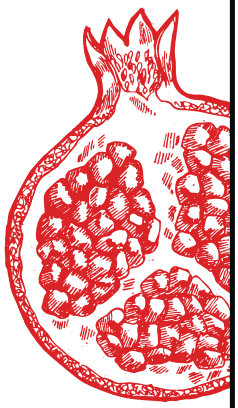
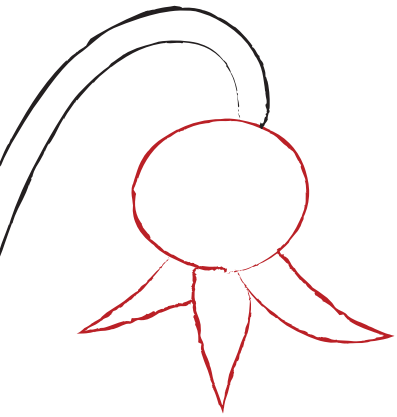
Vol 5, no. 1 2025

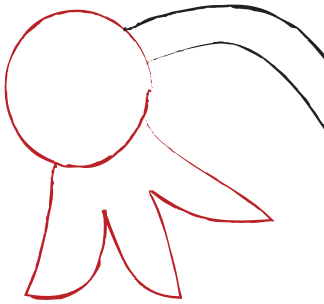


AABNER

ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH



Varia Issue



EABS
EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF BIBLICAL STUDIES

EBERHARD KARLS
UNIVERSITÄT
TÜBINGEN

UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK

Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research (AABNER)

AABNER is a Diamond Open Access, forum peer-reviewed journal, run by and for academics, published in collaboration with EABS. It publishes articles in English, German, and French.

AABNER is an interdisciplinary journal covering antiquity and its reception. It seeks to embody an ethos of academic rigor, equal opportunity, and non-discrimination.

ISSN: 2748-6419
Website: aabner.org
DOI prefix: 10.35068/aabner

AABNER is owned and published by Ami·e·s de la revue Advances in Ancient Biblical and Near Eastern Research, association n° W751258470, Paris, France, with the technical service provider being Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen Universitätsbibliothek, Germany.

2025

AABNER
ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

1 KGS 13
A CRITERION TO DETERMINE THE AUTHENTICITY OF AN ORACLE

Emanuelle Pastore

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2025): 1–21

URL to this article: DOI 10.35068/aabner.v5i1.1154

Keywords: Books of Kings, Deuteronomistic History, false prophecy, oracle, prophecy, true prophecy

Abstract

The pericope of 1 Kgs 13 deserves to be re-examined through the prism of true/false prophecy, despite the objections of some scholars. The question is not so much why the prophet lied—thereby formulating a false prophecy—but rather how to explain the man of God's failure to recognize his confrère's false prophecy. Why did the man of God, if truly assisted by God, not discern that it was a lie? It may well be that the pericope of 1 Kgs 13 offers some answers to this question, providing a new kind of criterion for detecting a lie and, therefore, a false prophecy.

La péricope de 1 R 13 mérite d'être réexaminée à travers le prisme de la vraie/fausse prophétie, malgré les objections de certains chercheurs. La question n'est pas tant de savoir pourquoi le prophète a menti – formulant ainsi une fausse prophétie –, mais plutôt de savoir comment expliquer que l'homme de Dieu n'ait pas reconnu la fausse prophétie de son confrère. Pourquoi l'homme de Dieu, s'il était vraiment assisté par Dieu, n'a-t-il pas discerné qu'il s'agissait d'un mensonge ? Il se pourrait bien que la péricope de 1 R 13 apporte quelques réponses à cette question, en fournissant un nouveau type de critère pour détecter un mensonge et, par conséquent, une fausse prophétie.

Die Perikope aus 1 Kön 13 verdient es, trotz der Einwände einiger Wissenschaftler erneut durch das Prisma der wahren/falschen Prophetie betrachtet zu werden. Die Frage ist nicht so sehr, warum der Prophet gelogen hat –und damit eine falsche Prophetie formulierte–, sondern vielmehr, wie es zu erklären ist, dass der Mann Gottes die falsche Prophetie seines Kollegen nicht erkannt hat. Warum hat der Mann Gottes, wenn er wirklich von Gott assistiert wurde, nicht erkannt, dass es sich um eine Lüge handelte? Es könnte gut sein, dass die Perikope aus 1 Kön 13 einige Antworten auf diese Frage gibt, indem sie eine neue Sorte von Kriterien liefert, um eine *Lüge* und damit eine falsche Prophetie zu erkennen.

AABNER

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
5, no. 1 (Spring, 2025): 1–21

1 KGS 13
A CRITERION TO DETERMINE THE AUTHENTICITY OF AN ORACLE

Emanuelle Pastore

The criteria for judging between a true and a false prophet or between a true and a false prophecy have been the object of numerous publications,[1] especially as these criteria are numerous, diverse, and sometimes difficult to apply. Whether one pays attention to the object of the prophecy, its fulfillment, the moral rectitude of the prophet who pronounces the oracle, the divine legitimacy of the prophet, the suffering destiny of the prophet, or the coherence between the oracle and the Law, it is never simple to evaluate the authenticity of an oracle.

The pericope of 1 Kgs 13 offers a fine opportunity to reflect on this theme in a fresh way. Indeed, the story immediately raises a number of questions that have often been resolved by appealing to one or the

[1] Crenshaw 1971; Hossfeld and Meyer 1973; Vogels 1977, 681–701; Münderlein 1979; Wénin 2004, 351–360; Römer 2014; Ebach 2023.

other criterion as a way to distinguish between true and false prophecy.[2] The episode refers to a man of God who came from Judah to deliver an oracle of evil and condemnation to the wicked king, Jeroboam. The oracle would come true much later, in the time of Josiah. It is therefore presented as true prophecy. Yet, a few verses further on, the man of God is accused of having been disobedient to Yahweh. Yahweh sends a lion to kill him. This brutal end was caused by a second prophet who lied to the man of God, urging him to disobey the instruction not to accept any invitations of hospitality. Not only does Yahweh not rebuke this lying prophet, Yahweh goes so far as to deliver a new oracle announcing the death of the man of God. Finally, the episode ends on a tragicomic note with a final scene in which the prophet buries the man of God in his own grave and begs his sons to, when it is his time, bury him beside the man of God, and he then reaffirms the authenticity of the first oracle that had been formulated against Jeroboam.

The strange episode raises several questions: Why does a man of God from Judah deal with a prophet from Bethel? Why does the prophet lie to the man of God, thus provoking his death? Is this a test, a ruse, or a conflict of interest between the two prophets? Are both prophets "true" prophets? What is really being reproached to the man of God for dying so brutally? Why is the man of God punished for his disobedience but not the prophet for his lie? Is God's behavior arbitrary?

As we shall see, these questions have been answered in a variety of ways. However, I would like to draw attention to certain conclusions that we will have to re-evaluate in the light of our study. Let us start with that of Gerhard Münderlein:

> Despite the experience of classical prophecy, it is not possible to establish an applicable criterion. Actual prophecy is clearly too complex to be summed up in formulas. This resigned realization is illustrated in the Old Testament by the prophet's account in 1 Kings 13. Here, the distinction between true and false prophet is totally abandoned. Even the true prophet is in constant danger of disobeying God (v. 19), and a

[2] All biblical quotations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from: *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (= National Council of Churches of Christ 1993).

> prophet's deception does not prevent him from subsequently proclaiming Yahweh's word (v. 18 ff.). This story presupposes a history of the phenomenon of prophecy, which teaches that there are no criteria for distinguishing between prophets, since the message of one and the same prophet can be the word of God, but also a lie.[3]

Münderlein is right to point out that the story of 1 Kgs 13 leads us to abandon the traditional opposition between the true and false prophet, since the same prophet can assume both roles successively. But what about the prophet's message, that is, the oracle itself? Does this story offer a criterion for discerning whether the oracle is true or false? Walter Gross replies that the text does not even deal with the theme of false prophecy:

> The nabi's lie is of interest … only with respect to its effect, not to its motivation. How is it that the nabi could only make up a word from YHWH by lying? The text does not ask the question. Nor does the problem of possible punishment of the nabi arise. The lie is only of interest because and to the degree that it is suited to move the plot forward. 1 Kings 13 is not about false prophecy. It is about obedience and disobedience.[4]

Gross observes that very little importance is attached to the false oracle of the prophet of Bethel, since the reason for the lie is not made explicit and since there is never any mention of divine punishment for the lie. He thus concludes that this story has nothing to do with the theme of true or false prophecy. This is the statement that most interested me and forms the starting point of my study. Why? Because, *a priori*, the prophet's lie in 1 Kgs 13:18 has all the characteristics of false prophecy. It is clearly introduced by four elements: (1) he presents himself as a prophet; (2) he claims that an angel spoke to him; (3) he pronounces it at Yahweh's command; and finally (4) it is specified that the prophet was lying. It is therefore to the assertion that 1 Kgs 13 is *not* about false prophecy that I wish to respond. The question that interests me is not so much why the prophet lied—thereby formulating a false prophecy—but rather how to explain the man of God's failure to recognize his col-

[3] Münderlein 1979, 139–40.

[4] Gross 1979, 123.

league's false prophecy. Why did the man of God, if he was truly being assisted by God, not discern that the angel story was a lie? It may well be that the pericope of 1 Kgs 13 offers some answers to this question, providing a kind of criterion for detecting a lie and, therefore, a false prophecy.

Delimitation and Structure of the Pericope (1 Kgs 12:32–13:34)

Without entering into the diachronic debate concerning 1 Kgs 13,[5] I shall consider the pericope as a whole and attempt to explain its narrative coherence.[6] I follow the delimitation proposed by Manhee Yoon from 1 Kgs 12:32 to 13:34:[7]

[5] The pericope of 1 Kgs 13 is generally considered in two main parts. The first part (1 Kgs 13:1–10) concerns King Jeroboam and the first intervention of the man of God. Their encounter seems to fit naturally into the context of an opposition between kingship and prophecy. But in the second part of the pericope (1 Kgs 13:11–32), King Jeroboam no longer plays any role. The man of God encounters another prophet, bringing to the surface another issue: the man of God's death. The change of theme between the two parts of the pericope has led to several redactional hypotheses. Two independent narratives may have been combined into one, or the second may have been an amplification of the first. Moreover, because of the similarities between 1 Kgs 12:30–32 and 1 Kgs 13:33–34, chap. 13 is often considered an insertion within the cycle on Jeroboam. Many believe that the insertion took place in the time of Josiah, since he is the subject of a prophecy (1 Kgs 13:2), which, according to the chronology of the books of Kings, will be fulfilled three centuries later. On this subject, see Dozeman 1982, 380–84; Eynikel 1990, 237; Walsh 1996, 176–92; Bosworth 2002, 365–66; Yoon 2016, 11–19.

[6] Others have already taken the same approach, and I will be basing myself on their work: Mead 1999, 191–205; Cogan 2000, 373; Walsh 2001, 179–80; Yoon 2016, 51–52.

[7] Although I have changed the titles of the parts, I have borrowed this proposed structure from Yoon 2016, 47–49, 50–51.

A – 12:32–33 Jeroboam's actions
  B – 13:1–2 Prophecy against the altar of Bethel
    C – 13:3–6 Sign confirming the oracle of the man of God
      D – 13:7–10 Obedience of the man of God
        X – 13:11–14 The two central questions
      D' – 13:15–19 Disobedience of the man of God
    C' – 13:20–26 Sign confirming the prophet's oracle
  B' – 13:27–32 Prophecy against the altar of Bethel
A' – 13:33–34 Jeroboam's actions

The pericope opens in A and ends in A' with the reprehensible actions of King Jeroboam. In B, a man of God from Judah delivers an oracle of destruction concerning the altar of Bethel, the authenticity of which is finally proclaimed by the prophet in B' at the end of the narrative. In C and C', the word announced, respectively, by each of the two men is immediately followed by an action attributed to Yahweh: Jeroboam's hand is paralyzed, and a lion kills the man of God. The man of God's faithfulness to Yahweh's word is tested twice: in D, he shows obedience, while in D' he disobeys. Finally, at the core of the pericope, in X, are the two questions posed by the prophet to the man of God, which I believe are the key to interpreting this text.

The Obedience of the Man of God (1 Kgs 13:1–10)

The story begins in 1 Kgs 13:1 with a mysterious, unnamed man of God from Judah who appears before Jeroboam, who then proclaims:

> O altar, altar, thus says the Lord: "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." (1 Kgs 13:2)

The prophecy is indeed fulfilled a few chapters later, in 2 Kgs 23:15, in the time of Josiah. Thus, the mixed history of the two kingdoms in

1–2 Kings brings together two royal figures: Jeroboam[8] and Josiah. The history of the divided kingship is presented under the sign of ambivalence; the North is systematically qualified negatively, and the South, despite several bad kings, remains placed under the patronage of the good king, Josias.

The prophetic oracle of the man of God is accompanied by a first miracle. When Jeroboam ordered the man of God to be seized, the hand he had raised against him withered (1 Kgs 13:4). At the same time, the sign (מופת) of the prophecy of doom is fulfilled: the altar is cracked and ashes spread (1 Kgs 13:5). This is indeed a sign, since it is given in preparation for a final fulfillment in the time of Josiah, when he will destroy the altar and burn the bones from all the tombs (2 Kgs 23:15–16).

While the sign certainly provides a confirmation function for the oracle—to which I will return below—it also evokes an ambivalence. Indeed, in Deut 13:2–5 the same term (מופת) is used to warn against prophets who, although performing signs, actually go astray from Yahweh by not observing his commandments. The theme of unfaithfulness to the commandments is mentioned in exactly these terms (verb שמר + noun מצוה) in Deut 13:5 and 1 Kgs 13:21. The man of God will rightly be reproached, a little further on in the pericope (in 1 Kgs 13:21), for not having followed the commandment that Yahweh had given him.

Two other aspects of Deut 13 are worth noting. Firstly, according to Deut 13:4, there is the idea of a testing (נסה) on Yahweh's part. Although the same verb is not used in 1 Kgs 13, we shall see that this aspect is nonetheless present in the pericope. Secondly, according to Deut 13:6, a disobedient prophet deserves death. In fact, the man of God will not pass the test of obedience to Yahweh to which the prophet will submit him and will die in 1 Kgs 13:24. In short, the intertextuality between Deut 13 and 1 Kgs 13 seems to shed light on the destiny of the man of God.

[8] With a few exceptions, the Northern kings who succeed Jeroboam are always described as having imitated Jeroboam's sins. See, for example, Nadab in 1 Kgs 15:26; Basha in 1 Kgs 15:34; Zimri in 1 Kgs 16:19; Omri in 1 Kgs 16:26; Ahab in 1 Kgs 16:31; and so on.

Let us return to the sign of the broken altar. Jeroboam is clearly not paying attention to this sign. His main concern is the health of his hand. At the king's request, the man of God intercedes for his hand to be healed, which happens immediately. The king promptly invites the man of God to his home, promising him a reward, to which the man of God responds in the negative, revealing a word that had been spoken to him earlier: "For thus I was commanded by the word of the Lord: You shall not eat food, or drink water, or return by the way that you came" (1 Kgs 13:9).[9] And he leaves. At this point, the faithfulness of the man of God to the word of Yahweh contrasts with the attitude of the king, who shows no sign of repentance over the condemnation of the altar at Bethel. Jeroboam is characterized by his refusal to listen to the prophetic word. In fact, the episode could have ended here, followed by the concluding verses (vv. 33–34), which state that Jeroboam did not rectify his conduct. But a twist takes place on the way back, when the man of God has a decisive encounter.

The topic of the road is in fact very present in the pericope. The term דרך appears for the first time in v. 9. This path leads either out of Bethel or into Bethel. It is interesting to note that in 1 Kgs 13:1–32, there are eleven occurrences of דרך ("path") and eleven occurrences of the verb שוב ("to return"), again in connection with the idea of the road.[10] This numerical correspondence is certainly not due to chance. The two terms refer to the prohibition, against the man of God, from taking "the road of turning back," that is, from returning to Bethel in the literal sense (man) and from returning to sinful ways in the figurative sense (Bethel). Indeed, it is in this figurative sense that the terms דרך and שוב are used a twelfth time again in 1 Kgs 13:33, concluding the sequence on Jeroboam:

[9] The reason and meaning for not taking bread and water can be explained through the figure of Moses. The same fast is asked of him in Deut 9:9, 18. The man of God in 1 Kgs 13 is thus described as following the example of Moses (Poirier 2022).

[10] The verb שוב is also used three times in 1 Kgs 13:3, 6, but not in the sense of which road to travel on. It refers to the physical state of Jeroboam's hand.

> Even after this event Jeroboam did not turn (שוב) from his evil way (מדרכו הרעה) but made priests for the high places again from among all the people; any who wanted to be priests he consecrated for the high places. (1 Kgs 13:33)

Fidelity to the Law is evoked through the metaphor of the road. In 1 Kgs 13:33, Jeroboam is judged according to the Torah. He must "turn aside" (שוב) from his evil ways. In 1 Kgs 13:9, the man of God must "turn aside" from the path that leads to Bethel. We understand that Yahweh has his demands on both the king and the man of God. No one must stray from the divine will manifested through the Law. This indicates that the possibility for the man of God to turn back is clearly an option. He too is a tempted man, and he too must faithfully follow Yahweh's will. If, in v. 10 the man of God shows immediate obedience to Yahweh, he will nevertheless disobey him in the rest of the story. The destinies of Jeroboam and the man of God are intertwined in the story. As Robert Cohn says: "The transformation of the man of God from God's ally to his enemy mirrors the fate of Jeroboam himself" (1985, 35).

The Disobedience of the Man of God (1 Kgs 13:11–22)

From 1 Kgs 13:11 on, "an old prophet" from Bethel comes on the scene. From the outset, a distinction in terms appears between the "man of God" (איש אלהים) and the "prophet" (נביא).[11] But in action, the two visionaries clearly perform a similar role, since they both receive and transmit words from Yahweh (1 Kgs 13:2, 21–22). It is therefore difficult to give a satisfactory explanation of the difference between the two titles.[12] However, the origin of the two visionaries—one from Judah (Southern Kingdom), the other from Bethel (Northern Kingdom)—is an echo of the two kings already mentioned in the pericope: Jeroboam, king of the North, and Josiah, king of the South.

[11] For a brief overview of the discussion, see Knauf 2016, 391.

[12] For a brief overview of the discussion: Bosworth 2002, 366–67.

The old prophet has heard of all the actions the man of God has taken with the king and all the words that he has spoken (1 Kgs 13:11). Before having his sons saddle his donkey to meet him, he asks them a question that turns out to be decisive for the rest of the story: "Which way did he go?" (1 Kgs 13:12). The question can be easily understood at the surface level—in which cardinal direction did he go?—but it could also be understood at a deeper level as asking the man of God about his deeper choices.[13] In other words, is he following Yahweh's way? In the same light, we can interpret the new question formulated by the prophet once he has reached the man of God: "Are you the man of God who came from Judah?" (1 Kgs 13:14). Here, too, the question has a twofold meaning: not only is it a question aimed at identifying the man of God, but above all it is aimed at determining whether he is *really* a man of God, in other words, whether he is being faithful to his mission. The idea of a test, mentioned above through intertextuality with Deut 13, is beginning to take shape. Remember that our proposed structure for 1 Kgs 13 places these two questions at the center of the narrative. Thus, everything that happens in the episode depends on how these two central questions are answered.

