BAALS OF BASHAN

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SUMMARY

This essay argues that the phrase “Bulls of Bashan” is not about famous cattle but about cultic practice. Although this has been suggested before, this essay uses archaeology and climatology to show ancient Golan was no place for raising cattle.

The phrase “Bulls of Bashan” occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible (Ps 22:12; Ezek 39:18; cf. Jer 50:19), along with Amos 4:1’s mention of “Cows of Bashan.” The vast majority of commentators have understood this to refer to the “famous cattle” of Bashan, a region supposedly renowned for its beef or dairy production.1 I would like to challenge this

interpretation, arguing not only that the phrase Bulls of Bashan refers not to the bovine but to the divine, but moreover that Iron Age Bashan would have been a terrible land for grazing and the last place to be famous for beef or dairy cattle.

Alongside the many scholars automatically commending Bashan beef have been a few who have suggested that there might be some idolatrous overtones to the phrase. This has particularly been the case with Amos 4’s denunciation of the powerful women of the Northern Kingdom as cows of Bashan. Most thorough here was Hans Barstad, who extensively illustrated the cultic nature of the denunciation in Amos 4 and the use of “Bashan” and “cows” in the Hebrew Bible, to which we shall return, and showed “cows of Bashan” must here refer to all of the inhabitants of Israel as Baal-worshippers. There are small holes in his argument, as the link to Baal in particular is weak and based in part on now-outdated understandings of Ugaritic material, but aside from that, his exegesis is irreproachable. Paul Jacobs and Gregorio del Olmo Lete consider instead that the bovine fertility god in Amos 4 is, in fact, Yahweh, the bull of Kuntillet Ajrud, and del Olmo Lete extends the mythological reading to “bulls of Bashan” in other pericopes.

These interpretations approach the question from the text itself and from the history of religions. I would like to support these interpretations by showing that it is impossible for “bulls of Bashan” to refer to famed cattle. The key to this argument is the reconstruction of the Iron Age environment of the Bashan. The Bible considers all of the central and southern Golan Heights, as well as the modern Al-Lajat to the east along the Yarmouk, to be Bashan. The term applies as well to the increasingly mountainous territory moving northwest toward Mount Hermon.

2 M. B. C., Das Buch Amos (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1969), 82-84; A. J. Williams, “A Further Suggestion about Amos iv 1-3,” VT 29 (1979) 206-211, here 206.
4 Barstad, Religious Polemics, 41-42.
Faunal remains, unfortunately, are of no help. There are abundant animal bones from the Roman and Byzantine periods, at Qazrin and Kanaf, for example. But for reasons to be outlined shortly, we cannot assume the same fauna for pre-Hellenistic periods. There are no bones from Middle Bronze Age Qazrin or Early Bronze II Qasr Bardawil. There are animal remains from the Middle and Upper Paleolithic Golan, and these include large bovids, probably wild aurochs. But these, too, are irrelevant for the biblical period, as the bovids had disappeared by Pre-Pottery Neolithic A, largely replaced by gazelle.

We will have to instead reconstruct the ancient environment and determine what agriculture it would best support. The method of Webley’s “Soils and Site Location in Prehistoric Palestine” (1972) was simply based on soil type. Webley calculated the percentage and total area within the catchment of each site that belonged to each soil zone. Webley’s procedure, however, was much too simple. It failed to take into consideration adequately variations in precipitation, slope, and standing pre-cultivation vegetation. What is more important, soil depletion in the Golan since antiquity renders mapping of modern soil zones useless.

Other scholars such as David Hopkins have attempted more elaborate reconstructions of the productivity potential of various regions in the Southern Levant, but because they rely on modern or 19th-century analogies for soil yields, still run into the problem of the changes to soil due to the Yarmouk River, see Chayim Ben David, “The Preservation of Roman and Byzantine Place Names from the Golan Heights,” Semitica et Classica 3 (2010) 265-271, here 265; “Hauran” includes the Jaulan as well as Jebel Druze to the east and the area in between. The Hula Valley does not belong to any of these, but was included in the Late Roman administrative district of Paneas; Ben David, “Preservation,” 268 n.18.


to the last millennium of erosion and over-grazing.\textsuperscript{14} Certainly, such analogies can be quite useful for understanding the dynamics of peasant farming in such regions or for consumption figures, but not for soils.

Work must begin somewhere else. Extensive studies have shown that climate, at least, has remained unchanged in Bashan since the Chalcolithic period.\textsuperscript{15} This can enable the mapping of environmental zones, which is the preface to reconstructing and mapping production schemes. Pollen samples from deep cores are also useful, and those taken from Birkat Ram show a dramatic change in the flora during the Hellenistic period, when the dense forest of deciduous oak disappeared.\textsuperscript{16} This skeleton of data can enable a reconstruction of the environmental zones based on other analogous regions of the world.

