

The Marzeah Amos Denounces—Using Archaeology to Interpret a Biblical Text

By [Philip J. King](#)



Archaeologists often accuse Biblical scholars of ignoring archaeological materials that could significantly illuminate the Biblical texts that scholars are studying. As one archaeologist recently put it: “Most [Biblical] commentators do not even make use of archaeology where it can contribute best, namely in illustrating the material culture of a given period, either in general or in terms of a specific reference in the [Biblical] text.”¹

For the most part, archaeology remains the great untapped resource in Biblical studies, despite the fact that the Bible and archaeology are so closely related.

As [BAR](#) readers know, there is a great deal of dispute concerning the term “Biblical archaeology.”^a I still find Albright’s^b definition satisfactory: Biblical archaeology, he said, “is the systematic analysis or synthesis of any phase of biblical scholarship which can be clarified by archaeological discovery.”²

Biblical archaeology is, therefore, a Biblical, not an archaeological, discipline. It is the responsibility of Biblical scholars, not archaeologists, to ferret out pertinent material evidence and apply it to the Bible.

There is a crying need for synthesizing works that bring archaeological data to bear on the Biblical text.

Correlating archaeological data with the Biblical record is not so easy as it sounds, however. The process is complicated by the fact that the artifacts are often mute and ambiguous, while the Biblical text is sometimes tendentious and unintelligible.

Nonetheless, archaeological evidence can contribute to the understanding of the Biblical text by confirming, correcting and supplementing it. The Biblical text itself, of course, must be analyzed using the methods of literary criticism, form criticism and tradition criticism.

In recent years, archaeologists have utilized increasingly sophisticated methods of research, often borrowed from the natural and social sciences (anthropology in particular), making it possible to go far beyond their earlier preoccupation with political history. No longer are archaeologists concerned exclusively with bare facts like kings, wars and conquests; they have turned their attention to social history as well. They have become absorbed with all aspects of daily life in ancient Israel, including religion, politics, economics, trade, living standards and social structure.

I would like to illustrate how these developments in archaeology can be applied to a Biblical text by taking an example from the book of Amos, an eighth-century B.C. prophet who was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees. Although he came from the village of Tekoa, south of Jerusalem, he preached in the northern kingdom of Israel, where he was associated with the capital city of Samaria and with the royal sanctuary at Bethel. Acknowledging the universal sovereignty of Israel’s God, Amos was vitally aware of political events in the bordering nations, as well as in Israel. Active during the peaceful and prosperous reigns of King Uzziah of Judah

(783–742 B.C.) and King Jeroboam II of Israel (786–746 B.C.), Amos appears to have exercised his prophetic ministry for only a short time. He was a rugged outdoorsman who preached divine judgment with harsh severity. Influenced by the Mosaic covenant that was based on responsibility and not on privilege, Amos was deeply disturbed by the rampant social injustices of his people, especially the venal upper classes. Wealth had created a social imbalance, resulting in two distinct classes, the rich and the poor.



Here is the text I want to analyze with the help of archaeology:^c

“Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music;^d who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first of those to go into exile, and the revelry [*marzeah*] of those who stretch themselves shall pass away” (*Amos 6:4–7*, Revised Standard Version).

This passage is one of Amos’s most famous sermons on the doom of the northern kingdom of Israel and its luxury-loving society in the eighth century B.C. The specific object of his indictment is the *marzeah* (pronounced “mar-zay-ach [like Bach]”; the dot under the “h” is implied hereafter), often translated as “revelry” (as here), or “banquet.”

Few social institutions in antiquity have been so illuminated by archaeology as the *marzeah*, although many aspects of it are still obscure and are the subject of scholarly debate.³ Of one thing, however, we are sure: The *marzeah* had an extremely long history, extending at least from the 14th century B.C. through the Roman period. In the 14th century B.C., it was prominently associated with the ancient Canaanite city of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra), on the coast of Syria, as we know from the cuneiform tablets found there. It was also popular at Palmyra, on the northern edge of the Syrian Desert, about 120 miles northeast of Damascus, in the Roman period (the first to the third centuries A.D.).

