



Reviews

SAUL, BENJAMIN, AND THE EMERGENCE OF MONARCHY IN ISRAEL: BIBLICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES edited by Joachim J. Krause, Omer Sergi, and Kristin Weingart, [*Ancient Israel and Its Literature*], SBL Press, Atlanta, 2020, pp. xii + 233, £28.00, pbk

One of the joys and at the same time challenges of scriptural study is the range of adjacent fields that can and should inform it. A fair grasp of the socio-historical, archaeological, and epigraphical data on the Ancient Near East is highly desirable if not essential properly to contextualize biblical exegesis. As a significant source for the period, the Old Testament, in turn, is the subject of analysis by archaeologists and historians. In this way, research interests frequently overlap and scholars from these different disciplines engage in collaboration, discussion, and academic exchange.

The present volume is the product of one such research colloquium: a collaboration between Tel Aviv and Tübingen Universities to ‘foster research on the history of ancient Israel’ (p. vii). The subject is one at the heart of the historical debate: the beginnings of monarchy in the region and the figures of Saul and David, whom the Bible points to as the first kings of a unified monarchy. Academic discussion resides in the apparent gap between this latter, biblical account, and history’s claim that the kingdoms of Israel and Judah emerged separately and largely simultaneously, with the Northern Kingdom (Israel) the more dominant for much of their concurrent history. Relevant to bridging this gap, is the enigma of Benjamin, a territory lying between these two kingdoms that seems to have been a disputed zone for Israel and Judah. Major toponyms from Saul’s story—Gibeah, Shechem and Jerusalem—may have been associated with this frontier zone. Could Saul, prominent within a polity in Benjamin, also be considered to enjoy some oversight over the people of Jerusalem, squaring the circle for historical and biblical accounts?

The papers presented in this volume look at different aspects of this ambiguous social landscape producing ‘a nuanced picture of diverging results as well as surprising overlaps’ (p. 2). After an introduction of the colloquium’s aims and the issues at hand, there follow eight essays taking different approaches to the problem.

Ido Koch, an archaeologist from Tel Aviv University begins by looking at the Philistines—long-time biblical opponents of Israel—in light of the epigraphical data. He finds a diverse social landscape across the region, contextualized by the decline of Egyptian influence through the Iron I

period (p. 15) and thus cautions against a unified and monolithic conception of the Philistines at this time (p. 12). Philistines appear as a ‘transregional phenomenon of vigorous warrior bands’ (p. 16), memories of whom are found in the stories of Saul and David. However, the biblical presentation of these disparate memories as a more administratively centralized Philistine people seems to be an ideology at the service of cohering a centralized Israelite identity against an archetypal Other (p. 17). Israel Finkelstein, also of Tel Aviv, gets right to the heart of the issue by considering the territorial ambiguity of Benjamin as a socio-polity, in particular the roles of Saul and Jerusalem. Finkelstein has made major contributions to the archaeological investigation of ancient Israel for more than thirty years and draws on all this knowledge (pp. 34–38) to suggest a ‘nuanced, three-stage process for the geographical expansion of the Saulide entity in the tenth century BCE’ (p. 50). From a territory around his hometown, Gibeah (tribal Benjamin and southern Ephraim), Saul expanded his rule to encompass the territory of Jerusalem to the south (Judah) and Shechem to the north (northern Ephraim). If Saul governed these geo-political sub-regions from Jerusalem, then his administration ‘may have served as a model for the idea of a great united monarchy’ (p. 50).

Another archaeologist from Tel Aviv, Omer Sergi, reflects on the biblical stories of Saul and David (1 *Sam* 9 – 2 *Sam* 5) in light of the historical data. Limiting the referent for ‘Israel’ to the inhabitants of Benjamin and Jerusalem, Sergi rejects the common conjecture that northern stories were brought to Judah following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in the late eighth century BCE. Israel in these texts is rather a social identity predating the kingdom of this name and centred around Jerusalem. Hence, ