Brendon C. Benz

The Land before the Kingdom of Israel: A History of the Southern Levant and the People Who Populated It

History, Archaeology, and Culture of the Levant 7


Emanuel Pfoh
National University of La Plata; National Research Council (CONICET)

This fine study by Brendon C. Benz stems from a PhD dissertation completed in 2013 at New York University under Daniel Fleming. In effect, one gains further appreciation of the present book by having previously read Fleming's Democracy's Ancient Ancestors (2004) and The Legacy of Israel (2012), especially their discussion of sociopolitical issues. Still, the book under review has relevance on its own as it advances a series of new interpretations on Near Eastern and biblical data and readdresses old problems, and for those reasons alone, it should be said from the outset, scholars of the ancient Levant should read and attend carefully to this work.

An introduction (1–14) sets the parameters of the research, especially in terms of the sources used. Epigraphic sources such as the Amarna letters are obviously a main avenue of information, along with archaeology, for the Late Bronze Age. But Benz also considers the biblical narrative as a primary source for assessing the early sociopolitical history of Israel, as it is considered to preserve, following Fleming (2012), “authentic memories of Israel’s early history that have been retained and embedded within the later Judahite framework of the Bible” (9). Furthermore, Benz states that “the Bible does provide a faithful account of the sociopolitical phenomena associated with early Israel” (10).
Part 1 of the study, “The Varieties of Sociopolitical Experience in the Late Bronze Age Levant” (15–138), offers an excellent discussion on the ways “social power,” as Benz calls it, was organized in the Late Bronze Age Levant. Chapter 1 (17–46) defines the nature of the Egyptian imperial domination of the Levant by means of networks of power. Chapter 2 (47–80) revises the categories of “cities” and “territorial kingdoms” in the Levant and notes the failure of previous historiography in matching these concepts with the available data; this is probably one of the most important insights in this study. In effect, Benz indicates that “the traditional tendency to posit a fixed political system dominated by ‘city-states’ and ‘territorial kingdoms’ in which power was a ‘top-down’ phenomenon in the Levant during the LB is based on the failure to recognize the dynamic and relational nature of power” (57). Actually, “power is widely distributed among the population of a city rather than monopolized by the so-called political elite” (50). Later on, Benz’s discussion, for instance, of the nature of the ḫupšū population (58–68) is particularly interesting, although I fail to see why they cannot be peasants, as Benz argues. In fact, when seen against the ethnographic record of Mediterranean societies, ḫupšū as an urban element with access to the means of production do indeed remind us of the characteristics of the Mediterranean agro-towns of more recent times (see Blok 1969), with peasants living in towns and behaving as clients of regional patrons. (Benz, regrettably, does not mention throughout his study the concept of patronage/clientelism to assess data from Amarna or later times.)

Chapter 3 (81–110) addresses the lands of the southern Levant in terms of political activity. Benz distinguishes between “multipolity decentralized lands” and the “city, and centralized lands” (82) and offers a key opinion regarding the relationship between politics and ethnicity:

While a political affiliation with either of these entities may have fostered “genetic bonds” in the form of political “brotherhood” and “fatherhood”, these bonds likely followed the vicissitudes of the political landscape. In this way, any “ethnic” relationship would have been intimately intertwined with, if not primarily based upon, a “political” relationship. (109; see also 258–59)

Such a statement may also be considered for thinking further about later political situations, that is, during the Iron Age II with the kingdoms of Israel, Judah, Ammon, Moab, and Edom, the Phoenician and Philistine “city-states,” and the Aramaean “tribal” kingdoms, in which interpretations of clear and demarcated ethnicity have been advanced (at times, quite irresponsibly indeed), especially in Old Testament scholarship but also in biblical/Syro-Palestinian archaeology.
Chapter 4 (111–38) studies the social and political dynamics of the sutû and 'apîrû peoples. After discussing the anthropology of pastoralism—a factor usually linked to these social elements in historiography—Benz discusses the tribal features of the sutû and 'apîrû, in particular their interaction with state structures of power. Here, too, the concept of clientelism would have been helpful to explain the political attachment of these social groups to major players of the Amarna political landscape (see, e.g., 132, 136).

