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Review of:

Killebrew, A.E., 2005. *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines and Early Israel, 1300-1100 B.C.E.* Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature. 362 pages. ISBN 1589830970. Paperback US\$39.95. ISBN 9004130454 Cloth US\$164.

This book is synthetic in approach combining archaeology, Biblical studies, Egyptology and social theory. Its aim is to define ethnicity and to discuss cultural diversity in the Biblical world of the 13th and 12th centuries BC. The Iron Age is an era that has been well discussed, particularly its latter half, and debated over the last 20 years by scholars belonging to various fields. The author supports the view that the earlier half of the Iron Age coincides with the gradual emergence of ancient Israel from the local Canaanite culture (Mazar 1992, Shanks et al. 1992, Dever 2003). Through the study of material culture the author aims to trace cultural and ethnic boundaries in Iron Age Palestine.

The book comprises six chapters with illustrations and photographs of pottery, architecture and artefacts incorporated in the individual chapters. The two introductory chapters deal with the chronological setting, particularly the transition from the Late Bronze Age to the Iron Age. The author examines aspects of the eastern Mediterranean at the close of the Late Bronze Age offering a world-systems perspective and arguing for the classification of cultural, economic and social systems into smaller sub-systems for a better understanding of cultural change both cross-geographically and cross-chronologically. The role of Canaan in relation to Egypt is evaluated through this same approach, the author concluding that it constituted a periphery to Egypt's imperial core. With the decline of Egyptian domination at the close of the Late Bronze Age, this periphery gained an autonomy which provided a suitable environment for the development of ancient Israel and the settling of the Philistines.

The author highlights Egyptian presence primarily from textual, architectural and material culture remains. Based on this evidence, Canaan constituted part of the Egyptian imperial periphery and the gradual retreat of the Egyptians from Canaan left room for the development of the Canaanites, the Philistines and the early Israelites. Concerning the Canaanites, the author chose to identify them through material culture, burial customs and cultic structures concluding that they were an 'ethnic mosaic' under Egyptian rule. The 'early Israelites' are discussed through texts, architecture and settlement layouts, as well as diet and burial customs. She explores the Philistines through political theory, textual sources (including Biblical accounts), settlement layouts and Killebrew's specialism, pottery, concluding that these peoples had brought with them innovations manifested primarily in their material culture.

She concludes that ethnicity in Iron Age Israel/Palestine is best seen in terms of a 'mixed multitude theory' and supports the notion of the periodic influx and coexistence

of various ethnic groups. The author contends that this very mixing of cultures has thus far made it difficult to distinguish the archaeological traces of the ancient Israelites. She therefore views the Israelite 'ethnogenesis' as a heterogeneous, multifaceted and complex process. These and similar difficulties in tracing the ancient Israelites have led many scholars to argue that ancient Israel actually never existed, being a post-Babylonian experience invented for the formation of a national identity, and that actually its inhabitants had always been Canaanites.

She discusses and presents a significant volume of excavation data, including her own, and manages to project a well-rounded discussion of ethnicity in the Biblical World. A careful examination of the bibliographic corpus on which this research was based, however, raises several points, of which I would like to highlight a few. Primarily, the meagre references to works pertaining to architecture, notably those by two French scholars, Braemer (1982) and Foucault-Forest (1996), that have contributed immensely to the understanding of architectural evolution from the Middle Bronze Age to the Iron Age in Israel/Palestine. Specifically, Foucault-Forest (1996) is the only publication to date analysing Middle and Late Bronze Age houses in great detail. This important work, well-known to specialists, has gone uncited by Killebrew who suggests that there are no comprehensive publications on Late Bronze Age houses.

Another limitation of the bibliography is the paucity of references to archaeological studies/discoveries in Jordan. Orientalists are familiar with the fact that these two regions share common geographic features that influence settlement patterns, for example, the Jordan River and its valley, one of the main breadbaskets of the region even up to the present. They shared many common resources and routes in antiquity, and should be treated as a unit when addressing issues pertaining to the built environment. Furthermore, during the Iron Age and other eras, these two regions present significant material culture similarities. Although the archaeology of the Late Bronze and Iron Ages in Jordan has had a shorter history than archaeology in Palestine, the last decade has produced significant work.

The criteria chosen to address the issue of ethnicity as indicators of cultural differences aid the author in presenting her case and promoting her theory of the emergence of ancient Israel from a 'mixed multitude' of peoples. However, she has omitted to elaborate on her motivations for including and excluding (potential) indicators. Regarding the indicator of architecture, the proposed interpretation of Late Bronze and Iron Age pillared houses leaves many unanswered questions. Recent excavations in Jordan, primarily at the sites of Tell Jawa, Tell Qufrein, Khirbet Al-Mudayinah al-Aliyah, Sa'idiyeh and Lahun, as well as the presence of these houses at Tel Keisan, a Phoenician site in the north of Israel/Palestine, demonstrate the diffusion of this architectural style. However, architecture is a sensitive criterion for discussing ethnicity and its exploration cross-chronologically and cross-geographically can lead to conflicting conclusions. For example, the distribution of Iron Age pillared houses in Israel/Palestine and Jordan could be interpreted as pointing towards an all-Canaanite population for the whole of the southern Levant.

Burial places and practices are used as a criterion to identify the Canaanites. Since this criterion is applied for identification purposes, it would have been desirable to have more discussion on the complete absence of exclusively Philistine cemeteries in Israel/Palestine and the resultant impact on tracking ethnicity. According to the author, the Philistine settlement layout is distinct, the pottery even more so, the nutritional regimes clearly changed – but what happened to all these people in the funerary context? Given the fact that the region is one of the best excavated in the world, it is difficult to comprehend how the supposedly distinct and settled Philistines neglected their dead. The proposed explanation is that they were cremated, a conclusion deriving from meagre evidence, which should be at best considered provisional.

These criticisms aside, the wide academic experience of Killebrew, as well as her personal involvement in excavations covering these vital periods, has certainly contributed to making the book a good overall review and synthesis of key elements for the discussion of ethnicity. Furthermore, the detachment from the Biblical narratives and search for new avenues for the discussion of ethnicity are certainly commendable, making this book stand apart from the average approach to ethnicity in the Iron Age Levant. The discussion of recent intellectual trends and their effect on interpretation are given a brief but much needed place in a modern scholarly work about the south-central Levant. The incorporation of data from Jordan would have been desirable and could have contributed to conclusions deriving from a larger and more recent data set. This book is recommended for a broad introduction and familiarisation with the question of ethnicity in the Iron Age of the region.

References

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