

When you cross over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is allotting to you, and when he gives you rest from your enemies all around so that you live in safety, then you shall bring everything that I command you to the place that the LORD your God will choose as a dwelling for his name: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and your donations, and all your choice votive gifts that you vow to the LORD. And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you together with your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levites who reside in your towns (since they have no allotment or inheritance with you). Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place you happen to see. But only at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes—there you shall offer your burnt offerings and there you shall do everything I command you. (Deuteronomy 12:10-14)

Then Jeroboam said to himself, “Now the kingdom may well revert to the house of David. If this people continues to go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, the heart of this people will turn again to their master, King Rehoboam of Judah; they will kill me and return to King Rehoboam of Judah.” So the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. (1 Kings 12:26-29)

The king [Josiah] commanded the high priest Hilkiah, the priests of the second order, and the guardians of the threshold, to bring out of the temple of the LORD all the vessels made for Baal, for Asherah, and for all the host of heaven; he burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron, and carried their ashes to Bethel. He deposed the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem; those also who made offerings to Baal, to the sun, the moon, the constellations, and all the host of the heavens. . . . He brought all the priests out of the towns of Judah, and defiled the high places where the priests had made offerings, from Geba to Beer-sheba; he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, which were on the left at the gate of the city. (2 Kings 23:4-5, 8)

Most of what we have learned so far about family and community religion has been pieced together from brief passages and passing references scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible. When we ask about the ritual aspects of the national or state religion of Israel and Judah, on the other hand, we find a wealth of data. This

observation shows where the interest of the Hebrew Bible lies. From the standpoint of the people who compiled these texts, personal experience of the deity by ordinary individuals is relatively unimportant; what matters is the relationship between Yahweh and the people of Israel as a whole (that is, their covenant with Yahweh). At the core

of this relationship lies the proper conduct of rituals at state-sponsored shrines.

Before we can talk about the kinds of rituals that were performed at the national shrines, we need to critically examine what the Hebrew Bible says about the history of state religion in ancient Palestine. Most scholars believe that the pro-Jerusalem bias of the people who crafted the Hebrew Bible has produced a distorted depiction of the history and function of Israel's national religious institutions.

THE MYTH OF CENTRALIZED WORSHIP

According to the Hebrew Bible, it was Yahweh who commanded that a central shrine be set up to serve as his place of residence among the people of Israel. The book of Exodus contains detailed plans that Yahweh is said to have given at Mount Sinai for the construction and operation of the tabernacle, a portable tent shrine where Moses was to meet with Yahweh on a regular basis (thus its alternate title, the tent of meeting) (Exodus 25–31). The amount of space lavished on the construction and dedication of the tabernacle (Exodus 35–40) also testifies

to its importance in the eyes of the people who framed the narrative. The same can be said for its physical location, which is described as being either in the center of the Israelites' desert encampments (Numbers 2:1–34) or far outside their camp, separated from its impurity (Exodus 33:7–11). The Torah also devotes many chapters to descriptions of the animal sacrifices and other activities that were supposed to be performed in or around the tent shrine (Leviticus 1:1–7:38; 16:1–17:9; 22:1–24:9; Numbers 15:1–31; 18:1–22).

The tabernacle becomes the focal point of Yahweh's interactions with Moses and his people for the remainder of the story. The tent is considered so holy that anyone other than a priest and Levite who approaches it is to be put to death (Numbers 1:51). This concern for the holiness of the tabernacle is rooted in the belief that Yahweh was present in concentrated essence in the innermost part of the tent, enthroned above the gold-plated box (the Ark of the Covenant) that held the Ten Commandments and other souvenirs of the desert wanderings (Exodus 25:22; 30:6; Leviticus 16:2; Numbers 7:89). Only the high priest could enter this part of the shrine, and he only once each year on the **Day of Atonement** after offering special sacrifices for his and his family's sins (Leviticus 16:1–14).

Interestingly, Moses and his assistant Joshua seem to have been exempt from this requirement (see Exodus 33:8–11).

This concentration on the central shrine is taken a step further in the book of Deuteronomy, where Moses announces that Yahweh intends to choose a single place in the land of Canaan to which all sacrifices and offerings must be brought (Deuteronomy 12:5–18, 26–27; 14:22–26; 15:19–20; 26:1–3). All male Israelites are expected to travel to this site three times a year to observe the major festivals (Deuteronomy 16:1–17). The presentation of sacrifices and offerings at any other place in Palestine, even to Yahweh, is expressly forbidden (Deuteronomy 12:13, 17; 16:5). All other places where

ritual activities might be conducted are to be destroyed (Deuteronomy 7:5; 12:2–4; compare Exodus 23:23–24; Numbers 33:30–52).