The *marzeah* was a pagan ritual that took the form of a social and religious association. The term may denote the group of people who participated in the rite, or the building where the rite took place. The occasion for the meeting could be joyful or sorrowful; sometimes the *marzeah* was the setting for mourning rites consisting of eating and drinking. Whether ritual banquets or memorial meals, these feasts lasted several days and were accompanied by excessive drinking. Wealth and affluence apparently were prerequisites for participation in the *marzeah*. At Palmyra the *marzeah* took the form of a funerary cult and consisted of the main elements enumerated by Amos in his description of the *marzeah*.

The purpose of the funerary aspect of the *marzeah* was to offer consolation to those in mourning. By sharing food and drink with the mourners, the participants in the *marzeah* provided solace and comfort. Some scholars regard the funerary *marzeah* as a feast for—and with—deceased ancestors (or Rephaim, a proper name in the Bible for the inhabitants of Sheol, the underworld.)

The passage from Amos that I have quoted is clearly a description of a *marzeah*, although many commentators have failed to identify it. Whether or not it is a funerary *marzeah*, overindulgence of several kinds is clearly indicated.

Other than this reference in Amos, the only other specific Biblical reference to a *marzeah* occurs in the Book of Jeremiah. There the reference is clearly to a funerary *marzeah*:

“For thus says the Lord: ‘Do not enter the house of mourning [*beth marzeah*], or go to lament, or bemoan them. ... No one shall break bread for the mourner, to comfort him for the dead; nor shall anyone give him the cup of consolation to drink for his father or his mother. You shall not go into the house of feasting to sit with them, to eat and drink” ([Jeremiah 16:5, 7–8](#)).

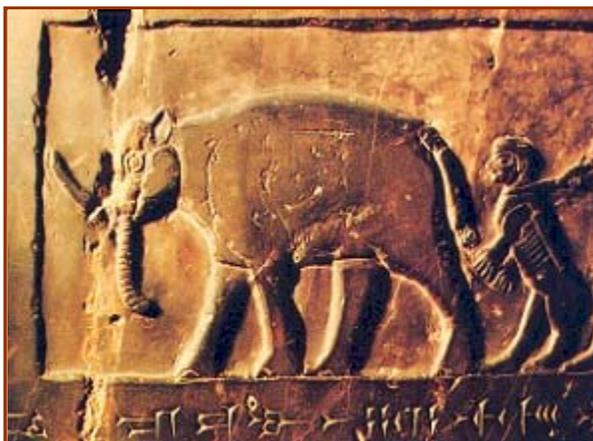
Although the term *marzeah* is not explicitly used in [Numbers 25](#), a *marzeah* may nevertheless be referred to. There we learn that the Israelites had gone whoring with Moabite women and began to offer sacrifices to their god Baal of Peor. The Israelites ate of the sacrifices and worshipped Baal. What else went on in this pagan ritual is suggested by the rage of the priest Phinehas:

“When Phinehas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose and left the congregation, and took a spear in his hand and went after the man of Israel into the inner room, and pierced both of them, the man of Israel and the woman, through her body” ([Numbers 25:7–8](#)).

In denouncing those who indulged in the *marzeah*, Amos enumerates five components of this revelry. His listing is not haphazard; it follows the traditional order of an ancient banquet, already known from other sources, such as those at Palmyra already referred to. These five elements are: (1) reclining or relaxing, (2) eating a meat meal, (3) singing or other musical accompaniment, (4) drinking wine and (5) anointing oneself with oil.

The first element of the *marzeah* that Amos refers to is “beds of ivory.” Even earlier, he referred to ivory in his description of the prosperity and ostentation of the residents of Samaria, who lived in “ivory houses” ([Amos 3:15](#)), that is, homes decorated with costly ivory inlays. For the prophets, Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel in the eighth century B.C., symbolized, with its “ivory houses,” not only self-indulgence, but also pagan immorality and flagrant injustice. It was Amos’s contention that exploitation of the poor made such luxury possible for the wealthy class.

