1996), 66.

Nevertheless, technical configuration of the figures, with a low/flat forehead, pellet eyes, a triangular chin with an incised mouth, and pronounced nose, comply with Aegean figurine forms.²³ The contours of Yavneh's female figurines ostensibly integrate a potpourri of cultural influences. Ziony Zevit has decried the classification of "Philistine" material culture, such as Yavneh's female figurines, as "primarily a form of Canaanite material culture overlaid with Aegean elements that existed alongside traditional Canaanite culture in that part of the coastal area that is termed Philistia."²⁴ In other words, the Yavneh figurines might not be actual representations of Philistine goddesses, but rather an amalgamation of Levantine or Aegean goddesses, with either culture mimicking the style of the other.

However, promptly discrediting the Yavneh female figures as Philistine goddess portraits, is premature. Although there is a dearth of Philistine textual sources, the Ekron Inscription, the only attested Philistine text (c. 600 BCE), relays the following:

The temple (that) built 'KYSH, son of Padi, son of YSD, son of 'ADA', son of YA'R prince of EKRON, for his lady, **PTGYH**. That she may bless him, and protect him, and prolong his days, and to bless his land.²⁵

Ekron's temple was not only dedicated to a Philistine goddess, Ptgyh, but the goddess's name is inconsistent with Semitic names. Therefore, a goddess, linguistically isolated from Semitic influence, existed and reigned

within the Philistine pantheon. The female figurines on the Yavneh stands may be representative of Ekron's patron deity, Ptgyh. Moreover, this appellation is noteworthy because Ptgyh may be an eponym for the mother-earth Greek-Mycenaean goddess, Pytogayah, who was worshiped at Delphi.²⁶ If the Philistine goddess is indeed associated with an earth-mother, then one would expect the iconography of the stands to incorporate Gaia acolytes.

Bovine, Lion, and Palm Tree Figures

Complementing the female figures were a medley of bovine, lion, and palm tree motifs. Decorative elements in the form of frontal views of bull and ibex heads protruded from the stands, often serving as platforms for the female figurines.²⁷ Bulls are a pervasive symbol in Near Eastern antiquity, signifying the overt masculinity and power of the storm and warrior god El, Asherah's male consort, and their son Ba'al.²⁸

Palm trees, abutted by a pair of ibexes, were often centrally featured on the long side, resembling pillars supporting a roof.²⁹ The triad motif, depicting a palm tree enclosed by a duo of ibex, commonly illustrates a mother goddess.³⁰ Because

²⁶ Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess*, Volume 57 of *Oriental Publications* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 181-182.

²⁷ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 69.

²⁸ Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, 44.

²⁹ Ben-Shlomo, *Philistine Iconography*, 12.

³⁰ Assaf Yasur-Landau, "A Message in a Jug: Canaanite, Philistine, and Cypriot Iconography and the 'Orpheus Jug'" in *Bene Israel: Studies in the Archaeology of Israel and the Levant During the Bronze and Iron Ages Offered in Honour of Israel Finkelstein*, Volume 31 of *Culture and History of the Ancient Near East*, eds. Alexander Fantalkin and Assaf Yasur-Landau (Leiden: Brill, 2008) 215.

²³ Ben-Shlomo, *Philistine Iconography*, 67.

²⁴ Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 140.

²⁵ Baruch Halpern, Andre Lemaire, Matthew Joel Adams, eds., *The Books of Kings: Sources, Composition, Historiography and Reception* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 343; the bolding of PTGYH is added for emphasis.

Asherah is a mother goddess, she is naturally conveyed in a vegetative form, such as a palm tree.³¹ This scheme has been adorned on manifold vessels dating to the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age in both Canaan and Egypt.³²

Similar to the bovine adornments, multiple recumbent lions adjoining the bases of the stands upheld female figurines.³³ While lions have been perceived as a male symbol correlated to the strength of El, lions in conjunction with a female figurine are interpreted as an alternative insignia for Asherah.³⁴ The rationale for this connotation is that not only does a lioness possess such prowess, but that she is a fierce mother insofar that 13th century Ugaritic texts have referred to Asherah's offspring as being a "pride of lions."³⁵ In fact, Asherah has been bequeathed the title as the "lion lady."³⁶

³¹ William G. Dever, Seymour Gitin, et al., *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age Through Roman Palaestina*, eds. William G. Dever and Seymour Gitin (Warsaw, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 457.

³² Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E. Issue 9 of Archaeology and biblical studies, Issue 9 of Society of Biblical Literature Archaeology and Biblical Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 132; Eliezer D. Oren, "An Egyptian Marsh Scene on Pottery at Tel Sera: A Case of Egyptionization in Late Bronze III Canaan," in *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times': Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Aren M. Maeir (Warsaw: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 270-271.

³³ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, "Cult Stands of the Philistines," 153.

³⁴ Brent A. Strawn, *What is Stronger Than a Lion?: Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East, Volume 212 of Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* (Saint-Paul, Switzerland: Academic Press Fribourg, 2005), 254.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 213.

³⁶ Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Evidence for Sun Worship Ancient*

Once again, the montage of the Yavneh stands, supplementing the female figurines, is analogous to themes linked to Asherah. The iconography may be invocative of both the Semitic Asherah and the Greek-Mycenaean Pytogayah, coalescing to form a Philistine fertility goddess, Ptgyh. In times past, numerous religions and cultures were perceived and treated as monolithic entities.³⁷ However, it is important to acknowledge and perhaps underscore the fluidity of ancient cultures and their complex interplay. People are and were not bound by arbitrary identity boundaries.³⁸

Israel, Volume 111 of JSOT Supplement (Sheffield: A&C Black, 1993), 29.

³⁷ Jas Elsner, "Archaeologies and Agendas. Reflection on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art," *Journal of Roman Studies* 93 (2003), 114.

³⁸ Ben-Shlomo, after widely surveying the Philistine artistry and honing in on its evolution, has deduced the following concerning the multifaceted cultural atmosphere within which the Philistines prospered: "It seems that during the Iron Age II, Philistia is relatively rich with figurative representations, mostly reflecting the Canaanite or Levantine style, which appear to intensify and develop, albeit with a distinct regional flavor. During the Iron Age, Philistia is probably a meeting point between various cultures and populations: the Philistine immigrants, the native Canaanites, the Israelites, and the Egyptians as well as other peoples. The fusion of these groups led to the wealth of the stylistic and symbolic world reflected in Philistine iconography. The development of iconographic representations in the Iron Age Philistia seems to reflect such a reality quite well, in addition to displaying the typical development of an immigrant society, undergoing a process of integration and 'creolization' with the host cultures it encounters. The iconographic syntax which appeared in Philistia was apparently understood by both Canaanites and Philistines alike, leading to the eventual merging of these cultures... Iconographic representations and language in material culture are indeed a complex issue, and in this case, are part of the composite relationships between the Philistines and their neighbors throughout the Iron Age," *Philistine Iconography*, 195. The Philistine iconography is indeed veiled with foreign cultural repercussions, but instead of allowing the

Collectively, the nude female figurines, zoomorphic exemplifications, and palm tree pillars, “may have been symbolic of the goddess as providing sustenance to all creatures.”³⁹ Yavneh’s iconographic tableau, promoting a Philistine mother-earth goddess (whether Asherah or Ptgyh), have been demonstrated on another cultic stand that had been buried in the late tenth century BCE at Tell Taanach.⁴⁰ Yigal Yadin commented on Taanach’s elaborate display, theorizing that that the tiers of the stands resemble temple imagery and architecture devoted to a goddess.⁴¹ Could the iconography on the Yavneh stands be a model of a goddess’s sacred precinct?

SMOKING OUT THE FUNCTIONS OF THE YAVNEH CULTIC STANDS

The Yavneh 2002 excavation divulged 120 complete or restorable cultic stands intermingled with thousands of remnants of cultic accoutrements.⁴² Endeavoring to comprehend their functions, scholars have solicited a sundry of suppositions. In particular, Kletter, Zwickler, and Ziffer have sifted through a litany of potential purposes in their *Yavneh I, The Excavation of the Temple Hill Repository Pit and the Cult Stands* (2010). An array of theories regarding the functions of the stands lie on a wide spectrum, ranging from bird altars, libation stands, to flower pots.⁴³ Expounding upon their hypotheses, I will delve deeper into exploring the plausible functions further

convolutions to hinder his Philistine correlation, he endorses the notion of “creolization,” an appropriation per se of others’ artistic depictions and even theological tenets; Ibid.

