There’s a Figurine at the Bottom of the Sea:
Maritime Votive Offerings at Shavei Zion
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In the early 1970’s a diver/fisherman had stumbled upon a large cache of terracotta figurines on the seabed in northern Israel. News of the remarkable find had reached the director of the National Maritime Museum, who contacted Prof. E. Linder from the University of Haifa, and the two had launched a series of surveys followed by several excavation seasons. During the excavations, hundreds of figurines, as well as pottery vessels and other notable finds, were found spread in an area over 1.5km wide off the coast of Shavei Zion. Although no clear remains of a ship were noted, save for a lead anchor weight, the excavators maintained this was the site of a 5th century BCE shipwreck that hauled a cargo of figurines and amphoras. However, an examination of the pottery retrieved from the site, which has never been fully published before, seems to suggest a wide chronological range, from the 7th to the 4th/3rd centuries BCE. Furthermore, there are some technological indications that suggest that a few of the figurines could not have been produced before the Hellenistic period, suggesting that the material culture at the site was accumulated over a long period of time, rather than deposited during a single cataclysmic event. Also, a series of analyses performed on a small sample of figurines and amphoras indicate that the clay originated from several locations along the Phoenician coast, suggesting they were produced in several different workshops. And finally, while the figurines were presented in preliminary publications as a cohesive collection of terracottas representing the goddess Tanit, based on emblems attributed to her found imprinted on the figurines, the reality is more complex. Although the figurines do display homogeneity in terms of production technique and general motif, they also demonstrate a high degree of variability in the size, posture, position of the limbs, headdress, and artistic style. The amphoras found at the site also display typological inconsistency. The heterogeneity of the figurines and pottery vessels does not seem to fit the profile of a merchantman’s cargo, which usually consists of bulk commodities. However, the homogeneity of the figurines’ motifs, all of which display the image of females demonstrating fertility and/or childbearing attributes, does seem to suggest they represent a form of unified cult. The association of this cult, which seems to relate to fertility and child bearing, with the goddess Tanit is appealing since the Phoenicians dedicated human infants to Tanit and to Baal Hammon at open air precincts known as Tophet sites found around the central Mediterranean.

This paper will argue that the underwater site of Shavei Zion does not represent a shipwreck, but rather, a cultic site in which figurines, and perhaps also other offerings, were cast into the sea as part of a local Phoenician cult. It will connect the site and ritual practiced in it to a broader Phoenician phenomenon in the Mediterranean, and explore the possible deity, or deities, that were worshipped at the site, and explore the possibility that the figurines represent a localized form of the central Mediterranean cult of Tanit and Baal Hammon.