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Essays on Ancient Israel, the Bible, and Religion
in Honor of

R. E. Friedman

on His Sixtieth Birthday

Edited by

SHAWNA DOLANSKY

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A Forgotten Cultic Reform? 2 Kings 3:2b

ANDRÉ LEMAIRE

École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris

One of the characteristics of the historiography of the books of Kings is the importance of the cultic institutions and related reforms.¹ The building of the Jerusalem temple by Solomon (1 Kings 6–8),² the cultic reforms of the Judean kings Asa (1 Kgs 15:12), Jehoshaphat (1 Kgs 22:47), Athaliah (2 Kings 11), Joash (2 Kgs 12:1, 17), Ahaz (2 Kgs 16:1, 19), Hezekiah (2 Kgs 18:4), Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:3–18), and Josiah (2 Kings 23) are all well known and have been the object of many studies, especially to contradict or defend their historicity.³ The same is also true for the cultic reforms of the Israelite kings Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:26–33) and Jehu (2 Kgs 10:15–28).

1. See H.-D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen: Untersuchungen zu einem Grundthema der deuteronomistischen Geschichtsschreibung* (Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 66; Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1980); R. H. Lowery, *The Reforming Kings: Cult and Society in First Temple Judah* (JSOTSup 120; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991).

2. See, for instance, V. Hurowitz, *I Have Built You an Exalted House: Temple Building in the Bible in Light of Mesopotamian and Northwest Semitic Writings* (JSOTSup 115; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

3. For Hezekiah's reform, see A. F. Rainey, "Hezekiah's Reform and the Altars at Beer-Sheba and Arad," in *Scripture and Other Artifacts: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Honor of Philip J. King* (ed. M. D. Coogan et al.; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 333–54; N. Na'aman, "The Debated Historicity of Hezekiah's Reform in the Light of Historical and Archaeological Research," *ZAW* 107 (1995) 179–95; L. Fried, "The High Places (*bāmôt*) and the Reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah: An Archaeological Investigation," *JAOS* 122 (2002) 437–65; A. Lemaire, *Naissance du monothéisme: Point de vue d'un historien* (Paris: Bayard, 2003) 103–13; Z. Herzog, "The Archaeology of the Beersheba Valley and its Implications for the Biblical Period," in *Congress Volume: Leiden 2004* (ed. A. Lemaire; VTSup 109; Leiden: Brill, 2006) 81–102, esp. pp. 96–97.

For Josiah's reform, see N. Lohfink, "The Cult Reform of Josiah of Judah: 2 Kings 22–23 as a Source of Israelite Religion," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of F. M. Cross* (ed. P. D. Miller et al.; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 459–75; B. Giesemann, "Die sogenannte josianische Reform in der gegenwärtigen Forschung," *ZAW* 106 (1994) 223–42; C. Uehlinger, "Gab es eine joschijanische Kultreform? Plädoyer für ein begründetes Minimum," in *Jeremia und die "deuteronomistische Bewegung"* (ed. W. Gross; Bonner biblische Beiträge 98; Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995) 57–89 (= "Was There a Cult Reform under King Josiah? The Case for a Well-Grounded Minimum," in *Good Kings and Bad Kings* [ed.

Among these many reforms, the cultic reform of King Jehoram of Israel, mentioned very briefly in 2 Kgs 3:2b, does not seem to have attracted many studies. Actually, although mentioned in Hoffmann's book,⁴ the action of Jehoram has been presented as "a puzzle."⁵ Its description, however, does not seem difficult to understand: "He removed the pillar of Baal (ויסר את־מצבת הבעל) which his father had done." However, the Septuagint and the Vulgate translation is "pillars" (a plural instead of a singular), and since there is no record that Ahab erected a pillar, commentators have proposed to emend the text either to מזבח 'altar'⁶ or to אשרה 'sacred tree',⁷ comparing to 1 Kgs 16:32–33a. Other commentators underline the fact that this action is attributed to Jehu in 2 Kgs 10:27a. So, this cultic reform appears to have been performed against something that might not have existed or that was eliminated later by somebody else. Is Jehoram's action a phantom? Let us first check the meaning of the sentence, and then we will analyze the historical context in order to appreciate its historicity and meaning.

