

Dr. Jonathan Greer, Archaeology and the Old Testament, Session 5, Cultural Contexts

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This is Dr. Jonathan Greer and his teaching on archeology in the Old Testament. This is session 5, Cultural Contexts.

Hello again. We're here with our final lecture and we're going to talk about cultural context. So, we'll look a little bit at the social structure, foodways, and also religion, and just scratching the surface, as has been the case with each of these lectures, hopefully piquing your interest for future studies. But when we think of the structure of ancient Israel, a common model is that of the patrimonial household, made popular by Larry Steger, David Sloan, Dan Master, and a number of others, that looks at the descriptions in the Bible and correlates them to certain patterns of society that we know in traditional societies and also a close correlation with the archeology, that sees at the smallest unit this house of the father, this bounded household where we have a central male figure and his children and then extended families.

We see some reflection of this even in the architecture, excavations of the architecture of ancient Israel. The next level up would be that of the clan, and on up to the tribe. And then, ultimately, at the top of the period would be the deity.

So, for ancient Israel, this is Yahweh. And you can see, even in the way it's depicted here with a slash mark here, the deity and the king both kind of precariously occupy the same position. And this gets at a little bit of why during the monarchy, if there's still, as many would suggest, trying to fit the monarchy into this patrimonial household model, what then becomes the relationship of the deity and the king? Especially to go back to our earlier discussion of image-bearing, if all humans are co-image bearers, where is this king? How does he situate between the social structures of the household and the divine? So, we see this tension playing out in scripture.

If we think about daily life for an ancient Israelite, what would their daily life have been like? It would have been very much subsistence living, where much of your day was consumed with thought and action about what you would eat, the gathering of food, the preparation of food, and preparing for times without food. Your first concern would be water. And you could collect rainwater in cisterns.

Here's a picture of a later cistern from the Hellenistic period that I took soon after a rainstorm, and you can see how green the water is. We might remember warnings, particularly in Jeremiah, comparing and contrasting living water rushing from a spring to cistern water that would become stagnant well into the year, and Jeremiah recalling the multiple sins of Israel, forsaking living water for cistern water. And it wasn't even great cistern water because it was cracked plaster, and it's leaking out.

So, you see some of these everyday images that come into the metaphors and language of scripture. But water, water, water. This is something we can't really appreciate in our modern contexts if we have access to turning a tap and water coming out.

But water had to be gathered from the cisterns or from the spring or from rivers or from wells, and it would have been very extensive. We also have wadis, seasonal areas of water flow that would be dry for most of the year and then rush with flash flood force during the rainy season, still to this day very dangerous. And we can learn archaeologically about water sources through surveys of the landscape and coordinating that with settlements and civilizations.

Produce that would have been grown consists of grapes and dates, wheat and barley, pomegranates, figs, and honey, it used to be thought, leading off of the commentary of the rabbis, that when the land is spoken of as the land of milk and honey, that it was referring to date honey. Well, now, with the discovery of industrial-level apiaries and beehives at Tel Rehov, we might suggest that maybe it is bees' honey as well. Perhaps it's both, but they certainly consumed honey.

Much of the non-animal plants, fruits, and vegetables that they consumed are accessible to us archaeologically through the study of microarchaeology, looking at those remains that we can't see with the naked eye but then that can be discovered or detected with the microscope. Livestock, sheep, goats, cattle, and also hunting. Hunting was very much a part of any ancient society, and the stark division between hunting and domestic livestock might have even been blurred, some have suggested.

But we find in the animal bone record representations predominantly of sheep, goats and cattle. Those are the three main animal bone types that we find. There are smaller numbers of wild game, particularly gazelles and deer, but we also have some limited evidence of pigs, as we've talked about, and also animal bones from the vehicles of the ancient world.

So, most travel was done on foot, but when you did have a vehicle or a portable trunk, more likely, the donkey was the preferred baggage carrier in this context, and camels were often used for long-distance trade when we got to the period of the first millennium. So here zooarchaeology helps us out, looking at the analysis of animal bones from archaeological sites. The primary ingredient of the diet would have been bread, bread from wheat and barley, and we know a lot about the process of getting from grain to bread through archaeology, ethnographic research, and also in the Bible, planting, harvesting, threshing, winnowing, sifting, and processing.

