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Please email me (matthieu.richelle@uclouvain.be) for an offprint.

Cult Centralization in the Books of Kings

Matthieu Richelle

Abstract

The books of Kings claim that the worship of Yhwh should have been centralized at Solomon's temple in Jerusalem, and that for most of their history, Israel and Judah did not conform to that principle. This chapter shows that cult centralization is a major theme of Kings indeed; it also discusses the possible origins of this religious principle and the hypotheses concerning its rationale. But Kings also claim that two kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, made religious reforms based on cult centralization, and this chapter introduces the reader to the debate about the historicity of these reforms, which involves both the literary analysis of the relevant passages of Kings, and the interpretation of potential archaeological evidence.

Keywords

Centralization; Temple; Jerusalem; Hezekiah; Josiah.

1. Introduction: A Central Theme of Kings

At the risk of a bad pun, one may say that cult centralization is a central theme of the books of Kings. According to that principle, the main religious rituals should take place in one temple and one alone. In the mind of the main redactors of 1-2 Kings, this is Solomon's temple in Jerusalem.

The importance of this principle appears in several ways in these books. First, it provides a major theological criterion by which reigns are evaluated. In the North, kings are systematically condemned for having maintained the sanctuaries built by Jeroboam I in Bethel and Dan, which are regarded as illegitimate; this is the "sin of Jeroboam." In the etiological comments of 2 Kgs 17, this is the main reason why the kingdom of Israel was destroyed and its population was exiled. In the South, many sovereigns are criticized for letting the population worship in the "high places." Basically, according to Kings, once Solomon's temple was built and inaugurated, the sacrificial rituals should have been restricted to that sanctuary. It is significant that neither the people, nor Solomon himself, are criticized for offering sacrifices in the high place of Gibeon *prior* to the construction of Jerusalem's temple (1 Kgs 3:4). In fact, Yhwh appears to Solomon there in a dream and makes him important promises (3:5-15). Second, the idea of cult centralization explains why so much space is devoted to the building of the temple (1 Kgs 6-7), its consecration (1 Kgs 8), repairs made to it (2 Kgs 12; 22:3-7), its despoliation (1 Kgs 14:26; 15:18; 2 Kgs 14:14; 16:7-9; 18:14; 24:13) and finally its destruction (2 Kgs 25).

That said, not every compositional layer of Kings was concerned with cult centralization. To the contrary, in the famous story of Elijah's confrontation to Baal's prophets on Mount Carmel, Elijah has an altar rebuilt for Yhwh in that place (1 Kgs 18,30). In the next chapter, he laments

the destruction of other altars dedicated to the same deity (19:10,14).¹ The earliest cores of these stories might have been composed before the fall of Samaria at the end of the eighth century BCE, but they were most likely inserted into Kings at a late stage, during the Persian period, by a post-Deuteronomistic redactor who was not concerned anymore with the notion that any other place than Solomon's temple, whether in Judah or in Israel, was illegitimate.²

Rather, cult centralization was a crucial component of the theological thinking of the Deuteronomistic redactors of Kings in the seventh-sixth centuries according to most compositional models.³ According to the large number of scholars who think that the first edition of Kings dates from the time of Josiah, in the late seventh century, the purpose of that edition was to glorify the latter king for his religious reform of (notably) centralization (see 2 Kgs 22-23). For those who postulate an earlier edition under Hezekiah or Manasseh, that edition culminated with Hezekiah's reform, consisting in putting an end to the high places (2 Kgs 18:4). In any event, all scholars agree that the exilic redaction(s) of Kings used the failure to centralize the cult in past centuries as an etiology for the doom of Judah, even though a redactional layer laid the blame on Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:9-15; 23:26; 24:3). Thus, for most scholars, centralization was presented in different ways in successive editions of Kings: as a remarkable achievement of one or two reforming kings (Hezekiah and/or Josiah), then as the ideal or imperative that most kings failed to attain or observe. Yet the latter perspective is actually a sort

¹ See also Naaman anticipating his involuntary participation to Rimmon's worship in Damascus (2 Kgs 5:18). For a nuanced understanding of this passage, see Römer, "Strange Conversion."

