The Symbolism of the Biblical World

Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms

by

Othmar Keel

Translated by Timothy J. Hallett

Winona Lake, Indiana
EISENBRAMS
1997
© Copyright 1972 Benziger Verlag Zürich Einsiedeln Köln and Neukirchener Verlag Neukirchen

Originally published as Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament: Am Beispiel der Psalmen

English translation from the first German edition with additions and corrections by the author, translation © copyright 1978 The Seabury Press Inc.


All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America.

Cover illustration based on a stag in ivory in the collection of the Badisches Landesmuseum Karlsruhe; used by permission.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Keel, Othmar, 1937–
    [Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament. English]
    The symbolism of the biblical world : ancient Near Eastern iconography and the Book of Psalms / by Othmar Keel ; translated by Timothy J. Hallett.
    p. cm.
    Includes bibliographical references and index.
    ISBN 1-57506-014-0 (alk. paper)
    1. Bible. O.T. Psalms—Criticism, interpretation, etc. 2. Art—Middle East. 3. Middle East—Antiquities. 4. Symbolism in the Bible. I. Title. BS1430.5.K4313 1997 223'.2064—dc20 96-34851 CIP

rectangle, stands Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, love, and war. The palm is her tree and the dove is her bird (cf. 290). Her right foot is set on a lion. The king stands in greeting before her. She appears to be presenting him with ring and staff. In any case, the picture depicts all parts of an entire temple complex. The temple building is a broad-room with a wide antechamber (cf. 172–73, 207). The anteroom and the forecourt incorporate all those features which characterize the temple as a sphere of life. We find these features repeated—almost without exception—in the Solomon temple and in the description of paradise: the mountain (Ezek 28:13–16), the rivers, the trees, the cherubim. Even the bulls are present. In the Jerusalem temple they carried the bronze sea (1 Kgs 7:25). Belief in the presence of the living God supplied the temple forecourts with all the symbols which had already played a role in the Ishtar temple of Mari.

4. THE ALTARS

The altar, or rather, the altars also constitute part of the furniture of the forecourts. Altars also belong to the inventory of the temple building. Here they will be dealt with together. According to the magical-mythical conception of the world, man could not simply participate in the vital forces of the holy precincts without contributing his part to the preservation and renewal of the same. His contribution was sacrifice.

Figs. 180 and 187 quite clearly show how the king, as chief priest, sustains the life-force through his offerings. Sacrifice was widely understood as the supplying of food (192). Thus the evaporation of liquid, the desiccation of sacrificial offerings (288), their burning, or their enjoyment by sacred animals (440) may have reinforced the belief that they had been appropriated by the gods. A large portion of the sacrifices was also consumed by the priests, as stipulated in the legislation regarding sacrifice in Lev 1–9. In an addition to the Book of Daniel (Dan 14 [Bel and the Dragon]) this practice is set forth as a great fraud perpetrated by heathen priests.

Experience and knowledge of Yahweh's independence from the cosmic structure rendered sacrifice problematical in Israel (cf. Ps 50 and chap. 6.2). Nevertheless, it was provisionally retained, and it was reinterpreted only in certain respects.

If the sacrifice in and of itself represents a meal or gift for the deity and does not merely envision an interior act on the part of the worshipper, then it is obvious 192. Sometimes ingestion of nourishment by the deity was conceived of in a rather anthropomorphic fashion. This impression from an Anatolian cylinder seal seems to suggest such a view. The god of war, with his double axe, sits enthroned. The person making sacrifice is about to pour his libation directly into the god's cup (but cf. 375, 441–43). Another worshipper, conducted by a tutelary goddess, brings forward a small male goat (cf. 435–36). Ps 50:8–15 is directed against anthropomorphic conceptions of the nourishment of the Deity.

Scanned by CamScanner
that the altar, as the place where the food or offering was set, must have been understood as the god’s table, or as a representation of the deity himself. Subjectively or objectively, first one, then the other sense can come to the fore. The psalms repeatedly convey the impression that to the supplicant the altar was more a representation of Yahweh himself than simply a place of slaughter or some kind of table. That is the case, for example, when the supplicant circles round the altar singing the praises of Yahweh (Ps 26:6-7), or when going to the altar is parallel to appearing before God (Ps 43:4; cf. also Ps 118:27).

The altar is both a place of sacrifice and a representation of the deity, even when it consists of no more than a series of cavities or basinlike holes in a venerated, holy rock. The Holy Rock in Jerusalem may originally have been such an altar (154).

