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Hess, Richard S., Gerald A. Klingbeil, and Paul J. Ray, Jr., eds.

Critical Issues in Early Israelite History

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In reviewing this book, indeed in reviewing any book on the history of ancient Israel, the review will ultimately tell more about the reviewer's own standpoint in this debate than about the quality of the book itself. I shall therefore play with open cards: I am positive toward a careful and sensitive use of the biblical texts as a source for reconstructing the history of ancient Israel. In my view, the texts in the Bible, although edited and written down much later than the events that they purportedly tell about, can nevertheless shed light upon customs and events in ancient Israel. Nonetheless, I am bothered by several aspects of the present volume. First, many of the essays appear to assume certain presuppositions, especially regarding the historicity and dating of the texts. While this in itself is not necessarily a problem, the issue here is that these presuppositions are most of the time silently assumed rather than openly stated. Second, I found too many of the essays to be mere reviews and critiques of other models of reconstructing the early history of ancient Israel; too few of them contain original research.

This collection of essays falls into three main sections. The first, containing textual studies, opens with K. Lawson Younger Jr.'s "The Rhetorical Structuring of the Joshua Conquest Narratives." The bulk of the essay is a detailed study on the various rhetorical devices found in the conquest accounts in Josh 10–11. My concerns are limited to the

short claim, mentioned both in the introduction and in the conclusion, that a better understanding of these rhetorical structures enables us to “posit better reconstructive models of Israel’s origin in the land” (32). Lawson does not, however, give any concrete examples of this. It is also not clear whether Lawson means that a better understanding of the literary structure of these narratives enables us to grasp more fully how the conquests happened, how the authors of these narratives understood the conquest to have happened, or how they wished to present the conquest to their audience.

Richard S. Hess, in “The Jericho and Ai of the Book of Joshua,” seeks to modify the popular interpretation of the two narratives in Josh 2 and 6. He argues that the words “city” and “king,” together with the description of the city walls and its gates, as well as that of Rahab and her family, implies a relatively small fort with a local commander. This interesting interpretation highlights the tendencies among many readers of the Bible to read into the narratives aspects that are actually not present. However, I am hesitant about Hess’s methodology. To bolster his interpretation, Hess draws attention to the fact that the Akkadian of the Amarna correspondence uses a form of the West Semitic root *mlk* to denote a more local leader rather than a king and that we have a comparable situation in the Ugaritic of the thirteenth century B.C. These kinds of comparisons, however, only work if a contemporary dating of the book of Joshua is assumed, something that few scholars do. One cannot use the meaning of an Akkadian word from the fourteenth century to elucidate the meaning of a Hebrew word in a text composed hundreds of years later.

The next two essays are review articles. Michael G. Hasel’s “Merenptah’s Reference to Israel: Critical Issues for the Origin of Israel” looks at the history of interpretation of the reference to Israel in the Merenptah inscription, and he points out that this inscription suggests that Israel, in some form or other, existed as a socioethnic people already located in the land of Canaan by 1209 B.C. Likewise, Efraín Velázquez II, in “The Persian Period and the Origins of Israel: Beyond the ‘Myths,’” reviews the scholarly theories pertaining to the origin of Israel, whether in the fifteenth–thirteenth century B.C. or in the Persian period. It is clearly structured and highlights well the strengths and weaknesses of the different theories. Velázquez concludes that there is truth in both theories: Israel did not originate in the Persian period, but normative Judaism took shape in that time. He further calls for a closer dialogue between archaeology and biblical studies. In both these cases, I am left with a feeling of want: there is nothing really new here, and there are no concrete examples of the wished-for collaboration between text and archaeology.

The next four essays deal with archaeological studies in broad contexts. Paul J. Ray Jr., in “Classical Models for the Appearance of Israel in Palestine,” discusses the recent models for reconstructing the origins of Israel, and he calls for a closer relationship between the

biblical text and archaeology. As with the preceding two essays, this overview is useful but lacks innovation and, more important, concrete examples. A case in point is Ray's brief suggestion that the Bible presents two models of land acquisition, one quick through conquest (Joshua) and one through a slow process (Judges), and that these two models, reflecting two different phases of Israel's emergence, are to be juxtaposed with the archaeological evidence. Then, before actually doing so, the essay ends!

The same critique can be leveled against Patrick Mazani's "The Appearance of Israel in Canaan in Recent Scholarship." Mazani laments the fact that "recent theoretical models have been rather narrow in their approach to the [archaeological] data" and that they have "failed to give a satisfactory explanation of the origin of Israel" (109). I agree. I am also looking for a model that has "a healthy respect for the biblical tradition itself" (109), but Mazani is not forthcoming.