Always a luxury item, ivory has a long and fascinating history in the Near East⁴ The principal source of commercial ivory was the elephant, the two main species being the African and the Asian (the Asian is sometimes incorrectly identified as the Indian elephant). The African elephant is the larger of the two. Weighing as much as six tons, its tusks average 6 feet in length; a pair may weigh 100 pounds. The Asian elephant is smaller, and only the males have tusks, averaging 5 feet in length, with a pair weighing about 70 pounds. A subspecies of the Asian elephant is the Syrian elephant, which became extinct after the eighth century B.C. However, it may have been the principal source of ivory for the Phoenicians and Syrians, who supplied the Canaanites and Israelites.



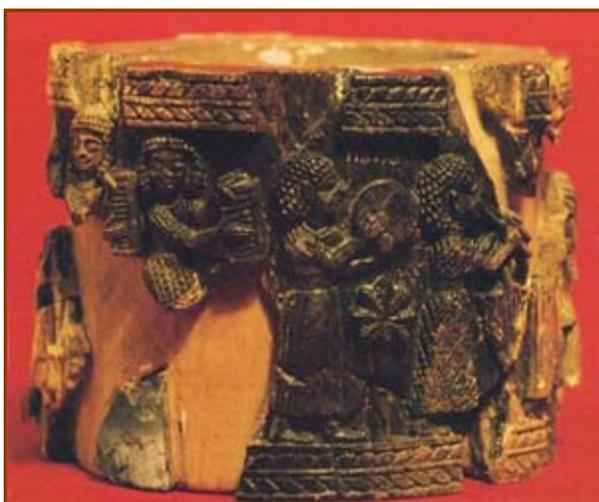
Ancient texts often refer to elephants, but there are no references to elephants in the Bible. Assyrian and Egyptian sources of the 15th century B.C. mention elephant hunts in North Syria. Pharaoh Thutmose III (1490–1436 B.C.) described a hunt in which 120 elephants were killed for their ivory. The famous Black Obelisk of the Assyrian monarch Shalmaneser III (859–825 B.C.) bears a classic depiction of an Asiatic elephant.

According to an Assyrian record, King Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.) of Judah sent ivory as tribute to Sennacherib of Assyria when Sennacherib invaded Judah and besieged Jerusalem in 701 B.C. Listed among Hezekiah's items of tribute are inlaid ivory couches, ivory armchairs, elephant hides and tusks.

The gradual disappearance of elephants in the ancient Near East was the result of extensive cultivation of the land where the elephants lived and of increased killing of elephants because of the increased demand for ivory.

There were at least two, perhaps three, schools of ivory carving in Biblical times. One was in North Syria, another was in Phoenicia and perhaps a third was in South Syria.

Thousands of ivories have been found at Nimrud in northern Assyria (present day Iraq). These ivories were carved in North Syrian style, which reflects a Canaanite-Mycenaean tradition. They may have been brought to Nimrud as booty, or the artisans who made them may have been taken to Assyria as part of the transfer of populations.



The motifs decorating Phoenician ivories, on the other hand, are clearly of Egyptian inspiration. Here, Egyptian traditions of art and mythological symbolism have been adapted to Canaanite-Phoenician themes. The ivories of ancient Israel were crafted by Phoenicians.





The distinctions between the Syrian and Phoenician styles have been summarized as follows:

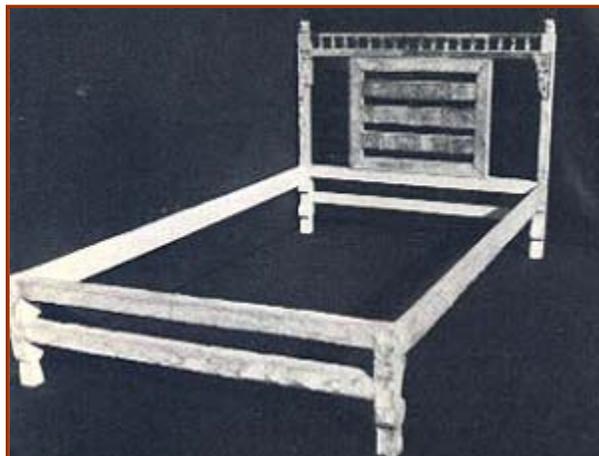
“Syrian-style ivories may be characterized by a greater sense of action, by squatter, more powerful proportions, and by more highly charged compositions, compared with the more quiescent, elegant, and slender figures harmoniously disposed in space, of the contemporary Phoenician Style.”⁴

