

STANDING STONES

When I accepted to do this workshop at the beginning of the year I decided to present a study on “standing stones.” Little did I realize at the time that a featured article in the recent *Biblical Archaeology Review*¹ would cover the subject well. Many of you may have already read the article. If so, my apologies for covering the same subject and even using many of the same pictures. If not, then allow me to encourage you to subscribe to *BAR*. It will keep you abreast of the issues surrounding biblical archaeology, even if you disagree with some of its interpretations, especially as it relates to establishing biblical facts.

The Hebrew word, *masseba* (*masseboth*, pl), is the term used (used 34 times) of a stone erected by human hands. If the upraised stone has an inscription and/or pictures on it, scholars prefer to call it a stela/stele (stelae, pl). But if there is nothing on the stone, the preferred name is the Hebrew transliteration, “massebah.” Carl F. Graesser defines a masseba in this way: “The messeba was basically a stone ‘set up,’ as its etymological origin (from *nsb* “to set up”) indicates. In this position it served as a marker, jogging the memory. It would arrest the attention of the onlooker because it stood in a position it would not take naturally from gravity alone; only purposeful human activity could accomplish such ‘setting up.’ The study of massebot, therefore, is the study of those purposes that led to that ‘setting up.’”² But why would ancient desert cultures “set up” stones in this manner for any purpose in the first place?

Mircea Eliade suggests: “Rock shows him something that transcends the precariousness of his humanity: an absolute mode of being. Its strength, its motionlessness, its size and its strange outlines are none of them human; they indicate the presence of something that fascinates, terrifies, attracts and threatens, all at once. In its grandeur, its hardness, its shape and its colour, man is faced with a reality and a force that belong to some world other than the profane world of which he is himself a part.”³ Thus, ancient nomadic desert cultures in Canaan, particularly the desert areas, “set up” such stones for a variety of purposes, purposes within which the ancient Hebrews participated. The Biblical record is mostly positive or at least neutral toward the practice, but as we will see became negative in various “reforms” for very good reasons.

I will use Graesser’s terms with reference to the purposes of “standing stones.” From archaeological and biblical study there seem to be four functions of “standing stones” (*masseboth*): 1) Memorial: to mark the memory of a dead person, 2) Legal: to mark a legal relationship between two or more individuals, 3) Commemorative stones: commemorating an event and honoring the participants, and 4) Cultic stones: marking the cultic immanence of the deity.⁴

MEMORIAL STONES. When Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin, Jacob was on the way to Ephrath (Bethlehem). He set up a pillar over her tomb (Gen 35:19-20). Apparently this “memorial stone” was remembered as late as Saul’s day and beyond (1 Sam 10:2): “When you leave me today, you will meet two men near Rachel’s tomb, at Zelzah on the border of Benjamin.” Less well known was a “memorial stone” set up by Absalom himself while he was still alive! “During his lifetime Absalom had taken a pillar and erected it in the King’s Valley as a monument to himself, for he thought, ‘I have no son to carry on the memory of my name.’ He named the pillar after himself, and it is called Absalom’s

¹ Uzi Avner, “Sacred Stones in the Desert,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (Vol. 27, May/June 2001, No. 3) 30-41.

² Carl F. Graesser, “Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine,” *The Biblical Archaeologist* (Vol. 35, 1972, 2) 34. For the entire article see pages 34-63.

³ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Meridean Books, World Publishing Co., 5th printing, 1968.

⁴ Graesser, p. 37.

Monument to this day” (2 Sam 18:18). Such monuments to the dead can be found throughout the Sinai and Negev deserts today. Uzi Avner, in his *BAR* article, states that “to date, 142 independent *masseboth* sites have been documented in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai, and the number continues to increase. In these shrines *masseboth* stand alone or in groups—pairs and triads are the most common, but groups of five, seven and nine also occur. Some are only a few inches tall while others are six feet and more. Most face east and many have at their base a carefully placed circular compartment or cell. Other features, such as offering benches, altars of different types and basins sometimes accompany *masseboth*. In addition to these independent sites, identical groupings of *masseboth* can be found at hundreds of tumuli (large stone heaps that mark a tomb) and in open-air sanctuaries.” This first picture is near Eilat, in the southern Negev desert, where “standing stones” were erected some 7,000 years ago! Avner thinks the smaller stones represent ancestral spirits while the broader and bigger stones represent the male/female deities. The male deity is usually always to the left of the female (represented by the smaller, shorter stone). In the foreground is an offering table. Several varieties can be found: at Ma`aleh Jethro, in the Uvda Valley, c. 30 miles north of Eilat. The next picture is of a reconstructed burial site c. 6000-5000 B.C., saved here from new construction. A Late Neolithic (6000 B.C.) open sanctuary in the Uvda Valley contains a group of 17 small, unaligned and detached *masseboth* enclosed protectively by four larger stones. The smaller stones represent the ancestors of the ancient worshippers. Another site at Eilat dating to the Late Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic Period (6000-5000 B.C.) present two large stones (deities?) presiding over 99 smaller stones (ancestors?).⁵ The biblical “memorial stones” in Genesis and Samuel do not seem to have the pagan concept of gods watching over ancestral spirits.