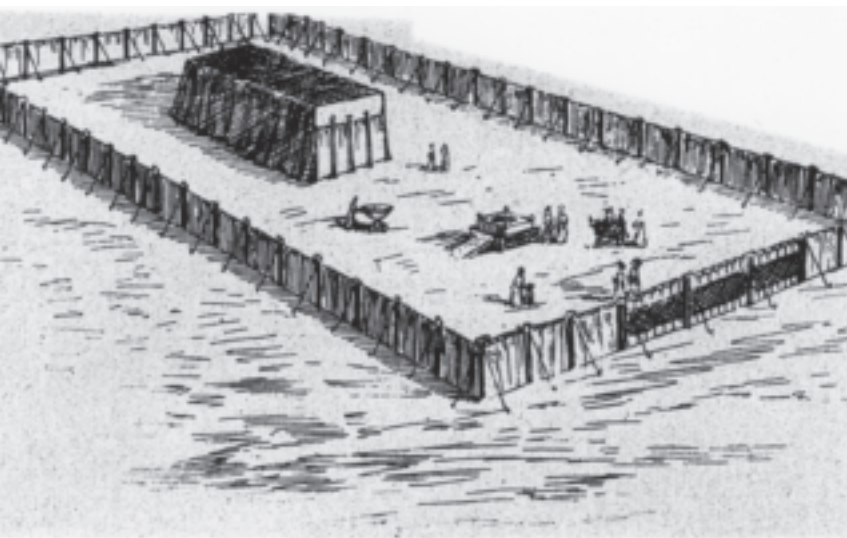


Fig. 28.2. An artist's depiction of the tabernacle that the book of Exodus claims the Israelites used as a worship center during their forty years in the desert.

As the story progresses, however, this insistence that all ritual activity must be concentrated at a single location appears to be forgotten. Not until the construction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings 6–8) does it emerge once again as a concern of the narrator. Even by biblical chronology this is a period of several hundred years in which the people of Israel are shown worshipping at many different places across the land without being criticized for it. The tabernacle recedes into the background once the people settle in Canaan; even its location is unclear, since it is associated with two different towns, Shiloh and Gibeon, and nothing is said about a move. (For Shiloh, see Joshua 18:1; 19:51; Judges 18:31; 1 Samuel 1:3; 2:22; 4:3; Psalm 78:60; Jeremiah 7:12; for Gibeon, see 1 Kings 3:3–4; 1 Chronicles 16:39; 21:29; 2 Chronicles 1:3–6). The picture is clouded further by reports that the Ark of the Covenant resided for a time in Bethel (Judges 20:26–28) and later spent twenty years in Kiriath-Jearim (1 Samuel 7:1–2; 1 Chronicles 13:5), attended by priests who have no evident links to the tabernacle. Not once in these stories does anyone claim that the tabernacle is the only valid place of worship. Again and again people are shown building altars and making sacrifices to Yahweh at various places across the land, including such God-ordained leaders as Samuel and Saul (1 Samuel 7:17; 9:12–13; 10:8; 11:15; 14:35; 16:1–5). In several instances these acts are explicitly commanded or approved by Yahweh or an angel (Judges 6:24–26; 13:15–23; 2 Samuel 24:18–25).

The presence of such conflicting materials within the Hebrew Bible suggests to most scholars that the idea of centralizing all ritual activity in a single location arose at some point after the construction of the Jerusalem temple (that is, during the monarchy) and not in the time of Moses as the book of Deuteronomy claims. Scholars are divided, however, over when this drive toward centralization began. Some think that such an outcome was inevitable once the decision was made to build a royal temple that would serve as a national shrine. Others see the move as a response to the construction of competing national shrines at Dan and Bethel in the northern kingdom after the death of Solomon (tenth century B.C.E.). Still others believe that the move toward centralization was initiated

by one of the kings of Judah, whether Hezekiah (eighth century B.C.E.) or Josiah (seventh century B.C.E.), perhaps under the influence of the Jerusalem priests. Some insist that there was no concern for a central shrine until after the Exile. Good arguments can be made for all of these positions.

