

Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: an Archaeological and Biblical Survey*, Grand Rapids: Baker Academic and Nottingham (UK): Apollos, 2007, pp432, USD 35, ISBN 978 0 8010 2717 9.

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

The study of religion in a historical context is notoriously difficult. What people believe, assent to and practise personally, filially, socially and nationally is rarely consistent, never static and may not be easily reducible to a series of propositions in any written or spoken language. This diversity is acknowledged by Hess who argues in this book that, 'while there existed a bewildering variety of religious beliefs and practices in the relatively tiny states that were Israel and Judah, this does not exclude, in terms of logic or evidence, the possibility of a single core of beliefs among some that extended back, perhaps far back, into Israel's pre-exilic past.' (15)

In particular this book is intended as an introduction to the subject; it reviews approaches to the study of religion, assesses earlier studies of Israelite religion and history, describes the context of West-Semitic religions and catalogues the evidence from the Old Testament and archaeological sources. The book is systematically presented; each chapter has topic headings at the beginning and conclusions at the end together with an extensive reference list.

Richard S Hess is the Earl S. Kalland Professor of Old Testament and Semitic Languages at Denver Seminary. He is the editor of Denver Journal, Denver Seminary's online theological review journal, and the Bulletin for Biblical Research. Dr. Hess earned a Ph.D. from Hebrew Union College, an M.Div. and a Th.M. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and a B.A. from Wheaton College. His research has taken him to universities in Chicago, Jerusalem, Cambridge, Sheffield, Scotland, London and Münster. He has worked on translations and has authored 8 books and commentaries.

Hess uses a working definition of religion to be 'the service and worship of the divine and supernatural through a system of attitudes, beliefs and practices.' Israelite religion is not necessarily biblical theology as the texts reveal but 'beliefs and practices that diverge from those the texts advocate.' (16) 'Israel' is roughly defined spatially as those occupying the highlands of Canaan during the Iron Age (1200-586BC).

Hess reviews some approaches to religion that are found to contribute to a framework for the study of Israelite religions. Émile Durkheim provided a social background to the practices described in the biblical text. Mircea Eliade demonstrated that religion should be studied in its own right and not in a reductionist manner, and that it was important to be aware of symbols and forms. E.E. Evans-Pritchard gave tribal religion significance by showing that the lives of its practitioners were rationally ordered according to

their own systems. He showed the importance of morality and sacrifice, as well as the need to identify how religious forms relate to one another and to study culture and religion without imposing value judgments.

When considering previous studies of Israelite religion Hess turns to the Documentary Hypothesis outlining its short comings. He is comfortable dividing the Pentateuch into narrative and prophetic, priestly and cultic, and covenant and legal material, however he is not comfortable with the Hypothesis which prejudices the date, authorship and origin of the material and so he dispenses with it.

The review of recent studies of Israelite religion is interesting. Ugaritic material features regularly and the identity of gods, archaeological material and monotheism are often discussed. Hess seems to support John Day's analysis of the Ugaritic gods of El, Asherah and Baal, and the Israelite's Yahweh. He devotes considerable space to the works of Mark S. Smith and Ziony Zevit who carefully document relevant textual and archaeological evidence. These scholars discuss the pantheon of gods known to ancient Israel proposing a comparatively late date, seventh or sixth centuries BC, for the adoption by Israel of a single god, Yahweh. Hess concludes that there are now more questions than there were a generation ago and that syntheses and sweeping generalisations no longer hold; instead he sets out to look at the evidence accepting its diversity and not driven to find a comprehensive synthesis.

Evidence for second millennium BC religion in the Levant is reviewed. In addition to Ebla, Mari and Ugarit, the material from Emar displays many ritual similarities with the Levite priestly traditions. In Palestine, Hess notes areas of external influence; the Hittites and Hurrians in the north and Jordan Valley, Egyptians in the Jezreel Valley and West Semitic along the coastal plain. Temple features are mentioned but there is no analysis of their design. A structuralist analysis of temple plans undertaken by the author yielded results consistent with Hess' conclusions (Davey, C.J. Temples of the Levant and the buildings of Solomon, *Tyndale Bulletin* 31, 1980, 107-146).

This background covers about a third of the book. The next third deals with evidence from the Old Testament. The Pentateuch is divided into the narrative and legal, and the priestly and cultic. Parallels and antecedents for names, narratives, legal traditions and cultic practices and structures are discussed revealing that nearly always they have been modified to suit the theology of the writers and editors.

The discussion on early Israel and the united monarchy deals with potential cultic sites, concepts of kingship and the significance of the description of the Solomonic temple. The writings of the divided monarchy deal with the literature, names, and epigraphic evidence. There is a lengthy discussion of the Kuntillet 'Ajrud texts mentioning 'Yahweh and his Asherah'. Hess accepts the common view that in popular religion Yahweh had a consort called Asherah. He notes that the evidence reveals a range of re-

ligions from a single god, Yahweh, and a variety of beliefs associated with a pantheon.

The chapter on archaeological sources for the divided monarchy deals with cult centres, domestic cult objects, iconography and burial customs. This is the material that many readers may turn to first, however the discussion is comparatively high level and assumes a fair amount of prior archaeological analysis. There are significant discussion of pillar-based female figurines and the Taanach cult stand.

Biblical and extra-biblical data is seen by Hess to be consistent. Features such as Yahwistic dominance in personal names reveals that at some level Yahweh was the sole deity, but the overall evidence shows that polytheism was always present. Hess sees two extremes, the prophetic religion of Yahweh and the Baal cult from Tyre attested by Ugartic texts, Philo of Byblos, Phoenician-Canaanite temples and names.

In concluding, Hess sees the Iron Age II as the crucial time for studying Israelite religion. He considers that it had a certain level of continuity from earlier West Semitic religion to later Phoenician and classical belief. It also had its distinctiveness, which is difficult to identify from the archaeological record because of the aniconic nature of Yahweh, but may be detected in theophoric elements in personal names. Also characteristic are the female pillar figurines and the general absence of male images. The area occupied by the northern kingdom of Samaria shows more continuity with West Semitic religion than the south.

Hess' final suggestion is that the distinctions of Israelite religion held a schema of faith which enabled it to foster the great monotheistic religions of the Western world. This salutary thought seems a world away from the archaeological miscellanea mentioned in the previous paragraph. It does however make the point that the people who were associated with the objects and history examined in this book were an early part of a cultural milieu that we have inherited.

The final stages of the book are not as well organised as the beginning. Issues referred to in summaries and conclusions are sometimes not discussed in the relevant chapter. There are photos through out, but discussions of objects such as the Taanach cult stand would have benefitted from a drawing. Scales and dimensions are missing from images. Significant issues such as child sacrifice are passed over fairly quickly and information from Iron Age I and the Phoenician west are alluded to in quick succession.

These matters aside, this work will be a companion for most students studying the subject as it sets out the relevant material, introduces the issues in the context of the study of religion and Israelite history and provides the resources for studying the subject in greater detail.