³⁹ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwickler, *Yavneh I*, 89.

⁴⁰ Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun*, 25.

⁴¹ Cited in P. W. Lapp, “The 1968 Excavations at Tell Ta’anek,” *BASOR* 195 (1969), 44.

⁴² Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwickler, “Cult Stands of the Philistines,” 155.

⁴³ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwickler, *Yavneh I*, 175.

by specifically addressing their use as: 1) architectural models; 2) symbolic pedestals; 3) incense burners; and 4) votive offerings, which will be elaborated upon in conjunction with their repository context.

Architectural Models

Ubiquitous in ancient societies, architectural models have facilitated the planning and construction processes of buildings, as seen in Egypt.⁴⁴ More often than not, though, these models evoked mythological and spiritual tenets, e.g. representations of temples, ancestral homes, heavenly abodes, etc. as palpable in Minoan and Mycenaean customs.⁴⁵ Essentially, “clay models of sacred architecture with cult images kept the real shrines and real images alive and kindled the devotion of those who possessed or dedicated them.”⁴⁶ Likewise, models with a provenance in the surrounding Levant seem to correspond to such sacred symbolism.⁴⁷

Yavneh’s excavators have no qualms repudiating the function of the stands as architectural models. They reasoned that the

⁴⁴ Corinna Rossi, *Architecture and Mathematics in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 127.

⁴⁵ Carmelo G. Malacrino, *Constructing the Ancient World: Architectural Techniques of the Greeks and Romans* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2010), 81.

⁴⁶ K. van der Toorn, “Goddess in early Israelite Religion,” in *Ancient Goddesses: The Myths and the Evidence*, eds. Lucy Goodison and Christine Morris (London: British Museum, 1998), 94.

⁴⁷ P. M. Michelle Daviau, “Ceramic Architectural Models from the Transjordan and the Syrian Tradition” in *Proceedings of the 4th International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East 29 March – 3 April 2004, Freie Universität Berlin. Volume 1: The Reconstruction of Environment: Natural Resources and Human Interrelations through time Art History: Visual Communication*, eds. Hartmut Kuhne, Rainer M. Czichon, and Florian Janoscha Kreppner, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2008), 299.

overall absence of doors, floors, and internal divisions in the stands, concomitantly with a concave roof and superfluous apertures, “do not vaguely resemble houses or temples of Iron Age Palestine/Israel.”⁴⁸ Augmenting this conclusion, archaeologist Jean-Claude Margueron corroborated: “no building remains exhibiting similar characteristic have *ever* been found in the Near Eastern excavations.”⁴⁹ The stands found at Megiddo, on the other hand, paralleled actual local temple constructions.⁵⁰ But would the Philistines, foreigners from elusive origins, necessarily construct models replicating actual temples, ones resembling the architectural style and layout as their Semitic neighbors, or were the models used as vehicles to invoke reverence of a sacred precinct?

The symmetrical display of the mystical iconography and pillars garnishing the 33-35 cm by 18-22 cm edifice of the stands reflect the architecture customary to Uruk temples in the protoliterate period.⁵¹ Furthermore, the column sequences exhibit hypostyle halls prominently structured in many ancient temples, including Syrian temples dating from the second millennium to the Iron Age.⁵² Also, the lack of doors is not a deterrent to the model proposal since doors

were not necessary for the comings and goings of the deities, only mortal priests, and it can be argued that the stands were primarily symbolic rather than functional.⁵³ In the same vein, the paraboloid form of the roof is certainly not indicative of a practical roof, but ancient cosmologies are imbued with this ideology that the firmaments were physically held up by sky-bearers (e.g. Shu and Atlas in Egyptian and Greek mythologies, respectively), which resulted in this concave/vaulted sky.⁵⁴

