

# The Cult reform in the Kingdom of Judah

Ze'ev Herzog

Since the discovery of the Arad Temple in Aharoni's excavations, forty five years ago, its interpretation has remained a heated issue of debate on the archaeological agenda. The history of research on the Arad Temple, coupled with the remains of the horned altar found at Tel Beer-sheba, is a fascinating case within the complex relationship between Archaeology and the Bible. At both sites the cultic structures were found demolished and their usage was not rehabilitated. This data is confronted with the biblical accounts on cult reforms conducted by King Hezekiah in late 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE and King Josiah in late 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Scholars of the Old Testament and Jewish History since the days of Wellhausen in late 19<sup>th</sup> century considered the account of Josiah's reform as historical event that designates the Deuteronomic approach. The version on the reform by Hezekiah was considered by many scholars as historically unreliable.

The current interpretation of the archaeological data at both sites of Arad and Beersheba indicates that the cult centers were dismantled one phase prior to their destruction associated with Sennacherib's campaign to Judah in 701 BCE. Thus the abolishment of cult in the Beer-sheba valley sites during the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE raises the possibility of correlating the archaeological finds with the biblical statements about demolition of *Bamot* (high places) and destruction of *Massebot* (cult stele) in Judah during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:4). Nevertheless scholars questioned these conclusions and suggested several alternative scenarios, all doubting the historicity of a cult reform in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, and its association with King Hezekiah (Na'aman 1995; Fried 2002; Uehlinger 2005; Edelman 2008).

In my presentation I will provide the main claims for and against the argument that cult remains at Arad and Tel Beer-sheba show evidence for an intentional abolishment, apparently by Hezekiah. This view was widely supported (Rainey 1994; Borowski 1995; Muennich 2004; Finkelstein and Silberman 2006; Herzog 2010).

Archaeology provides several important insights on the reality of cult practice in Judah. Differences in use of construction materials of the altars at both sites will be emphasized and explicate the lack of uniformity in the practice of cult. The fact that the reform of Hezekiah had political and economic aims, besides the cultic meaning, is self-evident. In Judah's centralized

government the economic, military and religious aspects of the state were combined and directed by the royal house.

The cult place at Arad was not rehabilitated after the demolition and the town at Beer-sheba was not rebuilt after Sennacherib's destruction. Whatever was the reason for the dismantling of the temple at Arad, no cult structure was erected there when the fortress was rebuilt in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Contrary to the older concept of Old testament scholars the cult reform of Hezekiah gains support from the archaeological material and the historicity of Josiah's cult reform should be placed in doubt.

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