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The Binding of Isaac, a Sacred Legend for the Jerusalem Temple

The *Akedah*(binding of Isaac) takes place on a mountain in the obscure land of Moriah. When a Judahite scribe later revised the story to have the angel of YHWH stop Abraham from killing his son, he connected Moriah with the Jerusalem Temple, thereby giving it a new *hieros logos*—a sacred founding legend, to compete with the northern worship site Beth-El.

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Binding of Isaac, from Gershonides’ Commentary on the Pentateuch, MS 14759,  f. 1v, 1429. British Library

Stories of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Historical Context

One of the most famous, and disturbing, stories in the Bible is the binding of Isaac, in which Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice his son, and is only stopped from doing so at the last moment by an angel (Gen 22). Commentators have struggled with this story on theological and ethical grounds, but an equally important, if less explored, angle is historical: Why was this story written, and what political or social purpose does it serve?

Since the mid-1970s, it is been generally accepted among critical scholars that the stories of the patriarchs in Genesis cannot be understood as historical accounts.[1] Whether or not among Israel’s ancestors were men with the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or women named Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel, the biblical stories are a part of Israel’s mnemohistory (collective memory), not its history.

Thus, stories set in this period are often best understood through the prism of what they would mean for the people who composed the story and told it. In this case, I suggest the importance of the story, at least in its final form, lies in how it functions as a *hieros logos* or “sacred legend” explaining the reason behind the founding of a holy place.

The Land of Moriah

The story begins with God’s command to Abraham to take Isaac to the land of Moriah:

בראשית כב:ב וַיֹּאמֶר קַח נָא אֶת בִּנְךָ אֶת יְחִידְךָ אֲשֶׁר אָהַבְתָּ אֶת יִצְחָק וְלֶךְ לְךָ אֶל אֶרֶץ הַמֹּרִיָּה וְהַעֲלֵהוּ שָׁם לְעֹלָה עַל אַחַד הֶהָרִים אֲשֶׁר אֹמַר אֵלֶיךָ.

Gen 22:2 And He said, “Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you.” (NJPS)

Moriah is mentioned nowhere else in the Torah, and even here, we are not told where it is or even in what direction Abraham walks.[2] All we know is that is hilly, and that it took a three-day walk from Beersheba[3] to get there:

בראשית כב:ד בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַיִּשָּׂא אַבְרָהָם אֶת עֵינָיו וַיַּרְא אֶת הַמָּקוֹם מֵרָחֹק.

Gen 22:4 On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.

Later in the story, after the angel of YHWH tells Abraham to spare Isaac, the story adds an important parenthetical:

בראשית כב:יד וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא יְ־הוָה יִרְאֶה אֲשֶׁר יֵאָמֵר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר יְ־הוָה יֵרָאֶה.

Gen 22:14 Abraham called the name of that place YHWH Sees, as the saying is today, “On YHWH’s mountain (he/it) is seen.”[4]

This parenthetical shows us that the place is identified with an Israelite worship site. The verse gives a new name for the mountain “YHWH Sees,” and even references a popular saying about what worshipers experience on the mountain. Thus, while the story never says the name of the mountain, the reader is assumed to know based on these hints.

A Later Verse?

Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167) lists this verse as part of “the secret of the twelve,” his code for verses that were written after the time of Moses.[5] The reason ibn Ezra thinks this is an interpolation from a later scribe is spelled out in the *Tzafnat Paʿanech* (*ad loc*), a supercommentary on ibn Ezra, written by the 14th century scholar, Joseph Bonfils:

...שאמר "אשר יאמר היום" שמשמע כאלו אמר: זה הוא מה שאומרים עתה בדורנו כשעולים לרגל, "בהר י”י יראה." כלומר, הוא עולה לעשות המועד בירושלם ולהשתחוות בהר י”י. ולא יתכן שיאמרו כן בימי משה. ולפי זה לא כתב משה זה הפסוק רק כתבוהו הנביאים האחרונים...

…It says here “whence the present saying,” the meaning of which is “this is what people say nowadays in our generation when they go up for the festival: ‘on the LORD’s Mountain (he/it) is seen.’” In other words, he is going up to celebrate the festival in Jerusalem and to do obeisance on the Mount of God. It is impossible that people would have said this in the time of Moses. Therefore, Moses could not have written this verse. Instead the later prophets wrote it…[6]

This is a non-issue for critical scholars, who generally assume the Torah was written well after the time of Moses; nevertheless, they understand this verse to be a later addition into the chapter for a different reason.

Southern Redaction of a Northern Story

Source-critical scholars have long noted that the binding of Isaac story has an early and later layer. In the early story, which stems from the Northern/Israelite E (Elohistic) text and uses the divine name Elohim, Abraham sacrifices his son, as commanded. In the revised story, however, which comes from the Southern/Judahite J (Yahwistic) school and uses the name YHWH, Abraham is stopped from killing his son by an angel and offers a ram in his son’s place. The revision is apparent not only from the change in divine names, but also from the double calling out of the angel (vv. 11 and 15), which functions as a resumptive repetition,[7] and most importantly, from the fact that Isaac is not mentioned as returning with Abraham in verse 19.[8]

The story was likely changed because of the redactor’s objection to human sacrifice[9] and to connect Abraham with Jacob through Isaac. Whatever the reason, the parenthetical reference to the future place of worship, which uses the name YHWH and refers to the appearance of YHWH’s angel, was added by the redactor as well.[10] To understand why, we need to look at the political and religious competition between Israel and Judah in the monarchic period.

Powerful Israel and Feeble Judah

At the end of the tenth century B.C.E., the people the Bible calls ancient Israelites were divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north, with Tirzah and then Samaria as its capital, and Judah in the south, with Jerusalem as its capital. The two kingdoms were not equal by any means.[11] The territory of the northern kingdom was larger, much more fertile, and economically stronger than its southern counterpart.[12]

Unsurprisingly, the military power of the northern kingdom of Israel was much greater than that of the Kingdom of Judah, as is clear from both extrabiblical and biblical sources.[13] While the Bible sometimes describes the kingdoms as allies, going to war together against common enemies, the king of Judah appears to be at most a junior partner in these scenarios, possibly even a vassal of Israel.

The relative position of the two kingdoms is expressed well in a narrative in which King Amaziah of Judah wishes to go to war against King Jehoash of Israel, לְכָה נִתְרָאֶה פָנִים “come, let us confront each other” (2 Kgs 14:8). The latter responds contemptuously:

מלכים ב יד:ט ...הַחוֹחַ אֲשֶׁר בַּלְּבָנוֹן שָׁלַח אֶל הָאֶרֶז אֲשֶׁר בַּלְּבָנוֹן לֵאמֹר תְּנָה אֶת בִּתְּךָ לִבְנִי לְאִשָּׁה וַתַּעֲבֹר חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה אֲשֶׁר בַּלְּבָנוֹן וַתִּרְמֹס אֶת הַחוֹחַ. יד:י הַכֵּה הִכִּיתָ אֶת אֱדוֹם וּנְשָׂאֲךָ לִבֶּךָ הִכָּבֵד וְשֵׁב בְּבֵיתֶךָ וְלָמָּה תִתְגָּרֶה בְּרָעָה וְנָפַלְתָּה אַתָּה וִיהוּדָה עִמָּךְ.

2 Kgs 14:9 …The thistle in Lebanon sent this message to the cedar in Lebanon, “Give your daughter to my son in marriage.” But a wild beast in Lebanon went by and trampled down the thistle. 14:10 Because you have defeated Edom, you have become arrogant. Stay home and enjoy your glory, rather than provoke disaster and fall, dragging Judah down with you.

Naturally, when Amaziah ignores the warning, he is defeated in battle, and booty from the Jerusalem Temple and palace is taken back to Samaria. Two other biblical accounts describe Israel attacking Judah, with Judah feeling sufficiently in danger such that it must turn to a third party to intervene.[14] One case leads to the conquest of most of Israel by Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria. Ten years later, in 722 B.C.E., Samaria was conquered by Sargon II, and the northern kingdom ceased to exist, while the Kingdom of Judah survived by becoming an Assyrian vassal and paying tribute.[15]

Many Israelites escaped death and exile by running to Jerusalem and becoming part of Judah, bringing their texts and traditions with them. This is why we find northern documents such as the Pentateuch E text, the book of Hosea, the stories of the Judges, and the Elijah and Elisha cycles in the Judean corpus known now as the Hebrew Bible.

The inclusion of these texts shows that Northern Israelite traditions were respected by Judahite scribes. Whether this is because of a (real or perceived) shared past, or respect for a more powerful kingdom that had dominated them for so long is unclear. Whatever the reason, Judahite scribes also felt competitive with northern traditions, and responded polemically to certain Israelite claims. We see this kind of polemic with sacred worship sites.

Israelite Religious Centers

The historical reason for why any given holy site was founded is often lost to posterity. Even so, these sites often receive mythic explanations of their significance. For example, the origins of the Esagila,[16] the Marduk Temple in Babylon, is explained in Enuma Elish (“When on high”),[17] which tells how Babylon’s chief deity Marduk defeats chaos in the form of primordial monsters, and creates the world and humanity. As a consequence, the Anunnaki (deities, children of the sky-god An) offer to build him a shrine (tablet 6):

His face lit up greatly, like daylight. “Create Babylon, whose construction you requested! Let its mud bricks be moulded, and build high the shrine!” The Anunnaki began shovelling. For a whole year they made bricks for it. When the second year arrived, they had raised the top of Esagila in front of the Apsu; they had built a high ziggurat for the Apsu…[18]

Thus, the *hieros logos* for why Esagila is holy is because the spot was chosen by Marduk, and the structure built by the gods themselves.

Many of the Israelite holy sites also have a *hieros logos* connected to an Israelite ancestor or early hero.[19] Some examples include:

**Ebal—**Joshuais said to have established an altar on Mount Ebal, just outside Shechem (Josh 8:30–35).[20]

**Shechem—**The Temple in Shechem is where Joshua makes a covenant with the Israelites, after which he sets up a pillar and places it underneath a tree there (Josh 24:21–26).

**Gilgal—**After crossing with the Israelites into the land, Joshua circumcises them in Gilgal (Josh 5:9).[21]

**Nebo—**The Mesha Stele (lns 14–18) states that a YHWH Temple stood in the town of Nebo, the same place where, according to Deuteronomy (32:49, 34:1), Moses is buried.[22]

**Penuel/Mahanaim—**The holiness of the twin sites of Penuel and Mahanaim is explained by Jacob’s encounter with a divine encampment and his wrestling with an angel (Gen 32).[23]

What we see here is a host of holy sites, most of which are associated with important figures from Israel’s past (Jacob, Moses, and Joshua).

Israel’s Royal Holy Sites: Dan and Beth-El

In addition to these—and many other—holy sites, the Bible states that Israel had two official, royal holy sites on its northern and southern borders, Dan and Beth-El (1 Kgs 12:29, 32­–33; Amos 7:13). Establishing holy sites on the borders of a country was customary in the ancient Near East. For instance, temples to the moon-god were built at Ur in the south and Haran in the north of the Babylonian Empire.[24] These two sites delineated the extent of the local gods and goddesses’ power, demonstrating that they reign from such-and-such a point inside this kingdom.[25]

The northern royal holy sites of Dan and Beth-El would have been problematic to Judahite scribes. Thus, they crafted a polemical account of their founding by Israel’s first king, Jeroboam, describing their founding as a result of Jerusalem envy, and describing their golden calves as improper attempts to represent God:

מלכים א יב:כח וַיִּוָּעַץ הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ שְׁנֵי עֶגְלֵי זָהָב וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם רַב לָכֶם מֵעֲלוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַ‍ִם הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר הֶעֱלוּךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם. יב:כט וַיָּשֶׂם אֶת הָאֶחָד בְּבֵית אֵל וְאֶת הָאֶחָד נָתַן בְּדָן. יב:ל וַיְהִי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה לְחַטָּאת וַיֵּלְכוּ הָעָם לִפְנֵי הָאֶחָד עַד דָּן.

1 Kgs 12:28 So, the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold. He said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Here are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” 12:29He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. 12:30And this thing became a sin, for the people went to worship before the one at Bethel and before the other as far as Dan.”[26]

This is not the only swipe the Bible takes at these sites.