The modern climate, rainfall, and so forth, can be applied to the ancient period.\textsuperscript{17} Elevation of various parts of the Golan is also obviously a constant. Elevation can be combined with rainfall, along with some minimal soil information: for example, basalt has always eroded to red and brown loam soil or heavy clay, and never did otherwise. The combinations of these factors define distinct environmental zones, and these zones can be compared with analogous regions that exist today in the world (many of them in Tasmania and New Zealand). Those analogies can fill in the rest of the information needed to decide what subsistence strategies would have been most profitable in the Golan.

Temperatures on the Golan range as low as 3.1 degrees Celsius and rarely above 19 degrees.\textsuperscript{18} Rainfall is between 400 and 1200mm per year, the lower rainfall the further south.\textsuperscript{19} There is more rain on the western slopes than the eastern flanks.\textsuperscript{20} The rock of the Golan is Plio-Pleistocene

\textsuperscript{14} E.g., Israel Finkelstein, “The Land of Ephraim Survey 1980-87, Preliminary Report,” TA 15-16 (1988-89) 117-183, here 126; David C. Hopkins, “Agriculture,” Oxford Encyclopedia of the Ancient Near East 1 22-30. Even in the early modern period, however, the Golan was not beef country. Only winter crops were sown there in the 19th century, with grazing done down in the Huleh Valley, creating a form of transhumance between the high country and the valley; Y. Karmen, “The Settlement of the Northern Huleh Valley since 1838,” Israel Exploration Journal 3 (1953) 4-25, here 8, 19.

\textsuperscript{15} Neumann et al., “Holocene Vegetation,” 329, 342.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. 338-39, 342.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid. 341.


\textsuperscript{19} Karschon and Zohar, The Arboreal Vegetation of Golan; Neumann et al., “Holocene Vegetation,” 331.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
basalt,\textsuperscript{21} which erodes to red loam, brown loam, and, when mixed with quartz grains from Aeolian dust, heavy clay of brown Mediterranean soil.\textsuperscript{22}

Such basaltic soils are poor in calcium carbonate and phosphorus.\textsuperscript{23} Ferrous-iron content is low, and aluminum oxide greatly increased.\textsuperscript{24} Hydraulic conductivity is low, which leads to the formation of perched water tables, and low hydraulic conductivity means low infiltration rate. Base saturation is relatively high. Heavy clay soils’ lack of sufficient surface and under-drainage keeps them cool well into the spring\textsuperscript{25} and results in poor herbage yields.\textsuperscript{26}

There are regions identical in rainfall, altitude, temperature, and soil in parts of Tasmania (near Swansea and Glamorgan) and the South Island of New Zealand (near Southland and Marlborough). These are caprovid zones, along with wheat and barley farming, not cattle ranches.\textsuperscript{27} Rainfall under 900mm per year on this soil at this temperature is considered too low for effective dairy farming, which would eliminate all but the north-western Shebaa Farms region of the Golan.\textsuperscript{28} Less than 10\% of farming on the South Island of New Zealand involves cattle.\textsuperscript{29} The same situation obtains for this particular part of Tasmania – sheep grazing and barley farming, but no cattle.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{21} Golan basalt is higher in strontium than Galilee basalt; O. WILLIAMS-THORPE and R. S. THORPE, “Geochemistry and Trade of East Mediterranean Millstones from the Neolithic to Roman Periods,” Journal of Archaeological Science 20 (1993) 263-320, here 296. There is Jurassic limestone higher up on Mount Hermon, but this need not concern us; Reifenberg, Soils 70.

\textsuperscript{22} Yuval GOREN, Israel FINKELSTEIN and Nadav NA’AMAN, Inscribed in Clay: Provenance Studies of the Amarna Letters and Other Ancient Near Eastern Texts, 23 (Tel Aviv: Institute of Archaeology, 2004); Reifenberg, Soils 74. The difference between the red and brown loams is the differences in color between ferric oxide and ferrous oxide silicic-acid soils, based on the mineralogical composition of the basalt; Reifenberg, Soils 79.

\textsuperscript{23} Reifenberg, Soils 79; A. R. WHITSON and E. J. DELWICHE, “The Management of Heavy Clay Soils,” University of Wisconsin Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin 202 (February, 1911) 1-17, here 3.

\textsuperscript{24} Whitson and Delwiche, “The Management of Heavy Clay Soils,” 1-17.


\textsuperscript{27} Moore, From Forest to Farm 85-88.

