
Introduction

As the title of this work openly indicates, the focus of this study is on threshing floors in ancient Israel. This work examines these oft-overlooked yet very important agricultural spaces where crops are threshed and winnowed to release grain. At the outset, one might suppose that there will be a discussion of how threshing floors were created, where they were located, and the types of agricultural activities that occurred on them in antiquity. One might also expect a discussion of the ancient Israelite threshing floors that have been uncovered in the archaeological record. While that information will be considered in this introductory chapter, the larger trajectory of this book is more complicated and perhaps unexpected. What will be revealed with a careful look at the major textual source of the region, the Hebrew Bible, is that, in the minds of biblical writers, threshing floors served purposes beyond their agricultural functionality. The bulk of this study focuses on the literary depictions of these spaces and asserts that in ancient Israel threshing floors were not only agricultural spaces but were regarded as sacred spaces. In the Hebrew

Bible, these essential food-processing sites are highlighted as locations under divine control and locations for human-divine contact. The passages that will be examined in the forthcoming chapters will elucidate how and why threshing floors exhibit qualities of sacred space. First, however, some introductory remarks about threshing floors and sacred space are provided in this chapter.

Threshing Floors: An Overview

At their most basic level, threshing floors are locations where people perform the agricultural activities of threshing and winnowing. In ancient Israel, these floors were located on hard substrates such as bare rocks or were created by beating down the earth until a flat floor was formed. For the convenience of transporting crops to and fro, threshing floors were often situated in close proximity to fields on rock shelves or on infertile soil.¹ Conversely, threshing floors could also be located outside of the perimeter of a village or on high ground in order to take advantage of the open air and wind that are necessary for winnowing.²

Threshing and Winnowing

Threshing is the process of releasing grain from crops by crushing stalks. In ancient Israel, wheat and barley were two common crops that required threshing in order to harvest grain. Based on modern agricultural practices, interpretations of the Gezer Calendar,³ and the

1. Ruth Shahack-Gross, Mor Gafri, and Israel Finkelstein, "Identifying Threshing Floors in the Archaeological Record: A Test Case at Iron Age Tel Megiddo, Israel," *Journal of Field Archaeology* 34 (2009): 171–84.
2. John C. Whittaker, "The Ethnoarchaeology of Threshing in Cyprus," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 63 (2000): 62–69.
3. The Gezer Calendar has been dated paleographically and orthographically to the tenth century BCE. The small calendar helps to establish and clarify the sequence of agricultural seasons in ancient Israel. The calendar suggests that an agricultural season might be as follows: two months of ingathering, two months of sowing, one month each for hoeing, harvesting, measuring, two

Hebrew Bible, Oded Borowski has suggested that in ancient Israel wheat and barley were sown in November and December. Barley was gathered and harvested in April and wheat in May. Borowski also notes that these agricultural seasons might vary from city to city based on natural conditions.⁴ Following the harvest, crops were brought to a threshing floor, laid flat, and threshed by crushing in order to separate the grain from the stalks. The crushing could be done using a stick, an animal, or a threshing sledge. After threshing is completed, the refuse is removed, and the stalks are winnowed. Winnowing is the process of tossing or waving stalks in the wind so that the inedible protective cover over grain, the chaff, is blown away, and the grain falls to the ground. Done by hand or with the aid of a winnowing fork, winnowing is typically performed after threshing so that the loosened grains can be separated from the stalks and chaff more easily. After the grains are released, they are gathered together and put through a sieve to remove any lingering debris.

Ethnographic studies are helpful in understanding how threshing and winnowing may have been used in antiquity. Although caution must be used when employing modern threshing-floor examples, many ancient principles and techniques are still in use and shed light on this discussion. In 1980, Linda Cheetham completed an ethnographic study in Greece and Cyprus regarding threshing and winnowing practices.⁵ Cheetham observed the use of flails, animals, and sleds/sledges for threshing. Flails are agricultural tools used to beat stalks on the ground. Before flails, sticks were probably used to thresh. Animals, usually donkeys or oxen, are also effective resources

months of harvesting grapes, and one month of gathering summer fruit. For more on the Gezer Calendar, see Seth Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 109–11; and F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al., “Gezer,” in *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 156–65.

4. Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987), 32–38.