Mock *Hieros Logos* of Dan

The Bible contains a mock *hieros logos* for the sanctuary at Dan. Judges 17–18 describes how Micah, a thieving son of a wealthy lady, establishes a worship site, complete with an idol, and hires a Levite to serve as priest. Soon after, Danite scouts, who wish to move the tribe northward, bribe this priest to leave Micah, steal his idol, and come with them to their new settlement in the north:

שופטים יח:ל וַיָּקִימוּ לָהֶם בְּנֵי דָן אֶת הַפָּסֶל וִיהוֹנָתָן בֶּן גֵּרְשֹׁם בֶּן מְנַשֶּׁה הוּא וּבָנָיו הָיוּ כֹהֲנִים לְשֵׁבֶט הַדָּנִי עַד יוֹם גְּלוֹת הָאָרֶץ. יח:לא וַיָּשִׂימוּ לָהֶם אֶת פֶּסֶל מִיכָה אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה כָּל יְמֵי הֱיוֹת בֵּית הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשִׁלֹה.

Judg 18:30 Then the Danites set up the idol for themselves. Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the time the land went into captivity. 18:31So they maintained as their own Micah’s idol that he had made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.

According to this, the worship site at Dan was originally founded by a rogue, idol-worshipping priest to serve scoundrels.[27]

The *Hieros Logos* of Beth-El

Most significant for our purposes, Genesis contains a detailed and impressive *hieros logos* for Beth-El (Gen 28:10–22; 35:1–7), the royal holy site closest to Israel’s border with Judah.[28] According to this story, the patriarch Jacob sees the ladder (or stairway)[29] to heaven in this spot during a prophetic dream:

בראשית כח:יז וַיִּירָא וַיֹּאמַר מַה נּוֹרָא הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה אֵין זֶה כִּי אִם בֵּית אֱלֹהִים וְזֶה שַׁעַר הַשָּׁמָיִם.

Gen 28:17 And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” (NRSV)

The claim that a given spot is the gate of heaven is an important ancient Near Eastern trope. Babylon, for instance, means “Gate of God” (*Bab-ilu*) in Akkadian.

As a result of this vision, Jacob consecrates this spot as a holy site, setting up a pillar and an altar.[30]

The south did not deny the holiness or antiquity of this site’s tradition; J even has its own version of the story.[31] Nevertheless, the association of Beth-El with a revelation to the patriarch Jacob likely posed a challenge to the Judahite scribes and their belief that Jerusalem was even holier. It is against this background that we should try to understand the redacted version of the *Akedah* story.

David Stops the Plague: Jerusalem’s *Hieros Logos*

The Jerusalem Temple’s *hieros logos* appears in 2 Samuel 24.[32] In this story, King David commands his general Joab to conduct a census of the people, and as a result, YHWH becomes angry with David and punishes the Israelites with a deadly plague. When David sees the Angel of Death approach Jerusalem, he begs God for forgiveness, saying that it isn’t the people’s fault.

שמואל ב כד:יח וַיָּבֹא גָד אֶל דָּוִד בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ עֲלֵה הָקֵם לַי־הוָה מִזְבֵּחַ בְּגֹרֶן (ארניה) [אֲרַוְנָה] הַיְבֻסִי.

2 Sam 24:18 That day Gad came to David and said to him, “Go up and erect an altar to YHWH on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”

David follows Gad’s command, runs to the spot, and purchases it from Araunah for fifty shekels silver, after which:

שמואל ב כד:כה וַיִּבֶן שָׁם דָּוִד מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה וַיַּעַל עֹלוֹת וּשְׁלָמִים וַיֵּעָתֵר יְ־הוָה לָאָרֶץ וַתֵּעָצַר הַמַּגֵּפָה מֵעַל יִשְׂרָאֵל.

2 Sam 24:25 David built there an altar to YHWH, and offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being. So YHWH answered his supplication for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel.

The *hieros logos* thus connects the Temple’s founding to David, and includes a miraculous event and the sighting of an angel.[33] Nevertheless, the story lacks the antiquity that is bestowed by a patriarch. Even worse, it connects *only* to the founding monarch of the Judahite dynasty, as opposed to a more consensus figure from Israel’s collective past.