We've uncovered iron implements that would be the tips of plows, that would be either human or animal powered that would break up the ground. They would have

then sown the seed that would have been saved from the previous crop, and then, as the fields grew, we also have some archaeological remains of sickles that would have been wood with flint blades that had been implanted in them. Sometimes, bone was used as well.

And then this grain would have been gathered, or the stalks, and would have been run over by the threshing sledge. So you have a relatively modern picture there of what a threshing sledge looked like, where on the bottom of the sledge there would have been bits of rock or metal, other hard materials that would then be dragged over the stalks to separate the head from the chaff. And then the next stage would have been winnowing and sifting.

And here we find slabs of exposed bedrock in windy places where, with pitchfork-type implements, the mash of seed and stalk would have been thrown and then winnowed where the chaff would blow away, and the grain would then fall to the floor where it would then be gathered up to be processed with grindstones. We find many grindstones at archaeological excavations. The saddle stone for the bottom and the grindstone on top, and you see this is an Egyptian example of the process of grinding the grain into flour.

Then very early on in human civilization, it was realized that if you leave a little flour with water alone for a while, it would begin to ferment in this natural process using the yeast of the air, and so-called sourdough bread is just what bread is until the modern invention of yeast. And then, as it's mixed together, the flour and the water are allowed to rise and then baked in ovens that they have or taboos. So, this is the process of bread making still practiced in many traditional societies.

And again, you see metaphors for bread baking all throughout scripture. One of my favorite examples of that is from the Book of Amos, which seemingly has each process of, well, it has many harvesting as well, but each step in the bread making, speaking of the hot ovens and so on and so forth. But we see these kinds of metaphors that are rooted in the real world of ancient Israel that are employed throughout the biblical story.

Olives were another very important crop, and you can see some video footage that I took relatively recently of the way that it was harvested using a long stick and beating a tree, having a laid out cover or a blanket to collect the falling olives. It was used for cosmetic purposes to lubricate dry skin but also for fuel for the olive lamps that would have lit their evenings. Methods of oil production is something else that we can identify archaeologically.

We have evidence for the process of wine making as well, but most prominent archaeologically are examples of the process of pressing olives, where the olives would have been gathered and placed in the basin upon which a grindstone would

have been turned to create a mash of the olives that would have included the pits and the pulp, the seeds. And then this mash would have been gathered and placed in baskets and put upon a pressing stone. And you can see the groove stuck in it there.

And then weights would have been applied to the beam on the other end of the press that would have squished the baskets. And so, the various pressings that would squeeze out the oil that would run down the groove and be collected in a ceramic vessel. So, we find archaeological evidence of these wine presses all throughout the lands and some stylistic changes from period to period, but we find much evidence of this in ancient Israel.

Other technologies that would have been important to everyday life include pottery, where they would take the clay, mix in a variety of inclusions into the fabric of the pot before firing, and temper the clay in certain ways depending on what kinds of temperatures this finished pot would be exposed to. So, for instance, for cooking pots, they would often include a temper to make sure to ensure that the cooking pot could withstand being placed directly onto a fire. And so, they would use pottery for their cooking, for their storage, and for their eating, for consuming.

Textiles as well. We have archaeological evidence of textile production. What's left in the archaeological record, unlike pottery, which we find broken pieces of pottery in every bucket that's collected, but with textiles, in the generations gone by, the only remnant would have been loom weights that would have been suspending the vertical strands as part of the loom.

Now we can see through microarchaeology evidence of textiles that have been lost to the naked eye, and in some rare cases, we have textiles that are preserved in very arid conditions of the Jordan Valley and of the Negev. We also have some evidence of tanning and leather that was used in clothing and then in later periods for parchment as well. Construction would have taken place with wood and stone.

In fact, more stone than wood. Wood was a rarity, so most walls and structures would have been built with stone, and the wood would have been the beams to span that expanse. Metallurgy as well.

