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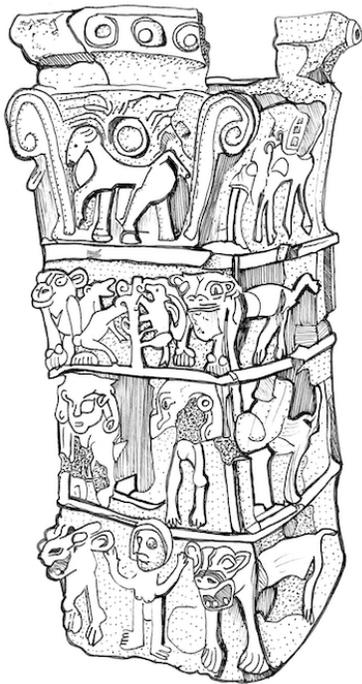
“A Reevaluation of Some Iconographic Motifs on the Taanach Cult Stand”

By [Brian R. Doak](#)

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Section: Israelite Religion in its West Asian Environment

Note: This paper, written while I was a PhD student at Harvard University in 2007, was a work-in-progress at the time it was presented, and I post it here as a snapshot of what I was thinking at that time (about 20 images and a bibliography accompanied the presentation, and these are not included here). Some published comments on this object along the lines of what I had presented now appear in my Phoenician Aniconism in its Mediterranean and Ancient Near Eastern Contexts (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 21; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), pp. 129–131.



The Taanach Cult Stand; Drawing by Nora Clair

Since its discovery in 1968, the so-called “Taanach cult stand” has generated no small amount of scholarly controversy; indeed, the unique combination of images on the stand evoke a variety of interpretations, perhaps due to the sheer number of key iconographic motifs used in combination and their implications for the history of religion within the borders of ancient “Israel” in the 10th century BCE. The imagery on the Taanach stand raises a series of provocative questions regarding many recent discussions, such as: Was the Israelite national deity, YHWH, depicted iconographically in ancient Israel, and are any of these images on the Taanach stand? Did ancient Israelites consider the putatively male YHWH to have a female “consort,” such as Asherah, and is this female deity represented at the bottom of the stand?

While these questions are interesting in their own right, one can hardly extract firm answers to any of these issues from a single artifact; as P.D. Miller correctly notices, some of the interpretations made of the stand are “rather a lot to ask of a single tenth-century cult stand, that it offers a collection of some of the main orthodox and heterodox iconography of Israelite religion” (2000: 44).

Given the relatively voluminous amount of attention given to this intricate piece, one may well question the need for yet another treatment. However, I offer two relevant motives for the present re-investigation:

(1) There has been no specific study made of the stand (that I know of) since the official publication of the archaeological data from the Iron Age Taanach cultic structure in 2000 by

Frank Frick; thus, our comments here will bring some of the new information to bear on the context and meaning of the stand.

(2) Throughout the nearly 40 years of studies on this stand, a majority of commentators have made several assumptions about the piece, all of which deserve serious questioning, namely: a) the figure on the bottom tier is the goddess “Asherah”; b) the empty space in tier II represents some kind of aniconographic phenomenon, c) the animal on the top tier is a symbol of some *male* deity, either Baal or YHWH (pick one).

Therefore, in hopes of addressing some of these problems, we will need to engage the iconography of the stand on several fronts. Thus, after briefly reviewing the historical and archaeological context of the stand, we will turn to an analysis of the respective tiers on our piece.

The ancient site of biblical Taanach (Tell Ta’anek) is located about five miles southeast of Megiddo, and has been the object of significant excavations undertaken by the German Ernst Sellin from 1902-04 (see Sellin 1905) and later by the American Paul Lapp (1963-68). In fact, both excavations uncovered fascinating cult stands; Sellin’s stand is often referred to as “Stand A,” while Lapp’s stand, the more intricate of the two and the subject of our study here, is referred to as “Stand B.” The most insightful comparison of both stands, and the best overall analysis of the iconographic motifs have been done by Beck and Keel and Uehlinger, cited on the slide.

Calling the inhabitants of Taanach of period IA “Canaanites” (Frick 2000: 24) seems hardly to be a radical conclusion, borne out even by the biblical data itself: despite the implication given in Josh. ch. 12 that Taanach had been completely defeated, Jud. 1:27 chides Manasseh for *not* driving out Taanach’s inhabitants. Hence, as Frick notes, into the later 12th cen. “Taanach’s [economic and material] associations...remained closer with the Canaanites to the north than with the proto-Israelites to the south” (Frick 2000: 25). After a gap of about a century, occupation resumed in period IIA and on into IIB, which, according to the traditional chronology, overlaps with the reigns of David and Solomon.

