UNIT II LIST OF DEITIES

Adrammelech
Amon
Anammelech
Artza
Asherah
Ashima
Ashtoreth
Baal
Baal Berith
Baal Peor
Baal Zafon
Baal Zevuv
Bel
Chemosh
Ciun
Cochav
Dagon
Gad
Hadad
Haman
Kos
Meni
Merodach
Milkom
Molech
Nebuchadnezzar
Nevo
Nechushtan
Nergal
Nisroch
Nivchaz
Rimmon
Siccuth
Succoth Benoth
Tammuz
Tartak
Terafim

Adrammelech (אַדְרַמֶּלֶךְ) was the name of a god worshipped by the Sepharvaim, whom the Assyrians resettled in Samaria after exiling the Kingdom of Israel (II Kgs. 17:31). Academia generally identifies this god with Adadmmelech (a form of the Syrian deity **HADAD**)[1] and its Sepharvaim worshippers as the inhabitants of ancient Sippar (a city along the Euphrates River, slightly north of Babylon).[2] The Bible pairs this god with **ANAMMELECH**, another Sepharvaic god.

The Adrammelech cult, like the **MOLECH** cult, involved child sacrifice. However, Nachmanides differentiates between the two by explaining that Molech worship simply required passing one's child through a fire, while Adrammelech worship consisted of completely burning the child.[3]

R. Saadia Gaon also mentions that this idol was associated with the constellational force of the ascending eagle (Aquila).[4]

Adrammelech's Form

- The Babylonian Talmud states that Adrammelech was shaped like a mule.[5] Maharsha explains that its worshippers believed that the best way to be successful in the world was through riches, so they deified the mule—the animal customarily used for bearing great burdens, which signify riches.[6]
- According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Adrammelech had the form of a peacock.[7]
- R. Saadia Gaon[8] and Rabbeinu Chananel (990–1053)[9] write that it had the form of a monkey.

Theophoric Appearance

The Assyrian king Sennacherib had a son named Adrammelech, who (together with his brother Sharezer) murdered his father while he worshipped in the temple of **NISROCH** (II Kgs. 19:37, Isa. 37:38, II Chron. 32:21). The Talmud explains that the brothers realized that their father wanted to offer them as sacrifices to Nisroch, so they preempted him by committing patricide.[10]

Amon (אָמוֹן), also known as Amun, was the chief Egyptian deity. It was originally worshipped as the local god of the Egyptian city No (later known as Thebes in Greek)[11]—which subsequently became the

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1 Driver 1958:19.

2 W. H. Ward, "Sippara," *Herbraica*, vol. 2:2 (The University of Chicago Press, 1886), pp. 79–86; and *DDD*, pp. 10–11.

3 Nachmanides to Lev. 18:21.

4 Ratzabi 1993:194.

5 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

6 Maharsha to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

7 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:2.

8 Ratzabi 1993:194.

9 Cited by Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 18:21.

10 TB *Sanhedrin* 96a. R. Aharon Marcus (Marcus 1973:169) notes that although the Greek historian Abydenus gives the murderer's name as Adramelus, that name is a Greek corruption of the name Adrammelech found in the Bible. Cuneiformic epigraphy gives the murderer's name as Arda-Mulissi, "servant of Mulissu," as Mulissu was the late Assyrian name for the Babylonian goddess Ninlil. On the basis of that claim, some scholars brazenly propose emending the name given in the Bible to Adrammeles; see *DDD*, p. 606; and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Y. Kamrat & S. D. Sperling (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Adrammelech."

11 Others, including Targum, Radak, and R. Yosef Kara (ad loc.), explain that Amon of No refers to the Egyptian metropolis Alexandria. Cohen 2017:154–155 finds difficulty in identifying

associated with the constellational force of the descending eagle (Lyra).[19]

Anammelech and Anat

Some scholars identify Anammelech with the Canaanite goddess Anat (ענת).[20] According to this view, worship of the ancient Canaanite goddess Anat in the Holy Land had long been eradicated; but since its cult had already spread eastwards, it later returned to the Holy Land in the form of Anammelech when the Assyrians imported the Sepharvaim to occupy Samaria.

Anat was the virgin war goddess mentioned multiple times in Ugaritic literature as BAAL's sister. She was also known in Ugaritic writings as "Queen of the Heaven," possibly the one mentioned in Jer. 7:18 and 44:15–30.[21]

Anat appears in the place name Bet Anat (בית ענת, House of Anat) found in Josh. 19:38 and Jud. 1:33, and some suppose that Anatot (Jeremiah's hometown, see Jer. 1:1) was also related to Anat. Albright[22] proposes that when the Bible names the judge Shamgar ben Anat (Jud. 3:31; 5:6), this means that he was from Bet Anat.[23]

Anammelech's Form

- The Babylonian Talmud[24] notes that the Anammelech idol was horse-shaped. Maharsha explains[25] that its worshippers believed that the best way to be successful in the world was through military might, so they deified the horse—the animal customarily used for chariots and cavalry—which signified military prowess.
- According to the Jerusalem Talmud, Anammelech was pheasant-shaped.[26]
- R. Saadia Gaon[27] and Rabbeinu Chananel[28] write that it was peacock-shaped.[29]

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The name Anammelech does not appear in the Bible or the archeological record. However, according to one traditional source, Abraham's nephew Kesed (Gen. 22:22)—understood by many to be the progenitor of the Chaldeans[30]—had a son named Anammelech.[31]

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19 Ratzabi 1993:194.

20 Van der Toorn 1992:93.

21 Ibid., 1992:101 argues that it is hardly conceivable that the "Queen of the Heavens" to which Jeremiah refers is Asherah or Ashtoreth, because the Bible generally mentions those deities by name and does not resort to such vague descriptions.

22 W.F. Albright, "The Evolution of the West-Semitic Divinity An-Anat-Attâ," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures, vol.* 41:2 (1925), p. 84.

23 H. Cohn, "Is the 'Queen of Heaven' in Jeremiah the Goddess Anat?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. 32:1 (2004). For more about Anat, see *DDD*, pp. 36–43. The Talmud (*Sotah* 34b and *Yoma* 10a) relates that the giant Ahiman, who lived in Hebron (Num. 13:22), was said to have built the city Anat.

24 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

25 To ibid.

26 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:2.

27 Ratzabi 1993:194.

28 Cited by Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 18:21.

29 J.D. Eisenstein (ed.), *Otzar Yisrael*, vol. 1 (New York, 1907), p. 154, suggests synchronizing these different views by explaining that Anammelech was an idol in the form of a centaur (half-man, half-horse) with wings.

30 See R.C. Klein, "Abraham's Chaldean Origins and the Chaldee Language," *The Seforim Blog* (December 30, 2014) [URL: http://seforim.blogspot.com/2014/12/abrahams-chaldean-origins-and-chaldee.html].

31 *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Tel Aviv, 1955), p. 58.

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31 *Sefer ha-Yashar* (Tel Aviv, 1955), p. 58.

Artza (ארצא) was the name of a god mentioned in the Bible. Zimri, the commander of half the Israelite chariot fleet, became King of Israel by assassinating his predecessor, Elah, king of Israel, while the latter was drunk at the House of Artza (I Kgs. 16:9). Targum notes that Artza was an idol.[32] Some explain that Artza was related to the word *eretz* (ארץ, land) and referred specifically to the worship of land cultivation, apparently associated with the sun (while sea-related endeavors were apparently associated with the moon).[33] However, Radak and Malbim explain that Artza was the name of a person, not an idol.

Asherah (אשרה) was the word for both a Canaanite fertility goddess and a ritual object used for idol worship. Some argue that Asherah was synonymous with **ASHTORETH**, with the former being the ritual symbol for the latter.[34] Bible critics originally denied the existence of a foreign goddess named Asherah, until the discovery of the texts at Ugarit.[35] In those texts, Asherah, known as Athirat,[36] was also called *rabat yamm* (רבת ים), which can be translated as either "Lady of the Sea," "Lady of the Day," or "Mistress of Yamm."[37] In other ancient civilizations, Asherah was called Ashirta or Ashertum.[38]

The Bible assumes a certain association between Asherah and **BAAL**, but does not precisely explain that link. The *Zohar*[39] identifies Baal worship with sun-worship and Asherah worship with moon-worship.[40] The *Zohar* also writes that Asherah was named after her mythological husband Ashur (see **MERODACH**). According to this view, for some unknown reasons, the name Baal became more prevalent than Ashur, so Asherah's husband was more commonly known as Baal.[41]

Asherah as a Ritual Object

While in some places the Bible seems to use the word Asherah as the name of a pagan goddess, in other places the Bible talks about "making"[42] or "planting"[43] an Asherah. This ostensibly refers to a cultic object, not a mythological goddess.

R. Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740–1814) explains that the word Asherah was derived from the word *yashar* (ישר, straight) and referred to a straight wooden tree/pole without any protruding branches. The ancient idolaters

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32 J. Brand, *Klei Zechuchit bi-Safrut ha-Talmud* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1965), p. 291, argues that even according to Targum, Artza was the person in charge of the idolatrous temple, not the deity itself.

33 *BB*, p. 29a.

34 See *Peirushei ha-Rav David Tzvi Hoffman, Devarim*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Nezach, 1959), pp. 152–154 and Barton 1891:82.

35 J. Day, "Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Northwest Semitic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 105:3 (1986), pp. 385–408.

36 The change from ש to ת is common when switching between Semitic languages (e.g., Hebrew and Aramaic).

37 J. Watkins, "Athirat: As found at Ras Shamra," *Studia Antiqua*, vol. 5:1 (2007), pp. 47–48.

38 For more about Asherah, see *DDD*, pp. 99–105.

39 *Bereishis* 49a.

40 R. Eliyahu Kramer of Vilna in *Biur ha-Gra* to II Chron. 14:4 explains that the Asherah cult deified the moon.

41 Marcus 1984:275. He also claims that the Hebrew word *asher* (אשר, that/because/when) is somehow related.

42 E.g., I Kgs. 14:15; 14:23; 16:33, II Kgs. 17:16; 21:3, and II Chon. 33:3.

43 Deut. 16:21.

believed that only such a tree was considered magnificent enough to be worthy of worship.[44]

Nachmanides explains that an Asherah was a tree planted to mark the entrance of an idolatrous temple and/or near a sacrificial altar for decorative purposes.[45] Similarly, Radak writes that Asherah refers to any tree that was revered,[46] or planted in honor of an entity that was worshipped.[47]

R. Yonah Ibn Janach (990–1050) writes that idolaters revered the Asherah trees, walked around them,[48] and used their leaves for medicine.[49] *Peirush ha-Rokeach* notes that the Asherah tree was used for telling the future.[50]

When Asherah appears as a ritual object, it does not necessarily denote the worship of a foreign deity. Gersonides supposes that one could theoretically erect an Asherah for Hashem, although such a practice is banned by the Torah.[51] The Torah forbids using an Asherah to worship Hashem because it is the way of the idolaters and if one adopts one of their practices, he might adopt more of them. Malbim uses this distinction to explain why Elijah felt that the Baal cult was worse than the Asherah cult.[52] However, R. Meir Simcha ha-Kohen of Dvinsk writes that only altars and single-stone altars can be erected for Hashem's sake (the former are sometimes permitted, while the latter are generally forbidden). An Asherah has no purpose whatsoever in worship of Hashem, and therefore must inherently represent a foreign deity.[53]

Planting and Building

Although an Asherah did not have to be of a particular species of tree,[54] the Mishnah[55] specifies that there were three types of Asherah trees in terms of their Halachic status:

1. A tree planted with idolatrous intentions. Benefit from such a tree is forbidden even before the tree is used for worship.
2. A tree trimmed or cut with idolatrous intentions. Benefit from such a tree is permitted except from the new foliage grown after it was trimmed.
3. A tree under which an image was placed for idolatrous purposes. Its Halachic status is subject to dispute: The anonymous Sages of the Mishnah forbid benefitting from it as long as the idolatrous image remains in place. However, R. Shimon disagrees and

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44 M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Yerios Shlomo* (Bene Barak, 2015), p. 191. See also *ha-Ksav ve-ha-Kabbalah* (to Deut. 16:21) who cites R. Pappenheim's explanation. R. Pappenheim again repeats this explanation in M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Cheshek Shlomo* (Shaalvim: Shlomo Aumann Institute, 2018), p. 554. Alternatively, he suggests there that Asherah refers to a group of trees planted in a *straight* line.

45 Nachmanides to Deut. 16:22.

46 *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. אשר).

47 R. David Pardo (1719–1792) describes seeing a strange tree in Jerusalem with split branches and a stone structure around it, which people told him was an ancient Asherah shrine (*Chasdei David* to Tosefta *Zavim* 1:10).

48 Ibn Ezra (to Isa. 66:17) also writes that they used to encircle the Asherah trees.

49 Berliner 1893:50.

50 Klugmann 2009c:190.

51 Gersonides to Deut. 16:21 and Deut. 16 Purpose #3.

52 Malbim to I Kgs. 16:31.

53 *Meshech Chochmah* to Deut. 12:3.

54 This is evident from the Mishnah (*Sukkah* 3:1–5), which mentions at least four different types of trees that could possibly be Asherahs: a palm, myrtle, willow, and citron.

55 *Avodah Zarah* 3:7.

> rules that only a tree which is worshipped can be forbidden, but a tree under which an idol is placed—but is never itself worshipped—is not forbidden.[56]

The Talmud cites the opinions of two Amoraic Sages as to how one can identify an Asherah tree. Rav says that any tree under which priests sat and did not taste its fruits could be assumed to be an Asherah tree.[57] Shmuel says that even if the priests simply said that the fruits were reserved for brewing beer in honor of an idolatrous temple, the tree should be considered an Asherah. The Talmud concludes that the law follows Shmuel's opinion.[58]

just Asherah and Hashem

Archeological findings at Kuntillet Ajrud (in the northeastern quadrant of the Sinai Peninsula) unearthed what the idolators portrayed as a "relationship" between Hashem and the goddess Asherah. Experts contend that this site was built by Jews of the Kingdom of Israel in King Jehu's time, and served either as a military outpost or a religious shrine.[59] One inscription at the site reads in Hebrew, "I blessed you to Hashem of Samaria[60] and His Asherah" (ברכת אתכם לי-ה-ו-ה שמרן ולאשרתה).

In this context, the term "His Asherah" is

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56 Rashi (to TB *Avodah Zarah* 42a) writes that every Asherah was a tree and clarifies elsewhere (Ex. 34:13 and Deut. 12:3) that it was specifically a tree that was worshipped. In this, it seems that Rashi follows R. Shimon's opinion that a tree can only become forbidden as an Asherah if it was worshiped. Maimonides, in his commentary to the Mishnah (ad loc.), rules in accordance with the anonymous sages that a tree can be forbidden as an Asherah even if it was not actually worshipped. However, elsewhere Maimonides (in Laws of *Avodah Zarah* 8:3–4) rules that a tree is not considered an Asherah unless it was worshipped. See *Kesef Mishnah* ad loc. for a possible resolution.

57 *Sefer ha-ha-Shlamah* and several manuscripts of the Talmud (Munich 95, New York JTS Rab. 15, and Paris Heb. 1.337) record a variant reading in which Rav said that if the priests *watch* the tree and refrain from tasting its fruits, it is an Asherah.

58 TB *Avodah Zarah* 48a.

59 Another possible appearance of Asherah alongside Hashem is the Khirbet el-Qom (in the Kingdom of Judah's territory) inscription which, according to some readings, invokes the name of Hashem and of Asherah to bless one Uriayhu. See Z. Zevit, "The Khirbet el-Qôm Inscription Mentioning a Goddess," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, vol. 255 (1984), pp. 39–47; and J. M. Hadley, "The Khirbet el-Qom Inscription," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 37:1 (1987), pp. 50–62.

60 We can argue that this inscription referred to "Hashem of Samaria" in order to differentiate between Hashem as worshipped in the kingdom of Israel (whose capital city was Samaria), and Hashem as worshipped in the kingdom of Judah. The kingdom of Israel tended towards deviance/idolatrous syncretism and might well have partnered Him with the Canaanite goddess Asherah, while at that time the kingdom of Judah largely adhered to traditional monotheistic worship of Hashem. In other words, the pairing of Hashem with Asherah may reflect a a deviant cult's unorthodox form of Judaism—a suggestion mentioned, but unduly rejected outright by C.A. Rollston, "The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence," *Stone-Campbell Journal*, vol. 6 (2003), pp. 108–109.
However, another inscription at that site refers to God as "Hashem of Teman," and this phenomenon begs an explanation of its own. We may posit that the word *teman* (תימן) in this context means "south" as it does in many places in the Bible. This allows us to explain that "Hashem of Teman" refers to Hashem as worshipped in the southern kingdom of Judah.

ambiguous,[61] as some scholars explain it should not be taken as the proper name of a deity, but as a reference to the cultic tree known in the Bible as Asherah. In this case it seems to have been erected "for Hashem," not for a foreign goddess.

However, others explain that it refers to the Canaanite goddess Asherah and the idolatrous belief that she served as Hashem's wife/consort. These idolatrous Jews may have conflated mythological renderings of Baal with Jewish theology, confusing the One Hashem with the Baal. However, this explanation is somewhat problematic because according to Hebrew grammar, the possessive suffix, which renders the phrase "*His* Asherah," cannot be appended to a proper name.[62]

Theophoric Appearances

Neither in the Bible nor in the archeological record has Asherah ever been used as a theophoric element in a Jew's name, nor was the goddess's name used in personal names at Ugarit.[63] Nonetheless, there is a Canaanite example of such usage in the name Abdu-Ashirta (lit., "Servant of Asherah"), which appears in the Amarna Letters as the name of an Amorite king.[64]

Ashima (אֲשִׁימָא) was an idol brought to Samaria by the people of the Syrian city Hamath who were imported by the Assyrians (II Kgs. 17:30). R. Saadia Gaon writes that this idol was associated with the astral force Mars.[65]

Some explain that Ashima was the god Ashim worshipped by the Arameans (as evident from the Elephantine Papyri).[66] Kohut theorizes that Ashima was related to the Zoroastrian demon of anger Aeshma (who was perhaps based on the Jewish tradition of Ashmedai, king of the demons).[67] The Zoroastrian deity Asman (god of the sky) is also phonetically similar to Ashima. Others identify Ashima with **ASHTORETH**,

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61 Some argue that the word "Asherah" simply means "wife." They explain that the Semitic root ASR (אשר) sometimes refers to the verb of "walking after" or "following" another. The Bible, as well as the ancient world in general, understands that the duty of a faithful wife is to "walk behind" or "follow" her husband. Thus, they explain that *Asherah* literally means "[She] who walks behind [her husband]" which essentially means "a wife." Thus, *Asherah* as both the name of a goddess and the ritual object associated with it are borrowed meanings, while the word itself is a common noun meaning "wife." This approach explains the Kuntillet Ajrud inscription as referring to Hashem and some other feminine figure that Jewish idolaters coupled with Him, and need not necessarily recall the Asherah cult. See B. Margalit, "The Meaning and Significance of Asherah," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 40:3 (1990), pp. 264–286. Sommer 2009:156–159; 266 presents archeological evidence for Jewish worship of Asherah alongside Hashem in the form of a cult stand found at the site of ancient Ta'anakh (a town mentioned in Jud. 1:27 and I Kgs. 4:12). That artifact purportedly pictures Hashem and Asherah together. However, other scholars interpret the image as depicting the Baal, not Hashem.

62 See J.A. Emerton, "'Yahweh and His Asherah': The Goddess or Her Symbol?" *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 49:3 (1999), pp. 315–337, for an in-depth analysis of these two views. A detailed summary of all the discussion on this matter is found in R. Thomas, "The Meaning of *asherah* in Hebrew Inscriptions," *Semitica*, vol. 59 (2017), pp. 109–169.

63 See J.M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 79–80.

64 *ANETS*, p.483–484.

65 Ratzabi 1993:194.

66 See Keil 1989:700 and Van der Toorn 1992:86; 91.

67 A. Kohut, *ha-Aruch ha-Shaleim*, vol. 1 (Vienna, 1878), pp. 317–318.

or with Tashmetu, the Babylonian goddess mentioned in ancient inscriptions found at the Arabian oasis Tayma.[68]

Ashima's Form

The Talmud notes that this idol was made in the form of a *barcha karcha* (ברחא קרחא),[69] which literally means a "bald sheep."

- Rashi explains that this means a goat, which generally does not have as much wool as a sheep.[70]
- R. Meir Abulafia explains that "bald sheep" refers to a specific type of goat which does not have any hair at all.[71]
- The Jerusalem Talmud explains that Ashima was a ram.[72]

Other commentators give other descriptions of the Ashima idol:

- R. Saadia Gaon[73] and Rabbeinu Chananel[74] mention a view that identifies Ashima with a cat.
- R. Eliyahu ha-Bachur (1469–1549) claims that the Ashima idol was made in a monkey's form.[75] However, R. Yaakov Emden (1697–1776)[76] points out that this view is contrary to that of the Talmud, quoted above.

Ashima Worshippers in the Talmud

Ibn Ezra[77] writes that the Cutheans[78] reworded the opening verse of the Bible to read, "In the beginning, Ashima created" instead of *In the beginning, Hashem created* (Gen. 1:1).[79]

The Talmud rules that the obligation of standing for one's elders does not apply to a *zaken ashmai* (זקן אשמאי, old ignoramus).[80] R. Eliyahu ha-Bachur writes that this derogatory term refers to the Ashima idol and its followers.[81]

R. Reuven Margolis (1889–1971) explains why the Talmud specifically notes that one is not obligated to respect an elderly Ashima

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68 *DDD*, p. 105.

69 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

70 Rashi to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b and to II Kgs. 17:30.

71 *Yad Ramah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

72 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:2. This explanation is also cited by Rabbeinu Chananel in his commentary to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b, printed by R.E. Horowitz in *Hadarom*, vol. 44 (Rabbinic Council of America, 1976), p. 62. Interestingly, R. Reuven Margolis notes (*Margolios ha-Yam* to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b §16) that elsewhere Rashi (to TB *Shabbos* 18b) writes that *barcha* means a large ram.

73 Ratzabi 1993:194.

74 Cited by Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 18:21.

75 *Sefer ha-Tishbi* (Bene Barak: Machon HaRav Matzliach, 2005), p. 29.

76 In his commentary *Ezer Ohr* printed in *Sefer ha-Tishbi* (Bene Barak: Machon HaRav Matzliach, 2005), pp. 29–30.

77 Ibn Ezra writes this in his introduction to the Book of Esther, also cited by Rabbeinu Bachya (Chavel 1970:331).

78 As mentioned in Unit I (Chap 5.25), the Cutheans worshipped the image of a dove. See *DDD*, p. 263, for the connection between Ashima and doves.

79 Samaritan apologists claim that the Cutheans did not *replace* Hashem's name with Ashima. Rather, they simply imitated the Jewish practice of not verbalizing the Tetragrammaton, instead pronouncing it as *Hashem*. Likewise, the Samaritans allegedly replaced His name with the word *shema* (שמא, name). See W. Brindle, "The Origins and History of the Samaritans," *Grace Theological Journal*, vol. 5:1 (1984), p. 53.

80 TB *Kiddushin* 32b.

81 *Sefer ha-Tishbi* (Bene Barak: Machon HaRav Matzliach, 2005), p. 29.

worshipper. Because the Cutheans replaced Hashem's name in their Bible with the name Ashima, Ashima worship came to symbolize the polar opposite of worship of Hashem. Such a heinous idol worshipper does not deserve the honor due to elders. The Talmud mentions elderly Ashima worshippers in order to illustrate the stark contrast between them and the elderly of the Jews.[82]

Ashtoreth (עַשְׁתֹּרֶת or עַשְׁתָּרוֹת), known in Greek as Astarte, was a fertility goddess sometimes viewed as a war goddess. Its cultural center was in Phoenician Sidon, but she was worshipped under different names, including the Sumerian Inanna, Babylonian Ishtar/Ishchara,[83] and later as the Greek Aphrodite/April,[84] Roman Venus, and Germanic Eostre.[85] In Canaanite mythology, Ashtoreth was married to her brother **Baal**, and, similarly, in Assyrian mythology, she was known as Bilit and was wed to the male god **Bel**.[86] Ashtoreth worship even spread to the coastal Philistines (see I Sam. 31:10).[87]

Ashtoreth was married to her brother Baal in Canaanite mythology, **Bel** in Assyrian mythology,[88] and **Tammuz** in Babylonian mythology. Many sources associate this goddess with ritual prostitution,[89] although other sources suggest that Ashtoreth was viewed as a virgin.[90]

Some understand that the Phoenician goddess Tanith was identical with Ashtoreth.[91] Others identify Ashtoreth with the Greek Juno, thus associating this goddess with the moon rather than Venus.[92] R. Menashe Ben-Israel points out that the word *astres*, meaning "planets," is derived from the name Ashtoreth.[93] A male version of Ashtoreth was found in the Mesha Stele, which invoked a deity named Ashtar-Chemosh, apparently associated with the Moabite god **Chemosh**. The exact nature of the relationship between Ashtoreth

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82 *Kav Bisamim* (Lemberg, 1913), 18b–19a.

83 See *DDD*, p. 450.

84 See S. L. Budin, "A Reconsideration of the Aphrodite-Ashtart Syncretism," *Numen*, vol. 51:2 (2004), pp. 95–145.

85 Greenfield 1993:57 mentions that scholars contend that the goddesses Ashtoreth and Anat (see **Anammelech**) were fused together to make up the Syrian goddess Attargatis, mentioned in Greek writings (see also *DDD*, pp. 114–116).

86 Barton 1891:76–77.

87 See *DDD*, pp. 109–114; 452–455; and *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 2, P. Merlo (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/New York 2009), s.v. "Astarte, Ashtoreth."

88 Barton 1891:76–77.

89 Ibid., 1891:79–81.

90 In his epic poem *Paradise Lost*, John Milton describes the Phoenician goddess Ashtoreth using imagery borrowed from Roman Catholic depictions of the "Virgin" Mary. The Protestant Milton thus meant to criticize the Catholics for their devotion to Mary—whose worship he deemed idolatrous—by equating it with the ancient worship of virgin goddesses. See J.B. Broadbent (ed.), *Paradise Lost, Books I-II* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 31.

91 G. H. Skipwith, "Ashtoreth, the Goddess of the Zidonians," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 18:4 (1906), pp. 715–738.

92 *BB*, p. 41a.

93 Lindo 1842:160. In fact, the English word "star" and its equivalents in most Indo-European languages are derived from the Babylonian form of Ashtoreth, namely Ishtar. See Y. Keil and S. Hacohen (eds.), *Daas Mikra, Esther* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1990), p. 14.

and **ASHERAH** is not entirely clear.[94] Some argue that Asherah was the ritual symbol for Ashtoreth.[95]

Ashtoreth's Form

The Bible uses the word *ashtaroth* (עשתרות) in association with the fecundity of sheep (Deut. 7:13; 28:4; 18; 51). Based on that association, Rabbeinu Bachya[96] and R. Menachem Tziyyoni[97] write that Ashtoreth was an idol made in a sheep's form. More specifically, Radak writes that the idol was shaped as a female sheep.[98] Although academia typically rejects the idea that Ashtoreth was originally a sheep goddess, archeological findings do show that sheep were sacred to the Ashtoreth cult of Cyprus and North Africa.[99]

Rashi,[100] based on *Sifrei*, understands that the word *ashtoreth* (besides being the name of a deity) refers to something hard and rocky. With this view, Rashi justifies associating Ashtoreth with horns in the place name Ashteroth-Karnayim (see below) because horns are hard and pointed. Indeed, Ashtoreth was commonly depicted in drawings and figurines as a long-haired woman with overemphasized mammary glands and/or horns.

However, Nachmanides[101] disagrees with Rashi's view[102] and argues that *ashtoreth* does not inherently refer to something hard and rocky. Rather, it refers to a pair of mountains which collectively resembled horns, inhabited by horned mountain goats and ibices.

Theophoric Appearances

Ashtoreth or derivations thereof appear in proper names in and out of the Bible:

The Bible (Gen. 14:5) mentions a place named Ashteroth-Karnayim (Horns of Ashtoreth, עשתרת-קרנים), a Rephaite principality in the trans-Jordan region. This place is sometimes abbreviated as Ashtaroth (Deut. 1:4, Josh. 9:10; 12:4; 13:12; 13:21, and I Chron. 6:56). Its name seems to recall the goddess Ashtoreth and has been identified by epigraphologists in several other ancient texts.[103]

Esther (אסתר), the main protagonist of the Book which bears her name, is purported to have been named after the Babylonian

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94 Doyle 1996:67 notes an interesting phenomenon in the Bible's way of referring to Asherah/Ashtoreth in juxtaposition to Baal/the Baalim. When they are mentioned together, Baal in the singular form is always mentioned with Asherah (in singular form); and the Baalim in plural form is juxtaposed to Ashtaroth (in plural form). The only exception to this rule is Jud. 2:13, where Baal is mentioned in the singular form, but juxtaposed with Ashtaroth (in plural). See also Jud. 3:7, which mentions Baalim and is the only place to have the name Asherah in the plural form (although the Peshitta and the Vulgate there "correct" the passage to refer to Ashtaroth).

95 See *Peirushei ha-Rav David Tzvi Hoffman, Devarim*, vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Nezach, 1959), pp. 152–154, and Barton 1891:82.

96 Rabbeinu Bachya to Deut. 1:4.

97 *Tziyyoni* to Lev. 17:14.

98 Radak to Jud. 2:13 and *Sefer ha-Shorashim* s.v. עשתר. An alternate way of reading Radak is that the idol was shaped like a female sheep's genitalia.

