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The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallactic Approaches.

The Continuum International, London, 2001.

(25 cm, XXII, 821). ISBN 0-8264-4728-7. £ 75.00.

The author of this important and original study is professor of Biblical Literature and Northwest Semitic Languages at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. He has given his book a slightly misleading title: it is more about archaeology and sociology than about strictly religious matters. The reader will certainly not find the things he may be familiar with from earlier handbooks on the religion (note the singular!) of Israel. Yahwism does not play a prominent part in this study and is primarily mentioned as part of the many other religions of Israel. At the end of the book Zevit tries to explain how Yahwism became prevalent after the Assyrian destruction of Israel in the eighth century BCE. But it is not the purpose of his book to describe a plausible background for this late development. Zevit describes the material and literary remains of the ancient Israelite religious practices during the Iron Age (c. 1200 - 586 BCE) and tries to place them within a sociological framework in a methodologically sound manner.

Zevit offers a wealth of material in an uncommon combination of facts and considerations. This calls for a transparent presentation, especially in a book that is intended for use by a broad public, undergraduate Bible students to begin with. In his style Zevit certainly shows that he is a good teacher. With patience, humor and often surprising analogies he presents his case. It takes some time, however, before the reader gets a clear picture of the place of the many elements presented within his theory as a whole. A full table of contents (not just the names of the chapters but also the subdivisions) and less fanciful titles would have been of help here. Zevit's book is like a building with many floors. He has dug deep to give it a good foundation. Reading it sometimes feels like being lost in the basement or in one of the many rooms. One needs a good map to find the way.

In chapter one Zevit describes the philosophical-hermeneutical groundwork. This survey of tendencies in modern literary and religious studies is something one does not expect - certainly not in this large extent - in a book on a special topic from the history of religions. He gives a clear

view of recent research, but the value for the analyses in the rest of the book is not so great that it could not be missed. This can be illustrated by the fact that in the concluding chapter, where Zevit comes with a synthesis, he bases his description on the "complexity theory" (p. 646, n. 67), which is not discussed, as one would expect, in the opening chapter. Meanwhile from reading the first chapter one gets the impression that Zevit would like to become the new Kaufmann. The studies of Yehezkel Kaufmann on the religion of Israel published between 1929 and 1955 are presented with much sympathy. Kaufmann made his own way between historical criticism and conservatism and he did not wish to be restricted to own limited field of research. Zevit calls Kaufmann "a trained philosopher, biblical scholar by profession, but historian by inclination" (p. 44). In Zevit's book we find a similar combination to which can be added that next to this Zevit also presents himself as an archaeologist. In this connection it can also be noted that Zevit points to the special role of Jewish biblical scholars without suggesting that biblical theology is or should be a confessional discipline (pp. 37-38, n. 48).

The next three chapters are devoted to the study of the material remains of ancient Israel. Zevit pays much attention to the relation of archaeology and biblical studies. See also his article "Three Debates about Bible and Archaeology", *Biblica* 83 (2002), 1-27. He is well aware of the many pitfalls awaiting someone eager to get a clear picture of religious institutions and practices in ancient Israel with among other things the help of archaeology. Although Zevit makes some firm statements, especially on the discontinuity between the Late Bronze and the Iron Age population, his use of arguments taken from archaeology is methodically clear and as a rule correct. For non-specialists it is very helpful that Zevit takes nothing for granted. He also tries to answer the simple questions. Each identification of a site and dating of the findings is put to the test. His clear presentation of the evidence gets extra value because of the fact that it is not only based on careful reading of the excavation reports but also on his personal observations at the sites and his contacts with some of the modern excavators. Zevit offers us a very useful, richly illustrated survey of the relevant sites and in many cases also of the different ways in which they have been interpreted (for instance, Megiddo: "not only the site of future battles between Gog and Magog, but also of contemporary conflict over the interpretation of archaeological data" [p. 231]). He calls attention to a number of locations previously left out of consideration in the description of the religions in ancient Israel. He also shows that in some cases the association with cultic practices is unjustified. One will also find persuasive new interpretations of among other things

the temple of Arad (stratum XI) as place of worship for two separate deities. And he also makes some interesting observations about cultic artifacts like the model-shrines.

He is not afraid of speculating about the meaning of the findings and about the religious thoughts and feelings of the ancient Israelites. He even assumes that the Israelites had their own mythology, not preserved in the Old Testament. In connection with the representation of birds in a tomb he suggests that they point to myths about death and afterlife with conceptions related to the Egyptian soul-birds (p. 247). It is inviting to pursue this path and take into consideration the role of birds in the Ugaritic texts, especially as it seems within the context of the cult of the dead (KTU 1.20-22; see my AOAT 219, 184ff.).

In chapter five Zevit shows that he is in the first place an expert in the field of ancient Hebrew epigraphy. He offers an exciting, detailed new presentation and interpretation of the ancient Hebrew inscription in the Judean Desert cave, Khirbet el-Qom, Kuntillet Ajrud, and Khirbet Beit Lei. His drawings, photos and very precise descriptions surpass most what has been published on these texts before. His interpretation of the texts and the related drawings is in many cases surprising but not always convincing. Not everyone will agree that Kuntillet Ajrud was a cult complex constructed for the worship of Baal, El, YHWH, and Asherah (not: "his Asherah"), that some of the drawings in Khirbet Beit Lei represent the Assyrian siege of Lachish, and that (according to the "god in a boat motif") the boats on the cave wall indicate the absence of YHWH and another deity.