Regarding the issue of whether or not Taanach would have been “Israelite” or “Canaanite” during the 10th century, we must exercise some caution. Under the so-called “low chronology,” some have questioned whether Taanach could be labeled “Israelite” at all during the IA-IIA periods (Finkelstein 1998). We do, however, have a great similarity in cultic assemblage and ceramics between Taanach IIB and Megiddo VA-IVB, and Taanach itself stands as possibly “the best anchor for the absolute chronology” based on the near impossibility of correlating Taanach IIB with anything but Shishak’s destruction layer, which can be confidently dated to 925 BCE.

The dating and context of our cult stand has been a matter of some debate, due mainly to the fact that the stand was found at the bottom of a well. Lapp dated his stand and its accompanying materials to the Iron IIB (Frick 2000: 29, 50), and it seems to have been related to the nearby cultic installation in some fashion.

Regarding the role of the “cult stand” in the Levant, we will mention two brief points:

(1) According to one recent typology (Gilmour 1995: 227ff.; see references in Frick 2000: 115), the “Taanach type” of cultic stand—that is, a stand with “multiple layers of iconographic representation” (Frick 2000: 115)—is a distinct type in the Levant and can also be found at Pella (east of the Jordan), Megiddo, and Jerusalem.

Based on evidence from Anatolian seals and clay structures, the “stacked animal” motif was already in use in the early 2nd millennium. Other evidence for the northern derivation of the depictions can be found in reliefs from Carchemish and Zinjirli.

(2) Although it was once thought that all such stands were used to offer up incense, we must now recognize that some of the stands were constructed *to hold something*. This conclusion is borne out by perhaps our best source of evidence for how the stands were used, namely, seal impressions from Mesopotamia and Egyptian tomb paintings. That the Taanach stand is “religious” in nature seems beyond question (due to its iconography), yet it cannot be accurately characterized as an “incense” stand since the piece shows no sign of combustion (Lapp 1969: 44; Fowler 1984: 185).

Turning now to the iconography on the Taanach stand, we find several intriguing depictions. The bottom tier of the stand clearly portrays a bare-chested female figure, whose hands are grasping the ears of lions which flank her on both sides.

In light of the leonine imagery, the default position is to identify the woman specifically with the goddess Asherah (Ugaritic *Athirat*), based on the proximity of the lions (words like “consensus” and “overwhelming evidence” have been bandied about recently in the identification of the woman with Asherah; see Frick, Dever, Hadley, et al.). Here, F.M. Cross’s analysis of the iconography has often served as the basis for identification: “The epithets Tannit, ‘Lady of the Serpent,’ and Labi’t, ‘the Lady of the Lion’ thus fit best with Asherah’s iconography” (Cross 1973: 34). Actually pairing *Asherah* with the lion has proven more difficult. Those who look to Cross (1973: 33-34) for affirmation of Asherah’s association with leonine imagery apparently have accepted Cross’ point about the conflation of Qudšu, Astarte, and Anat on the Winchester relief (which is apparently now lost), where Qudšu is supposedly made to be the equivalent of Asherah.

However, some have now cast serious doubt on the association of Qudšu with Asherah, claiming that leonine imagery has been illegitimately smuggled into Asherah’s repertoire via Qudšu. In fact, Cross has apparently conflated Qudšu and the Egyptian Qedeshet, an association which S. Wiggins (1991: 389) labels as circular—“each premise (namely that [the Ugaritic] *qdš* is a title of Asherah, and that the Egyptian stelae represent this identification) assumes that the other is true.” Thus, it seems no longer acceptable to make simple judgments about the identification of Asherah with lions.

We may also consider two other specific possibilities for the goddess—Anat/Anath and Astarte. It is noteworthy that Cross’ original identification of the “lion lady” was with Anat, on the basis of the Proto-Sinaitic texts (Cross 1967: 13; Wiggins 1991: 391). Although Anat could apparently be imagined in connection with some animals, her status as an active goddess in Iron Age Israel is dubious (Smith 2002: 54).

