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Rainer Albertz, A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period, volume 1: From the Beginning to the End of the Monarchy

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Vol. 1. From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy by Rainer Albertz and John Bowden

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church at Capernaum) through the Constantinian basilicas to the development of the triple-apsed churches in the mid-fifth century. John Wilkinson describes Christian worship in the Byzantine era as the background for interpreting the architectural remains and the Constantinian churches in Palestine. D. Pringle next describes the churches in the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem.

There follow, in order, articles on six churches in the Galilee, two in Samaria, seven in Jerusalem, ten in Judaea and the Judaeian desert, seven in the Negev, and four in the Sinai Peninsula—an impressive number for this small land. The editor has provided necessary aids. A large fold-out map locates sites where remains are located. One immediately notices the large number of sites directly northwest and west of the Dead Sea. The articles are generously provided with plans, isometric reconstructions, numerous black and white plates, twenty-four color plates (most containing a number of reproductions), a helpful glossary of technical terms of Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, and a quite detailed index. In short, the Israel Exploration Society's volume on churches is an excellent companion to its volume on early synagogues. While some will turn almost at once to the summary of the excavations under the Church of the Holy Sepulcher that enable a more definitive reconstruction of the Constantinian basilica (pp. 100–122), others will rejoice in the recovery of Justinian's Nea Church (pp. 128–35) by exacting excavation and thoughtful reconstruction. The brief descriptions of the churches at Horvat Beit Loya (Khirbet Lehi) and Kissufim together with the color plates demonstrate the abilities of good ecclesiastical workshops; two hunting scenes with the inscription ΕΡΓΟΝ ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ (probably) depicts Alexander the Great, a surprising scene in a church. If inscriptions did not clearly identify the building as a church, one would be tempted to suppose it a secular basilica. The "corpus" of Byzantine mosaic pavements presented by this book suggests a broad pattern book in the artisans' hands.

The final "Monks and Monasteries in Southern Sinai" by Yoram Tsafrir (pp. 315–33) will be useful to teachers of church history and students of early monasticism; its description of St. Cather-

ine's Monastery in the context of the geo-economic conditions of the south Sinai (Wadi Feiran) and Byzantine settlements (Raithu, Bir Abu Sweeira) are illuminating.

There are a few errors to note. The Greek in the text shows a number of errors. Neither the plate nor the drawing of Inscription 2 from Horvat Hesheq shows the last word of the transcribed text (pp. 68–68), while the transcription of Inscription 5 contains a word (ὐἰὸν) not in the drawing. There are two errors in the transcription of the inscription from the Nea Church (p. 134), while the word κοῦός (p. 153) should be κοινός. I also find problematic part of the transcription of Inscription 4 from Khirbet el-Beiyudat (p. 167). The glossary defines *opaion* (ὄπαῖον) as the Greek for "eye." The Greek for "eye" is *ophthalmos* (ὄφθαλμός); *opaion* is an opening in a tile to let smoke out, in a wall to serve as a pass-through or observation point. The glossator was misled by the Latin equivalent, *oculus*. But these are small problems in what is an excellent introduction to the richness of Byzantine life in Palestine.

Ancient Churches Revealed is a welcome addition to the corpus of popular guides to archaeological research. Footnotes are rare, scholarship worn lightly. It opens to the general public an aspect of Palestinian history that is often overlooked as late, repetitious, or banal. It belongs in the hands of everyone interested in the history of the Eastern church from Constantine to the Crusades.

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A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period. Vol. 1. From the Beginnings to the End of the Monarchy. By RAINER ALBERTZ. Translated by JOHN BOWDEN. The Old Testament Library. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994. Pp. xvi + 367. \$32.99.

Rainer Albertz has written a comprehensive history of the religion of biblical Israel in five political divisions: pre-state, state, exile, Per-

sian, and Hellenistic periods. The first volume,¹ reviewed here, deals with the pre-state and monarchic periods, beginning for all intents and purposes with the "Exodus group" and ending with the Babylonian exile. The interpretative framework supporting his canvass of a thousand years of history is a threefold sociological exposition of actors and institutional bodies organized by personal (familial) piety, the cultus of the local sanctuaries, and official state religion (illustrative diagrams appear on pp. 21 and 106). His tripartite sociological analysis is applied consistently throughout the text, and it is this feature more than his exploration of extrabiblical materials or summary conclusions that sets his "history of Israelite religion" apart from other examples of the genre available in English. The command of the secondary literature is formidable: the alphabetized bibliographies, current as of 1992, which stand at the head of each major section, especially rich in German-language scholarship, constitute a valuable resource for the specialist and nonspecialist alike. Cumulative scripture and subject indexes found at the end of vol. 2 enhance the work's usefulness.

