

The Big House

Capturing Divine Presence in the Temples of the Ancient Near East

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Myths about the Israelite Temple

1. The temple was solely devoted to religious activity
2. The temple was the only place that worship happened
3. Ordinary Israelites traveled to the temple regularly to pray and give offerings, like a synagogue today
4. It was good to be a priest
5. The Israelites believed that divine presence in the temple was metaphorical



The Ancient Near East



map from <https://oi.uchicago.edu/neareastmap>

Myth #1:
The temple was solely
devoted to religious
activity

Tel Ta'yinat Layout

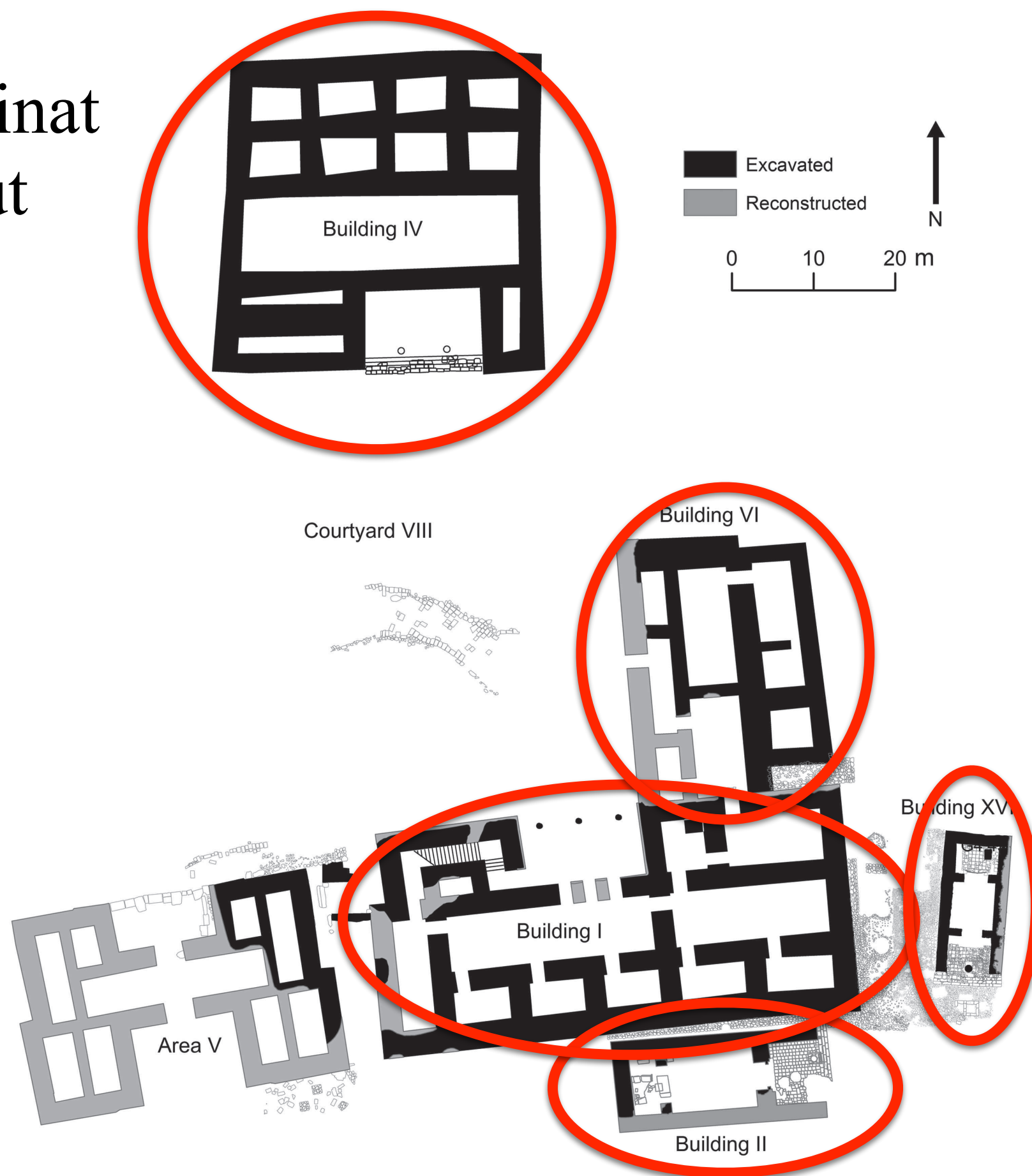


Fig. 3. Plan of Second Building Period complex in the West Central Area
(created by J. OSBORNE).

An excerpt from the Annals of Tiglath-Pileser I

*Language: Akkadian, ~1100-1075 BCE in Ashur
(modern north-central Iraq)*

At that time 641 years had passed since the temple of the gods Anu and Adad – the great gods, my lords – had been built by Shamshi-Adad III... It became dilapidated.... Asher-Dan, also king of Assyria, tore down this temple, but did not rebuild it... In my accession year, the gods Anu and Adad ... commanded me to rebuild their shrine. I rebuilt it from top to bottom and made it bigger than before... I brought the gods Anu and Adad, the great lords, my lords, inside and set them on their exalted thrones. Thus did I please their great divinity.... may the gods Anu and Adad faithfully have mercy upon me, may they love my prayers, may they heed my fervent petitions, may they grant abundant rain and extraordinarily rich years during my reign; may they lead me safely in battle and strife ...

Myth #1:

~~The temple was solely devoted to religious activity~~

In addition to being a place of religious activity, the temple complex also contained administrative centers and a royal palace. Building temples was also a means of self-aggrandizement for a new king.