We have various techniques that were used and archaeological evidence of some of these metallurgic installations that can still be detected archaeologically, and including little prills, little bits of metal that can be picked out sometimes as smelting where the ore is extracted. Other times, we have melting installations where existing metal items are placed in a crucible to be melted down and reused. Finding metal implements archaeologically, we don't find them as frequently as one might think because these were endlessly recycled and reused.

One does not throw away a metal implement but rather melts it down for reuse. Another important aspect of ancient Israelite culture is that of religion. We get a picture of the Israelite religion in the practices described in the Bible, and we then turn to the archaeological record, and we find many resonances with what we find.

Now, we do find lots and lots of evidence that it was not Yahweh alone that they were worshipping, and some will point this out as evidence for some kind of polytheistic representation of ancient Israel. But one needs to remember, again reading the biblical text, that any kind of allegiance to Yahweh, let alone Yahweh alone, is certainly projected as the minority opinion. So, if one reads the Books of Kings or the Prophets, we realize that the people were, in fact, worshipping a number of deities and attaching them and incorporating them with their worship of Yahweh, which is, in fact, what we often find in the archaeological record.

So, I see that not as a dissonance but as a resonance with exactly the situation that the Bible is describing. We have some complexities, as I mentioned, with the biblical perspective. But we also have archaeological material that can help us understand how the Israelite religion was practiced.

Going from practice to belief is, of course, more complicated, but these implements that we have, the material remains and iconographic remains and even onomastic remains, names, can help us reconstruct a bit of the picture in these kingdoms, as an ethnographic parallel, again, where we can by analogy make comparisons between ancient peoples and more recent peoples who live in traditional societies. When we think of cult places, and I should specify what I mean by cult, sometimes when I say cult, people are thinking sectarians who are waiting for the UFOs to come or something like that. I'm speaking here purely as cult as the practice of religion, cult as the practice of religion.

So, if we're looking at cult installations, we're looking at places where religion was practiced in ancient Israel. In the identification of such, anthropologists have come up with a number of criteria that can be applied to help us isolate where we have places of worship. Some of them are quite obvious, any icons or images of a particular deity or inscriptions.

Others, we start seeing repeated patterns in material culture that might suggest some kind of ritual activity, a certain type of artifact that shows up in great quantities in one place, figurines that are buried in a certain place, or concentrations of animal bones in a pit along with other vessels for burning incense or images, etc. So, we use kind of a constellation of data to establish various cult places, and various worship centers in the ancient world in general, and here particularly in ancient Israel. They range from very small so-called cult corners, where we find small rooms, typically with benches, and we have incense burners or painted stands, sometimes images, and particularly unusual vessels.

Sometimes, they will be zoomorphic in the shape of animals, and other times, we will find even figurines. And so, we have these small installations, so-called cult corners, and then we also have, in a very few examples, we have larger temples, larger temples. We have a temple at Arad, Dan, and a new discovery of a temple at Motza.

There's evidence that a large altar stood at Be'er Sheva. And then there are some earlier sites from the Iron Age 1 that have been associated with the worship of ancient Israel. A debated one is on Mount Ebal, which does, to my mind, seem to be a shrine, but there are some complexities in the biblical tradition on text-critical grounds that we maybe should be looking on Gerizim if we're looking for the altar that described in the biblical texts.

So, it's hard to tell with Ebal, but I think there's good evidence that it is indeed a shrine. To whom should we attach that, its construction, that remains debated. The bull site is another exciting find that certainly shows evidence of cultic veneration, and a small bull that was found there that many have connected to worship that's described in the Bible that's associated with bovine imagery.

So, we know that the bull was a common symbol in the Canaanite religions and in many other religions of that time, and we see that being intersected within the story from Exodus 32 and 1 Kings 12, and particularly associated with northern religion in those contexts. At Tel Dan, as I've previously mentioned, here's a photograph from there where the Parks Authority has reconstructed the metal framework for what would be the largest altar of this four-horn style ever discovered anywhere in the land. You can see these are the horns, but the facts are we only found one of those horns used in secondary use, and so we're recreating that size based on the base of the altar.

