
Archaeology has played a significant role in biblical (especially Old Testament) studies in the past two centuries. Despite its ability to aid in the interpreter’s understanding of the culture in which the biblical text is written (among other functions), few works address the concepts at a level accessible to any but seasoned scholars. Richard Hess sensed this same problem and the need for a basic introduction (9). In Israelite Religions, Hess provides a survey of methods, a synthesis of these methods and their relation to the biblical text, and a critical review of various views on the religious world of ancient Israel (9).

Summary

Although Hess does not organize his work into parts, he does outline his twelve chapters for the reader. Chapters one through three provide an introduction to major issues, various approaches, and a survey of previous study of Israelite religion. Chapters four and five then discuss West Semitic religion (Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Jordan) prior to Israel. Chapters six and seven discuss the Pentateuch, while chapters eight through ten look at the monarchy. Chapter eleven considers religion in the exilic and postexilic periods, and Hess ends the work with a conclusion in chapter twelve (21-22).

In chapter one Hess outlines three factors that have led to increased and sustained interest in ancient Israelite religion. The first is a renewed interest in the history of OT theology. The second is an explosion of archaeology in the Holy Land. The third is the philosophical and cultural trends, particularly postmodernism, of the present age (11). Hess also provides a working definition of religion: “the service and worship of the divine or supernatural through a
system of attitudes, beliefs, and practices” (15). Hess also directs the reader to his final conclusion that there is sufficient evidence to establish at least “the possibility of a single core of beliefs among some that extended back, perhaps far back, into Israel’s preexilic past” (15).

Hess’s key distinction in this chapter is that of theology—what the Bible says should be believed—and Israelite religion—what Israel actually did believe (22).

In chapter two, Hess emphasizes the “diversity of religious expressions in human cultures” through a focus on “backgrounds to the anthropological and sociological studies of religion” (41). He accomplishes this task by surveying the methods and views of numerous archaeologists and sociologists in the past few centuries.

Hess discusses early approaches to Israelite history in chapter three, beginning with de Wette, Vatke, and Wellhausen. After a lengthy excurses on the documentary hypothesis, Hess then discusses religious-history, tradition-history, and orality from Gunkel to Zevit, a period of over one hundred years of scholarship.

Chapters four and five consider pre-Israelite West Semitic religion. Chapter four focuses slightly more on the inscriptions that were found at Ebla and Amarna, whereas chapter five focuses more on the archaeological evidence in Palestine and Jordan that shed light on the movement from rural to urban populations and ancient cult centers (e.g. Meggido, Shechem, etc.).

In his discussion of the Pentateuch (chs. 6-7), Hess admits that he is necessarily selective, but his goal is to provide a “representation of the religious concerns found in the Pentateuch” (142). Chapter six focuses on the narrative and legal aspects of the Pentateuch, paying particular attention to the covenant. Chapter seven explores the priestly and cultic strands of the Pentateuch and considers the names of God, sacrifice, priests, blood, and wanderings through the Negev. His
survey in these two chapters leads him to eight conclusions (206-207). These eight conclusions help determine that cultic practices and the role of priests does in fact extend to ancient Israel, even before settling in the land.

Chapter eight focuses specifically on the early historical books and the corresponding archaeological evidence from Iron Age I (1200-1000 BC). Although admitting merit to any one of five positions on Israel’s appearance in the land, Hess argues “there is evidence for a significant and influential element of early Israel to have entered the land from outside” (244). In the discussions of the divided monarchy in chapters nine and ten, Hess provides written and archaeological evidence that provides a wealth of background to the religious practices and cultural context of this period in Israel’s history. Ultimately, Hess concludes that “both the biblical and extrabiblical evidence concur that Yahweh as a sole deity was present early in Iron Age II (cf. the Yahwistic dominance of theophoric elements in personal names), and that polytheism never died out, even at the end of the monarchy” (330).

Hess notes at the outset of chapter eleven that the primary purpose of the work was to trace Israel’s religion through the period of the monarchy; nevertheless, a full exposition of the issue requires some discussion on the direction that Israel’s religion took in the period during and after the exile, hence the content of chapter eleven (337). The majority of Hess’s discussion pertains to the rise of apocalyptic literature, who origin may have been propelled by despair of the destruction of Jerusalem, a response to the end of recognized prophets and prophecy, and a dissatisfaction with Hasmonean theocracy (343-344).

Finally, Hess’s conclusion (ch. 12) highlights three common threads that emerge from the survey. First, “ancient Israel was home to a variety of religious beliefs and practices that developed from earlier West Semitic beliefs” (349). Second, despite these varied religious
beliefs, the religion of ancient Israel has distinct features (349-350). Third, there was a “gradual evolution and change in ancient Israel” (350) marked by the diverse practices discovered in archaeology finds and ancient texts.

**Critical Evaluation**

Hess’s work demonstrates excellent scope and perhaps a surprising depth given its introductory nature, both of which prove helpful to those being introduced to the field. Several features of his work make it accessible to this same audience as well. For example, in numerous places Hess provides selections of important ANE texts in easily accessible English translations. This provides the reader not only with a supplement to the discussion on the text, but it provides a helpful introduction into the type of literature from that time period and helps readers begin to notice similarities in the literature themselves.

As noted above, a significant strength of Hess’s work is the depth with which he develops certain points despite the wide breadth and introductory nature of the work. An example of Hess’s depth relates to his discussion of Israel’s occupation of the land of Canaan (210-216). Hess provides readers with five views on the manner in which Israel came to occupy the land. The depth of the discussion is helpful, as Hess not only summarizes the key points of each view but also notes some of its weaknesses. For instance, in response to Alt’s peaceful infiltration model Hess points out that it does not adequately account for biblical evidence of battles, the evidence of the 13th century Merneptah Stele, and the burn layers of Hazor, Lachish, and Bethel (211). Hess provides similar responses to other positions as well. Additionally, Hess argues that no one theory can claim the full support of all the evidence, nor are any of the theories completely dismissed by the current evidence. Consequently, Hess concludes that all of the

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1 For example, see six examples in chapter four alone on pages 87, 95, 105, 110, 115, and 117.
positions may have some merit, which speaks to “the diversity of human motivations and social action involved in the process of becoming a people” (215). The depth at this point is furthermore a strength because a discussion of Israel during the united monarchy begs the question of how the nation arose in that place at all. Hess’s decision to include the discussion then provides important depth to help support his aim in the chapter.

The one significant weakness of the work lies in Hess’s failure to synthesize his conclusions. Ultimately, Hess concludes three common threads (noted in the summary above). However, the reader rightly recognizes that much of the content of Hess’s work speaks to different or more detailed issues than he concludes at the end. What function, then, does this material serve in the work? It may be that in Hess’s aim to provide an introductory text he has perhaps generalized his conclusions too much, despite providing evidence that could support a more significant conclusion. The reader is left to draw his own conclusions from some of the extraneous material, which is perhaps an admirable goal for some books, but proves less helpful for a self-identified introductory work.

**Conclusion**

Nevertheless, by Hess’s own standard, “if the work succeeds at all it will be to provide a stimulus to the reader for further research in one or more aspects of this vast and growing field” (9). In this respect, Hess surely succeeds, as few if any readers will fail to be prompted in one direction or another to pursue further study. This work provides a helpful collection of information that will serve students well in a reference capacity.