The verb *swr* generally means 'turn aside'; in the Hiphil conjugation with an object as here, it means 'remove'. As well noted by R. H. Lowery, "In four cases in Kings . . . the causative of *swr* describes a cult purge: Asa removed the idols his ancestors had made (1 Kgs 15:12), the Northern king Jehoram removed the Baal pillar (2 Kgs 3:2), Hezekiah removed the high places (2 Kgs 18:4, 22) and Josiah removed and destroyed Samaria's high place buildings (2 Kgs 23:19)."⁸ So, the meaning of this verb is clear, and it seems well adapted to describe a cultic reform.⁹

The object concerned by the reform is presented as מצבת הבעל. This syntagma is only attested again in the Hebrew Bible in 2 Kgs 10:27, and we do not have any other similar sentence with מצבת + divine name. As a *lectio difficilior*, there is no reason to emend the singular to a plural as was done by the versions,¹⁰ probably to generalize under the influence of 2 Kgs 10:27 (cf. also 1 Kgs 14:23; 2 Kgs 17:10, 18:4). So, one can understand the remark

L. L. Grabbe; London: T. & T. Clark, 2005] 279–316); Lemaire, *Naissance du monothéisme*, 115–21.

4. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen*, 27, 84–86.

5. T. R. Hobbs, *2 Kings* (Word Biblical Commentary 13; Waco TX: Word, 1985) 34.

6. *Ibid.*

7. Cf., for instance, B. Stade and F. Schwally, *The Books of Kings* (The Sacred Books of the Old Testament 9; Leipzig: Hinrichs / Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1904) 185.

8. Lowery, *The Reforming Kings*, 159.

9. See already Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen*, 84.

10. Against A. Šanda, *Die Bücher der Könige* (Exegetisches Handbuch zum Alten Testament 9/2; Münster: Aschendorff, 1912) 17.

of H.-D. Hoffmann: "Was eine 'masebe des Baal' eigentlich is, bleibt . . . unklar."¹¹ Various interpretations are possible:

1. One could think of a great rough stone that has been set up as a sacred pillar (cf. Gen 28:18, 31:45, 35:14; Josh 24:26). This stele was one of the three elements, with an altar and a sacred tree, of the traditional sanctuaries / high places that were "removed" by Hezekiah's reform (2 Kgs 18:4a; cf. Deut 12:2-3).¹² It was a symbol of the presence of the deity, eventually of YHWH himself, and there is no reason why such a stele could not have been used to symbolize the presence of Baal.
2. One could think of a low relief representing the deity Baal(/Hadad), like many exemplars of the storm-god reliefs found in northern Syria.¹³
3. One could think of a votive stele, dedicated to Baal with an inscription, or of a commemorative inscription thanking Baal for his help¹⁴ and eventually set up in his sanctuary. This interpretation may have an excellent parallel with the Mesha stele set up in the high place of Kamosh, god of Moab (cf. line 3: *w'š.hbmt.hz't.lkmš*).¹⁵

Actually, interpretations 2 and 3 could be combined, since the famous Aramaic Melqart stele¹⁶ is a good example of a votive inscription below a relief representing Baal-Melqart,¹⁷ while the Aramaic Zakkur stele¹⁸ is also

11. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen*, 85.

12. Lemaire, *Naissance du monothéisme*, 103-13.

13. See, for instance, A. Vanel, *L'iconographie du dieu de l'orage dans le Proche-Orient ancien jusqu'au VII^e siècle avant J.-C.* (Cahiers de la Revue Biblique 3; Paris: Gabalda, 1965) esp. 111-58.

14. See already Hobbs, *2 Kings*, 34.

15. See, for instance, J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 1: *Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971; hereafter abbreviated TSSI) 74-75; K. A. D. Smelik, "1. Moabite Inscription," in *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 2: *Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (COS 2) 137.