At first glance, those altars made of heaped up earth or uncut stones (Plates X and XI; Gen 31:46; Josh 8:31) seem to have had the character of a podium, a slaughtering place, or a table. But the archaic prescriptions that the altar be built only of uncut stones and that one must not mount it on steps, “that your nakedness be not exposed on it” (Exod 20:25-26), intimate that even the stone-heap altar was understood to be more than a table. The altar of burnt sacrifice in the forecourt of the Yahweh temple at Arad (cf. 170 and 248) is built, in compliance with Exod 20:25, of uncut stones and without steps (Plate XI).

193. “... I will go to the altar of God, to the God of my exceeding joy” (Ps 43:4).

194. “Arrange the festal dance with branches, up to the horns of the altar” (Ps 118:27b,c AT).
Its dimensions correspond to those specified in Exod 27:1 for the bronze-covered wooden altar of the tabernacle in the wilderness (5 × 5 × 3 ells [RSV: “cubits”] = ca. 2.25 × 2.25 × 1.35 meters). Thus, in the altar of burnt sacrifice at Arad, elements of two very different conceptions (Exod 20:25–26 and 27:1) take material form in a legitimate Yahweh altar.

The two functions of the altar (representation of the deity and “table”) find their clearest expression in the Massebah altar typical of the Syrian-Phoenician cultural circle (193).66 The Massebah altar shown in Fig. 193 is suited for offering sprinklings of blood, but not for burnt sacrifice. The horns at the four corners of the altar (cf. 195, 246), a feature attested quite early in the Syrian-Phoenician sphere, may owe their origin to a quartered or quadruple Massebah which was first moved from the middle of the altar to the corners for practical reasons, perhaps to provide room for the burnt offering.67 In any case, a great many OT texts indicate that the horns of the altar represent the deity in a very special way. The festal procession reached its goal at the horns of the altar (Ps 118:27); at them the man seeking asylum finds protection (1 Kgs 1:50; 2:28; Amos 3:14). The predication,

195. “. . . horn of my salvation” (Ps 18:3).

“horn of my salvation,” according to Yahweh in Ps 18:3, may be connected with the power of protection offered by the horns of the altar. The blood of atonement is also applied to the horns of the altar (Lev 8:15; 16:18; etc.)

We are not certain of the appearance of the principal altar which stood before the Solomonic temple. It was in all probability cubical, built of wood (Exod 27:1–2) or stones, and in either case covered with copper (2 Kgs 16:14; 1 Kgs 8:64; 2 Chr 6:13; Exod 27:1–2). It was relatively small (1 Kgs 8:64; 2 Kgs 16:14). According to 2 Chr 6:13 it pos-

196. “. . . go about thy altar, O LORD, singing aloud a song of thanksgiving, and telling

ing all thy wondrous deeds” (Ps 26:6b–7).
sessed the canonical measurements (Exod 27:1–2) already encountered in the altar of burnt sacrifice of the temple at Arad (Plate XI), which continued in use into the Solomonic period. 1 Kgs 1:50 and 2:28 indicate that the four corners of the altar were provided with horns, which would also conform to the canonical requirements of Exod 27:1. A four-horned altar of carefully hewn stones (1.57 meters high) was recently discovered at Beersheba. Its stones had been reused in a wall dating from the eighth century B.C. Since an altar of such modest proportions was too small for the greater solemnities (cf. Ps 66:15), the middle portion of the forecourt was used as a place of slaughter and sacrifice (1 Kgs 8:64).

Around 730 B.C., King Ahaz had the old copper altar replaced by a new, larger one (2 Kgs 16:10–16). It could be mounted by steps (2 Kgs 16:12; 193–94, 196). King Ahaz built this altar after a model he had seen with the Assyrian king (?) in Damascus. Since there are no Assyrian step-altars, the prototype may have been Aramean. De Groot and Galling conjecture that the altar of Ahaz corresponded in essentials to the Ezekiel altar. Three blocks measuring 8 x 8 x 1 meters, 7 x 7 x 2 meters, and 6 x 6 x 2 meters (Ezek 43:13–17) surmounted a base socle of approximately 9 x 9 x 0.5 meters. At the four corners of the altar were horns 0.5 meters in height. Steps led up to the altar from the east (194; cf. 193 and 196). The altar was large enough for doves, swallows, and sparrows to nest in it (Ps 84:3). This would be quite possible if the altar was built of uncut stones which in time developed numerous cracks and crannies. According to 2 Chr 4:1, an altar of the huge dimensions of the Ahaz-Ezekiel altar already existed in Solomonic times. However, that may be an instance of anachronism.

