

Sacred Stones in the Desert

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The Negev and Sinai are arid to hyper arid areas, characterized by summer temperatures above 105°F, low precipitation, up to 100 mm annual average in the more favorable areas, and up to a 4000 mm annual rate of potential evaporation. Obviously, the water balance is very negative, and therefore, expectations of finding archaeological remains are low.

Contrary to expectations, however, the desert is quite rich with ancient remains. Habitation sites of various periods are found, as well as agricultural installations, copper mines, trade routes, rock art, inscriptions and so forth. One of the prominent archaeological phenomena emerging from the desert is the abundance of cult sites. Hundreds, of several different types have been recorded,¹ one is the standing stones or “*maššebot*”.²

Maššebot are crude, unshaped stones, set vertically into the ground and range between a few centimeters and several meters high. Most commonly they face east, and a semi-circular stone cell is often built at their feet (see Figs. 2-4). Various features are found with them, offering benches, altars of different types and basins. To date, 142 *maššebot* sites are documented in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai, but their numbers increase with almost every excursion to the field. Ten *maššebot* sites have been excavated and various artifacts were found in them, flint implements, sea shell ornaments and others. *maššebot* are also found attached to hundreds of *tumuli* tombs, as well as in open-air sanctuaries and other cult installations. They consistently recur in groups of several numbers. Singles, pairs and triads are the most common, while groups of five, seven and nine also prevail. Figures 1, 2, 4, 9 present some of the common arrangements.

At present, the earliest *maššebot* in the Near East are known from three Natufian and Ḥarifian sites (14th and 11th millennia B.C.E.), in the Negev desert and southern Jordan (**Fig. 1**). During the 6th-3rd millennia B.C.E. they became especially common, and continued to prevail in the desert during the

¹ . For the early history and archaeology of the Southern Negev see Avner U., I. Carmi and D. Segal. 1994. Neolithic to Bronze Age Settlement of the Negev and Sinai in Light of Radiocarbon Dating, A view From the Southern Region. In R. Kra and O. Bar-Yosef (eds.), *Late Quaternary Chronology and Paleoclimates of the Eastern Mediterranean*. Pp. 265-300. Tucson. For the early agriculture in the Southern Negev see Avner U. 1998. Settlement, Agriculture, and Paleoclimate in Uvda Valley, Southern Negev Desert, 6th - 3rd Millennia B.C. In. A. Issar & N. Brown (eds.), *Water, Environment and Society in Times of Climate Change*. Pp. 147-202. Dordrecht. For other cult sites in the desert see Avner U. 1984. Ancient Cult Sites in the Negev and Sinai Deserts. *Tel Aviv* 11:115-131.

² . *Maššebah* (singular) or *maššebot* (plural) are the Hebrew, biblical words usually translated in biblical literature as “pillars” “stones”, “standing stones”. The Hebrew word, however, is often used in English scholarly literature as well.

biblical period and much later.³ In the sown lands, on the other hand, *maššebot* are only randomly found in prehistoric sites, and only from the second millennium B.C.E. did their numbers grow significantly.

The question is- “*what do these stones mean to you*”? (Joshua 4:6, 21). In short, if we combine the archaeological evidence with biblical and extra-biblical written sources, and with anthropological material, we learn of two principle types. One is *maššebot* that represents deities, or even serve as an abode for them. For example, in Genesis 28:22, Jacob says: “*and this stone which I set up for maššebah will be a god’s house*”. This may mean that the stone was perceived as containing the god's power and spirit. The “Sefire inscription”, (a treaty text between the kings of Arpad and Ktk, north Syria, 8th century B.C.E.) is written on large *maššebot*. The inscriptions refers to the stones as the “*house of god*”.⁴ The same term is applied to standing stones in later Arabian sources. Similarly, an Assyrian document describing King Tukulti Ninurta's campaign to the Lebanon coast, says that “*he camped by the stones in which the great gods are dwelling*”.⁵ From this type of *maššebot* other types developed later: stones that by virtue of the divine spirit witness treaties or covenants and supervise their fulfillment, stones that commemorate special events, religiously mark boundaries, and signify vows.

Another type of *maššebot* represent ancestral spirits. The custom of erecting stones for ancestors, as well as effigies, is still practiced today in various parts of the world. For the ancient Near East, the best known written source relating to this custom is the Ugaritic story of Aqhat, 15th century B.C.E. During the story, Dan-El repeatedly complains to the gods that he “*does not have a son to set up maššebah in the temple for his name*”. Although the translation of the last two words is questionable, it is well understood that in this case, the stone is perceived as containing and preserving the ancestral spirit.

