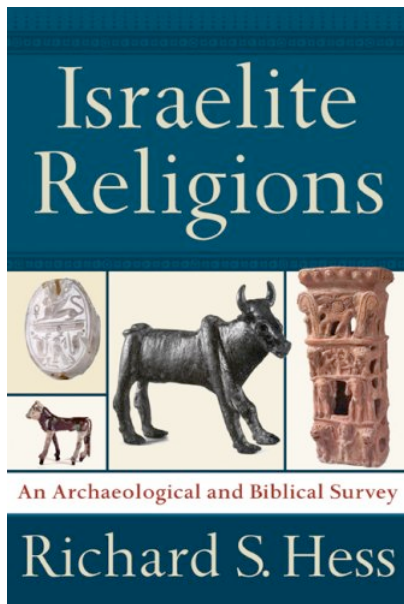


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Hess, Richard S.

Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey

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Richard Hess adds his version to a number of recent accounts of the religion of ancient Israel. The purpose of the book “is to survey the major elements of the study of ancient Israelite religion and the methods that have been used to study them” (11). The book begins with three introductory chapters: an introduction (ch. 1), approaches to the study of religion (ch. 2), and previous study of Israelite religion (ch. 3). Then follow two chapters on pre-Israelite West Semitic religion, one on Syria and Egypt (ch. 4) and the other on Palestine and Jordan (ch. 5). Then follow two chapters that most would see as unnecessary and only tangentially relevant to the main subject: narrative and legal strands (ch. 6) and priestly and cultic strands (ch. 7) of the Pentateuch. The core of the book is found in the next four chapters: early Israel and “the united monarchy” (ch. 8), written sources for the divided monarchy (ch. 9), archaeological sources for the divided monarchy (ch. 10), and the exilic and postexilic religion (ch. 11); finally, the conclusions (ch. 12). The book is finished off with a bibliography and indexes of names, citations, and subjects.

The book is aimed, at least in part, at a nonspecialist audience, clearly the knowledgeable conservative evangelical lay person, which explains part of the content. Hess seems determined to reassure this audience that their beliefs are respectable from a scholarly

point of view. The main target audience will no doubt be reassured, yet discerning readers will see a more complicated picture. The overall perspective that Hess seems to want to leave us with is the following:

From Exodus onward, the presence of a single deity for Israel, whose name and people emerge from the southern desert, becomes the unique feature of Israelite religion, however much it may have borrowed from the forms of surrounding cultures. The institutions of priesthood, sanctuary, and covenant all transform existing archaeological and (extrabiblical) textual media to define Israel's relationship with Yahweh as sole (monolatrous, though not necessarily monotheistic) [deity?], aniconic in representation, and lived out or actualized in a manner that rejected earlier West Semitic deities and yet embraced their cultic objects and actions, whether *maṣṣēbôt* and tent sanctuaries or treaties and blood sacrifices. (349)

If analyzed carefully, even this statement is a radical departure from the normative "biblical" portrayal. Yet within the volume there are many statements—sometimes explicit but more often implicit—that go against even this view. I sense a sort of schizophrenic approach on Hess's part in this book: on the one hand, there is a basic knee-jerk instinct to defend the biblical text (or at least conservative evangelical interpretations of it) and yet an (often subtle) admission that the data support a different view. This latter is frequently manifest in a simple citation of data or scholarly opinion without comment, even though the implications go against the idea of early monotheistic worship in Israel. One might accuse Hess of not being candid about the problems with his overall picture, but I am not sure that Hess is himself aware of the contradictions. It strikes me that we are witnessing a perhaps only semi-conscious or even unconscious struggle that Hess is having within himself. Let me illustrate this rather bold conclusion with a variety of examples.

(1) He spends two chapters (a rather large section of a book on religion) working out the "strands" of the Pentateuch, which bear an interesting conceptual parallel to the sources of the Documentary Hypothesis. This comes at a time when the Documentary Hypothesis is being queried as never before. Even though we are constantly reassured that Genesis is rooted in the second millennium B.C.E. and the likely late dating of many of the relevant texts is ignored, it is the idea that gives one pause—as if we were witnessing the beginnings of source thinking as known from the eighteenth century.

(2) The exodus story is discussed (152–55) with the claim that "the exodus reflects a historical event, however large or small" (154). But this is the view of many scholars, even including some that Hess would consider rather radical. Some sort of historical event may

well lie behind it, even if it is merely the fact that there were Jews in Egypt who emigrated (and immigrated) through a long period of history. What would be disputed is the claim that “the bulk of the detail ... is a possibility” (155 n. 40), if by “detail” one means the first nine plagues, the destruction of all the firstborn of Egypt, the drowning of the Egyptian army in the Reed Sea, and the presence and exodus of three million or more Israelites—all of which the text states. None of these is demonstrated or even a real possibility.

