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“Of Wood and Stone”, By Elizabeth C. LaRocca-Pitts.

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Review by U. Avner

The book is based on the author's Ph.D. dissertation, studying the perceptions and attitudes of the various biblical sources towards cultic paraphernalia: *bamot* (high places); *masseboth* (standing stones, pillars); *asherim* (mainly sacred trees or wooden poles); *mizbehot* (altars); and statuary. This book is one of several that have appeared in the last two years on Israelite religion (e.g. Hadley 2000; Alpert Nakhai 2001, Zevit 2001), which, in addition to a number of articles, demonstrates the increasing scholarly interest in the subject. The study focuses on a close analysis of the biblical texts, but also addresses early Bible translations and interpretations, as well as some archaeological finds.

The biblical sources examined in the study are: J; E; the Covenant Code (Ex 20:22-23:33); P; the Holiness Code (Lev 17, 11, 21, 22); D; Dtr (the Deuteronomistic Historian- Deut 1-4, 28:29-30:20 and Jos through 2Kgs); Chr (1 & 2Chr, Ezra and Nehemiah); and the Prophets. In some contexts, Ex 34 and Ex 20:1-17 are referred to as additional independent sources. Chapter 1 surveys the history of research on the subjects since the late 19th century, and demonstrates three main trends: 1. Earlier scholars, who studied the biblical attitudes towards cultic paraphernalia, rarely differentiated between the various biblical sources; 2. Most scholars described a polarity between the pagan Canaanite religion and the more advanced Israelite religion. 3. Occurrences of *bamot*, *asherim* and *masseboth* in Israel were commonly attributed to idolatrous influences from the Canaanites.

Chapters 2-4 list and analyze the views and attitudes of the various sources towards each of the cult items, with the following results: *mizbehot* are seen by all sources as legitimate when built and used for the cult of YHWH. J does not mention *bamot*, *asherim* *masseboth* or statuary, either in Israel or among the neighboring peoples. Ex 34 demands the destruction of *mizbehot*, *masseboth* and *asherim* of the previous inhabitants of the country, it does not mention them in relation to Israel, and only prohibits *massekot* (masks). E demands the destruction of *masseboth* dedicated to other gods, but approves of *masseboth* for the cult of YHWH. Ex 20:1-17 (the Ten Commandments) only prohibits idols (Hebrew- *pesel* and *temunah*), and does not mention any of the other items. The Covenant Code also prohibits statuary and approves of *mizbehot* for YHWH. Of all the neighboring

cultic items, this source only demands the destruction of *masseboth*, but does not mention *bamot*, *masseboth* or *asherim* in context of Israel. P commands the destruction of *bamot* and statuary, but does not mention *masseboth* or *asherim*. He uses the term *maskyot* (Num 33:52), probably as an alternative for *masseboth* of other gods, which are also said to be destroyed. In the context of Israel, he only mentions *mizbehot*, as a central element of YHWH's cult. The Holiness Code does not mention cult items of neighboring nations, but prohibits *masseboth*, cult statuary and *eben maskit* (here probably a curved stone) and promises that Israelite *bamot* will be destroyed by the Lord. D commands the destruction of all cult items of the neighboring nations and condemns all cultic paraphernalia except *mizbehot* for YHWH. It specifically prohibits *masseboth* for YHWH and *asherah* next to his altar, items which YHWH hates (Deut 16:21). However, the stones that Moses instructs the Israelites to erect after crossing the Jordan and on Mount Ebal (Deut 27:2-8) are not condemned, although they are understood today as *masseboth*. In Dtr *asherim* and *masseboth* are rarely mentioned before the establishment of the monarchy, and then they are prohibited for Israel. *Bamot* are approved before construction of the temple in Jerusalem, and then prohibited, but the *bamah* built by Elijah on Mount Carmel (1kgs 18), was never criticized. Dtr disapproves *asherim*, but never condemned the terebinth tree and the "rock", by which Gideon performed a test and a ceremony. These could have been *asherah* and *massebah*. Much like D, Dtr refrains from mentioning the word *massebah* in context of Israel and prefers the neutral term "stones" (*eben*, *abanim*). Chr expresses a negative attitude toward the *asherim* by frequent mentions of their destruction (by Asa, Hezekiah and Josiah). Only twice does he mention *masseboth*, in connection with the reforms of Asa and Hezekiah, however, he still preserves some neutral attitudes towards some of these items (see below). He generally opposes *bamot*, but mentions that *bamot* for YHWH continued to operate after the reform of Menasseh (2Chron 33:17). Obviously Chr condemns all statuary. In the prophetic corpus, *bamot* in Israel are criticized, *asherim* are rarely mentioned, but "green trees" occur more often, with a negative attitude. *Masseboth* are also rarely mentioned, sometimes with a surprising positive attitude (see below), while "stones" are referred to often, with a negative attitude. The conclusion from this survey is that each source viewed the cultic items differently and adopted a different position toward them.