Following this distinction, we will concentrate now on the first type of *maššebot*, that represents deities, take a step forward and try to interpret them further. In order to do so, we have to remember that traditional societies, past and present, naturally think in a symbolic way. For them, everything symbolized something, and every idea was represented by complex systems of symbols.⁶ I suggest that we look at the *maššebot* in a similar way and notice the shape of the stones and their position in the

³ . For some of the later *maššebot* see Avner U. in print. †Nabatean Standing Stones in the Negev, Their Interpretation and Cultural Context. *ARAM*.

⁴ . Fitzmyer J.A. 1967. The Aramaic Inscription of Sefire. *Biblica et Orientalia* 19. Rome, and in Pritchard J. (ed.) 1974. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Bible*. Pp.659-661. Princeton.

⁵ . Schramm, W. 1970. Die Annalen des Assyrischen Königs Tukulti-Ninurta II. *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 27:147-160.

⁶ . For the symbolic thinking of traditional societies see e.g. Turner, V. 1967. *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca; Turner, V. 1969. *The Ritual Process*. Chicago.

various combinations.

First, we find that the numbers of stones recurring in the groups are paralleled by groups of gods in various Near Eastern inscriptions, artistic presentations and mythologies. Therefore, a group of stones may have represented a known group of gods. Second, a closer look reveals that there are stones of different shapes and proportions, and within a group they were set in symmetry, or another apparent order regarding their shape. For example, a group of seven stones at the top of Ma'aleh Shaḥarut, east of 'Uvda Valley (**Fig. 3**), was set in a distinct pattern of alternating broad and narrow stones. Since the stones were carefully selected, and brought from some distance, we must assume there was some purpose or concept behind this arrangement. Since a similar relationship between broad and narrow stones is found in other groups, a possible explanation is that a narrow stone represents a male god and a broad stone represents a goddess, although, there were also other ways to distinguish between the two. In any case, this distinction finds support in ancient art and in present traditional societies,⁷ and helps to “decipher” groups of stones. We may identify several types of pairs, several types of triads and so forth, all with parallels, known groups of deities. Here I will present only two examples, one triad and one pair. Most of the artistic parallels will be taken from historical periods, but it should be noted that similar groups of stones also recur in all periods. For example, all types of prehistoric *maṣṣeboth* groups are paralleled by many small Nabatean standing stones (see note 2). Therefore, I find these comparisons valid:

Figure 4. presents a triad of *maṣṣeboth* set on the eastern side of a 4th millennium B.C.E. *tumulus* tomb in Wadi Zalaqa, eastern Sinai. The central stone is larger and broad, with two smaller stones on either side. This group was probably very popular since it is found in sites from different periods; it also enjoys ample iconographic equivalents. **Fig. 5** shows two ivory plaques from Ugarit, Syria, mid 2nd millennium B.C.E. On the left plaque a fertility goddess, most probably “Ba'alat”, is nursing two young gods. The right one, Mycenaean in origin, shows a broad hipped goddess feeding two ibexes that replace and symbolize the young gods.

More symbolic, but still equivalent compositions are seen in **Fig. 6**. These are decorations on Late Bronze age pottery from Lachish and Megiddo. The tree represent the goddess, similar to the concept of the biblical “*Asherah*”, and the ibexes often represent young gods. In the lower example, the tree is replaced by the pubic triangle, also symbolizing female fertility.⁸

⁷ . See detailed discussion in Avner U. 1993. *maṣṣeboth* Sites in the Negev and Sinai and Their Significance. In J. Aviram (ed.), *Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology in Jerusalem 1990*. Pp. 166-181. Jerusalem.

⁸ . For the *Asherah* in the ancient Near East and in Israel see e.g. Patai, R. 1967 (1990). *The Hebrew Goddess*. Detroit; Maier, W.A. 1986. *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence*. Atlanta; Olyan S. M. 1988. *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel*.