(3) In earlier publications (*Joshua* [TOTC; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996], 174; “Early Israel in Canaan: A Survey of Recent Evidence and Interpretations,” in *Israel’s Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography* [ed. V. Philips Long; SBTS 17; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999], 492–518, especially 506–8; originally published in *PEQ* 125 [1993]: 125–42), Hess suggested that the structure found by archaeologists on Mount Ebal was the altar of Josh 8:30–33. I criticized this interpretation (“The ‘Comfortable Theory’, ‘Maximal Conservativism’, and Neo-fundamentalism Revisited,” in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll* [ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies; JSOTSup 348; Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], 174–93, especially 185), as did others, and Hess seems to have taken these criticisms to heart: he now seems to reject this as the altar of Joshua. Although he misquotes me (I did not say “the evidence from the site proves nothing” but rather “So what has Hess demonstrated? Absolutely nothing”), Hess’s change of position is an encouraging one.

(4) It is stated that the teraphim of 1 Sam 19:13, 16 belonged to Michal (267). The aim of this statement seems to be to distance David from possession of teraphim. Yet the text does not say this. It states that Michal took “the” teraphim—not “her” teraphim—and put it in the bed to make the arresting soldiers think it was David. She was in David’s house (v. 11); the presumption must be that the teraphim was in the house with David’s consent. There is no evidence that the teraphim was more associated with Michal than David.

(5) At various points, Hess asserts or implies widespread literacy in ancient Israel (e.g., 62, 233–34, 273, 315). This is too large subject a subject to discuss in detail (see my overview with bibliography in *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?* [London: T&T Clark, 2007], 115–18), but there are some strange statements made, such as, “Further, assumptions about low percentage figures for literacy are highly speculative” (62). Hess is evidently unaware of how ironic his statement is, considering how speculative some of his arguments are in favor of high percentage figures of literacy. A further statement concerns the Izbet Sartah inscription (234 n. 75): “to dispute that a script is Hebrew, because it is too early, is meaningless unless one can say with certainty when the Hebrew script began or how widely it was distributed.” Yet this agnostic position

is suddenly abandoned a couple of sentences later: “The script has been generally identified as an example of one in the transitional period from a generally Phoenician script to one that is specifically Hebrew.” How can one say that, when we cannot say with certainty when the Hebrew—or Phoenician—script began or how widely either was distributed? In arguing for literacy in Iron I (233–34), he quotes W. G. Dever in support, but Dever’s statement is about the tenth or even ninth century.

(6) At several points within the text, Hess seems to agree that cultic prostitution was a reality (e.g., 111 n. 126, 256). Yet when he comes to give an extensive discussion of the subject, he ultimately rejects the idea (332–35).

(7) In a number of places, he suggests that the basic situation in Judah was monotheism—or at least henotheism (78, 103–4, 152, 161–62, 165, 245, 270, 316). This conclusion seems strange in the light of the following statement: “That Yahweh worship was in the minority in early Israel is a testimony to the syncretism described in Judg. 2:9–11” (270 n. 102). Hess also blames the monarchy for introducing polytheism into Israel’s faith (245). Yet he accepts that the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscription shows that Yhwh had a consort (283–89; see also below). So why not the obvious conclusion: Israel and Judah had not yet developed monotheism or even henotheism?

In sum, these and other examples show the typical conservative evangelical form of argument: quoting other conservative evangelicals (e.g., K. A. Kitchen, P. S. Johnston), countering widespread scholarly opinion with quotation of an alternative viewpoint (often from a conservative evangelical, such as on 155 n. 40, 280), giving a conservative interpretation to the data when this is less probable (such as Ps 82 on 103), and using dubious quotation of mainstream scholars’ opinions to support conclusions. Yet mixed in with this manner of proceeding are many counter tendencies, some quite astonishing in a work of this nature. One of the most amazing is the following :

the texts have provided what is arguably the major catalyst for a revolution in our understanding of the beliefs of the Israelites during the monarchy.... It is, in fact, no longer possible to accept a simple division between those who worshiped Yahweh as a single and unique deity, on the one hand, and those who served Baal and a pantheon of deities, on the other. As a result of the finds at Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, Yahweh has become a member of the pantheon of Iron Age Palestine. (283)

From Kuntillet ‘Ajrud, Hess accepts that Yhwh had a consort, which is a major admission. Granted, he does not follow through with the implications of this verdict, but, as noted above, we may be witnessing the beginnings of a revolution in Hess’s own thinking.

The collection of data in this volume is largely comprehensive, which is its main strength. The surveys of archaeological finds and textual material in chapters 8–11 are very helpful and mainly thorough. It is unfortunate, therefore, that the organization is at times eccentric: Why in chapter 8, for example, are some of the cult sites discussed at the beginning of the chapter but others delayed until later, where they are surveyed as “additional Iron Age I cultic sites”? In spite of this thoroughness, there are some small gaps for the reader to be aware of.

Especially important is the failure to note the presence of some Yahwistic names in northern Syria or to attempt to account for them (on these, see my forthcoming article “‘Many Nations Will Be Joined to Yhwh in that Day’: The Question of Yhwh Outside Judah,” in *Religious Diversity* [ed. John Barton and Francesca Stavrakopoulou]). The fact that certain non-Israelites have Yahwistic names is a potential problem for any theory about the development of Yahwism.