Evidently, the Yavneh stands were not miniature replicas of authentic structures, but their mythical elements convey hallowed dwellings. Petrographic analysis denotes that the stands were manufactured with the same technique and local clay, possibly from the same workshop.⁵⁵ This vast production resulted in “cheap replicas of sacred images” that pilgrims could acquire, using the cultic paraphernalia as potential temple substitutes.⁵⁶ As mentioned above, Yavneh was easily accessible, stationed along major trade routes, to travelers; but if pilgrims came to Yavneh, it does not appear that they returned to their respective communities with their stands because stands similar to those of Yavneh do not crop up elsewhere. Thus, while the stands have temple connotations, they did not function as substitute temples for distant worshippers unable to make frequent attendance. Therefore, alternative functions should be considered to determine a more tenable explanation for the purpose of the stands.

⁴⁸ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 193.

⁴⁹ Jean-Claude Margueron, “Architecture et Modelisme au Proche-Orient,” in *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times. Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday, Volume 1*, eds. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre De Miroschedji (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 193. Italics added for emphasis.

⁵⁰ Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel*, 328.

⁵¹ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 193; Charles Gates, *Ancient Cities: The Archaeology of Urban Life in the Ancient Near East and Egypt, Greece and Rome* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 34.

⁵² Gates, *Ancient Cities*, 107-109; Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 195.

⁵³ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 176.

⁵⁴ J. Oliver Thomson, *History of Ancient Geography* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 35.

⁵⁵ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 65.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 61.

Pedestals

In Isaiah 66:1, the Hebrew god declared: “Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting place?” Despite being a sixth century BCE Israelite text, Isaiah captures the prominent ancient Near Eastern notion that gods, or their presences, resided on divinely appointed seats. The profuse ritual iconography of the Yavneh stands, its small dimensions, allowing for easy portability, and its curved roof may as a whole emblemize a royal seat for a Philistine god.

Arguably the most eminent symbolic throne is the Ark of the Covenant, referred to as the “mercy seat” of the Hebrew god.⁵⁷ The Israelites transported this throne everywhere, including and especially into their battles, because they believed that their god communed with them upon it. The Ark reportedly possessed apotropaic powers that permitted the Israelites to triumph over their enemies. It’s no wonder the Philistines temporarily seized it for themselves.⁵⁸

Warfare and religion were tightly intertwined in antiquity. For this reason, according to the Mari tablets (c. 1800 – 1750 BCE), diviners and cultic priests were highly valued among an army’s vanguard as they would be divinely instructed in their tactics.⁵⁹ Both the Egyptians and the Assyrians escorted standards, figures signifying the power of their gods, into many of their wars.⁶⁰ Inevitably, the

Philistines were exposed to this divine pedestal concept and the Yavneh stands may evince that they adopted it into their theological tenets and military strategies.

The perforations atop the Yavneh stands are not befitting a symbolic throne. Conversely, an extravagant combat scene in Sennacherib’s Palace in Nineveh revealed that the Assyrian divine palladiums were transported vis-a-vis incense bowls, likely working together for prophetic inspirations on the frontline.⁶¹ In fact, incense burning was vital to the interaction of the Israelites with the Ark of the Covenant, as explicitly documented in Leviticus: “put the incense on the fire before the Lord that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is upon the covenant, or he will die.”⁶² Perchance the Yavneh stands merged the divine throne and the incense vessels into one lightweight entity, the fenestrations of the stands cradling the incense bowls.

Incense Burners

The Yavneh ensemble, i.e. cultic stands sprinkled with thousands of vessel remnants, brought ritual offerings to the forefront of the excavators’ minds.⁶³ Initially, it was thought the stands stabilized bowls containing ceremonial sacrifices, e.g. bread, slaughtered birds, or libations.⁶⁴ However, not even an infinitesimal dreg of any of these substances were extracted from the pit’s matrix.⁶⁵ Faintly besmirched with soot, rim fragments hinted at excavators to pursue the theory of incense burning.⁶⁶ Surprisingly, though, the soot evidence was

⁵⁷ Exodus 25:22.

