

Book Reviews

Susan Niditch, ed., *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons, 2016. 568 pages. Hardcover. Price \$195.00. ISBN 978-0-470-65677-8.

Cultures, whether modern or ancient, are complex. As such, many disciplines are essential to a proper understanding, not least of which for the world and culture of ancient Israel. Yet acquainting one's self with the fields of biblical studies, archaeology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and more, can be an overwhelming task. Hence the usefulness of up-to-date works that, while comprehensive in scope, are easily accessible. Thus, joining the numerous companion volumes published in the Wiley Blackwell series comes the *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel*, edited by Susan Niditch.

This tremendous piece of scholarship contains 28 articles published by leading scholars in their respective fields. The volume is divided into three sections: 1) Methodology; 2) Political History; and 3) Themes in Israelite Culture. Each chapter provides an excellent introduction to the subject, with varying level of specification.

The first section on methodology seeks both to contextualize Israelite culture in its historical setting, as well as trace the transmission of various traditions, primarily in the Hebrew Bible and epigraphic evidence. Elizabeth Bloch-Smith introduces the reader to the methods and issues involved with archaeology of ancient Israel, noting the complementary nature of text and the material culture. Song-Mi Suzie Park surveys Israel's neighbors, framing her discussion in terms of Israel's construction of its self-identity with relation to the Other. John R. Huddleston assesses the level and criteria of Egyptian influence upon Israelite culture and literature, suggesting a cautious disposition when drawing parallels between the two. Steven Weitzman details the complicated relationship between text and context. In interpretation the question naturally arises, "which context?" Historical? Literary? Or something else? He ably surveys various proposed approaches to engaging these contexts.

Four subsequent chapters in the first section address the issues relating to the transmission of Israelite tradition. Susan Niditch defends the notion of folklore and its relevance for ancient Israel. Focusing on the literary dimension of the Hebrew Bible, David M. Carr traces the multi-voiced composition of the Bible in light of ANE scribal culture. He seeks to show the complexity through traditional source divisions of the Pentateuch. Ohad Cohen, in one of the more technical chapters of the book, brings the linguistic data to bear on the dating of biblical material. Through a series of examples from the Targums, Judean Desert, and Hebrew Bible, Cohen shows various linguistic features that aid interpreters. The final chapter of the section is by Christopher A. Rollston on

epigraphy and writing culture in the Iron Age. Through a survey of monumental inscriptions, Rollston shows the vast nature of writing in the Levant during this period.

The second section of the volume focuses on the political history of Israel, from its inception to the Hellenistic period. Abraham Faust describes the theories of Israel's ethnogenesis from an archaeological perspective. Contrary to the view of some "minimalists," he is more optimistic regarding the ability "to trace the Israelites and to decipher many of the internal and external processes that characterized the group from the beginning of the Iron Age onward" (171). Brad Kelle follows with a summation of the issues and sources on the early monarchic period. He gives particular attention to the scholarly interest in the dynamics of state-formation as a means of accessing historical information of this period. J. J. M. Roberts, after discussing the composition of the Deuteronomistic History, outlines a chronological progression of the period of the united monarchy ending with the collapse of the southern kingdom. The post-monarchic period is detailed by Charles E. Carter (Neo-Babylonian/Persian period) and Matthew J. Goff (Hellenistic Period). Both of these chapters attest to Israel's response to a new environment in the wake of exile.

The final section of the volume treats numerous themes in Israelite culture, such as deities and religion, social interactions, and forms of artistic expression in literature and iconography. The first two chapters deal with the gods of Israel from a comparative perspective within the ancient Near East (Neal Walls), as well as the issue of Israelite monotheism (Mark S. Smith). Both chapters seek to demonstrate a polytheistic context for early Israel that, through historical circumstances, yielded to the monotheistic vision of early Judaism.

