THE HOUSE OF BAAL IN 1 KINGS XVI 32

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1 Kgs xvi 29-34 introduces the account of the reign of Ahab, and verse 32 tells how he set up an altar to Baal:

\textit{wayyāqem mizbhāh labbā’al bēt habba’al ‘āsher bánā b’šēntron}

He [i.e. Ahab] erected an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria \textit{(Revised Standard Version)}

S. Timm\(^1\) argues (pp. 32-3, 35) that the text originally read \textit{bēt} (or \textit{b’bēt}) \textit{’elōhām}, and that the MT’s \textit{habba’al} “ist offensichtlich durch das zweimal vorangehend \textit{hb’l} beinflußt” (p. 33). This argument was later taken up by H. Niehr,\(^2\) who claimed that “the MT’s incomprehensible statement that Ahab had built a Baal-altar in the temple of Baal disguises an earlier tradition according to which Ahab had erected an altar for Baal in the temple of YHWH” (p. 56). This emendation forms part of Niehr’s attempt to reconstruct the religious history of Israel and Judah. Two arguments are advanced in favour of the emendation, and it is the purpose of the present note to examine the hypothesis of Timm and Niehr, and to ask whether their view of the text is justified.

I

The first argument—though it is, in fact, mentioned second by Timm on p. 35—is that the MT of 1 Kgs xvi 32 does not yield good sense but contains a tautology: “Zu einem Tempel gehört doch immer ein Altar für den Gott, dem der Tempel geweiht ist!” In what circumstances, then, is the building of an altar likely to be mentioned? “Nur in dem

\(^1\) \textit{Die Dynastie Omri: Quellen und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Israels im 9. Jahrhundert vor Christus} (Göttingen, 1982).

Fall, wo in einem Tempel, der einem bestimmten Gott geweiht ist, zusätzlich ein Altar oder ein Kultobjekt für einen anderen Gott errichtet wird, ist das ausdrücklich hervorzuheben." It is presumably for that reason that Niehr says that the MT’s statement is “incomprehensible”.

There are difficulties in this argument. Although Niehr can write of “the temple of YHWH”, the supposed original text referred to bêt ēlōhîm, and he presumably assumes that here Elohim stands for Yahweh. The books of Kings use the phrase bêt yhwh only of the temple in Jerusalem, and the phrase never occurs with reference to a temple in the Northern Kingdom. It may be suspected that the reason is that the author or authors preferred to reserve the phrase for what they regarded as the only legitimate Yahweh temple and did not wish to use it of any other temple. There are references to altars in the north, and to bāmōt and bāṭṭê (or bêt) bāmōt in the north, but never explicitly to an altar dedicated to Yahweh. If 1 Kgs xvi 32 refers to such a Yahweh temple in the north—even with the slightly different wording of bêt ēlōhîm—the verse is unique in the books of Kings. It may also be asked whether the term bêt ēlōhîm would have been likely, if a temple dedicated to Yahweh had been intended. The phrase is used in Judg. xvii 5 of Micah’s shrine, of which the author of the story plainly disapproved. Micah’s words in xviii 24, ēlōhêy ‘âšer ‘âśâthi, strongly suggest that the word ēlōhîm in xvii 5 denotes gods in the plural—which is not the sense that Niehr finds in the reconstructed 1 Kgs xvi 32.

Further, we are told in 1 Kgs xvi 32 that the temple was built by Ahab. Although his sons, Ahaziah and Jehoram, had names compounded with Yahweh, Ahab scarcely seems a likely candidate in the books of Kings for the act of building a temple for the God of Israel. 2 Kgs x 21, 23, 25-7 mention a bêt habba’al, and verses 19 and 25 refer to a sacrifice, which implies that it had an altar. The temple appears to have been in Samaria (cp. verse 17). This passage is part of the account of Jehu’s rise to power, his killing of Ahab’s descendants, and the massacre of the Baal worshippers. Jehu’s words in verse 18, which introduce his invitation to the Baal worshippers to come to the house of Baal for a sacrifice in honour of Baal, attest Ahab’s connexion with the cult of Baal: “Ahab served Baal a little; but Jehu will serve him much.” Jehu will carry further the worship of Baal, to which Ahab was committed. It is surely more probable that the temple that is said in 1 Kgs xvi 32 to have been built by Ahab was a Baal temple, rather than the temple in honour of Yahweh assumed by Niehr.