99 Barton 1891:75.

100 Rashi to Deut. 1:4.

101 Nachmanides to Deut. 1:4, see also Rabbeinu Bachya to Deut. 1:2.

102 See *Mizrachi* ad loc.

103 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, M. Avi-Yonah (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007) s.v. "Ashtaroth, Ashteroth-Karnaim, Karnaim."

goddess Ishtar.[104] This sheds light on the Talmud's comment that Esther had a greenish complexion,[105] because the planet Venus was perceived in the ancient world as having a greenish hue. Furthermore, this accounts for the attribution of Psalms 22—which begins, *For the conductor on the Morning Star*—to Esther; because Venus, the planet associated with Ashtoreth, was also known as the Morning Star.[106]

The Bible (Gen. 6:1–4) relates a cryptic story traditionally interpreted as referring to a pair of angels who descended to Earth and ended up gratifying themselves with human women. One maiden, in particular, was accosted and propositioned by these fallen angels but withstood the temptation. As reward for her virtuous chaste, she was eternally angelified as a celestial entity. Some versions of this tale give the maiden's name as Istahr (איסטהר)[107] and identify the celestial entity with which she was associated as the Mazal Istahr, or Venus.[108]

Additionally, Josephus cites Menander of Ephesus, a historian who wrote about Tyrian history, who records four Tyrian kings whose names bear allusions to Ashtoreth: Abdastartus, Astartus, and Astarymus.[109]

Modern-Day Manifestations

As the goddess of fertility, Ishtar's symbols included rabbits and eggs. In Babylonian mythology, she was married to Tammuz. The rituals for worshipping Ishtar involved the yearly mourning of Tammuz's "death,"

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104 According to the Tannaic sage R. Nechemiah, cited by the Talmud (TB *Megillah* 13a), her real name was Hadassah (Est. 2:7), but the Bible calls her Esther because the gentiles named her after *Istahr* (אסתהר). Rashi and *Sefer ha-Aruch* (s.v. סהר) explain that *Istahr* derives from the Aramaic word *sihara* (סיהרא, moon), as she was equated with the moon in terms of her beauty. However, R. Yaakov Emden (*Hagahos Yaavetz* to TB *Megillah* 13a) notes that elsewhere the word *Istahr* does not refer to the moon. Job 31:26 refers to two luminaries, one unnamed source of light, and the moon. Targum (ad loc.) explains that the first source of light is *Istahr*, thereby disagreeing with Rashi's view that *Istahr* is the moon (though Rashi and Ibn Ezra there explain that the first source of light mentioned there was the sun). In light of Targum's position that *Istahr* is not the moon, R. Yaakov Emden explains that *Istahr* refers to Venus. In fact, an alternate version of R. Nechemiah's explanation cited in *Yalkut Shimoni* (Est. §1053) explicitly reads that she was called Esther by idolaters who named her after Venus, which they called *Istahr*.

R. Chaim Berlin (1832–1912) explains that Esther was called so because she was as beautiful as the maiden Istahr who refused the sexual advances of the fallen angels; see Y. Tawshunsky, *Pedut Yaakov-Esther* (Vilna, 1911), p. 43.

105 TB *Megillah* 13a.

106 See Radak to Ps. 22:1.

107 *Yalkut Shimoni* (Gen. §44) and Yassif 2001:116. In the version of this story recorded by R. Moshe ha-Darshan (an 11th-century French exegete), her name is Estera (אסטירה); see H. Albeck (ed.), *Bereishis Rabbasi* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1940), p. 29. According to Nachmanides (to Gen. 4:22), her name was Naamah (cf. *Zohar Bereishis* 55a, which tells the story of a woman named Naamah who *did* accede to the angels' desires).

108 See Stahl 2005:155 and Klugmann 2009a:99. According to *Yalkut Shimoni* (ad loc.), she was set into the constellation *kimah* (Pleiades), while according to other Tosafistic traditions, she became the zodiacal constellation *besulah* (Virgo); see Y. Gellis (ed.), *Tosafos ha-Shalem*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1982), p. 184.

109 *Against Apion*, Book I, §18.

followed by fertility rites celebrating its "resurrection."

The Catholic Church later Christianized these practices, giving them new credence as part of the Easter—a word derived from the name Ishtar—celebrations. That holiday begins with a forty-day period of mourning (over the death of Jesus) known as Lent, and then gives way to a festival (marking Jesus' mythological resurrection) customarily celebrated with the imagery of eggs and rabbits during the month of April. Moreover, just as Ishtar was associated with the morning star, so is Easter associated with special sunrise services.[110] While Easter is now considered a Christian holiday, it is really a pagan practice overlaid with a veneer of Christian references.

Baal (בַּעַל) was the chief Canaanite god. He was the god of thunder and rain, and due to the agricultural significance of rain, the god of fertility and fecundity. Baal was worshipped by other ancient cultures under different names, including the Ugaritic **HADAD**[111] and Babylonian **BEL/MERODACH**. It was later incarnated as the Greek Zeus, Roman Jupiter, and Germanic Donar/Thor.

The name Baal literally means "master" or "owner" (and in the context of a marriage, "husband"). Some argue that because Baal means "master" and *adon* (אדון) also means "master," Baal and the Greek god Adonis were the same deity.[112] R. Shmuel Laniado explains that Baal was derived from the word *beilah* (בעילה, sexual intercourse) and indicates that Baal was the "male" partner to the "female" idols **ASHTORETH** and/or **ASHERAH**.[113] Elsewhere, R. Laniado writes that the Baal/Asherah cult represented Satanic worship, with Baal representing the Satan and Asherah representing his consort Lilith.[114]

Baal Represents the Male Force

The Jerusalem Talmud[115] explains that the Baal idol was phallic-shaped and as small as a bean.[116] The Talmud adduces this from a scriptural passage associating Baal with the limb of circumcision, *The Children of Israel returned [to their old habit] and went astray after the Baalim, and they set Baal Berith* (בעל ברית, *baal bris*) *as a god for themselves* (Jud. 8:33). The word *bris* (ברית, covenant) in this context recalls the concept of *bris milah* (ברית מילה, circumcision); solidifying the Talmudic view that Baal was associated with the male reproductive member (see **BAAL BERITH**). R. Samson Raphael Hirsch notes that the very

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110 See P. Neal, *Should Christians Celebrate Easter?* (Christian Biblical Church of God, 2015), pp. 1–13.

111 See *DDD*, pp. 132–138.

112 *BB*, p. 29b.

113 Batzri 1995:28.

114 Ibid., 1988:633.

115 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:6.

116 *Sefer ha-Aruch* (s.v. אפון) explains the Talmudic passage thusly. However, in a parallel passage, the Jerusalem Talmud (JT *Shabbos* 9:1) replaces the word כאפון (like a bean) with נאפון (philanderer), meaning that Baal was phallic and was like a philanderer. R. David Frankel (*Korban ha-Eida* to JT *Shabbos* 9:1) explains that this means that Baal's form was phallic and erect, and compares the innuendo associated with Baal to the *mifletzes* (מפלצת, wooden phallic device) of Rehoboam's wife Maacah (see Chap 6.4).
R. Akiva Eiger (in his glosses to JT *Shabbos* 9:1) rejects Frankel's explanation and he, as well as R. Menachem of Lonzano (in his glosses to JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:6), argue that this second reading is mistaken. See also S. Lieberman (ed.), *ha-Yerushalmi ki-Fshuta* (Jerusalem, 1925), p. 159.

word *phallus* in Latin was derived from the Semitic word *baal*, as the *b-* and *ph/f* sounds are often interchangeable.[117]

Jeremiah admonishes the Jews by saying, *For the number of your cities was [equal to the number of] your gods, O Judah, and like the number of streets in Jerusalem have you placed altars to the embarrassment [and] altars to sacrifice to the Baal* (Jer. 11:13). Malbim explains that the two types of altars mentioned here was a pair of male and female idols that were worshipped in tandem. *The Baal* was a "male" idol and *the embarrassment* was a "female" idol (possibly Asherah) with its nakedness exposed.

The Baal Cycle

We can safely assume that the mythology of the Baal cult in Ahab's time somewhat resembled that of the Ugaritic texts because Jezebel imported her cult from basically the same area (although the texts at Ugarit apparently predate the Jewish Kingdoms in the Holy Land). The texts of the Canaanite cult found at Ugarit record different stories about Baal, known collectively by the *Baal Cycle*.

One episode of the *Baal Cycle* told of the chief god El appointing his son Yamm/Nahar, the god of the sea, as heir-apparent, much to the chagrin of the storm-god Baal (son of DAGON or El) who believed that he should be enthroned. Later, in a jealous rage, Baal killed Yamm's royal messengers who had announced at the gods' council that El had ruled that Baal should remain subservient to Yamm. Baal's rage was subdued by his sisters/consorts Anat and Athirat,[118] who reprimanded him for killing Yamm's royal couriers. After vilipending Yamm, Baal was finally encouraged by Kothar and Hasis to take action and destroy his adversary. They supplied Baal with special weapons which eventually helped him defeat Yamm.[119]

Another episode of the *Baal Cycle* described the military prowess of the goddess Anat and her reaction to being summoned before her brother/husband Baal.[120] When she finally came before him, Baal told her that all the other gods had palaces built in their honor, but he did not. Consequently, Baal asked Anat to beseech her father El and ask him to grant Baal a palace. Anat agreed and forwarded the wish to her father El, and eventually Baal's new palace was inaugurated.

A third episode in the *Baal Cycle* told of the struggle between Baal and his arch-rival Mot. In this story, Baal was married to Pidray (daughter of Light) and Taliy (daughter of Shower), but preferred to show his affection to a heifer which he impregnated.[121]

Baal and Asherah

An archeological fragment containing part of a Hittite myth reveals another aspect of Canaanite immorality. In this story, Baal was accosted by Asherah (El's wife), who quite boldly propositioned him to commit adultery with her. Not knowing what to do, Baal sought El's advice. El commanded Baal to cohabit with his wife and "humble" her. Baal cohabited with Asherah and "humbled" her by telling her that he had slain seventy-seven/eighty-eight of her sons. After some lacunae in the text, the story picks up with Asherah appealing to El, who told her to

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117 R. Hirsch in his commentary to Num. 23:13–14.

118 *ANETS*, pp. 17–18 records an ancient Egyptian myth in which Yamm was married to Ashtoreth.

119 Wyatt 2002:39–69.

120 Some scholars contest a marital relationship between Anat and Baal (see Doyle 1996:31–32). However, *ANETS*, p. 142, contains the fragment of a story involving Baal and Anat with a graphic description of intercourse between them.

121 Wyatt 2002:124–125.

cohabit with Baal and then turn him over (possibly for punishment).[122]

In some Canaanite myths, El was viewed as an old and impotent god, while Baal was somewhat younger. Some have theorized that for this reason, later idolatrous myths placed Asherah alongside Baal, instead of alongside El.[123] This explains why by Ahab's time, Baal and Asherah were viewed as a couple.

Baal as Mars or a Sun-god

Gersonides explains that Baal represented the astral force of the planet Mars[124]—which is associated with blood[125]—inside the zodiacal constellation of Aries, an astrological combination that was particularly related to the power of fire.

Abarbanel disagrees with Gersonides' approach and explains that Baal worshippers served the sun.[126] Although Abarbanel does not cite it, the *Zohar* too identifies Baal worship with sun-worship and Asherah worship with moon-worship.[127] The identification of Baal as a sun-god has also been found in archeological records. One of the Amarna Letters found in Egypt was a letter written by the Tyrian king Abimilki to the Egyptian Pharaoh Akh-en-Aton, in which the former flatteringly referred to the latter as his "sun-god" and compared him to Baal.[128]

Abarbanel justifies his position by noting that the Earth is illuminated by the sun and the moon. The relationship between the sun and moon symbolizes the relationship between a man and wife. In that relationship, the man is the active, giving partner, while the woman remains a passive receiver. Similarly, the sun actively illuminates the solar system, while the moon passively receives its light from the sun. Accordingly, Baal—which can mean "husband"—must logically represent the sun and Asherah, the moon.[129] To further illustrate this point, Abarbanel notes that the ancient Greeks called the sun Apollo and the moon Diana, with the former being a man's name and the latter a woman's.

Child Sacrifice for the Baal

Abarbanel[130] adds that Baal's association with the sun explains the juxtaposition of the verse, *and they worshipped the Baal* (II Kgs. 17:16) with the next verse, *And they passed their sons and their daughters through fire* (II Kgs. 17:17).[131] While passing of one's children through fire was usually related to worship of **Molech** (and, to a lesser extent, **Adrammelech** and **Anammelech**), in this context it was understandably linked with Baal, who by virtue of his association with the sun, was also connected to fire.

However, Nachmanides differentiates between child sacrifices for the Baal and the Molech:

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122 *ANETS*, p. 519.

123 J. Watkins, "Athirat: As found at Ras Shamra," *Studia Antiqua*, vol. 5:1 (2007), p. 48.

124 Gersonides to I Kgs. 18:21.

125 Based on this, we explained why the Baal prophets cut themselves in order to find favor in their deity's eyes (see Chap 5.12).

126 Abarbanel to I Kgs. 18:20.

127 *Bereishis* 49a.

128 *ANETS*, p. 484.

129 Furthermore, notes Abarbanel, the Hebrew word for sun (*shemesh*, שמש) is grammatically a male-gendered word, while the word for moon (*levanah*, לבנה) is female.

130 Abarbanel to II Kgs. 17:17.

131 A literalist reading of the passage reveals that these two clauses are actually not connected with each other. The prophet listed a litany of sins which the Jews had committed, without meaning to link Baal with passing children through fire.

Molech-worship involved simply passing one's child through a fire, while Baal-worship consisted of slaughtering one's child and then offering the corpse as a burnt-offering (see Jer. 19:5).[132]

Baal as a Set of Gods

The approach that the Bible's use of "Baal" refers specifically to the Canaanite god named Baal—although convincing and probably true for the most part—remains somewhat problematic and cannot explain all instances. In many instances, the definite article "the" is prefixed to the word Baal (*ha-Baal*, "the Baal") which implies that the word Baal itself is not a proper noun but a common noun. Moreover, in some thirteen passages,[133] the Bible refers to a multitude of Baals (known in Hebrew as *Baalim*, בעלים). If Baal was the name of a specific deity, then how can there be multiple Baals?

- Radak writes that the word Baal simply means "Lord." It can be prefaced to the names of many other gods, because their worshippers treated them like "lords."[134]
- Rashba explains that the term Baal need not necessarily refer to a specific deity. It can also reflect the idolaters' perception that the objects of their worship "lorded" over certain parts of Creation (as if Hashem had delegated part of His ultimate control to them).[135]
- Similarly, R. Menachem Tziyyoni explains that Baal was a term which referred to the forces of various celestial bodies, including the sun, moon, planets, and stars.[136] Nonetheless, he notes, the most prominent of these forces was the force of the sun, which the Baal prophets in Ahab's time worshipped.
- Others explain that the name Baal on its own always refers to the sun force. However, the Baal priests told their followers to worship the Baal through different images at various times and places. So when Baal is attached to other descriptives, the next word refers to the form which the Baal idol took in that context. For example, **Baal Zevuv** worshipped Baal through the image of a fly, while Baal Berith worshipped Baal through the image of a male organ.[137] According to this approach, the verse which implies that various Baalim existed—for the sun, moon, stars, and planets, respectively—means that idolaters worshipped images of various celestial bodies with the intent of ultimately harvesting their energies for their main deity—i.e., the Baal/sun.[138]
- Another view maintains that the multiplicity of Baalim simply reflects the main Baal deity and its attendants.[139]

Local Permutations of the Main Baal Deity

Baal worship assumed different forms and names in different places, as archeology attests. For example, the blessing on the *Yehimilk Inscription* (a building dedication penned by the Canaanite Yehimilk, king of Gebel/Byblos) invoked the gods Baal-Shamem

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132 Nachmanides to Lev. 18:21.

133 I.e., Jud. 2:11; 3:7; 8:33; 10:6, 10:10; I Sam. 7:4; 12:10; I Kgs. 18:18; Jer. 2:23; 9:13; Hos. 2:15; 2:19; and II Chron. 34:4.

134 *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. בעל).

135 *Peirushei ha-Haggados* to TB *Berachos* 6b.

136 *Tziyyoni* to Lev. 17:14.

137 *BB*, p. 30a.

138 *BB*, p. 32b.

139 See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 3, M. H. Pope (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Baal Worship."

and Baalat-Gebel.[140] The word *Shamem* resembles the Hebrew word *shamayim* (שמים, heavens), and may have alluded to Baal's role as a weather god.[141] The second name, Baalat-Gebel, might not have been a separate deity, but a description of Baal-Shamem as the Lord of Gebel (Byblos). Others argue that Baalat-Gebel was a goddess said to have been the Baal's consort (i.e., "the Lady of Byblos" mentioned in Greek writings).[142]

The *Kilamuwa Stela* contains the words of King Kilamuwa of Samal (a city-state in modern-day Turkey that was originally founded by Hittites). He boasted of bringing more success to his kingdom than any of his predecessors and, at the end of the inscription, invoked the names of three gods to punish anyone who dared tamper with his victory stele. The three gods that he mentioned are all derivatives of Baal: Baal Tzamad (בעל צמד), Baal Chammon (בעל חמן),[143] and Rakhabaal (רכבעל). Rakhabaal was also mentioned in an inscription on a golden sheath attributed to Kilamuwa, as well as an inscription ascribed to one of his successors, Bar-Rakhib.[144]

The *Karatepe Inscription of Azitiwadda* contains an inscription from one King Azitiwadda at Karatepe (also in modern-day Turkey), who styled himself "the blessed of Baal" and the "servant of Baal." In that inscription, the author speaks of establishing a "Baal Krntryš," which he hoped would grant him blessings.[145] The meaning of *Baal Krntryš* is obscured, with some scholars arguing that Krntryš is a non-Semitic place name and *Baal Krntryš* refers to the local manifestation of Baal as worshipped there.[146]

Theophoric Appearances

The word *Baal* appears as part of several place names in the Bible—although due to the ambiguity of the word *Baal*, these place names might not necessarily be invoking *Baal* as a theophoric element. These places include Baal-Gad (Josh. 11:17), Bamoth-Baal (Josh. 13:17), Bealoth (Josh. 15:24, I Kgs. 4:16), Baal-Hermon (Jud. 3:3), and Baal-Perazim (II Sam. 5:20, I Chron. 14:11).

The Bible also mentions the city of Baal Meon/House of Baal Meon in the trans-Jordan region which the tribe of Reuben built up (Num. 32:38 and Josh. 13:17). Targum pseudo-Jonathan explains that Baal Meon was previously the Moabite king Balak's capital city, and served as **Baal Peor**'s cult center.[147] Based on this, some explain that the "House of Meon" (Jer. 45:23) and the "House of Peor" (Deut. 3:25) are alternate names for Baal Meon.[148]

Baalbek, a town in modern-day Lebanon, is another site of ancient worship of Baal and its equivalents.[149]

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140 *ANETS*, p. 653.

141 See *DDD*, pp. 149–151.

142 Botica 2012:78–79.

143 This name is sometimes transliterated as Baal Hammon, which led some academians to mistakenly associate it with the place Baal Hammon (בעל המון) mentioned in Song of Songs (8:11); see Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and R. Avigdor Katz ad loc. In truth, it seems that the term Baal Chammon is probably related to ritual object *chaman* used for sun-worship.

144 *ANETS*, pp. 654–655.

145 *ANETS*, pp. 653–654.

146 Botica 2012:84.

147 Targum pseudo-Jonathan to Num. 32:38. See R. Ovadiah Bartenuro's *Amar Nakeh* (*Parashas Mattos*), which openly assumes that the word *Baal* in Baal Meon implies an association with idolatry.

148 See M. Wahlman, *Chikrei ha-Aretz* (Tel Aviv, 1921), pp. 31–33.

149 For a survey of Baal-related toponyms, see *DDD*, pp. 140–141; 144–149; 151.

Similarly, Baal also appears in personal names in the Bible and the archeological record. Baal seems to appear as part of the names of several members of King Saul's and King David's family (I Chron. 8:30–34, 9:36–40; 14:7),[150] as well as in Gideon's nickname Jerubaal.[151] Shards of pottery from Samaria also reveal names derived from Baal such as Abibaal and Baala.[152]

The Baal element was quite popular among the ancient world's non-Jewish population. The Bible reports that Ahab's foreign wife Jezebel was the daughter of the Sidonian king Ethbaal (I Kgs. 16:31). Ethbaal's name certainly conjures the Canaanite deity Baal, whose worship Jezebel notoriously forced upon the Jews of the Kingdom of Israel. R. David Luria (1798–1855)[153] even suggests that the very name Jezebel was related to her god Baal.[154] A similar name, Itobaal (lit., "Baal is with him"), was found in the *Ahiram Inscription* as the son of Ahiram, king of Byblos.[155]

Other names of Tyrian kings which include allusions to Baal are Abibalus (Abibaal), Baleazarus (Baal-Eser), Phelles,[156] and Ecnibalus (Yakinbaal).[157] The journal of an Egyptian frontier official records the names Baal-Roy (a Gazan soldier), Shemu-Baal, and the Tyrian king Baal-Termeg;[158] while other records tell of an Egyptian butler named Baal-Mahar.[159]

Furthermore, three descendants of King Yehimilk (mentioned above) bore the

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150 The Septuagint introduces the Baal-element into the names of two other characters associated with King David: Jashobeam, one of King David's warriors (I Chon. 11:11), and Jeshebeab, one of the twenty-four families of Kohanim (I Chron. 24:13), are translated in the Septuagint as Iesebaal and Isbaal, respectively. According to that version, those names have Baalic elements to them. However, this rendering seems to be uniquely Septuagintal, as other early versions of the Bible (like the Vulgate and the Peshitta) follow the Masoretic text on this. In fact, Dead Sea Scroll fragments of calendrical texts concerning the twenty-four Kohanic families consistently mirrors the Bible's Masoretic text which reads Jeshebeab and never refers to Isbaal; see D. Parry and E. Tov (eds.), *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader Part 4: Calendrical and Sapiential Texts* (Brill, 2004), pp. 2–53.

151 We will discuss the significance of idolatrous theophoric elements in Jewish names in Volume II.

152 *ANETS*, p. 321.

153 *Radal* to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 29:55.

154 M. Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat-Gan, 1991), p. 44, contends that the name of the Tyrian princess Ei-Zebul ("where is the prince/Zebul" or "Zebul exists") was changed to Jezebel in order to be connotative of *zevel* (זבל, dung). See also **Baal Zevuv**.

A seal which may bear the name Jezebel has been suggested to be the seal of Ahab's wife Jezebel. However, the consensus of scholars remains cautious about such identification; see N. Avigad, "The Seal of Jezebel," *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 14:4 (1964), pp. 274–276; and C.A. Rollston, "Prosopography and the יזבל Seal," *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 59:1 (2009), pp. 86–91.

155 *ANETS*, p. 661.

156 Recorded by Josephus (*Against Apion*, Book I, §18) in the name of Menander of Ephesus, a historian who wrote about Tyrian history.

157 *Against Apion*, Book I, §21.

158 *ANETS*, p. 258.

159 Ibid., pp. 214–215.

theophoric element *Baal* as part of their names: His sons Abibaal and Elibaal, and his grandson Shipitbaal.[160]

A cuneiform tablet found by archeologists mentioned Baal, king of Tyre, as party to a peace treaty with the Assyrian king Esar-Haddon (son of Sennacherib),[161] as well as in an inscription by Esar-Haddon's son Ashurbanipal, who boasted of having subdued a list of kings (including Manasseh, king of Judah).[162] Moreover, the name Hannibal, the famous leader of Carthage (a Tyrian colony in North Africa) also bears a theophoric reference to Baal.

Baal Berith (בַּעַל בְּרִית) was the name of a god which the Jews came to worship in the period of the Judges. The Bible notes that after the death of the judge Gideon, *The Children of Israel returned [to their old habit] and went astray after the Baalim, and they set Baal Berith* (בעל ברית) *as a god for themselves* (Jud. 8:33).

There are several explanations of this name. The Jerusalem Talmud explains that the term Baal Berith refers to the usual **Baal**, which was an idol in the form of the male organ, i.e., the place of the circumcision, known as the *bris* (ברית, covenant).[163] The Babylonian Talmud, on the other hand, explains that Baal Berith actually refers to **Baal Zevuv**, a god the Bible mentioned elsewhere as worshipped at the Philistine city Ekron.[164]

Others explain that the word "Berith" was related to the Aramaic word for Creation (*briys*, ברית) and alluded to the belief that Baal Berith created everything.[165]

Academic sources have suggested that Baal Berith referred to the worship at Mount Gerizim, which was associated with the Cutheans of Shechem, as mentioned in Unit I (Chap 5.25).[166] However, this supposition is somewhat questionable because in the time of the Judges, the Cutheans had not yet arrived in the Holy Land (unless one argues that the Cutheans simply adopted forms of idolatry which were already present in the Land).

Baal Peor (בַּעַל פְּעוֹר), sometimes spelled Baal Phagur, was the name of a Midianite/Moabite[167] form of idolatry, which the Jews in the wilderness ended up worshipping (as we mentioned in Unit I, see Chap 3.17). According to tradition, Peor was this deity's proper name. Some explain that Baal Peor referred to **Baal** worship at Mount Peor,[168] while other academic scholars associate this deity with the Greek god Priapus, whose worship welcomed the obscene.[169] Another approach links Baal

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160 See Botica 2012:86–88.

161 *ANETS*, pp. 533–534.

162 Ibid., pp. 294.

163 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:6 and JT *Shabbos* 9:1.

164 TB *Shabbos* 83b.

165 *BB*, p. 34a, mentions this view, but rejects it.

166 W.C. Wood, "The Religion of Canaan: From the Earliest Times to the Hebrew Conquest," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 35:1 (1916), p. 28.

167 R. Chaim Kanievsky, as cited in C.T. Lehrfeld, *Derech ha-Mikra'os* (Jerusalem, 2016), p. 176, and R. Yaakov Chaim Sofer in *Toras Yaakov, Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 2005), p. 233, explain that the Moabites worshipped both Baal Peor and **Chemosh**. Indeed, J.B. Snyder, "Did Kemosh Have a Consort (or Any Other Friends)?" *Ugarit-Forschungen*, vol. 42 (2010), pp. 646–675, entertains the possibility that the Moabites worshipped multiple gods besides Chemosh and surveys various candidates for the Moabite pantheon.

168 A. Rosenberg, *Otzar ha-Shemos*, vol. 1 (New York, 1923), p. 372.

169 For an elaborate defense of this view, see W. Drummond, "Concerning Egyptian Idols," *The*

Peor with Pluto, the Greek god of death, because when discussing the Jews straying after Baal Peor, the Psalmist refers to them eating *sacrifices of the dead*[170] (Ps. 106:28).[171] According to some, the Peor idol was donkey-shaped.[172] Peor was apparently also associated with fertility.[173]

Alternatively, the Midrash explains that the force of Peor was derived from one of the destructive angels that Hashem initially sent to destroy the Jews after they sinned by worshipping the Golden Calf.[174] After defeating that destructive force, Moses dug a subterranean chamber and banished the angel there. However, whenever the Jews would sin, the angel would arise from its underground prison and *spew* accusatory statements against the Jews. For this reason, that destructive angel is called Peor, which literally means "he who spews."

In order to counter Peor's efforts, Moses uttered a special Divine name which caused the angel to return to its dungeon. When Moses died, Hashem purposely buried him next to the place of Peor (Deut. 34:6) so that every time the angel would resurface to spew its accusations against the Jewish People, it would become frightened by seeing Moses' grave and quickly return to its prison.[175]

Peor Worship

The name Peor was related to the word *poer* (פּוֹעֵר) which can mean "reveals," "opens," or "spews." The "spewing" referred to Peor's role as a fortune-telling bathroom oracle.[176] R. Meir Abulafia explains that Peor means "opens," and refers to the opening of one's bodily cavities to release waste.[177] Rashi explains that one worshiped Peor by revealing his anus and defecating.[178] Similarly, Maimonides explains that Peor worship involved bowing one's head and exposing oneself to the idol.[179]

Classical Journal, vol. 9 (1814), pp. 570–584. He also argued that Peor/Priapus were adaptations of the Egyptian Horus and the Moabite Chemosh.

170 R. Chaim of Volozhin in *Ruach Chaim* (to *Avos* 3:3) offers an elaborate explanation of why eating in order to worship Peor is called eating from the sacrifices of the dead.

171 *Calmet's Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (Crocker and Brewster, 1835), p. 123.

172 S. Refaeli *"Ha-Aretz Lifnei Kibush Yehoshua"* in A.M. Luntz (ed.), *Yerushalayim*, vol. 9 (Jerusalem, 1911), p. 229.

173 See *DDD*, p. 147.

174 According to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 45) that angel's name was Charon-Af, while according to *Yalkut Shimoni* (Deut. §965) and Rabbeinu Bachya (to Deut. 34:6), it was Cheimah.

175 *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 45). According to a version of this Midrash cited by *Tosafos* (to TB *Sotah* 14a), Peor would arise every year at the same time of the year that the Jews had sinned by worshipping Baal Peor in order to prosecute the Jews for that sin. To silence Peor's efforts, Hashem buried Moses nearby.

The Talmud (TB *Sotah* 14a) simply states that Moses was buried next to Peor in order to atone for the sin of the Jews worshipping Baal Peor. R. Baruch ha-Levi Epstein (*Torah Temimah* to Num. 25:5 §11) writes that this requires additional clarification, because the Talmud does not explain why Moses' burial should atone for the sin of Peor and not, say, the sin of the Golden Calf. In light of the materials cited, we can explain why the sin of Peor was an especially pressing matter. See also I. Chait, *Philosophy of Torah* (CreateSpace, 2011), p. 169.

176 Klugmann 2009c:99.

177 *Yad Ramah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 60b.

178 Rashi to Num. 25:3.

179 *Teshuvos ha-Rambam*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1960), p. 726.

R. Chaim Shmuelevitz (1902–1979) writes that the self-deprecation of Peor worship was not simply a ritual act, but reflected an ideology which rejected the boundaries of basic human decency. That freedom to do whatever one pleased was the main draw to worshipping Peor.[180] In fact, Gersonides writes that the ultimate goal of Peor worship was for men and women to partake in a mass orgy.[181]

In light of this, we can say that Rashi too explains that the underlying concept behind Peor was the utter collapse of boundaries (both moral boundaries and, by extension, physical ones).[182] This is why the Talmud assumes that regarding Peor worship there is no difference between within and without its temple's curtains—any place could serve as fair grounds for worship.

Along similar lines, R. Moshe Shapiro explains that the ritual defecation of Peor served as a means of admitting one's imperfections and embracing them.[183] In other words, Peor worship absolved its worshippers of the need to conform to any standards. The craving for this unbridled freedom continues to affect society nowadays, manifesting as humanism and the belief that one is not bound by any intrinsic right or wrong, only "what feels good/right for me."

Others explain that defecation was not originally intrinsic to Peor worship. Rather, the original Peor service—whatever it was—induced such a strong emotional experience that the worshipper would invariably lose control of his bodily functions. As the generations progressed, people forgot about the original way of worshipping Peor and thought that the resulting defecation was the essential component.[184]

Permission to Relieve

The Sages say that a Jew cannot survive an encounter with Peor without losing something to it. To illustrate this idea, they cite the story of a Jew named Pinchas who regularly cursed Peor. One time, he was fixing some barrels when he heard the angelic representation of Peor coming towards him. He was scared that Peor would injure him, so he "slipped out his spit," meaning he revealed his male organ or started urinating towards Peor. Satisfied with that level of worship, Peor left him. The next night, Peor returned and told Pinchas that once he had already worshipped him, he could no longer justifiably curse him, so Pinchas agreed to no longer curse Peor.[185]

The Sages tell two more stories about Peor worship: One time, a Jew rented his donkey to an idolatress to ride. As they exited the city, she asked the Jew to wait for her while she entered the local Peor shrine to perform her ritual services. When she returned, the Jew told her to wait for him as well. He entered the shrine and relieved himself in a disgusting manner—to the great joy of the other idolaters, who claimed that nobody else had

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180 *Sichos Mussar: Shaarei Chaim* (Jerusalem, 2004), pp. 342; 362–364.

