Nancy Erickson
Isaiah's Model House

Abstract

Isaiah's scrutiny of idol fashioning in 44:6–20 provides a window into his understanding of image making in the ancient Near East. The prophet's descriptions are a symptom of his shared perception, or the common cognitive environment, of the ancient world in which he lived; this includes information gathered from the discipline of biblical archaeology. Based on the cultic literary context of Isaiah 44, a nuance of the usual meaning of the Hebrew term בית, and the prophet's larger shared environment attested by the material culture of the ancient Near East, I suggest Isaiah's use of בית in 44:13b assumes a "model house."

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Introduction

At the core of archaeological work is the hope of uncovering the past. Unearthed material provides a window to worlds gone by, a glimpse into ancient civilizations and millennia of evolution, and the possibility of examining history through its own lens. For Biblicists, archaeology may illumine the biblical texts and provide material comment to an ancient worldview.

In the nineteenth century a surplus of archaeological data, both textual and material, from Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Syria-Palestine created enormous enthusiasm among biblical scholars. Such was the excitement that copious analogues between biblical Israel and the ancient Near East led to an abuse of comparative studies between ancient cultures. The exaggeration of parallels was something S. Sandmel aptly labeled "parallelomania."[1] Since then biblical scholars have developed a more nuanced framework with which to interpret material culture of the ancient Near East and the biblical testament.[2] Notably, in a series of essays Hallo has proposed a "contextual method," which seeks to observe the convergences as well as the divergences in ancient Near Eastern literature and culture with the Hebrew Bible.[3] Other scholars have further nuanced Hallo's contextual approach.[4]

For the purposes of this essay I would like to highlight Walton's nuance of the contextual approach in what he labels a "common cognitive environment," that is, the thought world that ancient Israel shared with surrounding cultures.[5] The theory assumes that neighboring peoples in the ancient Near East were in contact with one another and simply shared a cultural milieu. This is not to say that distinctiveness was lost (although determining ethnicity and/or people groups such as ancient Israel is a particularly daunting task when recovering the past) but rather that the unique identity of peoples allowed for comment, both textual and material, of the same shared environment. Walton's approach is not particularly different from Hallo's contextual approach but it does highlight a certain fluidity when discussing known or accepted practices in the ancient world without necessarily indicating such beliefs or practices were adopted. Just as I can speak freely and with a fair amount of knowledge about football even though I have never played the sport, so too our biblical writers wrote freely about the world in which they lived. It is with this theoretical framework in mind that I would like to address Isaiah's understanding of בית in 44:13b.[6]

Below I will first address the larger biblical text of Isaiah 44:6–20, noting its salient literary features and some intricacies in translation, and then I will move into a discussion of verse 13b and the Hebrew term בית. I will then summarize
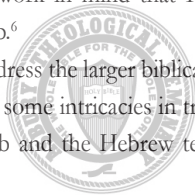
pertinent archaeological finds to provide a background for Isaiah's shared cognitive environment that will help inform the prophet's understanding of בית.

Isaiah 44:6–20

Isaiah's oracle of Yahweh (כה־אמר יהוה) in 44:6–20 is a scrutiny of idol fashioning. The message moves from self-declaration (מבלעדי אין אלהים, "There is no god beside me," v. 6) and rhetorical questioning (מי־כמוני, "Who is like me?" v. 7) in verses 6–8 to harsh critique and mockery of image-makers in verses 9–20. The message has clear linguistic and thematic echoes across the biblical canon. Consider Yahweh's rhetorical questioning of Job in chapters 38–40, perhaps most poignantly, "Who has put wisdom in the innermost being? Who has given understanding to the mind?" (38:7), and similar phrasing throughout the book of Isaiah (see 40:18, 25; 41:26). Descriptions of a critique of idol worship and fashioning may be noted in Deuteronomy 4. On the plains of Moab, Moses reminds his audience to watch themselves (שמר) lest they be inclined to fashion images in direct prohibition of the covenant Yahweh made on Mt. Horeb (4:15, 23). Image fashioning is prohibited in Yahweh's cult, yet it is a constant struggle for our ancient heroes and a source of regular discussion among our biblical writers (i.e., Lev 18:30; Deut 7:26; 12:31; Ezek 7:20; Isa 1:13; 40:18–20; 41:24). Surely the content of Isaiah 44:6–20 is at home for our prophet and perhaps nowhere else in the biblical corpus is the issue so extensively and systematically critiqued.