The second part of the book (Chs. 5-8) presents a synthesis of data on each of the main cultic items and examines the connection between them. It explores again how each of the biblical sources understood them and related to them, whether in Israel or among the prior populations of the land. Briefly, the main conclusions are as follows: Both the texts and archaeological remains do not make it clear exactly what *bamot* looked like. It is only clear that some of them included some

cult items, but these could also appear independently. Dtr and Chr fully accept the *bamot* in Israel before the construction of the temple in Jerusalem, Dtr disapproves of them afterwards, while Chr excuses their later existence by their attribution to the cult of YHWH. *Asherim* are less defined by the text, but they were variously understood as sacred green trees, wooden poles or wooden statues. Their connection with the goddess *Asherah* is taken as the best speculation, implying that the goddess was worshiped by Israelites despite prohibitions by D, Dtr and their related sources. *Masseboth* are the most diverse item, in functions, views and attitudes. E, the Covenant Code and First Isaiah approve *masseboth* for YHWH but condemn *masseboth* for other gods. D sees them as representing the older, prohibited cult of the land, while the Holiness Code and Micah view them as idols. *Mizbehot* are quite obvious in their use, but the various sources see them physically differently and have different criteria whether to approve or disapprove of them. In general, *mizbehot* for YHWH are accepted by most sources, but D and Chr prohibit their construction outside Jerusalem, once the temple is built.

The third part of the book examines the view of the cult items as reflected in the early interpretations and translations of the Bible, where the various cult items are usually seen as representing idolatry. The attitude towards various *bamot* and *mizbehot* differs according to the deuteronomistic ideology of cult centralization in Jerusalem, whether they were built before or after the temple construction in Jerusalem.

The overall conclusion of the study is that the various sources viewed differently the physical appearance of each cult items, and they certainly differed in attitude towards them. The sources do not imply that these items were originally Canaanite and only adopted by Israel. The differences between the sources, especially between D and Dtr indicate that there was no monolithic or normative YHWhism, and therefore, the traditional scholarly distinction between formal and popular Israelite religion is invalid.

The study is detailed and thorough and is a significant step forward in biblical studies on the Israelite religion. It presents a complex but realistic view of the ancient Israelite religion and agrees with the results of other recent studies which are largely based on Iron Age archaeological finds (Alpert Nakhai 2001; Zevite 2002). Yet, there is room for some comments.

1. Some minor mistakes occurred in the book. On pages 81 and 83, King Josiah is mentioned as allowing the cult of *asherah* and *'asabbim* in Judah after the death of Priest Jehoyada (2Chr 24:18), but it should be King Joash. On pages 209 and 211 the text refers to Jer 43:1 instead