The text is also unclear about what happened to the tabernacle after the Ark was reportedly moved to the Jerusalem temple. Many scholars believe that the tabernacle is a literary fiction that was patterned on the later Jerusalem temple, so that questions about its ultimate fate are irrelevant. Others acknowledge the similarity between the two shrines but suggest that the influence ran in the opposite direction; namely, the temple was based on an earlier tent shrine that may or may not have served as the focal point of Israelite religion prior to the temple. Among those who view the tabernacle as a real historical entity, some identify it with the tent of meeting



Fig. 28.3. Illustration from the *Christ-Herre Chronik*, ca. 1375–80.

that the Hebrew Bible says was carried with the Ark of the Covenant into Solomon's newly constructed temple (1 Kings 8:4; 2 Chronicles 5:5; compare 1 Chronicles 6:31–32), where it was either stored away or erected inside the temple to house the Ark. Others, however, argue that this text refers to a separate tent that David had set up in Jerusalem to house the Ark (2 Chronicles 1:3–6). A few texts suggest that the tabernacle may have remained at Shiloh until it was destroyed by invading

armies, most likely the Assyrians (Psalm 78:56-64; Jeremiah 7:12-15; 26:4-6). The narrative books say virtually nothing about either the operation of the tabernacle or its destruction. In the end, we simply do not know what happened to the tabernacle, or whether it existed at all. Archaeological excavations are unlikely to turn up any evidence that could aid in answering this question, since the text describes the tabernacle as being made of materials that would have long since decayed.

These disputes about the relation between the tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple are important because the answers that scholars give to these questions lead to very different understandings of the nature of state religion in ancient Palestine.

1. Conservative scholars see the tabernacle as the historical predecessor of the Jerusalem temple, with similar rites being performed in both facilities as specified by the laws of Torah. The building of the temple simply transferred this system to a more permanent home. The existence and operation of a central shrine was thus vital to the state religion of the people of Israel from their earliest history, despite the practices of certain kings who tolerated or even promoted more diverse forms of worship. The performance of sacrifices and other rituals at sites other than the central shrine was a violation of state religion and thus illegitimate. To make matters worse, most of these other sites followed deviant forms of Yahwism or honored gods other than Yahweh. Kings like Hezekiah and Josiah who acted to stamp out these other worship centers were simply enforcing the historic norms of state religion.

2. Maximalist scholars vary widely in their reconstructions of Israel's state religion. Most view the move toward centralization as an attempt by certain kings, especially Hezekiah and Josiah, to enhance their control over the religious and political lives of their subjects during periods of crisis. If the tabernacle existed at all prior to the construction of the Jerusalem temple, it functioned as one shrine among many, not as a central shrine that served the entire nation. The building of the Jerusalem temple did not change this pattern; it was erected to serve as a royal shrine alongside other worship centers, not to replace local sites of communal religious life. The same is true for the royal shrines at Dan and Bethel in the north.

Apart from those limited periods when the kings were seeking to extend their control over the regional worship centers, most people's lives would have been little affected by expressions of state religion. Their encounters with the royal shrines would have been entirely voluntary, as when one of them decided to travel to one of these sites during a religious festival or on some other occasion to present an offering or sacrifice to the deity. Many who made such trips would have been motivated by the belief that this site was especially powerful due to its close association with the deity and/or the king.

3. Minimalist scholars emphasize the religious diversity of Palestine in the preexilic period. Some acknowledge the existence of royal shrines that functioned apart from the regional shrines that were visited by ordinary people, while others insist that all such stories are myths—there was no such thing as a state religion in preexilic Palestine, only diverse local and regional forms of religion that involved the worship of many different gods. The stories of the tabernacle and possibly even Solomon's temple were created to lend ideological support to the efforts of a group of priestly elites who were seeking to unite the people of postexilic Judah around a temple-centered religion that would ensure priestly control over the lives of the ordinary inhabitants of Palestine. Passages in the Hebrew Bible that speak of activities in the tabernacle or the Jerusalem temple were created during this period to give a sense of antiquity to practices that did not actually begin until the postexilic period. Only during this later

EXERCISE 73

Read the following passages that describe the events that the Hebrew Bible says led to the founding of the Jerusalem temple and the northern shrines. What reasons are given for the founding of these shrines? How credible do these reasons seem to you? Why does the narrator express such different opinions of the northern and southern shrines?

- 2 Samuel 7:1-17
- 1 Kings 12:1-33
- 1 Kings 16:29-33
- 2 Chronicles 3:1—5:14

era can one speak of any real state religion among the people of Palestine.

THE CREATION OF ROYAL SHRINES

The Hebrew Bible contains detailed stories about the establishment of the royal shrines at Jerusalem in the southern kingdom of Judah and at Dan and Bethel in the northern kingdom of Israel. The narrative is heavily biased in favor of the Jerusalem temple and against the northern shrines, a point that has led many scholars to doubt the historical validity of the accounts. Most, however, find at least the core of the stories plausible, especially since archaeological excavations have uncovered the remains of a massive worship complex at Dan that dates to the period of the monarchy. Excavations at the presumed site of the Jerusalem temple have been impossible due to the presence there of the Dome of the Rock, the third holiest shrine of Islam.