When the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, the altar of burnt sacrifice was also destroyed. According to Ezra 3:3, however, it was rebuilt on its old foundations. That detail is confirmed by Hecataeus, who states that in the third century B.C. there stood before the temple an altar (approximately 4.5 meters high) of uncut stones built on a square foundation (with sides approximately 9 meters wide). 1 Macc 4:47 confirms its construction of uncut stones. After Antiochus IV had desecrated the old altar, the Jews razed it. Then “they took unhewn stones, as the law directs, and built a new altar like the former one.” Josephus also tells us that the altar was made of uncut stones. In view of the size, one could hardly dispense with steps, despite Exod 20:26.

In Ps 84:3, altars are mentioned in the plural (mzbbwt). The question of whether this plural refers to a plural number of places of sacrifice or is to be construed as a sacral plural, as in “mountains” (Pss 87:1 MT; 133:3) or “dwellings” (Pss 43:3 MT; 46:5 MT [RSV 46:4]; 84:2 MT [RSV 84:1]; 132:5, 7 MT) is probably to be resolved in favor of the latter sense. The texts cited above refer without exception to only one altar. The table for the showbread and the costly golden altar (1 Kgs 7:48) were in the interior of the temple and consequently could not provide the nesting place presupposed by Ps 84:3.

The golden altar of 1 Kgs 7:48 may have been an altar of incense. According to Exod 30:1–10, even the tabernacle in the wilderness was equipped with an altar of incense. It was approximately 90 centimeters high, and was furnished with four horns (cf. 195).

The holy of holies of the Yahweh temple at Arad contained two incense altars (248). The larger of the two was approximately the same size as the horned altar of Megiddo (195), which may also have served as an incense altar. Approximately 150 incense altars from the Persian period have been found at Lachish. The inscription on one of them indicates that in postexilic Lachish, as well as in pre-exilic Arad, one sought to appease Yahweh’s wrath (‘p) by soothing his nose (‘p) with incense (197).

Instead of an actual altar, a basin on a portable stand could also serve for burn-
197. The inscription on this altar from Lachish reads: "Incense (from) Y(a'u)sh, (the) son of Mech(ir) for Yah(weh), (our?) Lord."

198. Stand with a bowl for burning incense (cf. 199). It was believed that the wrath of the gods could be appeased by fragrant odors pleasing to the nose ("ap"), for a characteristic sign of wrath is heavy breathing through the nose. For that reason, "ap" could be used as a term for wrath (cf. Num 16:46–47). Ps 18:15 speaks of the wrathful blast of Yahweh's nostrils.

199. The offering of incense was an important part of expiatory sacrifices. On occasions of extreme necessity, the Canaanites and Phoenicians even sacrificed their own children. This fact is attested by Philo of Byblos (cited by Porphyry De abstinentia 2.56) and other writings. Lucian the Syrian supplements these reports with a further detail: the children were sometimes simply thrown or let fall from a lofty structure (De dea Syria 58). It is by no means certain, however, that the above illustration depicts this practice (contra P. Derchain, "Les plus anciens témoignages"). Here the Canaanites hold out a child to Ramses II; in precisely the same manner, the Philistines on their oxcarts hold out their children to Ramses III (H. H. Nelson et al., Earlier Historical Records, pl. 34; less clear in ANEP, no. 813). The arms, reaching downwards, set the children on the ground from the low oxcarts. Thus, it is not a matter of sacrifice, but of the giving of hostages. The same applies to the picture above (cf. also 86, 132a; and O. Keel, "Kanaanäische Sühne-riten").
ing incense (198: cf. 1 Kgs 7:50). Egyptian reliefs often show beleaguered Canaanites paying tribute to the Pharaoh, who storms upon them like a god of war (132a, 300–302); they attempted to placate him by offering incense (132a, 199, and cf. 86 and 162). In doing so, they employed utensils quite similar to that shown in Fig. 198. Some 1,000 years later, a similar incense burner appears in a relief on a Palmyre-
nian altar (200). The Aramaic inscription on the back of the altar informs us that such an instrument was called ḫammar.\(^4\)

In the OT, ḫammānim were regarded as typically Canaanite, and were thus repudiated by the prophets (Isa 17:8; 27:9; Ezek 6:4, 6). It is therefore unlikely that such portable stands (or similarly portable incense coffers) were used for burning incense in the Jerusalem temple. Instead, as suggested in Exod 30:1–10 and 1 Kgs 7:48, a proper, albeit small altar was probably used. It would have been similar to those found at Arad and Lachish.