181 Gersonides to Deut. 27:24.

182 Rashi to TB *Avodah Zarah* 51b, see also *Maharam* there.

183 Schlanger 2015:101. See Volume II for more about the self-deprecating approach to idolatry.

184 R. Avraham Ausband (Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Telshe Alumni in Riverdale, NY) often repeats this explanation in the name of R. Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (1787–1859). I have been unable to find this explanation recorded elsewhere.

185 *Sifrei* to Num. 25:3, according to *Peirush ha-Raavad* ad loc. R. David Pardo (in *Sifrei d-Vei Rav* there) admits that he does not understand the purpose of relating this story. R. Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (*Emek ha-Netziv* there) relates that the purpose of this story is to illustrate the lengths that the Evil Inclination goes to try and entice Jews to worshipping Peor, such that it can only be defeated through great exertion and self-control.

ever worshipped Peor with such devotion.[186]

Another story tells of a foreign ruler who traveled quite a distance to worship at the temple of Peor. He was unfamiliar with the practices of the Peor cult, so he asked the attendants to bring him a bull or ram to sacrifice for Peor. They told him that such was unnecessary for worshipping Peor; one need only reveal himself to the idol in order to worship it. This foreign dignitary was so disgusted by the concept, that he responded by smashing the heads of the Peor worshippers and cursing them and their god.[187]

Baal Zafon (בַּעַל צְפוֹן) was the name of an Egyptian idol near which Hashem told the Jews to encamp before crossing the Red Sea (Ex. 14:2). Some traditional sources associate this idol with the powers of the Evil Inclination.[188]

In god lists found at Ugarit, Baal Zafon was equated with the Babylonian gods **Hadad** and **Bel**.[189] In Ugaritic mythology, **Baal**'s palace was located on Mount Zafon (identified as Jebel Aqra, on the borders between modern-day Turkey and Syria). According to that approach, Baal Zafon may allude to Baal worship upon Mount Zafon.[190]

Baal Zafon's association with dogs (see below) leads some to associate it with Anubis, the Egyptian god of cemeteries (who was generally depicted as a dog or a man with a dog's head) and/or **Nivchaz**, which was also associated with dogs.[191]

Egypt's Last Idol Standing

On the night of the Plague of the Firstborn, Hashem destroyed all the idols in Egypt, leaving only Baal Zafon. Why did He do so?

- Targum pseudo-Jonathan writes that Hashem allowed that idol to remain so that the Egyptians would mistakenly think that Hashem does not hold the power to destroy it, and they would all gather to bow before it (perhaps the purpose of this was to reinforce the Egyptian's free will in order to hold them culpable for their sins).[192]
- Rashi explains that Hashem allowed Baal Zafon to remain standing in order to give the Egyptians a chance to mistakenly attribute their loss to that deity. This was in line with His general practice of allowing room for mistaken belief in idolatry, thereby extending the limits of free will.[193]
- The Midrash writes that Hashem allowed Baal Zafon to remain in order to embolden the Egyptians in their pursuit of

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186 *Sifrei* to Num. 25:3; and JT *Sanhedrin* 10:2.

187 The Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 64a) relates another story with the same point: There was once a gentile woman who became very ill. She promised that if she survived her sickness, she would worship every type of idolatry in the world. After she recovered, she set about worshipping all types of idolatry until she came upon Peor. She asked the Peor priests how to worship it, and they told her that one eats spinach, drinks beer, and then defecates before the idol. The woman was so disgusted at the prospect of worshipping Peor that she responded that she would rather get sick again than worship it.

188 R. Yom Tov Lipmann Heller (1579–1654) writes (in his commentary *Tuv Taam* to Rabbeinu Bachya Ex. 14:2) that some explain that Baal Zafon was associated with the Evil Inclination and Samael; see A. Heller (ed.), *Rabbeinu Bachya Im Sefer Tuv Taam*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 85.

189 Wyatt 2002:361.

190 *DDD*, pp. 152–154.

191 *BB*, p. 39a.

192 Targum pseudo-Jonathan to Ex. 14:2.

193 Rashi to Ex. 14:2.

the Jews and illogically charge towards the Red Sea, thinking that Baal Zafon would aid them.[194]

- Rabbeinu Bachya adds that indeed, when the Jews were trapped between the oncoming Egyptian army and the Red Sea, Pharaoh remarked that his god Baal Zafon had trapped the Jews.[195]
- Similarly, R. Ephraim Lenchitz (1540–1619) writes that the Egyptians believed that Baal Zafon possessed the power to grant gold and other precious items. Therefore, Hashem specifically allowed this idol to remain so that the Egyptians would think that it would support them in their effort to chase the Jews and return the treasures which they had taken from Egypt.[196]

The Name Baal Zafon

Based on R. Lenchitz's explanation, R. Yissachar Ber Eilenberg (1550–1623) relates Baal Zafon to the word *tzafun* (צפון, hidden), an allusion to the god's ability to reveal the locations of hidden precious items for the benefit of its followers.[197] Others explain that Baal Zafon was related to the word *tzfoni* (צפוני), a type of locust (Joel 2:20). According to this explanation, the Egyptians believed that this god protected them from locusts.[198]

Others explain that the word Zafon was related to the Hebrew word *tzafon* (צפון, north). R. Yehonasan Eyebschitz explains that Baal Zafon was associated with the zodiacal constellation Aries (i.e., sheep),[199] which is the *northernmost* constellation in the celestial hemisphere.[200] Indeed, we have already seen (Chap 3.2) that the Egyptians revered sheep as gods.

Finally, the English Protestant scholar John Selden (1584–1654) suggests that the root of the word Zafon was *tzafah* (צפה, gaze) and referred to the idol's sentinel role of gazing outwards to make sure that the enslaved Jews did not escape.[201]

Baal Zafon's Form

Ibn Ezra[202] explains that Baal Zafon was a copper image of certain celestial bodies believed to have the power to stop all slaves

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194 *Mechilta de-Rabbi Yishmael* to Ex. 14:2.

195 Targum pseudo-Jonathan (ad loc.) also writes that Pharaoh said that Baal Zafon trapped the Jews in the desert. Some editions of *Targum Yerushalmi* mistakenly read that Pharaoh said that **Baal Peor** had trapped the Jews; see *Ahavas Yehonasan* to Ex. 14:2. Nonetheless, on the basis of this supposed mistake, *BB* (p. 34b) claims that Baal Peor and Baal Zafon were identical. Even though their names hold opposite meanings, as *peor* means "revealed" and *tzafon* means "hidden," he argues that it is called Peor because its method of worship involves revealing oneself, while it is also named Baal Zafon for other reasons.

196 *Kli Yakar* to Ex. 14:2.

197 *Tzeidah la-Derech* to Ex. 14:2.

198 *BB*, p. 34b.

199 *Yaaros Devash* (vol. 1, *drush* #15).

200 Based on this, R. Eyebschitz writes that if Moses had warned the Egyptians that the Plague of the Firstborn would occur exactly at midnight, then they would not have believed him because at exactly midnight, a northern wind always blows (see TB *Berachos* 3b). The Egyptians viewed the north as associated with their god Baal Zafon, who was perceived to be on their side.

201 See J.P. Rosenblatt, *Renaissance England's Chief Rabbi: John Selden* (Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 77–78.

202 Ibn Ezra to Ex. 14:2; see also *Mizrachi* ad loc.

from escaping Egypt.[203] Targum pseudo-Jonathan explains that Baal Zafon was a square rock formation which resembled a man and woman with open eyes.[204]

The early Kabbalists write that Baal Zafon was associated with an evil dog. R. Chaim Vital (1543–1620) explains that the Baal Zafon idol depicted a man leading a sheep and, underneath that, an evil dog. Using witchery, the Egyptians cast a spell that should the Jews attempt to escape, the dog of the Baal Zafon idol would bark and cause all the dogs in Egypt to follow suit.[205] However, Hashem arranged that miraculously, the dogs did not bark, as the Bible writes, *And for all the Jews, a dog shall not bark at any man or animal* (Ex. 11:7).[206]

R. Nosson Nota Shapiro (1585–1633) also explains that the Baal Zafon idol was engraved with a depiction of an evil dog. He notes that the numerical value of the phrase *kelev ra* (כלב רע, evil dog) equals that of the words *baal zafon* (=322).[207]

The early Kabbalist R. Aharon of Candia writes that the evil force of Baal Zafon has 1,304 evil dogs at its disposal. R. Shimshon of Ostropoli (d. 1648) explains that this figure is the sum of the numerical value of the letters of the word *kelev* (כלב) multiplied by themselves; that is, (20*20)+(30*30)+(2*2)=1,304.[208]

Theophoric Appearances

Some scholars suggest that the city Zaphon in the territory of Gad (Josh. 13:27), as well as the personal names Ziphion (Gen. 46:16) and Zephon (Num. 26:15) from the family of Gad, are possibly related to the deity Baal Zafon.[209]

Interestingly, archeologists discovered an Egyptian stela which seems to name this god "Adon Zafon."[210] Additionally, "Baal Zafon" appeared in an Ugaritic mortuary prayer,[211] and was listed among Tyrian gods in a peace treaty between the Assyrian king Esar-Haddon and the Tyrians, many centuries after the Jews had exited Egypt.[212]

Baal Zevuv (בַּעַל זְבוּב) was a god worshipped at the Philistine city Ekron, also known as **Baal Berith**. Its name literally means "master of the fly." R. Menachem Azariah of Fano (1548–1620) explains that the proper name for Baal Zevuv was Zevuv, so he was technically called "Zevuv, the master of Zevuv."[213]

The Talmud writes that the Evil Inclination

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203 However, in his short commentary to Exodus (ad loc.), Ibn Ezra writes that Baal Zafon is simply the name of a place.

204 Targum pseudo-Jonathan to Ex. 14:2.

205 R. Mordechai ha-Kohen of Safed (1523–1598), explains (in his commentary *Sifsei Kohen* to Ex. 1:1) that the demonic dog was one of the images posted at each of Egypt's ten gates. The other nine gates housed similarly enchanted images including a horse, a donkey, an ox, a mule, a camel, and a human. See also *Shemos Rabbah* §20:19 which records that the Egyptians protected Joseph's burial place with demonic dogs.

206 See *Pirkei Shirah, Shaar Shimon* (Venice, 1664), p. 111b; and *Zecher David, Maamar* 3 (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2001), p. 190.

207 *Megaleh Amukos* §252.

208 *Dan Yadin* to *Sefer ha-Karnaim* (Amsterdam, 1765), pp. 4a–4b.

209 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 21, M. Avi-Yonah (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Zaphon."

210 *ANETS*, p. 249.

211 Ibid.

212 Ibid., p. 534.

213 See *Maamarei ha-Rama mi-Fano*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Yismach Lev-Toras Moshe, 2003), p. 177. R. Menachem Azariah explains that Targum Onkelos translates the city Elalah's name

is like a fly that sits between the two atria of the heart.[214] R. Menachem Ricanti (1250–1310) explains that this refers to the power of Baal Zevuv, who was associated with man's inclination for wrongdoing.[215] In fact, the Christian Bible mentions Beelzebub/Beelzebul, "the prince of demons," as another name for the Satan.[216]

Maharal (1520–1609)[217] notes that fly worship was simply another example of the idolatrous inclination driving people to commit the lowest and most degrading of acts in order to attain fulfillment.[218]

Lord of the Flies

Some explain that this deity was called "master of the flies" in the belief that it possessed the power to banish disease-carrying flies, thus protecting its worshippers from sickness.[219]

Others explain that this idol's actual name was Baal Zevul (בעל זבול, master of Zevul), alluding to this deity's supposed dominion over the heavens[220] (as Zevul is a name of one of the seven heavens[221]), but the Jews mockingly called it Baal Zevuv, associating it with the lowly fly instead of with the lofty heavens.

Some scholars contend that Baal Zevuv was worshipped by sacrificing flies, while others explain that Zevuv was the name of a place.[222]

R. Elazar Rokeach of Worms explains that ancient idolaters deified the fly because they believed that, unlike other insects, if one puts a fly through a mill it will not be crushed. This belief in the fly's ability to circumvent death told the ancients that the fly should be revered.[223] R. Shimshon of Ostropoli also cites the belief that flies can withstand the millstone's smashing. He adds that Zevuv is the heavenly force in charge of millstones, because the fly maintains a degree of dominion over the millstone's power.[224]

Solomon Founds the Baal Zevuv Cult

R. Shmuel Laniado writes that he heard an explanation for Baal Zevuv's origins from the great Kabbalist R. Moshe Kordovero (1522–1570). According to this approach, Pharaoh's daughter, who was wed to King Solomon, once asked her illustrious husband to give her something in honor of her (pre-existing) god. King Solomon mockingly gave her a fly

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(mentioned in Num. 32:3) into Aramaic as *Baal Devuva* (בעל דבבא, master of the fly) and explains that the word Elalah (אלעלה) equals the phrase "Zevuv, Baal Zevuv" in numeric value—both equal 136. Interestingly, the Targumim (Deut. 32:27, Lam. 1:9, Ps. 7:6, 9:7, 55:4, 74:3, 89:23) and the Talmud (TB *Gittin* 55b) consistently use the phrase *baal devuva* to mean "enemy."

214 TB *Berachos* 61a.

215 R. Ricanti to Gen. 3:1. See *Ben Yehoyada* and *Einei Shmuel* to TB *Shabbos* 83b, who explain the connection between Baal Zevuv and sexual impropriety.

216 See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, M.R. Ryan/Eds. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), s.v. "Beelzebul."

217 *Chiddushei Aggados* to TB *Shabbos* 83b.

218 We will further develop this idea in Volume II.

219 *Encyclopedia le-Beis Yisrael*, vol. 5, R. Halperin (ed.) (Bene Barak, 2010), p. 91.

220 *DDD*, pp. 154–155.

221 TB *Chagigah* 12b. In Ugaritic writings, the word *zevul* means "prince," so Baal Zevul could mean "Prince Baal."

222 Y. Dvir, "*Shemos ba-Aretz*," *Sinai*, vol. 39 (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1956), pp. 379–380.

223 Herschler 1992:106.

224 *Dan Yadin* to *Sefer ha-Karnaim* (Amsterdam, 1765) pp. 15b–16a.

that had landed on his clothes. She took this fly and established a temple in its honor, producing the Baal Zevuv cult.[225] However, this legend is ostensibly incompatible with the Babylonian Talmud which identifies Baal Zevuv with Baal Berith, for the latter clearly existed in the period of Judges—well before King Solomon's reign.

Ahaziah Seeks out Baal Zevuv

When Ahaziah, king of Israel (son of Ahab and Jezebel), took ill, he sent a messenger to inquire of Baal Zevuv in Ekron whether he would survive. Elijah the Prophet intercepted the messengers and told them—and eventually Ahaziah himself—that because Ahaziah had sought out Baal Zevuv instead of Hashem, he would surely die of his illness. Indeed, Ahaziah died soon after (II Kgs. 1:1–17).

Malbim explains that when Ahaziah realized that turning to **Baal**—the god of his parents—heeded no positive results, he sought out other gods.[226] Eventually, he turned to Baal Zevuv—a god associated with death, whose priests would regularly "prophesize" about who would live and who would die. This ironically hastened his demise.

The Smallest Idol

The Babylonian Talmud[227] understands that Baal Zevuv[228] was the same as Baal Berith.[229] This assertion comes up in a very peculiar discussion: The Talmud rules that one is even forbidden to worship the smallest idols possible. The Talmud supports this ruling by citing a Tannaic teaching that equates Baal Berith with Baal Zevuv, and explains that each person made an image of that god for themselves and placed it in their pocket. Whenever they remembered it, they removed it from their pocket, hugged it, and kissed it. The Talmud's underlying assumption is that Baal Zevuv was an idol formed as a small fly. Rashi explains that the word *bris* (ברית, covenant) of Baal Berith refers to its worshippers' great devotion to and adoration of the idol, to the extent that, as the Talmud understood, its worshippers would carry pocket-sized idols to shower with affection.

The commentators ask: If the Talmud simply meant to cite an example of a very small idol, then it could have quoted the Biblical verses in II Kings ch. 1 that relate the story of Ahaziah, king of Israel, appealing to Baal Zevuv. Why then did the Talmud quote a Tannaic teaching equating Baal Zevuv with Baal Berith?

They answer that quoting the Biblical verses which mention Baal Zevuv would not sufficiently prove the Talmud's point that even the smallest of idols are forbidden, because the Bible does not explicitly state that Baal Zevuv was a small idol. One might have thought that Baal Zevuv was called "master of the fly" without being fly-sized. Therefore, the Talmud had to quote the Tannaic teaching which equates Baal Zevuv with Baal Berith. The word *bris* (covenant) implies continual adherence, something that can only be achieved with a small, portable idol.[230]

Bel (בֵּל) was the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah prophesied about its downfall (see Isa. 46:1 and Jer. 51:44). Bel was an alternate name for the Babylonian god **Merodach**, and some

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225 Batzri 1994:2.

226 Malbim to II Kgs. 1:2.

227 TB *Shabbos* 83b.

228 On a technical note, the Talmud actually refers to this idol as "Zevuv, Baal Ekron," a slight variant of the Bible's name for this idol.

229 Ritva (ad loc.) explicitly notes that the source of this identification is tradition.

230 See *Tosafos, Chiddushei ha-Ramban, Likkutei Rabbeinu Betzalel Ashkenazi* quoting Rashba, *Chiddushei ha-Ran,* and *Chiddushei ha-Ritva* (to TB *Shabbos* 83b).

explain that Bel was the Babylonian form of the Canaanite god **BAAL**. The name Bel was probably the source of the names of the Celtic sun-god Belenus and the pagan Arabic god Malakbel. In some sources, Bel's mythological wife was Beltu.[231]

R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (1638–1702) suggests that the name Bel refers to the idol's dominion over Babylon (בבל),[232] because, as idolaters were wont to do,[233] they likely placed the idol at the entrance to the city.

Nimrod Founds Bel in His Image

R. Gedalia Ibn Yachya cites the historian Eusebis who wrote that Nimrod erected an idol in his own likeness, which he called Bel, and forced people to bow down to it.[234] Similarly, Abarbanel cites Roman historians who record that Nimrod was the first king of Babylon and he made himself into a god and commanded his people to worship him, so he erected a statue in his own likeness and named it Bel.[235]

Ibn Yachya and Abarbanel cite a variant version: Upon Nimrod's death, his son[236] Nino became king. Because Nino was greatly saddened by his father's death, he erected a statue in his father's likeness to honor him, which he would bow before. Furthermore, it was declared that anyone who was sentenced to execution and fled to this idol would automatically be pardoned. People continued to worship this statue for more than a millennium until Daniel's time.[237]

Daniel as Beltshazzar

The Bible (Dan. 1:7) records that Daniel, a Jewish child from the exiled Kingdom of Judah, was taken to **NEBUCHADNEZZAR**'s royal household and given the Babylonian name Beltshazzar (sometimes spelled בלטשאצר, and sometimes בלטאשצר). This name, of course, is similar to that of Belshazzar, the last king of Babylonia (whose army was defeated by the Persians).

In explaining the meaning of the name Beltshazzar, R. Saadia Gaon writes that Bel was an idol's name, and *tshazzar* (טש אצר) means "guardian of the storage."[238] Rashi explains that it was made up of the theophoric element Bel and the Aramaic word *tshazzar* (טשצאר, wisdom/freedom). R. Shmuel Masnuth (a 12th-century Syrian Bible commentator) adds that just as the Jews commonly included Hashem's name in personal names, so did the Babylonians incorporate the names of their gods in personal names.[239]

The Book of Daniel recounts that after Daniel accurately interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream about the Four Kingdoms that would rule over the Jewish People, Nebuchadnezzar began to worship Daniel as a demi-god, bowing before him, and sacrificing meal-offerings and incense in his honor (Dan. 2:46).

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231 See *DDD*, pp. 171–173 and *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 3, P. Merlo (Walter de Gruyter: Berlin/New York 2009), s.v. "Beltu."

232 Responsa *Chavos Yair*, vol.1, §1.

233 TB *Avodah Zarah* 40b.

234 *Shalsheles ha-Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1962), p. 222.

235 Abarbanel to Isa. 46:1.

236 Yassif 2001:129–130 cites a variant of this story in the name of the Greek historian Strabo (63–24 CE). He wrote that Nimrod's son and successor was named Bel, and Bel's son was Nino. According to this version, Nino was saddened by the death of his father Bel and erected a statue to honor him. Any person who fell into Nino's disfavor could go to the idol of Bel and request clemency, and Nino would absolve him of his sin.

237 In his commentary to Genesis, end of ch. 10.

238 R. Saadia Gaon to Daniel 1:7.

239 I.S. Lange & S. Schwartz (eds.), *Midrash Daniel* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1968), p. 12.

In fact, Nebuchadnezzar later remarked that Daniel's name Beltshazzar showed that he was somehow related to his god Bel (Dan. 4:5).

In light of this, the Talmud explains why Daniel was not cast into the furnace alongside Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. Daniel saw to it that he not be present at the time because he realized that should he be cast into the furnace, he would have surely been burnt (unlike his colleagues) as a fulfillment of the Scriptural imperative, *The images of their gods you shall burn in a fire* (Deut. 7:25), as Daniel was Nebuchadnezzar's god.[240] Furthermore, the Talmud explains that Nebuchadnezzar knew that Daniel would not bow to his idol. He therefore ensured that Daniel was not present so that he would not be forced to cast Daniel into the furnace and be subjected to his people's ridicule that he burnt his own god.[241]

Bel's Fall

Tradition relates that Daniel brought about Bel's fall. Yanai—a 7th-century poet who lived in the Holy Land—wrote a liturgical poem (customarily recited towards the end of the Passover Seder) listing different miracles that occurred in the middle of the night. In that poem, he mentions that the destruction of Bel occurred in the middle of the night. Abarbanel adds that this occurred on the night of Passover.[242]

One version of this tradition recounts that after destroying the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar took the *tzitz* (the Kohen Gadol's forehead plate), upon which Hashem's ineffable name was etched, and placed it inside his statue's mouth. The idol began to speak and stated, *I am Hashem your God* (Ex 20:2). This statement was technically true because the *tzitz* itself, which represents Hashem, said those words. However, the onlookers mistakenly thought that the statue uttered those words and began to think that the statue itself was god.

In order to counter this mistaken belief, Daniel feigned interest in worshipping Bel and claimed that he wished to kiss the statue's head. Ladders were brought for him to climb up to the top of the statue. As Daniel appeared to kiss the idol's head, he removed the *tzitz* from within its mouth. When the *tzitz* was removed, the idol immediately fell to the ground. It had only been miraculously suspended in a standing position through the *tzitz*'s power. By the laws of nature, the idol—whose height reached sixty cubits—was unable to stand on its own.[243]

In another version of Bel's fall, Daniel proved to an unnamed[244] Babylonian king that Bel did not eat from the sacrifices offered to it, which were, in fact, consumed by its priests. After the Bel priests admitted to perpetuating such a ploy, the Babylonian king decided to destroy the Temple of Bel.[245]

A third account about the fall of Bel tells that Nebuchadnezzar had a special snake that was reputed to be so strong that it could eat anything, thereby causing people to view it as a divine incarnation of Bel. Daniel, in his great

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240 TB *Sanhedrin* 93a.

241 See also *Bamidbar Rabbah* §13:4 and Stahl 2006:425–434.

242 In his commentary to the *Haggadah Shel Pesach* (s.v. אז רוב נסים).

243 See *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* §7:14; *Tikkunei Zohar* (§66); and *Likkutei Torah* (*Parashas Noach*).

244 R. David Ganz, in *Tzemach David* (vol. 2, Year 3390), mentions the tradition of Daniel causing Bel's downfall and cites three opinions about when the story occurred: it either took place during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar, the Persian king Cyrus, or (according to *Yosiphon's* implication) King Darius II. R. Ganz rejects the last view, arguing that it is implausible that Daniel could have lived all the way until Darius II's time, especially because Cyrus is the latest king mentioned in the Book of Daniel.

245 *Yosiphon* (Chapter 3).

wisdom, dispelled the divinity of the snake by feeding it straw with nails hidden inside. The snake took the bait and ended up puncturing its innards and dying.[246]

Both R. Yair Chaim Bachrach[247] and R. Yaakov Emden[248] surmise that even though the destruction of the Temple of Bel was facilitated by Daniel, the Babylonians or Persians later reinstituted its worship, so that by the time of the Talmudic sage Shmuel, the Temple of Bel was once again active. Archeology suggests that this restoration of the idol occurred sooner rather than later, because the Alexander Chronicle (BM 36304) records that Bel worship existed at the time of King Darius' downfall (though scholars disagree about whether this refers to King Darius I or Darius II).[249]

Chemosh (כְּמוֹשׁ), sometimes spelled Kemosh, was the chief Moabite god. It first appears in the Bible in Balaam's prophetic oracle that responded to the Moabites' loss of territory to the Amorite king Sihon (Num. 21:29). According to some sources, the Ammonites also worshiped Chemosh.[250] Menachem Ibn Saruk (920–970) writes that Chemosh was not the name of a specific idol, but a general term for idols.[251]

The Maskillic scholar Yehudah Leib Ben-Zev (1764–1811) suggested that the name Chemosh was a contraction of *kemo aish* (כמו אש, like fire), and referred to this deity's connection with fire.[252] Other academic scholars argue that Chemosh was either a god of war or the underworld[253]—with one ancient god list equating Chemosh with the

246 *Bereishis Rabbah* §68:13, *Yosiphon* (Chapter 3), Yassif 2001:245–255; 259–260. Variants of these last two stories were canonized by the Catholic Church in their version of the Christian Bible. See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 2, M. McNamara (Detroit: Gale, 2003), "Bel and the Dragon."

247 *Chavos Yair*, vol. 1, §1.

248 *Hagahos Yaavetz* to TB *Avodah Zarah* 11b.

249 Hool 2014:53–54.

250 The Bible relates that the king of Ammon sent the Judge Jephtah a belligerent letter demanding that the Jews return lands which were historically Moabite. In his response, Jephtah referenced *your god Chemosh* (Jud. 11:24). The commentators offer different reasons why Jephtah would invoke the Moabite god Chemosh when dealing with the Ammonites.
Nachmanides (to Num. 21:29) writes that Jephtah mentioned Chemosh because the Ammonites worshipped Chemosh just like their Moabite brethren. Similarly, R. Chaim Paltiel (Lange 1981:538) explains that Chemosh was originally Ammon's national idol, but, when Moab overran Ammon and conquered parts of their territory, they also "conquered" their god and adopted it as their own. (Perhaps this is what prompted the Ammonites to produce a new idol, **Milkom**.)
Alternatively, Nachmanides suggests that Jephtah meant that just as the Moabite god Chemosh and the Moabite king Balak had originally been unable to help the Moabites maintain their land, so too the Ammonites had nothing that could help them regain the land that they had lost to the Jews. Along the same lines, Radak (as understood by Batzri 1995:268) explains that Jephtah sarcastically told the Ammonite king that if he wished to usurp the territory which had originally belonged to Moab, then he should also adopt Chemosh—Moab's national idol—as his own god. For more information about this, see Klein 2016:125–130.

251 H. Filipowski (ed.), *Machaberes Menachem* (London, 1854), pp. 61–62.

252 J.D. Eisenstein (ed.), *Otzar Yisrael*, vol. 5 (New York, 1907–1913), p. 282.

253 Oded 2007a:594.

Babylonian god of the underworld, **NERGAL**.[254] Another opinion maintains that the name Chemosh was related to the Hebrew word *chmosh* (כמוש), which refers to something "withered" and "contracted," and probably alludes to what the Moabites wished upon their enemies, or the effects of being sunbaked.[255]

The Mesha Stele (see below) referred to this deity as "Ashtar-Chemosh," either implying some sort of connection (perhaps a mythological marriage) between Chemosh and **ASHTORETH**, or simply identifying Chemosh with the planet Venus.[256] As we shall explain below, the Mesha Stele also suggests that Chemosh was a sun-god.

In his epistle to Ovadiah the Proselyte, Maimonides writes that Chemosh worship involved shaving[257] one's head (ritual tonsuring) and refraining from wearing clothes with seams.[258] In fact, the Bible reports an incident that occurred in King David's time wherein Jewish emissaries sent to console the Ammonite king Hanun over the death of his father were humiliated by being stripped of half their clothing and being shaved (II Sam. 10:1–5 and I Chron. 19:1–5). R. Yaakov Chaim Sofer explains that the Ammonites especially humiliated these Jewish emissaries by cutting half their clothes and cutting their hair because they worshipped Chemosh, whose rituals involved refraining from wearing clothes with seams and the ritual sacrifice of hair.[259]

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254 *DDD*, pp. 187; 201.

255 See J. Qafih (ed.), *Peirush Neviim Rishonim L'Rabbeinu Avraham ben Shlomo, I Melachim* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Mishnat HaRambam, 2006), p. 240. *DDD*, p. 187, however, proposes and rejects such an etymology.

256 Oded 2007a:594.

257 Some editions of Maimonides' epistle read "baring" instead of "shaving." Maimonides (*Sefer ha-Mitzvos*, Negative Commandment #6) cites shaving one's hair for Chemosh as an example of worshipping an idol in its traditional way. See M. Kasher, *Torah Shleimah*, vol. 16 (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 232–234, who explains that this meant sacrificing one's hair to Chemosh, and proposes emending Maimonides' letter to Ovadiah the Proselyte to match this explanation. Sacrifice of hair as a rite associated with Chemosh is also mentioned in *Mechilta de-Rashbi* (to Ex. 20:5, Hoffman ed., p. 105), as well as several Yemenite Midrashim, including *Midrash ha-Biur* and *Midrash ha-Gadol* (Ex. 20:5).

A brouhaha erupted in 2004 concerning the Halachic permissibility of using hair from Indian temples in *sheitels* (Yiddish for "wigs," commonly worn by married Jewish women to cover their natural hair). One point of the controversy centered on whether the ritual haircuts at those temples are comparable to the ritual haircuts of the Chemosh cult. R. Yosef Shalom Elyashiv (1910–2012) originally ruled leniently on this matter, but then rescinded his lenient ruling and decided to forbid such *sheitels*; see his *Kovetz Teshuvos* (vol. 1 §77 and, vol. 3 §118). R. Moshe Sternbuch in responsa *Teshuvos ve-Hanhagos* (vol. 2, §414 and, vol. 5, §260–261) also takes this hardline approach against such *sheitels*. See also responsa *Shulchan ha-Levi* (vol. 1, *Chelek ha-Birurim* §28) by Rabbi Yisroel Belsky (1938–2016), and responsa *ve-Herim ha-Kohen* (vol. 4, §64) by Rabbi Yirmiyahu Menachem Cohen (currently *Av Beis Din* of Paris) who issue more permissive rulings. For more information about this controversy, see the Monsey-based journal *Kovetz Ohr Yisroel* vols. 36–37 (2004). More recently, my friend R. Moshe Ephraim Indik penned a missive entitled *Peas Keidma* that argues against the Halachic permissibility of such *sheitels*.