The Royal Shrines of Judah

According to the Hebrew Bible, the idea of building a temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem originated with King David, who envisioned it as a fixed home for the Ark of the Covenant, the sacred box from the Exodus period that David had recently brought to his new capital and placed in a special tent. Prior to that time, the Ark had been housed for most of its existence in the tabernacle,



Fig. 28.4. James Tissot, *The Ark Passes over Jordan*

though its most recent home had been in Kiriath-Jearim, where it was lodged apart from the tabernacle, as we noted earlier.

The story does not explain why David moved the Ark to Jerusalem without the tabernacle, so we can only speculate about what the narrator might have had in mind. According to the Torah, the Ark is the earthly symbol of Yahweh's presence, the place where he comes to meet with his people. The Ark is also a potent channel of Yahweh's power—the Jordan River splits in its presence (Joshua 3:9—4:18); the armies of Israel carry it into battle to ensure that Yahweh fights on their behalf (Joshua 4:1-4; 6:1-21; 1 Samuel 14:16-18; 2 Samuel 11:11); and anyone other than a priest or Levite who gets too close to it can become sick (1 Samuel 5:6-12) or even die (2 Samuel 6:6-10). The place where the Ark rests, by contrast, is invariably blessed by Yahweh (2 Samuel 6:12).

Whatever the truth behind these claims of supernatural power, the story of David moving the Ark to Jerusalem is at least plausible in light of the biblical depiction of David's reign. With the end of David's wars (2 Samuel 7:1) and the establishment of a relatively stable monarchy, David would have wanted to have this powerful object under his control. He could not afford to entrust it to a group of priests who might not support his newly united kingdom. Possession of this sacred relic would also reinforce his claim to the throne against the surviving members of Saul's family. So it makes sense that David might have ordered the Ark to be brought to Jerusalem and placed in a tent, recalling the story of Yahweh's presence in the desert tabernacle (2 Samuel 6:1-19). Here the king offered animal sacrifices (2 Samuel 6:17-18; compare 24:25) and appointed his sons to serve as priests (2 Samuel 8:18; compare 2 Samuel 15:12; 1 Kings 1:9; 8:62-64; 9:25), thus solidifying his family's position as the religious and political leaders of Israel. From a political standpoint, the plan was a stroke of genius.

Sometime later, according to the narrative, David proposed to build a glorious new temple in Jerusalem to house the Ark. But Yahweh rejected this plan, insisting that Yahweh could not be contained within a fixed building (2 Samuel 7:5-7). It thus comes as a surprise when Yahweh proceeds to give permission for David's son Solomon to build him a temple (2 Samuel 7:12-13; 1 Kings 5:5).

The book of Chronicles attempts to resolve this problem by having Yahweh explain that David is a warrior who has



Fig. 28.5. Bulls and calves were often associated with deities in the ancient Near East: (top) a gilded bull that was given to a Canaanite temple as a votive offering; (bottom) a stela showing the Canaanite god Hadad standing on a bull with a thunderbolt in his hand.

Bible, so we know almost nothing about why they were built or what kinds of activities were performed in them.

shed much blood, though why this should disqualify him from building the temple is never explained (1 Chronicles 28:3; compare 1 Kings 5:3-4). On the other hand, it is easy to see why Solomon and his supporters might have wanted to claim that he was simply following the orders of Yahweh and his esteemed father when he undertook to build for Yahweh a temple that was modeled on the facilities normally used to worship Canaanite deities, as archaeological excavations have shown. At the narrative level, this transition from a portable tent shrine to a fixed temple represents a major new departure in the state religion of Israel.

The Jerusalem temple was not the only place where the state religion of Judah was carried out. Archaeologists have uncovered the ruins of several other sanctuaries scattered strategically around the land of Judah that seem to have operated under royal control (see chapter 29). None of these temples is mentioned in the Hebrew

In form they resemble the biblical descriptions of the Jerusalem temple, though scholars disagree over whether animal sacrifices were performed at these sites as at the central temple. Their very presence, however, suggests that the state religion of Judah was more complex and less centralized than the texts indicate.