But there are a number of important archaeological characteristics at that site that would suggest that, in fact, in my interpretation at least, we have the worship of Yahweh going on in this sanctuary. So, we have a correspondence of the animal bone remains that fit very well with prescriptions for sacrifice as we have them in the priestly materials of the Bible. Some of this was the subject for some of my dissertation research that noted that there was a high correspondence between right-sided portions with a space that was connected with priests as opposed to left-sided portions in the courtyard.

And then we remember from priestly prescriptions that the priests were given the right shoulder or the right thigh, depending on which text, and if we're reading the Greek or the Hebrew, a fascinating connection. And there were three or four other connections with the animal bones. There are also, as you'll see in a coming slide, some exciting artifacts that connect with biblical descriptions of the worship of Yahweh.

And in fact, there was a seal found with a name, a theophoric name, that contains the element of the divine name Yahweh. So, as we can put these pieces together, there's lots of evidence here that the God that was being worshipped at Tel Dan was in fact Yahweh, certainly in the 8th century and very likely for the 9th, and I would push that back even into that transition, though much of this archaeology is still being evaluated. There may be some reconfigurations of the architecture.

So, we'll have to wait and see. But this temple at Tel Motza is not far from Jerusalem, that's been dated to the 9th and 8th centuries BC, is also generating quite a lot of excitement and questions about how, being so close to Jerusalem, how does that relate to the Jerusalem temple? Speaking of the Jerusalem temple, or we might say the temple, the one we think of when we're talking about the biblical text, we have many complexities in trying to understand what it looked like, how it functioned, and the biggest one is that we have no material remains whatsoever. It was argued that there was a pomegranate, but that's been since questioned, and maybe a repurposed artifact and a forgery combined in one.

But we have very little evidence, if any, for the first temple, the so-called first temple of Solomon. And the biblical descriptions, remember, these are describing the temple at various places in history. They even mention renovations that took place at particular times.

So, the biblical traditions present a composite picture of what the temple looked like. Nevertheless, we have some amazing comparandus, some amazing archaeological comparative material that can give us lots of information of the types of things being described, from inset windows to movable colt stands to the iconography of cherubs. They weren't chubby babies from the Renaissance period but rather ferocious guardian beasts with human faces, lion bodies, and wings.

These are guardian beasts we have flanking the temple at Andara, which demonstrates many parallels with the description of Solomon's temple with side chambers, with a porch, with a hall, and with the Holy of Holies. So, we have many examples of iconographic motifs, architectural features, this so-called tripartite structure of progressing from a porch to a main hall to a Holy of Holies. We have some of this at Tel Dan as well.

Decorations that we know from ancient Near Eastern iconography, from rosettes to cherubs to palmets, recessed windows, and pomegranates, among others. We also have various colt stands that were used for incense or perhaps for bowls into which libations were poured or incense was burned, and even altar kits. So I'll give this example from Tel Dan that I mentioned before that was found in the Western Chambers.

So, this is a bird's eye view. And in a small room here in the Western Chambers next to a small altar of one by one meter, we find some very interesting implements. One is this beautiful bronze bowl.

The other is a pair of shovels. These two shovels that look identical were found, one on top of the other. A third type of long-handled shovel.

And we also had a sunken pot that was filled with burned animal remains. What's amazing about this concentration of artifacts is that when we look in biblical texts of what makes up a tabernacle or a temple altar kit, it has very specific elements. It has a blood bowl, has a pair, always has a pair, of de-ashing shovels, an incense shovel, an ash pot, and in some lists it has a fork.

So, in some earlier research, I associated this bowl with none other than the biblical blood bowl that would have caught the blood of a sacrificial animal for splashing against the altar. This pair of shovels, as the pair of shovels described, is always side by side with the bowl in the biblical text. Incense shovels, we know from later depictions of these that go all the way into the Roman and Byzantine periods, that they often contain a much larger surface for the burning of the incense.

And the ash pot, as I mentioned, we already had one in the biblical text. They're portable, seemingly, and made of metal. This one is ceramic.