258 *Teshuvos ha-Rambam*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1960), p. 727.

259 *Zechut Yitzchak*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 28–29.

Chemosh's Form

An early Rabbinic tradition[260] about Chemosh and its later incarnations relates that it was a black woman-shaped stone which many different peoples pilgrimaged to "greet."[261] Reportedly, one out of a thousand of these pilgrims would mysteriously not return. R. Menachem Tziyyoni (1340–1410) adds that this stone has stood in place since the Six Days of Creation.[262]

R. Toviah ben Eliezer writes that the idol was located in the desert and its location is known in Arabic as "Mecca." He thus seems to identify the Moabite idol Chemosh with the Kaaba, the Muslim shrine at Mecca. However, a 14th-century Yemenite scholar named R. Avraham ben Shlomo cites R. Yitzchak the Spaniard that Chemosh was similar to the Kaaba in Mecca because it was a large idol, but only its head was visible.[263] This implies that Chemosh was not the same as the Kaaba, which makes sense since Mecca is in Saudi Arabia; while Chemosh was worshipped in Moab and Ammon, in the area of present-day Jordan.

The Talmud mentions that there was a fixed place of daily idol worship in Arabia,[264] and R. Yehudah ben Klonymous (1130–1169) explains that there was a stone there upon which the words, "bow to her" were inscribed.[265]

R. Nachshon Gaon (d. 882) links that fixed place of idolatry to Islam by writing that an Ishmaelite (i.e., a Muslim) can render wine forbidden for consumption by touching it because they are considered idolaters, as the Talmud writes that there is a fixed place of idolatry in Arabia.[266]

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260 *Midrash Lekach Tov* to Num. 21:29. R. Toviah and *Peirush ha-Rokeach* (Klugmann 2009c:85) write that people from "Moab and her neighbors" would come to prostrate themselves before Chemosh. They support this with the verse in Judges in which Jephtah mentions the idol to the Ammonite king (which shows that Chemosh worship was not limited to the Moabites). See Klein 2016:131–133.

261 The earliest source which identifies Chemosh with a stone is pseudo-Philo (Orlinsky 1971:191). He wrote that Jephtah told the Ammonite king that his god had not granted his kingdom any land because in actuality they had no god, and they had been led astray after stones. However, this account runs counter to the Bible.
Petrus Alfonsi (1062–1110), a Jewish apostate who converted to Christianity, wrote that Lot's two sons, Ammon and Moab, worshipped two stone idols: a black one named Mercurius (see **Cochav**) and a white one named Chamos (i.e., Chemosh). This somewhat resembles the Rabbinic tradition that Chemosh was a black stone. See B. Septimus, "Petrus Alfonsi on the Cult at Mecca," *Speculum*, vol. 56:3 (1981), pp. 517–533.

262 *Tziyyoni* (Lemberg, 1882), p. 65a.

263 See J. Qafih (ed.), *Peirush Neviim Rishonim L'Rabbeinu Avraham ben Shlomo, I Melachim* (Kiryat Ono: Machon Mishnat HaRambam, 2006), p. 240.

264 TB *Avodah Zarah* 11b.

265 See Y. Maimon (ed.), *Yechusai Tanaim ve-Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1963), p. 161.

266 Cited by S. Chasidah (ed.), *Shibbolei ha-Leket*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1988), p. 20. However, R. Moshe Sternbuch (in responsa *Teshuvos ve-Hanhagos*, vol. 4, §35) questions R. Nachshon Gaon's interpretation of the Talmud in light of the fact that the Talmud was written before Islam came into existence. In practice, R. Nachshon Gaon's view that Islam is idolatry is but a minority opinion. Most authorities follow Maimonides's view (Laws of *Maachalos Asuros* 11:7) that Muslims are not considered idolaters. See also E. Haouzi, *Yayn Malchus* (Strasbourg, 2003), pp. 241–244.

Mesha and Chemosh

The Bible (II Kgs. Chapter 3) records that during the reigns of Jehoram and Jehoshaphat, the tri-national army of Judah, Israel, and Edom waged war against Mesha, king of Moab. When the army was in trouble, Hashem saved them by performing miracles through Elisha the Prophet. After seeing these miracles, the Moabite king lost his motivation to fight and questioned why the Jews deserved such miraculous Divine intervention. He was told that because Abraham, the Jewish Patriarch, had been willing to sacrifice his only son in order to appease Hashem, Hashem maintained a special relationship with the Jews.

Mesha decided that he too could appease his god[267] by sacrificing his son,[268] and proceeded to sacrifice his own firstborn and heir-apparent atop the city's wall. Ibn Kaspi[269] explains that Mesha's rationale for sacrificing his son atop the city wall was twofold: Firstly, he sought to appease his god through this sacrifice. Secondly, he attempted to affect the tri-national army emotionally and make them retreat in guilt for having caused such a gruesome death. As Rashi explains, Mesha's efforts proved successful, as his sacrifice "reminded" Hashem that the Jews also worshipped idolatry, so He poured His wrath upon the Jews, forcing the tri-national coalition into retreat. Mesha's ensuing victory served as the impetus for writing the Mesha Stele, discovered by archeologists in 1868.

The Midrash notes that the word "wall" (הַחֹמָה, *ha-chomah*) used by the Bible in this context can also be read as "the sun" (הַחַמָּה, *ha-chamah*), to allude to the fact that the Moabite king worshipped the sun.[270]

In the Mesha Stele, the Moabite king attributed his victory to "divine" intervention, specifically thanking Chemosh. Coupled with Midrashic sources that Mesha offered a sacrifice to the sun-god in the midst of that war, this suggests that Chemosh was a sun-god.[271]

Theophoric Appearances

Chemosh appears as a theophoric element in several personal names attested to in the epigraphical record. The name of Mesha's father, as inscribed in the Mesha Stele, definitely begins with the theophoric prefix "Chemosh," but the end of his name is not clearly decipherable. Some interpret the name as Chemosh-Melech ("Chemosh is king") or Chemosh-Yat (a name which ostensibly belonged to a Moabite king mentioned in the *Kerak Inscription*[272]).

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267 This explanation implies that Mesha's sacrifice was idolatrous. However, TB *Sanhedrin* 39b records a disagreement between the Amoraic sages Rav and Shmuel over whether Mesha offered this sacrifice to Hashem or his idol. See also *Bereishis Rabbah* §55:5.

268 However, R. Yosef Kara, Radak, and Abarbanel explain (II Kgs. 3:27, Amos 2:1) that Mesha sacrificed the firstborn son of the Edomite king, whom the Moabites held in captivity. They find an allusion to this in Amos' prophecy which castigates Moab for having burnt the bones of the king of Edom. See also Poznanski 1913:144 and Wertheimer 1978b:90–91 who follow this approach. However, Rashi (to Amos 2:1 and TB *Taanis* 3a), in accordance with his own commentary to the episode in Kings, explains that Amos' prophecy refers to a different event. A different Moabite king had conquered the king of Edom and burnt his bones. The advantage of Rashi's approach is that it does not require reinterpreting the phrase *king of Edom* there to mean "[the child destined to become the next] *king of Edom*" (see *Kli Yakar* there).

269 *Adnei Kesef* to II Kgs. 3:27.

270 See *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Ki Sisa* §5) and *Yalkut Shimoni* (II Kgs. §227).

271 See *ANETS*, p. 320.

272 W.L. Reed and F.V. Winnett, "A Fragment of an Early Moabite Inscription from Kerak," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, vol. 172 (1963), p. 7.

A later Moabite king was named Chemosh-halta.[273] Sennacherib's Annals (three clay prisms with copies of the same text describing Sennacherib's conquests) tell that Sennacherib extracted tribute from a Moabite king named Chemoshnadab.[274] Moabite seals discovered by archeologists record a handful of other Chemosh-related names including, Chemosh-Am [son of] Chemosh-El the Scribe, Chemosh-Zedek, Chemosh-Palit, and possibly Chemosh-Hallel.[275] Chemosh also appears as a theophoric element in certain Egyptian names.[276]

Ciun (כיון), sometimes spelled Kaiwan, was an entity whose worship was criticized by the prophet Amos, who foretold the respective downfalls of the idols **Siccuth**, Ciun, and **Cochav** (Amos 5:26). Rabbeinu Bachya writes that this idol is mentioned twice more in the Bible: Jer. 7:18 and 44:19.

Targum understands that Ciun was the name of a foreign deity, while Rashi adds that it was identical to Siccuth. However, R. Moshe David Valle explains that Siccuth and Ciun made up a pair of male and female idols, with Siccuth being the male and Ciun being the female.[277] R. Saadia Gaon explains that Ciun was another name for the planet Saturn (known in Greek as Cronus).[278] However, R. Yosef Kimchi (1160–1235) writes that *ciun* cannot be an idol's proper name because Amos treats it grammatically as though it was in plural form.[279] Instead, he argues that *ciun* refers to the *preparation* of sacrifices for an unspecific deity. His son, Radak, cites both of these views.

Rabbeinu Bachya blends these two opinions and writes that the word *ciun* was derived either from the word *mechin* (מכין, prepare) and referred to a deity whose worship involved preparing foods and bringing them to the idol; or from the word *kavana* (כוונה, intention) and referred to the fact that its worshippers *intently* exerted much effort to assemble this idol.[280]

Some explain that Ciun was the same as **Rimmon**.[281] Others identify Ciun with Chiven/Siva, a Hindu goddess notoriously associated with sexual promiscuity.[282] Interestingly, when the Christian Bible (Acts 7:43) cites the verse above from Amos, it translates Ciun as Raiphan, a known Egyptian god.

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273 Oded 2007b:403.

274 *ANETS*, p. 287.

275 Oded 2007b:400, and *Encyclopedia Mikra'it*, vol. 4, B. Mazar (ed.) (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1968), p. 187.

276 *DDD*, p. 188. The Moabites were absorbed into the Babylonian Empire around the same time that the Jews were (whether by conquest or by more gentler means). Even under Babylonian, and later Persian, rule, the Moabites seem to have continued worshipping Chemosh. This is indicated by the continued appearance of the Chemosh theophoric element in personal names. However, once the Greeks came onto the scene, Chemosh seems to have been totally subsumed into Ares, the Greek god of war. See C. Cornell, "What Happened to Kemosh," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 128:2 (2016), pp. 284–299.

277 R. Moshe David Valle to Amos 5:26.

278 Ratzabi 1993:194, see also *DDD*, p. 478.

279 *Sefer ha-Galui* (s.v. מלך).

280 Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 18:21. See also M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Cheshek Shlomo* (Shaalvim: Shlomo Aumann Institute, 2018), p. 280, who admits that he does not know the meaning of Ciun and its connection to the letters כן in Hebrew.

281 *BB*, p. 41a.

282 See J. Roberts, "The Hindu Car or 'Tabernacle,'" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 1:1 (1834), pp. 87–92.

Cochav (כוכב) was an entity whose worship was criticized by the prophet Amos, who foretold the respective downfalls of the idols **Siccuth**, **Ciun**, and Cochav (Amos 5:26). Targum and Rashi understand that Cochav was the name of a god, while R. Yosef Kara explains that Cochav—whose name literally means "star"—is a general term for the worship of any celestial body. R. Saadia Gaon explains that Cochav refers to worship of the astral force of Mercury (known as Mazal Cochav).[283]

Mercury/Marculus

The Talmud often refers to an idol called Marculus (מרקוליס), which was associated with the cultic practice of throwing stones towards a heap of previously arranged stones. Prof. Saul Lieberman notes that the Sages sometimes used Marculus/Mercurius as a generic term for idolatry.[284]

R. Eliyahu ha-Bachur notes that some identify Marculus with the Roman god Mercury,[285] but questions this because he could not find evidence of rock-throwing as a form of Mercury worship.[286] However, ancient writers attest that a similar practice—namely placing a rock formation at the side of the road—was, in fact, associated with Mercury worship. (Mercury's Greek equivalent was Hermes, from whose name the English word *herm*, meaning "stone boundary marker," derives.)[287]

Rabbeinu Tam explains that Marculus's proper name was Cilus (קילוס),[288] which means "high praise" in Hebrew. In order to counter the positive meaning of the idol's name, the Sages nicknamed it Culus, which is related to the Hebrew word *keles* (קלס, disgrace). They also added the word *mar* (מר) which means "replace."[289] Thus, in Rabbinic eyes, the idol's name is *Marculus*, "[He whose name should be] replaced [with] disgrace."[290] Similarly,

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283 Ratzabi 1993:194.

284 S. Lieberman, "Palestine in the Third and Fourth Centuries," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 36 (1945), p. 368, and, vol. 37 (1946), p. 44.

285 See R. Ovadiah Bartenuro's commentary to the Mishnah *Avodah Zarah* 4:1, which explicitly makes this identification.

286 *Sefer ha-Tishbi* (Bene Barak: Machon HaRav Matzliach, 2005), pp. 165–166.

287 See W. Smith & C. Anthon (eds.), "Hermæ," *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (Harper and Brothers, 1843), pp. 500–501. See also JT *Avodah Zarah* 4:4 and *Sifra* to Lev. 26:1, which refer to Marculus on roads, clearly associating it with travel, as Mercury was the patron god of travelers.

288 R. Yaakov Yakub Ettlinger (*Aruch la-Ner* to TB *Sanhedrin* 64a) discusses the prohibition of uttering idols' names. In that context, he is unsure whether one may say "Cilos" because that idol is no longer worshipped; or whether even nowadays it may not be said, because it is an idol's name. According to the latter view, he notes that when *Tosafos* quote Rabbeinu Tam that the idol was really named Cilus, that name should only be written, but not read. Interestingly, *Tosafos* preface their quote of Rabbeinu Tam with the words "Rabbeinu Tam said...," which implies that this explanation was *said* by Rabbeinu Tam (as opposed to only *written* by him). See R.C. Klein, "Uttering the Names of Idols," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, vol. 73 (2017), pp. 10–11.

289 *Tosafos* to TB *Sanhedrin* 64a and *Avodah Zarah* 50a.

290 See *Maharam* (to TB *Sanhedrin* 64a) who explains why the Rabbis had to add the word *mar* and did not simply call the idol Culus, which itself means disgrace. He also discusses why the Rabbis did not name the idol Marcilus, "Replacing Cilus." See also Maharshal's commentary to *Smag* (Negative Commandment #32) and R. Chaim Benveniste's commentary there (*Chamra de-chayei* to *Smag*).

half-man/half-fish, it may well have been fish-like and also have had hands, thus resolving Rabbeinu Tam's objection to Menachem.

Some scholars note that the earliest source for identifying Dagon as a fish-god was the Christian scholar Jerome (347–420 CE), who referred to Dagon as *piscis tristiae* ("sorrowful fish"), a combination of the Hebrew words *dag* and *on* (און, sorrow).[309]

Academia largely rejects all etymologies that trace the name Dagon to "fish," "grain" (*dagan*, דגן), or to the Arabic word for "cloudy."[310]

Theophoric Appearances

In the writings of the Canaanite cult at Ugarit, there are two names with the theophoric element Dagan: El-Dagan and Ammini-Dagan.[311] Other examples of Dagan-based personal names were found at Emar and include: Isbi-Dagan, Kap-Dagan, Ribi-Dagan, Itti-Dagan, Dagan-nai, and Li-Dagan.[312] The name Dagon also appears as a theophoric element in such names as Ishme-Dagan,[313] Malik-Dagan, Kibri-Dagan.[314]

Gad (גד) was the name of a god that the Jews are chastised for having worshipped. The prophet Isaiah rebukes those Jews who forgot about Hashem and instead *set a table for Gad and pour libations for* MENI (Isa. 65:11). Although the consensus is that Gad was the name of a specific god, others disagree and explain it as a generic term for idolatry. Some authorities write that Gad was goat-shaped,[315] while others explain it was a woman whose foot was atop a globe, signifying the idol's purported ability to circumvent Mazal's powers.[316]

Abarbanel and Malbim explain that Gad refers to the multitudes of worshippers of an unspecified god.[317] Likewise, academia has identified sources in which Gad stood for the theological concept of divine providence, as opposed to denoting a specific deity.[318]

Gad and Mazal

Rashi[319] explains that Gad worship was associated with the worship of Mazal,[320] which Radak takes to mean a specific Mazal from a collection of Mazalos. Elsewhere, Radak and Ibn Ezra write

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returned the captured Ark of the Covenant to the Jewish People, they sent along with it a tribute of five golden images of hemorrhoids (whatever that means) and five golden mice (I Sam. 6:4).

309 G. Student, "Dagon: The Fish God," *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. 44:3 (2016); and *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, H. Mueller (Detroit: Gale, 2003), s.v. "Dagon."

310 *DDD*, pp. 216–218.

311 See N. Ayali-Darshan, "Baal, Son of Dagan: In Search of Baal's Double Paternity," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 133:4 (2013), p. 651.

312 D.E. Fleming, "Baal and Dagon in Ancient Syria," *Zeitschr. f. Assyriologie*, vol. 83 (1993), p. 92.

313 Pritchard 1992:564–565.

314 Ibid. 1992:623.

315 Interestingly, in Danish, *ged* (which is similar to Gad) is the word for goat. In Volume II, we will consider the possibility that the German word *gott* and the English word *god* are derived from Gad.

316 *BB*, p. 35a.

317 Abarbanel, Malbim to Isa. 65:11.

318 *DDD*, p. 340.

319 To Isa. 65:11 and TB *Sanhedrin* 92a. See also TB *Shabbos* 67b.

320 Maharsha to TB *Shabbos* 67b seems to understand that Gad was not the name of a specific god, but a general term for worship of Mazalos (see *Be'er Avraham* there).

that Gad represented the astral force of Jupiter,[321] or the multitude (*gedud*, גדוד) of celestial entities.[322] Some explain that Gad and Meni were a pair of idols worshipped together representing the sun and the moon, respectively.[323]

Others explain that Gad was the constellation of Capricon—a goat (*gedi*, גדי). Yet others argue that Gad was equivalent to the Roman god of good luck, known as *dea della fortuna* (Tyche in Greek mythology).[324] Finally, another view maintains that Gad was the name of a place and the deity is named after the place.[325]

Gad's Contradictory Implications

R. Shlomo Pappenheim explains that the name Gad is related to the Hebrew word *agad* (אגד, binding), and refers to the link between the physical manifestation of a thing or concept and its corresponding force in the spiritual realm. In the context of Isaiah's rebuke, the idolatrous Jews worshipped the spiritual forces charged with food and sustenance by setting a table for Gad and hoping that such worship would bring blessings to their produce.[326]

Similarly, R. Moshe Shapiro observes that *gad* is the root of several Hebrew words that have contradictory implications. On the one hand, some *gad*-related words denote continuation and growth: *god* (גוד, stretched), *gadol* (גדול, big), *negidu* (ניגדו, pull), *gidiyos* (גדיות, brimming edge). On the other hand, other *gad*-related words denote severance and separation: *gadua* (גדוע, truncated), *gadam* (גָדָם, a stump), *gidem* (גדם, amputee), *gader* (גדר, fence), and *gud* (גוד, partition).

R. Shapiro reconciles this dichotomy by explaining that the concept of Mazal combines two factors. Firstly, Mazal is viewed as something which influences others. In that way, Gad denotes the influx of influence that extends from the Mazal and continues to the individual. Secondly, in order to solidify the Mazal's role as a source of influence, some people detach it from the Ultimate Source of Influence—that is Hashem. This heretical outlook inevitably means severing the connection between Hashem and the Mazalos. In truth, while the first factor might be true, the second is clearly not. As we will explain in Volume II, the Mazalos are not independent powers. Rather they function as conduits for Hashem to channel His influence to the world. Nonetheless, Gad represents the idolatrous notion of viewing the Mazalos as the end-all source, disconnected from the influence of a Higher Mover.[327]

Worshipping Gad

The Talmud tells us that leaving morsels of food on the table after completing a meal is considered idolatrous because idolaters worshipped Gad by placing/leaving scraps of food and drink on a table after a meal.[328] The

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321 See *Chasdei David* (to Tosefta *Zavim* 1:10) who explains how Gad worship was indicative of the Jews rejecting the Davidic Kingdom.

322 Ibn Ezra and Radak (to Isa. 65:11 and Gen. 30:11), and Radak's *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. גד).

323 *BB*, p. 35a.

324 See *DDD*, pp. 336–337.

325 *BB*, p. 34a.

326 M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Yerios Shlomo* (Bene Barak, 2015), pp. 274–275 and M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Cheshek Shlomo* (Shaalvim: Shlomo Aumann Institute, 2018), p. 118.

327 R. Moshe Shapiro, *Parashas Shoftim* 5747.

328 TB *Sanhedrin* 92a. See *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh Deah* §178:3) and the commentaries there. See also *Radvaz* (vol.4 §201, vol. 8 §126) who rules that setting up a "Crib of Gad" in the house where a baby was born is not considered idolatry because its worshippers only set up *tables with food*, but not *cribs with bedding*.

Talmud qualifies this ruling, but the point is somewhat obscured and requires elucidation from later commentators:

- According to Rashi, the Talmud notes that Gad worshippers would also place whole portions of food on the table after the meal in order to appease Gad. Therefore, leaving over food after a meal is only forbidden if one also places a whole portion on the table.
- According to R. Meir Abulafia, the Talmud limits its ruling to a case whereby one expressly states that he is leaving the food for the sake of "Gad of the House." In contrast with Rashi's view, R. Abulafia writes that Gad worshippers would place *slices* of bread on the table, not *whole portions*.[329]

Theophoric Appearances

The name Gad seems to appear in several personal names and place-names in the Bible:

Firstly, Jacob's fourth wife Zilpah gave birth to a son whom Leah named Gad (Gen. 30:10–11).[330] Rabbeinu Bachya explains that Jacob's son Gad was called so because his descendants would be especially fortuitous and lucky (not as homage to the pagan god Gad).[331] R. Moshe Shapiro explains that by naming his son Gad, Jacob empowered him with the ability to experience significant growth without resorting to the denial of Hashem as the source of that growth. The Tribe of Gad served to remind the Jewish People of the reality that Hashem is indeed the source of everything and cannot be detached from Creation.[332]

R. Chaim Palagi (1788–1868) asks why Jacob allowed his son to be called Gad if that was an idol's name. To resolve this difficulty, R. Palagi supposes that Jacob lived before the idol Gad came into existence.[333] Others answer that while Jacob's son's name is *spelled* the same as the deity in question, the *vowelization* of the two differs slightly: Jacob's son was named */gvd/* (גָּד), while this deity was called */gæd/* (גַּד).[334]

Another Gad is found in the Book of Samuel, namely a prophet who prophesied to King David.[335]

The names of two spies that Moses sent to scout the Holy Land may contain theophoric references to Gad: Gadiel, son of Sodi, from the tribe of Zebulun; and Gadi, son of Suesee,

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329 *Yad Ramah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 92a.

330 Gersonides (to Ex. 16:31) writes that Gad is a type of white seed and Leah called Zilpah's son Gad because he was born white.

331 Rabbeinu Bachya to Genesis 30:11.

332 R. Moshe Shapiro, *Parashas Shoftim* 5747.

333 *Yismach Chaim* (Izmir, 1874), p. 6b, and *Ruach Chaim*, vol. 1 (Izmir, 1874), p. 159b. In the latter work, R. Palagi compares this to an idea proposed by R. Shimon Ashenburg (a 16th-century German grammarian) in *Devek Tov*. R. Ashenburg reconciles a contradiction in the Bible regarding the name of Issachar's son, which is given as Yov (יוב) in Genesis 46:13 and as Yashuv (ישוב) in Num. 26:24. He explains that Issachar's son was really named Yov, but since that is the same name as an idolatrous deity (Jove—another name for Jupiter), an extra ש was added to his name, so he was called Yashuv.

334 See S. Lifshitz, *Sharvit ha-Zahav ha-Chadash ha-Nikra Bris Avos* (Munkatch, 1914), p. 65b.

335 The Bible (I Chron. 29:29) reports that additional information about King David can be found in the writings of the prophets Samuel, Nathan, and Gad. That passage mentions a work called *Divrei Gad ha-Chozeh*, which was written by the prophet Gad. The Jewish community of Cochin, India, allegedly preserved a copy of this work, which was copied in the 18th century. This manuscript copy (MS Cambridge O0.1.20) is still extant, and was recently published by Dr. Meir Bar-Illan as *Divrei Gad ha-Chozeh* (Efrat, 2015).

from the tribe of Manasseh (Num. 13:10–11). However, the consensus rejects the possibility of a theophoric usage in those names and instead understands Gad in those names as a common noun.[336]

The Bible mentions places named Dibon Gad (Num. 33:45–46), Baal Gad (Josh. 11:17; 12:7; 13:5), and Migdal Gad (Josh. 15:37), while the Mishnah[337] mentions a place called Gadyon[338]—a name that the Talmud[339] understands is derived from Gad.[340]

Hadad (הֲדַד), also known as Adad/Adar or Addu, was a Babylonian/Aramean storm god. In Aram, it stood at the head of a pantheon and its name—which literally meant "the breast"—probably alluded to its supposed power to sustain the world. According to Aramean mythology, Hadad influenced both rain (which was essential for agriculture) and floods (which were detrimental to it). Arameans similarly believed that Hadad's voice (thunder) could be a good or bad omen depending on the god's mood. Hadad was also associated and/or synonymous with the Canaanite **BAAL** and Aramean **RIMMON**. Hadad was also known as Adodos in Greek, and was thus associated with the Greek god Zeus and the Roman gods Saturn and/or Jupiter. Indeed, ancient sources generally depicted Hadad as a bearded man with horns holding a double-axe and/or lightning

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336 *DDD*, p. 341. See also E. Friedheim, "The Names 'Gad, Gadya, Gada' among the Palestinian and Babylonian Sages and the Rabbinic Struggle against Pagan Influences" in A. Demsky (ed.), *These Are the Names: Studies in Jewish Onomastics*, vol. 3 (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2002), pp. 117–126.

337 *Zavim* 1:5.

338 See *Meleches Shlomo* to the Mishnah *Zavim* 1:5 who vowelizes the name as Gadyon (גַּדְיוֹן). Others vowelize it as Gad-Yavan (גַּד יָוָן), literally "the Greek Gad." R. Hai Gaon (commentary to the Mishnah), R. Hillel (commentary to *Toras Kohanim* to Lev. 15:3), and *Korban Aharon* (to *Toras Kohanim* there) explain that when the Greeks defiled the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, they dedicated an area for worship of Gad (which probably refers to Zeus, the Greek equivalent to Jupiter). A third rendering of the Mishnah reads: Geid Yavan (גַּד יָוָן). This vowelization is found in MS Kaufmann A50 fol. 278v and is also attested to in a treatise about the Holy Land written by Nachmanides's student. See *Sefer Kaftor vo-Ferach*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Beis Midrash LeHalachah BeHisyashvus, 1997), p. 445. See also *Tosafos* to TB *Niddah* 35a, who has the version "Garyon" (גריון).

339 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

340 R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (*Chavos Yair*, vol. 1, §1) explains that in this context the suffix *-on* added to the name Gad means "small" or "degraded." The Sages added this suffix to the idol's name in order to degrade it. Alternatively, the diminutive modifier alludes to the fact that the Greeks erected a mini-Gad idol near the Temple as a way of representing the greater Gad god that they worshipped. See also Radak (to II Kgs. 18:4 and Ps. 17:8) and Rabbeinu Bachya (to Deut. 32:10) who write that the appendage of an *n*-sound serves as a diminutive. Nonetheless, R. Bachrach concedes that sometimes that suffix has the exact opposite meaning and instead denotes greatness, like Yosef ben Gurion who is called Yosiphon. See *BB*, p. 30b, who also notes that the suffix *–on* does not necessarily serve as a diminutive or a superlative. In fact, Nachmanides (to Deut. 32:26) writes that appending *-yon* to words or names is simply a function of certain languages, but has no specific connotation. See also *Hagahos Rashash* to TB *Pesachim* 118a; responsa *Divrei Malkiel*, vol. 4 §14; and Radal to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 51:9.

bolt, which resembles the common imagery of Zeus.[341]

In Akkadian documents found at the ruins of the ancient Syrian city Mari, Hadad was referred to as "Hadad of Aleppo."[342] Aleppo (חלב, *chalav*) literally means "milk" in Hebrew, which solidifies the connection between Hadad ("the breast") and the Syrian city Aleppo.[343]

Theophoric Appearances

While Hadad does not appear explicitly in the Bible as the name of a deity, it is nonetheless present in the form of theophoric elements. Hadad was the name of an Edomite king who fought the Midianites (Gen. 36:35–36, I Chron. 1:46–51). Another Edomite king named Hadad lived in King Solomon's time (I Kgs. 11).

King David defeated the Aramean king Hadadezer ben Rehib (II Sam. 8, I Chron. 18–19), whereupon King Toi of Hamath sent his son Hadoram to offer King David a tribute (I Chron. 18:10). Interestingly, elsewhere (II Sam. 8:10) Hadoram's name is given as Joram, with an element of Hashem's name replacing the Hadad element.

Ben-Hadad was the Aramean king during the reigns of Asa and Ahab (I Kgs. 15:18–20; 20:1–32, II Chron. 16:2–4), and was succeeded by Hazael (II Kgs. 8:7–15), whose son and successor was also named Ben-Hadad (II Kgs. 13:24–25).

The name Hadadrimmon, which contains Hadad and Rimmon elements, appears in Zechariah's prophecy (Zech. 12:11).

Priests who worked in temples associated with Hadad were given the theophoric name Eved-Hadad (עבדהדד, servant of Hadad). Additionally, archeology and epigraphical records have unearthed ample instances in which Hadad was used as a part of a personal name.[344]

The Aramean king who authored the Tel Dan Stele ascribed his ascent to the throne and military success to Hadad.[345] He authored the stele to memorialize his battles with the kings of Judah and Israel.[346]

Haman (הָמָן) was a statesman in Shushan (Susa) under the rule of the Persian king Ahasuerus. The prophet Isaiah foretells, *Instead of the thorn bush, a cypress will rise* (Isa. 55:13). The Talmud explains that *the thorn bush* refers to Haman, who made himself into a god. The *cypress [that] will rise* in his stead refers to Mordechai who, at the conclusion to the Book of Esther, filled Haman's exalted position at the king's court.[347]

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341 See *DDD*, pp. 377–382.

342 Greenfield 1993:54–61.

343 A legend popularized by R. Pesachyah of Regensburg (the well-known 13th-century Rabbinic traveler and diarist) offers another origin for the etymology of Aleppo: He explains that the city Aram Zoba is known as Aleppo because Abraham used to bring his sheep and cattle there to graze, and his cows would produce milk. Additionally, he explains that Abraham used Aleppo as his base from which to provide milk to the poor locals (Eisenstein 1926:54).