A different kind of “memorial stones” can be found in Joshua. When Achan was stoned, “over [him]” the Israelites “heaped up a large pile of rocks” and it was called the “Valley of Achor,” meaning “Trouble” (Josh 7:25-26). Another *tumulus* (a pile of rocks to mark a burial site) is recorded in Josh 8:29: “He hung the king of Ai on a tree and left him there until evening. At sunset, Joshua ordered them to take his body from the tree and throw it down at the entrance of the city gate. And they raised a large pile of rocks over it, which remains to this day.” A third tumulus with similar circumstances involved the five kings of a southern coalition defeated in battle: “At sunset Joshua gave the order and they took them down from the trees and threw them into the cave where they had been hiding. At the mouth of the cave they placed large rocks, which are there to this day” (Josh 10:27). These burial sites seem to mark the event associated with the dead; i.e., victory over enemies whether Hebrew sinner or foreigner. We probably ought to classify them as “commemorative stones” (see below).

LEGAL STONES. Most common in this category were the boundary and covenant-treaty stones. There are several biblical examples. In Gen 31:44-54 Jacob and Laban make a treaty with one another and the stones involved act as a “witness” to the covenant-treaty and a boundary marker for the two. It was also given a couple of names: *Jegar Sahadutha* (Aramaic), *Galeed* (Hebrew), meaning “witness heap,” and *Mizpah* meaning “watchtower.” Sacrifices were offered and a fellowship meal followed. It is interesting to note that the Torah prohibited the moving of such boundary markers (Deut 19:14; 27:17).

Perhaps the most important “standing stones” used as “covenant-treaty” stones is at Sinai with Moses: “He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel” (Ex 24:4). Blood was sprinkled upon the people and the altar, the Book of the Covenant read, and a fellowship meal followed as above.

When Joshua renewed this same covenant with a new generation in his old age, the text says: “he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD. ‘See!’ he said to all the people. ‘This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God’” (Josh 24:26-27). Tradition identifies this picture of a large (broken) *masseba* outside of Shechem (present-day Nablus) as the “large stone” set up by Joshua. The stone can be dated somewhere between 1400 and 1100 B.C., which would fit Joshua’s dates whether early or late. But this is not certain.

⁵ Uri Avner, *BAR*, 38.

Legal standing stones could and often were inscribed (called *stelae*). Josh 8:30-35 records how the law of Moses was inscribed on stone (“Joshua copied on stones the law of Moses, which he had written” 8:32; cp. Deut 27:1-8: “And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”). While Avner and most other scholars wish to late-date the “inscribed law on stone,” a perfectly good example is Hammurapi’s Code, Babylonian law inscribed on what is clearly a “standing stone,” dated c. 1750 B.C.!

COMMEMORATIVE STONES. These “standing stones” commemorate an event and honor the participants. However, when Saul did this it was considered a bad thing because he did not obey God in the event: “Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor and has turned and gone on down to Gilgal” (1 Sam 15:12b). Glory was not given to God as Samuel had done earlier when he had defeated the Philistines (by a miracle storm from God!): “Then Samuel took a stone and set it up between Mizpah and Shen. He named it Ebenezer, saying, ‘Thus far has the LORD helped us’” (1 Sam 7:12). These are clearly “victory” stones.

A truly great event was Israel’s crossing the Jordan on dry ground. To commemorate this event twelve stones were taken from the river bed and brought to Gilgal. The text says: “In the future, when your children ask you, ‘What do these stones mean?’ tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the LORD. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever” (Josh 4:6-7, also vv. 20-24).

Another great event was the return of the captured ark of the covenant by the Philistines. The cows and cart with the ark and gold objects stopped at a large rock. That large rock became a “standing stone”: “The large rock, on which they set the ark of the LORD, is a witness to this day in the field of Joshua of Beth Shemesh” (1 Sam 6:18b).

The last biblical example is a strange one. The Transjordan tribes built a replica of the altar before the Tent of Meeting on the Jordan just before they were to return to their Transjordan homes. The rest of the tribes came to war against them, but they were quieted by the explanation: “It is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the LORD at his sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, ‘You have no share in the Lord’” (Josh 22:27). “And the Reubenites and the Gadites gave the altar this name: A Witness Between Us that the LORD is God” (Josh 22:34). So a replica altar becomes a “standing stone,” a witness to remind the tribes in Canaan that the transjordan tribes also belong to the twelve!

Beyond the biblical record we have several such “standing stones” available to us. The best example is at Gezer where there were ten standing stones over ten feet tall placed in a gentle arc in a north-south direction 100 feet long. First discovered in 1903, they were covered up for preservation until 1968 when they were fully excavated, found to be from the MB II C, c. 1600 B.C. Graesser thinks they represent ten groups in a legal covenant treaty, perhaps in victory or for unity purposes. He sees a legal function in the alignment. Other such “standing stones” can be found at Hazor (forty in ten loci) and Megiddo.