Before taking up the details of verses 6–20, consider the larger context of 44:21–28. Lexical repetition ties these later verses with the earlier section in 6–20 and hammers home the prophet's theological message: Yahweh alone creates (v. 21, 24–28) and he redeems (vv. 22, 23, 24; גאל). With the foolishness of idol fashioning in mind (vv. 6–20), Yahweh calls his audience to "remember … return to me, for I have redeemed you" (vv. 21 and 22; זכר ... שובה אלי כי גאלתיך). The prophet's message is all the more poignant following the mockery of images and their makers in verses 6–20.

The literary styling of verses 6–20 may be considered quasi poetic. Some Hebrew parallelism is apparent in the section: 6–8, 9–11 and 18–20. But verses 12–17 appear to be lacking poetic construction in the same sense. Watts nonetheless presents his entire translation in poetry, identifying individual stichs.[7] *BHS* also displays the text as poetry. Berlin identifies a unique sound pair (of consonance) in verse 8 (בלעדי and בל ידעתי) that she sees elsewhere in the biblical canon only twice (2 Sam 22:32; Ps 18:32).[8] Oswalt labels the entire section of 9–20 as "somewhat prosaic."[9] Differing opinions on the literary style of 6–20 are a testament to the difficulty of translation and interpretation of the passage.[10]

The specific descriptions of idol fashioning fall in verses 12–17 and seem to appear in unusual order causing some to suggest the prophet has reversed the steps of image making.[11] The process is described as follows: the ironsmith shapes and forges his work with tools and strength (v. 12) yet he grows hungry and weak; the carpenter measures, designs, and fashions the image in the form of a man for residing in a house (v. 13); the wood materials are acquired (in 14a the cutting of wood seems to precede the growing in 14b); some of the wood is used for fuel while the other is made into an image that is worshiped (v. 15); half of the wood is used for meal preparation and warmth (v. 16); the other half of the wood is used for fashioning a god to whom the craftsman worships and prays (v. 17). Certainly the sequencing of the steps is obscured for the reader but perhaps a logical order was not Isaiah's aim. Regardless it is clear that the prophet is well-versed in how image makers operate, their tools that they use, and their general method for creation. Childs notes that the prophet's details reveal careful firsthand observations "rather than being simply a catena of stereotyped caricatures of idolatry that had long since floated loose from any concrete historical experience."[12]

Verses 6–20 are littered with difficult vocabulary and syntax (in addition to the uneasy chronological order and question of literary style noted above). I will highlight here just a few elements of interest and then move to a discussion of the Hebrew term בית in verse 13b. The *hapax legomenon* in verse 8, תִּרְהוּ, is difficult. Its meaning is based primarily on the parallel with פחד, "trembling, dread, fear" and Arabic *wariha*.[13] Presumably relying on this parallel, 1QIsᵃ reads תיראו, "fear." The dots over המה in verse 9 are of particular interest. They are called *puncta extraordinaria*, "extraordinary/special points," and seem to indicate uncertainty or reservation from the scribes.[14] The rare term in verse 12, מעצד, also occurs in Jeremiah 10:3 as a tool for woodwork. A fine translation seems to be "small axe."[15] Others have favored haplography here, where גל has fallen out, there rendering גלם עצד, "he cuts out a mould," but this seems unnecessary.[16] The *qere* יְסְגוֹד in verse 17 is suggested by the Mp for *ketiv* יְסְגָּד.