5. Linda Cheetham, “Threshing and Winnowing—an Ethnographic Study,” *Antiquity* 56 (1982): 127–30.

for threshing. Animals walk over stalks, and their hooves and weight separate and crush the grain. Animals are also employed to pull threshing sledges around the threshing floor with a person standing or sitting on the sledge for added weight. Threshing sledges are large boards that have teeth or flints on the underside in order to cut stalks and separate grain faster.⁶

Threshing and Winnowing in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew Bible provides some evidence of threshing and winnowing, including the practice of threshing wheat (1 Chron. 21:20) and winnowing barley (Ruth 3:7). Likewise, threshing sledges and boards are attested in the Hebrew Bible as tools used for these agricultural activities. In biblical Hebrew, the lexemes *môrag* and *ḥārûš* are attested as meaning “threshing sledge” or “threshing board.” For instance, 2 Sam. 24:22 // 1 Chron. 21:23 describe a wooden threshing sledge (*môrag*) that is used to build a fire for a sacrifice offered by King David. Isaiah 41:15 describes a threshing sledge (*môrag*) having sharp edges, which fits well with Cheetham’s description of sledges having teeth or flints on the bottoms to slice and separate grain from stalks. Amos 1:3 describes threshing boards (*ḥārûš*) made of iron, although the context is metaphorical and probably does not reflect actual threshing boards. While the Hebrew Bible does mention these threshing instruments, there are very few references with only minimal information.

The Hebrew Bible also makes mention of animals assisting in threshing. A law in Deut. 25:4 stipulates that an ox that is treading (*šôr bēdīšō*) should not be muzzled. The law requires the humane treatment of animals that perform the work of trampling stalks to loosen grain. The book of Job includes a dialogue between Job and

6. Ibid., 128–29.

Yahweh where Yahweh poses a whirlwind of rhetorical questions, one of which asks if a wild ox (*rēm*) can bring grain to a threshing floor (Job 39:12). The purpose of the reference is figurative, but the question presumes the answer to be *no* because it is a wild, undomesticated ox. While it is not attempting to describe a concrete practice, the passage does imply that domesticated animals were used for transporting grain to and from threshing floors in addition to their use for trampling.

The book of Daniel includes the only reference to a threshing floor in biblical Aramaic. In Daniel 2, King Nebuchadnezzar⁷ has had a dream and requests various dream interpreters and diviners to tell him his dream (Dan. 2:1–3). As the Judean exile Daniel reveals Nebuchadnezzar’s dream, he describes a statue being struck with a stone and the pieces flying away in the wind like chaff on summer threshing floors (*’iddērê-qayit*) (Dan. 2:35). This reference suggests that threshing and winnowing were done during the summertime on threshing floors situated in windy areas.

Beyond these passages about threshing and winnowing practices, the Hebrew Bible also provides examples of metaphorical uses of threshing imagery, particularly to describe destruction. First Isaiah describes Yahweh’s careful manner of destruction as analogous to a farmer’s care in threshing crops (Isa. 28:27–28). Likewise, Second Isaiah describes Israel as a threshing sledge who will thresh and winnow enemies (Isa. 41:15–16). Amos uses similar language when he describes Damascus defeating Gilead with iron threshing sledges (Amos 1:3). Additional passages will be explored in the following

7. The Hebrew Bible attests the Babylonian king’s name as Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel and Nebuchadrezzar in Ezekiel and Jeremiah. The spelling with *n* may reflect an Aramaic translation of the Babylonian name *Nabû-kudurri-ušur* or a dissimilation of the *r*’s in the transcription of the name. See John Joseph Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*, ed. F. M. Cross, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 133.

chapter which assert Yahwistic control and judgment over enemies using threshing-floor imagery.

While it is clear that the activities of threshing and winnowing were performed in order to obtain grain, specific details about these processes are not overly abundant in the Hebrew Bible. This should not suggest that these actions were unimportant; on the contrary, in the schema of food production, threshing and winnowing are important processes. As an agrarian society, agriculture structured life and provided food needed for survival. From plowing and planting to gathering and harvesting, agricultural activities served as critical seasonal work that structured society and allowed for a sustainable lifestyle. Within this agricultural framework, threshing and winnowing are actions on which society hinged. After crops have grown and are gathered, they require processing to remove materials that hinder access to grains. At this juncture, threshing and winnowing are the actions that strip away stalks and reveal the edible food. After these tasks have been completed, grains may be stored for future use or further processed into other foodstuffs such as flour or bread.

Since threshing and winnowing are life-sustaining activities that happen on threshing floors, threshing floors were fundamental locations for human nourishment and survival. At threshing floors, inedible crops were beaten, trodden, and shaken to free the edible food held within. Threshing floors played a significant role as the locations of sustainability and survival. Because of the sustenance so deeply rooted in the agricultural work on threshing floors, these spaces were thought to be controlled and blessed by Yahweh, the ultimate supporter of life. This intrinsic notion of a divine participation in subsistence will be explored in this work.