16. See W. Pitard, *Ancient Damascus* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1987) 144; idem, "The Identity of the Bar-Hadad of the Melqart Stela," *BASOR* 272 (1988) 2-31; E. Puech, "La stèle de Bar-Hadad à Melqart et les rois d'Arpad," *Revue biblique* 99 (1992) 311-34; E. Lipiński, *The Aramaeans: Their Ancient History, Culture and Religion* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 100; Leuven: Peeters, 2000) 215; W. T. Pitard, "The Melqart Stela," *COS*, 2:152-53.

17. See C. Bonnet, *Melqart: Cultes et mythes de l'Héraclès tyrien en Méditerranée* (Studia Phoenicia 8; Leuven: Peeters, 1988) 132-36.

18. H. Donner and W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften* (3 vols.; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1966-1969) no. 222; Gibson, *TSSI* 2, no. 5; A. Lemaire, "Joa de Samarie, Barhadad de Damas, Zakkur de Hamat: La Syrie-Palestine vers 800 av. J.-C.," *Erlsr* 24 (Malamat Volume; 1993) 148*-57*; Lipiński, *Aramaean*, 254-55; A. Millard, "The Inscription of Zakkur, King of Hamath," *COS*, 2:155.

a good example of a commemorative inscription engraved below a probable representation of the high god “Iluer,” probably to be identified with Baalshamayin.¹⁹ These archaeological parallels from the end of the 9th or beginning of the 8th century B.C.E. reveal that such a stele dedicated to a deity would not be out of place in Israel at about the middle of the 9th century as was already well noted by E. Dhorme.²⁰

In 1 Kgs 3:2b, the stele is explicitly presented as made by the father of Jehoram, that is, King Ahab. Most commentators noted that there is no mention of this action of Ahab in the book of Kings, because in 1 Kgs 16:32–33a it is only said that Ahab set up an altar in the Temple of Baal that he built in Samaria and that he made the Asherah. However, one should underline that this silence of 1 Kgs 16:32–33a about a Baal stele does not contradict explicitly the statement of 1 Kgs 3:2b for two reasons:

1. As is well known, the historiography of the book of Kings does not pretend to be exhaustive, and the usual formula at the end of each reign makes an explicit reference to the royal annals for further information.
2. If one adopts interpretation 1 for the stele, one could expect that this Baal stele should be mentioned in addition to the altar and the Asherah in 1 Kgs 16:32–33a. But this is not the case if interpretation 2 and/or 3 are preferred since, in this case, as a votive or commemorative stele, this stele would have been set up well after the building of the temple, probably toward the end of Ahab’s reign. One could think, for instance, of a votive or commemorative stele set up after the battle of Qarqar (853) to thank the deity for the coalition’s victory against Shalmaneser III.²¹

Thus far, the sentence of 3:2b seems to be clear and easily understandable, especially if we interpret the Baal stele as a votive or commemorative stele. However, we must also explain the presentation in the MT of 2 Kgs 10:26–27 that apparently attributes the destruction of the Baal stele to King Jehu in 841 B.C.E.:

They brought out the steles of the temple of Baal and they burned it.
They pulled down the Baal stele and they pulled down the temple of Baal.

19. Cf. also the colossal statue of Hadad where the inscribed statue is designated by the same Aramaic word *nšb* as in the Melqart and Zakkur stele.

20. E. Dhorme, *L'évolution religieuse d'Israël I: La religion des Hébreux nomades* (Brussels: Nouvelle société d'éditions, 1937) 160–63; J. A. Montgomery and H. S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1951) 358; J. Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary* (2nd ed.; OTL; London: SCM, 1970) 482.

21. The participation of Phoenician and Aramean partners in the battle could explain the dedication to a regional high god. See the possible parallel of the Melqart stele.