Myth #2:

The temple was the
only place that worship
happened

Defining some terms

Religion: a method of thought or system of beliefs that is meant to orient one toward the supernatural and provide meaning in life.

Cult: “all those acts by which communities or individuals give outward expression to their religious life, by which they seek to achieve contact with God.” (Roland de Vaux)

Cult is one aspect of religion, but not the whole of it.

Bamot (במות)

Bamot were sanctuaries located in towns in the countryside. They were elevated, either naturally by being on a hillside, or artificially by constructing a platform.

Bamah at
Megiddo

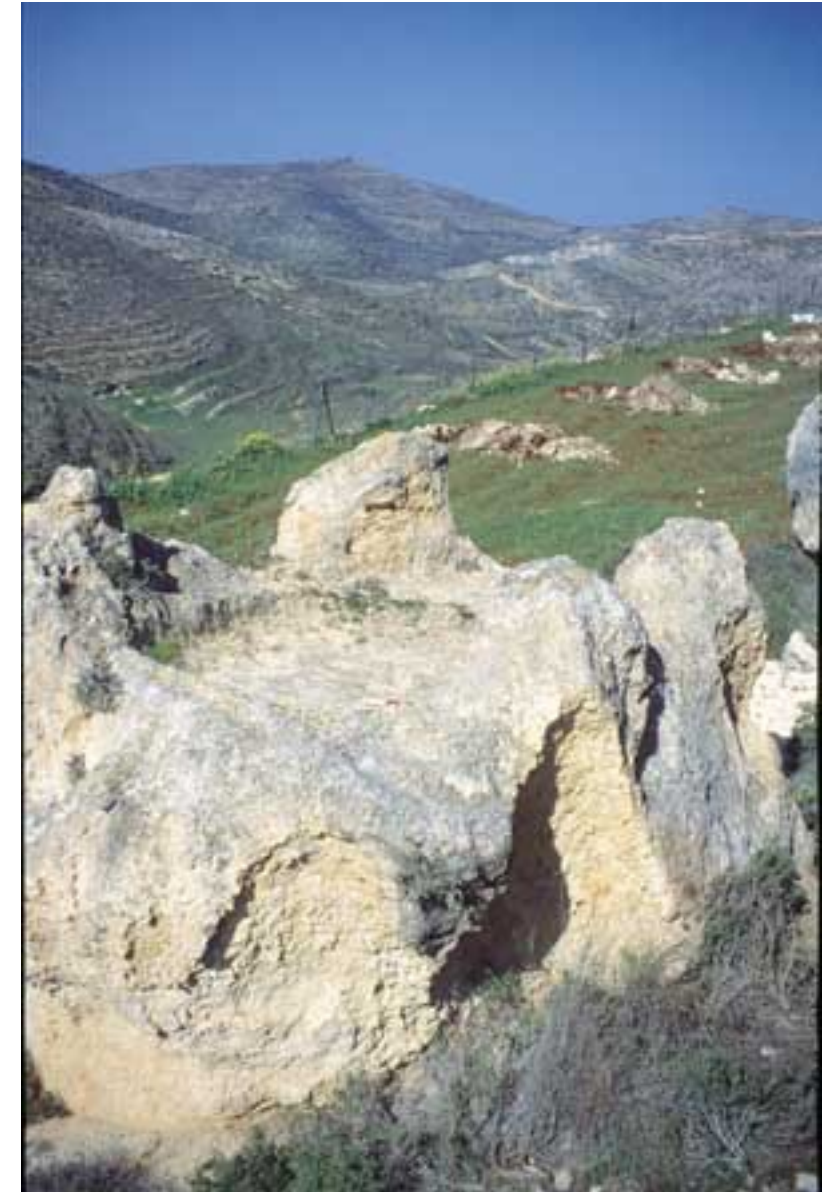


Bamot (במות)



Matzebot (מצבות)

Bamot (במות)