² Steven L. McKenzie, *Trouble*, 81-100, and *1 Kings 16 - 2 Kings 16*, 38-40; see also [ch. 19 in this volume](#).

³ [See ch. 7 in this volume](#).

of extension of the former, since even in the former, the success of one or two monarchs is showcased against the background of other kings' failure.

In a word, one way or another, centralization is the major theme of Kings; it is at the heart of its main compositional stages. The aforementioned positive references to sacred places other than Solomon's temple in a few passages belonging to Elijah's cycle do not amount to a real counter-current to that dominant theological notion in Kings: the structuring, governing notion in this literary work is that the cult should have been centralized in Jerusalem.

2. The Origins of the Notion: Deuteronomy?

What is less clear is whether this notion depends on the book of Deuteronomy.⁴ If there is one passage in the Hebrew Bible that explicitly presents cult centralization as a command by Yhwh, it is Deut 12, where this demand is even repeated several times. For instance, vv. 13-14 reads as follows:

Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place you happen to see.

But only at the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribes—there you shall offer your burnt offerings and there you shall do everything I command you.⁵

⁴ For more details and a broader perspective on the relationship between Kings and Deuteronomy, see ch. 6 in this volume.

⁵ Biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

Moreover, the rest of the Deuteronomic Code applies this constraint to a series of laws (Deut 12-26). The most traditional understanding of the relationship between Kings and Deuteronomy, famously defended by Martin Noth, is that the former is part of a large historiographical work, the so-called Deuteronomistic History, encompassing Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, with Deuteronomy as a sort of theological preface. More complex models that allow for a series of compositional stages still often posit that Kings was written on the basis of Deuteronomy's theology. In sum, Kings would owe its main theological tenet to Deuteronomy.

However, in recent years a number of scholars have pointed out differences between these two books, notably the fact that the high places are at the forefront of Kings' criticism but are altogether absent from Deuteronomy's *terminology*, in spite of the fact that the notion is present (see Deut 12:2). In addition, the date of the earliest redaction of Deuteronomy – whether in Josiah's time, or earlier (under Hezekiah or Manasseh), or later (in post-monarchic times) – is a matter of debate. Due to these uncertainties, and while it seems safe to say that the majority view remains that Kings depends on Deuteronomy's notion of centralization, other views have emerged in recent years, including the notion of a literary dependence the other way around: according to Konrad Schmid, Deuteronomy's fundamental law was inspired by the judgments of sovereigns in Kings.⁶

To complicate the matter further, what exactly Deut 12 demands is disputed. It has been suggested, for instance, that this chapter prescribes that the cult be practiced at *one site at a time*, even though that place may vary over time.⁷ Yet whereas this understanding may underlie the way certain redactors adapted to the tradition about a cult at Shiloh preceding that of

⁶ Schmid, "Deuteronomium."

⁷ Von Rad, *Deuteronomy*. See Schorch's criticism, "Samaritan's Version."

Jerusalem – Yhwh had chosen Shiloh, then it was destroyed, and later Yhwh chose Jerusalem⁸ – it is generally not regarded as a correct interpretation of the original meaning of Deut 12. More recently, on the basis of a “generic” interpretation of the definite article in המקום, Frederick Greenspahn has proposed that the law has a “distributive” meaning in that it points to *any* place that Yhwh will choose.⁹ Accordingly, Deut 12 would not really demand a cult centralization. This interpretation has, so far, met with little approval.¹⁰

More plausibly, one may note that Deut 12 does not prohibit any kind of religious rituals; it concerns animal sacrifices, not vegetal or incense offerings.¹¹ In this regard, it is worth noting what happened in the late fifth century BCE. When the priests of Elephantine asked the governors of Yehud (Bagohi) and Samaria for permission to rebuilt their temple for Yhwh, they promised to offer these three kinds of offerings (holocausts, vegetal and incense offerings) in the name of Bagohi. But when the two governors replied, they allowed the priests of Elephantine to offer “vegetal offerings and incense,” avoiding any mention of holocausts.¹² This may hint at a notion of centralization that regarded only animal sacrifices as the rituals that needed to be centralized.