The feeling of being put to the test—What way are you going? Are you a man of God?—can still be detected in the prophet's invitation to the man of God. It is the same invitation that King Jeroboam had made: to go to his house and enjoy a meal. The repeated request to come and eat and drink in Bethel sounds like a real test[14] for the man of God. Will he maintain the same position? He responds as before:

> But he said, "I cannot return with you, or go in with you; nor will I eat food or drink water with you in this place; for it was said to me by the word of the Lord: You shall not eat food or drink water there or return by the way that you came." (1 Kgs 13:16–17)

It is indeed on faithfulness to the word received from Yahweh that the man of God is tested. Neither the king nor the prophet have been able

[13] Dozeman 1982, 387–88; Reis 1994, 381.

[14] The term "test" to describe the prophet's actions is used by Thomas Dozeman (1982, 380).

to make the man of God accept anything so far. But the prophet finally succeeds by setting a trap.

The prophet makes quite a different argument, saying: "I too am a prophet like you, and an angel told me this, by order of Yahweh: 'Bring him back with you into your house so that he may eat food and drink water.' But he was deceiving him" (1 Kgs 13:18). The prophet's ruse is shameless: he takes advantage of his rank as a prophet to issue a false message supposedly received through an angel. The man of God falls into the trap: he follows him back to his home in Bethel, where he eats and drinks. Then, paradoxically, a true word from Yahweh is sent to the man of God through the lying prophet:

> Thus says the Lord: Because you have disobeyed the word of the Lord, and have not kept the commandment that the Lord your God commanded you, but have come back and have eaten food and drunk water in the place of which he said to you, "Eat no food, and drink no water," your body shall not come to your ancestral tomb. (1 Kgs 13:21–22)

Prophetic inspiration clearly left the man of God at the very moment when he stopped being faithful to the first word he had received. And prophetic inspiration then immediately joined the other prophet who, until then, had lied. This reversal of roles is all the more surprising given that the criterion of moral rectitude is not a criterion for holding the word of Yahweh. Lying does not prevent the prophet from receiving a true oracle from Yahweh (Yoon 2016, 70). What lesson can we draw from this reversal? At this stage of the story, we still do not know what the old prophet's motives are or what he is going to do. Let us continue our commentary in order to clarify matters.

The Death of the Man of God and His Burial (1 Kgs 13:23–32)

The death of the man of God is somewhat precipitated in the story. Indeed, there was nothing to suggest that it would take place so quickly. At most, the divine punishment announced in 1 Kgs 13:22 foretold the

impossibility of a family burial for the man of God, not his death. No details were given regarding the moment of his death or the circumstances in which it would take place. However, along the way, the man of God is killed by a lion. Once again, the news reaches the ears of the old prophet through intermediaries (in 1 Kgs 13:25 as well as 13:11), to which he responds without any hesitation:

> When the prophet who had brought him back from the way heard of it, he said: "It is the man of God who disobeyed the word of the Lord; therefore, the Lord has given him to the lion, which has torn him and killed him according to the word that the Lord spoke to him." (1 Kgs 13:26)

The prophet immediately discerns and recognizes that these facts concern his guest. Moreover, the lion is clearly perceived as Yahweh's instrument (see also 1 Kgs 20:36).[15] Finally, the reason for the death of the man of God is also made clear: it is due to his disobedience to the divine word. This tragic ending comes as no surprise to the reader, given the reference to Deut 13:6. What is harder to explain is why the old prophet put the man of God to the test by deceiving him with a false word. I will deal with this issue below in the final section.

When the prophet finds the body (1 Kgs 13:28), he is surrounded by the lion and the donkey. The situation is curious: the lion has not devoured either the man of God or the donkey,[16] and the donkey has not fled. Both stand quietly beside the body of the man of God, as if waiting for what is to happen next. This surprising situation confirms that the lion's attitude was divinely commanded (Yoon 2016, 78).

The old prophet takes the lifeless body of the man of God and buries it in his own tomb while stipulating to his sons his wish to be buried beside him. Why does he wish to be joined to him in the grave? He gives the reason in v. 32:

[15] The lion could even be a metaphor for Yahweh's action (see, for example, Amos 3:8; Dozeman 1992, 389).

[16] Nor will he devour the old prophet when he comes to recover the body of the man of God in 1 Kgs 13:28–29.

> For the saying that he proclaimed by the word of the Lord against the altar in Bethel, and against all the houses of the high places that are in the cities of Samaria, shall surely come to pass. (1 Kgs 13:32)

Not only does the correspondence between vv. 2 and 32 concerning the altar of Bethel contribute to the unity of the pericope, it also refers to the reign of Josiah in 2 Kgs 23:16. The old prophet had already understood this in 1 Kgs 13:26. The reason why he buried the man of God in his own tomb finally becomes clear: the mortal remains of the man of God would logically be spared by King Josiah, who, much later, would remember the oracle pronounced about him. The bones of the old prophet, placed in the same tomb as those of the man of God, thus escaped the profanation foretold in 1 Kgs 13:2.

We now understand why the prophet had buried the man of God in his own tomb and instructed his sons to bury him with him. On the one hand, the prophet was seeking to preserve his grave and prevent his bones from being burned to ashes by Josiah on the impure altar of Bethel, a fact that has led several commentators to describe the prophet's actions as "selfish."[17] On the other hand, the prophet's request to be buried with the man of God is not necessarily to be judged negatively, since it helps to highlight the authenticity of the oracle pronounced by the man of God (Yoon 2016, 79). A middle position between these two views would be that the old prophet was simply being clever: once he had confirmation of the authenticity of the oracle, he himself contributed to its realization by burying the man of God; moreover, by burying him in his own grave, he knew that his bones would be preserved in the future.

However, it remains to be elucidated—if that is possible—why the old prophet would manipulate the man of God to put him to the test. After all, in v. 18, when the old prophet had deliberately claimed that an angel had spoken to him and instructed him to communicate a counter-order to the man of God, he had not yet received any word from Yahweh that there would be anything to gain if he succeeded in making the man of God stay in Bethel. So, he was not lying for his own benefit yet. Why, then, did he do it?

[17] Marcus 1993, 71; Knauf 2016, 388.

The Lie and Confirmation of Prophecy

I agree with Yoon, who says that "the old prophet's lie is just an instrument by which the man of God's disobedience was brought about" (2016, 70). Indeed, we must not attach too much moral importance to this lie. The story does not focus on it. Paradoxically, it is the lie that reveals the disobedience of the man of God and highlights the authenticity of his prophecy. As contradictory as it may seem, the lie ultimately serves true prophecy. How should we interpret this?

Let us leave aside the possible reasons why the prophet lied and ask ourselves *why the man of God failed to discern his confrère's lie*. Is there anything that would have enabled the man of God to detect the lie? Most likely, there would indeed have been. My hypothesis is that the mistake made by the man of God was to trust a prophecy when he had no guarantee that it was true. Indeed, there is a criterion proposed throughout 1 Kgs 13 for authenticating a prophecy. This criterion is based on the possibility of verification. In this text, the two "true" oracles (1 Kgs 13:2 about Josiah and the altar and 1 Kgs 13:21–22 about the burial of the man of God)—in contrast to the false oracle of 1 Kgs 13:18—are both confirmed by an immediate, though partial, fulfillment: the altar of Bethel split before Jeroboam (1 Kgs 13:5) and the man of God was killed by a lion, as the prophet was able to verify (1 Kgs 13:28). In this text, the criterion of true prophecy is based on the immediate realization of a sign that testifies to the authenticity of the word that has been received. The two "true" oracles can be recognized as such because they are accompanied by a sign (proof) anticipating their full realization:

- **Oracle concerning Josiah and the altar (1 Kgs 13:2)**
  → sign: the split altar (1 Kgs 13:5)
  → final fulfillment with Josiah (2 Kgs 23:15)
- **Oracle concerning the burial of the man of God (1 Kgs 13:21–22)**
  → sign: the death of the man of God at the hands of the lion (1 Kgs 13:26)
  → final fulfillment with burial in the prophet's tomb (1 Kgs 13:30)

When the old prophet delivered his so-called "angelic oracle," he was unable to provide any proof of the authenticity of his words. The man of God's mistake was to rely on it, omitting the criterion of verification that is imperative for the other two (true) oracles in the episode. The oracle of the man of God in 1 Kgs 13:2 is confirmed by the precursory sign of the breaking altar. And the old prophet's oracle regarding the burial of the man of God in 1 Kgs 13:21–22 is confirmed by the precursory sign of the lion killing the man of God. In the absence of a sign confirming the oracle, it is not to be considered a message from Yahweh but a lie. The test to which the old prophet submits the man of God is, in my opinion, about this verification criterion. The man of God was negligent in disregarding the requirement of a sign or proof that is supposed to accompany any authentic oracle.

What is more, the literary context in which the episode takes place, that is, the entire Jeroboam cycle, supports my hypothesis. As we shall see, the sequence 1 Kgs 11:26–14:20 is also structured according to the same logic: oracle → sign → final fulfillment. I have adopted the proposed structure below from the work of Cohn (1985, 24), but I have changed some of the part titles:

A – 11:26–28 Introduction: Presentation of Jeroboam
B1 – 11:29–40 Ahijah's prophecy announcing the establishment of Jeroboam's kingship
→ sign: the divided coat
B2 – 11:41–12:24 Fulfillment of the prophecy
C – 12.25–33 Jeroboam's sins
X – 13:1–32 The prophecy of the man of God and its (partial) fulfillment
C' – 13.33–34 Jeroboam's sins
B1' – 14:1–16 Ahijah's prophecy announcing the end of Jeroboam's dynasty
→ sign: the death of Jeroboam's son
B2' – 14:17–18 (Partial) fulfillment of the prophecy with the death of Jeroboam's son
A' – 14:19–20 Conclusion: Obituary of Jeroboam

The episode of 1 Kgs 13:1–32 lies at the core of the concentric structure. According to Cohn, the story of the disobedience of the man of God is placed at the center because the fate of the man of God prefigures that of king Jeroboam, who also disobeyed (1985, 33–34). But this proposition about the structure of the tale also considers another logic, that of the systematic fulfillment of oracles. In B1, the prophet Ahijah announces the division of Israel into two kingdoms: ten tribes to the north, and two tribes to the south (Judah and Benjamin, according to 1 Kgs 12:21). The coat, divided into twelve pieces, is the sign that this is going to happen. Then, in B2, the circumstances leading to the fulfillment of the oracle are described: Rehoboam's harshness drove the ten tribes to rally to Jeroboam. In v. 15 of 1 Kgs 12, it is stated that this happened in accordance with the oracle in B1: למען הקים את דברו אשר דבר יהוה ("that he might fulfill his word, which the Lord had spoken"). The idea of the oracle's fulfillment is thus clearly present. In a mirror image, in B1', as Jeroboam's wife goes to consult Ahijah about her ailing son's health, the prophet announces the end of Jeroboam's dynasty (vv. 7–11). As a sign (although this term is not used), Ahijah proclaims the son's death (vv. 12–16). In B2', the child's death is enacted, already anticipating the end of the dynasty. The dynamic oracle → sign → final fulfillment is thus clearly apparent between B1/B2 and B1'/B2', just as it is in the central narrative (X) in 1 Kgs 13. The Jeroboam cycle is thus unified around this dynamic, and 1 Kgs 13 is the key to its interpretation.

Conclusion

This argument, then, leads to three conclusions. Firstly, there is no false prophet in this text, nor is there any opposition between the two prophets, as indicated by the old prophet's emotional words to his deceased confrère: הוי אחי ("Alas, my brother!", 1 Kgs 13:30). Both, moreover, spoke an oracle that turned out to be authentic and that was introduced by the same solemn formula: כה אמר יהוה ("Thus says Yahweh," 1 Kgs 13:2, 21), although the morality of each is reprehensible. It is not a question of distinguishing between a true and a false

prophet,[18] for that is basically impossible. Rather, the challenge is to discern the word spoken by the prophet. The story of 1 Kgs 13 does offer a criterion to discern the authenticity of an oracle.

Secondly, what exactly is this criterion? A true prophecy is recognizable by the precursory sign of its fulfillment. This sign highlights the efficacy of Yahweh's word. If the oracle is true—whether it comes true quickly or in the indefinite future—it must begin to appear partially in the present through a sign. This is the guarantee of its authenticity. In this respect, we have seen that the entire cycle of Jeroboam is structured according to this same logic of the fulfillment of the divine word. Even more broadly, 1–2 Kings tell how the two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, disappeared: because the kings and the people did not listen to Yahweh's word, the two kingdoms were destroyed. In this sense, the episode of 1 Kgs 13 reflects and fits in perfectly with the Deuteronomistic theology of the books of Kings, which Gerhard Von Rad has called a theology of Yahweh's word fulfilled in history.[19]

However—and this will be my third conclusion—the episode of 1 Kgs 13 stands out from certain convictions that are nonetheless Deuteronomistic, such as those we read in Deut 18.20–22:

> "But any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to

[18] This distinction does not exist in the Hebrew Bible. The expression "false prophet" (ψευδοπροφήτης) is found only in the Septuagint, and only ten times: Jer. 6:13; 33:7, 8, 11, 16; 34:7; 35:1; 36:1; 36:8; Zech. 13:2. Since this name is only used in the Hebrew Bible translation, it is already an interpretation, as Walter Vogels says (1977, 682), probably to help the reader understand the stories.

[19] "The Deuteronomist's conception is manifestly this: Jahweh revealed his commandments to Israel; in case of disobedience, he threatened her with severe punishment, with the judgement of total destruction, in fact. That had now actually taken place. Jahweh's words had been 'fulfilled in history they had not Tailed', as the Deuteronomist is also fond of saying. There thus exists, the Deuteronomist means, an inter-relationship between the words of Jahweh and history in the sense that Jahweh's word, once uttered, reaches its goal under all circumstances in history by virtue of the power inherent in it. This conception can be reconstructed very clearly from the Deuteronomist's work" (Von Rad 1961, 78). See also Vogels 1977, 685; Yoon 2016, 154–57.

> speak—that prophet shall die." You may say to yourself, "How can we recognize a word that the Lord has not spoken?" If a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that the Lord has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it. (Deut 18:20–22)

According to v. 20, the prophet who speaks a word that does not come from Yahweh must die. Yet the old prophet of Bethel does not die after lying to the man of God. The episode of 1 Kgs 13 therefore departs from Deut 18:20 on this point. The episode of 1 Kgs 13 supports the obvious: not every lying prophet dies immediately. We have seen that even lies can paradoxically serve true prophecy. Discernment is therefore more complex than what Deut 18 asserts.

Moreover, again according to Deut 18:10–22, the criterion for discerning the authenticity of a word is its fulfillment. But this criterion raises a major difficulty: it only works in retrospect. For example, if the prophecy is not fulfilled until after the prophet's death, how can we accept his word when he speaks it, and how can we consider him a true prophet during his lifetime? The episode in 1 Kgs 13, along with the whole of Jeroboam (1 Kgs 11:26–14:20), solves this difficulty: the sign is, in a way, already a guarantee of the truthfulness of a prophecy; the sign anticipates the full realization of the prophecy, which can take place long after the prophet's death.

Bibliography

Bosworth, David A. 2002. "Revisiting Karl Barth's exegesis of 1 Kings 13." *Biblical Interpretation* 10, no. 4: 360–83. http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/156851502603407 43.

Cogan, Mordechai. 2000. *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday.

Cohn, Robert, L. 1985. "Literary Technique in the Jeroboam Narrative." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaf* 97, no. 1: 23–35. https://doi.org/10.1515/zatw.1985.97.1.23.

Crenshaw, James, L. 1971. *Prophetic Conflict: Its Effect upon Israelite Religion*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Dozeman, Thomas. 1982. "The Way of the Man of God from Judah: True and False Prophecy in the Pre-Deuteronomic Legend of 1 Kings 13." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44, no. 3: 379–93. https://www-jstor-org.icp.idm.oclc.org/stable/43716233

Ebach, Ruth. 2023. *Trügende Prophetenworte: Zum Umgang mit falscher und unerfüllter Prophetie im Alten Testament im Kontext altorientalischer und antiker Divination* [Deceptive prophetic words: Dealing with false and unfulfilled prophecy in the Old Testament in the context of Ancient Near Eastern and ancient divination]. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Eynikel, Erik. 1990. "Prophecy and Fulfillment in the Deuteronomistic History: 1 Kgs 13; 2 Kgs 23,16-18." In *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies: Papers Read at the XIIIth IOSOT Congress*, edited by Chris Brekelmans and Johan Lust, 227–37. Leuven: Leuven University Press.

Gross, Walter. 1979. "Lying Prophet and Disobedient Man of God in 1 Kings 13: Role Analysis as an Instrument of Theological Interpretation of an OT Narrative Text." *Semeia* 15: 97–135.

Hossfeld, Frank Lothar, and Ivo Meyer. 1973. *Prophet gegen Prophet: Eine Analyse der alttestamentlichen Texte zum Thema: Wahre und falsche Propheten* [Prophet against prophet: An analysis of the Old Testament texts on the topic: True and false prophets]. Fribourg: Verlag Schweizerisches Katholisches Bibelwerk.

Knauf, Ernst A. 2016. *1 Könige 1–14*. Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder.

Marcus, David. 1993. "Elements of Ridicule and Parody in the Story of the Lying Prophet from Bethel." *Proceedings of the World Congress of Jewish Studies: The Bible and Its World*, Div. A.: 67–74. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23535749.

Mead, James. 1999. "Kings and Prophets, Donkeys and Lions: Dramatic Shape and Deuteronomistic Rhetoric in 1 Kings XIII." *Vetus Testamentum* 49, no. 2: 191–205. https://doi.org/10.1163/156853399774228975.

Münderlein, Gerhard. 1979. *Kriterien wahrer und falscher Prophetie: Entstehung und Bedeutung im Alten Testament*. Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang.

National Council of Churches of Christ. 1993. *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

Poirier, Jean-Michel. 2022. "À l'ombre de Moïse, l'homme de Dieu et le prophète de Béthel (1 R 13)" [In the shadow of Moses, the man of God and the prophet of Bethel (1 Kgs 13)]. In *Vrais et faux prophètes: comment discerner?* [True and false prophets: How to tell them apart?], edited by Cyprien Comte, 43–55. Paris: Parole et Silence.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

Reis, Pamela Tamarkin. 1994. "Vindicating God: Another Look at 1 Kings XIII." *Vetus Testamentum* 44, no. 3: 376–86. https://doi.org/10.2307/1535214.

Römer, Thomas. 2014. "Comment distinguer le vrai du faux prophète?" [How can you tell the true from the false prophet?] In *Comment devient-on prophète? Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France, Paris, les 4–5 avril 2011*, edited by Jean-Marie Durand, Thomas Römer, and Micaël Bürki, 109–20. Fribourg: Academic Press.

Vogels, Walter. 1977. "Comment discerner le prophète authentique?" [How can one discern a true prophet?]. *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 99, no. 5: 681–701.