Two methodological presuppositions underpin the entire study: a high level of confidence in the historical transparency of the biblical text and an essentialist understanding of Yahwism and Israel, both achieved by fusing the tasks of biblical exegesis and the writing of history. Albertz begins with a critical overview of nineteenth- and twentieth-century approaches to Israelite religion, concentrating on the differing objectives of theological (usually Protestant) treatments, with their Christian supersessionist readings of sacred evolution or *Heilsgeschichte*, and a history-of-religions methodology in which historical developments in Israelite religion are contrasted with the relevant phenomena of neighboring traditions. He rejects any form of dogmatic principles of division and selection: a genuine "history of Israelite religion" must explicate social as well as political developments in their proper chronological context. Modern-sounding social theory

¹ Originally published as *Religionsgeschichte Israels in alttestamentlicher Zeit. Teil I: Vom den Anfängen bis zum Alten Testament*, Das Alte Testament, Deutsche Ergänzungsreihe 8/I (Göttingen, 1992).

notwithstanding, the same interpretative issues that bedeviled yesteryear's scholarship haunt the pages of his social history of Israelite history: can a western-trained intellectual writing 25 to 30 centuries after the events on the basis of polemically skewed and achronological biblical texts, dubiously salient comparative data, and meager, ambiguous archaeological finds, competently expect to reconstruct the sequence of social and political events behind the formation of the Hebrew Scriptures?

As a procedural caveat in a related discipline, a growing number of medievalists are coming to the realization that, for example, the quest for the historical Roland in epic and legend is fraught with more interpretative pitfalls than scholars of earlier generations were trained to acknowledge, frequently leading them into naive reconstructions of a past as roundly tendentious as the legends themselves.² Reconstructing the religious praxis and belief in Iron Age Palestine, a rigorously critical focus of ancient Near Eastern specialists, remains a valid research goal. Analyzing the cult narratives and other biblical texts that illustrate what the biblical authors wished to tell their audiences about the divine nature and proper modes of worship is an enterprise as old as Josephus and, whether done under the auspices of a confessional or wholly secular constituency, is also valid. As time-honored a scholarly endeavor as it has become, the process of conflating the two—Syro-Palestinian religious history and biblical exegesis—courts confusion at every step. The very title of Albertz's work, implying as it does that "Israelite" appropriately describes the religion of the premonarchic inhabitants of Palestine as well as that of the kingdom of Judah and that "Old Testament" is a chronological peg comparable to political tags such as "Neo-Assyrian" and "Roman"³ evinces the entrenched

² Bernadette A. Masters, "The Oxford *Roland* as an Ahistorical Document: A Tale of Ghosts or a Ghost of a Tale?," in Lola Sharon Davidson, S. N. Mukherjee, and Zdenko Zlatar, eds., *The Epic in History*, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, no. 11 (Sydney, 1994), pp. 138–61.

³ How many Indologists, for instance, would be comfortable using expressions such as the "Mahābhārata Period" or the "Age of the *Bhagavadgita*" in dealing with the chronology of Siva iconography?

confusion of this correlative procedure. Observations such as “the most important decision in the history of Israelite religion is made with a dating of an essential part of Deuteronomy to the time of Josiah” (p. 199) is less an historian’s benchmark than an exegetical postulate controlled by the theologian’s anxiety to root the origins of Judaism in monarchic Judah. From the history-of-religions perspective that Albertz claims to follow, there is no privileging of Yahwism over Canaanite, Phoenician, or Assyro-Aramaean cults: to the extent that they flourished in Iron Age Palestine, not the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures, each requires the same depth of analysis.

Although Albertz suspects there is a measure of historicity behind the patriarchal narratives, he recognizes that archaeological evidence will not substantiate the environment of the Patriarchal narratives prior to Iron Age I and hence begins his historical development with the “Exodus group.” Writing under the influence of Gottwald, he conceives of this body as a collection of escaped slaves whose social and religious identity—Israelite and Yahwistic—is rooted in an egalitarian community whose collective sense of political freedom centers on the monotheistic cult of Yahweh as liberator: “. . . the considerable potential of opposition to domination *intrinsic* to Yahweh religion [meant that] . . . Israel, unlike all the other cultures of the Near East, developed an *essential* part of its religion . . . in the exceptional situation of a revolutionary process of liberation and the extreme conditions of the wilderness” (p. 24, italics mine). His essentialist understanding of Yahwism and Israel undermines his attempt to disentangle historical developments from ideological retrojections based on a mythical past of “biblical Israel.” According to him, the Yahwism of the Exodus group was monolatrous; despite the acknowledged worship of goddesses alongside Yahweh throughout most of the Iron Age (pp. 85–87, 211), and syncretistic Mesopotamian accretions in the official as well as the personal realms (pp. 188–95, 209–11), the “tendency” of Iron Age Yahwism to reclaim its monolatrous heritage in both the northern and southern kingdoms is an observation arrived at by ignoring significant pieces of data. Likewise,

“Israel” is envisioned as a transnational entity that existed prior to the Davidic kingdom and survived the fall of the historical kingdom of Israel in 722 in the social and religious identity of Judah. Is it legitimate for us to assume that substantial portions of the population of Judah in the time of Josiah conceived of themselves as the “authentic Israel” or do we do better to bracket this concept as a postmonarchic phenomenon, when the ownership of Palestine, north and south, was actively contested?