A better case may be made for Astarte; Lapp (1969: 44) called the figure “a naked figure of Astarte type,” although this identification was based on Sellin’s early analysis of Taanach’s Bronze- and Iron age figurines. As evidenced by the 15th-13th cen. figures found at the site, there seems to be a long continuity of a certain kind of representation in a particular cultic context. The explicit connection with the lion on the Winchester stele demonstrates to some degree the viability of an Astarte-lion (or Anat-lion) connection in Egypt, and thus the identification of the woman with Astarte on the stand seems more appropriate than with Asherah, although the connection is by no means certain.

In light of the pervasive goddess figures and imagery from the cultic installation and the conspicuous absence of male images at the site, we might even conclude that the piece is *entirely*

devoted to the worship of a female deity, perhaps even Astarte. As Keel and Uehlinger point out, “Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age terra-cottas with images on them were virtually all linked to the worship of female deities” (1998: 160). This realization could help solve one of the thornier but perhaps unnecessary problems of the stand’s interpretation, namely the issue of identifying the animal on the top tier and the putative *male* deity associated with it.

Notwithstanding the various and sometimes convoluted zoological arguments for the animal’s bovine or equine anatomy, interpreters have often overlooked a significant Late Bronze and Early Iron Age tradition of using the horse “as an attribute animal of Anat-Astarte” (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 160). Admittedly, it is not clear why the horse, if indeed it is an attribute of the goddess, should be on the top tier.

The sun disk, then, is not a male deity “riding” the animal in the style of Anatolian or Levantine war-gods, but rather is a *structural feature* of the model of the temple/shrine and meant to represent the heavens or the primacy of the deity more generally (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 160). To this end, Beck (1994: 369-73) has even proposed a reconstruction of the stand’s top tier which shows the sun-disk in its intended space of meaning, “resting above the voluted columns” and “unrelated” to the animal (372).

These considerations should cause us to push some of Keel and Uehlinger’s, and Beck’s, observations a step farther, to their logical conclusions: *the stand is devoted entirely to the female deity depicted on the bottom tier, and thus does not represent a male deity at all or a male-female union.*

Tier III, with its animals and tree, seems unquestionably connected to the general representation of the goddess on the stand.

This leaves us with the suggestively sparse depiction in tier II. Despite the persistent quest to find an apparition of YHWH or Baal on the stand, what is conspicuously *not present* is an anthropomorphic depiction of a male figure. Although tier II contains only two austere figures, we expect—on analogy from the other tiers—a central depiction. And certainly, the “window” or “space” between the figures is more prominent than on other similar stands.

We cannot rule out the possibility that some object or piece of material filled this “empty” space, which has been lost or destroyed over the millennia, although this does not appear to be the case. The empty space between the figures could be construed as a vague, anthropomorphic form, although this is quite a stretch. The craftsman likely intended the space to exist—but why?

The best case for YHWH’s presence in the stand’s empty space between the cherubim has been offered by Taylor in *Yahweh and the Sun* and several articles. For Taylor, the empty space is “intentional” and represents YHWH, who is, in Taylor’s translation of the biblical phrase, “Yahweh of Hosts who dwells (among) the cherubim.” However, there are several textual, theoretical and iconographic reasons why this conclusion should not be accepted.

(1) The biblical phrase *yōšēb hakarūbīm* does little to solve the problem in and of itself. Some insist that *yōšēb hakarūbīm* means “seated *above* the cherubim,” although, on analogy with the available evidence of “cherub thrones,” this is far from clear. The oft-cited throne scenes on the Megiddo ivory and the Ahiram sarcophagus, for example, show that the man does not literally sit “above” the cherubim figures, since they support the seat on which he actually sits, the heads of the cherubim being elevated on either side. There is perhaps another biblical tradition represented in Ezekiel (1:26 and 10:1), however, where instead of having the cherub wings representing a throne on which the deity sits (with the ark as “footstool,” as shown here), the *throne itself* rests *on top* of the platform (“above the dome/firmament”) created by the wings

of the creatures, and the “man” or deity is even above the throne. Either way, it is difficult to integrate the depiction on tier II with these types of textual descriptions.

(2) Perhaps the most difficult problem involves the question of *intentionality* on the part of the worshipper: Is a particular “empty space” or “non-image” *intentionally created* to “symbolize” or “convey” the presence of the deity in the mind of the craftsman? Empty spaces, vacant thrones, and riderless cult-wagons become comprehensible only within a *specific ritual context*, where the “presence” or power of the deity appears (Gladigow 1988: 472). Without an attempt at reconstructing this context, positing aniconism becomes a delicate matter.