A similar triad of Canaanite and Egyptian gods is demonstrated by a Late Kingdom Egyptian stela (Fig. 7). The Canaanite goddess Qudshu stands on a lion, with two male gods, Min and Reshef, on either side. Another presentation of this triad was discovered by Z. Meshel, in Kuntillet 'Ajrud in Sinai, drawn on a large jar, most probably by Israelites (**Fig. 8**). The stylized tree mounted on the lion's back, similar to the Egyptian stela, represents the goddess, the "Asherah", and the two ibexes again symbolize the young god.⁹

From these very few examples one can grasp the idea that combinations of crude prehistoric stones symbolize what is later presented in a fully iconic way or in different degrees of symbolism.

Another example is a pair of *maṣṣebot* near Giv'at Shehoret, north of Eilat, 5th-4th millennia B.C.E. (**Fig. 9**). The left *maṣṣebah* is higher (47 cm.) and narrow, while the right one is shorter and rounded. To date this pattern is attested to in seven of 24 pairs, of four different types. Sometimes the shorter stone is not broad, but with only two exceptions, the left stone is always the larger. A study of ancient iconography, biblical sources and anthropological material, shows that this order is not at all accidental, but almost universal, with two interrelated meanings. In order to understand this we must notice that through the eyes of the deities within the stones, the left/right order mirrors that of the viewer, *i.e.* the shorter stone stands to the left of the higher one. One meaning is that the secondary figure stands to the left of the prominent one, another is that a female stands to the male's left. This order was found, for example, in 72% of 125 couples randomly collected from ancient Near Eastern figurative art (see **Fig. 10**), while most of the other 28% had a reason to stand reversed. Placing the male on the right and the female to his left, is comparable with biblical references of male names before female names ("Adam and Eve", "Ba'al and Asherah" *etc.*). Two passages in Song of Songs (2:6; 8:3) also demonstrate this concept when the girl says "*his left arm is under my head and his right arm hugs me*". Votive beds from northern Syria and Anatolia (**Fig. 11**) present the words of the Song of Songs in a figurative way.¹⁰

Atlanta; Pettey, R.J. 1990. *Asherah, Goddess of Israel*. New York; Wiggins, S.A. 1993. *A Reassessment of Asherah*. Darmstadt. For the Triangle as representing the Goddess see Hestrin, R. 1987. The Lachish Ewer and the Asherah. *IEJ* 37:212-223.

⁹ . For the interpretation of the tree see Hestrin in Note 7, and Dever, W.G. 1984. Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud. *BASOR* 255:21-27. See also Keel O. and C. Uehlinger 1998. *Gods, Goddesses, and the Images of God in Ancient Israel*. Pp. 210-248. Minneapolis, with different conclusions.

¹⁰ . See Seibert, I. 1972. *Die Frau im Alten Orient*. Leipzig; Spycket, A. 1992. *Les Figurines de Suse*. Paris. Although some of the votive beds are reversed, the majority do "obey the rule".

In a few cases the secondary figure, or the female, is seated to the right of the prominent, or the male figure. In the Ugaritic myth, Ba'al invite the god Kotar to sit at his right, as a gesture of honor (Ferrara A. and S. Parker. 1972. Seating Arrangements at Divine Banquets. *Ugarit Forschungen* 4:37-9). Bat-Sheva sits at Solomons right (1 Kings 2:19), and

Interestingly enough, the pair of *maṣṣeboth* in the Israelite temple at 'Arad (**Fig. 12**), the northern Negev, also stands in the common left/right order, and probably, they represented a pair of deities. Moreover, another drawing from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (**Fig. 13**) may reflect the same idea. Many articles have questioned whether these figures represent Egyptian gods¹¹ or- Yahweh and his consort¹², and whether the Hebrew inscription above, mentioning “*Yahweh of Shomron and his Asherah*”, means “Yahweh and his sacred place”, “Yahweh and his symbol”¹³, or does it really address “Yahweh and his consort”¹⁴. In order to answer this question one more piece of information is needed. In numerous publications, both figures are shown with a tail or a penis, however, this is the result of restoration, with no indication on the original jar. Consequently, most scholars were misled, identified the figures as two male deities, and ignored the breasts on the right-side figure. Once the restoration of the right figure is removed (**Fig. 13**), a male and a female pair clearly appears, standing in the correct left/right order. In my opinion, the evidence derived from the pairs of *maṣṣeboth* seems to support the interpretation of these figures as Yahweh and the goddess *Asherah*, wearing a bull and a cow masks. The inscription above is now better understood as directly relating to the figures, even if it was written later than the drawing, as pointed out by P. Beck.

