**Cult Centralization in Theory and Practice**

At the heart of the Deuteronomistic theology is the belief that God has chosen one specific place, the Jerusalem temple, as the only site for valid sacrifice, and that this command was transmitted by God to Moses:

- Deut 12:2-4: When you enter the land, destroy all existing places of worship, including the altars, sacred pillars (*matzebot*), sacred poles (*asherim*), and idols (*matzebot* were made of stone, *asherim* of wood, and represented male and female deities, respectively).
- Deut 12:5: “You shall seek the place that Yahweh your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there.”
- Deut 12:13-14: “Take care that you do not offer your burnt offerings at any place you happen to see, but only at the place that Yahweh your God will choose in one of your tribes.”
- Deut 16:6: “But at the place that Yahweh your God will choose as a swelling for his name, only there shall you offer the Passover sacrifice.”
- So also Deut 12:11; 16:11, 15; 31:11, etc.

In the DtrH, all kings of Judah and Israel (!) are evaluated, in part, on the basis of their strict observation of this command. The faults of bad kings are listed, often including aberrant worship practices:

- Rehoboam, Abijam, Jehoram, etc., of Judah
- Jeroboam, Nadab, Baasha, etc., of Israel—all northern kings given a bad evaluation, even Jehu, who destroyed the cult of Baal.

In DtrH, even the good kings of Judah after Solomon and prior to Hezekiah are given only qualified good evaluations, because they permitted sanctuaries on the high places (*bamot*):

- Asa, Jehoshaphat, Joash, etc.

Only Hezekiah and Josiah given unqualified good evaluations in DtrH, because are said to have destroyed the high places.

ChrH shares this emphasis on a single valid place to offer sacrifice with DtrH, and puts even more emphasis on the importance of Solomon’s temple. After the exile, Ezra-Nehemiah sees Jerusalem as the only valid place for worship, and excludes the Samaritans from participation in the cult.

The Deuteronomist (D) and Priestly (P) writers in the Pentateuch similarly see Jerusalem as the only valid place for sacrifice and avoid any mention of sacrifice at traditional cultic
centers in Canaan or elsewhere. However, the Yahwist (J) and Elohist (E) writers explicitly mention Noah, the patriarchs, and Moses offering sacrifices:

- E: Gen 22:1-19; 33:20; 35:1-7; Exod 17:15, etc.

The different approaches of the Pentateuchal sources to offering sacrifices was one of the keys identified by Julius Wellhausen in the Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel for distinguishing the four main Pentateuchal sources from one another. The older two sources (J: 10th C; E: 9th/8th C) have no notion of a unique place of valid worship. In fact, Exod 20:24-25 (E) offers instructions on how to build a proper altar. On the other hand, the later two sources (D: 7th C; P: 5th C) view the Jerusalem temple as the only valid place to offer sacrifices. This suggests that an older view, allowing multiple altars throughout the land, including at traditional local sanctuaries, was replaced by the idea that only the altar in the Jerusalem temple was valid, by the late 7th century at the latest. This shift in point of view is often associated with the reform of Josiah and the discovery of the Book of the Law (2 Kgs 22-23), ca. 622.

In light of this understanding of changing ideas regarding cult centralization, the DtrH can be read in a different light. If the idea of cult centralization was not current before the 7th C, then the kings of Judah who were criticized for not removing the high places are being evaluated by a theological standard that was not current in their day. Furthermore, Jeroboam’s construction of temples and altars in Bethel and Dan can now be seen as acts that, while certainly in part politically motivated, were not at odds with current Yahwistic theology. Moreover, Jehu may now be seen as a king whose theological practices mirrored those of the best kings of Judah (best in terms of adherence to the traditional norms of Yahweh worship).

Similarly, stories in the earlier portions of the Pentateuch about Abraham planting a sacred tamarisk tree (Gen 21:33), a common Canaanite practice in places associated with worship, and other stories that mention oaks/terebinths of Beersheba, Shechem, and Mamre can be seen as consistent with the worship practices of both indigenous peoples and Israelites. Archaeological finds from the area include instances of the worship of “Yahweh and his Asherah,” suggesting that Yahweh was seen in some circles as a local Canaanite (or Kenite?) god.

Cult centralization at Jerusalem may have begun as a reaction against the Baal crisis of the 9th C, or it may have been associated with bureaucratic and political reforms in the days of Hezekiah and/or Josiah. The Assyrian stranglehold on Judah during the days of Hezekiah may have resulted in the temporary abandonment of sanctuaries outside Jerusalem, or the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the clutches of Sennacherib might have led people to ascribe special powers to the altar in Jerusalem. At any rate, cult centralization in Jerusalem became the accepted theological stance during the late 7th C in Judah, at least among the Jerusalem elite (the royal and priestly families), and this stance was carried into the exile as well, where it probably contributed to the developing idea of ethical monotheism.
The idea that Jerusalem was the only valid place for the worship of Yahweh was never accepted by remnants of the northern kingdom, the Samaritans, who built a temple to Yahweh on Mt. Gerizim during the first half of the 5th C, shortly after the construction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem (516). Belief that Mt. Gerizim was the place Yahweh “had chosen” (as opposed to “will choose”) for his name to dwell is reflected in a Samaritan expansion to the tenth commandment in Exod 20:17 (SP):

And it shall be when the Lord your God brings you into the land of the Canaanites, where you are entering, to possess it, that you shall take for yourselves large stones and plaster them with plaster, and you shall write on the stone all the words of this law, and it shall be when you cross over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, which I have commanded you today, on Mount Gerizim, and you shall build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones on which iron has not been brandished. With intact stones you shall build the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall offer on it burnt offerings to the Lord your God, and you shall sacrifice peace offerings, and you shall eat there and drink before the Lord your God on that mountain when you cross over the Jordan, in the direction of the setting sun, in the land of the Canaanites who live in the wilderness opposite Gilgal, next to the oak of Moreh, opposite Shechem.

Deut 27:4 SP (and OL) also says that the altar Moses commanded to be built was on Mt. Gerizim rather than on Mt. Ebal (the reading of MT, LXX, etc.). Egyptian Jews in Elephantine (6th C) and Heliopolis (2nd C) also built temples outside Jerusalem.