In chapter six Zevit discusses the literary evidence concerning the religions of ancient Israel from "the deuteronomistic essay". With regard to its origins he follows the theory of F.M. Cross about a double redaction and he also assumes "direct cross-cultural cultural stimulation by Mesopotamian writers" (445). In his retelling of the history of ancient Israel Zevit appears to have great trust in the credibility of these texts and in other places also of the book of Chronicles as a source of historical facts. In the eyes of many scholars he may be too confident here.

The next two chapters describe the ancient Israelite prophets and their critical sayings about the (non-Yahwistic) religions of ancient Israel. Zevit likes to present the data in long lists. Here we find "the Prediction-Fulfillment Pattern in Deuteronomistic Historiosophy" demonstrated in 58 combinations of the text containing the prediction with the text describing its fulfillment and an elaborate discussion of 65 chronologically arranged prophetic texts addressing non-Yahwistic, Israelite cults. To this is added a list categorizing the data under "meaningful

rubrics" like the different kinds of rituals, gods mentioned and remarkable phenomena like birds, bowing to the east etc. It is inevitable that his interpretation of so many, often very difficult texts will meet criticism, for instance, with regard to his conservative dating of the texts. One can also debate his choice of texts. He suggests that he has covered all relevant texts, but in the history of research many other texts have been mentioned as referring to non-Yahwistic deities or divine powers. An important source of information in this connection (not mentioned by Zevit) is the *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (ed. K. van der Toorn a.o.; Brill, Leiden, first edition 1995, second revised edition 1999).

In chapter nine Zevit pays attention to the information that can be derived from the theophoric elements in Israelite personal and topographical names. He clearly demonstrates that there was in Israel in the period before the exiles at least a minority who preferred to link their children and in some cases also their settlements with other deities than YHWH. Zevit simply speaks here of "the Israelites". In the next chapter it becomes clear that we have to think of a combination of different groups of people, partly non-Israelite, living next to each other.

The final "parallactic" synthesis builds upon his conviction that sociologically ancient Israel was a tribal society, also in the periods with the stronger central authority of the kings. He assumes that a concept of designated tribal territories was operative until the overthrow by the Assyrians. He compares this to the present status of the Kurds in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran; Druze in Israel, Lebanon, Syria; and the Tibetans in China and India (p. 641). This explains the many differences between the cult places in ancient Israel as became apparent in the archaeological overview. Each tribe had his own pantheon with a number of paired (masculine and feminine) deities. In most cases YHWH was the prime deity, be it in different manifestations, with the goddess Asherah as his consort. To the second tier belonged other deities, with Baal and Baalat as the most prominent. According to Zevit this was longer accepted in the official cult of Israel than suggested by the Deuteronomist.

Zevit comes against this background with a number of interesting new interpretations of biblical texts. It would explain why Ahab did not set up an Asherah in the temple of Baal (1 Kings 16:32-33): the divine pairs were not mixed up. It would also explain why Jehu destroyed the Baal temple, but left the Asherah unaffected (2 Kings 13:6): "he was acting as a Yahwist" (p. 651). Another interesting new interpretation concerns the enigmatic reference to "the priests of Asherah" in 1 Kings 18:19. They play no role in the final confrontation of Elijah and the priests

of Baal. As witnesses they must have been happy with the outcome in which the consort of Asherah proved to be superior to Baal. In many commentaries the reference to the priests of Asherah is explained as a gloss influenced by 2 Kings 17:16 (see W. Thiel, *Biblischer Kommentar IX/2*, 2002, p. 87). One would have expected Zevit, who usually in lengthy footnotes accounts for his views against other scholars, to pay attention to this different interpretation already proposed by Wellhausen. Another stunning new interpretation by Zevit concerns the so-called Elohist psalter as originally non-Yahwistic and referring to gods like Baal. These references to other gods would have replaced by Hebrew "Elohim" making the songs acceptable for Yahwistic use. Zevit tries to prove his case by pointing to "myths hidden in the Elohist Psalter" (pp. 678-684). It is remarkable, again, that Zevit does not enter here the modern scholarly discussion of the interpretation of the Psalms. This does not add to the convincing power of his suggestions. It would have been interesting, for instance, to know his reaction to J.C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism* (Peeters, Leuven, second revised edition 1997), who comes with quite a different view on the way YHWH became the one and only god of Israel and who offers a completely different interpretation of the Elohist Psalm 68. Zevit does mention this study (in the first edition), but only with regard to the study of names. Something similar can be said about the important study of R. Albertz on the history of Israelite Religion. Zevit only mentions it in one of the many discussions of minor details in the footnotes.

My conclusion can only be - and this is meant as a compliment after having worked through more than 800 closely printed pages - that this book should have been bigger. May Zevit be like a new Kaufmann and present us with more of these comprehensive studies on the religions, especially the Yahwistic religion, of ancient Israel.

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