The Royal Shrines of Israel

The establishment of royal shrines in the northern kingdom of Israel had an equally political motivation, if the story in the Hebrew Bible can be trusted. According to 1 Kings 12:26-33, King Jeroboam, who had recently rebelled against Solomon's son Rehoboam and set up his own kingdom in the north, established major shrines at Dan and Bethel (the northern and southern ends of his kingdom) and lesser ones at other locations so that his subjects would not have to travel to the temple in Jerusalem to offer sacrifices. The narrative attributes a political motive to Jeroboam's actions: since there was no separation of church and state in the ancient world, participation in the ritual life of the Jerusalem temple would inevitably bring his subjects under the influence of southern religious and political leaders and thus undermine his shaky authority. His solution, according to the Hebrew Bible, was to create new shrines within his own kingdom where his people could carry on their traditional forms of worship.

Here and elsewhere the narrator implies that Jeroboam's shrines honored gods other than Yahweh, using images of calves to represent their presence. But this makes no sense in the context of the narrative, since the story only works if the people of Israel are seen as devout followers of Yahweh who can be enticed to bring their sacrifices to a northern site instead of the Jerusalem temple. In fact, the Hebrew Bible includes several stories that suggest that both Dan and Bethel had long served as centers for the worship of Yahweh (for Dan, see Judges 17:1-5; 18:27-31; for Bethel, see Genesis 28:18-22; 35:1-15; Judges 20:18-28; 21:19). Most scholars believe that Jeroboam's golden calves were actually statues of bulls that symbolized the throne of Yahweh, not images of gods that were worshipped at the shrines. They served essentially the same role as the Ark and the cherubim did in the Jerusalem

temple. Both types of throne imagery were associated with kingly deities in the ancient Near East.

Other aspects of the biblical depiction of the religious system of the north suggest that it was formulated in direct opposition to the state religion of Judah. The reference to the Exodus saga in the account of Jeroboam's founding of the shrines ("Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt"; 1 Kings 12:28) recalls similar language in the books of Amos and Hosea, the only two biblical prophets who preached to the northern kingdom (Amos 2:10; 3:1; 4:10; 5:25; 9:7; Hosea 2:15; 9:10; 11:1-5; 13:4-6). Many scholars have suggested that the northern shrines may have given special prominence to the Exodus story as a paradigm for Israel's experience of liberation from the oppressive rule of Solomon, with Jeroboam, the founding ruler of the nation, playing the part of Moses. The ordination of priests from outside

the changes were motivated by a concern to return to older traditions that had been set aside in the south.

FROM ROYAL SHRINES TO STATE RELIGION

In both north and south, the forms of state religion changed over time. In the south, the temple was originally built as a royal shrine to be used primarily by the king and the priests to offer sacrifices and praises to Yahweh on behalf of the nation. Apart from the festival times, participation in this vital element of the state religion of Judah was effectively limited to the Jerusalem elites. The Jerusalem temple appears to have coexisted with the regional shrines for over two centuries with no effort by the kings



Fig. 28.6. A platform from the royal shrine at Dan where one of Jeroboam's calf shrines may have stood.

the traditional priestly families (1 Kings 12:31; 13:33; 2 Chronicles 11:14-15), if it reflects actual practice, would likewise have distinguished Israel from the south, though the practice may have begun as a political expedient due to a shortage of priests loyal to Jeroboam. Finally, the choice of a different date for celebrating the Festival of Booths (in the eighth month rather than the seventh) would have created a difference in the ritual calendars of the two states. Though the Hebrew Bible paints all of these practices as innovations, many scholars believe that

to control what was done at the shrines or to otherwise incorporate them into any kind of coordinated religious system. Over the years, many people came to view the Jerusalem temple as the central shrine of the nation due to its close ties with the king and the royal claim that Yahweh was present there in a unique way. Some people began to travel to the temple rather than to the regional shrines to offer sacrifices or observe the major religious festivals.

Not until the time of Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.E.), however, did the kings of Judah act to bring the regional shrines under royal control, unless Chronicles' account of a similar action by King Asa a century earlier is deemed credible (2 Chronicles 14:2-5). According to the Hebrew Bible, Hezekiah ordered all of the high places to be closed and their altars, poles, and pillars destroyed (2 Kings 18:4; 2 Chronicles 31:1). The only reason given for these radical acts is the king's personal devotion to Yahweh. The book of Chronicles suggests that his actions were an effort to undo his father, Ahaz's, practice of promoting the worship of other gods (2 Chronicles 28:1-4, 22-27; 29:5-7). Many scholars doubt the story of Hezekiah closing the regional shrines, though others think that the action makes sense as part of a broader strategy

to consolidate the king's control over Judah as he was preparing to fight the Assyrians (2 Kings 18:7).