In ancient Israel, the most significant collections of ivories have been recovered at Megiddo and Samaria. At Megiddo, over 300 ivory fragments, dating from the beginning of the Iron Age (12th century B.C.), came from the palace’s treasury room. Samaria yielded over 500 ivory fragments, which are more pertinent to understanding the passage from Amos because they date to the ninth century or eighth century B.C. (probably the latter). The Egyptian motifs decorating these ivories point to a style originating in Phoenicia. Since the motifs are Egyptian, and the presentation, Phoenician, we can infer that they came from Phoenicia. Egyptian symbolism on the Samaria ivories includes various deities, such as Horus, Ra, Heh, Isis, Nephthys and Osiris. These Egyptian motifs have been taken over and adapted by the Phoenicians, who were the conduits of most things Egyptian in the region.



The pagan symbolism adorning the Samaria ivories may well have outraged Amos as much as the luxury and affluence that the ivories reflected.

In his graphic description of the *marzeah*, Amos gives prominence to beds of ivory, couches decorated with ivory inlays, where guests sprawled during the festivities. An excellent example of such furniture is an ivory bed from the eighth century B.C. uncovered in the cemetery at Salamis in Cyprus.⁵



Ancient ivories thus provide a vivid illustration of the “beds of ivory” that Amos abhorred.

The next element in the *marzeah* passage is “calves from the midst of the stall” from which the celebrants obtained their choice meats.

This phrase refers to stall-fattened, tender calves. The Hebrew word for “stall” (*marbeq*) designates an enclosure where animals were restrained for fattening. A recent study of the tripartite public buildings at Megiddo, Beer-Sheva, Hazor and elsewhere has concluded that they were constructed as stables, specifically for the housing and conditioning of war-horses.⁶ John S. Holladay, the author of the study, is convinced that horses were kept in stables, not in open enclosures, in the ancient Near East. Building on Holladay’s study of public stables, Lawrence E. Stager has convincingly argued that domestic stables were located within, not separate from, domestic dwellings.⁷ These houses had a central room and side rooms with ceilings supported by pillars. Troughs for feeding the animals were constructed between the pillars. In short, the ground floor of the covered side-rooms of these houses served as domestic stables.



This background is useful for understanding several Biblical references to “calves from the midst of the stall” or fatted calves. When King Saul consulted the witch of Endor, for example, she served him a meal consisting of a stall-fed calf that she had “in the house” ([1 Samuel 28:24](#)). The “prodigal son” was served the same delicacy when he returned to his father’s house ([Luke 15:23–27](#)).

Eating “calves from the midst of the stall” was for Amos but another example of profligate feasting by the overly affluent residents of Samaria.

Turning to Amos’s reference to “the sound of the harp,” we know that music played a vital role in the life of ancient peoples. From archaeology, we also know a great deal about the instruments they used.^f But the Bible mentions only two stringed instruments, the *nebel* and the *kinnor*. Frequently, they are named together. They are both lyres. The *nebel* was larger and perhaps the more solemn instrument, intended for liturgical use. The *kinnor*, unlike the *nebel*, is asymmetrical. Both have a body, two arms and a yoke (or cross bar), but in a *kinnor* the arms are of unequal length. Utilized for both sacred and secular purposes, the *kinnor* was the instrument of David and the Levites.

In describing the musical component of the *marzeah*, Amos uses the word *nebel*, the larger of the two, which was ordinarily reserved for a religious function. The Revised Standard Version, which I have quoted above, translates *nebel* as “harp,” but this is probably inaccurate. The basic distinction between a lyre and a harp is that a harp has no yoke (crossbar). To date, not a single harp has been recovered from Syria-Palestine, so “lyre” would be a preferable translation.