344 *DDD*, pp. 377–382.

345 While most scholars assume that the author of the Tel Dan Stele was an Aramean king (usually identified as Hazael), J. Wesseliu argues that Jehu, king of Israel, actually authored the inscription. See "The First Royal Inscription from Ancient Israel: The Tel Dan Inscription Reconsidered," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An International Journal of Nordic Theology*, vol. 13:2 (1999), pp. 163–186.

346 A. Biran and J. Naveh, "The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment," *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 45:1 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1995), p. 13.

347 TB *Megillah* 10b.

Rabbinic tradition explains that Mordechai refused to bow to Haman because he had made himself into a god.[348] Some associate the Haman cult with that of an Elamite god Humban, and his wife Zeresh with the Elamite goddess Kiririsa, although the scholarly consensus rejects these connections.[349]

However, other Midrashic sources assume that Haman was not deified. Rather, his high position in the Persian government prompted Ahasuerus to decree that all citizens must bow to him simply out of honor.[350] Haman's reaction[351] to this decree was to sew an idol's image onto his clothes and on his chest,[352] so that anyone who bowed to him effectively bowed to his idol.[353] Realizing this situation, Mordechai refused to bow to Haman so as not to bow to this idol.[354]

R. Baruch ha-Levi Epstein (1860–1940) harmonizes these two approaches. He explains that Haman wished to show everyone that the idolatrous deity had granted him the power to hold influence over people and grant their needs. Haman engraved the idol's form on his chest in order to symbolize that he and the idolatrous god were one. Accordingly, both are true: Haman turned himself into a god, and he also tried to make others bow to the idolatrous image on his person.[355]

Similarly, R. Simcha Reuven Edelman (a 20th-century Polish scholar) explains that Haman's high position caused him to become haughty and believe that the gods had granted him divine powers. He sewed the gods' image upon his clothes to remind everyone of his prominent governmental position, which he attributed to his own divine powers.[356]

R. Yaakov Yerucham Warschner finds elsewhere in the Talmud an allusion to Haman's claim of divinity. The Talmud asks where the Torah hints to Haman,[357] and responds with the verse in which Hashem chastises Adam by asking,

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348 TB *Megillah* 19a and *Esther Rabbah* §7:8.

349 See *DDD*, pp. 432–434; 489–490.

350 See Maharsha (to TB *Megillah* 12a) who writes that Haman did not deify himself, but rather demanded that people bow to him in order to honor him.

351 S. Buber (ed.), *Sifrei de-Aggadata Al Megillas Esther, Midrash Panim Acheirim* (Vilna 1887), pp. 41a–41b, relates that Haman desired to annihilate the Jews even before Mordechai refused to bow to him. This Midrash explains that Haman attached his god's image to his clothes so that when the Jews bowed to him, they would essentially worship idolatry. This would anger Hashem and seal their fate of destruction. However, Mordechai foiled Haman's plan by refusing to bow to him and even ridiculing the idol worn on Haman's clothes.

352 *Tosafos* (to TB *Shabbos* 72b) quotes the Midrash that Haman had two idols upon on his chest. Ibn Ezra (to Es. 3:2) writes in the Sages' name that the idol's image was on his clothes or his hat.

353 *Esther Rabbah* §7:5 and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 50).

354 *Esther Rabbah* §6:2.

355 *Torah Temimah* (to Es. 3:2 §4).

356 S.R. Edelman, *ha-Tirosh* (Warsaw, 1901), p. 240.

357 R. Yehudah Aszad (1796–1866), as quoted in his son's introduction to his responsa *Yehudah Yaaleh* (vol. 2), explains that the names of idolatrous deities may not be used unless the Bible does so (TB *Sanhedrin* 63b). Thus the Talmud sought a Biblical reference to Haman to justify Mordechai's use of Haman's name—who had been deified—in the Book of Esther. See R.C. Klein, "Uttering the Names of Idols," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, vol. 73 (2017), pp. 5–7. Ironically, the name Mordechai is possibly linked to the god **Merodach**, and thus its use also requires justification (also provided by the Talmud there).

Did you eat from (הִמִּן, ha-min) *the tree from which I commanded you not to eat*? (Gen. 3:11).[358] The word *ha-min* is spelled the same as Haman (הָמָן), sans vowelization. In this, the Talmud associates Haman with a tree, implying that Haman himself, like the **ASHERAH** tree, was a form of idolatry.[359]

Worship out of Fear

The Talmud cites the Amoraic sage Rava's ruling that someone who goes through the motions of idol worship under duress, without accepting the idol's divinity, is not liable for capital punishment.[360]

The Tosafists ask: Given that the Halachah is decided in favor of Rava's view that one who worships idolatry out of fear is exempt from capital punishment, then why did Mordechai refuse to bow to Haman? They answer that although idol worship under duress is technically permitted, it is still better to give up one's life in order to avoid doing so (as this is included in the commandment of *Kiddush Hashem*—sanctifying Hashem's name).

Alternatively, the Tosafists explain that Haman was worse than a regular deified person because, in line with the Midrashim cited above, he also had images of other idols on his person.[361] R. Moshe Al-Ashakar (1466–1542) explains that this means that although Rava offers a dispensation for idolatry committed out of fear, this only applied to bowing to Haman himself because the king had decreed that everyone should bow to Haman. The "fear" of disobeying the king cannot be extended to also allow bowing to the idol on Haman's clothes. For this reason, Mordechai refused to bow to Haman.[362]

Kos (קוס or קוש), sometimes spelled Qaus, was the fertility god/desert god that headed the Edomite pantheon. Kos was also associated with war, as some scholars conjecture that its name was associated with the Hebrew word *keshes* (קשת, bow). Historians note that archeology attests to the worship of this deity in Egypt even before the founding of the Edomite state.[363]

Theophoric Appearances

The name of this deity does not appear anywhere in the Bible or in classic Rabbinic writings; rather it has only recently been rediscovered by archeologists. Nonetheless, we may point to one passage which seems to allude to such a god: Midrash Tanchuma writes that some people have disgusting names, but perform beautiful deeds. To this effect, it quotes the verse, *The sons of Barkos* (ברקוס), *the sons of Sisera* (Ezra 2:53, Neh. 7:55). This is part of the list of families of Nethinim who returned to the Holy Land from the Babylonian exile.[364] The Midrash writes that these people built the Second Temple and were members of the Men of the Great Assembly

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358 TB *Chullin* 139b.

359 *Seder Devarim le-Yaakov* printed in *Seder Yaakov*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 2010), p. 368.

360 TB *Sanhedrin* 61b. Abaye disagrees and cites a Tanaaic teaching that the prohibition of bowing to idolatry even includes bowing to a personage like Haman—even though the bower certainly did not view Haman as divine. Abaye understands this to mean that idol worship under duress, even without any heretical beliefs (as occurred when the Jews bowed to Haman) is forbidden. Rava rejects Abaye's proof and understands that this Tannaic teaching simply means that a deified person is indeed idolatrous, but not that bowing to idolatry under duress is forbidden.

361 *Tosafos* to Sanhedrin 61b and Shabbos 72b.

362 Responsa *Maharam Al-Ashakar* (§76).

363 *DDD*, pp. 674–677.

364 *Shemos* §2.

because, despite having disgusting names, they performed beautiful deeds.[365]

R. Dr. Tzvi Kaplan (1922–2012) writes that the reason why Sisera is considered a "disgusting name" is self-evident (ostensibly because this name conjures the memory of Sisera, the Canaanite villain of Jud. 4–5), but he cannot understand why Barkos is considered a disgusting name. He entertains the possibility that perhaps Barkos is considered a disgusting name because it does not have a "Hebrew ring" to it, but seemingly backs away from that position.[366]

However, in light of the evidence above, this Midrash makes more sense: the name Barkos literally means "son of Kos," a theophoric reference to the Edomite god.

In addition to commoners who bore names recalling Kos, there were several Edomite kings who had such names. From the time of Ahaz, king of Judah, Edom became an Assyrian vassal state. Thus, archeological records ascribed to the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser mention Kosmalaku, king of Edom, among other kings who surrendered to him.[367] Later, the Assyrian king Esar-Haddon mentioned Kosgabri, king of Edom, together with other vassal kings who swore loyalty to him at Nineveh.[368] Kos-related names are attested to by archeology even in later times, continuing through the period of the Idumeans (in the Second Temple Era).[369]

Meni (מְנִי) was the name of an entity which Isaiah chastises the Jews for worshipping. He rebukes those Jews who forgot about Hashem and instead *set a table for* GAD *and pour libations for Meni* (Isa. 65:11). The exact identity of this god—or even whether Meni refers to a specific god—is unclear, and the commentators offer a plethora of explanations.

Many commentators take the word Meni as the name of a specific astrological force.[370] R. Yeshaya of Trani writes that Meni was an idol's name, and heretics are thus known as *minim* (מינים, heretics).[371] Another possibility is that Meni was the Egyptian fertility goddess Min.[372] Others identify Meni as Manah, a deity worshipped by pagan Arabs.[373]

A separate approach maintains that *meni* is not a name, but a common noun that means "according to the number," and is derived from the Hebrew word *minyan* (מנין, number). Accordingly, some explain that the word *meni* refers to "the counting" of the seven astrological forces and, thus, to the collective

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365 An alternate version of this Midrash (*Tanchuma Shelach* §6) writes that they were returnees from the exile and contributed to the building of the Temple, but not that they were members of the Great Assembly. This second version is favored by *Eitz Yosef* (to *Tanchuma Shemos* §2), who writes that Nethinim could not have been members of the Great Assembly. A third version of this Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah* 16:10) simply mentions these people as returnees.

366 Z. Kaplan, *be-Halakha u-ve-Aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1960), p. 119.

367 *ANETS*, p. 282.

368 *ANETS*, pp. 291; 294.

369 *DDD*, p. 677.

370 See Radak and Ibn Ezra ad loc., citing R. Moshe Cohen.

371 Wertheimer 1978a:195.

372 See E.A.W. Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (Cosimo Inc., 2013), p. 299, who writes that Meni was the name of an Egyptian god. See also C. Coulter and P. Turner, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Deities*, comps. (Routledge, 2012), p. 318.

373 See J. McClintock and J. Strong, *The Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (Harper and Brothers, 1880), s.v. "Meni."

worship of astral forces.[374] Rashi follows this basic approach, but explains that "the number" refers to the number of priests, meaning Isaiah criticized those who *pour libations according to the number* [of priests]. R. Shlomo Ibn Parchon (a 12th-century Spanish grammarian) explains that Isaiah refers to the pouring of a large *number of libations*.[375] Ibn Janach[376] and Malbim understand that Isaiah referred to the large *number of attendees* present during idol worship.

R. Yosef Kara explains that the word *meni* is derived from the Hebrew word *mimaneh* (ממנה, appoint) and refers in a general way to all deities which idolaters "appointed" over themselves.[377] Similarly, R. Shlomo Pappenheim explains that Meni refers to the spiritual force "appointed" (*memuneh*, ממונה) over drinks and liquids. Idolaters would offer libations to Meni as a means of asking those divine powers to bless them with successful drinks.[378]

Finally, R. Yeshaya of Trani explains that *meni* is related to the Hebrew word *mann* (מן, provide meal/manna) and refers to the ritual meal that idolaters would arrange for their idols.[379]

Merodach (מְרֹדַךְ), also known as Marduk and **Bel**, was the chief god of the Babylonian pantheon. When Jeremiah foretold Babylon's downfall, he said that people would exclaim, *Bel is ashamed, Merodach is devastated; her idols are ashamed, her gods are devastated* (Jer. 50:2). Merodach was the god of the rising sun and spring vegetation. Before being accepted as the Babylonians' chief god, it was considered the patron god of the city of Babylon. Merodach was also associated with the astrological force of Jupiter. Merodach's mythological sons were **Nevo** (his scribe), and **Nergal**. Nevo's popularity eventually surpassed its father's, and it replaced Merodach as the head of the Babylonian pantheon.[380]

Merodach was also called Ashur (Assur). Academia established that Ashur was the chief Assyrian god, and when the Assyrians destroyed Babylon, they replaced Merodach with Ashur.[381] The name Ashur was similar to the Egyptian god Osiris, leading some to identify the Babylonian Merodach, Assyrian Ashur, and Egyptian Osiris as different names for one god.[382] Merodach's symbol was the spade, an allusion to the belief that he controlled the ditches used in Mesopotamia for water irrigation (which were built with spades), thus associating his agricultural powers with water and fertility. In fact, the name Merodach recalls the ancient Babylonian/Sumerian word

374 Radak, Ibn Ezra (ad loc.), and Radak's *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. מלא and מנה).

375 Z. Gottlieb-Stern (ed.), *Machaberes ha-Aruch* (Pressburg, 1944), p. 36a.

376 Berliner 1893:265.

377 See S. Langdon, "The Semitic Goddess of Fate, Fortuna-Tyche," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 1 (1930), pp. 21–29, who offers a similar etymology and criticizes Assyriologists for not realizing this connection.

378 M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Yerios Shlomo* (Bene Barak, 2015), pp. 274–275, and M. Tzuriel (ed.), *Cheshek Shlomo* (Shaalvim: Shlomo Aumann Institute, 2018), p. 118.

379 Wertheimer 1978a:195.

380 *DDD*, pp. 543–549; *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., vol. 9, H. Mueller (Detroit: Gale, 2003), s.v. "Marduk"; and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 13, P. Artzi & R. Kutscher (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Marduk."

381 See Kaufmann 1960:61 and *DDD*, pp. 108–109.

382 J.G. Griffiths, *The Origins of Osiris and His Cult* (Brill, 1980), p. 90.

marru, which means spade.[383] In addition to the spade, Merodach was sometimes depicted as a snake-dragon.[384]

Theophoric Appearances

The Bible mentions two Babylonian kings whose names bore theophoric references to Merodach. Merodach-Baladan,[385] son of Baladan, served as king of Babylon at the time that Hezekiah was king of Judah (Isa. 39:1).[386] Evil-Merodach—whose name, some explain, means "man of Merodach"[387]—succeeded **NEBUCHADNEZZAR** as king of Babylon (II Kgs. 28:27).

The name of Mordechai, one of the heroes of the Book of Esther, seems to recall Merodach as well. In fact, this can be used to explain an otherwise enigmatic passage: The Talmud asks where we find an allusion to Mordechai in the Torah, and replies by citing the verse with the phrase *pure myrrh* (Ex. 30:23), which Targum translates into Aramaic as *mira dachya* (מירא דכיא)—a phrase phonetically similar to the name Mordechai.[388] R. Baruch Epstein explains the Talmud's opening question by noting that Mordechai's true Hebrew name was Pesachyah;[389] yet, for some reason, the Bible chooses to identify him by his Babylonian name Mordechai, associated with the Babylonian god Merodach. Because of the idolatrous implications of the name Mordechai, the Talmud sought to find a positive allusion in the Torah to that name and does so by citing Targum.[390]

However, Kohut suggests that the name Mordechai means "small person" in Persian—a name which Mordechai's great humility prompted others to bestow upon him.[391]

Marduk (an alternate name for Merodach) was an official mentioned in the Elephantine Papyri.[392] Additionally, some argue that Shadrach, the name that Nebuchadnezzar gave Hananiah (Dan. 1:7), was somehow related to the Babylonian deity Merodach.[393]

Milkom (מִלְכֹם) was the chief Ammonite god. The Bible reports that in his old age, King Solomon "went after" Milkom, the god of the Ammonites (I Kgs. 11:5; 11:33, II Kgs. 23:13) and, a few verses later, that he built a temple for **MOLECH**, the god of the Ammonites (I Kgs. 11:7). Based on this, some commentators identify Milkom with

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383 T. Oshima, "Marduk, the Canal Digger," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, vol. 30 (2006), pp. 77–88.

384 N. Brisch, "Marduk (god)," *Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses* (Oracc and the UK Higher Education Academy, 2016).

385 Elsewhere, his name is given as Berodach-Baladan (II Kgs. 20:12).

386 *Esther Rabbah* §3:1 writes that Merodach-Baladan worshipped the sun, which fits with the explanations above that identify Merodach with Bel, which was a Babylonian sun-god.

387 Marcus 1984:124; Marcus 2016:175; and Bula 1984:658.

388 TB *Chullin* 139b.

389 See Mishnah *Chullin* 5:1.

390 *Torah Temimah* to Ex. 30:23 §48, and Est. 2:5 §11. See also *Yaaros Devash* (vol. 2, *drush* 13) and R. Meir Mazuz's article in *Kovetz Ohr Torah*, vol. 538 (2012), pp. 741–742.

391 See A. Kohut, *Aruch ha-Shalem*, vol. 5 (Vienna, 1878–1892), p. 244.

392 B. Porten & A. Yardeni (eds.), *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986), p. 114.

393 Keil 1994:12. Ignoring the initial consonants in the names Shadrach and Merodach, the rest of those two names contain the same letters, albeit not in the same order.

Molech.[394] A Yemenite Midrash asserts that Milkom/Molech involved worship of a specific planet, probably Saturn, which was also known as **Ciun**.[395]

Milkom in the Bible

The Bible records that after King David conquered the Ammonites, *He took the crown of their king [malkam] from upon his head...and it remained over David's head* (II Sam. 12:30). Targum and Radak interpret this verse literally, to mean that King David took the crown from atop the Ammonite king's head. However, Rashi, following the Talmud,[396] explains that *malkam* in this context refers to the crown of Milkom's idol. Although a Jew is forbidden from deriving any benefit from idolatrous paraphernalia, the Talmud explains that in this case, David was allowed to wear Milkom's crown because Itai the Gittite nullified the item's idolatrous status.

Elsewhere, when foretelling the fate of the Ammonites who occupied Gad's tribal territory after the Gadites were exiled by the Assyrians, Jeremiah asks, *Why has their king [malkam] inherited Gad, his people dwelling in its cities?* (Jer. 49:1). Here too, Targum and Radak understand *malkam* literally, while Rashi explains that *malkam* refers to Milkom, the Ammonites' god. Abarbanel harmonizes these two opinions by explaining that the Ammonites would typically refer to their god Milkom as their king.

Milkom's Form

Bits and pieces of the Ammonite religious cult can be gleaned from various sources. R. Binyamin of Tudela describes the ancient Temple of the Ammonites, where the Ammonites offered incense and sacrifices in front of an image of Milkom. He writes that the Ammonite idol was depicted as sitting on a gold-coated chair with two women at his sides.[397]

The *Zohar* writes that Ammonite swords had coiled snakes engraved on them because that was their god's image (see also **Nechushtan**).[398]

R. Yaakov Kamenetsky notes that the Bible only uses the root *sheketz* (שקץ, abomination) when referring to King Solomon straying after the Ammonites' god, but not when referring to other foreign gods.[399] This hints to the idea that the Ammonite god was likely an image of an insect or a rodent—creatures which the Bible refers to as *sheketz* or *sheretz*.[400]

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394 Rashi to II Sam. 12:30 and TB *Avodah Zarah* 44a (although see *Hagahos Rashash* there); Ibn Ezra to Lev. 18:21; and Nachmanides to Lev. 18:21 and Lev. 20:5.

395 Kapach 1957:361. In the Greek period, Milkom, which was understood to be a war deity, was Hellenized and translated into the Greek pantheon, essentially merging with Heracles. See C. Cornell, "What Happened to Kemosh," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, vol. 128:2 (2016), p. 296.

396 TB *Avodah Zarah* 44a. See also *Zohar* (*Vayishlach* 173a) which writes that a snake was engraved on the crown.

397 Eisenstein 1926:24–25.

398 *Mishpatim* 107a. *BB*, p. 38b, adds that the kings of Ammon were given the name/title Nachash (נחש, snake) because of the snake's significance in their religious cult (e.g., see I Sam. 11:1). The Bible also mentions a woman named Nechushta, who was Jehoiakim's wife (II Kgs. 24:8). She lived well after Hezekiah destroyed Nechushtan, so it is unlikely that her name conjured that deity (cf. Haran 2007:64).

399 The term is also used to describe Molech, which might be the same as Milkom, and **Chemosh** (I Kgs. 11:7, II Kgs. 23:13).

400 *Emes le-Yaakov* to I Kgs. 11:5.

Molech (מֹלֶךְ), sometimes spelled Moloch, was a type of idolatry proscribed by the Torah which involved passing one's child through a fire. Molech is mentioned once in conjunction with the Ammonites (I Kgs. 11:7) and a handful of times in Leviticus (18:21; 20:2–5) and in other places in the Bible (II Kgs. 23:10 and Jer. 32:35), without connection to any specific nation.

The Torah writes, *You shall not give from any of your offspring [to an idolatrous priest] to pass through for the Molech and do not profane the name of your God* (Lev. 18:21). A few chapters later, the Torah repeats this prohibition with more detail:

> *Any man from the Children of Israel and from the proselyte who lives with Israel, who gives from his children to the Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall pelt him with stone. I shall give My attention to that man, and I shall cut him off from among his people, for he had given from his offspring to the Molech in order to defile My sanctuary and to desecrate My holy name. (Lev. 20:2–5)*

Nachmanides notes that the Bible refers to this idol with a definite article (*the* Molech), implying that the Jews were already familiar with Molech, because they had been exposed to it in Egypt.[401] Nachmanides also discusses whether or not **Adrammelech** and **Anammelech** were different names for Molech.[402] He notes that even if they were not necessarily the same as Molech, all three forms of idolatry—as well as **Baal** worship[403]—embraced child sacrifice.

Ibn Ezra and Nachmanides write that Molech was another name for the Ammonite god **Milkom**. A Yemenite Midrash asserts that Milkom/Molech involved worship of a specific planet, probably Saturn, which was also known as **Ciun**.[404] Archeology has revealed that multiple cultures in the Ancient Middle East worshipped a god of death and the underworld named Molech (with slight variants).[405] Based on their conceptual similarities as gods of death, some theorize that Molech was also synonymous with **Nergal** and/or **Chemosh**.[406]

Alternatively, one Talmudic opinion adopted by some later commentators states that Molech was not a foreign deity but simply a type of divination.[407]

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401 Nachmanides to Lev. 18:21.

402 Ibid.; Rabbeinu Bachya (to Lev. 18:21) assumes that all three idols are the same, although he concedes that Rabbeinu Chananel understood that they were different.

403 See Jer. 19 which foretells the destruction of the Topheth at Ben Hinnom—a place where people sacrificed their children to Baal. Based on that passage, Nachmanides suggests that Baal is actually synonymous with Molech. Abarbanel (to Lev. 20:1) also claims that Baal and Molech are the same and, in line with his position on Baal, explains that these two forms of idolatry worshipped the sun. He explains that the idolaters argued that the sun was the king (מלך, *melech*) of the stars and that it epitomizes the elemental fire, so it was worshipped through fire. They would present their children to the fire as if to say that everything which they have, including their children, comes from Baal/Molech. Although he does not expressly write that Baal and Molech are one and the same, Gersonides (to Lev. 18:21) writes that the Molech ritual served to worship the astral force of Mars—which he understands was the perceived power behind Baal as well.

404 Kapach 1957:361.

405 *DDD*, pp. 582–583 offers a comprehensive survey of that evidence.

406 Doyle 1996:128–129.

407 TB *Sanhedrin* 64a. See R. Shimon Duran (*Zohar ha-Rakiyah* §154) who writes that the Molech

The Name Molech

Some explain that *molech* (מוֹלֶךְ: lit., he who reigns) was not the name of a specific idol, but referred to any god that one made into his "king." According to this explanation, the above passages prohibit one from offering his children to *any* idol—even idols which are not usually worshipped through child sacrifice.[408]

R. Yosef Nissim Ben-Adahan (a 20th-century Moroccan Rabbi) notes that the word Molech differs slightly in pronunciation from the word for reigning: In the former, the emphasis is on the first syllable, while in the latter, it is on the last. That is, *Mo-LECH* means "reigns," while this idol is consistently referred to in the Bible as *MO-lech*, which does not bear that meaning.[409] Because of the similarity between the name Molech and the word *molech*, theophoric allusions to Molech—if they exist—are difficult to discern, especially given that the word Molech is orthographically identical to the very common word *melech* (מֶלֶךְ, king).[410]

R. Yoel Teitelbaum proves that the word *molech* refers to one who reigns of his own accord but is undeserving of that position, as opposed to someone appointed to a position which he deserves. Thus, the name *Molech* refers to the fact that it was an authority that people accepted upon themselves, but was not actually granted any power from Above.[411]

Reform leader Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) presented the fanciful proposal that the Sages applied the vowelization of the word *bosheth* (בּוֹשֶׁת) to the god's name *melech* in order to produce the pejorative *Molech* (מוֹלֶךְ).[412] Martin Buber (1878–1965) proposed that Molech was a title for Hashem used by deviants who advocated child worship in Hashem's name.[413]

To Kindle a Child

The Mishnah explains that the Molech ritual was a two-step process: First, one handed over his child to the Molech priests and second, the child was passed through a fire.[414]

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rite was a form of divination used to tell the future. With this, he explains why the prohibition of offering one's child to Molech is written near the prohibitions concerning divination and witchery (Deut. 18:10).

His grandson, R. Zemach Duran (responsa *Yachin u-Boaz*, vol. 1 §105), explains exactly how child sacrifice fit into this form of divination: The Molech idol had seven mouths, and all seven mouths had to be opened for the idol to utter its predictions. If one offered incense, one mouth opened. If one poured libations, two mouths opened; if one sacrificed a bird, three mouths; a goat, four mouths; a bull, five mouths; an ox, six mouths; and a human, seven (see below).

408 Nachmanides to Lev. 20:5.

409 E. Batzri (ed.), *Maaseh Bereishis*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Haktav Institute, 1986), p. 372.

410 See Doyle 1996:147. C. Cornell, "A Moratorium on God Mergers? The Case of El and Milkom in the Ammonite Onomasticon," *Ugarit-Forschungen*, vol. 46 (2015), pp. 73–80, makes the same point concerning Milkom.

411 *Divrei Yoel Al ha-Torah*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem, 2005), p. 148.

412 See *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 14, M. Weinfeld/S. D. Sperling (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Moloch, Cult of."

413 G.C. Heider, "The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, vol. 43 (1985), pp. 50–51. See also Kaufmann 1960:287.

414 *Sanhedrin* 7:7. Nachmanides (to Lev. 18:21) explains that although the Torah does not explicitly say that Molech worship involves a fire, such is evident from II Kgs. 23:10 which writes regarding King Josiah's anti-idolatry campaign, *He also defiled the Topheth, which was in the valley of Ben Hinnom, so that no man could pass his son or daughter to the fire for the*

Rashi explains that after receiving the child, the *priest* would pass the child through/between two bonfires.[415] However, Nachmanides, basing himself on the Jerusalem Talmud,[416] disagrees and explains that the priest would only perform a ritual waving of the child. He then returned the child to the *father*, who passed his child through the fire.[417]

Meiri adds that the priest would light the fire after receiving the child. After passing the child through the fire, the priest would dress the child in special ritual clothes to signify that the child had been consecrated as a priest or initiated into the idolatrous cult.[418] Abarbanel explains that the site of Molech worship is sometimes called Topheth (תפת) because the Molech priests would play *tufim* (תופים, drums) to mask the cries of Molech's child victims.[419]

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that Molech worshippers believed that if a father did this, he would be successful in all his endeavors and his surviving children would have longevity.[420]

Rabbeinu Bachya[421] and Abarbanel[422] explain that idolaters typically sought to perform actions which Hashem considered the most disdainful. To that effect, they would specifically sacrifice human beings, which Hashem considers especially offensive because man is so important that he is, in fact, the most esteemed component of Creation.

Moreover, Sforno explains that the Torah views Molech worship as especially heinous because even if one continued to believe in Hashem, sacrificing one's child to Molech showed that he honored Molech more than Hashem, because to Hashem one only sacrifices animals (which are considered less important than human beings).[423]

Molech. (See also II Chron. 33:6 which writes that King Manasseh sacrificed his sons to the fire at Ben Hinnom, and II Kgs. 16:3/II Chron. 28:3 which writes that Ahaz burnt his children in fire).

Rabbeinu Bachya (to Lev. 18:21) writes that although the Torah does not specifically note that passing over to Molech involves a fire, this assumption is taken for granted, and elsewhere, the Torah (Deut. 18:10) forbids passing one's son or daughter through a fire, without explicitly mentioning the name Molech. Nonetheless, Rabbeinu Bachya (to Lev. 20:2) writes that according to the opinion that children sacrificed to Molech were not killed, that verse in Deuteronomy refers to some other form of idolatry, not Molech. See TB *Sanhedrin* 64b for another way of deriving that Molech worship involved fire.

415 Rashi to Lev. 18:21.

416 JT *Sanhedrin* 7:10.

417 Nachmanides to Lev. 18:21. R. Shimon Duran (*Zohar ha-Rakiyah* #154) writes that some people explain that the priest passes the child through the fire, not the father. However, he disagrees with this explanation. See D. Bitton (ed.), *Peirush ha-Mishnah le-Rambam, Seder Nezikin* (Jerusalem: Hamaor, 2009), p. 247, who discusses with which of these opinions Maimonides agrees.

418 *Beis ha-Bechirah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 64a. This suggests that Meiri maintains that the Molech ceremony was not a form of idol worship, but rather an initiation rite to an idolatrous cult. See R. Reuven Margolis' *Margolios ha-Yam* (to TB *Sanhedrin* 64a §17) who further adduces this view from *Sifrei* (to Deut. 18:10).

419 Abarbanel to Lev. 20:1.

420 Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 18:21.

421 To Deut. 12:29.

422 Ad loc.

423 Sforno to Lev. 18:21. R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (to Lev. 18:21) makes a similar point.

The Scene of Molech Worship

The Midrash describes the Temple of Molech in King Manasseh's time: The temple was built outside of Jerusalem and had an image with the face of a calf and two outstretched hands like a person ready to receive a gift. Idolaters would burn the idol until its hands looked like fire. There were seven rooms in the temple and the idol sat in the innermost room. Some explain that Molech worship was identical with sun worship, and the seven chambers corresponded to the seven astral forces which surround the sun.[424] Each person was able to enter another room according to the sacrifice that he offered. One who brought a fowl-offering entered the first room; a goat permitted entry to the second; a sheep, the third; a calf, the fourth; a bull, the fifth; and an ox, the sixth.

Entry to the seventh chamber was reserved for one who was willing to sacrifice his child. The priests would tell anyone who did so that there was no one above him and he would be allowed to enter the seventh, innermost chamber and kiss the idol.[425] The priests would then take his child from him and disembowel the child, who moaned as he died. Meanwhile, the priests played drums in order to mask the child's cries.[426]

R. Yosef Kara offers an elaborate description of how Molech worshippers would justify and ensure human sacrifice. The priests of Molech would make an image in the form of the city's mayor, and consistently feed a particular calf barley in the presence of that image. The calf began to think that the image was the one who provided it with its food. Later, when the priests wanted to offer a human sacrifice, they gathered the people of the city and announced that the gods requested one of those people to be sacrificed, to be chosen by the kiss of the calf. The calf would then be released and immediately lunge for the mayor, who resembled the image that "fed" him, and he would be offered as a human sacrifice.[427]

Did Molech Involve Murder?