Von Rad, Gerhard. 1961. *Studies in Deuteronomy*. London: SCM Press Ltd.

Walsh, Jerome. 1996. *1 Kings*. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press.

Walsh, Jerome. 2001. *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Wénin, André. 2004. "Méfiez-vous des faux prophètes." *Études* 400, no. 3: 351–60. https://doi.org/10.3917/etu.003.0351.

Yoon, Manhee. 2016. *The Fate of the Man of God from Judah: A Literary and Theological Reading of 1 Kings 13*. Toronto: Faculty of the Wycliffe College and the Biblical Department of the Toronto School of Theology.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER
ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

THE DIVINE FEMININE IN THE SONG OF SONGS: A COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Zacharias Kotzé

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2025): 23–38

URL to this article: DOI 10.35068/aabner.v5i1.1229

Keywords: ancient goddesses, female archetypes, hyleme analysis, Inanna/Ishtar, mythology, Song of Songs, the beloved

Abstract

The elusive identity of the beloved in the Song of Songs has long intrigued interpreters. While the allegorical interpretation of the beloved as the people of Israel in the Judaic tradition or the bride of Christ in the Christian tradition is widely recognized, recent scholarship has increasingly explored her role as a representative of diverse female archetypes. Yet, an intriguing avenue remains only partially explored: the possibility of perceiving her as an embodiment of an ancient Near Eastern deity. This article investigates the presence of mythological elements within the character and actions of the beloved. Employing comparative hyleme analysis, it endeavours to illuminate the parallels between the beloved's qualities and deeds and those of Inanna/Ishtar as chronicled in ancient Near Eastern literature.

Die schwer fassbare Identität der Geliebten im Hohelied hat die Forschung seit jeher beschäftigt. Während die allegorische Deutung – sei es als das Volk Israel in der jüdischen oder als Braut Christi in der christlichen Tradition – weithin anerkannt ist, richtet sich das Interesse neuerer Forschungen zunehmend auf ihre Rolle als Repräsentantin verschiedener weiblicher Archetypen. Eine besonders aufschlussreiche Perspektive blieb dabei bislang weitgehend unbeachtet: die Deutung der Geliebten als Verkörperung einer altorientalischen Göttin. Der vorliegende Beitrag untersucht mythologische Elemente in der Figur und im Handeln der Geliebten. Mithilfe einer vergleichenden Hylemanalyse werden strukturelle Parallelen zu Inanna/Ischtar, wie sie in der altorientalischen Literatur überliefert ist, herausgearbeitet.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
5, no. 1 (Spring, 2025): 23–38

THE DIVINE FEMININE IN THE SONG OF SONGS: A COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Zacharias Kotzé

The Song of Songs, nestled within the biblical canon, stands as an enigmatic and captivating text, drawing scholars and interpreters into its rich tapestry of love, longing, and desire. Its allure lies not only in its poetic beauty but also in the complex character of the female beloved, whose identity has long fascinated interpreters and eluded precise definition. Throughout history, scholars have approached the Song of Songs from diverse perspectives, each offering unique insights into its meaning and significance.

From allegorical interpretations to cognitive linguistic analyses (cf. Gault 2019), the Song of Songs has been subjected to a myriad of readings. Francis Landy and Fiona Black (2015) delve into its allegorical dimensions, viewing the work as a depiction of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel in Jewish tradition and between Christ and the Church in Christian interpretation. This allegorical approach, deeply rooted in both synagogue and church traditions, elevates the text to a

sacred realm, where the intimate relationship between the divine and the human is expressed through passionate love metaphors. Saadia Gaon, Rashi, and Ibn Ezra are among the commentators who have contributed to this ongoing conversation, shaping interpretations that seem to transcend time.

In contrast, others have questioned the purely allegorical reading of the text, seeking to uncover its historical and cultural roots. Theophile Meek (1922) proposes that elements within the Song of Songs may have originated from earlier religious ceremonies, particularly those celebrating the union of deities such as the sun god and the goddess of fertility. Drawing parallels between the lover in the Song of Songs and figures from Sumerian mythology, Meek suggests a deeper connection to ancient Near Eastern traditions, where love songs played a central role in religious rituals.

Further explorations of this connection led scholars to consider the influence of cultic love songs, particularly those associated with the Inanna-Dumuzi cult. Meek's theory, although facing criticism, found favor among some scholars, highlighting the enduring fascination with the intersection of mythology and biblical texts. Samuel Noah Kramer's (1962, 1963, 1969) extensive studies of Sumerian literature and love songs mark a significant milestone in this inquiry, suggesting that the Song of Songs may indeed have roots in ancient rituals, possibly nuptial ceremonies where the king played the role of the groom.

Marvin H. Pope (1977) challenges traditional interpretations, proposing a cultic setting for the Song of Songs at funeral feasts rather than at fertility rites. His theory, although eccentric, highlights the multifaceted nature of the text; he draws parallels with Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Indian texts to support his argument. Similarly, Hans-Peter Müller (1976) emphasizes the mythical nuances of the poetry, suggesting a theomorphic elevation of the human being through the incorporation of magical elements derived from Near Eastern love magic.

Othmar Keel (1994) builds upon Müller's approach, highlighting the extensive use of ancient Near Eastern divine imagery in the Song of Songs. Keel's contributions, along with Michael V. Fox's (1985), shift the focus to ancient Egyptian love poetry as a more relevant parallel to the biblical text. By exploring iconographic material from Egypt

and Mesopotamia, Keel illustrates the cultural context of the Song of Songs, framing it as a collection of love songs imbued with mythological allusions.

In recent decades, scholars have expanded their focus to explore socioreligious and linguistic aspects of the text, particularly as they relate to Akkadian love literature. Martti Nissinen (1998, 2001, 2008, 2016, 2023) argues for the continuity and modification of sacred marriage practices, highlighting the transition from Sumerian to Akkadian perspectives (cf. Wasserman 2016). By comparing the formal structure and common motifs between Akkadian love lyrics and the Song of Songs, scholars uncover a shared reservoir of erotic-lyric tradition, transcending cultural and temporal boundaries.

While scholars have explored the parallels between the female beloved of the Song and ancient Near Eastern deities, challenges remain in providing a rigorous and systematic analysis of the mythological elements present. The limitations of prior methods become apparent as scholars grapple with issues of consistency, conflicting narrative materials, and the evolving nature of ancient narratives.

In response to these challenges, this article employs the approach of comparative hyleme analysis, as developed by Christian Zgoll and Annette Zgoll (2020). Unlike previous approaches, hyleme analysis systematically dissects the narrative fabrics of ancient texts, revealing the smallest meaningful units, or hylemes, that contribute to the overall meaning of the narrative. By employing this innovative method, this study seeks to navigate the intricate layers of storytelling, providing a fresh perspective on the enduring resonance of mythological motifs in this enigmatic biblical text.

Hyleme Analysis: Unraveling Narrative Fabrics

In the study of ancient narratives, especially in texts such as myths and epics, understanding the intricate layers of narrative materials is essential. This process allows scholars to dissect these narratives into their constituent elements, which are referred to as hylemes. Hyleme analysis offers a unique approach by focusing on the core building blocks,

or hylemes, of myth rather than the specific narrative structures emphasized in narratology. Hylemes are the smallest meaningful units of a narrative, capturing fundamental actions or relationships within a story. By analyzing these basic units, examining hylemes allows for a detailed comparison of recurring narrative patterns across different texts (Zgoll et al. 2023). Unlike traditional narratology, which examines plot structure and sequence, hyleme analysis abstracts essential elements across variations in myth, allowing for a comparison and identification of recurring symbolic or thematic units that transcend particular storylines. This method enables a more flexible examination of myths across cultures and versions, avoiding the constraints of linear plot while revealing underlying consistencies and broader archetypes within the mythological material. Each hyleme consists of at least one hyleme element, its logical subject, and one hyleme predicate. In the standardized approach, hylemes are expressed in the present tense and active voice, such as: "Inanna is the daughter of Nanna." Sequences of hylemes are given in lists introduced by a dash, for example:

– Inanna is a young, unmarried girl.
– Dumuzi brings gifts to Inanna.
– Dumuzi praises Inanna's beauty.
– Inanna marries Dumuzi.

To distinguish them from the titles of texts, given in italics, such as *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, the names of Erzählstoff versions, or narrative materials, are given in small capitals, for example, INANNA BRINGS THE NETHERWORLD'S INSTRUMENTS OF POWER TO EARTH. Each hyleme contributes to the overall structure and meaning of the narrative, and their analysis can reveal the underlying complexity of ancient stories.

Hyleme analysis begins with the recognition that narratives, particularly in ancient texts, often consist of multiple layers of narrative materials and variants (Zgoll 2019). These materials are combined into a cohesive narrative, creating a multilayered fabric of storytelling. This process is not unique to a specific genre but is particularly prominent in myths and other forms of ancient narrative. For instance, Zgoll et al. (2023) highlight a stratigraphical analysis of the praise song *Inanna's*

Descent to the Netherworld that revealed the presence of at least three different versions of the myth within the composite narrative. These versions were combined to form a complex composition, reshaping the narrative's meaning and significance.

In this context, it is essential to acknowledge that the combination of multiple strata into one composite narrative is a complex endeavor. It is not merely a matter of merging different fabrics into a single garment; instead, it involves the selection of specific narrative versions and the determination of which version holds dominance. This process reflects the priorities of the storyteller and often acts as a battleground for competing worldviews.

Comparative hylistics, a specialized branch of hylistic studies, has emerged as a discipline that focuses on the comparative study of narrative materials across different versions, genres, and media. Zgoll et al. (2023) outline several essential steps for successful comparative analysis, including (1) creating comparable conditions across all variants, compensating for differences in the number of hylemes or level of abstraction; (2) maintaining a meaningful level of abstraction and (in) determinacy in the comparison; and (3) identifying hyper-hylemes that summarize complete external narrative materials in a single hyleme. This comparative approach allows scholars to uncover similarities and differences between narrative materials, even when presented in different textual formats. For example, the myth INANNA BRINGS THE NETHERWORLD'S NUMINOUS INSTRUMENTS OF POWER TO EARTH is embedded in both *Inanna's Descent* and *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, but the contexts provided by each narrative differ significantly. This illustrates how the same myth can take different forms in various textual manifestations (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 128–54). To return to the tapestry analogy—holding up two tapestries next to each other, one might notice both similarities and differences in the two creations. While the core narrative material remains consistent in different textual creations, the context and emphasis may differ, resulting in varying and even contrasting messages.

In summary, hyleme analysis presents a structured and comprehensive approach to understanding the complexities of narrative materials within ancient texts. This analytical framework, considered alongside

the principles of hyleme analysis and comparative hyleme analysis, offers valuable insights into the layers of storytelling, variations, and the interplay of narrative materials.

Hyleme analysis serves as an ideal tool to delve into the narrative fabrics of the Song of Songs, since the comparative aspect allows for the recognition of core narrative materials that persist across various versions in different cultural contexts (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020). Identifying recurring mythological elements or motifs associated with the female beloved within the Song of Songs promises to shed light on the deeper mythological layers concealed beneath the poetic verses of this biblical text.

Mythological Stoff Variants Relating to the Beloved

The narrative material pertaining to the beloved and her actions in the Song of Songs contains various hylemes that bear a striking resemblance to Stoff variants found in Mesopotamian mythology, specifically in the tales of Inanna's descent into the underworld and Dumuzi's death. These myths formed part of a group of "sphere-change" myths about the descent of various deities into the underworld that were very influential from the third to the first millennia BCE in Mesopotamia (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020). The myth of Inanna's descent held immense cultural significance throughout the history of Mesopotamia. It served as the foundation for festivals dating back to the fourth millennium BCE in Uruk and persisted for quite some time, influencing the establishment of deities even in the first millennium BCE. In the context of Mesopotamian kingship, rulers identified themselves as both the spouses of Inanna and the embodiments of the god Dumuzi.

To compare myths effectively, it is crucial to consider mythological substance in chronological order, regardless of the sequence presented in the text (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 98–114). In the context of Inanna's journey, the initial element to examine is the commencement of her sphere change, specifically her descent into the underworld. In her comparison of the epic praise songs *Angalta* ("From the Great Heaven"), traditionally known as *Inanna's Descent*, and *Innin me gal-*

gala ("Mistress of the Numinous Instruments of Power"), traditionally known as *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, Annette Zgoll demonstrates that Inanna's journey was motivated by her desire to obtain instruments of power from the underworld (2020, 115–17). In *Angalta*, Inanna puts on seven tools of influence in preparation for her journey. In *Innin me galgala*, she is dressed in a beautiful garment before leaving heaven to come to earth and enter the underworld.

While the Song of Songs lacks explicit references to the beloved embarking on a journey to the underworld, two key moments in the text evoke memories of Inanna's two deaths within the sphere-change sequence, as depicted in various Stoff variants of Inanna's descent.

In the Mesopotamian texts, although explicit terms for death are tactfully avoided, Inanna's demise is unmistakable. In one version, she traverses seven gates of the underworld, with gatekeepers compelling her to progressively relinquish the seven items of power that she put on in preparation for her journey until she arrives in a state of vulnerability, stripped of her clothing, which symbolizes her gradual demise. Her skin, symbolically interpreted as the "pala dress," is removed at the last gate, representing her ultimate death. Similarly, in *Innin me galgala*, Šukaleduda removes the garment with seven numinous powers that Inanna wore over her genitals before he violates her.

In the Song of Songs, the beloved experiences being "struck" (נכה) and "wounded" (פצע) by the keepers of the walls (5:7), culminating in the removal of her "garment" (רדיד), a term occurring solely here and in Isaiah 3:23's list of beautiful women's attire to be removed by Yahweh and replaced with baldness, sores, and illness as part of his judgment. This parallels Inanna's encounter with the gatekeepers and the ultimate removal of her garment. On a high level of abstraction, therefore, both *Inanna's Descent* and *Inanna and Šukaleduda*, as well as the Song of Songs share the following hylemes:

- someone attacks the female protagonist.
- someone removes the female protagonist's garment.

It is conceivable that ancient readers of the Song of Songs, familiar with the myth of Inanna's descent, would interpret these occurrences as symbolic of the goddess's death in the underworld.

While the female beloved is attacked in the context of her search for her beloved in the Song of Songs, the search motif occurs after Dumuzi's death in *Angalta* and after Inanna had been attacked by Šukaleduda in *Innin me galgala* (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 119). Moreover, while the search for the beloved is an important theme in both the myths and the Song of Songs, they do not constitute the purpose of Inanna's descent in the original myth. Nevertheless, both INANNA'S DESCENT and the Song of Songs include the hyleme:

– the female beloved searches for her male beloved.

Inanna's second death occurs when she usurps her sister, Ereškigal, to become the queen of the underworld. In this version, the Anuna gods pass a death sentence on Inanna, which Ereškigal executes by gazing upon her with "the eye of death" (*i-bi2 uš2-a*) and suspending her lifeless body on a stake.

In the Song of Songs, the beloved is "scrutinized" (שזף) by the sun and "scorched" (חרר) by her brother (1:6). Cheryl Exum (2005, 105) notes that "since the word 'brothers' is not used, but only 'sons of my mother,' no term for the woman's male relatives ever appears in the Song (the term 'brother,' however, appears in 8:1, applied to the male lover)." Wilhelm Erbt (1906, 198), followed by Meek (1922, 10), suggests that one should read "the son of my mother" (singular), rather than "the sons of my mother" (plural), as a poetic parallel for Shemesh, to be understood as the solar deity, which in ancient Sumer was Utu, the brother of Inanna. Reading the poetic reference to the brother in the singular finds support in the fact that the verb (שׂם) is also in the singular.

Most scholars read the verb חרר, "to burn, scorch," as a reference to anger (cf. Pope 1977, 292; Murphy 1990, 109; Exum 2005, 105; James 2017; Gault 2019, 59). The verb is probably related to Akkadian *arāru* and Aramaic חר, "to glow, burn" (Brown et al. 1996). While it remains unclear why the brother(s) would be angry at the beloved, many interpreters agree that the verse centers on the image of burning. For example, Elaine James (2017) notices symmetry between the personified sun gazing at her and the brother(s) burning against her, thereby taking on the scorching qualities of the sun. The image of searing is reinforced

by the beloved's self-description in verse five as שחרחרת, "dark," which doubles the חר, of the roots חרה, "to burn," and חרר, "to burn, scorch."

With reference to the beloved's self-description as dark and beautiful, numerous scholars have written at length about the possible relation, or lack thereof, between beauty and a dark skin complexion in the ancient Near East (cf. Gault 2019). While such considerations may be important, it also seems significant that beauty has been regarded as especially vulnerable to the evil eye throughout history in most cultures where it has been observed (cf. Seligmann 1910; Lykiardopoulos 1976). The request not to be looked at, the self-portrayal of beauty, the sun "looking" at her, and the repeated imagery of scorching all combine to evoke the concept of the evil eye, which in the ancient Near East was linked to the depletion of vital bodily fluids in the victim (Dundes 1981). In this context, the root חרר seems to acquire a sense of ocular aggression in parallel with the sun "looking" (שזף) at her. The sun scrutinizing her with its rays and her brother "burning" against her clearly evoke the desiccating effect of the evil eye. This leads to the hyleme:

– the beloved's older brother attacks her with the evil eye.

This parallels Inanna's older sister's attack with the "eye of death." On a high level of abstraction, therefore, both narrative variants contain the hyleme:

– an older sibling attacks the female protagonist with the evil eye.

Similarly, the sun, or the sun god Shemesh, "looking" at her, or scorching her and drying her out, parallels the Anuna gods killing Inanna, also with the "eye of death," after her skin has been removed in her initial death.

Inanna's second death at the hands, or eyes, of her sister was incorporated to emphasize her dominion over life and death in a composite myth (Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 143–45). By conquering the underworld, she acquires the title previously held by her older sister, Ereškigal, the "Radiant Lady of the Great Earth." The transfer of a deity's name to another deity, thus passing on the power of the original name-bearer to the new one, is a recurring motif in ancient Mesopotamian mythology.

Similarly, the beloved is described as radiant in Song 6:10: "Who is this shining (שקף, "looking down") like the morning, beautiful as the full moon, bright as the sun, terrifying as the stars?" As demonstrated by Annette Zgoll (2020, 145–48), such references to the "Radiant Lady" can be read as hyper-hylemes, condensing the entire myth into a single statement and signifying the great goddess's dominion over life, death, and the underworld. While the Song of Songs lacks explicit references to the beloved undertaking a journey to the underworld in the west and emerging again in the east, as in *Angalta* and to some extent in *Innin me galgala*, the description of her shining like the dawn can therefore be read as a hyper-hyleme summarizing the entire journey.

Ereškigal and the Anuna gods executing Inanna with the evil eye represent but one facet of the "eye of death" in the myth of Inanna's descent. To secure her resurrection, Inanna must first provide a substitute, for which she eventually chooses her own husband, Dumuzi. In the original myth of Dumuzi's death, demons kill him, prompting Inanna's mourning and search for him. In the revised myth, Inanna personally slays Dumuzi by casting the "eye of death" upon him. Annette Zgoll (2020, 138–40) notes that this rewriting of the original myth functions to present Inanna as gaining power over death.