The next two kings of Judah also seem to have concluded that it was in their best interest to exert control over the regional shrines. Hezekiah's son Manasseh is reported to have rebuilt the high places as part of a program to encourage the worship of gods other than Yahweh (2 Kings 21:1-7, 11), while Manasseh's son Josiah destroyed these same shrines as part of a broader "pro-Yahweh" centralization campaign (2 Kings 23:5, 8-9, 13-15, 19-20; 2 Chronicles 34:3-7). Nothing is said about the policies of the kings who came after Josiah, but the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who lived through the end

of the monarchy, speak often about people worshipping at different sites across the land (Jeremiah 3:6-13; 17:1-3; Ezekiel 6:1-7; 16:20-24) and honoring deities other than Yahweh (Jeremiah 2:23-28; 7:17-18, 30-31; 11:9-13; Ezekiel 20:30-32; 22:1-5). These statements suggest that the kings after Josiah reverted to their ancestors' policy of toleration, though it is unclear whether they sought to control the shrines.

Less is known about relations between the royal shrines and other places of worship in the north. The Hebrew Bible states that Jeroboam founded other shrines besides the ones at Dan and Bethel, but the extent of any such activity is unknown. The books of Judges and Samuel indicate that there were shrines in the north prior to the coming of Jeroboam, so the later editors may have mistakenly attributed to Jeroboam the establishment of shrines that existed long before his time.

By the time of Amos and Hosea (eighth century B.C.E.), additional major shrines could be found at Gilgal, a site with a long history of Yahweh worship prior to Jeroboam's time (Joshua 4:19-24; 1 Samuel 7:16; 10:8; 13:8-10; 15:20-21), and Samaria, where Ahab is said to have built a temple to Baal (1 Kings 18:32; compare Hosea 8:6). Both prophets indicate that there were many other places of worship in Israel (Amos 2:8; 7:9; Hosea 4:13, 19; 8:11; 10:1), some of which were used to honor deities other than Yahweh (Hosea 2:8, 13; 4:12-13, 17; 8:4-6; 10:5-8).

The nature of the relationship among these various shrines is unknown.