The Talmud rules that if one passes *himself* through the fire for the Molech, he is exempt from the death penalty normally applied to Molech worshippers.[428] In light of this passage, Nachmanides suggests that the Molech ritual did not involve killing the child who was passed through the fire. He reasons that if the ritual normally involved death, then the Talmud would not say that a person who does it to himself is exempt from the death penalty, because this suicidal ritual would have already killed him![429]

Maimonides also understands that Molech worship did not involve killing the child, and uses that assumption to explain people's rationale for serving Molech. Molech priests appealed to man's most basic fears—the loss of their money and children—in order to trick them into worshipping this idol. They would declare that if one did not pass their children through fire in Molech's honor, then one's children would die. Basic human decency and paternal instinct forced people to quickly perform this simple act which would save their

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424 *BB*, p. 37b.

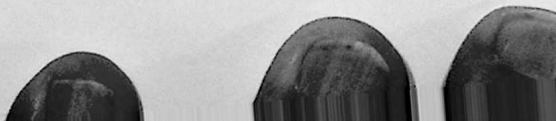
425 *Eichah Rabbah* §1:36 ranks the possible sacrifices differently: the first room was for meal-offerings; the second, fowl; the third, lamb; the fourth, ram; the fifth, calf; the sixth, ox; and the seventh was reserved for one who offered his own son.

426 S. Buber (ed.) *Old Midrash Tanchuma, Devarim* (Vilna, 1885) p. 8a. See also Rashi to Jer. 7:31.

427 R. Yosef Kara to Hos. 13:2; see also TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

428 TB *Sanhedrin* 64b.

429 Nachmanides to Lev. 18:21. See *Tiferes Yisrael* to *Sanhedrin* 7:7, *Boaz* §2, for an explanation of this Talmudic passage according to those who understand that the Molech ritual did entail killing the child.



children from certain death. Women, who were generally charged with the care of young children, were particularly susceptible to the idolatrous propaganda's trap.[430]

In order to counterbalance this belief, the Torah condemns Molech worship in the strongest of terms. The Torah brands worshipping Molech a defilement of Hashem's Sanctuary and a desecration of His name, and, contrary to the beliefs of Molech worshippers, it brought premature death to the worshipper and his family.[431]

Although Nachmanides ascribes the view that Molech worship did not involve murder[432] to Rashi,[433] Nachmanides himself disagrees. He argues that several Biblical passages insinuate that the children involved in Molech worship were indeed killed. For example, when Ezekiel spoke of the Jews' idolatry, he said, *And even their children, whom they had borne for Me, they passed before them to be consumed...when they slaughtered their children for their idols* (Ezek. 23:37–39). Using such words as *consumed* and *slaughtered* implies that the children passed through fires for Molech died. Abarbanel likewise reasons that the Torah would not have spoken so strongly against the Molech unless it involved murder (an assertion adduced from various proof-texts).[434]

When discussing King Ahaz passing his sons to Molech (II Kgs. 16:3), the Talmud states that Ahaz's son Hezekiah[435] was smeared with the blood of a Salamandra (a legendary creature whose blood is said to be fire-proof), which protected him.[436] This implies that had Hezekiah not been smeared with such blood, the Molech fires would have certainly killed him. However, Meiri, who adopts the view that Molech worship did not involve killing the child, explains that Hezekiah's father did not perform the *Molech* ritual with Hezekiah. Rather, he served Adrammelech and Anammelech, whose worship *did* involve killing the child in the fire.[437]

There is evidence on both sides of the question of whether Molech worship involved human sacrifice. Ibn Ezra resolves the dispute by explaining that the father

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430 Laws of *Avodah Zarah* 6:3 and *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:37.

431 See Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 20:2.

432 An approach taken by Radak (*Sefer ha-Shorashim* s.v. מלך).

433 Rashi to TB *Sanhedrin* 64b.

434 Abarbanel to Lev. 20:1. R. Nissim in *Chiddushei ha-Ran* (to TB *Sanhedrin* 64b) also reaches this conclusion.

435 The Bible does not explicitly identify Hezekiah as the victim of Ahaz's Molech worship. However, Rashi (to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b) explains that since nowhere else is another child of Ahaz mentioned, the one he sacrificed to Molech must have been Hezekiah. However, *Tosafos ha-Rosh* (ad loc.) questions this assertion by citing II Chron. 28:7 that mentions one Maaseyahu, son of the king, whom the Jerusalem Talmud (JT *Sanhedrin* 6:1) identifies as Ahaz's firstborn son. Instead, he proposes that the Talmud understood that Hezekiah was the child in question simply because we find that Hezekiah was a Torah scholar, so it would make sense that Ahaz would want to sacrifice him more than his siblings. See also *Eichah Rabbah* §1:36 and Rashi, Radak (to Ezek. 16:20). R. Elazar Moshe Horowitz of Pinsk (1817–1890) suggests that Rashi understood that Maaseyahu was actually a son of Pekah (king of Israel), not of Ahaz; see *Chiddushei ha-Gaon R. Elazar Moshe Al ha-Torah* (to II Chron. 28:7). See also *Ben Yehoyada* (to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b), *Margolios Yam* (there §19), and responsa *Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 17, §34.

436 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

437 *Beis ha-Bechirah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 64a.

passed the child through the fire, and sometimes the child survived and sometimes not.[438] Although the child sometimes died, his death was irrelevant, as it was not a necessary component of the ritual.[439]

Molech and Sexual Misconduct

Leviticus twice mentions Molech in the greater context of sexual prohibitions. Why is Molech mentioned along with such prohibitions? Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the Torah wishes to draw an analogy between the Jews worshipping Molech and a loose married woman. Just as the latter's husband will act zealously to ensure his wife's fidelity, so will Hashem act zealously to maintain the Jews' loyalty to Him.[440]

R. Zechariah ha-Rofeh (an early 15th-century Yemenite scholar) explains that the Torah prohibits Molech along with sexual misconduct because idolaters would traditionally offer their illegitimate and incest-born children to the Molech. Thus, the Torah juxtaposes the prohibition of the Molech with sexual misdeeds to stress that it forbids offering one's illegitimate children as much as one's legitimate children.[441]

Targum pseudo-Jonathan and Ibn Ezra explain that the prohibition against worshipping Molech refers not only to actual Molech worship, but also to a Jewish man engaging in sexual relations with a non-Jewish woman. Although such unions are prohibited elsewhere for other reasons, here the Torah forbids such unions because the resultant child will inevitably become a worshipper of Molech (or another form of idolatry).[442]

Later Manifestations of Molech

Maimonides notes that people were still worshipping Molech in his time, albeit in a slightly different way: Mothers would burn foul-smelling incense and wave their children on top of the fire. He notes that this custom definitely constitutes "passing one's child through a fire" and is thus forbidden.[443]

Interestingly, many different cultures call for a ritual bonfire to be lit during a spring/summer festival. For example, the Persian New Year, known as Nowruz, is a Zoroastrian holiday celebrated in the spring by lighting bonfires. Similarly, Beltane (sometimes known as May Day) was a pagan Celtic holiday traditionally

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438 Ibn Ezra to Lev. 18:21.

439 *BB*, pp. 38a–b proposes two ways of reconciling the different views of Molech worship. One theory is that while Molech worship originally called for simply passing the child through the fire, it later developed into burning the child. His second approach theorizes that the official "religion" of Molech only called for passing the child through the fire, but the more "pious and devout" adherents took this a step further and burnt their children.

440 Rabbeinu Bachya to Lev. 18:21.

441 M. Havatzelet (ed.), *Midrash ha-Cheifetz* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1992), p. 104.

442 The Mishnah (*Megillah* 4:9) rules that one who explains these verses forbidding Molech worship as forbidding lying with an Aramean woman should be shunned. This seems to reject pseudo-Jonathan and Ibn Ezra's view. However, the Talmud (TB *Megillah* 25a) explains the Mishnah's ruling by noting that the problem with explaining the verses as referring to an *Aramean* woman is that one might mistakenly conclude that a Jewish man may engage in sexual relations with a non-Aramean woman, even if she is not Jewish. See *Tosafos Yom Tov* and Maharsha (to *Megillah* there). R. Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam (1905–1994) offers a comprehensive discussion of whether the prohibition of Molech worship also includes engaging in sexual relations with an idolatress, in his responsa *Divrei Yatziv* (*Even Ha'Ezer* §26:7).

443 *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:37.

celebrated by dancing around bonfires and maypoles[444] on the first of May.

An early Christian custom calls for a holiday on the night of the summer solstice (known as St. John's Eve or Midsummer) whereby its adherents would ignite large bonfires in streets and marketplaces.[445] About this latter case, R. Nissim of Marseilles (a 14th-century French exegete)[446] writes that some argue that this custom is a remnant of Christianity's pagan origins—specifically Molech worship. When the early Christian leaders spread their religion, the idolatrous heathens did not easily surrender some of their original pagan ceremonies. To make Christianity more palatable to these masses, the Church incorporated some of their pagan practices. Eventually, the Church began to "Christianize" some of these practices by associating them with various Christian "saints."[447]

Alternatively, R. Nissim of Marseilles suggests that perhaps the Midsummer fire ceremony originally served the utilitarian purpose of warning the masses that midway through the summer, the climate was very dry and extra care should be taken with fire, which could easily spread. However, the ceremony's pragmatic message was eventually forgotten, so it remained but a cultic rite.

Nebuchadnezzar (נבוכדנצר), also known as Nebuchadrezzar, was the Babylonian king responsible for the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem and for exiling the Jews of Judah to Babylonia. In his time, Babylon superseded Assyria as the superpower of the Ancient Near East.[448]

Nebuchadnezzar claimed divinity and said about himself, *I will ascend over the tops of clouds; I will liken myself to the Most High*, [to which Hashem responded,] *but to the netherworld have you been lowered, to the bottom of the pit* (Isa. 14:14). As retribution for Nebuchadnezzar's blasphemous claims, Hashem caused him to become animal-like for seven years, living in the wilderness and feeding from the grass of the land (see Dan. 4:30).[449]

Arizal teaches that Nebuchadnezzar was a reincarnation of the Biblical Babylonian king Nimrod. Nebuchadnezzar attempted to achieve the same goal by erecting an idol in Babylon (see BEL) as Nimrod had attempted to achieve by building the Tower of Babel (Chap 2.13). Just as Nimrod's evil goals were thwarted by the positive counterbalance of Abraham—who was cast into a fire and survived—Nebuchadnezzar's efforts were likewise derailed by Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who also survived being thrown into a furnace.[450]

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444 For the Halachic permissibility of popular trends that mimic maypole dancing, see G. Shmalo & J. Fast, "Contemporary Wedding Trend or Pagan Rite? Umbrella Schtick and Maypoles," *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, vol. 54 (2007), pp. 31–44.

445 Some argue that the late Jewish practice of dancing around a bonfire on *Lag ba-Omer* is due to non-Jewish, and even pagan, influences, as that custom is not attested to in early Jewish sources. Curiously, R. Shmuel ha-Levi Wosner (1913–2015) rules (based on the *Tosefta Shabbos* 7:1), that dancing around a bonfire in a camp setting should be forbidden as it mimics idolatrous practices, but he does not mention any potential problem with *Lag ba-Omer* celebrations (responsa *Shevet ha-Levi*, vol. 7, §136).

446 *Maaseh Nissim* to Deut. 18:10. [We thank the work's editor, Dr. Howard Kreisel of Ben Gurion University, for providing a digital copy of this out-of-print work.]

447 See also *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* (3:8).

448 Interestingly, *Tosefta de-Targum* (to II Kgs. 19:35) records a tradition that Nebuchadnezzar was the son-in-law of the Assyrian king Sennacherib.

449 *Midrash Tanchuma* (*Vaera* §9), and *Shemos Rabbah* §8:2.

450 See *Likkutei Torah* (*Parashas Noach*) and *Sefer ha-Likkutim* (*Parashas Noach*). Interestingly,

According to Babylonian mythology, **Nevo** served as the scribe for the main god **Merodach**. His worship rose in prominence until eventually he became the main god of the Babylonian pantheon. Likewise, Nebuchadnezzar was originally the royal scribe for one of his predecessors, the Babylonian king Merodach-Baladan,[451] and afterwards became king himself. The parallels between Nebuchadnezzar's life story and the Nevo mythology may have legitimized Nebuchadnezzar's claim to divinity in the eyes of his Babylonian subjects.

R. Yair Chaim Bachrach explains Nebuchadnezzar's claim to godhood differently: The two main Babylonian gods were associated with two forms of wisdom. Bel—whose numerical value is thirty-two—was associated with *chochmah*, which has thirty-two paths of wisdom. Nebo—which can be read as "fifty is within him" (נ' בו)—was associated with *binah*, which corresponds to the fifty gates of understanding. Thus, just as the Midrash explains that when Moses ascended Mount Nebo, he transcended the fifty gates of understanding and battled the impurity of **Baal Peor**,[452] so did Nebuchadnezzar wish to embody the fifty gates of evil understanding and thirty-two paths of evil wisdom by claiming divinity.[453]

Bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's Idol

The Bible reports that Nebuchadnezzar erected a sixty-cubit tall golden idol in the plain of Dura and issued an ultimatum: Everyone must bow to his idol or be cast into a fiery furnace.[454] Daniel's three colleagues, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, refused to bow to the golden idol. They were cast into the furnace and miraculously emerged unscathed (Dan. 3:1–30).

The Midrash offers two opinions as to whether any Jews bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's idol. According to the first opinion, after Nebuchadnezzar built his idol, he gathered twenty-three men from each nation and demanded that they bow to it. Of the Jews gathered, only Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah refused to heed Nebuchadnezzar's command; the other twenty gave in. According to the second opinion, Nebuchadnezzar only gathered three men from each nation. All three Jewish men who were commanded to bow to the idol (namely Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah) refused.[455]

In the context of this episode, the *Zohar* notes a contradiction regarding whether Nebuchadnezzar's god was named Bel or Beltshazzar (see below).[456] In that *Zoharic* passage, the great sage R. Huna answers this contradiction to the joy of his fellow scholars, but his answer remains cryptic.

Saddam Hussein (1937–2006), the late dictator of modern-day Iraq (which includes Babylon), famously styled himself as a reincarnation of Nebuchadnezzar.

451 TB *Sanhedrin* 96a.

452 *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 45.

453 Responsa *Chavos Yair*, vol. 1, §1.

454 The number sixty was significant to the Bel cult because the numerical value of the two letters of the name Bel (ב and ל) multiplied by each other equals sixty. Archeology has unearthed the sexagesimal number system used by the ancient Babylonians, which centered on the number sixty. For more information about that method and its advantages, see D. Knuth, "Ancient Babylonian Algorithms," *Communications of the ACM*, vol. 15:7 (1972), pp. 671–677. Vestigial remains of Babylonian influences on contemporary mathematics are found in our timekeeping system, which divides one hour into sixty minutes and each minute into sixty seconds, instead of dividing the hour and minutes into hundredths.

455 *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* §7:13 and *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 33.

456 *Parashas Terumah* 174b–175a. R. Moshe Yechezkel Salah of Baghdad (1896–1966) in his work *Torat Moshe*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 1989), p. 206, explains that

Interestingly, while it seems from the abovementioned Midrash that Nebuchadnezzar's golden idol was intended to be worshipped as a god,[457] Rabbeinu Tam (1100–1171) argues that he did not erect the idol for idolatrous purposes, but rather for the purpose of honoring himself (perhaps it was a statue in his likeness).[458]

Aftermath of Bowing

The Talmud presents a disagreement between two Tanaaic approaches as to why the Jews in Ahasuerus's time deserved to be destroyed: R. Shimon explains that it was because they partook of Ahasuerus' banquet. The anonymous Sages, on the other hand, explain that it was because they bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's idol.[459] It would seem that according to R. Shimon, bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's idol was not considered idolatry, while according to the Sages, it was.

R. Yehonasan Eyebschitz reconciles these two approaches by explaining that they actually complement each other. The problem with the Jews enjoying Ahasuerus's banquet was that it made mundane use of the Holy Temple's vessels. However, this could be offset with the argument that once Ahasuerus used those vessels for unholy purposes, they lost their holiness and were allowed to be used for the banquet.

However, as already mentioned, the Jews had previously bowed to Nebuchadnezzar's idol. This action should be considered idolatry, which would justify the decree for their destruction. However, this too can be countered with a simple argument. That is, the Jews argued that bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's idol did not constitute idolatry because the idol contained the *tzitz*—upon which Hashem's name was written—and the Jews were actually bowing to *it*, as opposed to the deity represented by Nebuchadnezzar's idol. Yet, these two arguments are mutually exclusive, for if the vessels of the Temple lost their holiness—thereby justifying the Jews' participation in Ahasuerus' banquet—then the *tzitz* would have also lost its holiness, negating the argument that the Jews in Nebuchadnezzar's time bowed to something other than his idol. Therefore, explains R. Eyebschitz, both of these sins together sealed the Jews' fate in Ahasuerus's time.[460]

Atonement for Bowing

Well after Nebuchadnezzar's reign, some Jews returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the Holy Temple. They offered special sacrifices during the Temple's inauguration. As we mentioned in Unit I (Chap 7.4), the Talmud explains that those sacrifices were meant to atone for the public sin of idolatry which had occurred in Zedekiah's time—at the end of the First Temple period. Why did the Talmud assume that those sacrifices intended to atone for something that had happened a generation earlier, and not for bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, which had happened only a few years before?

According to the opinion that maintains that Nebuchadnezzar's idol was idolatry, the Jews who bowed to it did not sin wantonly, rather, they simply followed the mistaken ruling of a court which allowed them to do so. R. Moshe

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Nebuchadnezzar's god had two names: Bel *and* Beltsazzar. This answer was so obvious to R. Huna that he did not even bother to answer the question posed to him.

457 See also *Radal* to *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 33:105.

458 *Tosafos* to *Avodah Zarah* 3a and *Pesachim* 53b.

459 TB *Megillah* 12a. See *Anaf Yosef* (to *Ein Yaakov*, TB *Megillah* 12a) who explains why the Talmud quotes R. Shimon as offering the second explanation, while in Midrashic sources, he is the one who offered the first explanation.

460 *Yaaros Devash* (vol. 1, *drush* #3).

Sofer explains that the judges of those courts were not obligated to bring a special sin-offering for their mistaken ruling because the sin occurred outside of the Holy Land and the judges are only obligated to offer a special sin-offering for sins that transpired in the Holy Land.[461]

However, a dissenting opinion—that of R. Shimon—maintains that even if the sin occurred outside of the Holy Land, a court can still be liable for offering this special sin-offering on a mistaken ruling, if they *realized their mistake while* in the Holy Land. According to this, we might argue that the sin-offerings brought in Ezra's time were offered by the court as atonement for their mistaken ruling about Nebuchadnezzar's idol.

However, R. Sofer points out that R. Shimon, who maintains that the court is liable for sins outside of the Holy Land, is the same R. Shimon who held that Nebuchadnezzar's idol was not considered idolatry. With this, R. Sofer completely discards the possibility that the sacrifices in Ezra's time were meant to atone for bowing to Nebuchadnezzar's idol, thus bolstering the Talmud's assertion that they were meant to atone for the sin of idolatry in the generation of Zedekiah.

The *Notzri* Cult

Jeremiah foretold of Nebuchadnezzar's invasions of Jerusalem by saying, *Notzrim are coming from a faraway land and they shall impose their voice on the cities of Judah* (Jer. 4:16). R. Saadia Gaon,[462] R. Yonah Ibn Janach,[463] and Radak explain that *Notzrim* refers to Nebuchadnezzar's soldiers,[464] whose name is sometimes written as two words (נבוכד, *nevuchad* and נצר, *netzar*). Netzar forms the base of the term *Notzrim*.[465]

The Tannaic sage R. Yishmael maintains that one may not engage in business with idolaters for three days before and after idolatrous holidays. The Talmud notes that according to this opinion, one can never do business with a *Notzri*.[466] What is a *Notzri*? Based on the above, Meiri explains that *Notzrim* are Babylonians,

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461 *Chasam Sofer* to TB *Horayos* 6a. See TB *Horayos* 3a.

462 S.Z.L. Skoss in *Tarbiz*, vol. 28:3 (1959), p. 308. See also A. Berliner & D. Hoffman (eds.), *Otzar Tov* (Berlin, 1878), p. 56, who ascribes this passage to R. Shmuel b. Chofni Gaon.

463 Berliner 1893:315.

464 Rashi (ad loc.) explains that *Notzrim* is related to the word *matzor* (מצור, siege) and refers to Babylonians who besieged Jerusalem. Targum understands that *Notzrim* is related to the word *botzer* (בוצר, harvest) and refers to the Babylonians who treated the Jews like harvested produce.

465 Abarbanel (in his commentary to Jer. 4:16, and *Mashmia Yeshuah* 4:4) cites this explanation but rejects it. He reasons that it is implausible that Nebuchadnezzar's followers would be known by the latter part of his name, but not the former. He also asks why Jeremiah would say that the Babylonians come *from a faraway land* if Babylon was not so far from Jerusalem. Instead, Abarbanel explains that *Notzrim* were the Romans. While a casual reading of the Bible suggests that Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of the *First Temple*, he was, in fact, foretelling the destruction of the *Second Temple*. The Romans—who destroyed the Second Temple—are prophetically called *Notzrim* because they were destined to collectively adopt the Christian religion, which is named after Jesus of Nazareth—a *Notzri*.
See R. Yaakov Yerucham Warschner's *Seder Yaakov* (to TB *Avodah Zarah* 6a) who differentiates between the terms נוצרים and נצרים. The former is spelled with the letter *vav* and refers to Christians, while the latter does not. However, see D. Bitton (ed.), *Peirush ha-Mishnah le-Rambam, Seder Nezikin* (Jerusalem: Hamaor, 2009), p. 463, who dismisses this distinction.

466 TB *Avodah Zarah* 6a, 7b.

who notoriously worshipped the sun.[467] Of the seven astral forces, the sun is associated with Sunday,[468] therefore these people observed every Sunday as a holy day.

Similarly, the Talmud explains that those non-Kohanim who "stand over" the sacrifices in the Holy Temple on Sunday did not fast because of the *Notzrim* (while those who "stand over" the sacrifices on other days do fast, save for Friday and Saturday).[469] This is because the *Notzrim* treated Sunday as a holy day, so fasting on that day would lend credence to their view.[470] Meiri again explains that these *Notzrim* were Babylonians, followers of Nebuchadnezzar, who revered the sun and observed Sundays as special days.[471]

Academia identifies this cult with the gnostic Mandaeism, a religion in the vicinity of Babylonia which celebrated Sunday as their holy day. Interestingly, Mandaean folklore celebrates a daughter of Nebuchadnezzar as an important heroine.[472]

Nevo (נְבוֹ), also known as Nebo or Nabu, was the Babylonian god of writing and wisdom. As god of writing, Nevo was symbolized by a single cuneiformal wedge and/or a writing stylus, and was sometimes shown atop a dragon. Nevo was sometimes depicted wearing a long-fringed robe under a slit skirt. Its astral affiliations lay with the planet Mercury. The name Nevo was likely related to the word *niv* (נִיב, speech) or *nevuah* (נְבוּאָה, prophecy).[473]

According to Babylonian mythology, Nevo was **Merodach**'s firstborn son, making it **Nergal**'s brother. While Merodach was originally worshipped as the main Babylonian god, Nevo later took its place.[474] Some identify Nevo with **Nivchaz** and/or **Nisroch**.[475]

Nevo's Downfall

Nevo is explicitly mentioned by Isaiah, who prophesied its downfall by envisioning it falling to its knees before being carried off into captivity:

> **Bel** *is kneeling, Nevo is doubled over. Their idols were loaded on the beast and animal; your bearers are overloaded, it is a burden on the weary beast. They have doubled over and fallen on their knees together; they could not escape being carried off and have themselves gone into captivity (Isa. 46:1–2).*

The Talmud relates that the Amoraic sage Ulla once traveled from the Holy Land to Babylon, and another sage[476] asked him where he had

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467 *Beis ha-Bechirah* to TB *Avodah Zarah* 2a.

468 See *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 6.

469 TB *Taanis* 27b.

470 See Rashi to TB *Taanis* 27b.

471 *Beis ha-Bechirah* to TB *Taanis* 27b. Rashi (to TB *Avodah Zarah* 6a) explains that a *Notzri* is one who follows the mistake of "that man" who commanded his followers to make Sunday a holy day. (See *Hagahos Yaavetz* there who notes that Jesus never preached Sunday as a day of rest; that idea was later introduced by the Church).

472 L. Zalcman, "Christians, Noṣerim, and Nebuchadnezzar's Daughter," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 81:3 (1991), pp. 411–426.

473 See Abarbanel (to Jer. 46:1) who mentions that the name Nevo is related to the word for prophecy.

474 *DDD*, pp. 606–609 and J. Tudeau, "Nabu (god)," *Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses* (Oracc and the UK Higher Education Academy, 2013).

475 *BB*, p. 29a.

476 According to the standard edition of TB *Sanhedrin* 63b, that Amoraic scholar was Rava.

slept. Ulla replied that he had slept in Kal-Nevo.[477] The second sage questioned how Ulla was allowed to say "Kal-Nevo" if it contained the idol Nevo's name, and it is forbidden to utter the names of idols. Ulla defended himself by quoting R. Yochanan, who ruled that the name of any idol explicitly mentioned in the Bible may be uttered, for Nevo's name appears in Isaiah's abovementioned prophecy.[478]

Several lines later, the Talmud quotes R. Nachman, who offers a mocking interpretation of the verse describing Nevo's downfall. He renders the second verse as: *They have splattered all over and fallen on their knees together; they could not escape their diarrhea.*[479] Rashi explains that this was not meant literally, because these idols were not living beings. Rather, the Talmud means that Isaiah's prophecy should be viewed as disparaging Bel and Nevo and applying unappealing characteristics to them.

R. Yair Chaim Bachrach suggests that Bel and Nevo were different names for the same idol, and that both were somehow identified with BAAL PEOR. He notes that Baal Peor was worshipped by offering the excremental byproduct of beets and beer, while Bel and Nevo are associated with excrement in the Talmudic interpretation of Isaiah's prophecy.[480]

R. Yitzchak of Volozhin (1780–1849), a son of R. Chaim of Volozhin, notes that the Talmudic

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However, Rabbeinu Chananel reads: R. Nachman. This passage from Rabbeinu Chananel's commentary to TB *Sanhedrin* was first printed by S. Assaf in M. HaMeiri (ed.), *Ish ha-Torah ve-ha-Maase* (Jerusalem, 1946), p. 80. R. Achai Gaon also reads R. Nachman, instead of Rava; see S. Mirsky (ed.), *Sheiltos de-Rav Achai Gaon*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Yeshiva University/Mossad HaRav Kook, 1962), p. 136.

477 The Talmud (TB *Yoma* 21a, *Zevachim* 96a) cites a scholar named R. Shmaya Bikal-Nevo. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that Bikal-Nevo was the name of a place. In *Hagahos Rashash* (to TB *Yoma* 21a), R. Shmuel Strashun (1794–1872) explains that Rashi means that even though the Talmud did not say "R. Shmaya *from* Bikal-Nevo," Bikal-Nevo was nonetheless the name of his hometown. R. Moshe Sofer explains that Rashi intended to stress that R. Shmaya continued to study Torah even when in a place of idolatry; see Y.N. Stern (ed.), *Derashos Chasam Sofer*, vol. 2 (Cluj, 1929), p. 239a. R. Strashun then notes that this contradicts the Talmudic passage above which assumes that the town's name was Kal-Nevo, not Bikal-Nevo. R. Yair Chaim Bachrach (in responsa *Chavos Yair*, vol. 1, §1) also takes note of this.

However, R.N. Rabinowitz, *Dikdukei Sofrim-Yoma* (Munich, 1872), p. 25, notes that some Talmudic manuscripts reflect the variant reading "R. Shmaya from *Kal*-Nevo," thus eliminating the contradiction and removing the possibility that the town's name was Bikal-Nevo. He notes that Ulla said that he had slept "*bi-Kal-Nevo,*" which means "in Kal-Nevo;" yet if the town's name was *Bikal*-Nevo, he should have answered *bi-Bikal-Nevo* ("in Bikal-Nevo"). See *Dikdukei Sofrim-Zevachim* (Munich, 1884), p. 185

A. Kohut, *Aruch Completum*, vol. 2 (Vienna, 1873), p. 214, suggests identifying Kal-Nevo with the Syrian city of Chalybon (Aleppo). However, this identification seems farfetched because it transposes two important consonants in the word, the *n*-sound and the *b*-sound, with the resulting name not bearing any connection to the idol Nevo.

478 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

479 R. Meir Abulafia in *Yad Ramah* (to TB *Sanhedrin* 64b) adds that the idol was kneeling in anticipation of immoral acts.

480 Responsa *Chavos Yair* (vol. 1, §1).

imagery associating Bel and Nevo with feces is not simply meant to be crude and degrading, but also alludes to the spiritual pollution and dirtiness that idolatry spreads.[481]

Theophoric Appearances

The god Nevo appears most famously and frequently in the form of the Babylonian king **NEBUCHADNEZZAR** and his general Nebuzaradan. Additionally, Samgar-nebu (Jer. 39:3) was one of the officers in Nebuchadnezzar's army that occupied Jerusalem, and Nebushazban (Jer. 39:13) was one of the officials charged with handling Jeremiah's incarceration.

Nevo also appears in the Bible in a slightly altered form in another context: After Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem, he brought many Jewish children to his royal court in Babylon. Among these children was Azariah, whom Nebuchadnezzar's chief of staff nicknamed Abed-Nego (Dan. 1:7). R. Saadia Gaon explains that Abed-Nego (עבד נגו) means "servant of Nego," with Nego being another name for Nevo (as the sequential letters נ and ב are sometimes interchangeable).[482]

Outside of the Bible, Nabopolassar was an important figure whose name bears a theophoric allusion to Nevo. He was an Assyrian official who took advantage of the Assyrian Empire's weakened state (after its failed siege of Jerusalem in Hezekiah's time) to establish a strong kingdom in Babylon.[483] He was the father of Nebuchadnezzar, his successor.