The Song of Songs subtly alludes to this pivotal event in the myth of Inanna's descent. In Song 4:9, the lover laments that the beloved has "ravished" (לבב) his heart with one of her eyes. While interpreters often read this idiom as the beloved exciting the lover with her gaze, it can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the beloved violently assaulting the lover with her "eye of death," as Inanna did with Dumuzi. Support for this interpretation arises from Song 6:5, where the lover beseeches the beloved to avert her gaze as her eyes "assault" (רהב) him. Once again, on a higher level of abstraction, both myths encompass the hyleme:

– the female protagonist attacks the male protagonist with the evil eye.

Annette Zgoll (2020, 137–54) note that Inanna's act of killing Dumuzi in the revised myth underscores her dominion over death. The combined myths of Inanna and Dumuzi also depict her as the one who wields power over life, enabling her to revive Dumuzi from the

underworld. This capability to retrieve individuals from the underworld marked a revolutionary shift, transforming the "land with no return" into the "land with return." This power of Inanna held profound significance for Mesopotamian kingship, as it was believed that the king embodied Dumuzi. Inanna's dominion over life and death, symbolized by her ability to bring individuals back from the underworld, was instrumental in reshaping ancient Mesopotamian beliefs.

Significantly, a comparable theme is discernible in the Song of Songs. In Song 8:5, the beloved proclaims: "I have awakened you under the apple tree where your mother brought you forth and gave birth to you." This awakening conveys a sense of resurrection, particularly in the context of the repeated verbs associated with giving birth. On a higher level of abstraction, therefore, both narrative variants encompass the hyleme:

– the female protagonist revives the male protagonist.

Before this "awakening," she "leans" (מתרפקת) on him, a term that appears as a hapax, presenting a challenge for interpretation. In the following verse, she implores: "Set me as a seal on your heart, as a seal on your arm, for love is stronger than death and harsher than the underworld." In a manner reminiscent of Inanna, the beloved is portrayed as the mistress of life, death, and the underworld. The seals offered as protection against the forces of death and the underworld could well have been associated with the numinous instruments of power that she fashioned in the underworld and subsequently brought back to earth for use in the worship of the great goddess (cf. Zgoll and Zgoll 2020, 143).

In summary, the hyleme analysis applied to the beloved's narrative in the Song of Songs reveals intriguing parallels with Mesopotamian myths, particularly those surrounding Inanna and Dumuzi. These shared hylemes, such as the assault by keepers and the removal of garments, or the concept of the evil eye and resurrection, illuminate a complex interplay between life, death, power, and love in both accounts. The exploration of these common hylemes invites a deeper understanding of the Song of Songs, its cultural context, and its potential connections to ancient Mesopotamian mythological traditions.

Conclusion

The hyleme-based approach provides a systematic method to identify underlying thematic parallels in the Song of Songs and Mesopotamian myths, shedding light on the mythological substratum of the text. Earlier interpretations, such as those by Marvin Pope and Othmar Keel, have contributed valuable insights by establishing connections between the Song of Songs and ancient Near Eastern mythology and iconography. However, hyleme analysis offers specific methodological advantages that enrich these interpretations.

Pope's interpretation highlights the mythological elements within the Song of Songs, focusing on individual symbols and motifs that parallel ancient Near Eastern myths. Although insightful, this approach sometimes examines these elements in isolation, without fully integrating them into the broader thematic structure of the text or its connections to Mesopotamian myth. Hyleme analysis, by contrast, breaks down the text into core elements and investigates how these elements interact to depict the beloved in ways that resonate with portrayals of Inanna in Mesopotamian tradition. This more holistic approach reveals how subtle references to key mythological themes are interwoven, providing a fuller understanding of the text.

Similarly, Keel's iconographic approach draws visual parallels between the Song of Songs' imagery and ancient Near Eastern art, adding valuable context. Yet, its primary focus on imagery sometimes overlooks the narrative and thematic depth of the text. Hyleme analysis complements Keel's findings by exploring how these motifs function within the text's narrative and contribute to its thematic landscape. By situating the Song of Songs within the broader cultural and religious contexts of the ancient Near East, hyleme analysis shows how traditional motifs are reinterpreted and transformed in ways that evoke themes of power, love, life, and death, giving the poem a distinctive literary voice.

In conclusion, the hyleme analysis offers an integrated, nuanced understanding of the Song of Songs, bringing out the complex portrayal of the female beloved through allusions to the myths of Inanna. This approach not only deepens our comprehension of the text's literary and theological dimensions but also firmly anchors it within the rich

cultural tapestry of the ancient Near East. In doing so, hyleme analysis enhances our appreciation of the Song of Songs as a work of profound literary artistry and cultural resonance, offering fresh perspectives that continue to advance scholarly dialogue.

Bibliography

Brown, Francis, Samuel R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. 1996. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Dundes, Alan. 1981. *The Evil Eye: A Folklore Casebook*. New York: Garland.

Erbt, Wilhelm. 1906. *Die Hebräer: Kanaan im Zeitalter der hebräischen Wanderung und hebräischer Staatengründungen* [The Hebrews: Canaan in the age of Hebrew migration and the founding of Hebrew states]. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'she Buchhandlung.

Exum, Cheryl. 2005. *Song of Songs*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox.

Fox, Michael V. 1985. *Song of Songs and the Ancient Egyptian Love Songs*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Gault, Brian P. 2019. *Body as Landscape, Love as Intoxication: Conceptual Metaphors in the Song of Songs*. Atlanta: SBL Press.

James, Elaine T. 2017. *Landscapes of the Song of Songs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Keel, Othmar. 1994. *The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Kramer, Samuel N. 1962. "The Biblical 'Song of Songs' and the Sumerian Love Songs." *Expedition* 5, no. 1: 25–31. https://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/the-biblical-song-of-songs-and-the-sumerian-love-songs/.

Kramer, Samuel N. 1963. "Cuneiform Studies and the History of Literature: The Sumerian Sacred Marriage Texts." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 107, no. 6: 485–527. https://www.jstor.org/stable/986108.

Kramer, Samuel N. 1969. *The Sacred Marriage Rite: Aspects of Faith, Myth, and Ritual in Ancient Sumer*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Landy, Francis and Fiona Black. 2015. *Song of Song through the Centuries*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons.

Lykiardopoulos, Amica. 1976. "The Evil Eye: Towards an Exhaustive Study." *Folklore* 92, no. 2: 221–30. https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.1981.9716210.

Meek, Theophile J. 1922. "Canticles and the Tammuz Cult." *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 39, no. 1: 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1086/369963.

Müller, Hans-Peter. 1976. „Die lyrische Reproduktion des Mythischen im Hohenlied.“ *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 73, no. 1: 23–41.

Murphy, Ronald E. 1990. *Song of Songs*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Nissinen, Martti. 1998. “Love Lyrics of Nabû and Tašmetu: An Assyrian Song of Songs?” In *“Und Mose schrieb dieses Lied auf”: Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient* [„And Moses wrote down this song”: Studies on the Old Testament and the ancient Near East], edited by Manfried Dietrich and Ingo Kottsieper, 585–634. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag.

Nissinen, Martti. 2001. “Akkadian Rituals and Poetry of Divine Love.” In *Mythology and Mythologies*, edited by R. M. Whiting, 93–136. Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project.

Nissinen, Martti. 2008. “Song of Songs and Sacred Marriage.” In *Sacred Marriages*, edited by Martti Nissinen and Risto Uro, 173–218. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Nissinen, Martti. 2016. “Akkadian Love Poetry and the Song of Songs: A Case of Cultural Interaction.” In *Zwischen Zion und Zaphon*, edited by Ludger Hiepel and Marie-Theres Wacker, 145–70. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag.

Nissinen, Martti. 2023. “Female Voices in Akkadian Love Poetry.” In *Reading the Song of Songs in a #MeToo Era*, edited by Elaine T. James and Simeon B. Chavel, 135–62. Leiden: Brill.

Pope, Marvin. 1977. *Song of Songs*. New York: Doubleday.

Seligmann, Siegfried. 1910. *Der böse Blick und verwandtes: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Aberglaubens aller Zeiten und Völker* [The evil eye and related: A contribution to the history of superstition of all times and peoples]. Berlin: H. Barsdorf.

Wasserman, Nathan. 2016. *Akkadian Love Literature of the Third and Second Millennium BCE*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Zgoll, Christian. 2019. *Tractatus mythologicus: Theorie und Methodik zur Erforschung von Mythen als Grundlegung einer allgemeinen, transmedialen und komparatistischen Stoffwissenschaft* [Tractatus mythologicus: Theory and methodology for the study of myths as the foundation of a general, transmedial and comparative science of matter]. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Zgoll, Annette and Christian Zgoll. 2020. *Mythische Sphärenwechsel: Methodisch neue Zugänge zu antiken Mythen in Orient und Okzident* [Mythical changes of spheres: Methodically new approaches to ancient myths in the Orient and Occident]. Berlin: De Gruyter.

Zgoll, Annette, Bénédicte Cuperly, and Annika Cöster-Gilbert. 2023. “In Search of Dumuzi: An Introduction to Hylistic Narratology.” In *The Shape of Stories: Narrative Structures in Cuneiform Literature*, edited by Gina Konstantopoulos and Sophus Helle, 285–350. Leiden: Brill.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER
ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

NEHEMIAH'S TABLE, PERSIAN-STYLE FEASTING, AND LOCAL ELITES IN THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE

Kacper Ziemba

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 5, no. 1 (2025): 39–66

URL to this article: DOI 10.35068/aabner.v5i1.1256

Keywords: Achaemenid Empire, commensal politics, Michael Dietler, Nehemiah, Persian Empire, Yehud

Abstract

Nehemiah 5:17–18 mentioning the governor's table has been interpreted as an instance of Persian-style feasting in the province of Yehud influenced by the sumptuous feasts organized by the Great Kings. This article discusses the two other occurrences of Persian dining, in Lydia and Egypt, comparing them with the biblical narrative and archaeological sources from the province of Yehud. It also applies Michael Dietler's theory of commensal politics to assess how the local elites in the Achaemenid Empire could have used Persian-style dining as a tool for social distinction. It concludes that Persian-style dining was a social phenomenon that could have functioned to bind the vast territories and diverse populations of the empire through a kind of patron–client relationship.

La mention de la table du gouverneur dans le texte de Néhémie 5:17–18 a été interprétée comme un exemple d'un banquet perse dans la province de Yehud, influencée par les somptueux banquets organisés par les Grands Rois. L'article examine les deux autres occurrences de banquet perse en Lydie et en Égypte, en les comparant au récit biblique et aux sources archéologiques de la province de Yehud. Il applique également la théorie de la politique commensale de Michael Dietler pour évaluer comment les élites locales de l'Empire achéménide pouvaient utiliser les banquets perses comme un outil de distinction sociale. L'étude conclut que le banquet perse était un phénomène social capable de lier les vastes territoires et les populations diverses de l'empire par des relations de patronage.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
5, no. 1 (2025): 39–66

NEHEMIAH'S TABLE, PERSIAN-STYLE FEASTING, AND LOCAL ELITES IN THE ACHAEMENID EMPIRE

Kacper Ziemba

The administration of the Achaemenid Persian Empire was an elite affair involving both ethnic Persians and other peoples living in the empire.[1] The highest levels of governance were principally the domain of Persian aristocratic families, with the Achaemenid dynasty on the royal throne. That group, defined by Pierre Briant as "ethno-classe dominante," engaged in relations with local elites, including royal dynasties, temple officials, and urban elites, who were instrumental in keeping Persian rule stable.[2] It was also the case in the province of Yehud, where the

[1] This article was written in the context of the Divergent Views of Diaspora in Ancient Judaism project at the University of Copenhagen. The first version was presented at the 2023 EABS Annual Conference in Syracuse. Many thanks to Alexiana Fry for improving the English text.

[2] Briant 1988; Basello 2021. Note, however, that Briant has revised this idea over the years; see his remarks in Briant 2017, 4–5, and his specific studies in the same volume.

local Judean elite administered the territory partially corresponding to pre-587 Judah.

This article will focus on how Persian-style feasting across the empire involved the local elites. The custom of elite feasting in the Ancient Near East and its political and social consequences are well-studied phenomena.[3] Concerning the Achaemenid Empire, I will address four issues:

(A) The feasts of the Achaemenid kings
(B) Social theory regarding commensal politics
(C) The cases of Persian-style feasting in Lydia and Egypt
(D) The case of Persian-style feasting in Yehud

In this article, I will look at three cases of Persian-style dining that took place in the empire's heartland and the western satrapies. I will use Michael Dietler's (2010) theory of commensal politics as a way to assess how the practice of Persian-style dining influenced the local elites in the empire. Moreover, I will use the concept of patronage to explain the ramifications of feasting in the Persian province of Yehud. Patronage is a mechanism of political and social exchange, defined as asymmetric and reciprocal relations between a patron (the socially dominant party) and a client (the socially subservient party). It allows an individual with political and economic prestige and power to influence other individuals who are subject to them through ties of asymmetric reciprocity. This relationship is based on the mutual exchange of goods and services. Patrons provide non-material services such as protection and access to decision-making bodies or persons within the government. The primary non-material service that clients provide is loyalty. While the patrons may appear to give more in goods and services than they receive, they obtain a valuable intangible benefit from the relationship in the form of enhanced prestige, that allows him to exert political influence over his clients Moreover, the relationship binding patron and client is expected to last a long time and must be voluntary: it is not, in modern parlance, a "one-off" arrangement.[4]

[3] For some examples, see Milano 1994; Altmann and Fu 2014; de Martino et al. 2024.

[4] Westbrook 2005, 211; Pfoh 2022, 2.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

Patronage can also function, and often does, through intermediaries, taking the form of intermediary patronage. The bond may be dyadic, but its practice allows for an expansion into a pyramidal network where a smaller patron is also a client of a greater patron, acting as a broker between two parties, often separated by geographic or personal distance such as differences in rank or office. Therefore, there are at least two unequal parties in this cultural dependency and exchange (Kettering 1988, 425–26).

In the brief passage of Neh 5:17–18 that concerns the province of Yehud, the governor of Yehud, and other Judeans, we read the following:[5]

> והיהודים והסגנים מאה וחמשים איש והבאים אלינו מן הגוים אשר סביבתינו
> על שלחני ואשר היה נעשה ליום אחד שור אחד צאן שש ברורות וצפרים נעשו
> לי ובין עשרת ימים בכל יין להרבה ועם זה לחם הפחה לא בקשתי כי כבדה
> העבדה על העם הזה

> Moreover, there were at my table one hundred fifty people, Judeans and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. Now that which was prepared for one day was one ox and six choice sheep; also fowls were prepared for me, and every ten days skins of wine in abundance, yet with all this I did not demand the food allowance of the governor, because of the heavy burden of labor on the people.

[5] Scholars have widely accepted that the basis of the book of Nehemiah's first-person narrative (so-called "Nehemiah Memoir") is the report of the governor of Yehud written in the second half of the fifth century (see, e.g., Blenkinsopp 1988; Reinmuth 2002; Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2015). However, scholars have also pointed out that the first-person account is a composite text. Recently, Fried has divided the account into the report of Nehemiah, who was supposed to have been sent to Yehud to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and the later added report of the fifth-century provincial governor Yehoʾezer, which includes Neh 5 (2021, 6–11). Earlier, Jacob L. Wright had identified seven layers in Neh 1–13, where Neh 5:16–18 falls into the third, which contains "supplements which illustrate the positive implications of the building project by way of the negative reactions of the enemy" (2004, 340). He argues that the preceding verses in Neh 5:14–15 contain "belated information that Nehemiah also served as a governor" and that one cannot preclude that the information was added by authors in the fourth century (or even later) to contrast Nehemiah with the contemporary governors (Wright 2004, 179). He considers Neh 5:16–18 as belonging to the earliest layer of chapter 5 (Wright 2004, 186).

The governor describes the feast organized at his table. Unfortunately, he does not provide any information about its organization, location, items used by feasters, or circumstances, but he does mention the amounts of food served at the feast and the groups of people who participated. Nothing is explicit about the funding sources for this event or about who bore the burden of paying for it.

One question asked by scholars concerned the identity of the diners: among the governor's guests were the Judeans and the "officials" and "those who came to us from the nations around us." David Clines opined that the Judeans were "Jewish officials" (1984, 171), as did Hugh Williamson (1985, 232) and Antonius Gunneweg (1987, 90). Joseph Blenkinsopp believed that all those who attended the feasts were "the provincial bureaucracy, native and Persian delegations and visitors from other parts of the empire, family members, acquaintances, and assorted freeloaders" (1988, 265). Bob Becking only spoke of "staff members" (2018, 224). Lisbeth Fried argued that the text is corrupt and that the "Judeans" (יהודים) has replaced the "nobles" (חרים); thus, "the men who sat at Nehemiah's table were the Persian nobles residing in Judah, holders of estates granted by the king, satrap, or governor to friends and retainers" (Fried 2018, 827).

The other group was composed of "those who came to us from the nations around us." In the Nehemiah Memoir, members of other southern Levantine communities are the governor's opponents (Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab). Anne Fitzpatrick-McKinley (2015) argued that local politics in the southern Levant were very competitive and involved local elites vying with one another for dominance in the region. Moreover, Peter Altmann posited that the "nations around us" were Nehemiah's adversaries and that "Sanballat and company could fit in this category" (2016, 277).[6]

Another question asked by scholars concerned how such a feast was paid for: the huge amounts of meat and wine consumed during it must

[6] Note, however, that the dating of the passages concerning Nehemiah's adversaries to the Persian period is debatable; see Finkelstein 2018, 71–82, who argues that while the theme of adversaries may date to the Persian period, their naming is secondary and they represent the rivals of Judea in the Hasmonean period.

have costs a pretty penny. Altmann (2016, 287) argued that Nehemiah paid for it from his own wealth. Fried (2018, 824) proposed that the governor of Yehud owned an estate, similar to an *ulhi* ("house"), in or outside the province. In various Persepolis documents, we learn that the *ulhi* was, to quote Briant, "the ensemble of people who worked on an 'estate,' which includes lands and various kinds of farms and which is headed by the master of the house" (2002, 445). In recent years, archaeologists have identified numerous structures that dotted the Judean countryside in the Persian period (Fried 2018, 824). Their function is still unclear, but some were likely involved in agricultural production and would have supplied some of the food and drink for the governor's table.[7] Fried also argued that agricultural sites in the Rephaim Valley were likely the sources for much of the food and drink consumed at the feast (2018, 825). These sites must have been involved in the redistributive system of the province and functioned much like similar sites did in the countryside around Persepolis, which are known to have supplied the royal table. Apart from economic concerns, Fried, along with other scholars, opined that Nehemiah's table was also a local mimicry of the royal customs (Altmann 2016, 287). If we read Neh 5:17–18 against the background of Achaemenid rule, then we ought to look for any archaeological remains that can be linked to Persian-style banqueting in the province of Yehud and then to seek out any comparable material from other parts of the empire as a means to get a fuller picture of the phenomenon. First, however, I will discuss the feasts at the royal court of the Persian kings.

The Royal Table

The main *loci* of Achaemenid feasts were the royal centers in the imperial heartland—namely, Persepolis, Susa, and Pasargadae—and Babylon.