Altars at bamot

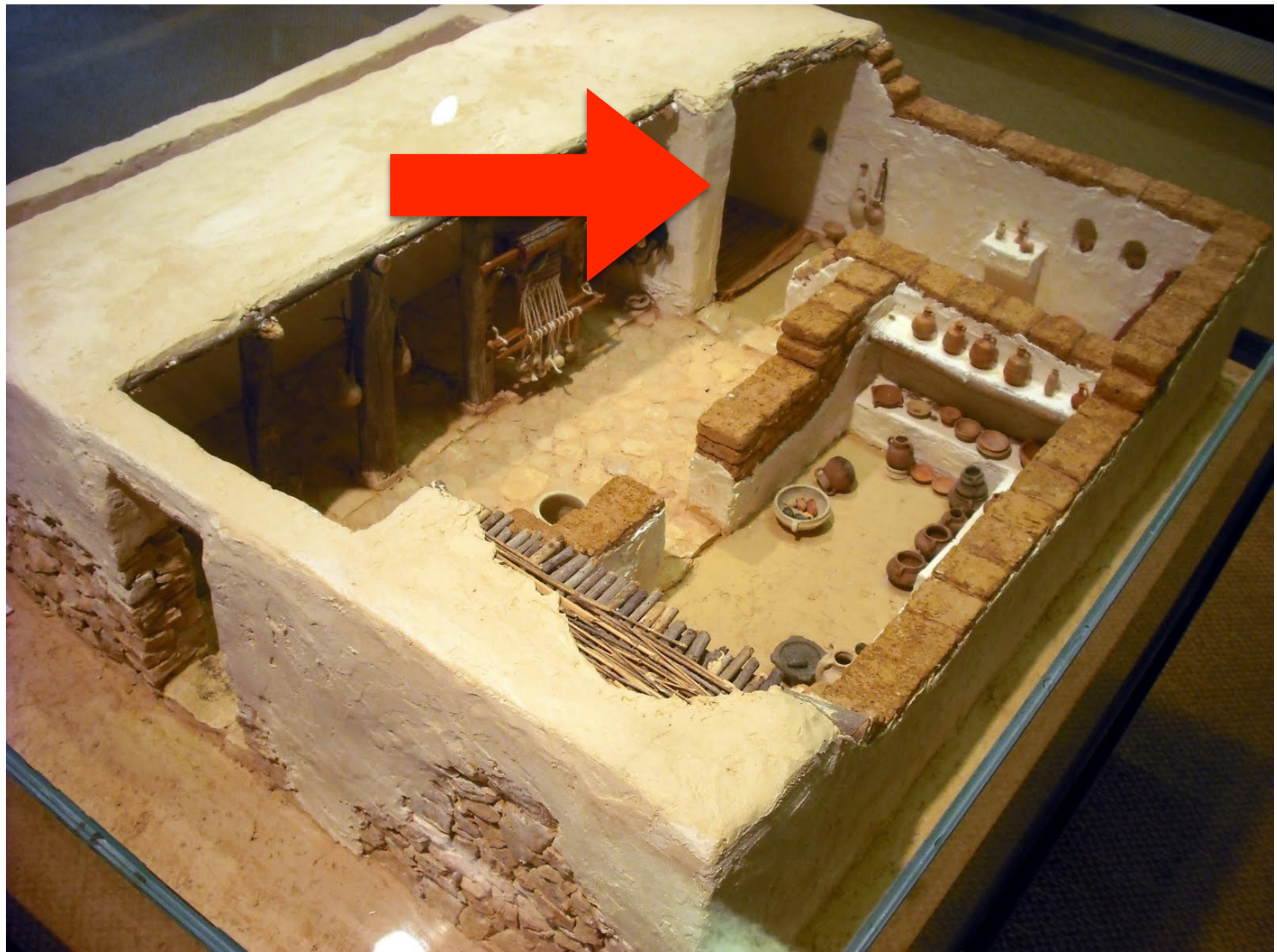
Home Altars and Cult Figurines

Individual homes would often have small altars and cult figurines for personal use. These would have been used for grain, not animal offerings.



Cult of the Ancestors

In the ancient Near East, it was common for there to be a continuing relationship between living and deceased family members.



Myth #2:

~~The temple was the only place that
worship happened~~

Religious activity took many forms in the ancient Near East, Israel and Judea included. Many religious activities centered around the home and local community. Only some cultic activity would have taken place at the temple.

Myth #3:

Ordinary Israelites
traveled to the temple
regularly to pray and
give offerings, like a
synagogue today

Purity and the Temple

In order to visit the Israelite temple, an ordinary Israelite had to be free from impurity.

This was virtually impossible!

Because most Israelites were in a constant state of impurity, most Israelites were not able to enter the temple precinct.

Pilgrimage Festivals

שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יִרְאֶה כָּל־זָכוֹר אֶת־פְּנֵי הָאֵדֹן
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

Exod 34:23 (also: Exod 23: 17)

Three times a year, all of your males will appear in the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel.

Better:

Three times a year, all of your males will look upon the presence of the Lord, the God of Israel.



Personified provinces bringing offerings for an Egyptian god.

Prayer at a Temple

(Deut 16:16) לֹא יֵרָאֶה אֶת־פָּנָי יְהוָה רִיקָם

The three stages of a visit to the temple:

1. a person approaches the temple to view the divine presence (as required)
2. the person presents their gift
3. the person thereby receives divine blessing

Prayer at a Temple

1. יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ
2. יֵאָר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנֶּךָ
3. יֵשָׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

1. the hope that the person will be welcomed by the deity
2. the hope that the deity will see the person favorably and bless them
3. the hope that the deity will allow the person to leave in safety (alive)

Myth #3:

~~Ordinary Israelites traveled to the temple regularly to pray and give offerings, like a synagogue today~~

Ordinary Israelites rarely, if ever, went to the temple. When they did, it was to pay a tithe, complete a pilgrimage, or some other special occasion. Most Israelites could not afford meat offerings, and the temple was not a place to gather for regular prayer.

Myth #4:

The Israelites believed
that divine presence in
the temple was
metaphorical



The Big House

Sumerian: É.GAL



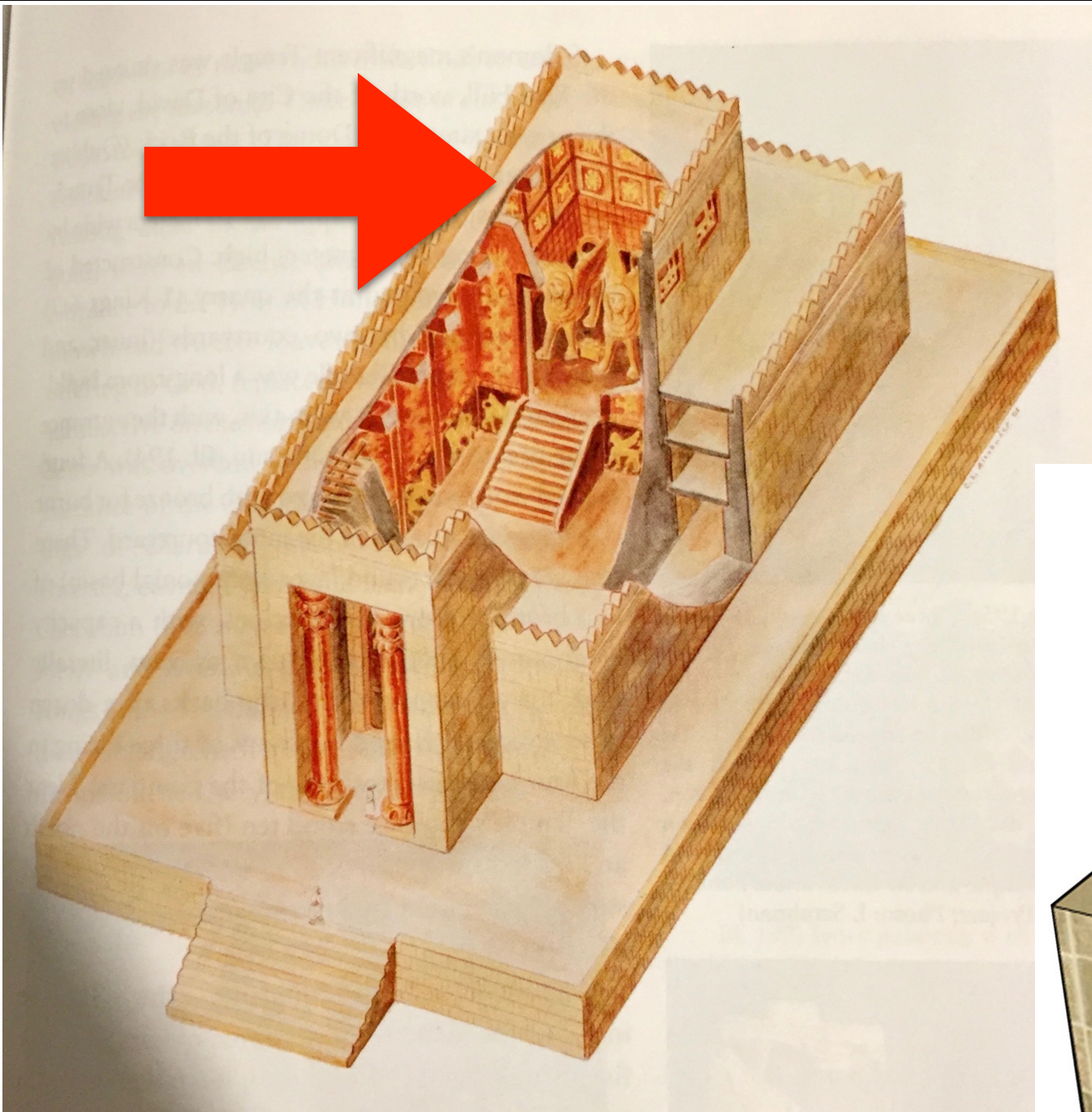
É = house
GAL = big

Akkadian: ekallum

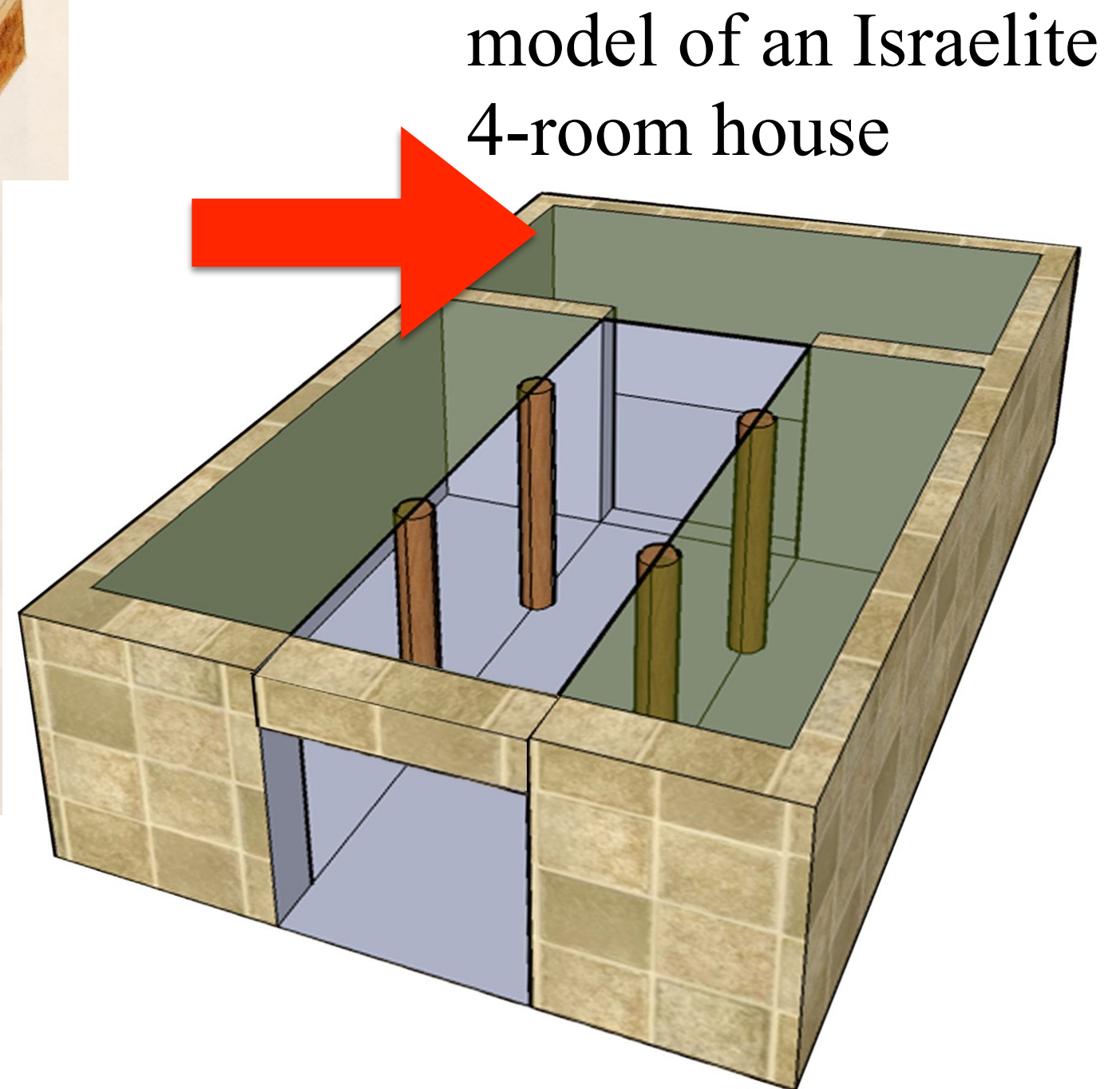
Hebrew: hekhal

היכל

What's in the name?