'Arad is not the only case where Israelite *maṣṣeboth* are found. At least 36 Iron Age *maṣṣeboth* sites have been discovered to date, some are related to an Israelite population. Recently, A. Mazar published an Israelite high place (*bamah*) from Tel Rehov, with *maṣṣeboth*, in a clear cultic context (BAR 26/2). But still, the case of 'Arad is crucial. In light of the evidence presented above, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that the pair of *maṣṣeboth* represented a pair of deities. Also, we cannot argue that the temple was not Israelite. Two small *ostraca* found in the site mentioning the names of *Pashhur* and *Merimot*, testify that authoritative Israelite priestly families served there¹⁵. This means that

Asherah was probably set at Yahweh's right (Deut. 33:2), if a correction of the passage is accepted (Weinfeld M. 1984. Kuntillet 'Ajrud Inscriptions and Their Significance, *Studi Epigrafici E Linguistici* 1: 121-130.

See discussion on the left and right, with references, in Avner, U. 1993. *Maṣṣeboth* Sites in the Negev and Their Significance. In J. Aviram (ed) *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990*, *Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology*, Pp. 166-181. Jerusalem.

¹¹ . See e.g. Hadley, J.M. 1987. Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud. *VT* 3:189-196.

¹² . Gilula M. 1979. To Yahwe Shomron and his Asheraa. *Shnaton* 3:129-137 (Hebrew); Margalit, B. 1989. Some Observations on the Inscription and Drawing from Khirbet El-Qom. *VT* 39:371-378.

¹³ . See e.g. Emerton J. 1999. Yahweh and his Asherah *VT* 49:315-337.

¹⁴ . See Gilula and Margalit in Note 11, and Dever, W.G. 1984. Asherah, Consort of Yahweh? New Evidence from Kuntillet 'Ajrud. *BASOR* 255:21-27. On the questions briefly mentioned here see further discussions and scholarly opinions in Dietrich W. and M. Klopfenstein 1994. *Ein Gott Allein?*. Gottingen. See also references in Emerton's article in Note 12.

¹⁵ . Aharoni, Y. 1968. 'Arad, Its Inscriptions and Temple. *BA* 31:2-32.

maššeboth were worshiped in an official cult, not only a popular one, if this distinction ever existed¹⁶. When Y. Aharoni excavated the temple of ‘Arad, he thought that the holy of holies, with the *maššeboth*, was eliminated during the religious reform of Hezekiah by building a new casemate wall on top. However, later studies demonstrated that this wall was built at a much later time, during the Hellenistic period. The debate continues only on the question of whether the temple, with the *maššeboth*, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. or a few years earlier during an Edomite invasion. In either case, the *maššeboth* at ‘Arad survived the religious reforms of both Hezekiah and Josiah.

From all this, the question arises, what is the real attitude of the bible and the Israelite religion towards the *maššeboth* ?

The answer is complex. On one hand, the bible strongly denounces the *maššeboth*, since they represent a pagan cult and polytheism. Thirteen passages order their destruction in an attempt to detach Israel from the cult and customs of the Canaanites. For example: “*You shall destroy all the places wherein the nations worship their gods... And you shall break down their altars and dash to pieces their maššeboth and burn their Asherim...*” (Deut. 12:3). Four other passages, however, absolutely prohibit *maššeboth* with no connection to the nations: “*...you shall not erect maššebah that Yahweh your lord hates....*” (Deut. 16:22).

On the other hand, there are passages mentioning *maššeboth* cult in Israel with no condemnation at all: The *maššebah* that Jacob erected at Beith-El, was mentioned twice (Gen. 28:16-22; 35:14-16). In the first, after naming it “*House of God*“, he vowed to Yahweh, and in the second he erected the stone near an altar he built on Yahweh’s command. Moses erected the twelve *maššeboth* at the foot of Mt. Sinai and made a sacrifice to Yahweh during the very ceremony of signing the covenant between Yahweh and the Israelite people (Ex. 24:4-8). Joshua erected the “big stone“ under the sacred *Elah* tree (=Asherah) in Yahweh’s sanctuary in Shechem (Josh. 24:26). Samuel erected the “helping stone” commemorating Yahweh’s salvation of the people (1 Sam. 7:12). The Levites made a sacrifice to Yahweh at Beith Shemesh, in front of the “*large stone*” when the ark was returned by the Philistines (1Sam. 6:15). Solomon made a large sacrificial ceremony at Gibeon (1 Kgs. 3:4), where the tabernacle stood (2 Chr. 1:3) as well as a “*large stone*” (2 Sam. 20:8). Josiah, who conducted an vigorous religious reform against the *bamot*, he himself renewed the covenant between the people and Yahweh “*at the pillar*” (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chron 34:31), similar to Joshua in Shechem and similar to other Near Eastern examples where *maššeboth* witnessing the signing of treaties.