I was talking to one of my friends that the only thing I didn't find was a fork. He was working on some similar material. Andrew Davis is his name now at Boston College.

And he said, did you go back and check the records? There was a long metal handle found on the threshold of this room. So, we might have even had the fork because what do you call a three-pronged fork with two prongs broken off? You call it a long metal handle. So maybe we have all of them.

In fact, not all of the lists in the biblical text have a fork. So, these and others suggest a strong correlation with, again, something from the Bible and archaeology. Another example is that we find all throughout ancient Israel and Judah so-called JPFs, Judahite or Judean pillar figurines, that depict a female and have sometimes been associated with the worship of Asherah as little goddess images.

Others have said no, no, no. Asherah is a late Bronze Age deity. We're reading back specifics into this.

Is Asherah even a deity at this time period? Or are there elements that are reminiscent of Asherah's worship without being actual images of her? Others would say these are prayers in clay or some kind of charm to aid women in the process of pregnancy and lactation. So, the verdict is still out. But the curious thing is that high

concentrations of these have been found in Jerusalem itself during the timeframes of some of the most faithful kings, from the biblical perspective, those of Hezekiah and Josiah.

But you get a sense of some of the material culture of ancient Israelite worship through finds such as these. Another piece of evidence that we can bring in is onomastic evidence, that is the names from this biblical time period. So, we have names in the Bible, and then we also have names that can be identified archaeologically.

So, here's the Hezekiah seal, and these are pictures of the Samaria ostraca, pieces of pottery that were used perhaps as essentially note paper, receipts, tracking shipments of olive oil dating to the 9th or perhaps the 8th century. But by looking at these names, what's particular in terms of the question of religion is that many of these names are theophoric names. That is, they contain an element of a deity's name in their name.

So, my name is Jonathan, Yo-Natan. Yo as a shortened form of Yahweh, Natan has given, so Yahweh has given. My name is a theophoric name.

We have theophoric names, and you've heard them. Yah is a shortened form of Yahweh. Jeremiah, Hezekiah, and Zechariah are theophoric names.

But we also have theophoric names with other deities, with Baal, with Hadad, et cetera. So, by tracking some of the onomastic evidence, we can suggest the deities that were worshipped in specific contexts. Some can speculate as far as the geographic and also chronological distribution, tracking the popularity of names as some correspondence to the deities worshipped in those contexts.

Now, it doesn't always work. I once had a Christian student named Muhammad. His parents, one was Christian, and one was Muslim.

So, it doesn't always correspond to the religion of the peoples. But in ancient contexts, particularly where deities were bound to particular ethnic groups and tied to a locale rather than in many modern contexts where one could choose a religion or a religious change, they say something as far as the big picture of the relevance of worship. Now, you do have examples in scripture where names are changed, and so on and so forth.

But it can be suggestive and helpful as far as the deities that were worshipped at particular times. Most helpful in many ways are particular inscriptions, especially lengthy ones. Now, we don't have too many, but two that have caused quite a lot of excitement, Khirbet al-Qom and Qintilat al-Jarud mention Yahweh and his Asherah.

And some have even suggested that the iconography depicted on the Qintilat al-Jarud pithos is supposed to be an illustration of Yahweh and his Asherah. It appears that the iconography and the inscription were done at different times, but maybe was it someone else filling in the gaps? Lots of debate about these things. And even, what does it mean, his Asherah? Because we don't typically have a pronominal suffix on a person's name, a deity's name no less.

So is his Asherah, is the Asherah an implement, a sacred tree, or some kind of image reminiscent of a female deity, but in fact has been appropriated to Yahweh worship? I've heard of some Christians who even have Christmas trees in December, where there's a reappropriation of what was formerly a pagan symbol that is then folded under a particular religious umbrella. So, I think this is maybe more complicated than we sometimes realize, this correspondence between icons and meaning, between worship, presence, and worship. So, we need to apply those same tools when we look at these ancient artifacts.