When it comes to 1-2 Kings, these books regard as problematic animal sacrifices and incense (1 Kgs 13:2; 22:43; 2 Kgs 12:3; 14:4; 15:35; 16:4; 17:11; 23:5). Therefore, it may be that the redactors of Kings held a more demanding view of centralization than those of Deuteronomy.

⁸ Römer, “Cult Centralization.”

⁹ Greenspahn, “Deuteronomy.”

¹⁰ See Arnold, “Deuteronomy 12,” for a criticism of Greenspahn’s theory.

¹¹ See, for instance, Vermeylen, *Jérusalem*, 113.

¹² Granerød, “The Former.”

Be that as it may, a clear effort at coordinating Kings and Deuteronomy appears in Solomon's prayer of dedication of the temple, at least in some witnesses of v. 16. Here the MT reads:

Since the day that I brought my people Israel out of Egypt, I have not chosen a city from any of the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, that my name might be there; but I chose David to be over my people Israel.

While the MT does not mention Jerusalem, it does mention the fact that Yhwh did not choose a city where a temple could be dedicated to him, and the literary context (Solomon's temple dedication) strongly implies that Jerusalem is regarded as Yhwh's choice. A fuller version appears in the parallel of 2 Chr 6:5-6:

Since the day that I brought my people out of the land of Egypt, I have not chosen a city from any of the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, so that my name might be there, and I chose no one *as ruler over my people Israel; but I have chosen Jerusalem in order that my name may be there, and I have chosen David to be over my people Israel.*

Here Jerusalem is explicitly mentioned as the place chosen by Yhwh. Interestingly, while 4Q54, which is a Hebrew witness of the text of Kings, is fragmentary, it does attest the last part of the Chronicler's sentence, including the mention of Jerusalem as the chosen place: the words in italics in the quotation of 2 Chr 6:5-6 above are preserved in 4Q54. Part of these words, including the mention of the choice of Jerusalem, also appear in the Old Greek. It may be that the earliest state of Solomon's prayer did mention the fact that Yhwh had chosen Jerusalem and that the MT lost this mention through scribal accident, although the differences among the

witnesses suggest a complicated textual history.¹³ As we have seen, the idea that Yhwh chose Jerusalem is strongly implied by the literary context, so it is likely that this idea was explicitly stated.

The motif of the city chosen by Yhwh harks back to the formula “the place that Yhwh will choose/has chosen” in Deuteronomy (Deut 12:5,11,18, etc.). In the fictional setting of the book, the city is not named, and this allowed Samaritans to identify it as Gerizim (which fits the reading “has chosen”), and Judahites as Jerusalem (which corresponds to the reading “will choose”). But the books of Kings, which are not part of the Samaritan canon, make it clear that the place in question is Jerusalem. This creates a clear connection between Deuteronomy and Kings. An echo to that idea appears in a late addition in 2 Kgs 21:7 (the addition includes at least the words in italics below):¹⁴

The carved image of Asherah that he had made he set in the house *of which the LORD said to David and to his son Solomon, “In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever.”*

3. The Rationale Behind Cult Centralization

Whether the notion of cult centralization originated in Deuteronomy or in Kings, or stemmed from a shared milieu or tradition to which the redactors of these books belonged, the reason why the latter came to regard centralization as an imperative is still unclear. The only motive

¹³ See the **discussion in ch. 1 in this volume.**

¹⁴ See also v. 4.

given in the biblical books is Yhwh's choice, but why Yhwh wanted to choose in the first place is not explained. As a result, scholars can only put forward hypotheses.