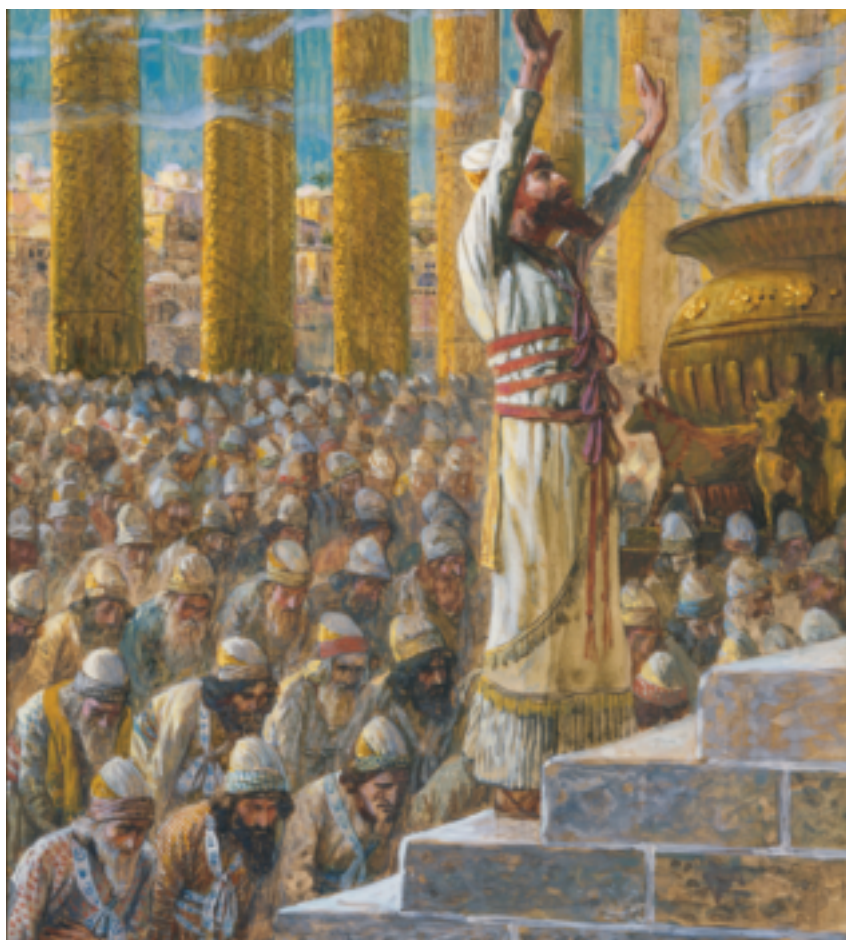


Fig. 28.7. James Tissot, *Solomon Dedicates the Temple at Jerusalem*

Since the major shrines appear to have been founded by the kings of Israel, we can assume that they continued to operate under royal patronage and control. In addition to maintaining the nation's relationship with the supernatural realm, these shrines would have served to reinforce and justify the authority of the king. The lesser shrines might have functioned independently of the royal shrines, like the ones in Judah during the same period, or they might have operated under the control of the kings. In the end, our knowledge about the state religion of Israel is simply too scanty to permit many solid judgments.

ONE GOD OR MANY?

In the eyes of the people who compiled the Hebrew Bible, the nations of Israel and Judah were judged by Yahweh because their kings failed to uphold and promote the worship of Yahweh at a single central shrine. In reality, the state religion of both kingdoms appears to have been broadly polytheistic for much of their history. In the southern kingdom, the practice emerges as early as King Solomon, who is said to have built shrines outside Jerusalem where his foreign wives could worship the gods of their homelands (1 Kings 11:7-8). The text says nothing about Solomon actively promoting the worship of foreign gods among his people, but his shrines were reportedly still in use at the time of King Josiah some three centuries later (2 Kings 23:13-14). Solomon's example was taken a step further by his grandson Abijam, who is said to have erected an image of the Canaanite goddess Asherah for his wife in Jerusalem (1 Kings 15:13).

For several years in the mid-ninth century B.C.E., Judah was ruled by kings (and one queen) who were allied by marriage with the kings of Israel. According to the Hebrew Bible, these rulers followed their Israelite relatives in worshipping the Canaanite god Baal (2 Kings 8:16-18, 25-27), even erecting a temple for Baal in Jerusalem (2 Kings 11:18). After these kings were deposed, their immediate successors, Joash and Amaziah, are accused by the author of Chronicles of shifting their allegiance from Yahweh to other deities later in their lives (2

Chronicles 24:17-19; 25:14-16). Nothing is said about any of these kings encouraging the worship of other gods besides Yahweh as a matter of policy, but at the very least the king's example was certain to influence others.

No such ambiguity clouds the stories of Kings Ahaz (742-727 B.C.E.) and Manasseh (687-642 B.C.E.), both of whom are said to have built shrines and altars to various deities throughout the land of Judah (2 Chronicles 28:25; 2 Kings 21:3). Apparently they also appointed priests to serve at these sites, since the author refers later to "the idolatrous priests whom the kings of Judah had ordained to make offerings in the high places at the cities of Judah and around Jerusalem . . . who made offerings to Baal, to the sun, the moon, the constellations, and all the host of the heavens" (2 Kings 23:5). All of these texts point to a conscious royal policy of promoting polytheistic forms of worship. A similar picture emerges from the books of the prophets, who repeatedly denounce the people of Judah for worshipping other gods during this period (see chapter 33).

The polytheistic character of the state religion of Judah in the latter decades of the monarchy is especially evident in the way the kings handled the Jerusalem temple. The book of Chronicles claims that Ahaz closed the Jerusalem temple and removed its furnishings, thus rendering it unusable (2 Chronicles 28:24). His grandson Manasseh is said to have built altars to "the host of heaven" in the courts of the temple and placed an image of Asherah inside its walls (2 Kings 21:4-7). The story of Josiah's reforms (640-609 B.C.E.) mentions a number of objects that had been placed in and around the temple for the worship of other gods, including implements that were sacred to Baal, Asherah, and "the host of heaven"; an image of Asherah; statues of horses and chariots that had been dedicated to the worship of the sun; and a series of altars probably used in the worship of various deities (2 Kings 23:4-12). In the latter days of the monarchy, the prophet Ezekiel has a vision in which he sees the leaders of Judah offering incense in front of statues and paintings of various unnamed deities inside the temple, as well as women and men worshipping the Mesopotamian fertility god Tammuz and the rising sun at the temple gates (Ezekiel 8:5-18).

If these narratives are even partially grounded in history, they testify to a state religion in Judah that was not only polytheistic to the core but also actively promoting the worship of other gods alongside Yahweh. The efforts of kings like Hezekiah and Josiah to purge Judah of polytheistic religion and centralize worship in the Jerusalem temple offered a revolutionary challenge to this system. We should not be surprised that their innovations did not last long after their deaths.