Nebonidus—also not mentioned in the Bible—was the Babylonian king before Belshazzar. R. Alexander Hool argues that Nebonidus was Nebuchadnezzar's son and Belshazzar's father.[484]

In the Elephantine Papyri, there are plenty of Aramean names which contain allusions to Nevo, including Nabusha, Shezinabu, Nabunathan, Nabudalah, Nabuaqab, and Nabudalani.[485]

Nevo in the Trans-Jordan

When listing the cities occupied by the tribe of Reuben in the trans-Jordan region, the Torah mentions *and Nevo and Baal Meon with altered names* (Num. 32:38). Rashi explains that Nevo and Baal Meon were the original names of these cities, but since those names were also names of idols, the Reubenites changed them. Rabbeinu Bachya follows this approach and cites Isaiah's abovementioned prophecy as proof that Nevo was an idol's

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481 See gloss to *Nefesh ha-Chaim* 2:7.

482 R. Saadia Gaon to Daniel 1:7. Ibn Ezra (ad loc.) cites R. Saadia Gaon's explanation and notes that there is no proof to it. Others (Keil 1994:12) explain that Nego refers to the astral force *Nogah* (i.e., Venus), which would associate this god with **ASHTORETH** (or, more accurately, Ishtar, her Babylonian equivalent).

483 The Talmud (TB *Sanhedrin* 95b) associates Nebuchadnezzar's early life with the Assyrian Empire by asserting that when the Assyrian military camp was miraculously smitten during its siege of Jerusalem, only five men survived: Nebuchadnezzar, Nebuzaradan, the Assyrian king Sennacherib, and his two sons. This is quite understandable given that Nebuchadnezzar's father—the eventual founder of a Babylonian kingdom—was originally an Assyrian official. However, *Midrash Eichah Rabbasi* (Eisenstein 1915:247) records that a young Jeremiah met with an ambitious Nebuchadnezzar, who was portrayed as poor and destitute, hardly the condition one would expect for the son of an official in the world's strongest empire of the time.

484 Hool 2014:216–218.

485 B. Porten & A. Yardeni (eds.), *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1986), pp. 20, 26, 34, 99, 114.

name. By citing this verse, Rabbeinu Bachya insinuates that Nevo worship predated the Jewish conquest of Canaan, and that the idol was not only worshipped in Babylon, but even in the trans-Jordan area, closer to the Holy Land.[486]

Nachmanides, on the other hand, disagrees with Rashi's approach and explains that Nevo and Baal Meon were the original names of those cities under Moabite rule, which were later altered by the victorious Amorites, and subsequently restored by the Reubenites.

Nechushtan (נְחֻשְׁתָּן), also known as *Nechash ha-Nechoshes* (נחש הנחשת), was a copper snake worshipped by the Jews. Moses had fashioned the physical snake statue while the Jews were in the desert (although it was most definitely not intended to be an idol). It was destroyed approximately seven hundred years later by Hezekiah, the King of Judah, as the Bible relates, *He also ground up the copper serpent that Moses had made—for until those days the Children of Israel used to burn incense before it—he called it Nechushtan* (II Kgs. 18:4).[487]

Some academic scholars theorize that the Jews deified the snake due to foreign influence, likely that of the neighboring Ammonites, who also worshipped the image of a snake (see **Milkom**) or some other non-Jewish snake cult.[488] Interestingly, the founders of Christianity later revived the significance of this brazen serpent by imagining that it somehow represented Jesus on his cross.[489]

R. Chaim Dov Rabinowitz (1909–2001) notes that the phrase, *he called it Nechushtan*, is written in the singular form, implying that one person began calling it Nechushtan. He suggests that either one person gave the copper snake this name and it "stuck," or that Hezekiah purposely gave it that name in order to disparage it.[490] Indeed, Rashi and R. Yosef Kara explain that the name Nechushtan was a means of mocking the idol—as if to say that it was simply a piece of copper. Radak adds that the letter *nun* at the end of the word Nechushtan serves a disparaging diminutive.[491]

The Copper Snake's Origins

When the Jews traveled the wilderness and complained about the manna, Hashem sent fiery snakes to punish them. He then commanded Moses to construct a serpent and place it on a pole so that anyone who had been bitten could look at it and become healed. Moses made the snake out of copper, and it indeed healed anyone who looked at it (Num. 21:4–9).

The Mishnah explains that the copper snake itself did not decide between life and death. Rather, when people looked up to gaze upon the snake, they remembered Hashem in the heavens. The snake itself had no intrinsic power. Rather, people's strengthened

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486 There seems to be another, mysterious, parallel between Nevo in the trans-Jordan and the Babylonian god of the same name. The Bible (Deut. 34:1) reports that Moses ascended Mount Nevo in the trans-Jordan and died there, and the Talmud (TB *Megillah* 13b) explains that Moses died on the *seventh* day of the month of Adar. An inscription attributed to the Assyrian king Esar-Haddon speaks of celebrating the day of the festival of Nevo on the *eighth* day of the month of Adar (*ANETS*, p. 290).

487 *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Num. 21:9.

488 *BB*, p. 39b. See also M. Münnich, "The Cult of Bronze Serpents in Ancient Canaan and Israel," *Iggud: Selected Essays in Jewish Studies*, vol. 1 (2005), pp. 39*–56*; and *DDD*, pp. 744–746, for a multitude of archeological findings involving ritual bronze snakes.

489 Binder 2012:78.

490 *Daas Sofrim* to II Kgs. 18:4.

491 See also Batzri 1994:354 and the Unit II entry on **Gad**.

conviction in Hashem caused Him to heal them.[492]

After this story, the snake was saved for future generations as a testament to the miracle that Hashem had performed for the Jews.[493] It was placed in the Tabernacle, and eventually in the Holy Temple,[494] where it remained until Hezekiah's time.

Worshipping the Copper Snake

During Hezekiah's reign, people began to believe that the snake itself possessed powers to harm and to heal,[495] and eventually worshipped it (possibly due to the influences of some non-Jewish snake cult). As a result, when Hezekiah carried out his mass purge of idolatry, he also destroyed the copper snake.

Gersonides writes that people worshipped Nechushtan because it was fashioned by Moses, who was recognized as an important figure.[496] (Similarly, this is one of the reasons that Moses did not want the Jews to know his burial place; for had they known where he was buried, they might have turned the site into a shrine.)

R. Yosef Karo (1488–1575) explains that the copper snake represented the Evil Inclination. Moses placed it on a pole in order to teach that one should only "glance" upon the Evil Inclination, i.e., only use its desires as necessary for the sake of physical survival but not more than that. Under Ahaz's influence, the pursuit of desire became a goal on its own, so Hezekiah decided to destroy the snake so that people would not idolize or indulge in the Evil Inclination that it represented. In doing so, Hezekiah foreshadowed the future Sages' complete eradication of the idolatrous inclination.[497]

Why Not Earlier?

The Talmud asks: If the previous righteous kings Asa and Jehoshaphat had carried out purges of idolatry, then why was Nechushtan allowed to remain until Hezekiah's time?[498] The Talmud explains that Hezekiah's

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492 *Rosh Hashanah* 3:8.

493 Radak to II Kgs. 18:4; Maharsha to TB *Berachos* 10b. R. Moshe Sofer (*Chasam Sofer* to TB *Pesachim* 56a) offers a different reason as to why the copper snake was kept. He argues that it was in order to counterbalance the possible heretical effects of the Book of Remedies. That book included different ways to heal every kind of malady and sickness, and could lead one to the heretical conclusion that health and recovery is an entirely natural matter not dependent on Hashem. In order to counter that possible conclusion, the copper snake was preserved, for it reminded people that Hashem alone heals the sick. The Mishnah (*Pesachim* 4:9) reports that Hezekiah was the person responsible for hiding the Book of Remedies. Thus, in Hezekiah's time, after the Book of Remedies was hidden, there was no longer a need to keep the copper snake, so Hezekiah opted to destroy it.

494 See Haran 2007:64, who also assumes that Nechushtan was inside or near the Temple.

495 Kapach 1957:436.

496 Gersonides to Deut. 34:6.

497 *Maggid Meisharim* (*Parashas Chukas*).

498 We mentioned above (Chap 4.26 and 6.24) that the Bible writes that Solomon built idolatrous temples which were later destroyed by Josiah. The Talmud deduces from the fact that the Bible writes that *Josiah* destroyed them—not one of his predecessors (i.e., Asa, Jehoshaphat, or Hezekiah)—that those temples were not really destroyed by Josiah, and had not really been built by Solomon. Those temples were entirely allegorical.
Why do we not apply that same reasoning to argue that Nechushtan worship was equally non-existent, because it was said to have been destroyed by Hezekiah, and not Asa or Jehoshaphat? Perhaps the Talmud's assertion about Solomon's phantom-temples was

forefathers did not destroy Nechushtan in order to leave space for Hezekiah to become famous.[499]

The commentators explain that this does not—Heaven forfend—literally mean that Hezekiah's illustrious predecessors spared an idolatrous cult so that their descendant could later become famous for destroying it. Rather, it means that Asa and Jehoshaphat did not have the divine assistance necessary to realize that Nechushtan was idolatrous and should be destroyed.[500]

Alternatively, Radak and Abarbanel explain that during the reigns of Asa and Jehoshaphat, the masses had not yet begun to worship the snake. It was only in the time of Hezekiah's father, Ahaz, that such dubious practices began; so Hezekiah, upon assuming the throne, immediately put a stop to them.

R. Yehonasan Eyebschitz understands that even in Hezekiah's time, the Jewish People did not literally worship Nechushtan. Rather, Hezekiah foresaw that the nation's idolatrous trajectory would eventually lead them to worshipping Nechushtan, so he destroyed it preemptively. R. Eyebschitz explains that while Hezekiah acted to prevent his projection from coming to fruition,[501] his predecessors felt that they could not act on mere predictions, so they allowed Nechushtan to remain.[502]

Nergal (נֵרְגַל) was the god of death and pestilence worshipped by Babylonians and Assyrians in Cutha. After the fall of the Kingdom of Israel, the Assyrians imported the Cutheans from their Mesopotamian homeland to occupy the territory of Samaria. The Bible (II Kgs. 17:30) records that the Cutheans built a shrine to Nergal in Samaria.

As a god of death, Nergal also served as the lord of the underworld and was associated with disease.[503] According to archeological texts, the Mesopotamian Nergal was equivalent to the Canaanite god Resheph.[504] Filosseno

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based on the assumption that three righteous kings—Asa, Jehoshaphat, and Hezekiah—would not have overlooked such an aberration; while the Nechushtan idol being overlooked by two righteous kings—Asa and Jehoshaphat—was more plausible. Alternatively, because the Bible itself gives more detail about the Nechushtan idol, by explaining that it was the copper snake fashioned by Moses, the Talmud could not entertain its nonexistence.

R. Baruch Kolodny of Beitar Illit explains that Hezekiah's predecessors were unable to destroy Nechushtan. Hezekiah was only able to do so as a result of his own innovative decree that one could render someone else's possessions forbidden idolatrous contraband by worshipping them (Chap 6.14). Until Hezekiah, the copper snake had not been rendered banned property—even though people were already worshipping it—because they did not *own* it. Thus Asa and Jehoshaphat did not destroy it. Only after Hezekiah's decree was enacted did the copper snake assume the status of idolatrous paraphernalia and become subject to destruction.

499 TB *Chullin* 6b.

500 See Maharal's *Chiddushei Aggados* (to TB *Chullin* 6b–7a), Maharsha, *Rosh Yosef*, and *Toras Chaim* ad loc.

501 In the same way, Hezekiah initially refrained from marrying due to his foreknowledge that he would bear wicked sons (see Chap 6.15).

502 *Tiferes Yehonasan* to Lev. 1:10.

503 *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006), s.v. "Nergal"; and Y. Heffron, "Nergal (god)," *Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses* (Oracc and the UK Higher Education Academy, 2013).

504 Wyatt 2002:362.

Luzzatto (1829–1854) explained that Nergal was some sort of man-eating deity.[505] Nergal ranked third in prominence in the Babylonian pantheon (following its mythical father **Merodach** and brother **Nevo**).[506]

Academic sources classify Nergal as a war god, thereby associating it with the astral force of Mars. In fact, R. Menachem Kasher (1895–1983) notes that the word Nergal is related to the Aramaic word *nereg* (נרג, hammer)—a reference to the tool most often used to depict a war god.[507] However, R. Saadia Gaon writes that Nergal was associated with the astral force of Jupiter.[508]

The name Nergal is comprised of two words—*ner* (נר, candle) and *gal* (גל, reveal, mound, or wave)—but the implication of those two words together remains an enigma.

Nergal's Form

The Talmud relates that Nergal was rooster-shaped.[509] Rabbeinu Chananel specifies that it was a wild rooster.[510] R. Meir Abulafia explains that the name Nergal is related to the word *ragil* (רגיל, frequent) and therefore alludes to a rooster, which is the animal that copulates most *frequently*.[511] Alternatively, he explains that the name Nergal alludes to a rooster, *tarnigol* (תרנגול), because it contains the same letters.[512]

R. Shmuel Laniado explains the rooster's symbolism. Cuthean idolaters exiled from Cutha to Samaria expressed their hope of returning home via their worship of Nergal. They wished that just as a rooster can differentiate between night and day (because it crows in the early morning), their god should give them the opportunity to experience the difference between exile (night) and redemption (day).[513]

Alternatively, the Jerusalem Talmud explains that Nergal was a foot-shaped idol,[514] and indeed the word Nergal is similar to *regel* (רגל, foot). This foot represented the "feet" of Jacob and Joseph. It seems that the idolaters saw these "feet" alluded to in the Bible: When Laban said to Jacob, *I have learned by divination that Hashem has blessed me on account of you* (Gen. 30:27), Jacob conceded, *Hashem has blessed you with my coming* (Gen. 30:30). The term *with my coming* (*le-ragli*, לרגלי) literally means, "according to my foot." Similar, the house of Potiphar was blessed on account of Joseph's arrival (Gen. 39:5).[515]

Theophoric Appearances

The name Nergal appears in several Babylonian names found in and beyond the Bible. The Bible (Jer. 39:3) records the names of Nebuchadnezzar's officers who entered Jerusalem upon its capture. The name

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505 M.Y. Ashkenazi, *Ho'il Moshe* (Livorno, 1892), p. 286.

506 Keil 1989:700.

507 M. Kasher, *Torah Shleimah*, vol. 5 (Jerusalem, 1927–1992), p. 1205.

508 Ratzabi 1993:194.

509 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

510 A manuscript of Rabbeinu Chananel's commentary to TB *Sanhedrin* was discovered in the Cairo Genizah and fragments from it were published in several venues. R.E. Horowitz published this particular passage (to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b) in *Hadarom*, vol. 44 (Rabbinic Council of America, 1976), p. 62.

511 See TB *Berachos* 22a.

512 *Yad Ramah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

513 Batzri 1994: 346.

514 This follows the Mishnah's assertion (*Avodah Zarah* 3:2) that even statues of feet were sometimes worshipped as idols.

515 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:2.

Nergal-sharezer appears twice in that list, and once more in the list of officers charged with administering Jeremiah's detention (Jer. 39:13).

Archeological sources refer to a Babylonian king named Nergal-sharezer or Nerigilssar, who is said to be Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law. This figure may be identical to Nergal-sharezer from the Bible,[516] although the Bible and Rabbinic literature[517] seem to otherwise entirely ignore his existence.[518]

Sharezer was a son of the Assyrian king Sennacherib, who (along with his brother **Adrammelech**) killed his father. Some argue that Sharezer's actual name was *Nergal-sharezer* (like the Nergal-sharezer mentioned above), but the Bible omitted the "Nergal-" part of his name because it conjures a foreign deity.[519]

Nisroch (נִסְרֹךְ) was the name of a god worshipped by Assyrian king Sennacherib, in whose temple he was assassinated (II Kgs. 19:37, Isa. 38:38, and II Chron. 32:21).

The Talmud (see below) explains that Nisroch was a deified wooden plank from Noah's ark. Rashi notes that the name Nisroch is related to the word *neser* (נסר, wooden board).[520]

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516 *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 15 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Nergal-Sharezer."

517 The Talmud (TB *Kiddushin* 72b) mentions that Nebuchadnezzar's son-in-law was the governor of the Babylonian province Mesene, but does not mention his name or whether he later became king.

518 While he apparently reigned between Evil-Merodach and Belshazzar, the Bible and Rabbinic literature do not mention any Babylonian king with such a name—or even any king between Evil-Merodach and Belshazzar. Nonetheless, R. Hool proposes that this omission does not disprove the historicity of his reign because, as some scholars explain, the Bible sometimes loosely attributes the reign of a king's successor to the earlier king. Thus, the years of Nerigilssar's reign (and those of his successor Nabonidus) were included within the twenty-two years attributed to Evil-Merodach (who, according to extra-Biblical sources, only reigned for two years). Interestingly, one source (Yassif 2001:249–250) brands the Babylonian king who destroyed the Temple "Nebuchadnezzar the Great" and writes that he had a son named Nebuchadnezzar II, who was the father of Evil-Merodach. [Although Nabonidus never appears in the Bible or in any early rabbinic work, his name does appear in a Dead Sea Scroll fragment known as *The Prayer of Nabonidus* (4Q242). That fragment describes a prayer ascribed to Nabonidus, who was afflicted with some sort of malady that brought him to monotheism and the realization of Hashem's power. See also F.M. Cross, "Fragments of the Prayer of Nabonidus," *Israel Exploration Journal*, vol. 34:4 (1984), pp. 260–264.]
Biblical precedent for such an approach is found in II Kgs. 15:30, which mentions that Pekah, the King of Israel, died during the *twentieth* year of Jotham, king of Judah's reign, even though Jotham only reigned for sixteen years. The "twentieth year of Jotham's reign" was actually the fourth year of his successor Ahaz's reign. *Seder Olam* (Ch. 22) explains that the Bible chose to date Pekah's death according to Jotham, even though he was already dead, because Ahaz was wicked while Jotham was righteous (Hool 2014:215).

519 Marcus 1973:169 and Keil 1989:748. This, of course, begs the question of why the Bible censored this instance of Nergal-sharezer but not others. Furthermore, as we have demonstrated throughout this encyclopedia, the Bible is rife with names which bear idolatrous theophoric elements, so this name should not be any different.

520 Rashi to TB *Sanhedrin* 96a and II Kgs. 19:37.

Some explain that the name Nisroch is related to the word *nesher* (נשר, eagle) and refers to the deification of the eagle. These commentators supplement the Talmud's explanation that Nisroch was a wooden plank by writing that an eagle's image was engraved upon it. They relate the deification of the eagle to the ancient legend[521] of the eagle that soared towards the sun only to be burnt and subsequently resurrected from its ashes (similar to a phoenix).[522]

Academic scholars have been unable to identify Nisroch with any known Mesopotamian deity, but this makes sense because the Nisroch cult was short-lived because it was founded by Sennacherib and probably died with him. Nonetheless, some conjecture that "Nisroch" is the Bible's way of mockingly referring to **Merodach**.[523] Others identify Nisroch with **Nevo**,[524] Ninurta (a Babylonian fertility god), or Nusku (a Babylonian god of light).[525]

R. Meir Abulafia understands that Nisroch was not actually an idol, but rather refers to a board from Noah's ark that reminded Sennacherib of Hashem's mighty powers and made him comment, "This is the Great God who saved Noah from the flood and who caused for me all of this."[526]

A Plank from Noah's Ark

As mentioned above, the Talmud explains that Sennacherib found a wooden plank from Noah's ark and ascribed his military successes to it. He then pledged to sacrifice two of his sons in its honor should he continue to be successful. When his sons found out about this, they killed their father as he worshipped at Nisroch's shrine, and then they fled to the land of Ararat.[527]

Tosefta de-Targum adds some details to the story and explains that Sennacherib built a temple in Nineveh to worship Nisroch. His sons **Adrammelech** and Sharezer were so disappointed that their father failed to recognize Hashem's power after having survived Hashem's decimation of the Assyrian army in one night to save Jerusalem that they assassinated him. After killing their father, they fled for Kurdistan—where the Jews of the Kingdom of Israel had been exiled—and converted to Judaism.[528] *Tosefta de-Targum* writes that Adrammelech and Sharezer were the same as Shemaya and Avtalyon,[529] two early Tannaic

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521 Radak (to Ps. 103:5, Isa. 40:31, and Mic. 1:16); Rabbeinu Bachya (to Gen. 2:19); and Abarbanel (to Isa. 40:31) cite this legend in R. Saadia Gaon's name.

522 *BB*, p. 39b. For more about the deification of eagles in general, see *DDD*, p. 271.

523 Keil 1989:748.

524 *BB*, p. 29a.

525 *DDD*, pp. 630–631.

526 *Yad Ramah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 96a.

527 TB *Sanhedrin* 96a.

528 *Tosefta de-Targum* to II Kgs. 19:37.

529 The Talmud (TB *Gittin* 57b) writes that Sennacherib's descendants taught Torah publicly, and identifies those descendants as Shemaya and Avtalyon. Interestingly, the first letters of the names Sharezer and Adrammelech are the same as the first letters of the names Shemaya and Avtalyon, respectively. Maimonides (in his introduction to *Mishnah Torah*) writes that Shemaya and Avtalyon themselves were converts to Judaism, however, Maharal (*Derech Chaim* to *Avos* 1:10) disagrees, and explains that they were *descendants* of converts. R. Menachem Azariah of Fano (*Gilgulei Neshamos, Samech*) writes that Shemaya and Avtalyon were *reincarnations* of Adrammelech and Sharezer. All in all, none of these sources echo *Tosefta de-Targum's* claim that Shemaya and Avtalyon themselves

sages, who lived centuries later in the Second Temple period.[530]

Maharal explains that Sennacherib identified with Noah because Noah had survived the miraculous destruction of the world, just as Sennacherib had survived the miraculous destruction of his army.[531] Maharsha explains that Sennacherib did not actually worship the wooden plank itself. Rather, he believed that Noah's ark represented a higher spiritual power, which he served via the wooden plank.[532]

Midrashic sources also record that when **HAMAN** erected wooden gallows upon which he wished to hang Mordechai, his son Parshandatha (who was the governor of Kurdistan) brought him a fifty-cubit wooden beam from Noah's ark.[533]

Nivchaz (נִבְחַז) was the name of a god worshipped by the Avvites, whom the Assyrians imported to the region of Samaria to replace the exiled Jews (II Kgs. 17:31). According to some versions of the Bible, the idol was actually named Nivchan.[534] R. Saadia Gaon writes that it was associated with the astral force of Saturn.[535]

The Talmud relates that the Nivchaz idol was dog-shaped.[536] Rashi explains that this is alluded to in the name Nivchaz, which is related to the word *novaiach* (נובח, bark).[537] Radak adds that Nivchaz is a contraction of *novaiach* and *chaz* (חז, sight), denoting the fact that when a dog *barks*, it *shows* its teeth. Similarly, R. Yaakov Emden explains that when a dog *sees* a stranger, it *barks*.[538]

R. Shmuel Laniado explains that Nivchaz worshippers alluded to the fact that just as a dog has the audacity[539] to continually request food after its requests have been denied, so too, they would continue to pray to their original gods to redeem them from their Samarian exile to their Mesopotamian homeland.[540]

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were Sennacherib's two sons. Although R. Ishtori ha-Parchi (*Kaftor vo-Ferach* ch. 5) writes that Adrammelech and Sharezer converted to Judaism and are buried at Gush Chalav, many early travelers to the Holy Land testified to seeing their graves *alongside* those of Shemaya and Avtalyon, implying that they were not the same people (Eisenstein 1926:59–60; 64; 79; 82; 332).

530 They are mentioned in the Mishnah *Avos* 1:10.

531 *Chiddushei Aggados* (to TB *Sanhedrin* 96a) and *Be'er ha-Golah* (*Be'er* 4).

532 Maharsha to *Sanhedrin* 96a.

533 See S. Buber (ed.), *Sifrei de-Aggadata Al Megillas Esther, Midrash Abba Gurion* (Vilna 1887), p. 19a; and *Midrash Panim Acheirim*, pp. 36b–37a (also cited by *Yalkut Shimoni*, Ex. §256 and Es. §1055). On the other hand, *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (ch. 50) explains that the fifty-cubit beam that Haman used originally came from the Holy Temple in Jerusalem which had already been destroyed.

534 Radak (to II Kgs. 7:31) mentions both versions and concludes that the Nivchan version is erroneous. *Minchas Shai* (to II Kgs. 17:31) and Maharsha (to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b) suggest that perhaps because the last letter in the word Nivchaz—the *zayin* (ז)—is customarily written larger than usual, people confused it with a final-*nun* (ן), thus mistakenly rendering the word Nivchan.

535 Ratzabi 1993:194.

536 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

537 Rashi to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

538 *Hagahos Yaavetz* to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

539 See TB *Beitzah* 25b, which states that dogs are the most brazen animals. Furthermore, Kabbalistic sources tend to refer to dogs as *kalbin da-chatzifin* (כלבין דחציפין, dogs of *chutzpah*).

540 Batzri 1994: 346.

Various academic scholars have offered different interpretations as to the origins and meaning of the name Nivchaz:

- Some academic scholars explain that Nivchaz is the Bible's name for Ibnakhaza, a god worshipped in Elam (Persia).[541]
- Others oppose an Elamite identification of this god, and instead explain that the word Nivchaz is a deliberate corruption of the word *mizbeach* (מזבח, altar) and refers to the deification of a specific altar.[542]
- Yet others identify Nivchaz with the deity **Nevo**.[543]
- Nivchaz's association with dogs (see below) leads some to identify Nivchaz with **Baal Zafon** and/or Anubis, both of which are associated with dogs.[544]

Rimmon (רמון) was an Aramean storm god. Although its name literally means "pomegranate," according to some scholars it is pronounced Ramman, rendering it similar to the word *ram* (רם, high), and thus giving it the probable meaning "the high one."[545] Rimmon may have been another name for the Syrian god **Hadad**[546] and/or the Canaanite god **Baal**.

Scholars assume that the House of Rimmon at Damascus later became the Temple of Zeus in the Hellenistic period, and then the Temple of Jupiter Damascinus under the Romans.[547] Some identify Rimmon with **Ciun**.[548]

R. Chaim Vital died in 1620 and was buried in Damascus. According to some sources,[549] he specifically requested to be buried near the Temple of Rimmon as a way of Kabbalistically diminishing the evil forces represented by its idolatrous cult.[550]

Bowing in the House of Rimmon

The Bible (II Kings 5:1–19) recounts an episode involving the prophet Elisha (Elijah's protégé) and Naaman (the general of the Aramean army during King Hadad II of Damascus's reign). Naaman was a leper who was miraculously healed by following Elisha's advice to immerse in the Jordan River. This miracle impressed the Aramean general, who thus recognized Hashem as the One God. As Naaman took Elisha's leave, he requested that:

> *For this thing, may Hashem forgive your servant: When my master [the king of Aram]*

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541 See Driver 1958:19*; and Keil 1989:700.

542 See Z. Ron, "*Nivhaz* or *Nivhan*?" *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, vol. 37:4 (2009), pp. 239–242, who offers a synthesis of this explanation (associating Nivchaz with an altar) and the Talmud's (associating Nivchaz with dogs) in Shmuel Shimshoni's name. He suggests that both are possibly correct and the Avvites worshipped a dog-shaped altar. For more about the deification of altars in general and the possible connection to Nivchaz, see *DDD*, pp. 23–24; 623.

543 *BB*, p. 29a.

544 Ibid., p. 39a.

545 A. Calmet, *Dictionary of the Holy Bible* (Crocker and Brewster, 1832), p. 790.

546 Some see a correlation between the two, because Hadad means breast while pomegranates are breast-shaped fruits whose crowns resemble nipples.

547 Greenfield 1976:197.

548 *BB*, p. 41a.

549 See R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad's *Od Yosef Chai* (to Ezekiel Ch. 24). A similar tradition cited in the name of R. Moshe Najara (1508–1581) explains that this is also why R. Chaim Vital left the Holy Land and relocated to Damascus after the death of his master R. Yitzchak Luria. See N. Low (ed.), "*Toldos Rabbeinu Chaim Vital*," *Eitz ha-Daas Tov*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem, 2008), p. 54. See also A. Yaari (ed.), *Igros Eretz Yisrael* (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1971), p. 295.

550 This is similar to the way that Moses' burial next to **Baal Peor** achieved a similar effect.

enters the House of Rimmon to bow down there, he leans on my arm, so I must bow in the House of Rimmon; when I bow down in the House of Rimmon, may Hashem (please) forgive your servant for this matter.

Naaman sought Elisha's approval for continuing to serve the king of Aram, which would invariably necessitate his participation in idolatrous rituals, such as bowing in the House of Rimmon. Elisha seems to have responded approvingly when he replied, *Go to peace*.

The Talmud asks whether a Noahide must risk his life in order to avoid transgressing the Noahide prohibitions even if under duress. It proves from Elisha's response to Naaman that a Noahide need not allow himself to be martyred if forced to commit such a sin.[551] R. Yitzchak Arieli (1896–1974) explains the rationale for this ruling: Only the Jews have historically been able to transcend their survival instincts by sacrificing their lives to fulfill Hashem's commands. Noahides, on the other hand, cannot be expected to transcend their natural human instincts.[552]

R. Shmuel Laniado suggests that Naaman did not mean to simply ask for permission to bow in the House of Rimmon. Rather, Naaman hinted to Elisha that when he would be forced to bow in the House of Rimmon, he would intend to bow in Hashem's honor, not the idol's (for Hashem is omnipresent).[553] Based on this, R. Laniado explains that Naaman asked Elisha for forgiveness because onlookers would assume that he was really bowing to Rimmon.[554]

Peirush ha-Rokeach offers a similar interpretation based on a particularity in the wording of Naaman's request. The last two times that Naaman uses the word *Rimmon*, it is spelled without the letter *vav* (רמן instead of רמון), which could also mean "trickster," alluding to Naaman "tricking" his master by pretending to bow to Rimmon while really bowing to Hashem. This also points to the idea that Naaman's heart was towards Hashem when he bowed in the House of Rimmon, even though it seemed as though he was bowing to the Rimmon idol like his master.[555]

While the Talmud understands that Elisha *approved* Naaman's request to continue serving his master in the House of Rimmon, the Midrash ascertains otherwise. According to the Masoretic text of the Bible, the word *please* in Naaman's request is written, but is not read. Based on this, *Midrash Ksiv ve-Lo Kri* explains that just as this word should be "missing" from the text, Naaman's intelligence was also "missing," as evidenced by his ignorant request.[556] In essence, the Midrash criticizes Naaman for his request, but does not elaborate on the reason for this criticism.[557]

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551 TB *Sanhedrin* 74b–75a. The Talmud (ad loc.) offers an exception to this leniency if the sin will be committed in the presence of ten Jews—a variable that was not in play in the case of Naaman.

552 Y. Arieli, *Einayim la-Mishpat, Sanhedrin* (Jerusalem, 1947), p. 191.

553 R. Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam in responsa *Divrei Yatziv* (*Yoreh Deah*, vol. 2 §175) notes that this logic only applies to bowing in an idol's temple, but not when bowing directly to an idol. In other words, one is never allowed to bow directly to an idol—even if his intent is to bow towards Hashem. See also *Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah*, vol. 5 §11.