reconstruction of
Solomon's temple





Gods in the ancient Near East were thought to be just like humans, only *much* bigger.

“In Apsu Marduk was born... Ea his father begat him, Damkina his mother bore him. He sucked the breasts of goddesses, a nurse reared him... his growth was manly, he was mighty from the beginning.”

(Enuma Elish)

יְבִרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ
בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ

*God created mankind in his image;
in the divine image he created them. (Gen 1:27)*

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם (Exod 25:8)

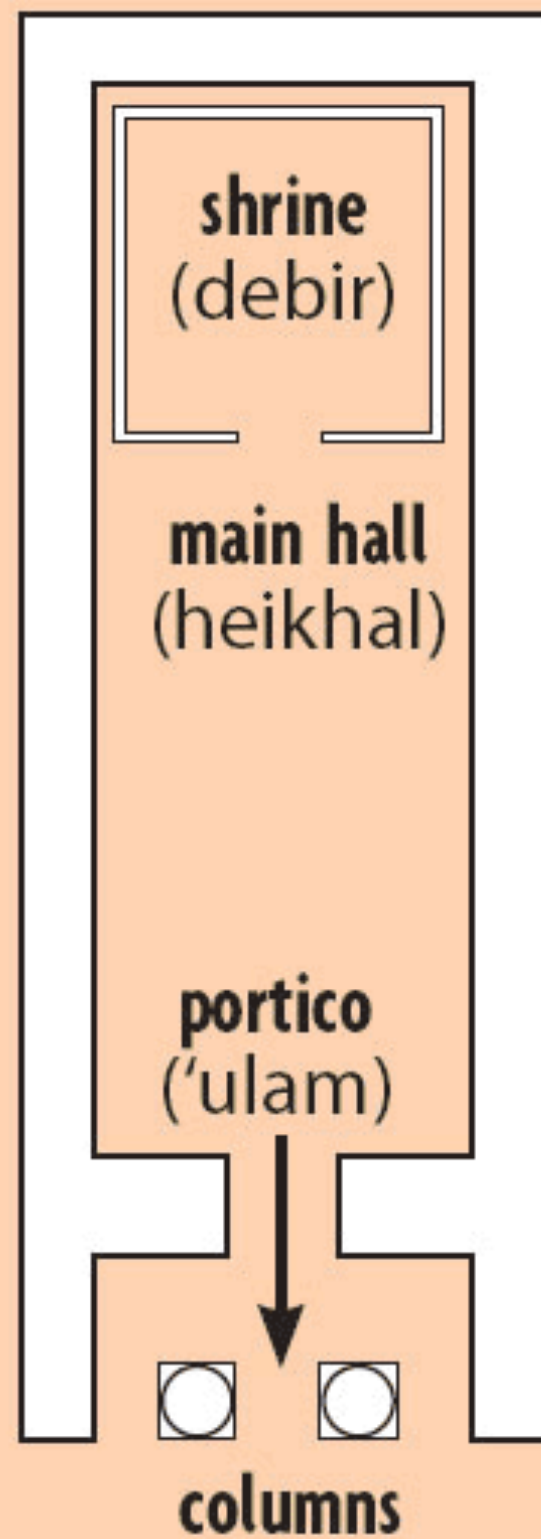
Make a holy place for me, so that I can live in the midst of you!

וַיְהִי דְבַר-יְהוָה אֶל-שְׁלֹמֹה לֵאמֹר הַבֵּית הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר-אַתָּה
בֹנֶה אִם-תֵּלֵךְ בְּחֻקֹּתַי וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי תַּעֲשֶׂה וְשִׁמְרָתָ
אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי לִלְכֹת בָּהֶם וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת-דְּבָרִי אֲתָךְ אֲשֶׁר
דִּבַּרְתִּי אֶל-דָּוִד אָבִיךָ