CULTIC STONES. These “standing stones” mark the cultic immanence of the deity. “The small stele-with-offering table, bearing a sun disc symbol of the deity (Fig. 2g), from Ugarit is the clearest example of such a cultic function for a figured stele.”⁶ Ahab apparently had erected a “sacred stone of Baal” (2 Kgs 3:2), a figured stele. Later Jehu’s drive to purge Israel of Baalism destroyed this *masseba* of Baal: “They brought the sacred stone out of the temple of Baal and burned it. They demolished the sacred stone of Baal and tore down the temple of Baal, and people have used it for a latrine to this day” (2 Kgs 10:26-27). Could this “*masseba* of Baal” erected by Ahab have been the reference of Hosea’s words: “he [Israel, the northern kingdom] adorned his sacred stones” (Hos 10:1)? That is, he made the stone “better” by carving a Baal symbol on it?

Jacob’s theophany experience, a dream in which angels were going up and down on a ladder that went from earth to the heavens, a vision of God who restated promises made to Abraham and Isaac, was

⁶ Graesser, p. 44.

commemorated by taking the stone he had used for a pillow and made it a masseba. “When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, ‘Surely the LORD is in this place, and I was not aware of it.’ He was afraid and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven.’ Early the next morning Jacob took the stone he had placed under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on top of it. He called that place Bethel, though the city used to be called Luz” (Gen 28:16-19). Jacob, then, made a vow that if God would care for his needs on his journey, Yahweh would be his God. He concluded: “This stone that I have set up as a pillar will be God’s house, and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth” (Gen 28:22). Later, Jacob built an altar at Bethel at God’s command. God changed his name from Jacob (deceiver) to Israel (he struggles with God) and reaffirmed his covenant promises of seed, land, and blessing. “Jacob set up a stone pillar at the place where God had talked with him, and he poured out a drink offering on it; he also poured oil on it. Jacob called the place where God had talked with him Bethel” (Gen 35:14-15). There is no doubt that this masseba of Jacob has become a cultic stone, a place of worship, a “house of God,” i.e., a temple. But just as certainly we know that Jacob did not worship the stone itself. It was a “witness” to a great event, a place where God revealed himself to an undeserving patriarch.

In Arad a masseba was found in the Holy of Holies, probably having stood in the central position, and according to Graesser “surely functioned as a cultic stone, the focus of the worship there, such as the sacrifices offered on the two incense altars. It might also have been a commemorative stone, marking the victories granted by Yahweh to the garrisons here. Considering the patriarchal traditions connected with Arad and the pre-Solomonic sanctuary, one may even wonder if this stone, like the one at Bethel, did not commemorate a theophany to the patriarchs [sic].”⁷ Of course, Graesser was guessing. Avner notes two masseboth in the Holy of Holies, the left one taller than the right, which in his mind suggests a male and female deity.⁸ More likely if this worship center is a small replica of the Jerusalem Temple, the two stones just may represent the stone tablets of Moses which were in the Holy of Holies supposedly until its destruction by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.

In spite of the many positive or at least neutral references to masseboth in the Hebrew Bible, there are thirteen passages that demand their destruction such as Deut 16:22—“Do not erect a sacred stone, for these the LORD your God hates.” Ex 23:24—“Do not bow down before their gods or worship them or follow their practices. You must demolish them and break their sacred stones to pieces.” Lev 26:1—“Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves, and do not place a carved stone in your land to bow down before it. I am the LORD your God.” Also see Ex 34:14; Deut 7:5; 12:3; 1 Kgs 14:22-23; 2 Kgs 3:2; 17:8-11; 18:4; 23:14; Jer 43:13; Micah 5:13; 2 Chr 14:3; 31:1. Both Hezekiah and Josiah sought to destroy these masseboth and limit all worship to the central sanctuary in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 18:4; 23:14). Israel’s early use of such “standing stones” seem to be legitimate cultural aids in legal, memorial, and commemorative functions, but toward the latter days of the two kingdoms such “sacred stones” took on the pagan idea of “image,” and thus fell under the prohibition of the second commandment (Ex 20:4).⁹ Not until after the Babylonian exile would Israel finally rid herself of the desire to worship some kind of “image” of God.

The only reference to a “standing stone” in the New Testament is perhaps found in 1 Pet 2:5,12. Ray Vander Laan suggests that Peter mixes his metaphor of “stone.” In v.5 we are “living stones” built into a spiritual house, the temple of God (the Church). In v.12 we are to “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse [us] of doing wrong, they may see [our] good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.” Vander Laan suggests that to be a “standing stone” in this world is to invite close scrutiny into your life with God. If it is a genuine, faithful, and powerful life in good deeds, then the pagan can only say: “Look what God has done!”¹⁰

⁷ Graesser, p. 52.

⁸ Avner, *BAR*, p. 34.

⁹ Graesser, pp. 62,63.

¹⁰ Raynard Vander Laan, “Step Three: Standing Stones,” *That The World May Know*, Focus On The Family Publishing, 1995.