Verse 13 presents its own challenges for translation. Six verbal forms seem to pile up:יַעֲשֵׂהוּ, יְתָאֲרֵהוּ , יַעֲשֵׂהוּ, יְתָאֲרֵהוּ, נָטָה, and לָשֶׁבֶת. Note the repetition of roots and forms. The LXX renders the verse shorter, leaving out the repetition. The movement of verbal aspect is noted by Oswalt, suggesting it lends to the difficulty of translation for the verse.[17] Most English translations render verse 13 as a gnomic present (NASB, NIV, CEB, et al.). Oswalt comments the variation is a way for the prophet to "convey immediacy," where some of the project is complete while some of the project is still on going.[18] The word שֶׂרֶד in the second stich of verse 13

(following יְתָאֲרֵהוּ) is a *hapax legomenon* with a fascinating history.[19] Evidently a misunderstanding by later (Middle Ages) Hebrew philologists of the medieval Arabic translation of the Bible by Saadya Gaon prompted meanings related to a red-dyed cord though Saadya had translated the noun as a carpenter's plane.[20] The mistake influenced Jewish interpretation which in turn influenced Christian biblical exegetes and modern scholarship. NASB translates the noun "red chalk." Probably a better rendering of the *hapax* is related to the carpenter's plane, as Saadya suggests, or perhaps a similar sharp stylus.[21] The form מקצעות is also a *hapax*. Its meaning is assumed from the root קצע and is best understood as a utensil for cutting or scraping, perhaps "carving tool" as the CEB translates.[22]

The ל + infinitive construction in 13b, לָשֶׁבֶת, may express the result of the many actions of the entire verse (see above, though this is difficult) and this is how some translations render the infinitive, "*so that* it may dwell" in a house (i.e., NASB, NIV). Other translations render the infinitive more loosely, "*to* dwell" in a house (NRSV, CEB, Watts). The full expression with the infinitive is לָשֶׁבֶת בָּיִת, something like "for dwelling/to dwell a house." The clumsy English rendering follows the Hebrew. The LXX adds the dative preposition ἐν to ease the translation, "to dwell/set up *in* a house." English translations follow (i.e., NASB, NRSV, NIV, Watts, Childs, Oswalt, etc.) and this seems to be the best meaning. The assumed object of the expression is labeled with two descriptions in verse 10: פֶּסֶל,אֵל, "god," "idol/image." Subsequently, it is a deity or idol that is envisioned as residing *in* the house of 13b.

The noun בית in 13b is ubiquitous in the Hebrew Bible. Its semantic range includes "dwelling," in its various facets, and "family," as in a family line/house. The noun is also used in numerous compound place names, such as בֵּית־אֵל, "Bethel."[23] The semantic range in the Hebrew Bible for the definition related to "dwelling" is not particularly broad; it means "house" with its many nuances just like the English term (i.e., mansion, cabin, tent, container, mouse-hole, etc.). Sometimes the term is specified: the abode, or "house," of a spider i.e., "spider's web" (Job 8:14), a "bird nest" (Ps 84:4[3]; 104:17), or a habitat for moths (Job 27:18). In cultic contexts בית may refer specifically to a "house" of a god, or by extension "temple."[24] Exodus 23:19 denotes בית אלהים, "*house* of God"; 1 Samuel 5:2 describes a בית דגון, "*house* of Dagon"; 2 Samuel 12:20 reads בית יהוה, "*house* of Yahweh"; and there are many other examples (i.e., Gen 28:22; Judg 17:4–5 and 18:31; 1 Sam 1:7; 1 Kgs 8:10; 2 Kgs 10:25; 2 Chron 34:9). The meaning of בית in Isaiah 44:13 falls within this range of interpretation: a house/abode of a deity/idol for dwelling. Below I suggest that the particular nuance of the noun (missing from

the standard lexicons) that Isaiah imagines in 44:13b indicates a "*model* house/abode" for a deity, such as those attested in the archaeological record of the ancient Near East.