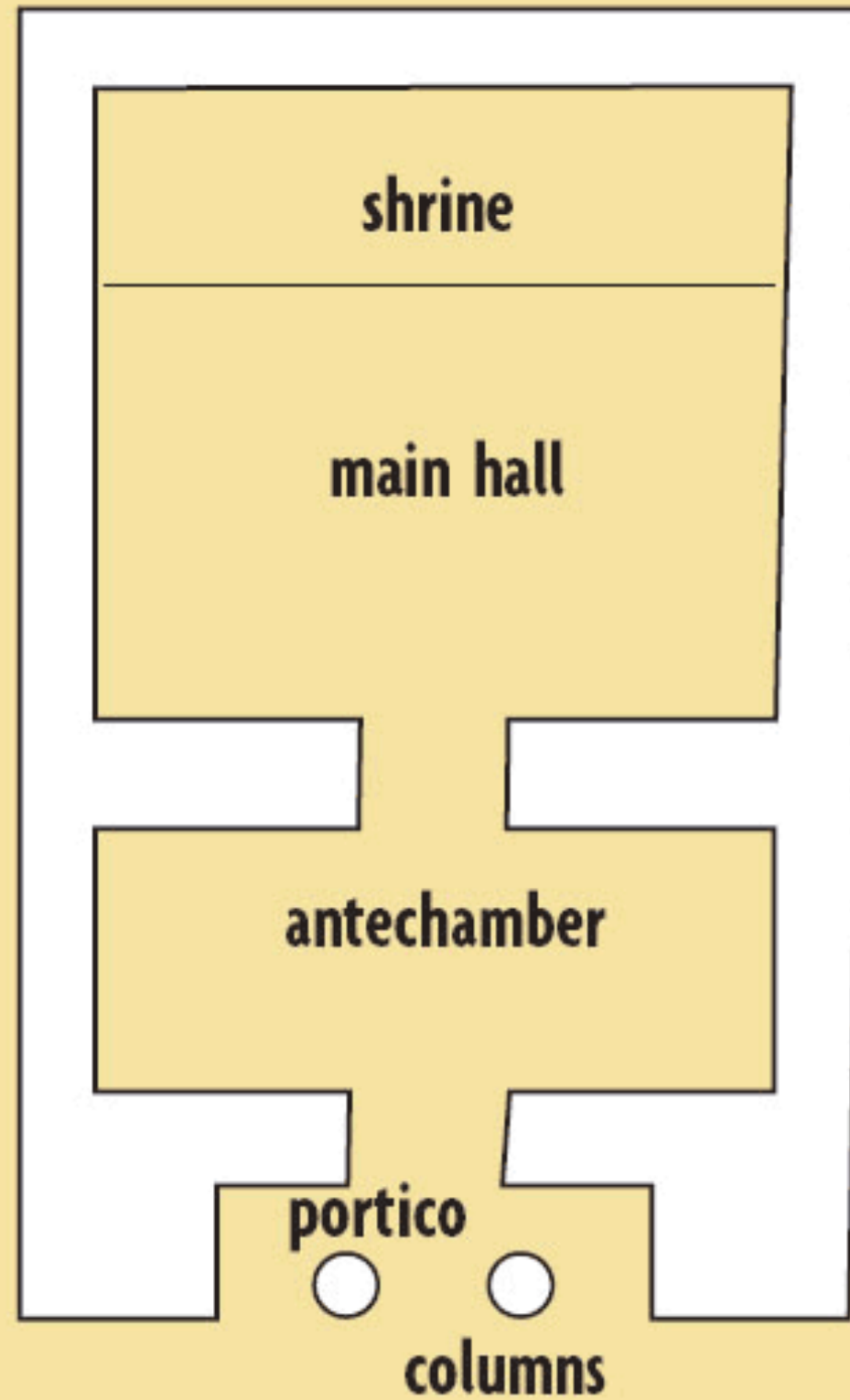
וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְלֹא אֶעֱזֹב אֶת-עַמִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל

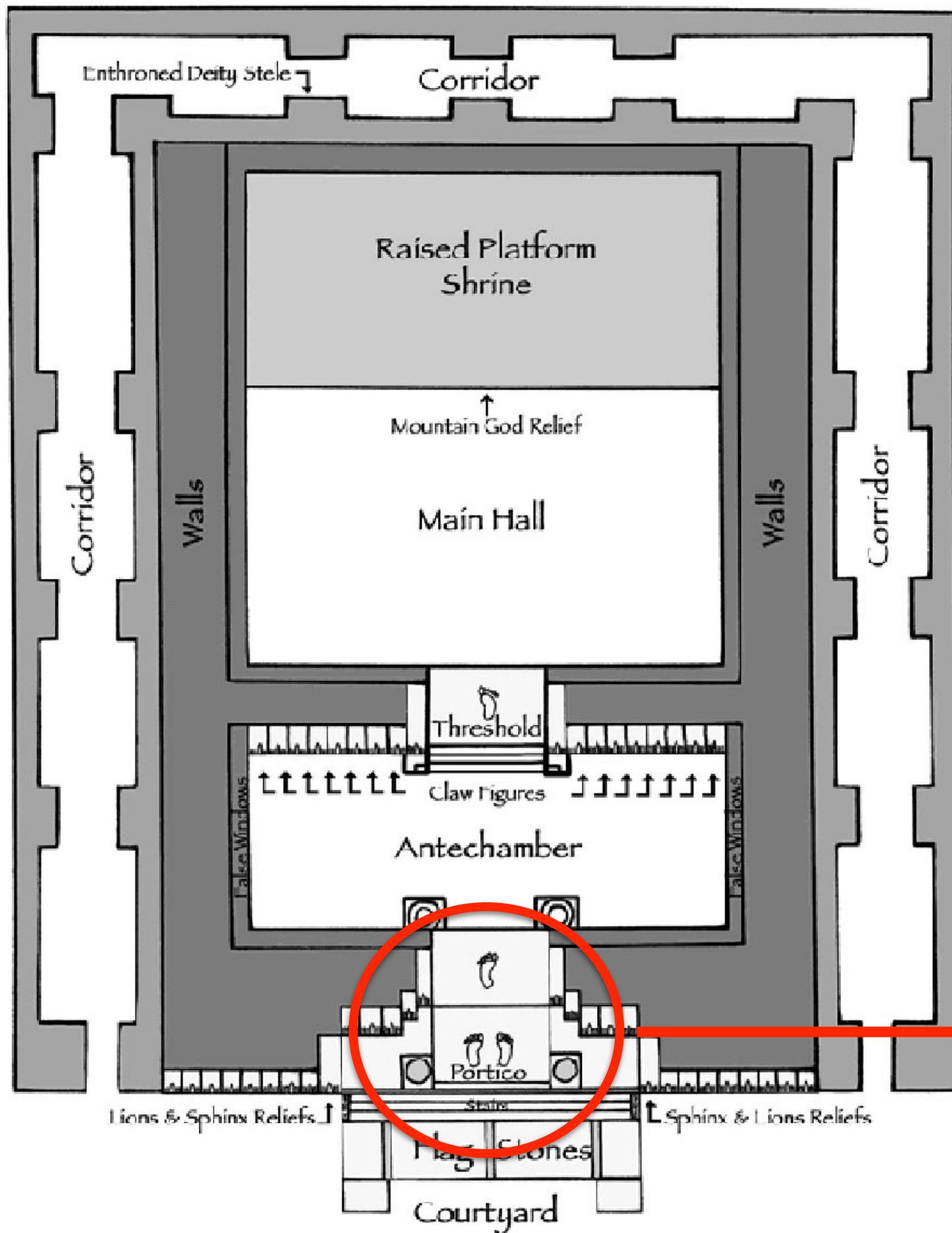
The word of the Lord came to Solomon, “With regard to this house that you are building, if you continue to do my statutes and my ordinances, and continue to obey all of my commandments, then I will establish my promise with you, which I promised to David, your father. I will live in the midst of Israel and I will not leave my people Israel.