[7] See Faust 2018, who suggests that they were "estates" rather than forts or military installations, as is often proposed; also, see the more critical stance by Kletter and Silverman 2021, who argue that "estates" and "forts" should not be understood as mutually exclusive and that these buildings could have had multiple functions.

The king also feasted in different places outside these three cities owing to the court's nomadic nature.[8] Much information about Persian royal dining—descriptions of the courses, rituals, guests, staff, and so on—comes down to us from Greek authors who perceived the Persian court with numerous biases, presenting it as an example of Persian *tryphé* or "extravagance" (Briant 2002, 255–56). The administrative sources from the Iranian heartland merely refer to foodstuffs delivered to the royal court via the Persian supply chain created by the economic needs of Persepolis (Henkelman 2010, 676–92). They do help, however, to corroborate some aspects of the picture of royal feasting painted by Greek sources.

Greek authors emphasized the opulence of the royal table. Polyaenus, for example, quotes a list of items consumed daily by the king for lunch and dinner. Foodstuffs included flour, meat, spices, milk, fruit and wine. Once, when staying in Media, the king distributed food among his soldiers (Polyaenus, *Strat*. 4.3.32). Heracleides from Cumae, quoted by Athenaeus, also emphasizes the enormous numbers of animals slaughtered daily for the king's table. He adds that each royal guest could take home whatever he left untouched at the meal. Like in Polyaenus's account, the king offered food to his bodyguards and the lightly armed soldiers in his personal guard (Ath. 4.145b–46a). Reports about the allocation of large amounts of food for royal banquets are confirmed by texts from Persepolis from the reign of Darius I, the so-called "J Texts," which concern supplies sent to the royal table in Fars. The items included cattle, poultry, and various types of flour, oil, wine, and honey.[9]

The royal table boasted luxurious tableware. Athenaeus quotes letters attributed to Alexander the Great's commanders, who informed their leader about the loot of cups inlaid with precious stones captured in the wagon of Darius III near Damascus (Ath. 11.781f–82a). Among the types of vessels associated with the royal court, two of them were especially prominent: the Achaemenid *phialē* and *rhyton*. *Phialai* are shallow bowls with carinated shoulders and an everted rim. In our case,

[8] See, e.g., Briant 2002, 186–89; Henkelman 2010, 713–31; Llewellyn-Jones 2013, 74–95.

[9] See some texts in Kuhrt 2010, 607–9.

several pieces were recovered from the Achaemenid capitals: two silver *phialai* were found in Persepolis and another one was discovered on the acropolis of Susa (Colburn 2021, 194). Four silver unprovenanced *phialai* with an Old Persian inscription running around the edge of the vessels explicitly associate them with Artaxerxes I (Colburn 2020).

The links between the *rhyta*—animal-shaped drinking horns—and the king's table are less explicit. A glass *rhyton* in the shape of a bull was found in Persepolis. The gold lion-shaped object now in the British Museum comes from eastern Turkey (Ebbinghaus 2018). As Henry Colburn notes, the lion motifs are reminiscent of the Persepolis glyptic, which allows them to be associated with the royal court (Colburn 2021, 197). These objects could also be gifts from the king to representatives of local elites or satraps. The royal table could also have been a context for the exchange of gifts during its seasonal migrations.[10]

Another vessel that appears in the context of royal residences is the so-called "Achaemenid bowl." Depictions of this deep vessel with an everted rim appear on the Apadana reliefs from Persepolis, where it is carried by members of some delegations from different parts of the empire, including Ionians, Babylonians, and Bactrians. Metal Achaemenid bowls were found in the Persepolis treasury. Additionally, two golden bowls bearing inscriptions with the names of Darius I and Xerxes probably come from the area of Hamadan, ancient Ecbatana (Colburn 2021, 204). The royal centers provide the context for their use on the king's table. However, their significance goes beyond royal dining habits. The fact that the Apadana reliefs depict them carried by members of various delegations from across the empire indicates their use in different places throughout the empire. Thus, they could have served as a unifying item for the communities living under Achaemenid rule (Calmeyer 1993, 160). The fact that their imitations made of less prestigious materials (clay) were found in significant quantities in different parts of the empire—for example, Egypt, Asia Minor, Palestine, and Babylonia—indicates their spread beyond its heartland. Elspeth Dusinberre interpreted this phenomenon as a result of Achaemenid cultural influence across the empire (1999, 98–100), and Colburn

[10] On these phenomena, see Briant 2002, 302–15; Kistler 2010; Miller 2010.

pointed to their role in the expression of the social aspirations of the lower classes (2021, 205).

The setting was another important aspect of the feasts. As mentioned above, the main *loci* of the royal table were the major centers of the empire, namely, Persepolis, Susa, Ecbatana, and Babylon. These places featured impressive palaces, which included an *apadana*, a hypostyle ceremonial hall. Lush gardens—known as "paradises" (Briant 2002, 442–44)—were located in Pasargadae, near Persepolis (Jacobs 2021). Such gardens were also located near the residences of satraps and governors outside the imperial heartland.[11]

The setting of the feasts highlighted the importance of the monarch, who hosted the guests in his residences. The organization of the feast and its dynamics emphasized his status and place in the empire. Heracleides, for example, points out that only some participants of the royal table could eat with the king. However, they dined in his presence, though a veil separated them from the latter. Only during large ceremonies did all the guests feast together in one room. Heracleides's account gives the impression of there being concentric circles organized according to prestige, with the monarch at the center—thus emphasizing the place his place in the empire. However, lavish feasts were not solely the king's privilege. Heracleides mentions the most highly honored guests leaving the court after the first course was served in order to entertain their own guests (Ath. 4.145b–46a). The Persepolis Tablets point out that Irdabama (Darius I's mother or wife), Irtashtuna (*dukšiš*, a "royal woman"),[12] and Karkish, the satrap of Karmania, had their own tables (Henkelman 2010, 693–713).

The royal table was not simply one among many celebrations organized at the royal court. First, and foremost, it was a ritual that empha-

[11] For some sources, see Kuhrt 2010, 615–16; for Karačamirli in Azerbaijan, see Knauß et al. 2013; for possible gardens in Daskyleion in Phrygia, see Kaptan 2010, 831.

[12] In the Persepolis Tablets, according to Madreiter and Schnegg 2021, 1126, "the title *dukšiš* (pl. *dukšišbe*) denotes women who belong to the king's family, such as the princess(es), the king's wife, his sisters, and also the ruling queen, such as Amestris (wife of Xerxes)."

sized the king as the central and most powerful figure in the empire. Second, the unequal commensal circles mentioned by Heracleides reified the stratification of imperial elites. Thus, these feasts contributed to the distribution of social prestige. The custom of handing out gifts by the king was a conspicuous sign of royal favor. Thus, the king acted as a powerful patron for the imperial elites, who likewise acted as patrons for the satraps (and provincial officials), and the satraps posed as patrons for the local elites across the empire, who in turn were patrons of those who dwelled in their regions, a cascading effect emanating from the seat of the empire.

Thus, the royal table was a social and symbolic phenomenon *per se*. An anthropological theory of feasting and commensal politics will, therefore, aid us in understanding the key elements of this phenomenon.

Commensal Politics

Eating and drinking are not only physiological requirements for survival, but they are also social constructs. Social anthropologists have long pointed out the social consequences of food, its preparation, and its consumption.[13] Jack Goody (1982) emphasized that social hierarchies are often maintained by varying degrees of access to and control over food. Commensality is also much more than fellow feasters' conviviality. The banquet may have implications for the hierarchy within the group, the importance of individuals within it, and its identity and cohesion Feasts are in this way theaters of political relations and "provide an arena for both the highly condensed symbolic representation and the active manipulation of social relations" (Dietler 2010, 67). Dietler (2010) described three dimensions of commensal politics based on the consequences they may have for the political and social dynamics of a community: the empowering feast, the patron-role feast, and the diacritical feast.

Within the first dimension, egalitarian elites meet within communities where the social hierarchy is unclear. The feast "involves the

[13] See, e.g., Appadurai 1981; Bourdieu 1984.

manipulation of commensal hospitality toward the acquisition and maintenance of certain forms of symbolic capital, and sometimes economic capital" (Dietler 2010, 75). These feasts are competitive but do not necessarily result in the elimination of the competitor(s) by the host. They have implications for relative status, and their political effects may, therefore, be "subtle, limited, and thoroughly emphasized" (Dietler 2010, 77).

The second dimension, the patron-role feast, involves the "formalized use of commensal hospitality to symbolically reiterate and legitimize institutionalized relations of asymmetrical social power" (Dietler 2010, 82–83). Its organization requires the patron to have access to large quantities of food or exotic products served to feast participants. As hosts of such feasts occupy an elevated status in the community, the institutionalization of authority relies on this binding asymmetrical commensal link between unequal partners in a patron–client relationship. The guests are ready to accept their status of subordination to the host, who is in a certain way obliged to give the feast through the position he holds. On the other hand, the organization of feasts by the host begins to be perceived as his obligation to the group, which is associated with the institutionalization of his power (Dietler 2010, 83).

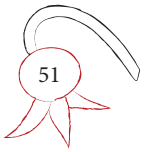
Finally, the third dimension, the diacritical feast, stresses the distinctiveness of the fellow feasters from the rest of the community by emphasising the exclusivity and elitist nature of the event by the use of luxurious or exotic dishes served on unique vessels and consumed in a distinctive place. In the words of Dietler himself:

> Diacritical stylistic distinctions may be based upon the use of rare, expensive, or exotic foods or food ingredients. Or they may be orchestrated through the use of elaborate food-service vessels and implements or architectonically distinguished settings that serve to "frame" elite consumption as a distinctive practice even when the food itself is not distinctive. Or they may be based upon differences in the complexity of the pattern of preparation and consumption of food and the specialized knowledge and taste (i.e. "cultural capital"). (Dietler 2010, 86)

Moreover, this type of feasting "is subject to emulation by those aspiring to higher status. Such emulation constitutes an attempted elevation

of status through representational means, which may focus on either (or both) the mimetic development of styles of action (manners, tastes, etc.) or the use and consumption of objects (foods, service vessels, etc.) that are materialized signs of a particular social identity" (Dietler 2010, 86). This dimension is characteristic of aristocratic and elitist circles and often serves as a tool to differentiate them from the rest of the community.[14]

The dimensions of feasts described by Dietler are analytical constructs, and we should not perceive them as mutually exclusive situations. Different dimensions may interrelate and overlap. The commensal habits of the Luo people from Kenya and Tanzania show that the hospitality characteristic for the empowering feast may help to build an institutionalized position in the patron-role feast (Dietler 2010, 103). Thus, one specific feast may have different dimensions.



We can now turn to two cases of feasting—material and textual references to feasting by local elites in the Persian Empire. Two places provide a fair number of sources for this practice: the Achaemenid satrapies of Lydia and Egypt. We will then finally be able to look at the case of Yehud.

Lydia

Lydia was one of the satrapies of Asia Minor. Greek authors mention Lydia relatively often because its satraps were involved in the conflicts between the Greek *poleis*. Plutarch mentions the palace of Tissaphernes, a satrap at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries, located near Sardis. A lavish garden was planted near the residence (Plut. *Alc*. 24.7). Diodorus reports that after the Battle of Sardis in 395, the Spartan army devastated "Tissaphernes' garden and park (*parádeison tòn Tissaphérnous*), which had been beautifully laid out at great cost with plants and other things for luxury and enjoyment of peace of all good things" (Diod. Sic. 14.2). The archaeological material from the city and the countryside is

[14] A fine example is the Greek aristocratic symposium that provides a parallel to dining in the Persian Empire. See Węcowski 2014.

also quite extensive. The excavations in Sardis yielded a large assemblage of vessels dating to the period from c. 500 BCE to the Hellenistic period (Greenewalt 2010). Although large parts of the material remain unpublished, a general picture has emerged. The Achaemenid period saw changes from the preceding Lydian period. This is demonstrated in drinking and eating ware, as Iranian-style vessels replaced the local ones, such as *skyphoi*, two-handled wine cups (Dusinberre 1999, 96, 127).

The excavations in Sardis revealed a number of Persian-style metal vessels. These contain a silver *phiale*, a ladle with a calf-head terminal, a fluted jar, and three additional saucers.[15] Moreover, metal vessels were found that stem from graves in the eastern part of Lydia in the upper Hermos region (modern Gediz). Two silver *phialai*, including one decorated with eighteen male heads, were found in the İkiztepe tumulus. A silver *phiale* from the site contains gold decorations depicting a Persian king/hero, and another Achaemenid silver bowl probably comes from the site in Gökçeler.[16]

Drinking appears in depictions of elite members attending a reclining banquet. The most famous of these representations come from the tomb in Karaburun, which is dated to around 470 BCE (Dusinberre 2013, 22). One of the depictions shows a man wearing a Persian garment with rosettes and jewelry and holding a chalice in the Achaemenid style in his hand; his servant balances a cup on three fingertips (Mellink 1972, 265). This feat required specific skills and practice and is associated with Persian drinking culture. Xenophon mentions that Cyrus was supposed to have learned the correct way to hold a cup on three fingertips at the court of Astyages (*Cyr.* 1.3.8). The representation of this method appears in the iconography of seals from Persepolis (PFS 170), as well as in other places in the empire (Colburn 2021, 198). Although

[15] See objects in Waldbaum 1983, nos. 963–69; Greenewalt et al. 1993, 35–37; Dusinberre 2013, 132–33.

[16] See Cahill 2010, cat. nos. 167, 168, 189. The pictures are also available at the website of the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis at https://sardisexpedition.org/en/artifacts?publication_name%5B%5D=LATW (accessed October 14, 2025).

no such depictions of the king or people drinking at court exist, it seems to have been one of the symbols of Persian style across the empire. For the local Lydian elites, possessing such vessels could mean belonging to the broader imperial Persian culture. Lydians could learn how to drink and eat in Persian style at the satrapal court in Sardis, or in Persepolis and Susa. An extensive network of roads, including the Royal Road connecting Sardis with Susa, fostered connectivity throughout the empire.[17] Moreover, at the court of a satrap or a king Lydians could receive prestigious Persian drinking vessels as gifts.

The Achaemenid period was a time of change when it came to the drinking practices of the broader subset of the Lydian population. Another vessel characteristic of Lydia in the Achaemenid period is the so-called "Achaemenid bowl," a deep cup with a carinated rim. These handleless, wine-drinking cups made in Sardis from local clay became extremely widespread during the Achaemenid period. Their finds span from the earliest Achaemenid deposits to the Hellenistic period. The large number of finds indicate their use by the wider population. Dusinberre argued that "this indicates some profound shifts in cultural Sardis in the Achaemenid period, probably to do with drinking styles introduced by the elite which non-elites then emulated" (1999, 96).

Egypt

We have three silver *phialai* that stem from Tell Timai in the Eastern Delta. Some authors have dated them to the Ptolemaic period, but the site's context and stylistic analogies with Artaxerxes's *phialai* have led others to date them to the Persian period.[18] Another site from the Eastern Delta that yielded silver *phialai*—two, in this case—is Tell el-Maskuta. One contains an Aramean inscription linking the vessel to Kainu, the king of Kedar: "that which Kainu, son of Geshem, king of Kedar, offered to Hanilat" (TADAE D5.14). The inscription is paleo-

[17] On connectivity and communication in the Persian Empire, see, e.g., Briant 2002, 357–87; Kuhrt 2014.

[18] See the discussion in Colburn 2021, 206.

graphically dated to c. 400 BCE but may have been added later (Colburn 2021, 207). The Kedarites were a North Arabian group allied with the Achaemenids. According to Herodotus, their representatives probably facilitated the route of Cambyses's army through the Sinai (Hdt. 3.88.1) and may have been present in the satrapy since the sixth century (Graf 1990). Indeed, Isaac Rabinowitz argued that the Arabs were garrisoned at Tell el-Maskuta by Darius I to guard the canal linking the Red Sea with the Mediterranean (1956, 9). Thus, Kainu seems to be a leader of the group that helped to secure the Persian hold over Egypt. Some metal Achaemenid bowls made of silver (Tell Timai; Tell el-Maskuta) and bronze (Thebes) have also been found in Egypt. The one from Tell el-Maskuta, like the silver *phialē* just mentioned, contains a dedicatory inscription for the Arabian goddess Hanilat, which places them in the context of the Arab presence in Persian Egypt (Colburn 2021, 211). It is significant that some of the bowls also contain Egyptian stylistic elements. This indicates that they were crafted in Egypt for an Egyptian audience (Colburn 2021, 212).

Persian-style vessels made of other materials are much more numerous. Ceramic Achaemenid bowls have been found in larger quantities, including at Tell Dafana (Delta), Heliopolis, Thebes, Karnak, and the Kharga and Dakhla oases in the Western Desert. Significantly, these ceramic imitations come from many places in Egypt and are not limited to centers of imperial administration. Moreover, some of these imitations have round ring bases, which allows them to be put away half-empty without pouring out the liquid. For these reasons, Colburn believed that they spread independently in Egypt and were adapted to local needs and integrated into Egyptian dining practices (2021, 213–15).

Excavations in Egypt also yielded some *rhyta*. A fragment of a faience object was found at Canopus in the Western Delta, and a ceramic *rhyton* was found that came from a grave in Suwa near modern Zagazig. Three more such objects remain unprovenanced. Some of them were made of local materials (Colburn 2021, 207–9). Although no metal *rhyta* have been found in Egypt, we have literary evidence of their use. Athenaeus, citing a letter from Cleomenes of Naucratis sent to Alexander, mentions the loot that was captured at Memphis (see Briant 2002, 294–96). Among the longer list of cups that were captured are

rhyta (Ath. 11.784a–b). The fact that the loot was captured in Memphis indicates that these drinking horns were part of the furnishings of the satrap's court.

It seems that the use and possession of Achaemenid vessels was a status marker in Persian Egypt. This pertains to both metal vessels and imitations made of cheaper materials. For local elites, the use of metal bowls and *phialai* could bring them closer to the Persian elites. Colburn argued that these vessels "nevertheless functioned as a means of creating new social distinctions at the expense of traditional elites, or maintaining existing ones in the face of social and political changes brought on by Achaemenid rule" (2021, 219). In this way, the phenomenon of royal gifting was a tool for creating new elites. The Achaemenid *phialai* most likely entered Egypt as gifts from the Great King or any number of his satraps. Thus, they were status markers because they were objects linking the recipient with the king in the context of the royal banquet. Moreover, their imitations made of less prestigious materials equally played their role as a marker of the cultural aspirations of the lower strata of the population. This conclusion brings to mind the Achaemenid clay bowls from Sardis. Thus, Persian-style feasting and drinking was a well-established phenomenon in Achaemenid Egypt, whose cultural significance influenced the local elites. Now, after having discussed Lydia and Egypt, we can return to Yehud.

Yehud

Unfortunately, excavations at sites in the former province of Yehud have not yielded any metal vessels that can be associated with the Persian drinking style. In Palestine, metal vessels recovered so far have come from Ain Shems, Lachish, and Tell Safi in Philistia (Stern 1982b, 268), and more bronze objects have come from Khirbet Ibsan to the west of the Sea of Galilee (Amiran 1972). Finally, ceramic Achaemenid bowls were found in several sites in Palestine, including Ein Gedi in Yehud (Stern 1982b, 95).