Perhaps the most obvious possibility is that the clergy of Jerusalem wanted to control the cult all over the country. Alternatively, it may be that the king aimed at such a control,¹⁵ or perhaps some officials in the administration,¹⁶ although it seems clear that the highest degree of authority would be required to justify and impose such a drastic reform. The need for the king to reinforce the cohesion of the population after an influx of refugees from the northern kingdom when Samaria fell in the late eighth century BCE has also been considered a possible motivation.¹⁷ The fact that the kings who led reforms, according to Kings, are also kings who revolted against their suzerain, the Assyrian emperor, may suggest that centralization was part of a strategy on their part, to reinforce their control over the population they governed.

These first theories point to the role of possible players in Jerusalem. Another, complementary approach is based on a possible conceptual correlation with monolatry. The question is what precedes what. On the one hand, it may be that cult centralization fostered a monolatric trend: as Thomas Römer writes, "since Jerusalem was to become the only legitimate place of Yahwistic worship, Yhwh was transformed into the only god to worship (monolatry)." On that view, the Shema Israel in Deut 6:4 would have been "the motto of the so-called Josianic reform: there is only one Yhwh, and this is not the Yhwh of Samaria, of Teman and other cultic places, but the Yhwh of Jerusalem."¹⁸ But a connection the other way around is also conceivable: if

¹⁵ Vermeulen, *Jérusalem*, 116.

¹⁶ Römer, "Rise and Fall," 333, 337, points to the scribe Shaphan, who played an important role in Josiah's reform according to 2 Kgs 22

¹⁷ Finkelstein, "Jeroboam II's Temples," 263.

¹⁸ Römer, "Rise and Fall," 333.

some circles favored the exclusive worship of Yhwh, this may have led them to claim sole legitimacy for Yhwh's sanctuary in Jerusalem. A mutual influence between centralization and monolatry is also easily imaginable.

A last possibility is that centralization was a reality imposed "from the outside," due to the destruction of most other temples in Judah by the Assyrians in the late eighth century BCE, when Sennacherib invaded the country. That reality was theologically appropriated and rationalized, interpreted positively as a sign or confirmation that Yhwh ascribed Jerusalem a special status and had, in fact, chosen its temple as the place where to reside. This leads to the question of the historical roots of centralization, more precisely, to the vexing issue of the possible historicity of the centralization reforms attributed to Hezekiah and Josiah in Kings. This involves two kinds of evidence, literary and archaeological, which will now be explored successively.

4. The Literary Debate

Hezekiah's reform is actually based on two verses (2 Kgs 18:4, 22), which arguably provides a relatively weak basis to build a historical scenario. Indeed, both verses are regarded by some scholars as additions to the text.¹⁹ We will be content here to briefly examine the first and most important verse, 2 Kgs 18:4 (on which the other verse clearly depends):

He [= Hezekiah] removed the high places, broke down the pillars, and cut down the sacred pole. He broke in pieces the bronze serpent that Moses had made, for until those days the people of Israel had made offerings to it; it was called Nehushtan.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Na'aman, "Debated Historicity."

Two main reasons suggest to some that the entire verse was interpolated into the passage.²⁰ First, some phrases, such as “he broke down the pillars” or “he cut down the sacred pole,” might be due to the influence of the Pentateuch (see Exod 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3), or result from an imitation of Josiah’s reform (see 2 Kgs 23:14). The second half of the verse, involving a bronze serpent from the time of Moses is particularly regarded as suspicious. However, even if one assumes that these phrases are secondary, which is debated, it does not follow that the beginning of the verse is also an addition. The first words (“He removed the high places,” הוֹאֵה הַסִּיר אֶת־הַבָּמֹת) are precisely the ones that are really important for the notion that Hezekiah centralized the worship.