According to 1 Kgs 7:48, there was in the temple at Jerusalem another table besides the altar of incense: it was the table for the bread of the Presence (cf. 1 Sam 21:1–7). If the reference in 1 Kgs 6:20 is to be applied to it, it was made of cedar. According to Exod 25:23–30, it measured about 90 × 45 centimeters and was approximately 65 centimeters high. The show-bread table on the Arch of Titus quite accurately reflects these dimensions (cf. 460). Ezekiel 41:21–22 calls for a table twice that size. Fig. 201 shows an Assyrian presentation table.

In Egypt, one presentation table is often placed next to another (cf. 196). In Assyria, however, a single table is the rule (373, 440).\(^5\) That apparently held true in the Canaanite-Mesopotamian region as well. There the gods were more consistently conceived of in anthropomorphic fashion than was the case in Egypt (cf. pp. 46, 326). As the OT demonstrates, that proved a lesser deterrent to an increasingly barren understanding of sacrifice than the more strongly dynamic view of Egypt, where it was believed that the divine powers could be almost boundlessly augmented by increased sacrifices.

An Assyrian relief from the palace of Assurbanipal in Nineveh (202) very aptly summarizes what has been said thus far concerning the temple as region of life (cf. 162a, 191): the entire temple complex rises on a mountain. The immediate vicinity of the temple is characterized by trees (180–82) and water (183–88). The water is remarkably supplied by an aqueduct,\(^6\) which divides into several branches on the temple mount. The temple proper is not easily identified. At first glance, the arch at the left appears to be the entrance, and the pillared structure on the right the long-room, shown from the side (on the com-

---

200. A portable incense stand, shown on the relief of an altar. The Aramaic inscription on the back of the altar informs us that the term for such a stand was ḫammān. ḫammānim were apparently not used in the Jerusalem cultus, and were condemned by the prophets as a typically Canaanite implement.
201. "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine" (Ps 50:12).

202. "How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul yearns and pine for the courts of the LORD. My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. . . . Happy they who dwell in your house! continually they praise you. Happy the men whose strength you are! their hearts are set on the pilgrimage. . . . I had rather one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere" (Ps 84:2–3, 5–6, 11a NAB; cf. Ps 84:1–2, 4–5, 10a RSV).
bination of various aspects, cf. the gate and altar in Fig. 196). This interpretation is seemingly reinforced by the presence of something like masonry between the pillars of the “long-room.” Oddly enough, however, the vertical butt joints appear to be missing. However, this interpretation is seriously undermined by the fact that “up to the present there is no evidence from Syria of a temple plan with engaged columns, and that is precisely what we are faced with.” In consequence, we must probably take the supposed long-room to be the front of a templum in antis with two pillars, and interpret the supposed masonry as the registers of a bronze portal or something of the kind. The supposed entrance, however, was probably a stele which actually stood in front of the temple and separate from it (cf. 440). The stele bears the portrait of an Assyrian king in an attitude of worship (cf. 418). The via sacra with its little altar may have led in a straight line not only to the stele, but also to the very front of the temple which lay behind it.

S. Mowinckel assumes that the Jerusalem temple, like most great ancient Near Eastern sanctuaries, must have had its via sacra. He takes milut of Ps 84:6 MT [RSV: 84:5] as an allusion to it. milh is a paved street. The plural would have an intensive character, as in “mountains,” “dwellings,” and “altars.” Mowinckel assumes that the street would have led over the western hill to the temple mount (cf. 151 and 152). It is more probable, however, that it led from Gihon (1 Kgs 1:38–39, 45), following at first the Kidron Valley, then approached the temple from the east, so that its last section merged with the extended axis of the temple complex.

5. THE HOUSE OF YAHWEH

The psalms use two principal terms for what we call the temple (or more precisely, the temple building): “house (byt) of Yahweh” (Pss 5:7; 23:6; 26:8; 27:4; etc.) and “palace (bykl [RSV: ‘temple’], from the Sumerian e-gal, ‘great house’) of Yahweh” (Pss 5:7; 27:4; 48:9; 65:5; etc.). Neither byt nor bykl in themselves denote anything specifically cultic (as for instance our “temple” or “church”). The house or palace of Yahweh is therefore distinguished terminologically from other buildings only by its inhabitant or owner. The same is true of the term “dwelling place” (miyn; Pss 26:8 MT; 74:7); in a number of passages the plural [reflected in MT only] indicates the special quality of this particular dwelling place (Pss 43:3; 46:5 MT [RSV 46:4]; 84:2 MT [RSV 84:1]; 132:5, 7; cf. above p. 114).