Repurposing the Akedah as Jerusalem’s *Hieros Logos*

Binding of Isaac, MS 14759

To solve this problem, the Judahite editor of the *Akedah* story took the moving and dramatic Elohistic account of Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, and revised it to include, among other things, a saying about the mountain of YHWH that the audience would connect with the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, the revised version of the story implies that the event—which was no longer an actual sacrifice but a tale about the faith of Abraham and the saving of Isaac—took place at the future site of the Jerusalem Temple. Such a narrative was meant to compete with Jacob’s epiphany at Beth-El.

Abraham was the favorite patriarch of the south,[34] and J has Abraham build altars and/or call on YHWH in the northern holy sites of Shechem (Gen 12:7) and Beth-El (Gen 12:8) as well as the southern holy sites in Hebron (Gen 13:18) and Beersheba (Gen 21:33), thus attributing their founding to him.[35]

This is also the strategy being deployed by the editor of the *Akedah* story, according to whom the otherwise unidentified mountain in the land of Moriah becomes Mount Zion. This connection is made explicitly in the Second Temple period book of Chronicles:

דברי הימים ב ג:א וַיָּחֶל שְׁלֹמֹה לִבְנוֹת אֶת בֵּית יְ־הוָה בִּירוּשָׁלַ‍ִם בְּהַר הַמּוֹרִיָּה אֲשֶׁר נִרְאָה לְדָוִיד אָבִיהוּ אֲשֶׁר הֵכִין בִּמְקוֹם דָּוִיד בְּגֹרֶן אָרְנָן הַיְבוּסִי.

2 Chr 3:1 Solomon began to build the house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the Lord had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had designated, on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

Here the story of David and the threshing floor is connected to the toponym Mount Moriah,[36] thus recalling both sacred myths in his account of the building of the Jerusalem Temple. By this time, the connection between the binding of Isaac and the Jerusalem Temple was firmly established in Judean collective memory, and the sacred spot of Mount Zion was given a very ancient and powerful sacred legend as its foundation myth.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-binding-of-isaac-a-sacred-legend-for-the-jerusalem-temple)

1. Especially important in changing the paradigm were: Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives,* BZAW 133 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).
2. Samaritan tradition identifies this with the area near Shechem based on the similarity to Elon Moreh in that vicinity. See discussion of this and other identifications in, TABS Editors, [“The Mysterious Land of Moriah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-mysterious-land-of-moriah) *TheTorah* (2014); Isaac Kalimi, *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy: Studies in Scriptures in the Shadow of Internal and External Controversies*, Jewish and Christian Heritage 2 (Assen, Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2002), 9–58.
3. Abraham was in Beersheba immediately before the story (Gen 21:32) and returns there afterwards (Gen 22:19).
4. The verse is very difficult to translate, especially the final clause. The translation above is that of Everett Fox, with slight adjustments. See Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, The Schocken Bible 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 95.
5. For more on this, see Zev Farber, [“Editorial Comments in the Opening Chapters of Deuteronomy,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/editorial-comments-in-the-opening-chapters-of-deuteronomy) *TheTorah* (2013); *idem*, [“The Significance of Ibn Ezra’s Position that Verses Were Added to the Torah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-significance-of-ibn-ezras-position-that-verses-were-added-to-the-torah) *TheTorah* (2014).
6. For a full quote of ibn Ezra and Bonfils’ discussions of all these verses, see TABS Editors, [“Seven Torah Passages of Non-Mosaic Origin According to Ibn Ezra and R. Joseph Bonfils,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/seven-torah-passages-of-non-mosaic-origin-according-to-ibn-ezra-and-r-joseph-bonfils) *TheTorah* (2014).
7. For more on this phenomenon, see Zev Farber, [“Resumptive Repetition (Wiederaufnahme),”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-resumptive-repetition-wiederaufnahme) *TheTorah* (2013).
8. See discussion in Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), 65 [n. \*]; Tzemah Yoreh, [“The Sacrifice of Isaac in Context: Recovering a Lost Ending of the Akedah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-sacrifice-of-isaac-in-context-recovering-a-lost-ending-of-the-akedah) *TheTorah* (2014). Whether the story was redacted by the scribe who combined J and E, knowns as RJE(thus Friedman), or by the Yahwist himself (thus Yoreh), is immaterial for our purposes.
9. Child sacrifice is a controversial topic in the Bible. See discussion in, Eve Levavi Feinstein, [“Giving Your Firstborn Son to God,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/giving-your-firstborn-son-to-god) *TheTorah* (2016); Samuel Z. Glaser, [“Biblical and Greek Ambivalence Towards Child Sacrifice,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/biblical-and-greek-ambivalence-towards-child-sacrifice) *TheTorah* (2016).
10. Yoreh sees much of vv. 16­–18 as redactional as well. While Friedman sees these verses as original, he accepts that verse 16a, which is a resumptive repetition of v. 11, has also been adjusted, to include the words נְאֻם יְ־הוָה, “the word of YHWH,” which would not appear in an E story in Genesis.
11. Editor’s note: For how these political differences affect the family narrative of Genesis, see Marvin A. Sweeney, [“Israel’s History as a Family Narrative,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/israels-history-as-a-family-narrative) *TheTorah* (2015).
12. The Jezreel valley, the bread basket of the country, was located in the midst of the Kingdom of Israel, the fertile hills of Menashe and Ephraim were ideal for olive plantations, while the warmer Jordan valley with its abundance of water was ideal for palm trees and dates. The Gilead, similar in geography and food production to Galilee, yielded grapes and grain. The southern kingdom was poorer; about half of the kingdom was covered with desert. The desert extended east of Jerusalem down to the Dead Sea and south of Beer Sheba. The only fertile land was the Low Land (*Shefelah*) and the fertile valleys of the Ayalon and the Yarkon.
13. The extra-biblical sources are:
	* **Kurkh Monolith**—King Shalmaneser III of Assyria’s record of the battle of Qarqar (853 B.C.E.), which describes Ahab, king of Israel, as one of the leaders of the enemy coalition, who came with 2000 chariots and 10,000 foot soldiers.
	* **Mesha Stele**—Dating to around 850 B.C.E., King Mesha’s Moabite inscription describes how Moab reconquered territory in the northern Transjordanian tableland (*mishor*)*.* As background to his triumph against “the son of Omri,” Mesha describes how Israel’s King Omri had previously conquered all this land in the time of Mesha’s father.