of Jer 34:13. A correction is also needed for translation of the tree-name “*elah*”. Most Bible additions render “oak”, but the Bible clearly distinguish between “*alon*” (oak) and “*elah*” (terebinth, e.g. Isa 6:13, Hos 4:13), as present-day botany also distinguishes between them. The correction is meaningful since “*elah*”, in Hebrew is also a “goddess”, so the name bears implications for understanding the tree as a goddess, i.e. *Asherah*. Ample examples in Near Eastern art support this interpretation, such as the images of the goddess Nut in Egypt as a hybrid woman-tree. On this broad background, combined with biblical and extra-biblical sources, there is no reason to assume that in Israel *Asherah* was perceived differently. Another correction is suggested for page 213, where the *massebah* of Isa 19:19 is described as a border stone, following, again, most translations of the bible. The Hebrew text, however, may read differently. Examining the connotations of *essel* (with) and *gebul* (border) indicate that the verse actually means “*massebah* for YHWH within the border (territory) of Egypt”, rather than “on the border”. In this case, this *massebah* is significantly changed to a cultic one. The Chr source also deserve a comment, that there are strong arguments to separate Ezra-Nehemia and the Chronicles to two different writers, (see Japhet 1986; I thank H. Eshel for the reference).

2. Some textual points could have been exploited better. For example, the writer correctly showed that “stone” or “stones” are used by some of the sources as a neutral substitute for “*masseboth*”. At least one important example was not mentioned, the “large stone” at Gibeon (2Sam 20:8), that most probably stood in the same “large *bamah*” where Solomon performed a thousand sacrifices (1kgs 3:4) and where the tabernacle was standing as well (2Chr 1:3). As in other occurrences, this “large stone” appears pertinent to the *bamah*. In another case, the term “pillar” (“*amud*”) seems to replace “*massebah*”. When King Josiah renewed the covenant between the people and God, he stood “by the pillar” (2kgs 23:3), while 2Chr 34:31 even changed it to “stood in his place” (“*al ‘omdo* instead of “*amudo*”). Against the background of Gen 31, Deut 27:2-4, Josh 24:26, and extra-biblical examples (e.g. the stones of the Sefire inscriptions {see below}; Herodotos 3:8; Thucydides 5:18:10) it is quite clear that the “pillar” was actually *massebah*, witnessing the covenant. Interestingly, immediately after the ceremony Josiah commenced with his assertive religious reform, in which every item of idolatry, from Geba’ to Be’er-Sheva’, was destroyed. However, in the detailed description of the reform (2kgs 23:4-25) the only *masseboth* mentioned being smashed were those of the *bamot* built by Solomon near Jerusalem, for his foreign wives, some 350 years earlier. It is quite remarkable that these occurrences of *masseboth* in the texts survived the later deuteronomic editions of the bible

The above examples indicate that *masseboth*, as well as *asherim*, were actually more rooted in the Israelite culture than expected. This is also well demonstrated by the archaeological finds, which are only briefly addressed in the book. At least 38 Iron Age locations of *masseboth* were discovered to date in Israel. Some of them are safely attributed to Israelite population, while others, if they belonged to Canaanites, were not destroyed as demanded by D, Dtr and other sources. Most important are the *masseboth* (originally three) in the cult focus of the temple at 'Arad. Here, they stood in a formal Israelite temple, served by priesthood families (*Pashkhur* and *Merimoth*, Aharoni 1968). One *massebah* survived both religious reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, while the others were not destroyed, only concealed in place by plaster.