This text is fraught with difficulties and variant readings. There are at least two obvious difficulties:²²

1. In v. 26 the steles are burned (verb שָׂרַף), while in v. 27 the stele is pulled down (verb נָתַח). This seems incoherent. Furthermore, the use of the verbs is strange, since it is the only place where they are used with מצבה as the object. Actually, in this context, one expects שָׂרַף to be used with Asherah as the object²³ and נָתַח, which is the opposite of בָּנָה,²⁴ with altar (מִזְבֵּחַ),²⁵ house or temple (בַּיִת),²⁶ or else eventually במה (2 Kgs 23:8, 15; 2 Chr 31:1; 33:3) or walls (2 Kgs 25:10; Jer 39:8, 52:14; 2 Chr 36:19).
2. The object pronominal suffix of the verb שָׂרַף is singular while מצבות is plural.

In these conditions, it is not surprising that in v. 26 a few Hebrew manuscripts and the versions have read the singular מצבת rather than the plural. At the opposite in v. 27, a few Hebrew manuscripts and the Palestinian Greek have the plural instead of the singular.²⁷ Furthermore, *byt* is missing in v. 26 in the primitive Septuagint, while v. 27b_a is lacking in a few Hebrew manuscripts and the Vaticanus.

Taking into account all these difficulties and variants and following B. Stade,²⁸ the primitive Hebrew text could well have read something like:

They brought out the *Asherah²⁹ of the temple of Baal and burned it,³⁰ and they pulled down the *altar³¹ of Baal and they pulled down the temple of Baal.

22. See, for instance, P. Buis, *Le livre des Rois* (Sources bibliques; Paris: Gabalda, 1997) 221–22.

23. See 1 Kgs 15:13; 2 Kgs 23:6, 15.

24. Cf. D. J. A. Clines, *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* (8 vols.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 5:816.

25. Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5, 12:3; Judg 2:2; 6:28, 30, 31, 32; 2 Kgs 23:12; 2 Chr 31:4; 34:4, 7.

26. Lev 14:45; 2 Kgs 11:18, 23:7; Isa 22:10; Jer 33:4; Ezek 26:12; 2 Chr 23:17.

27. Cf. D. Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament: 1 Josué, Juges, Ruth, Samuel, Rois, Chroniques, Esdras, Néhémie, Esther* (Orbis biblicus et orientalis 50/1; Fribourg: Édition Universitaires / Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982) 397.

28. "Miscellen. 10. Anmerkungen zu Kö. 10–14," *ZAW* 5 (1885) 275–97, esp. 278–79.

29. C. F. Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Book of Kings* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903) 306; Stade and Schwally, *The Books of Kings*, 232; K. D. Fricke, *Das Zweite Buch von den Königen* (Die Botschaft des Alten Testaments 12/2; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1972) 136. The objection of Gray, *I and II Kings*, 558, followed by Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle*, 397–98, has no textual or archaeological basis: we have no attestation of a wooden מצבה.

30. See, for instance, the NEB (1970).

31. See Burney, *Notes on the Hebrew Text*, 306; Stade and Schwally, *The Books of Kings*, 233; Montgomery and Gehman, *Commentary*, 416; Gray, *I and II Kings*, 558; Fricke, *Das zweite Buch*, 136; G. H. Jones, *1 and 2 Kings* (New Century Bible; 2 vols.; Grand Rapids:

Later on, an addition in the margin also mentioning מצבת הבעל was inserted once, instead of the mention of the Asherah (in v. 26) as the object of the verb שרף, and a second time, instead of מזבח, as the object of the verb נתן. Even though the restoration of this primitive Hebrew text is conjectural, it is clear that the two attestations of the word מצבה in 2 Kgs 10:26–27a are textually problematic³² and that there was probably some transformation in the pre- or proto-masoretic tradition.

In addition to this difficult textual problem, we must critically analyze the probable historical situation connected originally with the removing of the Baal stele. If this mention was original in the revolution of Jehu, it seems very difficult to see how and why it was later attributed to King Jehoram, who was regarded a bad king (3:2a: הרע בעיני יהוה) and was killed by Jehu so that the historiography of the Jehu Dynasty and, later on, of the reform movement, probably tended to attribute to Jehoram bad, not good, actions. Conversely, if this mention is original in Jehoram's reign, one can understand that this good action was later attributed to king Jehu by the historiography of the Jehu dynasty, all the more easily because Jehu was responsible for the destruction of the temple of Baal in Samaria.