Yet one feature of this phrase is also thought problematic by some, and this is the second argument to consider here. According to a few scholars, this phrase interrupts the flows of the text due to the fronted pronoun (הוֹאֵה). But this is arguably a rhetorical effect foregrounding Hezekiah’s achievement by contrast to what the previous kings had done – or, to be more precise, not done. Indeed, the first claim of the verse (“He removed the high places”) has been prepared for by a series of six sentences of the type: “He did not remove the high places” (1 Kgs 15:14; 2 Kgs 12:4; 14:4; 15:4, 35; 16:4). Thus, 2 Kgs 18:4a is part of a literary strategy using the negative observation about a series of kings as a leitmotiv that culminates in the positive claim made about Hezekiah: at last, the king who would remove the high places came. This is the strongest argument of those who believe that the earliest edition of Kings climaxed in Hezekiah’s reign.²¹ Those who do not hold this view regard this reign as an intermediate climax preparing Josiah’s narrative. At any rate, the frontal pronoun in v. 4a is not surprising.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion, see Thomas, *Hezekiah*, 320-343.

²¹ Thus, for instance, Thomas, *Hezekiah*.

The same kind of construction and the same literary strategy occur in the eighth-century BCE royal inscription of Kilamuwa, which draws a contrast between a king's achievements and his predecessors' failures: it repeats that Kilamuwa's predecessors "did nothing" before saying: "but I (*W'NK*), Kilamuwa..."²²

In sum, there are good reasons to regard the very beginning of v. 4 as part of the earliest edition of Kings. At the same time, one may understand why such a verse, possibly loaded with additions, is sometimes believed to be secondary as a whole; this is why a debate persists.

Turning to Josiah, the amount of text in 2 Kings 22-23 concerning his reform is much more significant, so much so that many scholars regard this reform as an integral part of the literary logic of Kings. What is often doubted is the historicity of the finding of a book in the temple (which is what prompts the reform, according to the narrative in 2 Kgs 22). But this does not affect the likelihood that the earliest edition of Kings that contained a section on Josiah's reign also evoked his reform. In turn, it is generally considered that the core of 2 Kgs 22-23, or the source of this core, stems from Josiah's time, since it was evidently written as an apology for his reform.²³ More importantly, depending on how one reconstructs the compositional history of the two biblical chapters, a number of details of the reform are likely fictional. Nevertheless, the core of the text most likely included the centralization of the cult.²⁴ In fact, we find here a paradox: the centralization reform that is the most attested in the literary text of Kings is also the reform that is the least attested by archaeology: there is much more to say about possible archaeological traces of Hezekiah's cult centralization, mainly based on two verses of Kings. But this is to anticipate the archaeological debate, to which we now turn.

²² See Schade, "Fronted Pronouns," 120-121.

²³ See ch. 7 in this volume.

²⁴ See e.g. ch. 7 in this volume, or Pietsch, *Kultreform*.

5. The Archaeological Debate

Archaeology can contribute to the debate in two ways. First, excavations can prove that several temples were actively in use at the same time, indicating that the cult was not centralized for the duration of these temples' coexistence. In a way, this may substantiate the claim of redactors of Kings that the Israelites and Judahites worshipped in a number of places outside Jerusalem. In fact, because Kings names Jerusalem as the site where the cult was centralized, any archaeological evidence of the existence of temples outside of that city and during the monarchic period proves relevant. Second, *positive* evidence of centralization in archaeology concretely takes the form of traces of destruction, desecration, or decommission, of temples outside Jerusalem.

With regard to the first topic, excavations have unearthed a number of temples from the monarchic period, both in Israel and in Judah. Let us begin with the northern kingdom, and limit ourselves to the most assured findings:

- At **Tel Dan**, a religious precinct that included a huge altar and priestly rooms with cultic paraphernalia was unearthed. No remains of a temple building have been found yet. The excavator, Avraham Biran, dated the construction of that sacred area to the tenth century BCE,²⁵ thus drawing a connection with the notion that it was used at the time of

²⁵ Biran, *Biblical Dan*.