Archaeology, Ethnography, and Threshing Floors

Though threshing floors were essential to survival in ancient Israel, there have been minimal publications on both ancient and modern threshing floors, which is probably because they are difficult to detect in the archaeological record. Archaeologist Shimon Dar notes, “Many ancient threshing floors have vanished with the expansion of those Arab villages which are located on ancient sites, and with the introduction of heavy mechanical implements into areas of ancient cereal growing.”⁸ These issues raised by Dar are noteworthy. Indeed, modern sites atop ancient ones make it difficult to access ancient threshing floors. Similarly, the mechanization of threshing and winnowing practices changes how these traditional threshing sites are utilized. Even when ancient sites are excavated, threshing floors are still difficult to detect. When done effectively, threshing does not leave macroscopic or microscopic evidence because the floors are cleaned of grains and threshing by-products.⁹ If organic components remain on threshing floors, they likely blow away since these spaces are often located in windy areas. Anthropologist John Whittaker aptly notes:

More ethnoarchaeological studies of threshing, and more detailed archaeological examination of ancient *alonia* [threshing floors], are both necessary because threshing floors have been important features in village life all around the Mediterranean for thousands of years. Although few archaeologists have attempted to interpret them or even to describe them, the recognition and study of threshing floors could help understand a number of issues.¹⁰

8. Shimon Dar, *Landscape and Pattern: An Archaeological Survey of Samaria 800 B.C.E.–636 C.E.*, Part i, BAR International Series 308[i] (Oxford: B.A.R., 1986), 191.

9. Georgia Tsartsidou et al., “Ethnoarchaeological Study of Phytolith Assemblages from an Agro-Pastoral Village in Northern Greece (Sarakini): Development and Application of a Phytolith Difference Index,” *Journal of Archaeological Science* 35 (2008), 600–13; and Shahack-Gross, Gafri, and Finkelstein, “Identifying Threshing Floors in the Archaeological Record,” 173.

10. Whittaker, “The Ethnoarchaeology of Threshing in Cyprus,” 68.

In 1995 Whittaker researched threshing floors and threshing practices in Cyprus, and his work is informative for this discussion. Whittaker interviewed elderly villagers in Cyprus regarding threshing floors and threshing practices. His findings suggest that threshing floors are often clustered together in an ideal part of a village with wind accessibility. The reason for threshing floors to be close together is so that people can socialize and assist one another in the laborious threshing process. According to the villagers interviewed, ideally every family would have its own threshing floor near to the village so that transporting grain to and from would be as easy as possible. When looking for a threshing floor, Whittaker observed that the earth was often packed down, chalky, and would sometimes be plastered. Some threshing floors are marked with walls to delineate one threshing floor from another.¹¹

Ethnoarchaeological studies in northern Greece done by Georgia Tsartsidou, Simcha Lev-Yadun, Nikos Efstratiou, and Steve Weiner also provide helpful insights into threshing floors. For example, one study has suggested that threshing floors were dismantled and remade every year. Because of the shortage of viable, fertile land, threshing floors were also used as cultivation plots. After crops were grown and harvested, a plot of land was turned into a threshing floor, and after the harvest, the threshing floor was turned back into cultivated land.¹²

While there have not been many threshing floors uncovered in the archaeological record, there are sites of note. An early Roman period threshing floor has been uncovered at Khirbet Manşur el-‘Aqab, 6 km northeast of Caesarea, Israel. The excavators, Y. Hirschfeld and R. Birger-Calderon, date the site between the first century BCE and the first century CE.¹³ The estate includes a residential area and a

11. *Ibid.*, 67–69.

12. Tsartsidou et al., “Ethnoarchaeological Study of Phytolith Assemblages,” 610.

13. Y. Hirschfeld and R. Birger-Calderon, “Early Roman and Byzantine Estates near Caesarea,” *IEJ* 41 (1991): 81–111.

courtyard with various agricultural features, including a threshing floor, a wine press, and an olive-oil press. The excavators describe the threshing floor as a rock-hewn semicircular area, 7.6 m in length and a maximum of 1.8 m in width. Based on the size and shape, they speculate that threshing was performed manually using a flail.¹⁴ They also report that two rectangular basalt millstones used for grinding wheat and barley into flour were found within the residential complex. The outdoor agricultural installations and the millstones support the interpretation of this area as a threshing floor.