As often the case, a good deal of emphasis is placed on the covenant in Israel. Yet we have to keep in mind that this is a theological concept of some biblical writers; it is not certain that the idea was widespread outside this narrow circle (e.g., not in Amos or Micah). Scholarship has gone in a large circle and come back in recent years to the idea of Wellhausen that the concept is fairly late (Lothar Perlitt, *Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* [WMANT 36; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1969]; Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1986], though Nicholson argues that it can be found as early as Hosea).

Hess also cites D. J. McCarthy (*Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* [2nd ed.; AnBib 21A; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978]) in reference to seeing Deuteronomy as being based on the treaty format, which Hess wants to take back to the second millennium B.C.E. (54–57; cf. 162, 349–50). He fails to note, however, that McCarthy rejected the Hittite treaty form of the second millennium and argued that Deuteronomy was based on the Neo-Assyrian treaty form. The idea that the supposed use of the Hittite treaty form “proves” Deuteronomy and other passages early is found only in conservative writings and has been rejected by scholarship as a whole.

It may be a small point overall but I feel compelled to correct the following: Hess misquotes me (not for the first time) on 96. To the statement, “However there remains a common West Semitic heritage to Ugarit and the Bible,” he adds a footnote with the statement, “contra Grabbe (1994).” This is a reference to my article “‘Canaanite’: Some Methodological Observations in Relation to Biblical Study,” in *Ugarit and the Bible: Proceedings of the International Symposium on Ugarit and the Bible, Manchester*,

September 1992 (ed. G. J. Brooke et al.; Ugaritisch-Biblische Literatur 11; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1994), 113–22. In that essay I in no way questioned a common Northwest Semitic heritage to Ugarit and the Bible; rather, my concern was the frequent (often unconscious) attempt to equate “Ugaritic = Canaanite.”

On 286 the translation of line 1 of inscription B has a missing phrase (“[Yh]wh of Tman and to Asheratah”) at the end. On 289 n. 174, line 3 of the inscription should read *wmšryh.l’šrth.hwš’ lh*. Neither of these printing errors affects the basic argument.

Some bibliography has been missed. A basic work is Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd ed.; Leiden: Brill; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Another useful collection of essays is Bob Becking, Meindert Dijkstra, Marjo Korpel, and Karel Vriezen, *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (The Bible Seminar 77; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001); the essay analyzing the Taanach altar would have been a useful addition to Hess’s discussion. In his list of works on the Persian period (337), Hess is unaware of my *History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period 1: Yehud: A History of the Persian Province of Judah* (London: T&T Clark, 2004); he would have learned that most scholars now reject an identification of Sheshbazzar with Shenazzar (338). Finally, Hess makes the surprising statement that the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim has not been found (216), apparently unaware of several recent articles and especially the volume by Yitzhak Magen, Haggai Misgav, and Levana Tsfania, *Mount Gerizim Excavations, Volume 1: The Aramaic, Hebrew and Samaritan Inscriptions* (Judea and Samaria Publications 2; Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2004).

In the end, my own view of the development of Israelite and Judaic religion is not a million kilometers from Hess’s (see my overview in *Ancient Israel*, 150–63). Israel began with a typical Northwest Semitic religion. Yhwh seems to have been the main ethnic deity but far from the sole one. Whether there was ever a Yhwh-alone movement is debatable, but, if so, it was very much a minority view. Most people of Israel and Judah accepted worship of other deities, and Yhwh had a female consort. It was only toward the end of the monarchy that an official movement to worship Yhwh alone came about. There may have been a gradual trend of a greater emphasis on Yhwh, though this is difficult to document. But Yhwh’s consort seems to have been dropped. On the other hand, worship of other deities continued among the people, as attested by passages such as Jer 44:15–19. Monotheistic views were probably prevalent in some circles by the “exilic” period, but it evidently took some time to become the common view, perhaps in the Persian period.

Hess seems to accept some of this outline, but he tries to push a monolatrous—if not a monotheistic—Yhwh worship back to an early period in Judah. Yet, as exemplified above, there are many statements and admissions in the text that counter this perspective: evidence of cults outside the Jerusalem temple; the worship of deities other than Yhwh; a female consort alongside Yhwh; (incomplete) editing of the biblical text to give a monotheistic (or henotheistic) outlook; a variety of cultic and mantic practices that the text condemns; and so on. A careful reader will find it difficult to reconcile these data with some of Hess's conclusions, but this is ultimately to his credit: he has, for the most part, given the data on which religion in Israel and Judah can be reconstructed.

Hess is knowledgeable in the ancient Near Eastern sources. He has also been mostly comprehensive in his survey of the relevant data, whether archaeological, inscriptional, or biblical. There is much useful material catalogued here. Let us hope that the intended conservative evangelical audience will begin to take in the implications of this information.