Biblical sources, though not generally positive about the north, note a number of its military exploits:

* + **War with Aram**—1 Kings 22 describes how Ahab takes King Jehoshaphat of Judah with him to war against Aram. In this battle, Ahab is killed.
	+ **War with Moab**—2 Kings 3, 4-27, relates a military campaign led by Ahab’s son, Jehoram, who brings Jehoshaphat and the king of Edom to fight against Mesha, king of Moab.
1. Basha attacks Asa, who turns to Ben-Hadad of Damascus for help in 1 Kings 15:17-21; Pekah of Israel, together with King Rezin of Aram, attacks Judah, and its king, Ahaz, turns to Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria for help in 2 Kings 16:5–9. Isaiah adds an important detail to this plot:

ישעיה ז:ה יַעַן כִּי יָעַץ עָלֶיךָ אֲרָם רָעָה אֶפְרַיִם וּבֶן רְמַלְיָהוּ לֵאמֹר. ז:ו נַעֲלֶה בִיהוּדָה וּנְקִיצֶנָּה וְנַבְקִעֶנָּה אֵלֵינוּ וְנַמְלִיךְ מֶלֶךְ בְּתוֹכָהּ אֵת בֶּן טָבְאַל.

Isa 7:5 Because Aram—with Ephraim and the son of Remaliah—has plotted evil against you, saying, 7:6 Let us go up against Judah and cut off Jerusalem and conquer it for ourselves and make the son of Tabe’el king in it. (NRSV)