S. A. Geller attempts to reconstruct the development of the priesthood and cult in ancient Israel through an analysis of literary strands in the Tetrateuch. Notably he links Israelites cultic life to creation theology. These, he says, provide a counterbalance to the intellectualism of Deuteronomic covenant religion. Robert R. Wilson highlights differing dimensions of prophecy in Israel, from oral proclamation to its literary form(s). He also considers the social role of the prophets. Turning to apocalypticism, John J. Collins elucidates the relationship between apocalypticism and classical prophecy. Counter to the quest for the external roots of this phenomenon, Collins says that apocalypticism was the product of the Hellenistic age.

The social interactions in this section are headed by a discussion of "household religion" by Francesca Stavrakopoulou. Here, she emphasizes the role of women, the dead, and figurines in the household cult. She warns against relying too heavily on the biblical text for one's reconstruction, preferring to employ an interdisciplinary approach. Raymond F. Person, Jr. contributes a chapter on education and the transmission of Israel's traditions. He outlines the

parental responsibility for the instruction of children according to economic necessity. Additionally, he discusses the evidence for literacy in Israel, which, he says, supports a standardized practice in an elite scribal guild. He draws particular attention to the mnemonic function of these texts within an oral culture. T. M. Lemos describes issues pertaining to kinship relations from a diachronic perspective. Though familial ties were very strong, the effects of population increase and the imperialistic rule following the Babylonian exile strained and reconfigured the dynamics of Jewish communities. Bernard M. Levinson and Tina M. Sherman describe the legal literature and institutions in the Hebrew Bible. While perhaps underappreciated, they argue that the legacy of Israel's legal codes continues to shape even contemporary Western society. The topic of Carol Meyers' chapter is on the lives of women in ancient Israel. Included are the economic, social, religious, and communal roles of women. All of these, she claims, challenge the idea of an androcentric society where women played a subordinate role. In the final chapter of social interactions, J. David Schloen focuses on the economic structures in Iron Age Israel and Judah. After establishing a theoretical framework, he presents the economic factors that would come into play with population growth under a centralized monarchy, which moved from a system of reciprocity and redistribution to specialized production and market exchange.

In the first of four chapters on artistic expression, Edward L. Greenstein describes the literary artistry of authors in the ancient Near East. Features such as parallelism and puns were employed in service to the performative nature of texts. In many cases, he says, words "were crafted according to aesthetic, and not merely pragmatic, principles" (471). The two following chapters present the spawning of literature from the Persian period (Tamara Cohn Eskenazi) and the Hellenistic Period (Benjamin G. Wright III). The former describes Israel's attempt to cope with challenges associated with their communal identity under Persian rule. The latter chapter looks to the legacy of Jewish tradition following the rise of Alexander the Great. Wright categorizes the Hellenistic Jewish literature according to their general approach to earlier scriptural material, and not simply according to their genre or theology. The common tradition these texts attest to, says Wright, obviate the need to speak of Judaisms (plural) during this period. The volume's final chapter, authored by Theodore J. Lewis, turns to the iconography of Israel's national deity. Though he notes the emphasis by scholars on the concrete representations of Yahweh, Lewis presents a series of examples that indicate the abstract conception of deity. In sum, he says "[it] is time to reset our iconoclastic clock such that our study of iconography appreciates those artists who used abstract images (in language and material culture) to depict the divine" (529).

Overall, this work presents a comprehensive introduction to the world of ancient Israel. From the selection of top-tier scholars, to the scope of material covered, readers will find a vast spectrum of relevant issues presented in an

accessible format. A further notable feature is a summary sentence of every secondary source cited in the bibliography at the end of every chapter. This allows readers to know what a listed work contributes, rather than simply relying on a book's title. The layout of the book is another positive feature. Clear headings and wide margins make the book easy and enjoyable to follow.

While some chapter presents questionable theses, methodologies, and interpretations of evidence, I would note two over-arching stylistic points that may prove inconvenient. First, some contributors do not list page numbers when citing secondary works. In these cases, readers are directed only to a book, article, or dissertation, without any guidance for a relevant section of the work. Needless to say, this is regrettable. Second, while the volume includes an extensive subject index, an ancient source index would be a valuable addition. This is especially pertinent since there is overlap in various chapters on particular issues and texts. Nevertheless, this comprehensive volume will serve a standard reference work on the culture ancient Israel for years to come.

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