Jeroboam I (1 Kgs 12:29-30), but Eran Arie prefers a date in the eighth century BCE and ascribes its construction to Jeroboam II.²⁶

- A four-horned altar was found in 2013 at **Dothan** in a building dated to the ninth century BCE.²⁷
- Mention should also be made of two horned altars from **Shiloh** that may date from the Iron Age IIA and/or IIB.²⁸
- Other temples may have existed in **Megiddo**, **Taanach**, and **Tel Amal**, before being destroyed, perhaps by the Arameans in the second half of the ninth century BCE.²⁹
- Excavations at **Mount Gerizim** have shown that a temple existed there already in the fifth century BCE,³⁰ and Arie has recently pushed back its construction to ca. 650-550 BCE.³¹

Epigraphy may suggest the existence of additional cultic places. On inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a site in the Northern Negev frequented by Israelites in the early eighth century BCE, the syntagms "Yhwh of Teman" and "Yhwh of Samaria" likely presuppose

²⁶ Arie, "Reconstructing." Finkelstein, "Jeroboam II's Temples," 259, considers a date in the late ninth century as a possibility.

²⁷ Gibson, Kennedy, and Kramer, "A Note."

²⁸ Finkelstein, "Jeroboam II's Temples," 255.

²⁹ Na'aman, "Abandonment," 595-597.

³⁰ Magen, Misgav and Tsfania, *Excavations*, vol. 1; Magen, *Excavations*, vol. 2. See also Pummer, "Was There."

³¹ Arie, "Revisiting."

local temples in the regions of Teman and Samaria.³² A Neo-Assyrian inscription, the Nimrud prism, mentions the deportation of gods from the city of Samaria, which suggests that there was at least a temple there in the second half of the eighth century.³³

Let us now turn to the southern kingdom:

- The best known temple discovered by archaeologists is that of **Tel Arad**, a fortress to the south-east of the Dead Sea. In addition to a stone altar for sacrifices, the temple included a cella (“holy of holies”) containing two standing stones – although these stones were not used at the same time. One of these stones was originally painted, as remains of pigment shows.³⁴ The dating of the strata is disputed, but Ze’ev Herzog argues that the temple was in use in the eighth century BCE (more on this below).
- At **Tel Beersheba**, the excavators found stones that originally belonged to a sacrificial altar from the eighth century BCE, in secondary use in a wall.³⁵
- According to Saar Ganor and Igor Kreimerman, the six-chambered gate at **Lachish** (in the Shephelah) included, in the late eighth century BCE, a cultic room containing a double horned-altar.³⁶ However, David Ussishkin contests this interpretation and

³² Na’aman (“In Search”) believes that the inscription refers to the temple in Bethel;

Finkelstein (“Jeroboam II’s Temples,” 252) think the temple was located in the town of Samaria. Although Mount Nebo lies outside the territory of Israel (and Judah), it is worth noting that the Mesha stele mentions “utensils of Yhwh” there, which implies that a sanctuary dedicated to this god existed at that place. See Aḥituv, *Echoes*, 392-394, 410.

³³ Finkelstein, “Jeroboam II’s Temples,” 252.

³⁴ Herzog, “Fortress” 63.

³⁵ Herzog, “Perspectives.”