¹⁶ . The distinction between official and popular cult is common in discussions on Israelite religion. However, in the recent Centennial Symposium of the Albright Institute and ASOR, Jerusalem May 2000, Z. Zevit lectured on this subject and convincingly denied this dichotomy.

It is also interesting that almost no words have been preserved against *maššeboth* in the books of the prophets, except for one sarcastic comment of Jeremiah (2:27). On the other hand- Isaiah (19:19) prophesied that 5 cities in Egypt will worship Yahweh, and will erect for him *maššeboth*. Hosea (3:4-5) described a disastrous situation symbolized by the absence of a king for Israel, and the absence of sacrifice and *maššebah*.

Surprisingly, in all these passages, *maššeboth* were mentioned in a direct connection with the very name of Yahweh and his cult, with no condemnation at all, and this is the same god that “*hates maššeboth*”. More surprising is the fact that these passages survived the Deuteronomistic addition of the bible, the one that demanded devotion to Yahweh alone, in Jerusalem only, and with many strict prohibitions.

How can we explain the contradiction? In my opinion, *maššeboth* were deeply rooted in the Israelite cult and culture throughout the first temple era. This was not because of Canaanite influence, but due to the common desert origin of both *maššeboth* cult and the major body of Israelite religion.

The connection between *maššeboth* and the desert seems solid. Although they were erected in most parts of the Near East, in the desert they formed an especially consistent phenomenon, in all characteristics examined quantitatively. *maššeboth* made their first occurrence in the desert, by the 14th. millennium B.C.E., they greatly increased in numbers from the 6th millennium B.C.E., and they prevailed there in large numbers during later periods (see Note 2). In the fertile countries, on the other hand, they are found only randomly in prehistoric sites, and only from the 2nd millennium B.C.E. did they become really common. The *maššeboth* discovered to date in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai outnumber those in the rest of the Near East, despite the fact that this desert area encompasses only one percent of the Near East as a whole. In the desert, 89% of the *maššeboth* face east, which means that they follow a dominant sacred orientation. In the fertile areas, on the other hand, only 38% are facing east, while others, as well as temples, face different orientations. The desert *maššeboth* appear as coherent groups of consistent numbers and shapes, while those in the sown land are usually detached and inconsistent in combinations and shapes.

And what about the roots of Israel's culture and religion ?

The desert played an essential role in the Israelite conscience. Many studies have been made on the desert foundation of Israelite social frames, culture, religion and laws. Throughout the monarchy period a “desert ideal” prevailed, which is best represented by the Rechabites, one of the groups who joined Israel and most probably originated from the Negev. They did not build houses but continued to live in

tents, they did not plant grapes and did not drink wine (Jer. 35). Thereby they retained a modest, non materialistic way of life, that emphasized freedom and spirituality. This is exactly how Diodorus (9:94.3, quoting Hieronymus) described the Nabataean in their early history, 400 years after Jeremiah. It is no wonder that the Rechabites were involved in the religious-cultural reform of King Yehu (2Kgs 10:15-28).

From various biblical sources, mainly Genesis and 1 Chronicles, we learn of many clan names that were first listed among the desert people, Midian, Edom and Amalek, which later appeared in the tribes of Judah, Shim'on, Benjamin and Menasheh. We also read about the Jerahmeelites, Calebites, Qenites and Qenazites who joined Israel, and about the Shim'onites who married 32,000 Midianite women (Num. 31). Desert geographical names also passed to Israel. Reqem, identified as the *Sela' Edom* (Josephus, Ant. 4,7,1) was also a city in the land of Benjamin. The names *'Ir Nahash* and *Gei Harashim*, identified with the copper mining and production area of *Punon (Faynan)* in the north-eastern Araba Valley, are also found as clan names in Judah (1 Chron. 4:12, 14). Even the name Har Se'ir was adopted for a mountain on the border between Judah and Benjamin (Jos. 15:10).