Although no metal *rhyta* have been found in Palestine, zoomorphic vessels resembling Persian patterns have been discovered stem in the

region. Ephraim Stern (1982a) divided them into four types. First, there is the animal-headed beaker in the shape of a ram that comes from Samaria. Second, we have curved *rhyta* with a crouched-animal base that come from Tel Mevorakh on the Carmel coast, Tel Jemmeh in Philistia, Tel el-Hesi in Philistia (this one was made of travertine and supposedly originated in Egypt), and Khirbet esh-Sheikh Ibrahim (Horvat Dorban) in Yehud. The lion-faced gryphon found at Sepphoris is an Attic imitation of the Achaemenid *rhyton*. Third, there is the so-called "horn *rhyton*" shaped like an elongated horn. This type is represented by the clay, ram-shaped rhyton found at Tell Abu Hawam on the bank of the Kishon River. Fourth, there are "everyday" vessels such as jugs and amphorae with animal-shaped handles. A single fragment found in Ein Gedi is probably the handle of a vessel in the shape of an animal (a lioness?). It appears to imitate Achaemenid metal prototypes (Stern 1982a, 42). Stern argued that all these objects (except the Attic rhyton from Sepphoris and the travertine vessel from Tell el-Hesi) are examples of the imitation of Achaemenid patterns by local potters (Stern 1982b, 42). Moreover, they are "clearly made of local clay" (Stern 1982b, 38). The fact that they are local crafts—two (Ein Gedi, Khirbet esh-Sheikh Ibrahim) stem from Yehud—indicates that local potters were familiar with their prototypes, which were likely used in Palestine. The hypothetical prototypes, *rhyta* made of prestigious metals, have not survived, possibly due to their having been melted down in later periods.

Although the governor's report in Neh 5:17–18 does not mention the location of the feast, we should expect that its locus was the local center of Persian power, as was the case with Lydia (Sardis) and Egypt (Memphis). In Yehud, such a place would be the governor's residence. The location scholars have proposed is Ramat Raḥel, a site located south of Jerusalem. It lies on a hill close to two vital roads in Yehud: the King's Highway from Jerusalem toward Beersheba and the road leading toward the Coastal Plain along the Valley of Rephaim. Excavations conducted since the beginning of the twentieth century have revealed structures interpreted as an administrative center functioning from the eighth to the seventh centuries to the Persian period (Lipschits et al. 2017, 35–118). Two key finds indicate the importance of this place in the Persian

period. The first consists of *yhwd* stamp seals (65 percent of the total found in the province), which support the claim that the site functioned as a local administrative and redistributive center (Lipschits et al. 2017, 98). Moreover, the storage jars discovered there testify to the large storage capacities of the site (Lipschits et al. 2021, 48–57). The second is the surroundings of the buildings: analysis of plant pollen from the site has made it possible to better understand the site's verdure during the Persian period (Lipschits et al. 2012). The garden boasted imported trees and plants such as the Lebanese cedar, citron, and Persian walnut, which do not occur naturally in the Palestinian flora. Other plants—like the willow, water lily, and poplar—needed large amounts of water provided by an irrigation system (Lipschits et al. 2017, 110–11). This image brings to mind the gardens surrounding the royal residences and the seats of the satraps.

The proposed identification of Ramat Raḥel as the seat of the Persian governor has enormous ramifications for understanding Neh 5:17–18. We must emphasize the Persian context of Nehemiah's feast: it was held in a place of power, the Persian governor's headquarters, surrounded by a Persian garden. It is possible that the Persian symbolism went beyond this and was even more explicit. Christine Mitchell argued that a winged disc, like the flying sun-disk representing Ahuramazda found in Achaemenid iconography, could have been present in the palace in Ramat Raḥel (2016, 89).[19] As local elites may have traveled to other centers of Persian power (e.g., the court of the satrap of Beyond the River or Egypt), they could recognize it as a symbol of Persian power. Ideas, people, and objects could move quickly throughout the empire thanks to the communication system ensuring interconnectivity between the provinces (Colburn 2013). We do not know if the governors of Yehud possessed prestigious Persian vessels, but the Royal Road network may have facilitated their circulation across the empire. Although no such item stems from Yehud, imitations made from local clay indicate they were known to the Yehudites. As Ramat Raḥel was a local redistribution center, many locals must have visited the place and seen or heard about the banqueting items. Although the Nehemiah Memoir does not

[19] On the winged disk in Achaemenid art, see Root 1979, 169–76.

mention banqueting staff, its organization necessitates cooks, service, and the like. All this may have contributed to the spread of knowledge about the Persian banquet inside the small population of Yehud.

Despite the influence of Persian-style feasting on the lower social strata, governor feasts seem to have remained elite affairs. The possible use of prestigious vessels and the consumption of quantities of meat emphasized the exclusive character of the Persian feast. The same was true for their location. A lush garden planted in the dry climate of the semi-arid areas south of Jerusalem must have impressed those passing nearby and visiting the site. Its location near two main roads leading south and west meant that most people heading into the city could see it. Thus, Ramat Raḥel was a landmark of Yehud, providing—to use Dietler's terminology—a frame for the diacritical feast. The governor's feast in Yehud could be, as in the cases of Lydia and Egypt, a local instance of Persian-style feasting in the empire.

Conclusion

This article has examined the occurrences of dining in the Persian style across the Persian Empire. Although the material comes from three distinct regions, we can draw some conclusions about the empire in general and about the province of Yehud in particular.

Local Elites and the Persian Empire

Even though the source material is uneven, we were able to discuss Persian-style banqueting in three parts of the Persian Empire. As we lack sources for many parts of the Achaemenid Empire, we cannot say that it was the case elsewhere. However, at least in Lydia, Egypt, and Yehud, Persian-style feasting originating at the court of Great Kings appears to have been a custom that influenced local elites. The administrative centers in satrapies and provinces were places where new eating and drinking patterns spread locally. This phenomenon's nature was diacritical, which allowed local elites to emphasize their position and symbolically indicate their distinctiveness from the rest of the population. The Persian feasting style and drinking cups used during feasts were

a tool for social distinction that allowed members of the elite to emphasize their social standing. The prestigious nature of these feasts was not limited to the location and vessels used. The participation therein required the knowledge of specific customs and skills, as vessels had to be handled properly. One could not put away a half-empty *rhyton* without making a mess on the table. The Achaemenid *phialai* had to be held correctly on the tips of three fingers, as shown by the iconography from Lydia (see above), Babylonia (Kuhrt 2010, 872), and Egypt (Wasmuth 2017). Moreover, the lower social classes imitated the new customs of the elites. It points to the impact that the Achaemenid Empire had on broader groups of conquered populations.

Politics and Patronage in Yehud

The feasts, apart from their role in the politics of Yehud, may also have had consequences for the spread of Persian culture in the province. It is probably no coincidence that Neh 5:17–18 is just one of several passages in the Hebrew Bible influenced by Persian-style feasting (Mathys 2010). The Persian influence on Yehud seems to have been be quite significant.

The Nehemiah Memoir (if we consider that the parts relating to Nehemiah's conflicts with Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem have historical value for our knowledge of the fifth century) indicates that politics in Yehud was highly competitive, with local elites vying for power with contenders from and outside the province. Participation in feasts could therefore have influenced the composition of the elites in the province. Being invited affected a person's position; on the contrary, the exclusion from the governor's banquet would have been a blow to one's prestige and sociopolitical standing. Feasts contributed to the distribution of prestige and—as Colburn postulated for Egypt (see above)—resulted in the confirmation of the position of *homines novi* in Yehud. The acquisition of skills associated with imperial culture may have been important for distinguishing local elites amid elite rivalry in the provinces. A possible analogy is found in Boris Chrubasik's discussion of the elites in Hekatomnid Caria in the fourth century BCE, where "being the best in Greekness" and adopting "Greek cultural elements could give local elites a political tool for their intra-community competition, differentiating themselves from their social competitors" (2017, 106).

The governor's feasts were more than diacritical. The governor, in my view, could have had access to sufficient resources that would allow him to pose as a powerful patron in the province, and Fried has already argued for the governor's table as a patron-role feast (Fried 2018, 831). However, this dimension of the feast could have had more far-reaching ramifications than just strengthening his authority. Patronage was a phenomenon deeply rooted in Palestine and the entire southern Levant, and its features permeated social and political life (Pfoh 2016). One can argue that the feasts were integrated into the native political culture and thus "glocalized" into social mechanisms rooted in Yehud. With the king as the supreme patron in the empire, satraps, local governors, and local officials could have served as middle patrons (or brokers) in their administrative units and beyond, as could be the case for Tobiah, one of Nehemiah's main adversaries (Edelman 2022). One could argue that drinking parties also provided a context for establishing patron–client relations with satraps and other Persian officials in Lydia and Egypt. It was relevant not only to those indulging in the feasts, but also to all engaged in supplying, preparing, serving, and protecting them (if the leftovers were distributed after the banquet was over, as was probably the case for Great King's table).

In this way, Persian-style feasting was not only an opportunity for local elites to showcase their status; it also served as one of the tools that bound together the vast territories and populations of the Achaemenid Empire under Persian rule.

Abbreviations

PFS – Persepolis Fortification Seal
TADAE – *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. Edited by Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni. 1986–1999. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Bibliography

Altmann, Peter. 2016. *Economics in Persian-Period Biblical Texts: Their Interactions with Economic Developments in the Persian Period and Earlier Biblical Traditions*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Altmann, Peter, and Janling Fu, eds. 2014. *Feasting in the Archaeology and Texts of the Bible and the Ancient Near East*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Amiran, Ruth. 1972. "Achaemenian Bronze Objects from a Tomb at Kh. Ibsan in Lower Galilee." *Levant* 4: 135–38. https://doi.org/10.1179/lev.1972.4.1.135.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1981. "Gastro-Politics in Hindu East Asia." *American Ethnologist* 8, no. 3: 494–511. https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1981.8.3.02a00050.

Basello, Gian Pietro. 2021. "Hierarchy and *ethno-classe dominante*." In *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 859–70. Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

Becking, Bob. 2018. *Ezra-Nehemiah*. Leuven: Peeters.

Blenkinsopp, Joseph. 1988. *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Briant, Pierre. 1988. "Ethno-classe dominante et populations soumises dans l'empire achéménide: le cas de l'Égypte." In *Achaemenid History III: Method and Theory*, edited by Amelie Kuhrt and Helen Sancisi-Weerdenburg, 137–73. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.

Briant, Pierre. 2002. *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*. Translated by Peter T. Daniels. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Briant, Pierre. 2017. *Kings, Countries, Peoples: Selected Studies on the Achaemenid Empire*. Translated by Amélie Kuhrt. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Cahill, Nicholas, D., ed. 2010. *Lidyalılar ve Dünyaları / The Lydians and Their World*. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık.

Calmeyer, Peter. 1993. "Die Gefäße auf den Gabenbringer-Reliefs in Persepolis." *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 26: 147–60. https://zenon.dainst.org/Record/000543839.

Chrubasik, Boris. 2017. "From Pre-Makkabaean Judaea to Hekatomnid Karia and Back Again: The Question of Hellenization." In *Hellenism and the Local Communities of the Eastern Mediterranean: 450 BCE–250 CE*, edited by Boris Chrubasik and Daniel King, 83–110. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Clines, David J. A. 1984. *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther: Based on the Revised Standard Version*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Colburn, Henry P. 2013. "Connectivity and Communication in the Achaemenid Empire" *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 56, no. 1: 29–52. https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341278.

Colburn, Henry P. 2020. "Ernst Herzfeld, Joseph Upton, and the Artaxerxes *Phialai*." *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 55, no. 1: 112–17. https://doi.org/10.1086/712774.

Colburn, Henry P. 2021. *Archaeology of Empire in Achaemenid Egypt*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Dietler, Michael. 2010. "Theorizing the Feast: Rituals of Consumption, Commensal Politics, and Power in African Contexts." In *Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics, and Power*, edited by Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden, 65–114. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Dusinberre, Elspeth R. M. 1999. "Satrapal Sardis: Achaemenid Bowls in an Achaemenid Capital." *American Journal of Archaeology* 103, no. 1: 73–102. https://doi.org/10.2307/506578.

Dusinberre, Elspeth R. M. 2013. *Empire, Authority, and Autonomy in Achaemenid Anatolia*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ebbinghaus, Susanne. 2018. "Feasting Like the Persian King." In *Animal-Shaped Vessels from the Ancient World: Feasting with Gods, Heroes, and Kings*, edited by Susanne Ebbinghaus, 135–87. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums.

Edelman, Diana V. 2022. "Nehemiah's Adversary, Tobiah the Patron." In *Patronage in Ancient Palestine and in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, edited by Emanuel Pfoh, 256–64. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press.

Faust, Avraham. 2018. "Forts or Agricultural Estates? Persian Period Settlement in the Territories of the Former Kingdom of Judah." *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 150, no. 1: 34–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2017.1405233.

Finkelstein, Israel. 2018. *Hasmonean Realities behind Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles: Archaeological and Historical Perspectives*. Atlanta: SBL Press.

Fitzpatrick-McKinley, Anne. 2015. *Empire, Power and Indigenous Elites: A Case Study of the Nehemiah Memoir*. Leiden: Brill.

Fried, Lisbeth S. 2018. "150 Men at Nehemiah's Table? The Role of the Governor's Meals in the Achaemenid Provincial Economy." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 137, no. 4: 821–31. https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2018.0044.

Fried, Lisbeth S. 2021. *Nehemiah: A Commentary*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Goody, Jack. 1982. *Cooking, Cuisine and Class: A Study in Comparative Sociology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Graf, David F. 1990. "Arabia during Achaemenid Times." In *Achaemenid History*, Vol. 4: *Centre and Periphery*, edited by Helen Sancissi-Weerdenburg and Amelie Kuhrt, 131–48. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten.

Greenewalt, Crawford H., Jr. 2010. "The Lydian Pottery." In *Lidyalılar ve Dünyaları / The Lydians and Their World*, edited by Nicholas D. Cahill. Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık. https://sardisexpedition.org/en/essays/latw-greenewalt-lydian-pottery

Greenewalt, Crawford H., Jr., Christopher Ratté, and Marcus L. Rautman. 1993. "The Sardis Campaigns of 1988 and 1989." *Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 51: 1–43.

Gunneweg, Antonius H. J. 1987. *Nehemiah*. Berlin: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn.

Henkelman, Wouter F. M. 2010. "'Consumed before the King': The Table of Darius, That of Irdabama and Irtaštuna, and That of His Satrap, Karkiš." In *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court: Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen," Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.–25. Mai 2007*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 667–776. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Jacobs, Bruno. 2021. "The Residences." In *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 1005–34. Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

Knauß, Florian S., Iulon Gagošidse, and Illyas Babaev. 2013. "Karačamirli: Ein persisches Paradies." *ARTA* 2013.004: http://www.achemenet.com/document/ARTA_2013.004-Knauss Gagosidse-Babaev.pdf.

Kaptan, Deniz. 2010. "From Xenophon to Kritoboulos: Notes on Daskyleion and the Satrapal Court." In *Der Achamenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court: Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen," Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.–25. Mai 2007*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 829–52. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Kettering, Sharon. 1988. *Patrons, Brokers, and Clients in Seventeenth-Century France*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kletter, Raz, and Jason M. Silverman. 2021. "'Estates' or 'Forts' in Persian Period Yehud?" *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 153, no. 1: 42–61. https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2020.1751510.

Kistler, Erich. 2010. "Achämenidische Becher und die Logik kommensaler Politik im Reich der Achämeniden." In *Der Achamenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court: Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen," Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.–25. Mai 2007*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 411–58. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Kuhrt, Amélie. 2010. *The Persian Empire: A Corpus of Sources from the Achaemenid Period*. London: Routledge.

Kuhrt, Amélie. 2014. "State Communication in the Persian Empire." In *State Correspondence in the Ancient World: From New Kingdom Egypt to the Roman Empire*, edited by Karen Radner, 112–40. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lipschits, Oded, Liora Freud, Manfred Oeming, and Yuval Gadot, eds. 2021. *Ramat Raḥel VI: The Renewed Excavations by the Tel Aviv–Heidelberg Expedition (2005–2010). The Babylonian-Persian Pit*. State College, PA: Eisenbrauns.

Lipschits, Oded, Yuval Gadot, Benjamin Arubas, and Manfred Oeming. 2017. *What Are the Stones Whispering? Ramat Raḥel: 3000 Years of Forgotten History*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Lipschits, Oded, Yuval Gadot, and Dafna Langgut. 2012. "The Riddle of Ramat Raḥel: The Archaeology of a Royal Persian Period Edifice." *Transeuphratène: recherches pluridisciplinaires sur une province de l'empire achéménide* 41: 57–79.

Llewellyn-Jones, Lloyd. 2013. *King and Court in Ancient Persia 559 to 331 BCE*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Madreiter, Irene, and Kordula Schnegg. 2021. "Gender and Sex." In *A Companion to the Achaemenid Persian Empire*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 1121–37. Chichester, UK: John Wiley and Sons.

Martino, Stefano de, Elena Devecchi, and Maurizio Viano, eds. 2024. *Eating and Drinking in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 67th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Turin, July 12–16, 2021*. Münster: Zaphon.

Mathys, Hans-Peter. 2010. "Der Achämenidenhof im Alten Testament." In *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court: Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen," Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.–25. Mai 2007*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 231–308. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Mellink, Machteld. J. 1972. "Excavations at Karataş-Semayük and Elmali, Lycia, 1971." *American Journal of Archaeology* 76, no. 3: 257–69. https://doi.org/10.2307/503919.

Milano, Lucio, ed. 1994. *Drinking in Ancient Societies: History and Culture of Drinks in the Ancient Near East: Papers of a Symposium Held in Rome, May 17–19, 1990*. Padua: Sargon.

Miller, Margaret C. 2010. "Luxury Toreutic in the Western Satrapies: Court-Inspired Gift Exchange Diffusion." In *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court: Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema "Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen," Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.–25. Mai 2007*, edited by Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger, 853–97. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Mitchell, Christine. 2016. "A Paradeisos at Ramat Rahel and the Setting of Zechariah." *Transeuphratène: recherches pluridisciplinaires sur une province de l'empire achéménide* 48: 77–91. https://doi.org/10.2143/TE.48.0.3178238.

Pfoh, Emanuel. 2016. *Syria-Palestine in the Late Bronze Age: An Anthropology of Politics and Power*. London: Routledge.

Pfoh, Emanuel. 2022. "Introduction: Patronage as Analytical Concept and Socio-Political Practice." In *Patronage in Ancient Palestine and in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader*, edited by Emanuel Pfoh, 1–37. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press.

Porten, Bezalel, and Ada Yardeni, eds. 1986–1999. *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

Rabinowitz, Isaac. 1956. "Aramaic Inscriptions of the Fifth Century B.C.E. from a North-Arab Shrine in Egypt." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 15, no. 1: 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1086/371302.

Reinmuth, Titus. 2002. *Der Bericht Nehemias: zur literarischen Eigenart, traditionsgeschichtlichen Prägung und innerbiblischen Rezeption des Ich-Berichts Nehemias*. Fribourg: Éditions universitaires de Fribourg.

Root, Margaret Cool. 1979. *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.