A beautifully crafted seal, dating from the seventh century B.C., bears the tantalizing Hebrew inscription: “(Belonging) to Ma^cadanah, the king’s daughter.” This is the first occurrence in Israel’s history of the name Ma^cadanah, derived from a Hebrew root meaning “delight”; she is not further identified, nor is her father, the king. What makes this tiny scaraboid (beetle-shaped) seal of brown jasper especially memorable is the delicate design of a *kinnor* that decorates it. The lyre is asymmetrical, consisting of a soundbox and two unequal arms, with 12 strings attached to a yoke. A string of pearls adorns the outer edge of the soundbox, with a rosette in the center. The king’s daughter perhaps chose the lyre as her emblem because she played this instrument.





A poignant representation of three lyre-players also appears on an Assyrian relief from Nineveh commemorating Sennacherib's conquest of the Judahite city of Lachish in 701 B.C. These Judahite prisoners of war are depicted playing their lyres on their way to Assyrian captivity under the watchful eye of an Assyrian soldier armed with a club and a bow.



With this background, we can easily picture the celebrants at the *marzeah*. Amos is describing the singing of songs to a lyre accompaniment. The lyre being used is the *nebel*, the lyre that was normally used for religious functions.

Inordinate consumption of wine is enumerated as the fourth element of the *marzeah*. The celebrants drink "wine in bowls." The Hebrew word *mizraq*, used here for a wine bowl, is unusual. Its root, *zrq*, means "to throw" or "to sprinkle" (dust, ashes, water or blood). In the ceremony of covenant ratification at Sinai, "Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw [*zrq*] against the altar" ([Exodus 24:6](#)). A *mizraq* is a dish or basin used for sprinkling, so it must have had a wide mouth. It is mentioned frequently in the Bible in cultic contexts.

For example, in the description of the altar of burnt offering, we are told: "You shall make pots for it [the altar of burnt offering] to receive its ashes, and shovels and basins [*mizraq*] and forks and firepans; all its utensils you shall make of bronze" ([Exodus 27:3](#)).

Amos may have referred to sacred vessels at the *marzeah* to underscore its sacrilegious nature. At the same time, he may be emphasizing their unusually large capacity, in order to condemn the inordinate drinking that was an integral part of the *marzeah*. Some bowls that archaeologists have found and classified under *mizraq* are quite capacious, having a diameter of as much as 18 inches.



A fluted bronze bowl (*phiale*) with a Phoenician dedicatory inscription may cast light on the kind of drinking container used in the *marzeah*. It was supposedly found in modern Lebanon, according to the dealer through whom it was purchased. Stylistic elements suggest a date in the fourth century B.C. for its manufacture. It measures 7 inches in diameter and is quite shallow.

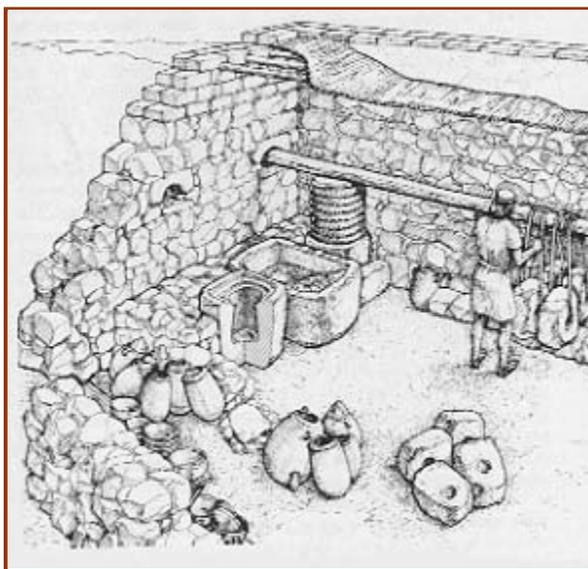
Typical of bowls depicted in libation scenes, it lacks handles. Although this bowl is later than Amos's time, Assyrian prototypes of it are known from Amos's time, when Israel was under Assyrian rule. The most important feature of this bronze *phiale* is the inscription, which reads: "We offer two cups to the *marzeah* of Shamash." The reference to "the *marzeah* of Shamash," the sun god of the Semitic pantheon, offers another clue to the nature of the *marzeah*, as well as to the type of drinking vessels used in the ritual.⁸



The final element we shall examine in the quotation from Amos is the reference to anointing with "the finest oils."