Gerald A. Klingbeil's "Between North and South': The Archaeology of Religion in Later Bronze Age Palestine and the Period of the Settlement" endeavors to describe the religion of Late Bronze Age Palestine. In particular, Klingbeil suggests a wealth of textual parallels between the Bible and the texts from Emar, Ugarit, and Alalakh, some more plausible than others. In fact, this would probably have been a better paper had Klingbeil focused on a fraction of these parallels and then explored them in greater detail. He also discusses the lack of parallels between the ancient Israelite cult and that of Egypt. Klingbeil suggests that these phenomena are the result of "the traumatic experience of Israel in Egypt" (134), combined with the "biblical memory concerning the origin of the patriarchs [in Upper Mesopotamia]" (142). Again, this is a viable interpretation, but it would need a lot more substantiating evidence. In particular, it would need a lengthy discussion of the origins of the traditions surrounding the character of Abraham (the meager note 76 is not enough!). Moreover, it is insufficient to state, in support of Israel's presence in Egypt, that it is "supported by extensive extrabiblical Egyptian textual data" (134). As I am not aware of the existence of such extrabiblical textual data, an accompanying note with the relevant details would have been useful.

Finally, Mark W. Chavalas's "The Context of Early Israel Viewed through the Archaeology of Northern Mesopotamia and Syria" is a good, solid piece of research outlining the history of Upper Mesopotamia and Syria in the third and most of the second millennia B.C.E. However, as the goal of the essay is to enrich "our understanding of the larger world of the biblical patriarchs and of Israel" (161), it is largely irrelevant to those biblical scholars who doubt that Gen 12:4-5 mirrors the origin of Israel. In addition, the problem is less that Chavalas holds such a view that very few scholars today share, more that he never actually *argues* for this position.

The final four essays, dealing with archaeological studies in regional contexts, are consistently of a higher quality. Ralph K. Hawkins, "The Survey of Manasseh and the Origin of the Central Hill Country Settlers," reflects on the use of archaeological surveys for reconstructing the history of ancient Israel. He interacts primarily with A. Zertal's suggestion, as well as with his critics, that the survey of the Manasseh Hill Country shows a movement from east to west, something that would fit an outside origin of Israel. Hawkins further discusses the ways in which Zertal's theory can shed light upon our understanding of the narratives in the book of Joshua.

Daniel M. Master's "Israelite Settlement at the Margins of the Northern Hill Country: Connections to Joshua and Judges from Tell Dothan" reinvestigates the results of Joseph Free's excavation of Tell Dothan (1953–64). He looks at the ways in which the archaeology of places mentioned in the Bible has changed over the last fifty years. Today, we cannot use archaeology as a simple test case for demonstrating the historicity of a biblical narrative, but we can use material remains in order to shed light upon the geography and the customs presupposed by the biblical texts.

Steven M. Ortiz's "Rewriting Philistine History: Recent Trends in Philistine Archaeology and Biblical Studies" does exactly what the title implies, and he does it well. His essay interacts critically with both more and less well-known current models, and he makes a strong case for rejecting especially Finkelstein's claim that the references to the Philistines in the Hebrew Bible all stem from the seventh century B.C.E.

Finally, Bryant G. Wood, in "The Search for Joshua's Ai," focuses on the whereabouts of the cities mentioned in Josh 7:2. He challenges the commonly held identification of et-Tell with Ai and that of Beitin with Bethel and instead suggests that the geographical and archaeological data of these two cities, together with Beth Aven, can find better matches in el-Bira (Bethel), Beitin (Beth Aven), and Khirbet el-Maqatir (Ai). He argues that the root of the problem lies in the misidentification of Bethel, which in turn caused Ai to be wrongly identified. This further removes the discrepancy caused by the fact that et-Tell was not occupied during the Late Bronze Age, the presumed time of the conquest as told in the book of Joshua, between the biblical account of Israel's settling in the land and the picture implied by archaeology.

In conclusion, I can recommend this book but with reservations. I value challenges to what has become more or less a consensus in much of the scholarly world, namely, the indigenous origin of Israel. At the same time, this book would have benefited from much deeper and better argued studies. When challenging the consensus, it is imperative to make one's assumptions explicit, and one often needs to do a more thorough job than when one bases claims upon already commonly accepted views.