Stern, Ephraim. 1982a. "Achaemenid Clay Rhyta from Palestine." *Israel Exploration Journal* 32, no. 1: 36–43. https://www.jstor.org/stable/27925823.

Stern, Ephraim. 1982b. *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period 538–332 B.C.* Translated by Essa Cindorf. Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips.

Waldbaum, Jane C. 1983. *Metalwork from Sardis: The Finds from 1958–1974*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wasmuth, Melanie. 2017. "Die Stele des Djedherbes als kulturelles Zeugnis ihrer Zeit." *Archäologischer Anzeiger* 1: 85–123. https://publications.dainst.org/journals/aa/2028/6627.

Węcowski, Marek. 2014. *The Rise of the Greek Aristocratic Banquet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. .

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

Westbrook, Raymond. 2005. "Patronage in the Ancient Near East." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 48, no. 2: 210–33. https://doi.org/10.1163/1568520054127121.

Williamson, Hugh G. M. 1985. *Ezra, Nehemiah*. Waco, TX: Word Books.

Wright, Jacob L. 2004. *Rebuilding Identity: The Nehemiah-Memoir and Its Earliest Readers*. Berlin: De Gruyter.

AABNER
ADVANCES IN ANCIENT BIBLICAL AND NEAR EASTERN RESEARCH

WHAT'S PHOENICIAN ABOUT *THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME*?

Helen Dixon

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2025): 67–87

URL to this article: DOI 10.35068/aabner.v5i1.1246

Keywords: British Mandate Palestine, Egyptomania, Film, Phoenician, Pop culture, Reception history

Abstract

This study examines how Wes Anderson's *The Phoenician Scheme* (2025) invokes Phoenician-ness. While the term references a first millennium BCE coastal Levantine cultural group, this is not the setting for the film Instead, Anderson evokes "Phoenicia" in three ways: as heritage, as a fictional 20th century place, and as aesthetic. First, the film's dedication to Anderson's father-in-law highlights modern "Phoenician" identity as a component of Lebanese heritage, tied to narratives of mobility, entrepreneurship, and resilience. Second, the fictional setting of "Greater Independent Phoenicia" reimagines mid-20th-century Middle Eastern geopolitics, echoing Mandate-era Palestine through artificial borders, infrastructure schemes, and conflict between Western opportunists and regional stakeholders. This constructed geography underscores the persistence of imperial power dynamics beneath the language of investment and development. Third, the film's visual style produces a "Neo-Phoenician" aesthetic, blending Egyptomania, Orientalism, and eclectic references reminiscent of how ancient Phoenician art has historically been interpreted (as hybrid and derivative). Situated within reception history, Anderson's use of "Phoenicia" reflects both intentional and unconscious engagements with ancient and modern identities. Ultimately, the film uses "Phoenicia" as a flexible and fictional cultural framework to explore colonialism, memory, and familial relationships rather than as any direct representation of the ancient world.

Cette étude examine la manière dont le film «The Phoenician Scheme» (2025) de Wes Anderson convoque la «phénicianité». Bien que ce terme désigne un groupe culturel de la côte levantique datant du premier millénaire avant notre ère, le film ne se déroule pas à cette époque. Anderson semble plutôt évoquer la «Phénicie» selon trois axes principaux: en tant qu'héritage, en tant que lieu fictif du XXe siècle et en tant qu'esthétique. Premièrement, la dédicace du film au beau-père d'Anderson met en lumière l'identité «phénicienne» moderne comme une composante de l'héritage libanais, associée à des récits de mobilité, d'entrepreneuriat et de résilience. Ensuite, le cadre fictif de la «Grande Phénicie indépendante» réinterprète la géopolitique du Moyen-Orient au milieu du XXe siècle, évoquant la Palestine de l'époque du Mandat à travers des frontières artificielles, des projets d'infrastructure et des conflits opposant opportunistes occidentaux et acteurs régionaux. Cette géographie construite souligne la persistance de dynamiques de pouvoir impérial sous le discours de l'investissement et du développement. Troisièmement, le style visuel du film produit une esthétique «néo-phénicienne» mêlant égyptomanie, orientalisme et références éclectiques, rappelant la manière dont l'art phénicien antique a été historiquement interprété (comme hybride et dérivé). Dans le cadre de l'histoire de la réception, l'utilisation de la «Phénicie» par Anderson reflète à la fois des rapports intentionnels et inconscients, aux identités antiques et modernes. En somme, le film utilise la «Phénicie» comme un cadre culturel fictif et malléable pour explorer le colonialisme, la mémoire et les relations familiales, plutôt que comme une représentation directe du monde antique.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER

Source: *Advances in Ancient, Biblical, and Near Eastern Research*
5, no. 1 (Spring, 2025): 67–87

WHAT'S PHOENICIAN ABOUT *THE PHOENICIAN SCHEME*?

Helen Dixon

Introduction

As academic specialists in Phoenician history and culture, my Phoenicianist colleagues and I were excited to learn the title of Wes Anderson's most recent film, *The Phoenician Scheme* (2025),[1] and we also cautiously wondered if it would be about residents of Phoenix, Arizona (as so many of our news alerts for "Phoenician" are). Academically, the term "Phoenician" is used to refer to inhabitants of coastal Syria, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine in the first millennium BCE, who wrote in a specific Northwest Semitic dialect of the same name and worshipped a polytheistic pantheon led by the goddess Ashtart. They are perhaps best known for seafaring, purple dye production, and the colonies they

[1] The official distributor is Focus Features (https://www.focusfeatures.com/the-phoenician-scheme). The film was cowritten with Roman Coppola, but he is not credited on the distribution page. The film is now available streaming on many media platforms.

established across the Mediterranean world, including Carthage and the Punic culture it engendered. This certainly is not the kind of historical setting in which Anderson typically does his directing! And of course, the film is not set in the first millennium BCE, but in an alternative past in which a new "Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia" was being built by colonial Western powers somewhere in the Middle East. Nevertheless, there was more to say about the Phoenician-ness of the film than I expected.

Critical analysis of the film is already robust, with emphasis on the redemptive elements of the main character's storyline, including uses of (sometimes quite biblical) near-death and resurrection scenes to underscore the potential for atonement and transformation.[2] But there has been relatively little analysis of the film's title, *The Phoenician Scheme*, and setting, a business venture placed in a twentieth-century "Phoenicia." In this short work of analysis, I argue that Phoenicia is evoked in the film in three main ways: as a heritage, as a fictionalized place, and as an aesthetic. The first two—heritage and place—were undertaken deliberately and likely represent the extent to which Anderson intended the film's title to be what it is. The third, aesthetic, generated by the colonial references the film makes, may be a coincidence, but these visual references end up deepening the significance of the film's title, given how Phoenicians are known (or remain unknown) to most Western audiences. I intend this suggestion as a work of reception history—how I as a specialist see the historic cultural group I study reflected in the decision-making of the director, both consciously and unconsciously, in ways that he may not have intended but which have interesting resonances for those who study the ancient eastern Mediterranean world. While I will not spoil any surprises in the film (since Anderson's movies are more about mood than plot), I will also not narrate the entire storyline in the analysis that follows, though I encourage interested readers to watch the 101-minute film to form their own impressions.

[2] See, for example, Tallerico 2025.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

Heritage

First, Anderson explicitly dedicates the movie to his father-in-law, Fouad Mikhael Maalouf, with the following text appearing for seven seconds over the final scene of the film: "In memory of Fouad Mikhael Maalouf. Born in Bethlehem, died in London. Shaded in life by the cedars of Lebanon" (Fig. 1). Fouad Mikhael Maalouf[3] is the father of Anderson's wife, Juman Malouf, who was herself born in 1975 in Beirut at the outbreak of the Lebanese Civil War. Juman's mother and Fouad's wife is Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh (b. 1945); she and Fouad met at a party in Beirut in 1968, before the Lebanese Civil War, and eventually moved to Saudi Arabia and London together. Anderson's dedication of the film to Fouad Maalouf reflects Maalouf's life as a businessman, often spending long periods of time away from his family while working to

Figure 1: Dedication of the film to Wes Anderson's father-in-law (partial screenshot from 1:35:54; all timestamps are taken from the runtime on Peacock+, including opening logos and credits).

[3] The "Maalouf"/"Malouf" spelling of the family name is associated with Lebanese and Syrian (largely Christian) families, descendants of the Bani Azad of the Ghassanid tribes. "Maloof" is the spelling adopted by Maloofs International, an organization dedicated to preserving the history of the family (established in 1967). See Maloofs International 2026.

build something larger than himself (and perhaps always somewhat out of reach).

In addition to explicitly connecting Palestine (through Fouad's birthplace in Bethlehem) and Lebanon as shapers of Maalouf's identity, the film dedication's poignant nod to Maalouf's heritage likely encapsulates the core of Anderson's intention in evoking "Phoenicia" in the film. Phoenician heritage has become a meaningful component of modern Lebanese identity, especially among Maronite Christian, Druze, and wealthier Sunni communities living in Lebanon and in the diaspora. Scholars like Asher Kaufman (2001) have traced this development to the early twentieth century, when origin stories set in the ancient world were used to legitimize newly demarcated nation-states after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. Positive stereotypes of Phoenicians as highly literate, adventurous, and mobile, and as excellent businessmen[4] have found resonance in the contemporary world for many Lebanese.[5]

Maalouf embodied these values as a Lebanese construction engineer based in Saudi Arabia but born in the West Bank.[6] While there is no doubt that Maalouf identified primarily as Lebanese, Anderson seems to evoke Maalouf's birthplace indirectly, using "Phoenician" in ways that the term "Palestinian" was used under the British Mandate throughout the film, as I explore below. The main character of Anatole "Zsa-Zsa" Korda (Benicio del Toro) is based on Maalouf not only in little details like the shoeboxes in which he kept important records, but also in larger themes like his relationship with his daughter (see, e.g., Sims 2025). It might also be relevant that the Maalouf family is Maronite, a primarily Lebanese Christian denomination with unique Levantine history but in full communion with the Catholic Church

[4] And nearly always "men," as Bärbel Morstadt (2017–19) has rightly pointed out.

[5] One could draw comparisons with novels like *The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dadboub* (Norris 2023), which tells the story of the "merchants of Bethlehem" as heroes of trade and transmitters of global knowledge in the nineteenth century. I thank Izaak de Hulster for this insightful observation.

[6] After leaving Lebanon in 1975 at the outbreak of the civil war, the family lived in London for two years and then Khobar (Saudi Arabia) for six years, before moving back to London.

(Harmon 2025). This Catholicism is likely the context through which the film's heavenly scenes should be understood.

In the film, Korda is constantly surviving assassination attempts undertaken by business competitors, foreign governments, and perhaps even family members, offering a caricatured nod to the ways Lebanon is often caught in the midst of regional violence.[7] His major infrastructure project in the film is called the "Korda Land and Sea Phoenician Infrastructure Scheme," consisting of four parts: a canal, a tunnel, a dam, and a hotel, each a large-scale building project designed to reshape the landscape for future commercial enterprises in the fictional state of Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia. The full project is visualized on a map behind Bjorn (Michael Cera) late in the film (Fig. 2), but it is taken for granted throughout the storyline. This is the second

Figure 2: A map of the four-part "Phoenician Scheme" (partial screenshot from 1:17:50).

[7] A shocking real-world example is the high-profile assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafic Hariri in Beirut in 2005, which was variously blamed on the Syrian government, pro-Syrian Lebanese generals, a lone-wolf suicide bomber, and ultimately a Hezbollah operative, who was convicted *in absentia*. See, for example, United Nations 2005.

way "Phoenicia" is evoked in the film—as a place that does not correspond to any modern nation-state, but that evokes geographies and historical realities in the twentieth-century Middle East. The story is set in the year 1950. Though it is never mentioned in the film, this choice evokes the 1948 declaration of Israel's independence, which was enacted eight hours before the termination of the British Mandate for Palestine.[8] In *The Phoenician Scheme*, the term "Phoenicia" appears in places and phrases where "Palestine" did under British colonial control. Prior to the Mandate period, several regional surveys were caried out and funded by British institutions, including the Palestine Exploration Fund's Survey of Palestine (1872–1880), which became tools of development and control of the region. But the imposition of the boundaries of a fictional Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia are revealed as aspirational when we encounter three distinct regions throughout the film, presented on section cards as we meet three of the project partners:

I. Sacramento Consortium section card (30:42): "Upper Independent Phoenicia (lat/long: 33°N 36°E)"

Tunnel Sign: "Welcome to the Trans-Mountain Locomotive Tunnel" and "Territory of His Majesty the 7th King of Lower Western Independent Phoenicia" (each line followed by a direct translation in Arabic).

The coordinates for this imaginary tunnel, when placed on a modern map, are to be found in Syria, west of Jasim, not far from the contested Golan Heights.[9] This is the section in which we meet the dashing Prince Farouk (Riz Ahmed), who is quite literally pulled into a game he has never played before (basketball). Though he wins, the advantage is all Korda's. The names of Prince Farouk and his father, King Hussein,

[8] The Mandate for Palestine was established by the League of Nations, for British administration of the territories of Palestine (1920–1948) and Transjordan (1921–1946) following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire after World War I (1914–1918).

[9] The world's nations, with the exception of the United States and Israel, view the Golan Heights as Israeli-occupied Syrian territory.

in the film are taken from twentieth-century Egyptian and Jordanian dynasties but with only ambiguous biographical references to their namesakes.

II. Newark Syndicate section card (50:03): "Lower Independent Phoenicia (lat/long: 26°N 36°E)"

Canal Sign: "Welcome to the Trans-Desert Inland Waterway" and "Principality of Lower Middle Independent Phoenicia" followed by Arabic translations and the added note, "No food or lodging next 155 nautical miles."

These real-world coordinates find us in the Red Sea, off the coast of Al Wajh, Saudi Arabia. This project is likely meant to conjure major colonial undertakings of the past, like the building of the Suez Canal (completed in 1869) or the Panama Canal (completed in 1914). In fact, Tanjil Rashid (2025), in his review for *The Guardian*, productively compares the character of Zsa-Zsa Korda to Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal, designer of a (failed) plan for the Panama Canal, and developer of various mines and railways in Africa.[10] But the film's Trans-Desert Inland Waterway might also be intended to reference the long-proposed (never executed) Ben Gurion Canal, another plan to connect the Red Sea to the Mediterranean as an alternative to the Suez (Musmar 2024).

III. Cousin Hilda section card (58:00): "Eastern Independent Phoenicia (lat/long: 29°N 47°E)"

Dam Sign: "Welcome to the Trans-Basin Hydroelectric Embankment" and "Domain of the Hilda Sussman-Korda Private Utopian Outpost, Middle Independent Phoenicia," followed by direct translations in Hebrew.

[10] As Rashid (2025) goes on to point out, the character's name directly references Zoltan Korda, a Hungarian Jewish émigré who directed colonial adventure films in the 1930s.

With the shift to Hebrew and the language of "private utopian outposts," Anderson makes the parallels between his imagined "Phoenicia" and the historical "Palestine" more direct—this is a reference to Israeli *kibbutzim*, collective agricultural or industrial settlements run through shared governance and profit. A modified translation of Exodus 15:8, "Lo, the current stood firm," is inscribed on the dam itself.[11] Even cousin Hilda (Scarlett Johansson)'s name, Hilda Sussman, seems selected to represent a German Jewish immigrant to Israel.

It is all the more interesting that the dam's coordinates are to be found near the border between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. One might think the scope of the dam would point to the Aswan High Dam (completed in 1970) as a reference point, but I think that the Ruafa Dam near Abu Ageila in the north of the Sinai Peninsula (close to Egypt's border with Israel and site of several significant battles between the two states) is more salient to this imagined construction site.

In this political landscape, "Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia" is a colonial proposal that contains factions with very different goals and cultural identities. Despite the dream of modern technological "improvements" that could connect its regions, it is clear to the viewer that they will perpetuate existing hierarchies of power, still dominated by European businessmen and the US government. Anderson seems self-aware of the impossibility of the project of "Modern Greater Independent Phoenicia," since the coordinates given in the title cards do not at all match the constellation of sites as given in the Figure 2 map, which shows the three sites together with the hotel (whose coordinates are never given) on a single landmass, traversed by a river. The section cards function to introduce the different sects or parties, each motivated by distinct worldviews, who are being pushed to invest in the Phoenician scheme. The hotel serves as the place where the fragile agreement is articulated, brokered, and then disintegrates (perhaps

[11] The closest published translation I could find is in the 2004 Holman Christian Standard Bible: "The currents stood firm like a dam" ("Lo," common in the 1611 KJV translation, typically translates Biblical Hebrew *hinneh*, which is not present in the verse).

suggesting historical referents like the King David Hotel in Jerusalem or the Phoenicia Intercontinental in Beirut).

In terms of landscapes, while the movie was filmed entirely at the Babelsberg Studio in Potsdam, just outside Berlin, Germany, constructed outdoor sets draw inspiration from Egypt, Jordan, the Sinai, and even Turkish monumental art. Most of the glimpses we get of "Phoenicia" are of flat desert settings, very unlike modern Lebanon with its coastal cities, cedar forests, and mountain villages. Instead, Anderson has deliberately placed the characters among Ozymandias-like monuments (Shelley 1818) when Korda waits with his daughter Liesel (Mia Threapleton) by the train tracks (Fig. 3). These shots appear reminiscent of photography at the turn of the twentieth century, with staid composition and low color saturation, as the sun and desert sands create a sepia-like tone, as if the film had been hand-colored. The visible sculpture heads in these scenes (one bearded, one beardless, both in conical hats) are a direct homage to the monumental fragments from Mount Nemrut in Kahta in southeastern Turkey. The original heads come from a royal tomb and sanctuary built near the summit of the mountain by King Antiochus I of Commagene (a Greco-Iranian kingdom that lasted about 235 years) in 62 BCE (Fig. 4). Nemrut Dağ was made a UNESCO

Figure 3: Left: Korda with Liesel, waiting for Prince Farouk; Right: a view of the train tracks (partial screenshots from around 31:00).

Figure 4: Image of the Nemrut Dağ UNESCO heritage site today (Wikimedia; u/Efekan06).[12]

World Heritage Site, acknowledging one of the most colossal undertakings of the Hellenistic period that "is evidence of the dual origin of this kingdom's culture" (i.e., both Persian and Greek iconographies are represented at the site; UNESCO 1987). Taken out of their mountainous context, these heads are never referred to by the characters who walk and do business beside them. They are both mysterious and banal, something left behind that also points to the mythical importance of the landscape in the minds of those who wish to control it.

The final location for the film's business negotiations is the "Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace" hotel, sold to an American conglomerate ("who ruined it, of course," as Korda says). The lobby and ballrooms of this hotel are used for the "signature-signing ceremony" for the "Association of Infrastructure Philanthropists."

[12] Available online at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Nemrut#/media/File:Nemrut_mountain_and_blue_sky.jpg (accessed August 20, 2025).

