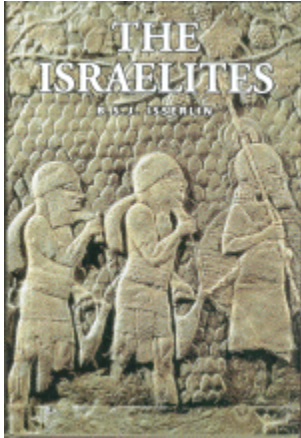


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**Isserlin, B. S. J.**

***The Israelites***

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In this volume Isserlin sets out to present a rare comprehensive picture of ancient Israel. He proposes “to offer as concise a picture of Israel and her intellectual and material culture as emerges from the combined study of the Bible, extra-biblical texts and archaeology, in the light of recent scholarship” (9). Based on the model of Donald Harden’s *The Phoenicians* (1962), including a similar list of chapters and breadth of coverage, Isserlin addresses such wide ranging topics as the history of Israel and Judah, village planning, social structure, industries and crafts, religion, and the writing and formation of the biblical literature. *The Israelites* is the single most comprehensive treatment of the people and society of ancient Israel to date. Isserlin engages in the current scholarly debates about the historical veracity of the biblical portrait of Israel and represents fairly opposing opinions on multiple debated issues. The text is written in a clear, easily accessible style without footnotes or citations. It is well illustrated with 85 black and white photographs and 74 line drawings, maps, and charts. A full bibliography, subdivided by topics, is included at the end of the volume to point readers to further areas for research.

In his introduction, Isserlin discusses the sources—biblical, epigraphic, and archeological—and their limitations for reconstructing Israelite history and society. Although he acknowledges that the sources, whose interpretation is frequently disputed, provide only a fragmentary picture of Israel’s social and political history, he argues that they enable us nevertheless to construct a general picture of ancient Israelite lifestyles and of the main stages of their development. Isserlin divides his presentation of the

Israelites into three parts: “The Stage and the Players,” “The Material Culture,” and The World of the Spirit.

Isserlin begins Part I with the requisite chapter on the geography of Israel. He suggests that many of the tensions in Israelite history are related to geographical factors, yet backs away from assigning any causal role to geography. Geography simply provides or denies opportunities. The Israelite use of geography was determined by historical processes. Isserlin’s following chapters on “Origins and Affinities of the Israelites” and “History” are likely to elicit the most criticism. Isserlin is clearly aware of the historical problems posed by the biblical literature. He rejects what some scholars have labeled the “Albrightean Synthesis.” He is familiar with the current debates on the history of Israel, and acknowledges the various critical opinions where appropriate. Nevertheless, Isserlin seems to favor a more cautious (some might say “maximalist”) approach to the historicity of the biblical tradition than many biblical scholars might accept. For example, in spite of the many historical problems posed by the patriarchal and exodus traditions, Isserlin acknowledges recent arguments in favor of a “patriarchal age” in the first half of the second millennium, and for a thirteenth century Exodus, though he never presents the arguments themselves. He expresses a similar caution when he argues that even personal, seemingly private, conversations in the stories of David and Solomon cannot be regarded as free inventions of the author, for Near Eastern courts were full of “non-persons” who could have witnessed and passed on the conversations to others. He embraces Finkelstein’s understanding of the archaeology of the “settlement,” yet also marshals arguments to support the external origin of the Israelites. Overall, Isserlin attempts to present a balanced approach to the origin and history of the Israelite, but the reader senses a desire on his part to hold onto the historical veracity of the biblical tradition in spite of its historical problems.

Isserlin concludes the first part of the book with a discussion of the Israelites’ social structure and political system. This chapter is largely descriptive in nature. Isserlin discusses Israelite family structure, the social role of women and slaves, political organization, and the role of kings. He is largely dependent upon the biblical literature, but he also draws upon archaeological evidence—the Samaria Ostraca for social structure, town planning at Tell el Far‘ah (Tirzah) for the distinction between rich and poor residential quarters—where appropriate and available. Unfortunately, when Isserlin ventures to provide an explanation for a social or political feature, his explanation is often theological rather than social-scientific, as one might expect. For example, he draws upon a covenant theology to explain the early “bond of common outlook” among the Israelites. He also emphasizes that civil and criminal matters were governed by “divine law,” rather than by laws issued by king or governmental institution. In both cases, a dose of social-scientific theory would better illuminate the social and political dynamics at work behind the biblical texts from which Isserlin bases his interpretation.

In Part II Isserlin presents a picture of the material aspects of ancient Israel, drawing primarily on the archaeological evidence but supplemented with biblical evidence, especially when the former is lacking. He has an extensive discussion of town planning and architecture, including the layout of towns and administrative centers and the construction of houses, palaces, and public works. A brief discussion on agriculture is followed by an excellent treatment of the rarely discussed role of crafts and industries in ancient Israel. Isserlin's presentation is lucid and accurate throughout. However, more discussion is needed on the relationship between the urban and rural aspects of the society. He points out that the towns lived as "parasites" off the countryside and that by the eighth century agricultural production was geared to providing a surplus, but he does not address the social, political, or economic forces at work in this relationship. Similarly, his brief discussion of trade lacks a sufficient explanation for the purpose or role of trade within the Israelite social or economic system. Isserlin concludes Part II with a chapter on the organization, equipment, and practice of war.

Although the focus of Part III is the Israelite world of thought and ideas, Isserlin grounds his discussion in their material expressions. Thus, the first chapter addresses "Language, Writing and Texts," and includes a discussion ranging from the characteristics of the Hebrew language and epigraphic materials to the distinction between poetry and prose in the biblical literature. Isserlin's discussion of Israelite religion focuses on temples and other sanctuaries, cultic furnishings and accessories, and cultic practices. He recognizes the common ground Israelite religion shared with Canaanite religion, but Isserlin also notes the ways in which Israelite religion is distinctive. In the final chapter, Isserlin surveys the limited representations of Israelite art, and successfully highlights what is distinctively Israelite.

*The Israelites* stands out from the pack of many books on ancient Israel for its breadth of coverage and judicious use of biblical, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence. Isserlin offers few new theses, and much of the information will be familiar to biblical scholars and archaeologists. The value of this volume is in its synthesis of evidence and scholarly opinion and in the resulting comprehensive picture of the ancient Israelites. The lack of footnotes (or other form of citation) is thus a weakness to the book. Although the bibliography provides the reader with ample material for further research, it is quite difficult to follow-up on, or verify, any particular claim made by Isserlin. This level of documentation may limit its use for scholars. Nevertheless, the book should prove to be a valuable resource for both students and the educated lay reader interested in ancient Israel.