The leadership of Israel during the desert sojourn was also strongly connected to the desert people. Aaron was related to the Korah clan by marriage (Ex. 6:21), which was part of Edom and Amalek. Moses married the daughter of Jethro's, the priest of Midian, and was also related to the Kenites (Jud. 1:16).

From this brief survey¹⁷ one can get the impression that the Israelite roots in the desert were much deeper than could be explained by just the 40 years in the desert. Moreover, the Israelite god Yahweh was clearly a desert god. In addition to the Sinai theophany, various biblical passages associate Yahweh directly with the Sinai desert. One says: "*Yahweh came from Sinai and rose up from Se'ir; he shone forth from Mount Paran...*" (Deut. 33:2, and see Jud. 5:4-6; Hab. 3:3; Ps. 68:8-9). Also, three different Egyptian inscriptions, 2nd millennium B.C.E., name districts in the desert, one is: "*the land of the Shasu Yahwe in the land of Se'ir*". This means that already before the exodus (if the 13th century B.C.E is accepted) some desert tribes in *Se'ir* (*i.e. Sinai*, the Negev, and Edom) worshiped Yahweh and named their territory after his name.¹⁸

Here we can better examine the relationship between the *maṣṣebot* and the Israelite religion. As described before, the dominant orientation of desert *maṣṣebot* was east, while in the sown land, during

¹⁷ . See in detail- Axelsson, L.E. 1987. *The Lord Rose up from Seir*. Lund.

¹⁸ . Givon, R. 1964. *Toponymes Ouest-Asiatiques a Soleb*. VT 14:239-255. Weinfeld, M. 1987. *The Tribal League at Sinai*. In, Miller P.D Jr., P.D. Hanson and S.D.McBride (eds.) *Ancient Israelite Religion*. Pp. 303-314. Philadelphia.

all periods until the Iron Age, both *maṣṣeboth* and temples were oriented to various directions. In Israel, however, the east was the only sacred orientation. The tabernacle faced east, the temple of ‘Arad faced east, and so did the first and the second temples in Jerusalem. Therefore, the sacred orientation principle was shared by the desert *maṣṣeboth* and the Israelite cult places.

Another point concerns the nature of *maṣṣeboth*. In the desert almost all *maṣṣeboth* were crude, natural, unshaped stones, while in the fertile lands the majority were deliberately shaped. For many reasons the desert characteristics cannot be explained by a lack of technological ability of the inhabitants. One reason is that two out of three *maṣṣeboth* of the 14th-11th millennia B.C.E. were carefully shaped, but the later ones were not. Rather, this can be better explained as another principle, which finds expression in several biblical passages: “... *but if you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it*” (Ex. 20:22, and see also Deut. 27:6; Jos. 8:31; 1K. 6:7). This means that the crude stone, shaped by nature, or god, not by man, is sacred and appropriate for cult purposes. *maṣṣeboth*, therefore, are an abstract representation of god, directly associated with the aniconic theology, banning the portrayal of gods in human or animal form. They followed the desert tradition that later developed in Israel to “programmatically aniconism”, as Mettinger termed it,¹⁹ through the Deuteronomistic theology. What emphasizes the desert connection of aniconism is the fact that it was shared by the prehistoric desert religion, by the Israelites, the Nabataeans²⁰ and the Islam, all with desert roots. In contrast, it is hard to imagine Christianity, that emerged in the sown land, without the icons of Mary, Jesus and saints.

To day it is widely agreed that the formation of Israel was a more complex process than is described in the Bible, in which various groups were involved, mainly, ‘*Abiru*, Canaanites, and *Shasu*. Some were already present in Canaan and the neighboring countries before the exodus, others, of all origins, went out from Egypt. Social and political situations gradually united them into one nation. Each group contributed to the forming culture. The desert groups, although obviously inferior in material culture, had the power to influence the others in the religious realm.

The ancient desert origins of the Israelite religion may explain why the *maṣṣeboth* played such an integral role in the Israelite cult, why all biblical passages referring to *maṣṣeboth* are associated with the name of *Yahweh* not to any other of God’s titles. It is true that in the late 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. opposition developed against the *maṣṣeboth* cult, due to the rise of Deuteronomistic ideology, as expressed by the reforms of Ezekiah and Josiah. Their desert origins, however, and their ancient connection with *Yahweh*, the abstract, aniconic desert god, may explain why these vigorous reforms did

¹⁹ . Mettinger, T. 1995. *No Graven Image?* Stockholm. In a later article he suggest that “Programmatic aniconism“ developed only in the exilic or post exilic period (Mettinger T. 1997. *Israelite Aniconism: Developments and origins*. In, K. Van der Toorn (ed) *The Image and the Book*, Leuven. 174-204).