Similarly, during excavations at Samaria, Dar uncovered several agricultural installations, including multiple threshing floors, wine presses, and olive-oil presses dating roughly from the Hellenistic period to the Roman period. The threshing floors were typically level areas cut into rock, some with stone fences around them and some without fences, almost always on the outskirts of a settlement. Two threshing floors were found on top of a hill, a traditional location to have access to wind for winnowing. Dar describes one threshing floor with rainwater cisterns near it, which he speculates may have been so that animals had access to water as they assisted in threshing.¹⁵ Dar also notes that several threshing floors were clustered together, which is in line with Whittaker's ethnographic study that suggests people threshed and winnowed together, perhaps to help one another or to socialize.¹⁶

Other excavators have suggested that threshing floors have been unearthed at their archaeological sites, including Gezer (W. Dever),¹⁷ Khirbet Abu Musarraḥ (Y. Peleg and I. Yezerski),¹⁸ Khirbet 'Almit (U. Dinur and G. Lipovitz),¹⁹ and Qibbutz Sasa (H. Bron).²⁰ While

14. *Ibid.*, 99.

15. Dar, *Landscape and Pattern*, 191–93.

16. Whittaker, "The Ethnoarchaeology of Threshing in Cyprus," 68.

17. William G. Dever, ed., *Gezer IV: The 1969–1971 Seasons in Field VI, the "Acropolis," Part I, Text* (Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 1986).

hard, flat surfaces are sometimes deemed threshing floors because they meet the physical expectations of these spaces, some of these locations have been labeled as threshing floors without in-depth macroscopic and microscopic analysis of the locations. In order to prevent and/or correct this problem, Ruth Shahack-Gross, Mor Gafri, and Israel Finkelstein have published an important article on how to classify threshing floors based on archaeological and ethnographic studies.

At the beginning of their work, they rightly note the difficulty in identifying threshing floors in the archaeological record, and their research at an Iron Age layer of Tel Megiddo can serve as a useful case study of the questions that should be asked for flat surfaces uncovered on an excavation. In their study of a hard, flat surface uncovered at Megiddo, Shahack-Gross, Gafri, and Finkelstein performed geoarchaeological studies of the remnants on the floor and found evidence of wood ash and inorganic remains of livestock dung, neither of which are typically found on threshing floors. Based on these remnants, along with the texture of the soil, they concluded that the area of analysis is a single-family trash heap, not a threshing floor, as previously thought. Based on their archaeological and ethnographic research, they expect threshing floors to be found in open areas outside of a settlement with a single hard surface, signs of trampling, and no artifacts since the floor would have been cleared of produce after threshing.²¹ This study is valuable and calls for a

18. Y. Peleg and I. Yezerski, "A Dwelling and Burial Cave at Kh. Abu-Musarraḥ in the Land of Benjamin," in *Burial Caves and Sites in Judea and Samaria from the Bronze and Iron Ages*, ed. H. Hizmi and A. De-Groot (Jerusalem: Israeli Antiquities Authority, 2004), 107–56.
19. U. Dinur and G. Lipovitz, "A Burial Cave from the 6th Century B.C.E. in Hurvat Almit," *Niqrot Zurim* 14 (1988): 44–51. (Hebrew)
20. Hendrik (Enno) Bron, *Sasa Hadashot Arkheologiyot: Excavations and Surveys in Israel* 125 (2013), http://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=2225.
21. Shahack-Gross, Gafri, and Finkelstein, "Identifying Threshing Floors in the Archaeological Record," 173.

reinterpretation of hard floors discovered on excavations, yet some flexibility in their criteria is needed. As demonstrated at Khirbet Maṣṣur el-‘Aqab, threshing floors can also be found within domestic contexts, and they may not exhibit signs of trampling if they are rock-hewn floors as at Samaria.

Both archaeology and ethnography provide insights into the location of threshing floors and why they are so difficult to study. These flat floors are often situated in areas with wind accessibility. They are not likely to leave organic material because these materials would be collected, or the wind would blow them away. The floors are likely to contain earth that is pressed down, hard, and chalky, or they can be rock-hewn floors. Threshing floors may have been communal spaces, although owning a threshing floor near to one’s property was probably ideal and convenient. Likewise, other agricultural features often accompany threshing floors, such as oil and wine presses. In areas where all of the land was fertile, threshing floors might be temporary so that the land could be used for cultivating crops.

Threshing Floors in the Hebrew Bible

As sites where crops are processed, threshing floors are spaces essential for survival in agrarian societies, and as such, inhabitants of ancient Israel surely used threshing floors for these vital operations. Because threshing and winnowing were ubiquitous practices in ancient Israel, it is likely that everyone had access to a threshing floor, whether privately owned or shared. The Hebrew Bible attests both privately owned (2 Sam. 6:6 // 1 Chron. 13:9; 2 Sam. 24:16 // 1 Chron. 21:15) and communal (1 Sam. 23:1; 1 Kgs. 22:10 // 2 Chron. 18:9) threshing floors.