In T. Mettinger’s important study of the aniconographic phenomenon in *No Graven Image* (1995), for example, Mettinger’s discussion of aniconism is “confined to the level of the phenomenology of religion,” centering “on the ritual characteristics of the cults in question.” His definition of aniconism is “not per se dependent on the type of imputed referential relation between the symbol (the theophoric object) and its referent (the worshippers’ notion of God).” Hence, the boundary between aniconism and simply having *no aniconic phenomena at all* could be very difficult (if not impossible) to discern in light of Mettinger’s refusal to consider “the worshipper’s notion of God.” Without this relationship between symbol and referent, what exactly differentiates an architectural feature of a temple, such as a plain pillar, from a pillar created as an abstract form of the deity and thus an *intentional abstention* from anthropomorphic representation?

(3) As mentioned earlier, the strongest iconographic parallels for this stand’s motifs derive from Anatolian and Phoenician sources. If indeed it can be established that the stand’s iconography has a primarily Phoenician or Anatolian origin (as Beck, Hestrin, and Keel/Uehlinger have shown), then it seems reasonable that we search for its *aniconographic* inspiration in these regions as well (as opposed to the biblical texts).

Here the evidence does suggest some tantalizing, albeit ultimately unsatisfactory, possibilities:

(a) In his pioneering study of Phoenician aniconism (in *No Graven Image*), Mettinger suggests several instances of possible *aniconographic* representations of goddesses (specifically Astarte) in the Sidonian tradition.

(b) Despite these examples—which, it should be noted, are quite late—Mettinger seems to have ignored several other pieces of evidence where we have clear depictions of enthroned female Phoenician deities which persisted for centuries both in the Phoenician mainland and in the Mediterranean colonies. Nevertheless, we might at least consider the possibility that the craftsman of our stand has attempted to *integrate both iconographic (tier I) and aniconographic or symbolic depictions of the same goddess on the stand*. In this view, the goddess depicted anthropomorphically at the bottom is also then represented in each of the other three tiers: *aniconographically* in tier II, in the tree of tier III, and by the symbol of the horse in tier IV. This is admittedly speculative, but certainly no more so than other reconstructions of the stand’s meaning.

IV. Conclusions

So, considering the fact that we are not dealing with positive data when assessing the significance of the space between the sphinxes, the evidence for YHWH’s “appearance” in this empty gap is very suspect, at best. In light of our previous discussion on the problems of viewing the figure in tier I as Asherah, reading a YHWH-Asherah pairing into the stand is unnecessary. *If there is no male deity in tier IV, and if no one lurks in tier II’s empty space, then there is no male*

deity on the stand at all. If this interpretation is correct, then so much for the YHWH-Asherah “marriage,” at least here. Although the notion of Da-Vinci-Code-style *hieros gamos* rituals and their accompanying mythological and iconographic tropes are indeed titillating, we should exercise extreme caution when positing such features on this Iron Age cultic implement.

Without clear parallels and further archaeological evidence, (notwithstanding the possibly of Mettinger’s example above), tier II is best viewed as the *entrance to the shrine of which the stand is a model* (as understood by Keel 1998: 41, et. al.). Returning to the issue of the function of the cult stand, what we have here, then, is an example of what Claude Lévi-Strauss (in *The Savage Mind* 1966: 23-5) and, more recently, J.Z. Smith (*Relating Religion* 2004, 224-7) have identified as the tendency toward *miniaturization* in religious representation and cultic contexts. Lévi-Strauss argued that miniaturized depictions of temples or even the entire cosmos are “not just projections or passive homologues of the object: they constitute a real experiment with it”; thus, “the intrinsic value of a small-scale model is that it compensates for the renunciation of sensible dimensions by the acquisition of intelligible dimensions” (24).

These reflections led Smith to analyze some ritual implements mentioned in the Greek magical papyri in terms of the miniaturization tendency; small-scaled temples and shrines are “treated as if they were major edifices housing a divine image and a cult table,” and receive sacrifice, a cultic meal, and incubation rituals (225). These rituals, before the miniaturized objects, are a *replacement* for larger temple space and thus create the immediacy of the formalized temple in an “ordinary but purified room” (225). Indeed, this is perhaps the very situation that we have in the small “cultic-structure” at Taanach. Further study (that is, beyond what I have been able to give here) of this theoretical aspect of miniaturization and religious representation in the Levant could help contribute to the hitherto perplexing socio-religious questions of *how* and *why* cult stands were created and used in Israel, and perhaps bring us closer to understanding other enigmatic features of these intricate religious artifacts.