Korda describes the venue as "situated on a precarious border among three fiefdoms, two of which remain under martial law after a military coup." Seated at the table are King Hussain Fouad of Lower Western Independent Phoenicia (Mardini Abdulaziz); Leland, a representative of the Sacramento Consortium (Tom Hanks); Marseille Bob of the Savarin-Montrachet gang (Mathieu Amalric); Marty from the Newark Syndicate (Jeffrey Wright); Hilda Sussman-Korda for the "Private Utopian Outpost" (Scarlett Johansson); a cardinal representing the Roman Catholic Church (Johannes Krisch); along with Uncle Nubar (Benedict Cumberbatch). These complicated national, corporate, and religious leaders are brought together (along with the American "handlers" watching them) in a set drawn straight out of American Egyptomania.[13] The setting and ceremonial dress Korda puts on for his presentation represent the third and most indirect way in which Phoenician-ness shows up in *The Phoenician Scheme*.

Aesthetic

There is what I will call a kind of "Neo-Phoenician" aesthetic identifiable especially in scenes that take place in this final project location, the hotel. While Anderson is primarily engaging late-nineteenth to early-twentieth century Egyptomania[14] (or "Egyptian Revival" style) in these scenes, added contextual elements like Korda's ceremonial dress, the audience of representatives of the various regions of "Phoenicia," and the interest in Egyptian (and other) cultural elements in first-millennium BCE Phoenician art work together to convey a unique—but still Orientalizing—aesthetic in the culmination of the negotiations in the film. In Edward Said's articulation of the term,

[13] The term "Egyptomania" refers to a cultural phenomenon whereby interpretations of Egyptian art, religion, and culture are incorporated into the fashion, interior design, or other elements of a non-Egyptian group. For historical context, see, for example, Humbert et al. 1994; Colla 2007. For examples of American Egyptomania, see Brier 2004.

[14] For more on Egyptomania, see the series beginning with Elniski 2024.

"Orientalism" refers to Western depictions of the East that reductively construct an alluring and threatening "other." Anderson's sets and costuming reject simple interpretations of this aesthetic (the threatening Uncle Nubar always appears in a Western-style suit, for example), instead offering a complex pastiche of modern and ancient imagery the characters register and navigate in unspoken ways throughout the film.

Wes Anderson's mother, Texas Anne Anderson (née Burroughs), studied archaeology in graduate school at Rice University after divorcing Wes's father in 1977.[15] One wonders if she would have had a copy of something like Sabatino Moscati's *The World of the Phoenicians*, which had been translated from Italian to English in 1968, around the house for Wes to stumble upon. Whether or not this kind of direct exposure is traceable, "Phoenician art" has long been (problematically) described as eclectic, a mix of iconography that could be seen as drawing on Egyptian, Achaemenid Persian, and Greek elements (see, e.g., Martin 2021). The major collections of Phoenician art are also the products of colonial rule in the Levant: the collections at the Louvre in Paris, the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, and the British Museum each compete with the collections at the Beirut National Museum and have introduced Phoenician art to museum-going publics outside of the Levantine coast.

In the film, the ballrooms at the "Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace" hotel are similarly eclectic—fantastic gold and pastel renderings of Egyptian Revival architecture (Fig. 5), with papyriform patterns rendered in Art Deco style along dramatic curtains at center stage (Fig. 6). Of course, these Egyptianizing and Art Deco elements could be interpreted as the gaudy and eclectic self-presentation of an American entrepreneurial and industrial milieu in the early twentieth century. For example, a similarly Orientalizing aesthetic can be found in historic 1920s American buildings like the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, built in 1928 as the grand headquarters for Atlanta's Shriners and explicitly inspired by the Alhambra in Granada, Spain, and the

[15] The full obituary is available at https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/houstonchronicle/name/texas-anderson-obituary?id=56465591 (accessed August 20, 2025).

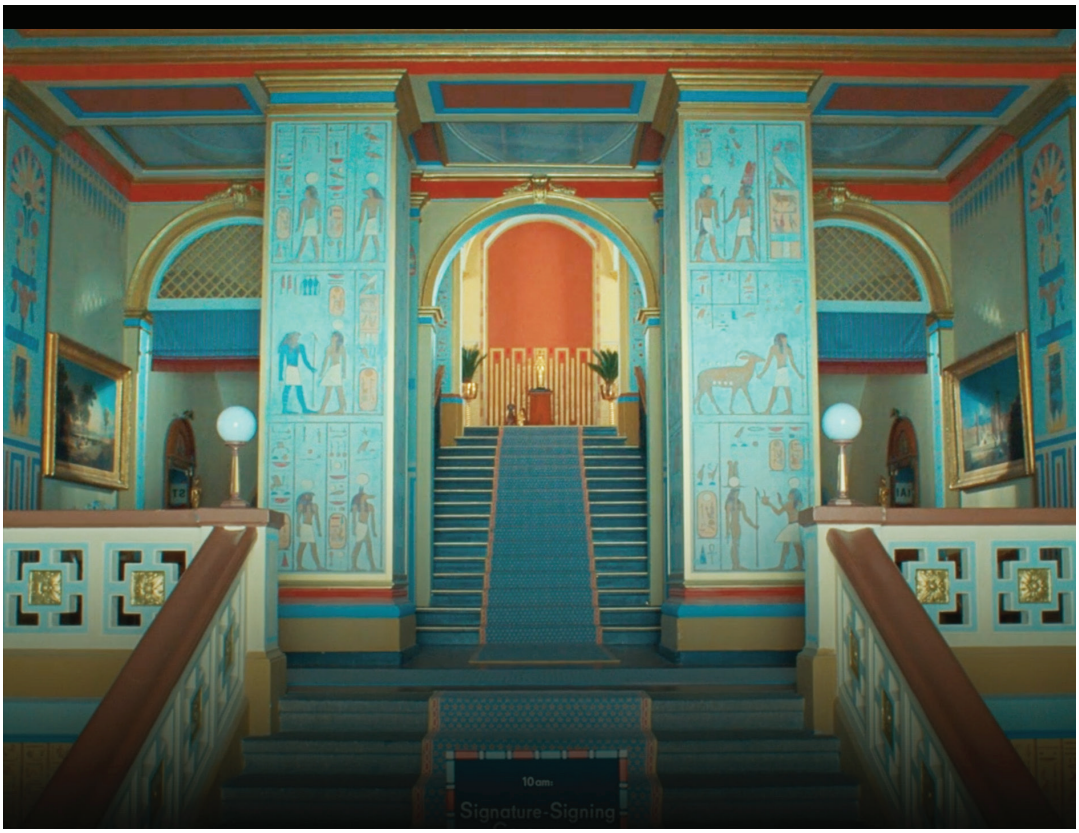


Figure 5: The entrance to the ballroom at the "Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace," hotel where the signing of the agreement will take place (partial screenshot from 1:17:30).

Temple of Karnak in Luxor, Egypt.[16] But the Anderson presentation is not cartoonish or clashing—the effect is curated, pulled from a specific palette of ancient and colonial referents.

In particularly striking scenes, Uncle Nubar's executive suites feature canopic jars and pharaonic statuettes alongside Orientalizing paintings (Fig. 7). But this interest in all things Egyptian is also traceable to the Phoenicians themselves—two kings of the city-state of Sidon had themselves buried in Egyptian sarcophagi (King Tabnit and Eshmunazor

[16] Fox Theatre 2026. The Shriners are a fraternal Masonic organization that was established in New York in 1872, originally known as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AAONMS). The organization still contributes to a network of nonprofit children's hospitals and medical facilities throughout North America. See Shriners International 2026.

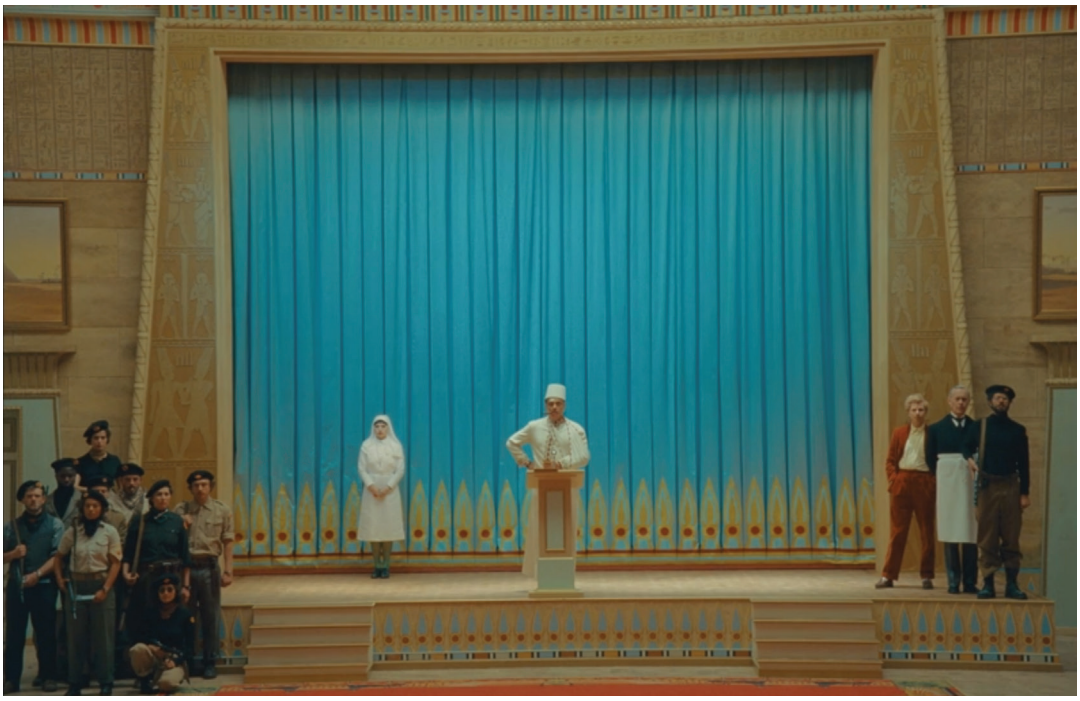


Figure 6: The presentation stage in the "Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace" hotel ballroom, with Korda at the podium (partial screenshot from 1:17:33).

Figure 7: The interior of the executive suites in the "Royal Majestic Imperial Calouste Korda Desert Oasis Palace" hotel, where Uncle Nubar is staying (partial screenshot from 1:20:56).

II),[17] and Egyptian hieroglyph-shaped amulets were the preferred grave good for the inhabitants of Amrit, Tyre, and Sarepta in the first millennium BCE. I have no way of knowing if Anderson was informed by light research on Phoenician art and architecture or simply embraced his own eclectic vision of the early-twentieth century cultural interest in the past, but the result is (perhaps accidentally) an intriguing neo-Phoenician aesthetic. The "Phoenician-ness" of this Egyptomaniacal dreamscape is emphasized when Korda puts on a long white garment with stylized papyrus fronds woven into its edges. The white fez is perhaps a nod to Druze leaders / initiated men (in modern Lebanon, Syria, Israel, and elsewhere), who often wear a red fez wrapped in a white band or cloth (Textile Research Center Leiden 2018). We first see him in this outfit alongside the Catholic Liesel and secular Hilda in the ballroom, all in completely different white ceremonial attire (Fig. 8). Much ink has been spilled over Anderson's fetishization (across several films) of the Ottoman fez as a symbol of un-self-aware colonialism.[18] But this white

Figure 8: Liesel, "Zsa Zsa" Korda, and Hilda dressed in white in preparation for the formal signing of the final agreement (partial screenshot from 1:17:58).

[17] Louvre AO 4806, https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010120357.

[18] For example, Ed 2025; Rashid 2025.

fez sets Korda apart from even other fez-wearers at the negotiations and in sharp contrast with Uncle Nubar's Western, dark pinstripe suit in their fight scene.

Before ending my analysis, it is worth reflecting more globally on *The Phoenician Scheme*'s appearance at this historical moment. In a fictional op-ed published by *The Onion* just after the film's theater release, Anderson himself asks "You Sure You're in the Mood for Another Wes Anderson Film with Everything That's Going On?" (The Onion 2025). This humorous fake column is about the collapse of American civil liberties and democracy, a jarring time for Anderson's quirky fare. But we might ask the same question about the ways in which Phoenicia in this film covers for the colonial "Palestine," a term now inseparable from a contemporary world in which famine, humanitarian crisis, and violence in the region are ongoing while the US president openly threatened to "own" the Gaza Strip (Liptak 2025). The film certainly acknowledges the broken and reactionary people who were responsible for devastating decisions and technologies made in the mid-twentieth century and the insidiousness of Western interference in the Near and Middle East. It is only the man targeted for assassination after assassination who repeats "myself, I feel very safe," and it is the next generation who finds themselves reeling at the inhumanity of the world as they inherit it.

The Phoenician Scheme is being pitched as "the story of a family and a family business" (Focus Features 2025), and Anderson's dedication of the film makes it clear that in some way it is also a story about his own family. Further, Phoenicia as a construct is not Palestine:[19] Phoenicians are appealing ancestors precisely because they survived many powerful empires and precede the divisions brought on by monotheisms. As I have emphasized above, I do not mean to imply that the points I have

[19] The etymological root of the word "Palestine," *p-l-s-t*, is instead associated with the Peleset group (likely from the Aegean world), which arrived in the Levant during the migrations at the end of the Late Bronze Age, becoming known in the Hebrew Bible by the Northwest Semitic term "Philistines." For more on the Philistines as depicted in the Hebrew Bible, see, for example, Dothan and Cohn 1994; and the bibliography in Ehrlich 2000. For more on the study of Philistine material culture, see Aja 2009; Shai 2011.

laid out here form the only correct interpretation of Anderson's use of the first-millennium BCE adjective. Instead, these resonances might have made their way into the film through Lebanese and American impressions of Phoenicians, and are made more powerful through the juxtapositions of past and present (Anderson's own contributions to reception history) that happen throughout the film. While the historical inhabitants of Sidon and Tyre are not in any direct way the subject of this project, the legacy of the Phoenicians and the hold they have on the imagination of modern groups gives Anderson a different kind of stage on which to enact an exploration of a daughter's influence on her unfeeling father. Colonialism is no less evil in *The Phoenician Scheme*, but in Anderson's micro-expressive way, "Phoenician"-izing the history seems to offer a less direct way to explore the evolution of power and performance in our glorified-but-shameful interconnected past.

Bibliography

Aja, Adam. 2009. "Philistine Domestic Architecture in the Iron Age I." PhD diss. Harvard University.

Brier, Bob. 2004. "Egyptomania!" *Archaeology* 57, no. 1: 16–22. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41780856.

Colla, Elliott. 2007. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dothan, Trude, and Robert L. Cohn. 1994. "The Philistine as Other: Biblical Rhetoric and Archaeological Reality." In *The Other in Jewish Thought and History*, edited by Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn, 61–73. New York: New York University Press.

Ed, Lien. 2025. "Wes Anderson's History without Historicism." *The Other Side*, June 24. https://otherside1.substack.com/p/the-phoenecian-schemes-history-without.

Elniski, Liv. 2024. "A History of Egyptomania in Material Culture: Two Hundred Years of Sartorial Orientalism (Installment #1)." *Victorian Secret*, December 25. https://livelniski.substack.com/p/a-history-of-egyptomania-in-material.

Ehrlich, Carl S. 2000. "Philistines." *Oxford Bibliographies Online* (last modified 2018). https://doi.org/10.1093/obo/9780195393361-0144.

Focus Features. 2025. "The Phoenician Scheme." https://www.focusfeatures.com/the-phoenician-scheme. Accessed August 20, 2025.

Fox Theatre. 2026. "The Story of the Fox Theatre." Fox Theatre. https://www.foxtheatre.org/about-us/fox-history. Accessed May 22, 2026.

Harmon, Angela. 2025. "Maronite Church." *EBSCO Research Starters*. Accessed May 22, 2026.

Humbert, Jean-Marcel, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler. 1994. *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art, 1730–1930.* Paris: Éditions de la Reunion des Musées.

Kaufman, Asher. 2001. "Phoenicianism: The Formation of an Identity in Lebanon in 1920." *Middle East Studies* 37, no. 1: 173–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/714004369.

Liptak, Kevin. 2025. "Trump Says US Will 'Take Over' Gaza Strip and Doesn't Rule Out Using American Troops." *CNN*, February 4. https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/04/politics/netanyahu-trump-white-house-meeting/index.html.

Maloofs International. 2026. "Maloofs International, Inc." https://maloofsinternational.org/. Accessed May 22, 2026.

Martin, S. Rebecca. 2021. "*Phoenician* versus *Phoenicianism*: Scholarly Categories and Collective Identities." In *Transformations and Crisis in the Mediterranean: "Identity" and Interculturality in the Levant and Phoenician West during the 5th–2nd Centuries BCE*, ed. Giuseppe Garbati and Tatiana Pedrazzi, 31–43. Rome: CNR – Istituto di Scienze del Patrimonio Culturale.

Morstadt, Bärbel. 2017–19. "Women in Phoenician Society: A Short Note on the Present Unsatisfactory State of Research." *Studi Epigrafici e Linguistici* 34–36: 95–103. http://sel.cchs.csic.es/sites/default/files/I.

Moscati, Sabatino. 1999 [1968]. *The World of the Phoenicians.* London: Orion Books.

Musmar, Frank. 2024. "The Ben Gurion Canal Project." *Israel HaYom*, May 12. https://www.israelhayom.com/2024/05/12/the-ben-gurion-canal-project/.

Norris, Jacob. 2023. *The Lives and Deaths of Jubrail Dadboub: Or, How the Bethlehemites Discovered Amerka.* Stanford, CA: Standford University Press.

Rashid, Tanjil. 2025. "The Phoenician Scheme Is Fantasy. It Is Also a Remarkable Engagement with the Real-Life Conflict in the Middle East." *The Guardian*, June 17. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2025/jun/17/the-phoenician-scheme-is-fantasy-it-is-also-a-remarkable-engagement-with-the-real-life-conflict-in-the-middle-east.

Shai, Itzhaq. 2011. "Philistia and the Philistines in the Iron Age IIA." *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins* 127, no. 2: 119–134. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41304095.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe. 1818. "Ozymandias," *The Examiner* 524, January 11, 24. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Ozymandias_(Shelley).

Shriners International. 2026. "Our History." Shriners International. https://www.shrinersinternational.org/en/who-we-are/history-of-the-fraternity

Sims, David. 2025. "Wes Anderson Lets the Real World Filter In." *The Atlantic*, June 6. https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2025/06/the-phoenician-scheme-review-wes-anderson-interview/683047/.

Tallerico, Brian. 2025. "The Phoenician Scheme." RobertEbert.com. May 30. https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-phoenician-scheme-film-review-2025.

Textile Research Center Leiden. 2018. "The Druze." In *From Kaftan to Kippa*. Online exhibit. https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-digital-exhibition/index.php/from-kaftan-to-kippa/item/57-06-the-druze.

The Onion. 2025. "You Sure You're in the Mood for Another Wes Anderson Film with Everything That's Going On? By Wes Anderson." June 17. https://theonion.com/you-sure-youre-in-the-mood-for-another-wes-anderson-film-with-everything-thats-going-on/.

UNESCO. 1987. "Nemrut Dağ." UNESCO World Heritage Convention. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/448/. Accessed August 20, 2025.

United Nations. 2005. *UNIIIC Report on Hariri Assassination*. October 20, Beirut. https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-180707/.

AABNER 5.1 (2025)
ISSN 2748-6419

AABNER