²⁰ . See Patrich, J. 1990. *The Formation of Nabatean Art*. Jerusalem, and Avner in Note 2.

not succeed in obliterating the *maššeboth*. Only after the return of the Israelites from the Babylonian exile, and the formation of the Jewish religion, did *maššeboth* disappear from cult practice.

Until recently the desert was very benevolent in preserving its ancient remains, which still have much to tell us. But, while only a small portion of them have been studied, or briefly documented, their rapid disappearance is alarming, due to army training, development projects, and the lack of protection. It is difficult to tell how many of these sites will still be available for studying or visiting in the coming years.

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1. Rosh Zin, a Natufian site in the Negev Highland (14th millennium B.C.E.), excavated by D. Henry. The base of the *maššebah* was found *in situ*, with interesting flint and stone objects interred at its foot. The upper part was found fallen near the base. This stone, unlike later *maššeboth*, was carefully shaped (photo by the writer).



2. Bir Sawaneh, eastern Sinai, a 4th millennium triad of *maṣṣeboth* found upright, the central stone is 1.5 m high. At their foot is a stone offering bench, and circular cells are built both in front and back of the *maṣṣeboth*.



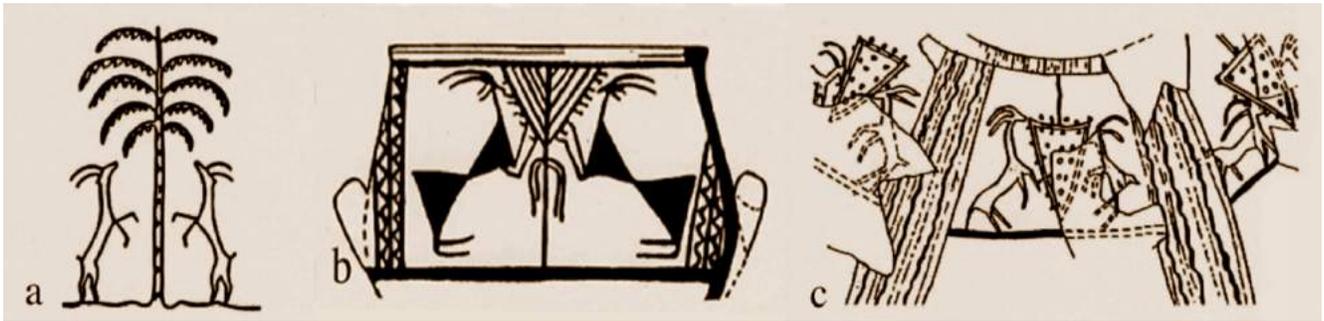
3. The top of Ma'aleh Jethro ('Uvda Valley), a group of seven *maṣṣeboth* up to 1.1 m high, facing east. The right stone was found tilted backward, the others were found standing vertically, set in an alternating order of narrow and broad. Another stone, large and broad, was set at the back of the *maṣṣeboth*, as it occurs in a several sites. The semi circular cells on the eastern side was partially restored following the excavation



4. Wadi Zalaqa, eastern Sinai, a 4th millennium triad of *masseboth* attached to the eastern side of a *tumulus* tomb, looking from east. The central stone is larger and broader, 88x83 cm, with an offering bench at its foot and semi circular cells on their eastern side.



5. Two ivory plaques from Ugarit, mid 2nd millennium B.C.E. The left plaque presents a winged goddess with the “Hathor hair-dress”, most probably “*Ba’alat*”, nursing two young gods. The right one, Mycenaean in origin, shows a broad hipped goddess feeding two ibex that replace and symbolize the young gods (After Dassoud, R. 1941. *Les découvertes de Ras-Shamra (Ugarit) et l’Ancien Testament*. P. 61 Paris; Winter, U. 1983 *Frau und Göttin*. Abb. 409. Göttingen.)