Model Houses/Shrines in the Ancient Near East

Model houses/shrines from the ancient Near East are a well-known phenomenon. Such model houses are known from the third millennium onward and attested from a wide geographical area. There is little question that the model shrines were used for cultic purposes. Their contexts, in or near temples or rooms with clear cultic activity, and decorations (more on this below) support the assumption. The general shape of the models is either rectangular, with a small floor area and larger wall, or rounded, appearing like a jar thrown on a potter's wheel with an incised door. Interestingly, some extant shrines have yielded evidence of a closing device near the opening, indicating that a door did not survive. The model house from Tel Rekhesh (ninth century) attests indications of such a door (two holes on the right side of the opening of the receptacle) and was likely used as a box to hold a divine figure.[25] This assumption may be supported by other models such as the older, well-known Ashkelon shrine (ca. seventeenth century) with accompanying calf. As with the model at Tel Rekhesh, the Ashkelon model attests evidence of a clay closure and in this instance, the resident figure (calf) was found *in situ* with the model.[26] Extant examples such as these confirm one possible function of model houses, that is to "house" a deity or image/idol.

16th century BCE model shrine and accompanying calf from Ashkelon
(Credit: Kim Walton from the Israel Museum, Used with Permission)

Other extant shrines attest a simple opening on one end with no assumed door or closing feature. Many of these shrines, however, demonstrate decorative elements on the façade such as pillars, trees, lions, doves, or deities/figurines; iconography that is familiar to ancient Near Eastern cultic contexts.[27] Such stylized façades may have functioned to identify the deity/deities with the shrine and so are considered iconic, lacking a portable figurine but detailing identification through affixed stylized art. Some model shrines demonstrate a more simplistic styling and may be considered aniconic, lacking a likeness of a deity but by representation through something associated with a deity considered a sign of the deity's presence. The terracotta model shrine from Akhziv (seventh century; Phoenician mainland) is one such example. Quoting Culican, Doak states that the piece was a "'deliberate attempt' to create an 'aniconic cult object.'"[28]

9th-8th century BCE model shrine from Jordan

(Credit: Kim Walton from the Israel Museum, Used with Permission)

Many scholars classify the model house/shrines as miniaturizations of larger scale edifices such as temples.[29] For Ziony Zevit, this connection between a model and its larger, cultic version is crucial for understanding the shrine's functions.[30] However, identifying the larger representation of so many varying, smaller models is a difficult if not impossible task. Nonetheless, we can be quite certain that these small, house-shaped shrines are related to the cult and many, if not all, were considered a type of dwelling or "house" for a deity/deities.[31] The larger repertoire of these model houses, just a few of which are noted here, were certainly a part of the shared cognitive environment of the writer of Isaiah 44:13b (cf. the model houses from Ugarit, Dan, Tirzah, Hazor, Gezer, Transjordan, and elsewhere).[32] Which type of model house the prophet had in mind is unknown but perhaps one similar to those attesting a door, intended to house an image or idol like one whose manufacturing is described in verses 12–14.

In an attempt to find such model houses/shrines in the biblical texts Zevit proposes that the rare biblical word חמן, found in Ezekiel 6:6 and 2 Chronicles 34:4, in fact refers to the miniaturized construction. The term is usually translated "incense altar" (i.e., CEB, NASB, NIV, NRSV). Zevit's conclusion is cautious but he may be correct.[33] The term is not well understood.[34] Even if Zevit's suggestion for

understanding חמן is correct I propose that the writer of Isaiah utilized the term בית in 44:13b to mean a model house/shrine; the prophet would not have been bound to a single expression. Indeed, Isaiah is littered with varied and colorful vocabulary. The rendering of בית as a "model house" of a deity/idol is supported by the cultic literary context, the semantic range of the term בית, and the larger shared environment attested by the material culture of the ancient Near East.[35]