Solomon's Temple



'Ain Dara Temple



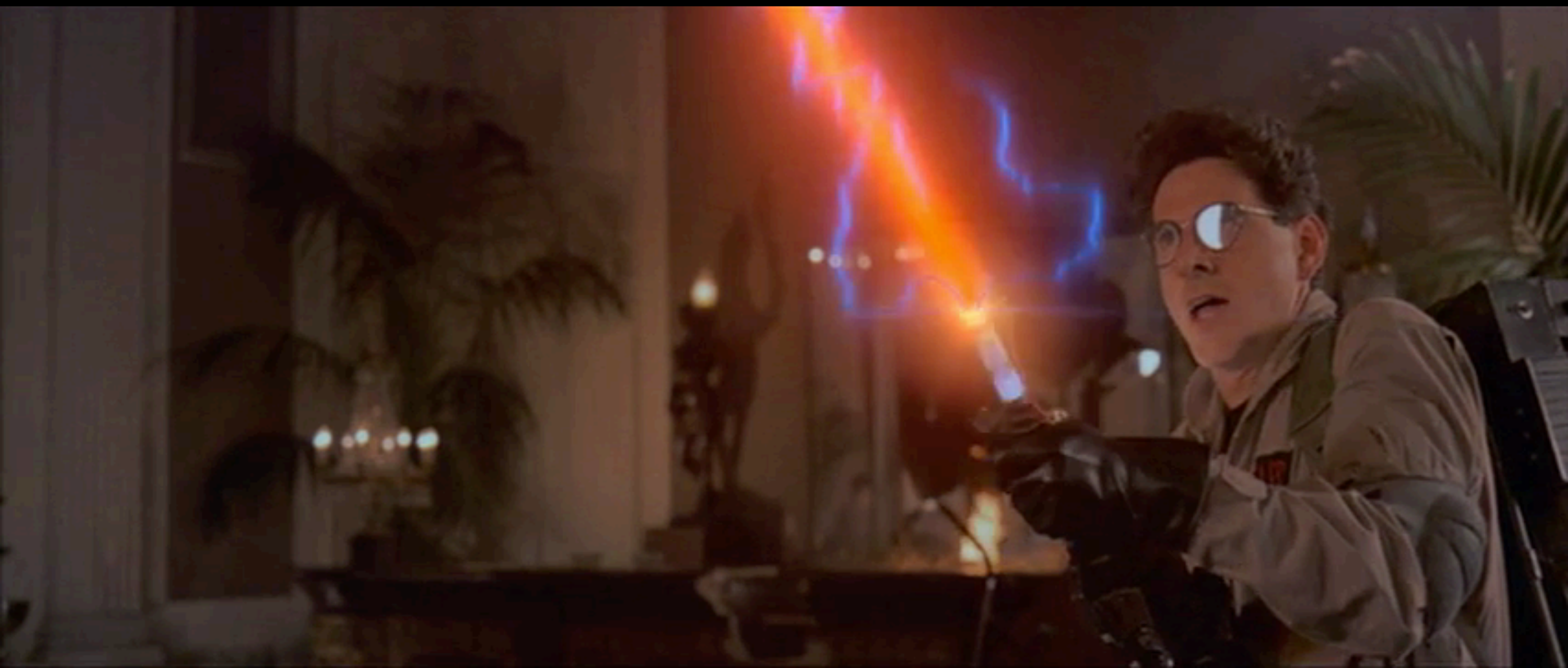


‘Ain Dara, near Aleppo, Syria



‘Ain Dara, near Aleppo, Syria





וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שְׁלֹמֹה וְכָל-עַדֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל הַנוֹעֲדִים עָלָיו אֹתוֹ לִפְנֵי
הָאָרוֹן מִזְבְּחִים צֹאן וּבָקָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יִסְפְּרוּ וְלֹא יִמְנוּ מִרַב

King Solomon and all of the community of Israel who were assembled with him before the ark were sacrificing so many sheep and cattle that they could neither count nor number them, there were so many! (1 Kgs 8:5)

וְהִקְרְבוּ לַחֲנֻכַּת בֵּית-אֱלֹהִים דָּנָה תֹרִין מֵאָה דְּכָרִין מֵאֵתִין
אֶמְרִין אַרְבַּע מֵאָה וְצִפְיָרִי עֶזֶר לְחֻטִּיא לְחֻטָּא
עַל-כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּירֵי-עֶשֶׂר לְמִנֵּי שְׁבִיטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

And for the dedication of the house of God, they sacrificed 100 bulls, 200 rams, 400 lambs, and 12 goats for a purification offering according to the number of the 12 tribes of Israel. (Ezra 6:17)

The presence of a god in a temple was real.