1. The southern kingdom of Judah, always the weaker and more vulnerable kingdom, survived the turmoil and remained the only player for the next 136 years.
2. The name is Sumerian and means “house with high top.” This is likely the structure envisioned in Genesis 11’s Tower of Babel story, a structure so tall that its head is supposed to touch the sky.
3. This is known as the Babylonian creation story and was performed during the new year Akitu festival. For more on this festival and the performance, see Uri Gabbay, [“Babylonian Rosh Hashanah,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/babylonian-rosh-hashanah-battle-creation-enthronement-and-justice) *TheTorah* (2014).
4. Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, revised edition, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000 [orig. 1989]), 262.
5. Not all *hieroi logoi* make recourse to a famous person. For example, the Temple in Kiryat-yearim, currently being excavated by the Tel Aviv school, has a miracle story instead: When the Philistines return the ark, it first comes to Beth-shemesh, but the locals treat it with disrespect, and many die. The people of nearby Kiryat-yearim then take the ark, appoint a local boy named Elazar as the priest, and the area prospers (1 Sam 6:11–7:2). Other holy sites in Israel go unmentioned in the Bible. For example, a cultic center from the time of the Kingdom of Israel was discovered on top of a hill in Samaria. It contained a circle of large stones, and a standing stone on the east side. Scholars speculate that in the center stood a sacred tree. Among the significant discoveries was a bronze statue, 18 cm long, of a bull. The *hieros logos* of this site has been lost.
6. The site envisioned by this passage is likely El-Burnat. See discussion in Zvi Koenigsberg, [“Joshua’s Altar on Mount Ebal: Israel’s Holy Site Before Shiloh,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/joshuas-altar-on-mount-ebal-israels-holy-site-before-shiloh) *TheTorah* (2018).
7. This may be a reference to the northern worship site mentioned a number of times in the prophets (Hos 4:15, 12:12; Amos 4:4, 5:5), or perhaps the Gilgal near Jericho (Josh 5:10), which also appears on the Madaba Mosaic map. There are other Gilgals as well. Editor’s note: For a discussion of the story in Joshua, see David Frankel, [“Joshua Circumcises Israel in Response to Egypt's Scorn,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/joshua-circumcises-israel-in-response-to-egypts-scorn) *TheTorah* (2018). For a discussion of the meaning of Gilgal as a toponym, see Zvi Koenigsberg, [“Gilgal: YHWH’s Footprints in the Land of Israel,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/gilgal-yhwhs-footprints-in-the-land-of-israel) *TheTorah* (2020).
8. While Deuteronomy also claims that no one knows where his grave is (Deut 34:6), this is likely a polemical attempt to undermine what was likely the *hieros logos* for this site. Editor’s note: For more discussion on this, see David Ben-Gad HaCohen, [“The Unknown Yet Known Place of Moses’ Burial,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-unknown-yet-known-place-of-moses-burial) *TheTorah* (2015); Mark Leuchter and Zev Farber, [“Pre-Biblical Aaron, Miriam, and Moses,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/pre-biblical-aaron-miriam-and-moses) *TheTorah* (2020).
9. Editor’s note: For more on this story, see David Ben-Gad HaCohen, [“Jacob’s Journey to Mahanaim and Penuel in J and E,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/jacobs-journey-to-mahanaim-and-penuel-in-j-and-e) *TheTorah* (2018).
10. While we have no description of Judah establishing border temples, the biblical description of Josiah’s reformation (2 Kings 23) inadvertently reveals them. After removing all “abomination” from the temple and Jerusalem, destroying and burning them, Josiah turned to the worship sites in the kingdom:

מלכים ב כג:ח וַיָּבֵא אֶת כָּל הַכֹּהֲנִים מֵעָרֵי יְהוּדָה וַיְטַמֵּא אֶת הַבָּמוֹת אֲשֶׁר קִטְּרוּ שָׁמָּה הַכֹּהֲנִים מִגֶּבַע עַד בְּאֵר שָׁבַע וְנָתַץ אֶת בָּמוֹת הַשְּׁעָרִים אֲשֶׁר פֶּתַח שַׁעַר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שַׂר הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר עַל שְׂמֹאול אִישׁ בְּשַׁעַר הָעִיר.

2 Kgs 23:8 He brought all the priests out of the towns of Judah, and defiled the high places where the priests had made offerings, from Geba to Beer-sheba; he broke down the high places of the gates that were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua the governor of the city, which were on the left at the gate of the city.

Geba north of Jerusalem and Beer Sheba in the south are the two extents of his kingdom. Archaeology confirmed the existence of a worship site in Beer-sheba, as a dismantled horned altar was discovered in Beer-sheba Stratum II. (As a student, I took part in the excavations of this site.)