There were two important types of houses in the ancient Near East. In both, the basic shape was rectangular, but one had the entrance on the narrow side (203), the other on the long side (204). In the first type, in the case of a temple, the cult statue is usually placed on the narrow side opposite the entrance. This arrangement, like that of the later Christian basilicas, emphasizes the distance between the visitor and the god. The long-house may have originated in southern Russia.

Two major variants of the second house-type are to be identified: in one, the entrance is located at the extreme end of the broad side (205); in the other, it is placed at its center (206). In the first instance, the visitor must turn ninety degrees upon entering in order to view the main portion of the room. This type is consequently called the bent-axis or “Around-the-corner” type. In passing by such a house, one sees nothing but the opposite wall near the door. The bent-

Scanned by CamScanner
2nd c. A.D. P. Collart and P. Coupel, L’autel monumental de Baalbek, pl. 3.

180. Section of a limestone stele (height of section, 32 cm.): Ur, Urnammu (ca. 2050 B.C.); Philadelphia, University Museum. ANEP, no. 306. A. Parrot, Sumer, figs. 279–282. H. Schmökel, Ur, Assur, pl. 54.**


182. Cuticle stand, painted clay, h. 106 cm.: Megiddo (1350–1150 B.C.); Loud, Megiddo, vol. 2, pl. 251.**


185. Dolerite relief, h. 1.17 m.: Assur: fountain of the Assur Temple: 8th–7th c. B.C.; Berlin, VA. W. Andrae, Das wiedererstandene Assur, p. 155, pl. 2b. A. Parrot, Assur, p. 74, fig. 82.**

186. Cylinder seal, carnelian, h. 3.7 cm., diam. 1.7 cm.: 9th–8th c. B.C.; Pittsburgh Morgan Library, New York. ANEP, no. 706. M. A. Beek, Atlas of Mesopotamia, fig. 252. Cf. H. Frankfort, Cylinder Seals, pl. 34b.**


188. Portable kettle, bronze: Larnaca (Cyprus), Late Mycenean Period (1400–1200 B.C.); Berlin. A. Furtwängler, „Über ein... Bronzegerät.“, p. 411. AOB, no. 505. IWB, vol. 2, p. 217. Cf. AOB, no. 506; ANEP, no. 587.**

189. Ivory, Nimrud, 9th–8th c. B.C. R. D. Barnett, Catalogue, pl. 33f. BL, col. 1031, fig. 67, fig. 2.**


191. Wall painting, l. 2.5 m., h. 1.75 m.: Mari: period of Hammurabi (1728–1686 B.C.); copy (after the original) in the Louvre. A. Parrot, Sumer, pp. 279f., fig. 346. M. T. Barrelet, „Une peinture de la cour 106,” pl. 1. Cf. A. Moortgat, Kunst, p. 74.**

192. Cylinder seal (impression) from Kuškupiye, 19th–18th c. B.C.; Ankara, Inventory No. Kt. alk 462. N. Ozgüç, Anatolian Group, no. 67 (cf. nos. 49 and 71).**


195. Limestone altar, h. 54.5 cm.: Megiddo, near the sacred precincts: 10th–9th c. B.C.; Jerusalem, Palestine Museum. H. G. May and R. M. Engberg, Material Remains, pp. 12f., pl. 12. ANEP, no. 575. After a photograph by the author.**


198. Incense stand, ceramic, h. 67 cm.: Megiddo, 1150–1100 B.C.; Chicago, Oriental Institute A 20830. H. G. May and R. M. Engberg, Material Remains, pp. 20–23, pl. 20. ANEP, no. 583.**

199. Section of the relief in Fig. 157.


201. Relief: Nineveh: palace of Assurbanipal, Room S (668–626 B.C.); BM 124886. R. D. Barnett and W. Forman, Assyrische Palastreliefs, fig. 98.**

202. Relief, w. 1.32 m., h. 0.93 m.: Nineveh: palace of Assurbanipal (668–626 B.C.); BM 124939A. R. D. Barnett and W. Forman, Assyrische Palastreliefs, fig. 134. A. Jeremias, Das Alt im Lichte des AO, fig. 18. BHH, vol. 3, cols. 1385f. Drawing after a photograph in the British Museum.***


205. Bent-axis house. W. Andrae,