Concluding Remarks

Isaiah's use of בית in 44:13b is included among one of the most thorough treatments scrutinizing images and their fashioners in the Hebrew Bible. The term is easily translated "house" and includes a range of related nuancing. I suggest that the particular type of house that the prophet has in mind is not unlike one of the many model houses/shrines extant in the ancient Near East. Such models were certainly a part of Isaiah's common cognitive environment and the prophet freely drew upon this assumed knowledge when describing the residence of the idols he so skillfully mocks.

Postscript

My hope when I began this essay was seeded in reaction to current scholarship, at least as I perceive it. There is a tendency in any field for the proverbial pendulum to swing far in one direction just to swing back in the other and I have sensed recently in the field of biblical studies a certain fear among scholars to once again delve into the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East. As academics we become so focused in our study that we easily become a student of the text or rather, a student of the material culture.[36] While it used to be that Biblicists over-emphasized similarities between ancient Israel and surrounding cultures it seems now that the shared worldview has been missing in many a discussion. I hope here to offer a small contribution to further understand the multi-faceted worldview of our biblical prophet.

End Notes

[1] S. Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962):1–13.

[2] Nuances have developed over time, from such interpretations as those supported by Friedrich Delitzsch, whose famous lectures, "Babel und Bibel," (delivered January 13, 1902, January 12, 1903, and October 18 and 27, 1904) suggested that ancient Israel was essentially derivative of Babylon without uniqueness, to Benno Landsberger's response, proposing that Babylon should be investigated on her own terms (Benno Landsberger, "Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt," *Islamica* 2 [1926]: 355–72). For a review see Peter Machinist,

"Assyriology and the Bible: Benno Landsberger's *Eigenbegrifflichkeit* Revisited," SBL annual meeting paper (Atlanta, GA, November 23, 2003); see also Bill T. Arnold and David B. Weisberg, "A Centennial Review of Friedrich Delitzsch's 'Babel und Bibel' Lectures," *JBL* 121/3 (2002): 441–57, for a review of Delitzsch's work.

[3] Hallo first introduced the comparative methodology in his article "New Viewpoints on Cuneiform Literature," *IEJ* 12 (1962): 13–26. He has since written numerous articles on the subject, as have many others. Here I highlight just a few: Hallo, "Biblical History in its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach," in *Essays on the Comparative Method*, eds. W. Hallo, Carl D. Evans, John Bradley White, SIC I (Pittsburg: Pickwick Press, 1980), 1–26; "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature*, eds. W. Hallo, Bruce W. Jones, Gerald L. Mattingly, SIC III (New York: E. Mellen Press, 1990), 1–30; K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The 'Contextual Method': Some West Semitic Reflections," in *The Context of Scripture: Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), xxxv–xlii; S. Parker, *Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions: Comparative Studies on Narratives in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[4] Many a method are espoused in numerous works that deal with comparative studies but see especially, M. Malul, *Comparative Method in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical Legal Texts*, AOAT 227 (Kevelaer: Butzon and Bercker, 1990) and Jack M. Sasson, "About 'Mari and the Bible'," *RA* 92 (1998): 97–123, esp. 98–99.

[5] John Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

[6] My interest in Isaiah is in hope of honoring John Oswalt's many published works that address the prophet. We are all indebted to him for his many excellent resources on the prophet.

[7] John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34–66*, WBC 25, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 680–82.

[8] Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 105–06. Berlin also identifies a phonological repetition in verses 6 and 9 that she ties to verse 8.

[9] John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapter 40–66*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 170.

[10] The question of the literary style of verses 9–20 and the seemingly otherwise connectedness between verses 6–8 and 21–23 have prompted some scholars to assume the section is a late addition. Oswalt confirms its unity. See his discussion, 170–188.

[11] Oswalt, 180.

[12] Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*, The Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 343.