6. Three examples of decoration on Canaanite pottery, mid 2nd millennium B.C.E. On the top, from Lachish, the goddess is replaced by a tree, *i.e.* the “*Asherah*”. In the middle, from Megiddo, the same composition is presented in a geometric, triangular style. On the bottom, the tree is replaced by the pubic triangle, also symbolizing the fertility goddess (after Amiran 1969. *Ancient pottery of the Holy Land*, P. 164, Jerusalem; Loud, G. 1948. *Megiddo II*. Pl. 72:3. Chicago; Tufnell *et al.* 1940 *Lachish II*. Pl. 59:2. London).



7. A Late Kingdom Egyptian stela from the Cairo Museum, presenting a Canaanite goddess, Qudshu or “*Ba’alat*” standing on a lion, with the Egyptian god Min on the left and the Canaanite Reshef on the right (*ANEP* 473, *c.f.* *ANEP* 470-474).



8. Kuntillet 'Ajrud, north-eastern Sinai, ca. 800 B.C.E., a drawing on a large jar depicting a stylized tree- "Asherah"- on a lion's back, with two ibexes that symbolize the young gods (after Beck, P. 1982. The Drawing from Horvat Teiman (Kuntillet 'Ajrud). *TA* 9:7).



9. Give'at Sheḥoret, north of Eilat, a 5th-3rd millennia B.C.E. common pair of *masseboth*, where the left stone is taller and narrow, the right one is broader and shorter. At the feet of the stones is an offering table. The stones were found in place but broken, and were later mended.



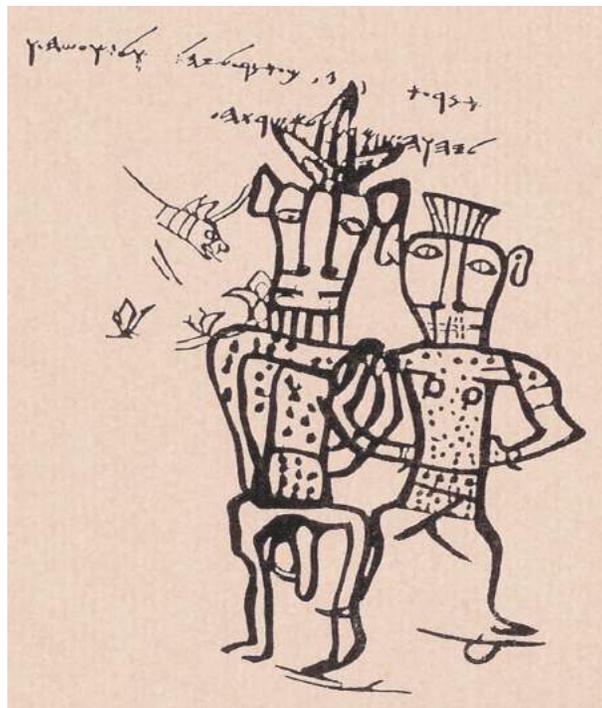
10. A statue of Menkaure (Mykerinus) King of Egypt and his wife Khamerernebtly II on his left, Mid 3rd millennium B.C.E. (after Arnold, D. 1999. *Meisterwerke des Alten Reiches. Antike Welt* 30:449; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston).



11. An Early Akkadian pottery votive bed with a loving couple, the male's left hand is under the female's neck and his right hand hugs her, just as the girl says in Song of Songs (after Seibert 1972. *Die Frau in Alten Orient*. P. 27. Leipzig).



12. The holy of holies in the 'Arad temple as it presently restored in the site, with replicas of the *maṣṣebah* and incense burners (the originals are exhibited in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem). The larger, left *maṣṣebah* was found fallen, the right one found *in situ* but covered by plaster. In an earlier stage, another small *maṣṣebah* was standing between the two, also found plastered. This type of triad is known from other *maṣṣebah* sites, and possibly represented a trio of gods, two adults and a young one. Probably, covering the small *maṣṣebah* was intended to direct the cult to a pair of gods, and later, when the right *maṣṣebah* was covered as well, the cult focused on one god.



13. A painting on a large jar from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, presenting two masked figures, a male and a female. Unlike most publications, the right figure is shown here with no tail or a penis, since it was not indicated on the original drawing on the jar. The Hebrew inscription above addresses "Yahweh of Shomron and his Asherah" (After Meshel, Z. 1978. *Kuntillet 'Ajrud: A religious Center from the Judaeian Monarchy on the Border of Sinai*. Israel Museum Catalogue No. 75. Jerusalem, Fig 12, with correction of the right figure).