On occasion, Albertz achieves the historian’s productive Medusa-like stare at the subject matter, when he opines that “the ‘molek cult’ did not involve child sacrifices, even if the wild prophetic and Deuteronomistic polemics in part seek to indicate this” (p. 192) and recognizes that much of the Baʿal worship decried by Hosea smacks suspiciously of legitimate forms of the cult of Yahweh (p. 173). His puzzlement that the “Exodus event” constitutive of early Israelite identity did not leave resonant traces in the biblical onomasticon (pp. 95–96) reveals a sound instinct for discrepancies, even if his solution is untenable. What one misses here is a consistently keen engagement of the narrative of religious events in the biblical text as narrative. For example, in Kings, the cult of Baʿal is portrayed as flourishing for a forty-year span between the reigns of Ahab and Jehu, to be briefly revived by Manasseh and definitively crushed by Josiah.⁴ This may be historical nonsense, but it is the history of “Israelite religion” as the authors of Kings saw it, and their vision warrants an exposition in any work based, as is Albertz’s study, on biblical exegesis.

Readers comfortable with the assumption that the Hebrew Scriptures contain a narrative that closely mirrors the historical changes of religion in Iron Age Palestine may find Albertz’s work useful as a seminary textbook or reference tool. Those who approach historical reconstructions based on the biblical text with less sanguine expectations nevertheless will appreciate his at-

⁴ See the discussion in George Savran, “1 and 2 Kings,” in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), pp. 148–49.

attention to detail and command of the secondary literature, even if the author's confident rehearsal of the motive, events, and dramatis personae of the Deuteronomic reform (pp. 195–231), for instance, may not command assent.

The haste with which the 1992 German original was translated into English is evident in places. For instance, rendering of "Die Versammlung der freien Bauernschaft Judas" (p. 361, a questionable interpretation of the elastic term *am hā'āreš* in 2 Kings 21:23–24) as "the assembly of the free farmers of Judah" (English translation, pp. 201, 232–33) levers a social and vocational particularity into the text that may prove misleading to English-speaking readers. The attribution of the Black Obelisk to the obscure Shalmaneser II instead of the third recognized holder of that name (p. 156) and the composition of the Nehushtan-object in 2 Kings 18:4 of iron instead of bronze (p. 180) are errors not found in the German original.

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Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters. By JAMES M. LINDENBERGER. Writings from the Ancient World, Society of Biblical Literature, vol. 4. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994. Pp. xv + 155.

Lindenberg is well known in Northwest Semitic studies for his capable study of the Ahiqar text from Elephantine.¹ In the present volume, he continues his study of Aramaic documents of the Persian period, specifically the letters, to which are added the Hebrew epistolary documents, that date to the immediately preexilic period in Judah. All of the Hebrew texts and many of the Aramaic ones were written by Judaeans/Jews and thus constitute some of the basic documents for the history of Judah immediately before the Babylonian exile and of

¹ *The Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar* (Baltimore, 1983).

a Jewish diaspora community in Egypt during the Persian period. The non-Jewish writers were others of Syro-Palestinian origins living in Egypt or Persian officials writing to the local officials in Egypt, using Aramaic as a *lingua franca*. The only document here that was actually discovered in Mesopotamia is the so-called Ashur ostrakon, unearthed during German excavations at Ashur. To the Hebrew and Aramaic texts are appended the very rare first-millennium epistolary documents in other Northwest Semitic languages, one in Phoenician, one in Edomite, and one in Ammonite (chap. 8).

The format of this series allows for the presentation of the original text (here printed in square Hebrew/Aramaic characters without, of course, vowels), a translation, and very brief notes, mostly of a generally explanatory nature. This volume may be used, therefore, as a classroom tool for students both with and without a reading knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic. The absence of textual, grammatical, and philological notes means that for this volume to be used with real profit in Hebrew or Aramaic language classes, it would have to be under the guidance of a teacher with advanced philological training. The translations are generally very close to the basic interpretations I would have chosen or have actually chosen,² with a less literal translation style than I have used. In one passage interpreted differently from what I have proposed, though, I still cannot accept³ that *yb*² and *yd*^c in Lachish 4:9–10 may be translated as though the word *ʔdny*, 'my lord', were present (it does not appear until much later in the sentence).

In sum, this is a valuable addition to the Writings from the Ancient World series, and the author and editor (Kent Harold Richards) are to be congratulated.

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² D. Pardee, with S. D. Sperling, J. D. Whitehead, and P.-E. Dion, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters*, Society of Biblical Literature, Sources for Biblical Study 15 (Chico, California, 1982).

³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 93.