³⁶ Ganor and Kreimerman, “Gate Shrine.”

concludes that no altar was found there.³⁷ The possibility of another cultic room on the other side of the gate has also been discussed.³⁸

- Certainly the most exciting finding in recent years is the temple at **Tel Moza**, situated seven kilometers from Jerusalem as the crow flies. Overall, the building has the same architectural outline as Solomon's temple as described in Kings.³⁹ An altar and religious figurines have been found there. The temple was built in the late tenth or early ninth century, and was thus contemporary to that of Jerusalem.⁴⁰

In sum, archaeological discoveries have proved the existence of a multiplicity of temples, both in Israel and in Judah. In the southern kingdom, it is clear that the cult was not centralized at Jerusalem until the eighth century, if ever. The evidence reviewed so far stems from archaeology only; the biblical text mentions the existence of other temples in a variety of places,⁴¹ including sanctuaries in Jerusalem that are distinct from the temple.⁴²

Do we have material evidence of the destruction, or desecration, or decommission, of temples in Judah, where the books of Kings claim that centralization reforms occurred in the late eighth (under Hezekiah) and late seventh (under Josiah) centuries? In the former case, the answer depends on the interpretation of archaeological data from Arad, Beersheba, Lachish,

³⁷ Ussishkin, "Was a 'Gate Shrine' Built."

³⁸ Liraz, "A Second Cult Room."

³⁹ Shapira, "The Moza Temple."

⁴⁰ Kisilevitz, "Judahite Temple"; Kisilevitz and O. Lipschits, "Tel Moza."

⁴¹ For an inventory, see Richelle, "Centralisation." See also, for the northern kingdom, Finkelstein, "Jeroboam II's Temples," 252-259.

⁴² Römer, "Cultes." See also Guillaume and Hellander, "The House."

and perhaps Moza.⁴³ Both the temple of Arad and that of Moza were covered in a thick layer of earth; it happened in the late eighth century in the former case, and, in the latter case, at some point, impossible to specify, in the same century. For many scholars, the aim of burying a sanctuary was to decommission it.⁴⁴ Some believe, however, that Arad's temple was buried in order to protect it when Sennacherib was invading the country.⁴⁵ This seems far from self-evident, however, and it is worth noting that there was no temple built at the same place in the next stratum. In the case of Moza, an additional fact is that the cultic paraphernalia were intentionally broken before being collected, deposited and buried. Shua Kisilevitz and Oded Lipschits interpret this as "as part of a religious ritual during which cultic paraphernalia were decommissioned to make room for new artifacts—an act of reverence rather than signifying a break in religious traditions."⁴⁶ However, it could be argued that the destruction of cultic figurines is more evocative of a violent reform. With regard to the altar of Beersheba, it is also tempting to regard its dismantling as a sign of a reform. Finally, the case of Lachish is difficult: Ganor and Kreimerman argue that the horns of the altar found in a room of the gate were deliberately broken, and that a toilet seat was put there, which, obviously, would be a way of desecrating the place (see 2 Kgs 10:27-28).⁴⁷ As we have seen, however, Ussishkin doubts the identification of the altar. Yet he seems more at pains when it comes to

⁴³ For a detailed discussion of each of these cases, see Moulis, "Hezekiah's Cultic Reforms."

⁴⁴ See, in the case of Arad, Herzog, "Perspectives," and "Social," 1478.

⁴⁵ Fried, "High Places," 447.

⁴⁶ Kisilevitz and Lipschits, "Tel Moza," 303.

⁴⁷ See also Garfinkel, "Cultic Reform."

demonstrating that the toilet seat was not actually used in the way noted by Ganor and Kreimerman.⁴⁸

All in all, it is certainly arguable that plausible evidence for Hezekiah's cultic reform exists, although interrogations in dating and interpretation remain, and alternative scenarios are also defended. Two additional aspects can be mentioned. First, if the reform happened, it may be that different methods were used in different sites to disrupt the use of a sanctuary. While this has been used as an argument against making a connection with Hezekiah's reform,⁴⁹ it is quite reasonable to assume that enforcers of the reform could proceed locally in different ways to reach the same results. Second, the different possible traces of a reform do not necessarily date from the same year, and we may have to reckon with a process rather than a sudden event.⁵⁰