\textsuperscript{28} NEW ZEALAND DAIRY BOARD, The New Zealand Dairy Industry (Wellington: New Zealand Dairy Board, 1971) 1; New Zealand Agriculture 40-46, 109

There are good reasons for this. Heavy clay soils are particularly bad for cattle. Grazing on such soils, compounded in Bashan by soil water logging caused by both the seasonal perched water tables and the more than 200 basalt springs known in the Golan, results in compacted soils with decreased porosity. This alters the microsite conditions that control the performance of pasture plants’ roots, on which their persistence depends. The poor herbage yields result in milk production too low to be economically sustainable. No one puts cows on heavy clay soil.

Brown loam is no better. Where it has been used for grazing, the mineral and hydraulic deficiencies that obtain for any basaltic soil, outlined above, resulted, in 1969, in a loss of $69 per beef farmer per year. Where herds were less than fifty head of cattle, losses grew to $102 per farmer per year. Only by selective winter grazing crops and, in New Zealand, confining grazing to small cells has beef production become sustainable on brown loam. And even then, the cows were selenium-deficient, a condition that results in white muscle disease in calves, retained placentas, low fertility, abortions, poor weight gain, and lowered immune response.

There are more problems than the soil. The relatively primitive Durum wheat of the Iron Age Golan had a low sodium level. When cattle graze on pastures of it, the negative effect on lactating dairy cows could be quite marked.

34 M. Ragush and F. F. Cline, Farm Practices in the Weyburn Loam and Regina Heavy Clay Soils of Saskatchewan (Ottawa: Canada Department of Agriculture, 1953) 7.
36 Ibid, 11-12.
37 Troy Right, “Brown Loam Branch Station: More Beef is the Aim,” Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experimental Station Research Highlights 52, no. 10 (October, 1989) 4-5, here 4; Troy Right, “Wintergrazing Research at Brown Loam,” Mississippi Agricultural and Forestry Experimental Station Research Highlights 53, no. 7 (July, 1990)1-2, here 2.
Social voles (Microtus socialis) have been present in Bashan since the Late Pleistocene. During winter 1985 the vole population density in the Golan peaked and almost all grazing was eliminated. The damage to cattle ranchers was considerable, because additional fodder had to be provided for the cattle. The ancient Golan was full of predators, including jungle cats (Felis chaus) and Asiatic jackal (Canis aureus). Predation from the latter even today is "claimed by some farmers to be as high as 10% of all calves born."

So if they are not bovids, what might the “Bulls of Bashan” be? We can begin an answer with a look at Bashan. Bashan is often mentioned with its ruler, King Og (Num 21:33; Deut 1:4; 3:1-3, 13; 4:47; Josh 9:10). Og is a giant (Deut. 3:11), the last of the Rephaim, and Bashan is called the Land of Rephaim (Deut 3:11, 13; Josh 12:4-5; 13:12). Og’s cities are listed as Edrei and Ashtaroth (Deut 1:4; Num 21:33; Josh 12:4; 13:12).

The Rephaim probably represent the spirits of the dead kings, both in the Bible (Ps 88:11 [10]; Prov 2:18; Isa 14:9-11; 26:14, 19; Job 26:5; LXX 2 Sam 5:18, 22) and at Ugarit (KTU 1.15 iii 2-4, 13-15; KTU 1.108 i 1; KTU 1.20 i 1-3; KTU 1.161 R 2-3, 8-12; KTU 1.6 vi 47-53). Remarkably, the Rephaim at Ugarit are linked to the exact same cities as Og is.

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44 Yom-Tov, Ashkenazi and Viner, “Cattle Predation,” 19-22. Actual predation numbers are closer to 1.5-1.9%; Ibid., 21.
45 If the translation is correct, an early 5th-century BC tomb inscription from Byblos summons “The Powerful Og” against anyone who would disturb the dead person’s remains (Byblos 13.2), replacing the term Rephaim in similarly formatted Phoenician tomb inscriptions Tabnith and Eshmunazzar (KAI 13.8 and 14.8); Wolfgang RÖLLING, “Eine Neu Phoenizische Inschrift Aus Byblos,” in *Neue Ephemeris fur Semitische Epigraphik*, Vol. 2, 1974) 1-15, here 2.
given in the Bible – Athtarat and Edrei (KTU 1.108). Both locations are on the eastern edge of the Bashan. Ashtaroth, Ugaritic Athtarat, is probably Tell el-Ashtereh (M.R. 175.096); Edrei is Daraa. And the Rephaim can be bulls: KTU 1.161 gives the “Ancient Rephaim... Rephaim of the Underworld” (lines 8-9) the title “Bull Eternal” in lines 7 and 24.