The presence of a god ensured divine protection and blessing for the surrounding area, and was desirable.

A photograph of a nuclear power plant with three large, grey, hourglass-shaped cooling towers. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a sky filled with dark, dramatic clouds and a bright orange glow on the horizon. The towers are silhouetted against the sky. In the foreground, there are some smaller industrial buildings and a field.

Gods were known to have fickle temperaments. Their presence was desirable, but dangerous.

Myth #4:

~~The Israelites believed that divine presence in the temple was metaphorical~~

The Israelites, like other ancient near eastern societies, believed that their god was physically present and living in the temple.

Myth #5:

It was good to be a
priest

Proximity to the god was dangerous!

לֹא תֹכֵל לִרְאֹת אֶת־פָּנַי כִּי לֹא־יִרְאֵנִי הָאָדָם וְחַי

You cannot look at me; indeed, a human being cannot look at me and live. (Exod 33:20)

וְלֹא־יָבֹאוּ לִרְאוֹת כְּבִלְעַת אֶת־הַקֹּדֶשׁ וּמָתוּ

Do not let them [the Kohathites] enter the sanctuary to look even for a moment, or they will die! (Num 4:20)

The job of priests was to work in
very close proximity with the god!

The Levitical Body Count



Myth
~~It was~~



Nadav
(Lev 10)



Hophni, Phineas
(1 Sam 4)



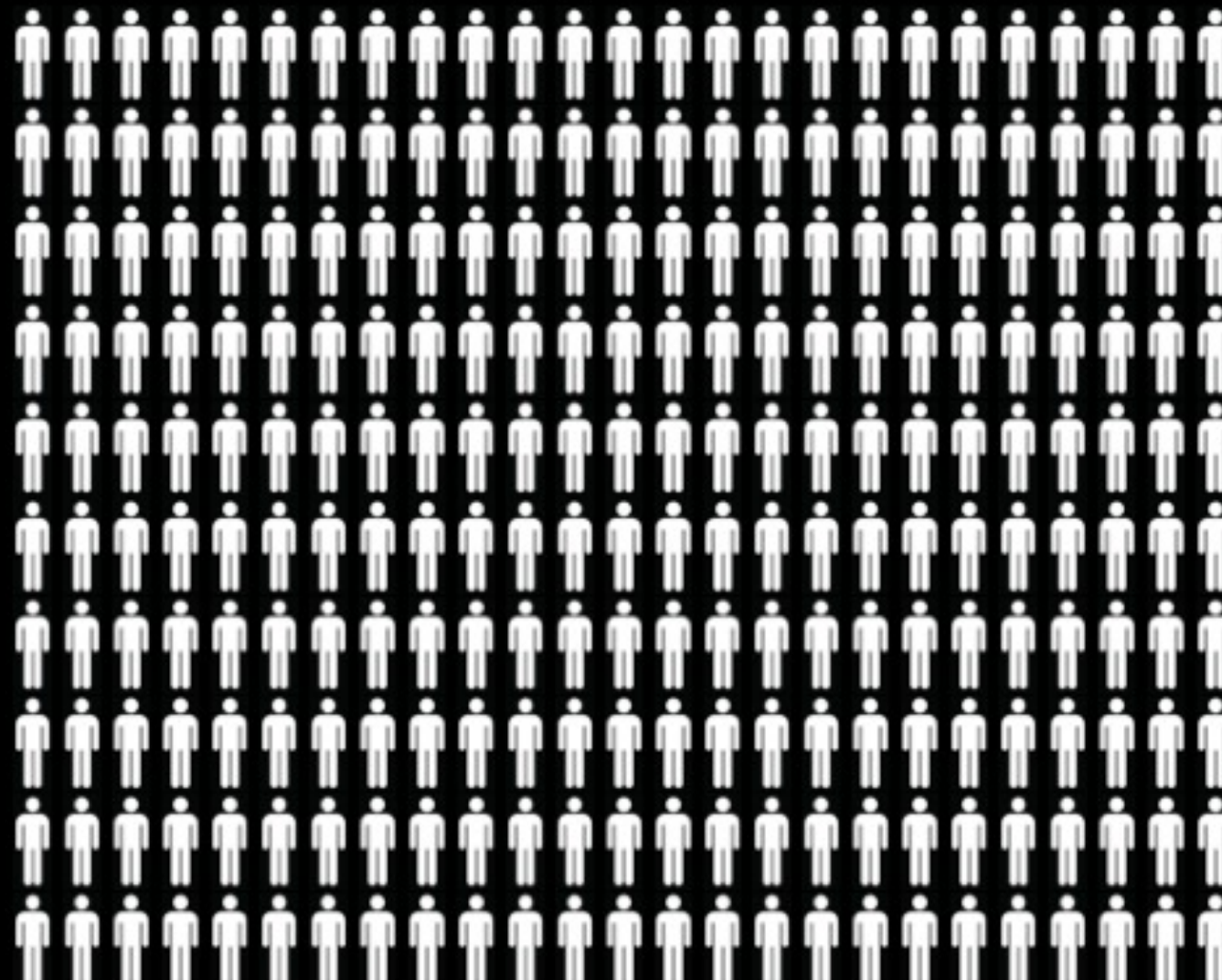
Avihu
(Lev 10)



Uzzah
(2 Sam 6)



Korah
and
his men
(Num 16)



It was

test!