1. It was also customary to have high places at the gates of cities. My excavations at the Aramean city of Bethsaida, in the kingdom of Geshur, uncovered high places with the stele of the moon-god at the gates of Stratum VI (11th to 10th centuries B.C.E.) and the later gate of Stratum V (9th to 8th centuries B.C.E.). Probably, the idea was the same: to state that the local gods and goddesses reign from this point inside the city.
2. Editor’s note: For more on this story, see Frederick E. Greenspahn, [“Reading the Golden Calves of Sinai and Northern Israel in Context,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/reading-the-golden-calves-of-sinai-and-northern-israel-in-context) *TheTorah* (2015).
3. Beth-El does not have a parody, but the book of Kings includes a story immediately after the account of Jeroboam’s consecration of Beth-El, according to which a man of God from Judah appears at Beth-El:

מלכים א יג:ב וַיִּקְרָא עַל הַמִּזְבֵּחַ בִּדְבַר יְהוָה וַיֹּאמֶר מִזְבֵּחַ מִזְבֵּחַ כֹּה אָמַר יְ־הוָה הִנֵּה בֵן נוֹלָד לְבֵית דָּוִד יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ שְׁמוֹ וְזָבַח עָלֶיךָ אֶת כֹּהֲנֵי הַבָּמוֹת הַמַּקְטִרִים עָלֶיךָ וְעַצְמוֹת אָדָם יִשְׂרְפוּ עָלֶיךָ

1 Kgs 13:2 and proclaimed against the altar by the word of YHWH, and said, “O altar, altar, thus says YHWH: ‘A son shall be born to the house of David, Josiah by name; and he shall sacrifice on you the priests of the high places who offer incense on you, and human bones shall be burned on you.’”

This “prophecy” is eventually fulfilled in 1 Kings 23:15–18. This story is certainly an attempt to polemicize against Beth-El in the wake of the Josianic reform that declared all worship sites other than Jerusalem to be illegitimate. (As note above, before this reform, Judah too had multiple worship sites. Archaeology confirms sites in Beer-sheba and Arad in the south, and Motza, right near Jerusalem.)

1. The site remained important for some time after the destruction (2 Kgs 17:28). While archaeology has not as yet uncovered a worship site in this area, remains of a sanctuary dating from the Early, Middle and Late Bronze Ages allude to the fact that Bethel had a long tradition of being a sacred place.
2. The meaning of the term סֻלָּם here is debated. The BDB dictionary, and the NRSV, Fox, and R.E. Friedman translations go with “ladder”; HALOT (Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament), NJPS and E.A. Spieser go with “stairway,” while Robert Alter goes with “ramp.”
3. For more on this story, Yitzhak (Itzik) Peleg, *Going Up and Going Down A Key to Interpreting Jacob's Dream (Gen 28.10-22)*, The Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 609 (London: Bloomsbury-T&T Clark, 2015).
4. For one source division, see Baruch J. Schwartz, [“Did Jacob Meet Yhwh by the Stairway to Heaven in Beth-El?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/did-jacob-meet-yhwh-by-the-stairway-to-heaven-in-beth-el) *TheTorah* (2018). Another appears in Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed*, 77.
5. This chapter is the last section in a four-chapter appendix that now closes the book of Samuel. Editor’s note: For more on this story, see Shira Golani, [“Is There as Consensus that a Census Causes a Plague?”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/is-there-a-consensus-that-a-census-causes-a-plague) *TheTorah* (2016).
6. Editor’s note: For more on the founding of the Jerusalem Temple, see David Glatt-Gilad, [“How the Jerusalem Temple Was “Chosen” as the Only Place of Worship,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/how-the-jerusalem-temple-was-chosen-as-the-only-place-of-worship) *TheTorah* (2017).
7. Editor’s note: For a discussion of how the patriarchs represent different aspects of Israel’s later political realities, see discussion in Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, [“A Parasha Pregnant with the Past, Present, and Future of Israel’s Protagonists,”](https://www.thetorah.com/article/a-parasha-pregnant-with-the-past-present-and-future-of-israels-protagonists) *TheTorah* (2016).
8. Until Josiah’s reformation in the second half of the 7th century B.C.E., there were multiple worship sites in Judah. It is thus not surprising that J would prefer to associate various worship places with Judah’s favored patriarch, as opposed to simply dismissing them as illegitimate.
9. In Chronicles, it is the name of the mountain, not, as in Genesis, the name of land in which the unnamed mountain is found.