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Koenen, Klaus

Bethel: Geschichte, Kult und Theologie

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A first chapter (called “2” after two pages of introduction) covers “topographical and toponymical problems” (3–26), in which the reader is not told that the pre-Roman site of Bethel (Beitin) covers no more than 1 ha (4 acres). The history of Bethel is discussed on pages 27–68, starting with a critical review of the Albright-Kelso excavations (see further *infra*). The following chapter (69–79) briefly reviews some of the literary works attributed to Bethel by previous authors (the “Elohists,” in whom Koenen still seems to believe, parts of Amos, the “Deuteronomistic History”—another hypothetical construct that Koenen transmits without the shadow of so much as a caveat—the Priestly writer, the Psalms of Asaph, and Ps 20). The author rejects all these attributions. The cult of Bethel is discussed on pages 81–140. After another review of deities proposed for this sanctuary (Bethel, Baal, Astarte, Anat, Yahû [should read Yahô, as attested by the variant spellings *yhw* and *yhh*], Anat-Bethel, Ishim-Bethel, El, Jahwe, and Asherah; only a biblical scholar can argue against the identity of Anat-Bethel and Anat-Yahô at Elephantine by pointing out the fact that the two personal names do not occur in the same text [91]—they still occur in the same corpus), the bovine cult statue of Bethel is identified as a representation, not a pedestal, of Yhwh (95–132). The iconographic evidence being ambiguous, the biblical polemic against the “calve(s)” provides the decisive argument. There is no discussion of whether the alternatives (representation, symbol, attribute, or pedestal) were mutually exclusive for Israelites of the eighth century

B.C.E. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the matzebah, the altar, the ark, and the Aaronide priesthood. The theology of Bethel (141–80) is reconstructed on the basis of Exod 32:1–6, Gen 28:10–22; 35:1–7, which are taken as reflecting cult legends of and from Bethel (a hypothetical position much less well-founded than many others that Koenen rejects) and, in addition, by polemics by or in Amos, Hosea, Jer 48:13, Judg 20–21, and 1 Sam 10. A chapter of its own is dedicated to the polemics against Bethel by (or in) Amos, Hosea, and the Deuteronomistic corpus (181–93). The positive reception of traditions of (or from) Bethel in the Bible (195–209) is seen in the transformation of the “Bethel tradition” into a patriarchal tradition and in the relocation of God’s presence to sites other than Bethel. A summary (211–17), bibliography (219–44, in which the most recent versions of A. de Pury’s investigations of Hos 12 are nevertheless missing), list of figures, and two indices (subjects and biblical references) conclude the volume.

Koenen’s approach is characterized by a concept of “history” that identifies it with those references in the “sources” that survived critical scrutiny, exemplified by frequent statements that this or that historical reconstruction is not “attested in the sources” (as if it could be!). This reviewer prefers to regard “history” as a theoretical (and creative) construct aimed at solving the problems inherent in the data, which, of course, presupposes that one sees these problems. In consequence, Koenen’s history of Bethel is wrong in two decisive points.

1. For Koenen, there is no doubt that the Jeroboam who transformed Bethel into a “royal sanctuary” and installed the bull figure was Jeroboam I. It is much more likely, however, that it was Jeroboam II. In the period from Rehoboam to Asa, Benjamin (with Bethel) was disputed territory (cf. 1 Kgs 14:30; 15:7; 15:16; 15:32)—not really the ideal context for cultural investments that, as it seems, did last for a while. As Koenen observes (38–39), the economic recovery that one should expect if Jeroboam I did establish a regional sanctuary (and pilgrimage center) does not show up in the archeological evidence for the ninth century. So it did not exist. Koenen’s specious argumentation to save the veracity of the biblical record culminates in a lack of historical imagination (39). The projection of the establishment of the Bethel cult (as the primordial and lethal “sin of Jeroboam”) by the biblical writers is easily conceivable on the background of severe competition between the sanctuaries of Bethel and Jerusalem from the seventh through the fifth centuries B.C.E. The failure to regard not only the iconography but also the chronology of the bulls that Koenen has collected shrouds the fact that bovine imagery is nearly completely absent from the tenth century but very prominent in the eighth century. This fact offers a chronological anchor for the tradition in 1 Kgs 12.

2. The results of the Bethel excavations boil down to an unstratified corpus of pottery. Koenen follows Dever (1971) in the assumption that this corpus does not contain sixth-

and fifth-century pottery. Meanwhile it has become clear that “Iron II C” pottery extends, at least at peripheral sites, well into the fourth, if not third, century B.C.E. (see most recently P. Bienkowski, *BASOR* 330 [2003]: 90). The reviewer finds in the Bethel corpus quite a number of seventh through fifth century forms. This observation agrees well with the picture emerging from regional archeology that shows that Jerusalem was deserted in the sixth century, and sedentary life in Yehud concentrated in the Benjamin region (these data, though published by Lipschits as early as 1999, are not properly evaluated by Koenen). In addition, Koenen denies the historicity of 2 Kgs 17:28 and defends that of 2 Kgs 23:15–20. The reviewer finds it easier to argue the other way round.

In general, Koenen claims an archeological and philological competence that he does not have. According to page 31, note 13, the “Chacolithic” of Bethel belongs to EB IA—Koenen continues to call it “Chacolithic” (undoubtedly because his “source” does it) and even preserves “EB IV,” which is now generally regarded as and called IBA (Intermediate Bronze Age). If a god carries a lance (87 n. 50), it is Baal, not Resheph. On page 22, *maqātir* is not a single “incense burner”; on page 43, *bēt mamlākāh* and *miqdaš melek* are neither the “house of *the* kingdom” nor the “sanctuary of *the* king”; in Zech 7:2–3 “Bethel” can only be the subject of the sentence, or the Hebrew would be incomprehensible (62–63); on page 84 the translations of Gen 31:13 and 35:7 are wrong; in Hos 10:15 a translation “such did (the cult, the sanctuary of) Bethel to you” is possible; “such was done to you in (or at) Bethel” is, again, impossible. In Jer 48:13 (177–78) “Bethel” can only be the designation of Israel’s supreme deity, or there is no parallelism in this poetic verse.

Biblical scholars who still regard the methods and the presuppositions of German Protestant biblical scholarship of the 1960s the apogee of the discipline will appreciate this book; those who think that there has been some progress since, both in terms of method and factual knowledge, might safely disregard it.