⁵⁸ 1 Samuel 1-6.

⁵⁹ Hans M. Bastard, “Sic Dicit Dominus: Mari Prophetic Texts and the Hebrew Bible” in *Essays on Ancient Israel in Its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na’aman*, eds. Yara Amit and Nadav Na’aman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 27.

⁶⁰ Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains, Volume 2* (Piscataway: Gorgias Press LLC, 2001), 347.

⁶¹ Mehmet-Ali Atac, *The Mythology of Kingship in Neo-Assyrian Art* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 40.

⁶² Leviticus 16:13.

⁶³ Devries, “Cult Stands,” 37.

⁶⁴ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 177.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 178.

scant and the archaeologists speculated that the stands were too fragile to withstand a recurrent heating and cooling cycle so the incense theory was abandoned.⁶⁷ That abandonment, however, was put aside a few years later after the other artifacts were thoroughly evaluated and dozens of vessels were ascertained as firepans, similar to those discovered in Cyprus.⁶⁸

Chemical analyses conducted on the soot residue disclosed organic molecules consistent with floral oils, viz. dihydromethyl jasmonate, isopropyl laurate and myristate, and oleic acids, viz. diacylglycerols and monoacylglycerols.⁶⁹ In other words, a mixture of jasmine, nutmeg, and tallow elements were involved in a liquefaction and vaporescent process homogenous to incense burning.⁷⁰

The fact that jasmine is native to modern day Iran and Turkey and nutmeg to India is symptomatic of the widespread trading networks flourishing at this time.⁷¹ The Incense Route, extending from the Mediterranean and South Arabia, reached its apex c. 800 BCE to 200 CE.⁷² The *Via Maris* connected to this Incense Route, which explains Yavneh's procurement of jasmine and nutmeg.⁷³

Antiquity is replete with archaeological and textual evidence for incense burning. The Israelites, for instance, habitually used incense for supplication purposes: "Let my

prayer be counted as incense before you."⁷⁴ The Egyptians did likewise and even used incense to alleviate the discomfort of innumerable ailments.⁷⁵ In all likelihood, the Philistines incorporated such procedures at Yavneh as well.

Of particular significance is the safrole and myristicin components of the jasmine and nutmeg flavonoids found at Yavneh because they can induce hallucinations.⁷⁶ These hallucinogenic agents, when kindled, stimulated an altered state of mind that conceivably fostered oracular rituals.⁷⁷ Ideally, Philistine texts would be consulted to confirm this prophetic methodology, but this lacuna leads us to the Hebrew Bible again.

In II Kings, Ahaziah, a Judean King (c. 841), suffered an injury that he thought necessitated intervention from Baal-zebul, the Philistine god of Ekron.⁷⁸ This decision culminated in Elijah's denouncement of Ahaziah.⁷⁹ This pericope illustrates not only

⁷⁴ Psalm 141:2.

⁷⁵ Eugen Strouhal, Bretislav Vachala, and Hana Vymazalová, *The Medicine of the Ancient Egyptians, Volume 1* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 156.

⁷⁶ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 169.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 206.

⁷⁸ II Kings 1:2: "Ahaziah had fallen through the lattice in his upper chamber in Samaria, and lay injured; so he sent messengers, telling them, 'Go, inquire of Baal-zebul, the god of Ekron, whether I shall recover from this injury.'"

⁷⁹ Elijah's denouncement is rooted in the Mosaic Law that forbids the Israelite's acculturation of the gentile divination techniques as outlined in Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy 18:9-12 interdicts: "When you come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you, you must not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices

⁶⁷ Daviau, "Ceramic Architectural Models," 301.

⁶⁸ Kletter and Ziffer, "Incense-Burning Rituals," 166.

⁶⁹ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 169.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 170.

⁷¹ Jennifer Peace Rhind, *Fragrance and Wellbeing: Plant Aromatics and Their Influence on the Psyche* (London: Singing Dragon, 2013), 107.

⁷² Dierk Lange, *Ancient Kingdoms of West Africa: African-Centred and Canaanite-Israelite Perspectives; A Collection of Published and Unpublished Studies in English and French* (Dettelbach: J.H. Roll Verlag, 2004), 270.