554 Batzri 1994:119–120.

555 Klugmann 2009b:324.

556 Eisenstein 1915:503.

557 Although the commentators cited above assume that Naaman disavowed his beliefs in his

Theophoric Appearances

An individual named Rimmon the Beerothite from the tribe of Benjamin had two sons who took the initiative of killing Ish-Bosheth (II Sam. 4). While one might argue that this individual was named after the Aramaean god Rimmon, it is more likely that his namesake was the popular pomegranate fruit.

The Bible records that Asa, king of Judah, sent a tribute to the Aramean king Ben-Hadad, son of Tabrimmon, son of Hezion, in order to convince him to wage war against Baasa, king of Israel (I Kgs. 15:18–19, I Chron. 16:2–3). The name Tabrimmon is a portmanteau composed of *tav* (טב, good) and Rimmon.

Similarly, the prophet Zechariah refers to "the mourning of Hadadrimmon" (Zech. 12:11). The first part of his name, Hadad, may allude to the Aramean god Hadad, while the second part of his name refers to Rimmon. In fact, Targum[558] and the Talmud[559] explain that "the mourning of Hadadrimmon" refers to the mourning over Ahab, king of Israel, who was killed by Hadadrimmon, son of Tabrimmon.[560] Malbim[561] notes that Hadadrimmon is another name for Ben-Hadad, the Aramean king during Ahab's reign.[562]

Outside of the Bible, Rimmon appears as a theophoric element in several proper names: Zedek-Ramman, Ramman-Natan, and Ramman-Ayali.[563]

Places Named Rimmon

The name Rimmon also appears in the Bible in several place-names. They should not necessarily be taken as theophoric elements (especially because they were not connected to the Arameans), but they nonetheless bear mention.

Rimmon was the name of one of twenty-nine Jewish cities located in the jurisdiction of the tribe of Judah (Josh. 15:32). This city is mentioned again in Josh. 19:7, when delineating the cities of the tribe of Simeon, whose portion was situated inside Judah's territory (Josh. 19:1; I Chron. 4:32). When the Judean exiles returned under Nehemiah's leadership, this city was once again rebuilt (Neh. 11:29).[564] The city is again mentioned in Zechariah's prophecy (14:10), which foretells of an expanded Jerusalem that will be distinguished from the rest of the Holy Land when Hashem turns the surrounding area from Geba to Rimmon[565] into a plain, so that Jerusalem's lofty position will be clear to all.

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old Aramean gods and instead pledged allegiance to Hashem, Ibn Ezra (to Ex. 20:1) understands that the two are not mutually exclusive. That is, Ibn Ezra explains that although Naaman believed in Hashem, he also wished to continue worshipping Rimmon because he believed that it would grant him certain benefits if he worshipped it.

558 Targum to Zech. 12:11.

559 TB *Moed Katan* 28b.

560 Ibn Ezra (to Zech. 12:11) disagrees with this explanation and writes that the identity of Hadadrimmon is unknown, and we should not expect to recognize every person who was famous in the ancient world.

561 To Zech. 12:11.

562 R. Abdallah Somekh (1813–1889) in responsa *Zivchei Tzedek*, vol. 3, §12, offers a summary of other commentators who offered this explanation and their reasons.

563 Greenfield 1976:195.

564 It was called *Ein-Rimmon* (עין רמון, pomegranate spring).

565 Rashi (ad loc.) cites the Tosefta (*Sotah* 11:7), which notes that the locales of Geba and Rimmon are rocky and mountainous. A. Goor, "The History of the Pomegranate in the Holy Land," *Economic Botany*, vol. 21:3 (1967), p. 220, mistakenly cited this Tosefta as the source

Other places in the Bible that include the word Rimmon in their names are:

- Rimmon, which appears in a list of cities in Zebulun's territory (Josh. 19:13);
- Rimmon-Perez (רמון פרץ, pomegranate bursts forth), which was one of the Jews' forty-eight stops in their desert sojourn, as recounted in Numbers 33:19–20;
- Gath-Rimmon (גת רמון, pomegranate press) in the tribal territory of Dan, which is listed among the cities given to the Levitical family of Kohath (Josh. 21:23);
- Sela-Rimmon (סלע רמון, pomegranate rock), to whence the refugees from the tribe of Benjamin fled when attacked by their fellow Jews during the concubine of Gibeah episode (Judg. 20:45–47; 21:13).

Outside of the Bible, the Jerusalem Talmud tells of seven elders who intercalated the calendar at a site called Bikas Rimmon (בקעת רמון, the valley of Rimmon).[566]

Siccuth (סכות) was the name of an idol in Amos' prophecy that foretold the respective downfalls of Siccuth, **Ciun**, and **Cochav** (Amos 5:26). Siccuth might have been identical to **Succoth Benoth**. Although Rashi explains that Siccuth and Ciun were identical,[567] R. Moshe David Valle explains that Siccuth and Ciun were a pair of male and female idols, with Siccuth being the male and Ciun, the female.[568] R. Saadia Gaon explains that the Siccuth cult worshipped the astral force of Mercury,[569] although academic scholars contend that Siccuth might have been related to other astral forces.[570]

R. Yosef Kara explains that Siccuth was related to the word *masecha* (מסכה, molten image). R. Eliyahu ha-Bachur suggests that the word Siccuth was related to the similar-sounding Latin word for a parrot, *psittacus*, implying that Siccuth was parrot-shaped.[571]

Amos rebukes the masses by referring to the god Siccuth as "Siccuth, your king." Radak explains that Amos used the term "your king" sarcastically to deride the idolatrous Jews for picking a star and making it "their king" instead of Hashem. Alternatively, Radak explains that Siccuth worshippers viewed the idol as the "king" of a pantheon.

Others understand that Siccuth was not an idol's name, but means something else:

- Targum explains that Siccuth referred to the practice of receiving breads from idolatrous priests (similar to the Catholic communion ceremony).
- R. Yonah Ibn Janach explains that Siccuth was not a proper name, but was related to the word *haskes* (הסכת, listen).[572] According to this, Amos rebukes the Jews for listening to and accepting upon themselves some unnamed form of idolatry.[573]
- Similarly, Ibn Ezra explains that Siccuth

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for another place bearing the name Rimmon, Geva Rimmon. However, a thorough look at the Tosefta reveals that it simply explains Zechariah's prophecy, which mentions the expression *from Geba to Rimmon*, and does not refer to a separate place.

566 JT *Chagigah* 3:1. See also *Eichah Rabbasi* §1:45 and *Bereishis Rabbah* §64:10 which mention a place called "the valley of the House of Rimmon" (בקעת בית רמון).

567 Rashi to Amos 5:26.

568 R. Moshe David Valle to Amos ibid.

569 Ratzabi 1993:194.

570 *DDD*, pp. 722–723.

571 Glosses to Radak's *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. סכת).

572 Radak in *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (s.v. סכת) cites this explanation, but also suggests that Siccuth was actually an idol's name.

573 Berliner 1893:339.

refers to the Jews "heeding" the idolaters' calls for worship.

- Rosenberg explains that Siccuth was not the name of a deity, per se, but referred to a *sukkah* (סוכה, hut) built as a shrine for **Molech**.[574]

Succoth Benoth (סכות בנות) was the god of the Babylonians that the Assyrians imported to occupy Samaria after they conquered the Kingdom of Israel (II Kgs. 17:30). Radak points out that although in **Nebuchadnezzar**'s time **Bel** was the chief Babylonian god, Succoth Benoth had played that role earlier in Sennacherib's time.[575] Some explain that Succoth Benoth was the Hebraized form of the Babylonian gods Saq-kud and Banitu/Zarpanitu (who was **Merodach**'s wife in Babylonian mythology).[576]

R. Saadia Gaon writes that this idol was linked with the astral force of Venus and its associated astral tributaries. He proves that Succoth Benoth had an astral connotation by citing Amos' prophecy (5:26) that foretold the respective downfalls of the idols **Siccuth**, **Ciun**, and **Cochav**. R. Saadia Gaon reasons that since the latter two are clearly forms of astral worship, the first, whose name closely resembles Succoth Benoth, must also have been a form of astral worship.[577]

Hen and Chicks

The Talmud relates that this idol was hen-shaped,[578] and the Jerusalem Talmud adds that it was formed as a hen and her hatchlings.[579] *Sefer ha-Aruch* explains that Succoth was related to the word *socheches* (סוככת, covers), and referred to the hen covering its young.[580] Rashi explains that in the language of Succoth Benoth's worshippers, a hen was called "*succoth benoth*."[581] Radak adds that the word Succoth is related to the word *sechvi* (סכוי, rooster).[582]

Based on the Talmudic connection between Succoth Benoth and a hen, some explain that Succoth Benoth referred to the astrological constellation known as *kimah* (כימה, Pleiades), which was symbolized by a hen and her chicks.[583]

R. Meir Abulafia writes that only a hen cares for her chicks alone by covering them with her wings, while with other birds, the male helps the female to care for their young.[584] R. Shmuel Laniado explains the symbolism of the hen as understood by the Succoth Benoth worshippers exiled to Samaria: They wished that just as a hen gathers her chicks and protects them under her wings, their god should gather them, return them home to Babylon, and protect them.[585]

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574 See A. Rosenberg, *Otzar ha-Shemos*, vol. 7 (New York, 1923), p. 225.

575 Radak to II Kgs. 17:30.

576 See Driver 1958:18*; Keil 1989:700; and *DDD*, pp. 821–822. Van der Toorn 1992:86 proposes that Banit was viewed as Nevo's consort.

577 Ratzabi 1993:194.

578 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

579 JT *Avodah Zarah* 3:2.

580 S.v. סך.

581 Rashi to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

582 Radak to II Kgs. 17:30. See TB *Rosh Hashanah* 26a.

583 Rosenberg argues that the Hebrew word *kimah* is derived from the Semitic word *kimut/kimtu* which means "family" or "cluster." In this context, it would refer to the cluster of stars that make up the constellation. See A. Rosenberg, *Otzar ha-Shemos*, vol. 5 (New York, 1923), p. 362.

584 *Yad Ramah* to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

585 Batzri 1994: 346.

Tammuz (תמוז) was a Babylonian fertility god. At various points in history, it represented plentiful pasture and/or agriculture. In Sumerian, this idol was known as Dumuzi.[586] R. Yehudah Ibn Balaam (1000–1070) quotes R. Hai Gaon that Tammuz was another name for the Greek god Adonis, for whom many ancient elegies were composed.[587] Some argue that Tammuz was of Egyptian origin because its name resembled that of the Egyptian king Themos.

Radak notes that some explain that Tammuz means a marten (a cat-like mammal), and refers to an idol formed in its likeness.[588]

Tammuz shared its name with the first summer-month of the traditional Jewish calendar, adopted from the Babylonians, even though the name does not appear in the Bible in that capacity.

Ancient Tammuz Worship

When describing the sins for which Hashem brought the destruction of the Holy Temple, the prophet Ezekiel recounts a vision in which he was brought *to the gate of the Temple of Hashem that is to the north, and behold, there were women sitting, causing the Tammuz to cry [mivakos]* (Ezek. 8:14).

Radak[589] and Meiri[590] explain that the expression *causing the Tammuz to cry* sarcastically refers to the Tammuz celebrations. During the month of Tammuz, worshippers of the idol by the same name held a festival, and women came to rejoice in the festivities. Nonetheless, ancient sources and traditional commentators alike favor a literal understanding of that expression, associating Tammuz worship with crying.[591]

Sumerian legends tell that since this god was associated with produce, it would "die" at the onset of the summer when grain was milled. Worship of this god includes a late winter festival celebrating its mythological "marriage" to the goddess Inanna (**ASHTORETH**),[592] and a period of mourning over its "death" in the beginning of the summer. Another legend has Tammuz damned

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586 Marcus 1984:134 argues that the Aramaic word *dimasa* (דמעתא, tears) is related to Tammuz/Dumuzi. R. Tzvi Hirsch Chajes also changes the *t*-sound into a *d*-sound when attempting to ascertain the identity of this idol. However, he argues that the name Tammuz is related to the Aramaic word *dimmus* (דימוס, judgement), and is identical to the Greek Titaness Themis, who was the deification of law and order. See M. Herskowitz, *Maharatz Chajes* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2007), pp. 130–131.

587 M. Perez (ed.), *Peirush Rabbi Yehudah Ibn Balaam le-Sefer Yechezkel* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2000), p. 41.

588 Radak to Ezek. 8:14.

589 Ibid.

590 A. Sofer (ed.), *Chibbur ha-Teshuvah* (Jerusalem: Kedem Publishing Ltd., 1976), p. 630.

591 R. Tzvi Elimelech Shapiro (1785–1841) writes in *Igra de-Pirka* (*Likutim*, §11) and *Bnei Yisaschar* (*Tammuz-Av*, §1:3) that according to *Sefer Yetzirah* (Eisenstein 1915:242), the month of Tammuz corresponds to the sense of sight. The eyes could be used for good or bad, depending on what one does with them. Because the eyes are specifically associated with the month of Tammuz, anything good or bad that one does in that month with their eyes is especially magnified. Accordingly, when the women in Ezekiel's time would cry with the Tammuz, they were using their eyes for evil at an especially inappropriate time (based on an idea heard from R. Moshe Shapiro).

592 In this festival, the king or local ruler assumed the role of Tammuz, while a priestess took the role of Inanna. They mimicked the marriage of the god and goddess by physically consummating their relationship. The followers of the Tammuz cult believed that with this act, the king fertilized all of nature for the coming year.

to live in the netherworld for half the year, thus justifying a joyous festival upon its release, and a period of mourning upon its return.[593]

The Greek myth of Adonis mimics that of the Babylonian Tammuz.[594] In the Greek version of the festival, *ad hoc* groups of women would gather to commemorate Adonis' tragic death by publicly crying and rending their clothes. (The commemoration was known as Adonia.)[595] According to historical records, the mourning for Adonis was limited to women; men did not partake in the wailing.[596]

The Crying Idol

Not only was Tammuz worshipped by crying, but the idol itself also "cried." Rashi explains that Tammuz was an idol with an internal heating element which would cause its eyes (made of lead) to melt, creating the illusion that it was crying.[597] Its priests would use the "crying" to prove that the idol requested sacrifices.[598] Following this basic approach, R. Yosef Kara explains that during the month of Tammuz they placed the idol in the heat of the sun, which somehow caused the metal to sweat—thereby giving the illusion of a crying idol.[599]

Similarly, Radak explains that Tammuz's priests performed some sort of trick with water, which gave the illusion of a crying idol.[600] R. Shlomo Ibn Parchon explains that Tammuz was insect shaped. Its priests placed it on water, which entered the idol's cavities and made it appear to cry.[601]

Crying for the Tammuz

R. Eliezer of Beaugency (a 12th-century French commentator) explains that Tammuz was worshipped by women crying before it.[602] R. Moshe David Valle writes that because women were more likely to cry due to their emotional softness—as the Talmud writes, a woman's tears are more frequent than a man's[603]—this idol was commonly worshipped by women.

R. Yeshaya of Trani explains that the word *mivakos* does not mean that the women would make the idol cry, rather it means that they would cry over the idol. He compares this to the verse *Rachel weeps [mivakah] for her children* (Jer. 31:14)—although he admits that this usage is a grammatical anomaly in the Bible. He also explains that the passage in Ezekiel quoted above refers to sun-worshippers, who would mourn the waning influence of the sun after the summer solstice, as the days begin to shorten.[604]

Alternatively, Radak explains that the word Tammuz is related to the word "burnt," as used

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593 *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006), s.v. "Tammuz"; and *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd ed., vol. 19, E. I. Weisenberg (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), s.v. "Tammuz."

594 *Britannica Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2006), s.v. "Adonis."

595 See M.P. Dillon, "'Woe for Adonis': But in Spring Not Summer," *Hermes*, vol. 131 (2003), pp. 1–16, who disagrees with the accepted view that Adonia occurred in the summer.

596 J.D. Reed, "The Sexuality of Adonis," *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 14:2 (1995), pp. 317–347.

597 Rashi to Ezek. 8:14.

598 Radak also cites this explanation (*Sefer ha-Shorashim*, s.v. תמז).

599 R. Yosef Kara to Ezek. 8:14.

600 Radak to Ezek. ad loc.

601 S. Gottleib (ed.), *Machaberes ha-Aruch* (Pressburg, 1844), p. 74a.

602 S. Poznanski (ed.), *Peirush Al Yechezkel ve-Trei Asar le-Rabenu Eliezer mi-Balgenzi* (Warsaw: Mekize Nirdamim, 1913), p. 14.

603 TB *Bava Metzia* 59a.

604 Wertheimer 1978b:13.

in the Aramaic expression *le-meiza le-atona* (לאתונא לאמיזא, to heat the furnace) employed by **NEBUCHADNEZZAR** (Dan. 3:19). Accordingly, he explains that the crying associated with Tammuz refers to women crying over their sons and daughters who were sacrificed to the fires (see **MOLECH**).

R. Valle further suggests that this idol was called Tammuz because it was associated with the month of Tammuz, in which Satanic forces cause worry and sadness, as this month is reserved for punishment.[605] By crying before the crying idol, these women would show that they identified with its cause and thereby strengthened the forces of evil. Based on this, R. Valle explains that the verse in Ezekiel quoted above means, *there were women sitting, crying* with *the Tammuz*.[606]

R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai explains that the Jewish women knew that the Babylonians were destined to breach the city walls of Jerusalem during the month of Tammuz, so during that time they would cry while praying to their idols and asking them to cancel the Divine decree. This was a most heinous crime, because they brazenly persisted in sinning by turned to idols to overturn Hashem's decree, instead of repenting and praying to Hashem.[607]

Similarly, Abarbanel and R. David Zacut Modena (1778–1865) explain that these women ascribed the tragedies that would occur in the month of Tammuz to the god Tammuz instead of to Hashem. This angered Hashem more than other forms of idolatry, and contributed to the Temple's eventual destruction.[608]

Tammuz the Prophet

Maimonides relates an alternate Sabian Tammuz myth: There was once an idolatrous "prophet" named Tammuz who requested that a certain king worship the seven astral forces and the twelve constellations of the zodiac. The king responded by punishing this "prophet" with a gruesome death. The legend says that the night that he was killed, all the idols from all the Babylonian temples gathered before the great golden idol—the idol of the sun (see **BEL**)—and began to eulogize Tammuz and describe what had happened to him. The idols cried the entire night and upon dawn, they flew back to their respective temples. The legend concludes that this repeated itself every year on the first day of Tammuz. In order to commemorate this story, women would gather and lament Tammuz's death.[609]

Tartak (תַּרְתָּק) was one of the idols imported to Samaria by the Avvites, who were brought there by the Assyrian occupiers (II Kgs. 17:31).

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605 See Rashi (to Jer. 2:24) who explains that Hashem reserves the month of Av for punishment. See also *Hagahos Mordechai* (TB *Moed Katan* §934) who discusses whether or not the custom of *Birkas ha-Chodesh* (lit., "blessing the month," i.e., announcing the new month on the Sabbath before it begins) should be carried out for the month of Av, in light of the fact that that month is set aside for punishment.
However, in truth there is no overt source in classical Rabbinic literature which labels any month as set aside for punishment. The closest idea found is the Talmudic passage (TB *Sotah* 35a) which writes that the ninth of Av is a day of "crying for generations" and the seventeenth of Tammuz is called a day reserved for punishments (see Maharsha to TB *Taanis* 28b). See R. Yosef Al-Ashakar in M. Amar (ed.), *Tzafnas Paneach* (Lod, 2009), p. 128, who writes that both Tammuz and Av are considered months reserved for punishment.

606 *Mamleches Kohanim* to Ezek. 8:14.

607 *Chomas Onach* ad loc.

608 *Zecher David*, *Maamar* #3, §1 (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom, 2001), p. 290.

609 *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:29. See *DDD*, pp. 829–830, for an academic analysis of the view that Tammuz was not originally a god, but a deified person.

The Talmud explains that this idol was donkey-shaped.[610] R. Yaakov Emden explains that Tartak's etymology alludes to its association with donkeys. Tartak is a portmanteau of the words *trei tikin* (תרי תיקין, two sacks), which refers to the fact that donkeys customarily carried two sacks—one on each side—to balance each other's loads.[611]

R. Saadia Gaon writes that this idol was associated with the astral force Mercury.[612]

For the most part, the academic world admits that it cannot identify Tartak with any known ancient deity.[613] Some academic sources propose that Tartak is somehow a Hebraized rendering of the name Attargatis, a known Syrian goddess.[614] Those who explain that NIVCHAZ was a Persian deity argue that Tartak was also a Persian god, because they are juxtaposed in Kings.[615]

Terafim (תְּרָפִים) were some sort of idolatrous divination devices, but the commentators differ regarding what exactly they were and how their powers were accessed. R. Ovadiah Sforno (1475–1550) warns that using *terafim* is tantamount to idolatry because it implies a rebellion against Hashem, even if one just makes use of the *terafim* without explicitly declaring that they are his god.[616]

R. Avraham bar Chiyya ha-Nasi (1065–1145) explains that *terafim* were orbucula (crystal/glass balls) used for divination.[617]

Rashi[618] and Radak[619] cite three opinions as to what exactly *terafim* were.

1. *Terafim* were copper time-keeping devices.
2. *Terafim* were talking images that had to be created at certain "auspicious" times. This seems to be Rashi's preferred opinion as he explains that *terafim* are images created at certain "auspicious" times, which possess the ability to talk and reveal hidden things.[620] Elsewhere, he again repeats this explanation and adds that the image speaks through witchcraft.[621] Finally, in yet another location, Rashi clarifies that this "auspicious" time is one hour out of a year.[622]
3. Ibn Ezra favors the approach that *terafim* were images of human beings fashioned in order to receive powers from Above.

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610 TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

611 *Hagahos Yaavetz* to TB *Sanhedrin* 63b.

612 Ratzabi 1993:194.

613 A. Rosenberg, *Otzar ha-Shemos*, vol. 5 (New York, 1923), p. 553, writes that one cannot expect academia to be able to explain anything about Tartak as long as nothing is known about the Avvites themselves. Nonetheless, he expresses the optimistic belief that in the future more information shall be forthcoming about the Avvites. Not much has changed in the century since those words were penned, see *DDD*, pp. 836–837.

614 J.A. Montgomery, "1. Tartak," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 33:1 (1914), p. 78.

615 Keil 1989:700.

616 Sforno to Ex. 34:17. This way of viewing *terafim* and witchcraft will be expanded upon in Volume II.

617 A. Schwarz (ed.), *Iggeres R. Avraham bar R. Chiyya ha-Nasi she-Kasav le-R. Yehudah bar R. Barzilai Al Sheailah bi-Chaldeim* (Vienna, 1916), p. 11.

618 To Hos. 4:3.

619 To Jud. 18:5.

620 Rashi to Hos. 4:3.

621 Rashi to Jud. 18:5 and Ezek. 21:26.

622 Rashi to II Kgs. 23:24. Gersonides (to Jud. 17:10 and I Sam. 19:13) writes that according to ancient beliefs, *terafim*, if fashioned at certain times, would have the ability to divinely arouse one's sense of imagination so that one would think that he heard a voice foretelling the future. See Rashi to Jud. 18:5 and Ezek. 21:26.

Etymology of the Word *Terafim*

There are many possible etymologies of *terafim*, each with its own explanation. Nachmanides explains that the word *terafim* is related to the Hebrew word *rafah* (רפה, weak) and refers to the fact that *terafim* offered "weak prophecies."[623] That is, their prophecies were generally true,[624] but sometimes simply lies, as the prophet Zechariah says, *Because the terafim speak nothingness* (Zech. 10:2). Malbim explains that *terafim* are called weak because their physical components eventually wear out and become "weak."[625]

The *Zohar* explains that the word *terafim* is related to the phrase *makom torefeh* (מקום תורפה, the dirty place) and refers to the oracle's repulsiveness and impurity.[626] As we shall explain below, *terafim* were indeed disgusting.

Some identify *terafim* with the Egyptian god Serapis, theorizing that while the idols were really called *seraphim* (שרפים), the Sages changed their name to *terafim* in order to degrade them.[627] Others explain that the word *terafim* is related to the Hebrew word *terufah* (תרופה, medicine) and refers to their perceived ability to heal the sick.[628] Another theory explains that the word *terafim* is related to the word *patar* (פתר, interpret) by way of a linguistic phenomenon known as metathesis, wherein a word's consonants change order.[629]

An additional suggestion is that *terafim* is related to the Hittite word *tarpis* which means "demon," with whom those who used *terafim* ostensibly communicated.[630]

Images of Humans

Ibn Ezra provides evidence for his favored explanation that *terafim* were humanoid objects from the episode of King David and Michal. Michal put *terafim* in David's bed to give the appearance that he was still there, implying that the *terafim* had a human form (see end of Chap 4 for more about this episode).

Some historians explain that *terafim* were thought to represent the deceased ancestors of those who consulted with them, who would advise them regarding how to escape dangerous situations.[631]

Another explanation argues that *terafim* were images of two young boys and represented the astral force of Gemini—twins—worshipped by the Greeks as Castor and Pollux.[632] According to this, the word *terafim* is a contraction of the Aramaic phrase *trei fumei* (תרי פומי, two faces).

Similarly, R. Moshe Provencal (1503–1576) writes that *terafim* had two mouths (which is why the word is always in plural form).[633] One

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623 Nachmanides to Gen. 31:19.

624 Radak (to Gen. 31:19) and Gersonides (to Jud. 17:10) write that *most* of the time, the *terafim* spoke falsehood (with the implication that *sometimes* it spokes the truth).

625 Malbim to Lev. 19:4.

626 *Vayeitzei* 164b. This explanation is independently offered by *Midrash Sechel Tov* (to Gen. 31:19).

627 *BB*, p. 44b.

628 See *BB*, p. 42b; A. Rosenberg, *Otzar ha-Shemos*, vol. 5 (New York, 1923), p. 547; and *DDD*, pp. 844–845.

629 C.J. Labuschagne, "Teraphim: A New Proposal for Its Etymology," *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 16:1 (1966), pp. 115–117.

630 H.A. Hoffner, "Hittite Tarpiš and Hebrew Terāphîm," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 27:1 (1968), pp. 61–68.

631 A. Rosenberg, *Otzar ha-Shemos*, vol. 5 (New York, 1923), pp. 548–549.

632 *BB*, p. 45a.

633 A.Y. Yani (ed.), *Shailos u-Teshuvos Rabbeinu Moshe Provencillia*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1989), p. 22.

mouth foretold only good occurrences, and the other only bad. He notes that while this was the original meaning of the word *terafim*, it later evolved to mean any type of doll. To illustrate this point, he points to the Italian word *pupa* (פּוּפּ) which means "doll," even though it basically means "mouth-mouth" in Hebrew.[634]

How to Make *Terafim*

Rabbinic sources offer two different versions of how exactly *terafim* were prepared. The first tradition, found in the Midrash *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, explains that they slaughtered (from his front and back) a human firstborn and pickled his head with salt and oil. Then, they took a golden plate, wrote the names of impure spirits upon it, and placed it under the slain firstborn's tongue. Finally, they affixed the head to a wall and it would talk with them.[635]

A second tradition is found in the work *Midrash Lekach Tov* by R. Toviah ben Eliezer (an 11th- to 12th-century Greek Rabbinic figure).[636] He writes that first they immersed a (dead?) person in oil for many days until his skin dissolved. Then, they grabbed the hair of his head and pulled it in a way that would detach his head and lungs from his body. Afterwards, they stood the corpse up and an impure spirit would appear to be resting upon on it. It was able to foretell the future through magic and would respond to any question posed to it.[637]

Another complicating factor is that apparently *terafim* would speak in tongues, and one could only understand them if they drank a certain potion. *Peirush ha-Rokeach* explains the procedure for preparing such a potion: First, they starved a wild animal for three days, and then let it suck blood from a "red" man. Then they slaughtered the animal and collected its blood in a cauldron. They cooked the blood in the cauldron with certain spices, and anyone who drank from that potion would be able to understand the *terafim*'s otherwise undecipherable language.[638]

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634 Although this is not found in any traditional sources, some propose that *terafim* were images composed of parts from different animals. That is, it portrays the head of one animal, the foot of another, etc. (see *BB*, p. 43b).

635 *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* ch. 36. Targum pseudo-Jonathan (to Gen. 31:19) basically follows this approach, but writes that they would pickle the head in spices (this also appears in the version of *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* cited by *Yalkut Shimoni*, Zech. §578). Furthermore, pseudo-Jonathan writes that they would write magical incantations upon the plate, but does not specify that they were names of impure forces.

Sefer ha-Yashar (Tel Aviv, 1955), pp. 80–81, also follows this approach with slight differences. There, he writes that either golden or copper plates were used for the *terafim* and that the *terafim* would only speak if one prostrated oneself before them. *Sefer ha-Yashar* does not say that the names of evil spirits were written upon the plates, but rather writes that "the name" was written upon it (implying that it was Hashem's name).

R. Menachem Tziyyoni in *Tziyyoni* (Lemberg, 1882), p. 15a, also follows *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer's* tradition, except that he cites *Megillas Sesarim* (literally, "The Scroll of the Hidden"), which writes that the firstborn had to be a "red" person, and that the head was affixed to either the window of one of the city walls or the wall itself.

636 *Midrash Lekach Tov* to Gen. 31:19.

637 *Peirush ha-Rokeach* (Klugmann 2009a:240) follows this basic tradition but differs slightly. He writes that they would take a "red" man and immerse him in *honey* until all of his skin was removed, with only his lungs *and heart* attached.

638 Klugmann 2009a:240.

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Rabbi Reuven Klein once again combines traditional Rabbinic scholarship with historical and archeological information to give us a complete and comprehensive treatment of a vast topic, this time idolatry. Engaging and informative, this unique book is highly recommended for those who want to gain a deeper understanding of the main obstacle to the Jewish People's relationship with God in the time of the Bible.

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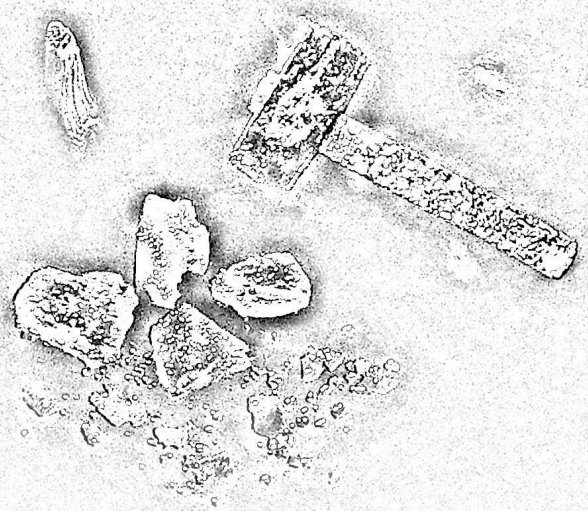
GOD versus gods



Judaism in the Age of Idolatry

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