Less is known about religious developments in the north. Presumably the shrines that Jeroboam built at Dan and Bethel continued to center on the worship of Yahweh, though other gods may have been worshipped there as well. According to the Hebrew Bible, a major change occurred with the accession of King Ahab (874–853 B.C.E.), whose wife, Jezebel, was a Phoenician princess. Jezebel is portrayed as a fierce partisan of the Canaanite god Baal, the local equivalent of the Phoenician deity Melkart. Like Solomon in the south, Ahab built a temple for his wife's favored deity in Samaria, the new city that his father had built to serve as his capital. The book of Kings claims that Ahab worshipped Baal along with his wife (1 Kings 16:32–33), but the book also includes several scenes in which Ahab listens to the words of Yahweh or his followers (1 Kings 18:41–42; 20:13–22, 28–30; 21:1–4), and the names of his sons include shortened forms of the name of Yahweh. Most likely Ahab worshipped Baal alongside Yahweh, as did many other people in ancient Palestine.

The lengthy account of Ahab's reign focuses primarily on his interactions with the prophet Elijah, a man depicted as the champion of the "Yahweh-only" party. The book of Kings presents Jezebel as an evangelist for Baal who seeks to kill the prophets of Yahweh (1 Kings 18:3–4) while supporting 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah, Baal's female consort, with her own funds (1 Kings 18:19). Somewhat later, however, her husband, Ahab, is shown seeking advice from 400 prophets who speak in the name of Yahweh, not Baal (1 Kings 22:5–12). Similar stories are reported for Ahab's children, who seem to have worshipped both Baal and Yahweh. Gauging the historicity of these stories is difficult, but taken together they suggest that Baalism enjoyed the official support of the rulers of Israel during this period, while

the status of Yahwism was more precarious. How any of this might have affected worship at the local shrines is unknown, though it seems reasonable to think that those that operated under royal patronage would have elevated Baal to greater prominence without neglecting the worship of Yahweh.

According to the book of Kings, the temple, the priests, and all of the followers of Baal in the land of Israel were wiped out by Jehu, a general who overthrew Ahab's son and killed his entire family under the direction of Elisha, a prophet of Yahweh who had earlier served as Elijah's assistant (2 Kings 10:18–31). The story claims that Jehu called the followers of Baal to gather inside their temple and then commanded his soldiers to kill them all. The idea that all of the priests and worshippers of Baal could have been squeezed into a single building and slaughtered at one time is incredible in light of the author's earlier claim that only seven thousand worshippers of Yahweh remained in the entire land (1 Kings 19:18). Most likely any actions that Jehu took against the devotees of Baal would have been limited to the area around Samaria. This accords better with the author's later claim that Yahweh sent the Assyrians against Israel in part because they "worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal" (2 Kings 17:16). The narrator is also aware that the people of the north continue to worship a variety of gods in his own day (2 Kings 17:32–34). Together these passages suggest that the state religion of the northern kingdom of Israel included provisions for the worship of other deities alongside Yahweh throughout much of its history.

CONCLUSION

The people who crafted the Hebrew Bible wanted their readers to believe that Yahweh had established a centralized system of worship for his people as far back as the Exodus generation, when he ordered the construction of the Ark of the Covenant and the tabernacle. This system was to operate under the control of the priests (and later the kings) of Israel and was to revolve around a central shrine to which the people of Israel were to bring their sacrifices and offerings to Yahweh—first the tabernacle, then later the Jerusalem temple. Deviations from this system were to

be punished, since Yahweh would eventually inflict judgment upon his people if they were not corrected.

Unfortunately for the authors, some of the stories that they included in their collection undermine this thesis. The books of Judges and Samuel show the followers of Yahweh worshipping at a variety of sites around the land without criticism, and many of the “good kings” of Judah are said to have allowed such activities to continue during their reigns. The book of Kings indicates that many of the kings of Israel and Judah supported and even encouraged the worship of other gods besides Yahweh, making the state religion of both nations polytheistic for much of their history. Only rarely do we hear of anyone trying to create a centralized religious system that limited the worship of Yahweh to a single site and rejected other gods.

This idea, which appears to have been a minority position among the elites of Judah, was a genuine innovation in the religious life of ancient Palestine.

EXERCISE 74

Read the following passages and summarize what they say or imply about the way the kings of Judah viewed and used the Jerusalem temple in the years following its founding.

- 1 Kings 15:9-22
- 2 Kings 12:1-18
- 2 Kings 16:10-18
- 2 Kings 21:1-9
- 2 Kings 23:1-20



Fig. 29.1. A goat being ritually sacrificed in a contemporary Samaritan religious ceremony.