⁷³ Frevel, "Gifts to the Gods?" 34.

that deities were summoned for medicinal guidance, but that this was a ritual that attracted the Israelites, indeed the king himself, to the Philistines. Baal-zebul, literally “Lord of the Fly,” has been subject to etymological theories, bifurcating scholars into two camps, that the name is: 1) a deliberate adulteration by redactors of the Ugaritic epithet for prince, *zbl*; or 2) a metaphor based on a god that forfended individuals from flies wrought on by diseases.⁸⁰ Both are feasible, but perhaps the name implies something entirely different: a god associated with incense smoke likened unto a fly that rises to the heavens.

While this passage concerns Ekron and a male god, recall that Ekron’s temple was consecrated to the goddess, *Ptygh*, and is exceptionally near Yavneh (9.6 km), where a *favissa*, brimming with incense stands ostensibly featuring such a goddess, was identified. As it may be, pilgrims might have traversed to Yavneh for related oracular purposes. However, the evidence do not aver incense burning directly at Yavneh, but rather that these incense utensils were deposited there, perhaps as votive offerings to the goddess or ritually decommissioned temple accessories or both.

REPOSITORY PITS

The similar typology and the stratigraphy of the artifacts within Yavneh’s *favissa* sustain the conclusion that the vessels and stands were interred approximately at the same time.⁸¹ Because of the relatively articulated condition of the stands, scholars have inferred that they were intentionally positioned within the *favissa* – not the collateral damage of a sacked

temple.⁸² Additionally, being conspicuously located on the top of a hill, they likely were not the priestly preemptive concealment on the eve of a temple’s destruction.⁸³ Also, the fragmented ceramics, for the most part, did not originate from shared complete vessels, signifying they were determinedly deposited in their shattered states.⁸⁴ All factors, in unison, support the determination that the pit and its objects were manifestations of votive offerings.

Objects were ritually interred and conferred to gods in the Near East as early as the Neolithic period.⁸⁵ Billie Jean Collins, Hittite historian, postulates the three foremost incentives that motivated Hittites to deposit cultic paraphernalia to their gods: 1) to solicit the favor of the gods for some endeavor; 2) to request a cleansing of a structure; and 3) to invite deities to safeguard their newly established home.⁸⁶ Effectively, the pits “served as a channel for the underground deities, both to ease their passage between the world and as a door through which to receive offerings.”⁸⁷ In a Hittite inscription, labeled by Collins as “Tunnawiya of Hattusa’s Ritual of ‘Taking of the Earth,’” worshippers dug a pit in which they consecrated a modeled bedroom to the “*Sun Goddess of the Earth*.”⁸⁸

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid, 57.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 201.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 199.

⁸⁶ Billie Jean Collins, “Necromancy, Fertility, and the Dark Earth: The Use of Ritual Pits in Hittite Cult” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, eds. Paul Mirecki and Marvin Meyer (Leiden, Boston, and Koln: Brill, 2002), 226.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 229: “Afterwards within the storage pit of the Sun Goddess of the Earth they dig a clay pit (qappi) a little downwards. They make it (as) a small bedroom and then they put the model[s] of the beds to the inside... Within the storage pit the small bedroom of the Goddess of the Earth has already been dug out. They come (to the place) where they seat the Sun Goddess of the Earth. And the pit that they dig out

that the Lord your God is driving them out before you.”

⁸⁰ Halpern, Lemaire, and Adams, *The Books of Kings*, 305.

⁸¹ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 194.