But then we also look in the biblical texts that do mention, and interestingly enough, almost always in the plural, the Baals and the Asherahs, both in plural. So there were certainly, and there was much worship and incorporation of these deities, of the peoples around them, very much folded into the worship of Yahweh in the Iron Age. We also have wonderful examples from iconography that can help us understand the religion of ancient Israel.

I'll give two examples here. This is an image from the Ahiram sarcophagus that some will associate with biblical Hiram, discovered in Byblos. And it shows the deceased king, indicated by the drooping lotus, carrying a bowl before an offering table.

But what I want to point out here, he's got his foot on a footstool and his throne is created by flanking cherubs, flanking cherubs. So, where have we heard of this? Well, in the description of Solomon's temple in the Holy of Holies, we have two cherubs that overshadow the ark. Some would suggest, I think rightly so, it is the form or function of some kind of throne.

The ark itself is referred to as a footstool. So, the takeaway there that we learn, this is in the sea of clarity that can be clarified by some of this iconography, is that what do we have in the Holy of Holies? We've got furniture. This is making a statement that is aniconic.

There's no image of the deity. There's rather a furniture upon which the invisible deity resides, enthroned above the cherubim. Another fascinating example is the Tanakh cult stand from the 9th century BC at Tanakh on the edge of the Jezreel Valley. It shows no inscription on this but certainly depicts religious iconography where you have a calf, some will say a horse, but I understand it as a calf along with

many others, with a sun disk that is winged and curls on the side that are probably to represent pillars.

Then a tree that's flanked by wild goats and lions. Up here, we have cherubs on the side. Next one down, we have an empty space with two cherubs.

And then on the bottom register we have a female figure with two lions. So, a number of scholars have suggested here that we have a depiction of Yahweh and some female deity, Asherah perhaps, or a later manifestation of a particular Asherah. And so, you have Yahweh depicted abstractly and iconically in the symbol of the sun.

And interestingly with Hezekiah, a faithful king described in the Bible, he also employed the sun disk as an image in his iconography. So, we have biblical texts, too, that associate Yahweh with the sun disk. So, here's Yahweh enthroned above a calf, which we've heard about in the Northern Kingdom.

The calf as a vehicle or a pedestal for the deity. Cherubs that are associated with Yahweh. And then the next register down, a sacred tree, goats, and lions.

These are all associated with female deities in general in the ancient Near East. So, some have suggested Yahweh and Asherah. And then an empty space with cherubs, Yahweh, with a female figure with lions again.

So, cherubs, cherubs, lions, lions. So, I would suggest Yahweh and Asherah, Yahweh and Asherah. We have here an example certainly of the blending of religious traditions regardless of the specific identification of these images.

The final example that we have, again just scratching the surface here, that can help us understand ancient Israelite religion and also culture more broadly is to look at ancient Near Eastern archaeology and texts outside of ancient Israel. So, we have other temples, other cultic paraphernalia, and extensive texts as well as ethnographic parallels. We can see similarities in the fact that they are practicing sacrifices, they are engaging in sacred feasting, a number of rituals that parallel biblical rituals, hymns, temples, priesthood, implements, and many, many similarities.

But also differences, many differences. Of course, the prime difference is the centrality of the object of worship, that being Yahweh, the personal God of ancient Israel. But it's also, to come full circle and to end on this, it's also an interesting distinction in the way that religion functions in relationship to the hierarchy of the monarchy.

So, in all of these other contexts, with very few exceptions, the high priest is often the king or they're working together in concert. There's an elevated view, both

politically and religiously, of this figure of the king. It's something very different in ancient Israelite religion and in ancient Israelite culture because the king of Israel rightly understood is none other than Yahweh himself.

So, we've seen through this story of ancient Israel that we've come back to where we started in Genesis 1. There's a tension, a contrast between the design of God's role in his relationship to humanity that ebbs and flows throughout the history of ancient Israel as they buck against this design. But that religion as the expression of the worship of Yahweh is to be to Yahweh and Yahweh alone, not to a political figure or a national ideology. So, this is something, I think, for those of us in faith context to think about, these days especially.

Because even though these things are long ago and we have to excavate them from layers of dust, they continue to be relevant and exciting in new ways.

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