That said, archaeological data, epigraphical texts and some iconography also document a major event (or series of events) that occurred in 701 BCE: the invasion of Judah by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, marked by the destruction of a number of sites in the countryside and the conquest of Lachish (whereas Jerusalem was not taken). Hence yet another scenario: a *de facto* centralization, consisting in the destruction of multiple cultic places by the enemy.⁵¹ Seeing that Jerusalem and its temple had been spared (because Hezekiah had paid Sennacherib), religious leaders in the capital may have concluded that Yhwh had protected it; the historical event was thus regarded as a sign or a confirmation that Yhwh had chosen Jerusalem as his preferred place of worship, or even as the only to be legitimate in his eyes. It

⁴⁸ Uehlinger, "Was There," 165-167.

⁴⁹ Edelman, "Alleged Cultic Centralization," 421.

⁵⁰ Moulis, "Hezekiah's Cultic Reforms," 176.

⁵¹ Edelman, "Alleged Centralization," 400, 425.

is even imaginable that Hezekiah finished what Sennacherib had begun, by closing the temples that remained intact, or in use, in the countryside.

What about Josiah's reform? The possible archaeological evidence is very limited here. It is not based on the destruction, desecration or decommission of temples. It consists merely in the disappearance of astral motifs on seals between the seventh and the sixth century BCE. Because such iconographic motifs are interpreted in connection with deities, this may be a consequence of Josiah's drastic actions against the worship of deities other than Yhwh.⁵² This argument is thus based on another aspect of Josiah's reform according to the biblical text than the elimination of illegitimate cultic places. It seems safe to say that the main reason why many scholars believe that a historical kernel underlies the narrative of Josiah's reform is not archaeological but literary. They often find it hard to believe that the robust tradition about that reform in 2 Kgs 22-23 is based on nothing at all,⁵³ especially if it served propagandistic purposes under Josiah, since Judahites could easily have noticed it if it was based on no reality at all.

6. Conclusion

Because both the biblical and the archaeological evidence is partly equivocal and subject to interpretation, it is no wonder that historians reach different conclusions as to the historicity of Hezekiah's and Josiah's reforms, from those who regard both as probably ahistorical⁵⁴ to those

⁵² Uehlinger, "Was There."

⁵³ Römer, "Rise and Fall," 330.

⁵⁴ Pakkala, "Why."

who admit that only one of these reforms occurred, to those who believe that both happened. Intermediate scenarios are also conceivable. Thus, it is possible that a king attempted to suppress the worship outside Jerusalem but succeeded only partially, with some cultic places remaining in place due to local resistance. It is important in this regard to remember that archaeology is rarely able to detect cultic activities that may have taken place in the open air without any building. In addition, we have seen that a *de facto* centralization could explain part or all of the fall into disuse of temples in the countryside at the very end of the eighth century. Moreover, other “reforms” not documented in literary sources may have occurred. Nadav Na’aman argues that three temples (in Megiddo, Tanaach, and Tel Amal) were destroyed by the Arameans in the second half of the ninth century BCE, and that Jeroboam II chose not to rebuilt them. This abandonment amounts to a sort of reform, Na’aman argues.⁵⁵

What is sure in the end is that centralization became a *literary fact* and a *major theme* in biblical literature and especially in Kings. In the end it is worth taking a step back to look at the big picture. Compared to the number of temples in earlier periods, Israel and Judah had a relatively limited number of temples during the monarchic period.⁵⁶ The number of cultic sites in the Second Temple period seems to continue to shrink until the cult in Judea was effectively centralized in Jerusalem at the end of the first millenium BCE (there was another Jewish temple in Egypt, that of Leontopolis). Overall, then, a trend toward reduction of the number of temples seems observable throughout the first millennium BCE.

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⁵⁵ Na’aman, “Abandonment,” 595-597.

⁵⁶ Faust, “Archaeology,” and, more recently, “Israelite Temples.”

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