Yavneh's *favissa* is presented in accordance to this Hittite inscription, but it is still somewhat at odds for what one would expect with votive offerings in the sense that the objects are lacking in value.⁸⁹ Typically, luxury items (e.g. ivory and jewelry) would be entrusted to the gods, but Yavneh's stands are of little value as they were obviously used and damaged.⁹⁰ This may correlate to the social and economic class of the donor, but because the stands are more or less uniform in quality and style, they probably were purchased by pilgrims from the same workshop and later retired from the temple's vicinity to permit space on the plaster benches along the walls of the Holy of Holies.⁹¹ Lachish's Late Bronze Fosse Temple and Tel Qasile's Philistine sanctuary are surrounded by pockets of repository pits filled with ritually deactivated objects, supposedly achieved through breakage.⁹²

CONCLUSIONS

Confronted with comparable incense stands dotted throughout sites in Israel, archaeologist Lamoine Devries advocated their function as being "dual in purpose... first, the offering stands served as altars, and second, the offering stands bore symbols or motifs to remind the worshipper of Yahweh's continued presence."⁹³ While scholars have offered possibilities about how the Yavneh stands were used, I adhere to

downwards, this is joined to the other pit and the road is made...." Italics added for emphasis.

⁸⁹ Frevel, "Gifts to the Gods?" 30.

⁹⁰ Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 61.

⁹¹ Ephraim Stern, "The Sea Peoples Cult in Philistia and Northern Israel" in *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times. Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday, Volume 1*, eds. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre De Miroschedji (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2006), 388.

⁹² Kletter, Ziffer, and Zwicker, *Yavneh I*, 202.

⁹³ Devries, "Cult Stands," 37.

Devries's precedent by concluding that there are several suitable functions for Yavneh's stands, and they are not mutually exclusive.

The first conclusion I come to is that a goddess, possibly Ptygh or Asherah, was extolled at Yavneh by pilgrims desiring oracular mediation through incense burning rituals. This is based on the iconography's excessive earth-goddess symbolism, commonly associated with Asherah, and the Ekron's inscription specifying Ptygh as a Philistine goddess. Also, an orthographic analysis of Yavneh suggests a hallowed precinct. The soot residues upon the chalices consist of jasmine and nutmeg molecules, which are hallucinogenic agents. Yavneh's location along the *Via Maris*, linked to the Incense Route, allowed easy access for pilgrims and for the acquirement of exotic jasmine and nutmeg.⁹⁴ The burning of intoxicating incense likely facilitated prophesying methods, meriting the Philistine's sobriquet as "soothsayers." The Hebrew word utilized for "soothsayers" derives from the word for clouds, possibly reflecting the incense clouds that developed during the divinatory process.

The second conclusion is that stands were deposited, ensuing their oracular and temple usage, not only to preserve their sacredness, but to offer as votive gifts to the goddess. This is established by Yavneh's *favissa* packed with intentionally-smashed ceramic pieces and stands. The pit's position atop the tell suggests that the items were not hidden, and perhaps located there as the hill was perceived as a geographic altar, making the deposit atop a befitting placement for votive offerings. Essentially, they were symbolically placed on the altar, and the

⁹⁴ Seymour Gitin, "The Four-Horned Altar and Sacred Space: An Archaeological Perspective" in *Sacred Time, Place. Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, ed. Barry M. Gittlen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns 2009), 108.

cultic stands themselves as altars, became the outward token of their worship. This contributes to the soothsaying idea of the Philistines because the officiating priest performs rituals that symbolically lifted the sacrifice/offering to the goddess, metaphorically rising as incense clouds.

The third conclusion is that the iconography and cultic functions of the stands were influenced by the region's rich cultural diversity. Yavneh's geography exposed the locales to foreigners, traversing the nearby sea and trade routes, and their customs. Contemporary cultures implemented incense functions for spiritual, medicinal, and warring intentions. The firepans at Yavneh are analogous to the Cypriot firepans and the incense stands resemble the Minoan snake tubes.⁹⁵ Many Near Eastern cultures integrated model temples and symbolic thrones in their cultic affairs to resemble and invite the company of their gods, and the Philistines at Yavneh adopted it as well.

Scholars will surely be discussing and reinterpreting the finds from the 2002 Yavneh excavation for years to come. For now, the multi-disciplinary effort to understand their context in history, culture, and religion is ongoing. But based on my various conclusions, the Philistine "soothsayer" label is tied to the incense clouds.

⁹⁵ Geraldine C. Gesell, "The Minoan Snake Tube: A Survey and Catalogue" *American Journal of Archaeology* 80, no. 3 (1976): 247.

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