Building upon the theoretical insights from the previous chapters, part 2 deals with “Two Case Studies on the Varieties of Sociopolitical Experience in the Late Bronze Age Levant: The Land of Amurru and the Land of Shechem” (139–259). In this lengthy discussion, Benz produces a critical political history of Amurru (ch. 5, 141–79) and Shechem (ch. 6, 180–209) in a very welcome fashion, transcending the usual and mere description of the deeds of the political leaders and applying insights from the French historical school of Annales, in particular the Braudelian notion of long-term history, la longue durée (ch. 7, 210–45). Benz accomplishes here a fine processual reconstruction of Amurru, from a multipolety decentralized land to a centralized land under Aziru, and of Shechem, during most of the second millennium BCE “a collectively organized decentralized land that consisted of a variety of political entities and populations” (242–43). The perspective on these polities sets the stage for the later sociopolitical appearance of Israel in Canaan (ch. 8, 246–59).

Part 3, “The Transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron I and the Rise of Early Israel” (261–400), opens with a presentation of the current understandings of the rise of “early Israel” in the southern Levant at the turn of the second millennium BCE, dealing with the increase of settlements in the central hill country, the change in Egyptian administrative policy in the region, and the question of the arrival of the so-called Sea Peoples (ch. 9, 263–302). The next three chapters analyze biblical data referring to early Israel “that suggest continuity with these polities and populations of the LB Levant, particularly as they are depicted in the Amarna corpus” (301–2). First, Benz follows closely an approach initially advanced by Fleming (2012) in order to find historical memories stemming from the Iron Age in the Hebrew Bible, in what would be a “later Judahite rendition of Israel’s history” (308). Benz takes Judg 9 as an example of corporate decision-making processes that predate a fully monarchic institution in Israel, that is, referring to a situation proper of Amarna times in which we find examples of a “multipolety decentralized land” (ch. 10, 303–36). Judges 9 is also used later (ch. 11, 337–65) to illustrate the nature of the identity of the peoples related to Shechem, “which continued to play a role in the collective consciousness and organization of the populations associated with it during the early stages of Israel’s development” (338). Finally, chapter 12 (366–400) deals with the sociopolitical nature of early Israel as seen from the conceptual framework Benz proposed in previous chapters, calling into question
the traditional dichotomy between Israelite tribal highlanders and Canaanite urban lowlanders and arguing for seeing premonarchic “Israel” as a political rather than ethnic reality: Israel is a multipolity decentralized land (mātu) with a collective deity named Yahweh acting as the binder of its multiple peoples (374–99).

An extended conclusion (401–28) sums up the previous discussion, noting the local, Canaanite roots of sociopolitical early Israel as reflected in some biblical stories and passages. It is also noted that “Israel was a decentralized political collective consisting of a variety of polities and people groups” (405) that eventually gave way to the establishment of a house of David constituting a central political authority in the land. A final part of the conclusion (407–28) proposes an explanation of the introduction and consolidation of the monarchy in Israel, via David and Solomon, of whose historicity Benz does not doubt. Unfortunately, much of the proposed historical reconstruction is highly speculative, while based on an interpretation of the biblical text through the conceptual framework of parts 1 and 2.

To conclude, parts 1 and 2 of this study represent an important contribution to the sociopolitical history of the southern Levant during the Late Bronze Age. Of relevance, in particular, is Benz’s emphasis on the social distribution of power, its relational nature, and the continuity, from the Late Bronze to the Iron Age, of power structures and political practices. Part 3 attempts to follow up the sociopolitical interpretation by means of “excavating” the biblical text referring to early (premonarchic) Israel and the monarchy of David and Solomon. In this sense, for me, part 3 represents a regressive movement in the book into more traditional results of biblical scholarship and its quest to historicize—even if done in an archaeologically, anthropologically, and sociologically well-informed and intelligent manner, as this work does it—biblical stories and depictions. These final observations, however, stand far from diminishing the value and importance of Benz’s sociopolitical history of the southern Levant, as it offers a fresh, sophisticated, and elegantly written reappraisal of old issues and known sources.

References