The term “Bashan” itself can be equated with the Ugaritic bṯn (cf. Akk. bšmu, Aram. ptn, Arab. hathan; KB 3 1.165), which is used to describe Yammm/Leviathan in KTU 1.5 i.2. In Ps 68:23 [22], Bashan is in parallel with Yammm. God himself lives on Mount Bashan in verse 15 [16]. Del Olmo Lete perhaps pushes things too far in arguing that Bashan was the Canaanite “hell.”


50 The translation of the second word, ḫlmn, as “eternal” is debatable, but the first term, “bull” is clear.


Baal in particular is the probable mention of Lake Hula as ṣmq in KTU 1.10 ii 6-12, a place “abounding in bulls” where Baal hunts (but not the ṣmk in KTU 1.22 i 17).\textsuperscript{55}

So Bashan is an abode of the dead and other monsters in Ugaritic and biblical tradition, including probably the “Legion” of demons Jesus encounters there in Mark 5 (pars. Matthew 8; Luke 8). There are a few links to Baal, but Barstad perhaps makes too much of them. It is, after all, El who is a bull at Ugarit, not Baal. Nevertheless, as Michael Rice writes, “From late Upper Paleolithic times to the end of antiquity the bull is always honoured as a divine creature, as the manifestation of a god or as the witness of a god’s presence.”\textsuperscript{56} The connection Jacobs and del Olmo Lete draw to Yahweh are not unreasonable, given both Jeroboam’s bulls (1 Kings 12), one of which is at Dan not far from Bashan, and the golden bull calf of Exodus 32, and the semantic connections between the two many have noted.\textsuperscript{57} Schaeffer, Wyatt, and others have argued that Jeroboam’s bull is El.\textsuperscript{58}

Not all is lost for Baal, however. KTU 1.12 ii.54-56 likens Baal to a tor and an ḥbir. Anat and Baal give birth to an ḥbir in KTU 1.10 iii.35-37. Baal of Ugarit is the Aramean Haddad the storm god, who is depicted as a bull on seals found throughout the Aramaized Neo-Hittite kingdoms.\textsuperscript{59} And behind Aramean Haddad lies the Hittite storm god, Tarhuna, represented as or on a bull,\textsuperscript{60} as was the Hurrian storm god Teshub.\textsuperscript{61} He


\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, noting the parallelism of El and Bull in Num 23:22 and 24:8.


\textsuperscript{60} Ph. H. J. Houwink Ten Cate, “Hittite Storm God: His Role and his Rule According to the Hittite Cuneiform Sources,” in Natural Phenomena: Their Meaning, Depiction, and Description in the Ancient Near East ed. By Diederik J. W. Meijer (Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences 1992) 108. Examples include a vase from Inandik-tepe; Maciej Popko, Religions of Asia Minor (Warsaw: Academic Publishers Dialog, 1995) 78.

\textsuperscript{61} Bonatz, “Iconography,” 3.
continues to be represented as a bull, as late as a Roman-period image of the god Termessus from Cappadocia. The Rephaim stand in relationship with Baal. KTU 1.22 i 8-9 calls them “Rephaim of Baal, Warriors of Baal.” KTU 1.108 juxtaposes Baal with the Rephaim in the royal blessing for Ugarit.

Direct archaeological support for theriomorphic gods in Bashan is lacking, but there is an 8th-century basalt stele from Bethsaida, on the western foot of Bashan, depicting a bull’s head atop either a pole or a human figure. It seems likely that this image belongs to the West Semitic storm god. A 9th-century plaque from Tel Dan, Plaque B, depicts a bull being ridden by a god and a worshipper adoring the pair.

Perhaps it is enough to say the biblical authors used “Bulls of Bashan” as a multivalent term that might include spirits of the dead, giants, Baal, Legion, or even manifestations of El or Yahweh.

Finally, does this understanding of the term work in the biblical passages? Ezek 39:18 says, “You will eat the flesh of mighty men,” a loaded term from Genesis 6, “and drink the blood of the princes of the aretz,” which often means underworld – “rams, lambs, male goats, and all the fattened bulls of Bashan.” It works quite well, even alongside the list of caprovids (cf. Isa 13:21; 34:14, for demonic goats). In Psalm 22, the Psalmist laments “Many bulls surround me; strong bulls of Bashan encircle me. Roaring lions that tear their prey open their mouths wide against me.” Patrick Miller identified all of these as “demonic powers who are perceived as the cause of sickness and suffering.” And, as Barstad has shown, it works very well for Amos’s Cows of Bashan.

There were no famed bulls from the ranches of ancient Bashan, neither for beef nor for milk. Ancient Bashan was one of the worst possible places in ancient Israel’s environs for the raising of cattle. In the biblical tradition, as at Ugarit, Bashan is not the land of cattle but of spirits and trolls. Not bulls, but Baals.

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62 Ibid. 12.