[13] *HALOT* 1:436.
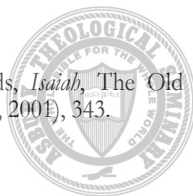
[14] Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, NAC 15b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 230. 1QIsᵃ places the term above the line, apparently a later addition. Some fifteen examples of *puncta extraordinaria* occur in the Hebrew Bible.

[15] *HALOT* 1:615.

[16] Watts, 684–685. Following the tradition of WBC Watts has a full technical discussion on the many unique forms and variants of our passage. See 683–685.

[17] Oswalt, 178.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Note that the same root vocalized differently appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to woven or embroidered clothing (Exod 31:10; 35:19). The meaning hardly makes sense here. *HALOT* 2:1354.

[20] Joshua Blau, "A Misunderstood Medieval Translation of *śered* (Isaiah 44:13) and its Impact on Modern Scholarship," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgraom*, ed. D. P. Wright et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 689–95.

[21] *HALOT* 2:1354.

[22] *HALOT* 1:628, 2:1123–24.

[23] See *HALOT* 1:124–29 for the full entry. Cf. *TDOT* 2:107–113; *NIDOTTE* 1:655–657.

[24] *HALOT* 1:124.

[25] Yosef Garfinkel and Madeleine Mumcuoglu, "A Shrine Model from Tel Rekhesh," *Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society* 33 (2015): 77–87. The dating of the Tel Rekhesh model is based on part by comparison with a similar shrine discovered at Tel Rehov, also dated to the Iron Age IIA.

[26] Lawrence Stager, "When Canaanites and Philistines Ruled Ashkelon," *BAR* 17.2 (1991): 24–43.

[27] One of the more recently discussed model shrines appears to come from the north-central Cisjordan or northern Transjordan region from the Iron Age II period (so Aren Maeir and Michal Dayagi-Mendels, "An Elaborately Decorated Clay Model Shrine from the Moussaeiff Collection," *Images as Sources: Studies on ancient Near Eastern artefacts and the Bible inspired by the work of Othmar Keel, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis*, special vol., [2007]: 111–124). The shrine's complex decorations are reason for the discussion and include a recumbent lion, applied female figurines, and stylized columns.

[28] Brian R. Doak, *Phoenician Aniconism in Its Mediterranean and Ancient Near Eastern Contexts* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 105. For William Culican's article see, "A Terracotta Shrine from Achzib," *ZDPV* 92 (1976): 47–53.

²⁹ The term "miniaturization" seems to have been first used by Claude Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966], 23–25) followed by Jonathan Z. Smith ("Trading Places," in *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 215–29) but see Doak, 102.

³⁰ Ziony Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 328–343. Doak describes Zevit's endeavor as guesswork, 103.

³¹ Maier and Dayagi-Mendels, 117–18.

³² Zevit, 328-338.

³³ Zevit, 340.

³⁴ *HALOT 1:329.*

³⁵ I acknowledge that the prophet may have intended for 13b to be understood differently, that the image was made for dwelling in *someone's* house, perhaps in the *idol-fashioner's* house. Goldingay and Payne follow this interpretation. They are bound to their rendering of בית as an adverb, "at home," and subsequently take the entire clause to indicate that the idol was "domesticated" (John Goldingay and David Payne, *Isaiah 40–55*, 2 vols., ICC [New York: T&T Clark, 2006, 353–54]).

³⁶ One readily available symptom of this split in academic fields can be seen in the absence of biblical scholars present at meetings devoted to material culture. While ETS, SBL, and AAR members happily engage and attend meetings related to theology and literature, ASOR members happily dialogue with one another in a different part of town. (This was quite literally the case at the most recent annual meetings in San Antonio, 2016.) The disciplines reap maximal benefit when in discussion with one another but sadly this is often not the case. The advantage is not limited to just literature and material culture, consider philosophy, the sciences, anthropology, sociology, etc.

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