Mentioned more than 200 times in the Bible, olive oil was both a necessity of life and a gift of God. Second in importance only to the production of wine, oil was a major industry in ancient Israel and a significant export to such regions as Egypt and Mesopotamia, which did not cultivate olives. Alluding to the prosperity of the oil merchants, Hosea tells us: "They make a bargain with Assyria, and oil is carried to Egypt" ([Hosea 12:1](#)).

The many stone olive-presses found recently in surveys and excavations in modern Israel, at such sites as Tel Miqne (Ekron), Tel Batash (Timnah) and Tel Dan (Dan), add substantially to the large number of olive presses previously known.



Olive oil had multiple uses in Biblical times: in food preparation, as an unguent for softening the skin, in offering sacrifices, as fuel for lamps, for medicinal purposes, for the preparation of cosmetics and as a lubricant.

Olive trees, still plentiful in the Mediterranean region, can survive for a thousand years. The principal predator of the olive tree is the locust. As Amos notes: "The locust devoured your fig trees and your olive trees" ([Amos 4:9](#)).

Two separate processes are involved in the extraction of olive oil—crushing and pressing. Crushing consists of grinding the olives into a soft paste. This is done by rolling a large stone (the crushing stone, or *memeḥ*) over the olives spread on a flat surface of rock or on the floor of a shallow basin (*yam*). Alternatively, this can be accomplished by treading or trampling the olives, as mentioned in [Micah 6:15](#).

To extract the oil, this pulp must then be pressed; this is done by placing the crushed olives in woven baskets (*aqalim*) that have holes in the bottom. The baskets are placed on the pressing surface, and pressure is exerted on the olives by a long beam weighted with stones and secured in a wall-niche behind the press. The olive oil then flows through the basket openings into a groove, then through this channel in the rock to a central vat or bowl. This kind of oil press was used throughout Iron Age II (1000–586 B.C.).

More than 100 oil presses have recently been found at Tel Miqne, identified with the Philistine city of Ekron, near the Mediterranean coast of Israel. This must have been one of the most important olive-oil production centers in the Near East in the seventh century B.C. Most of the presses recovered at Tel Miqne were equipped with larger-than-usual pressing surfaces and central collecting basins, so that they would produce more than twice as much oil as the simpler, smaller presses.

The initial crushing, done in a vat prior to the pressing process, yields the finest quality oil; this prepressed oil, also called virgin oil, is the best. Lawrence E. Stager explains the "finest oil" used in the *marzeah* as follows:⁹ Inscribed potsherds called ostraca, which were found in Samaria and which date to the eighth century B.C., often mention *shemen rahḥus*, literally "washed oil." According to Stager, this refers to a technique for extracting the finest oil. Water was poured over olives after they had been crushed, but before pressing, to "wash" off the oil. The resulting mixture of oil and water was then stirred; this would make the oil float, and it was then skimmed off by hand. This was the virgin oil, or in the words of Amos, "the finest oils."

This was the oil with which the dissolute celebrants at the *marzeah* anointed themselves.

Amos, the great prophet of social justice, targeted three realms of daily life for egregious violations of covenant responsibility: injustice in the courts, luxury among the upper class and worship in the sanctuary. The poor were denied their rights in court. The affluence of the rich was the direct result of their exploitation of the poor. Worship was form more than substance; consequently, conduct in the marketplace was totally unaffected by worship in the holy place. Amos spoke from the conviction that social justice is an integral part of the Mosaic covenant, which regulates relations not only between God and people, but also among people. Amos went so far as to say that the "day of the Lord," supposedly a day of reward and vindication, would be instead a day of destruction. Nonetheless, although the hour was late, Amos preached that there was still time for individual reorientation of life, or in his vocabulary, *teshubah*.

The Biblical text often gives only sketchy descriptions of articles of everyday life. Archaeology, as in Amos's description of the *marzeah*, can often fill in the gaps. As we have seen, these artifacts can also provide insights into the religious, social and economic life of the Biblical world.

We have focused here on just a few details, but a more comprehensive study would also provide information about the development of a variety of agricultural practices and of trade and industry, relating to pottery, wine, and metalworking, as well as to oil production. All of these elements helped create the pyramidal social structure in Israel that the prophets inveighed against so vehemently.