3. The reader may still remain with the question what actually were these stones that made them so condemned by most biblical sources? The writer, as well as earlier scholars, often address *masseboth* as dedicated to gods, even to YHWH, but this does not explain yet their real essence. Indeed, biblical and extra-biblical texts do offer some solution. In Gen 28:22, Jacob named the *massebah* that he erected “House of God”. This term is also used by the Aramean Sefire inscription referring to the very same inscribed stone as “*beth alhaya*” (Sefire II, C:3, 7, 9-10; Fitzmyer 1967:83, 90), and still later the term “*baith Allah*” was applied to *masseboth* by the pre-Islamic Arabs (Lammens 1929:17). This may mean that *masseboth* were perceived by the ancients as abodes, containing inside them the power and spirit of the gods. This is also implied from the statement of Tukulti Ninurta II (ca. 885 B.C.), that he “*camped by the stones in which the great gods are dwelling*” (Schramm 1970:150), and from Philo of Byblos (I.10.23, quoting Sanchunyathon, and then quoted by Eusebius) mentioning that the sky god Ouranos “*invented baetyls (=beit-El, house of God) by devising stones endowed with life*” (Attridge and Oden 1981:52-53). This perception explains how could a stones *watch* Jacob and Laban, *hear* the covenant’s words, and so forth. Unlike statuary, *masseboth* were abstract, “*complete stones*” which were not desecrated by shaping (c.f. Exod 20:25; Deut 27:6; Josh 8:31; 1Kgs 6:7). Additional functions of *masseboth*, such as commemoration of persons or events, were later attributed to them. This original meaning of *masseboth* may explain why were they so intensively condemned by some circles in Israel.

4. The fact that some sources accepted *masseboth* for YHWH deserves further discussion. The writer pointed out that the E source, the Covenant Code and First Isaiah approved *masseboth* for YHWH. Interestingly, a closer look indicates that the connection between YHWH and *masseboth* is stronger than expected. All biblical passages mentioning *masseboth*, “stones” or

“*amud*” with no condemnation, directly relate to YHWH and not to any other divine name (Gen 28:18-22, 31:45-52; Ex 24:4-8; Deut 27:2-8; Josh 4:13-20, 8:32, 24:26-27; 1Sam 6:14-15, 7:12, 14:33; 1kgs 3:3-5 with 2Sam 20:8; 2kgs 23:3 and 2Chr 34:31; Is 19:19; Hos 3:4-5). *Masseboth* and other Israelite cult items are commonly described by scholars as adopted from the Canaanite religion, however, LaRocca-Pitts noted that the biblical text does not support this view (p. 350). Indeed both YHWH and *masseboth* seem to have a common origin, in one specific environment, the desert. The desert background of YHWH is well-known, not only from the Bible (Ex 19; Deut 33:16; Jud 5:4-6; Hab 3:3 Ps 65:16) but also from three Egyptian inscriptions mentioning *YHW*, in lists of the *Shasu* districts in the land of Se‘ir (Giveon 1964; Mazar 1981; Weinfeld 1987). As to the desert connection of *masseboth*, during my work in the Negev and Eastern Sinai I documented to date more than 250 *masseboth* sites (including some discovered by others), most of them are dated earlier than the Iron Age. In addition, there are thousands of later *masseboth*, mainly Nabatean ones. From this bulk one can learn that, according to our present knowledge, *masseboth* first appeared in the desert, during the 11th millennium B.C., they became numerous especially since the 6th millennium B.C., and they continued to be dominant there as late as the Early Islamic Period. In most periods they greatly outnumbered those of the rest of the Near East. In the fertile zone, on the other hand, *masseboth* became common only in the early 2nd millennium B.C., when they were already well-established in the desert for several millennia. There are additional arguments to connect the *masseboth* to the desert culture, as well as to the cult of YHWH, and it is not impossible that because of this origin *masseboth* were so anchored in the Israelite culture, together with other desert religious and social principles (Avner 1984, 1993, 2000, 2001).

5. On one point I somewhat disagree with LaRocca-Pitts, that archaeology did not contribute to the question of what the various cultic items looked like. The archaeological data compiled by Zevit (2001), and by others, does shed light on these objects and the many *masseboth* sites in the desert also broaden our view of these stones. Five archaeological sites in the Near East in which remains of *asherim* were identified, together with ample artistic presentations and extra-biblical texts, also contribute to our understanding of them. The remains of a sacred wooden pole excavated by myself in Eilat is actually the oldest known to date (*ca.* 4570 Cal. B.C., see *AJA* 95:496-7, and Avner in press).

In summary, the book is highly recommended for reading and studying, and the writer is congratulated for the achievement. The above comments only indicate that there is still much to investigate into the ancient religion of Israel, and further contributions will certainly come to light.

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