The removing of the Baal stele is therefore very probable and historically connected with the reign of King Jehoram as reported in the notice of 1 Kgs 3:2b.³³ Can we determine its religious meaning?

On one hand, today it is clear that Ahab and his sons/dynasty were not true partisans of Baal and still recognized YHWH as their national god.³⁴ This is especially true of Jehoram. In fact, he is never accused of personal infidelity to YHWH. Even though he did not like the "true" prophets, as shown by the story of Micaiah son of Yimlah (1 Kgs 22:8–26) and Elisha during the joint Moabite campaign (2 Kgs 3:4–27), he did consult them. Elisha himself seems to have no grievance against Jehoram himself, only against the attitude of his "father and mother" (2 Kgs 3:13). This seems to be confirmed by the fact that Jehu does not reveal any ground for complaint against Jehoram himself but only against his mother Jezebel and his father Ahab (2 Kgs 10:22, 25–26, 34). Finally, even though he is judged as a bad king by the historiography of the books of Kings, because he followed

Eerdmans / London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984) 2:471. This primitive text was probably echoing back to 1 Kgs 16:32–33a.

32. The vote for the MT in 2 Kgs 10:26–27:3 "C" and 1 "B" (Barthélemy, *Critique textuelle*, 397–98) is a good sign of that.

33. With M. Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings* (AB 11; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1988) 43: "There is good reason to accept . . . the reliability of the present reference to a dedication by Ahab of a pillar to Baal"; against H.-D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen*, 86: "Dennoch wird man hinter 2 K 3,2 keine historische Nachricht vermuten dürfen."

34. See, for instance, W. Thiel, "Ahab," *ABD* 1:100–103.

the tradition of Jeroboam son of Nebat like all the kings of Israel,³⁵ it is still emphasized that he was “not like his father and mother” (2 Kgs 3:2).

On the other hand, according to 2 Kings 10, Jehoram apparently did not destroy the Temple of Baal with Baal’s asherah and altar (2 Kgs 10:26–27 emend.), which his father Ahab had made, probably for his wife “Jezebel daughter of Ethbaal/Ittobaal king of the Sidonians” (1 Kgs 16:31–32). It is likely true that, as long as Jezebel lived, Jehoram showed much respect to her and had no reason to destroy her Baal Temple in Samaria.³⁶

Given these conditions, why remove the Baal stele? It is difficult to tell, but we may propose a working hypothesis. First, this stele was probably set up *outside* the Baal Temple and thus could not be justified by the desire to show diplomatic respect for the cult of a foreign queen. Furthermore, as we have seen above, this Baal stele may have comprised a relief of the god Baal, eventually with a votive or commemorative inscription. If so, this stele was likely seen as an attack against the Israelite traditions of monolatry and aniconism. This was especially true if this stele comprised also a votive or commemorative inscription by Ahab as king of Israel.

If this working hypothesis is accepted, the cultic reform of Jehoram in 2 Kgs 3:2b was very limited indeed, but it may have served to deprive us of a royal stele with a relief and inscription set up by Ahab.

35. This critical appreciation is probably connected with the redaction during Hezekiah’s reign; see my “Vers l’histoire de la rédaction des livres des Rois,” *ZAW* 98 (1986) 221–36 (= “Toward a Redactional History of the Book of Kings,” in *Reconsidering Israel and Judah: Recent Studies on the Deuteronomistic History* [ed. G. N. Knoppers and J. G. McConville; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 8; Winona Lake IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000] 446–61, esp. pp. 450–53).

36. In 2 Kgs 3:2b, there is no hint about the location of the Baal stele: there is no indication that the Baal stele destroyed by Jehoram had been set up in the Baal Temple of Jezebel.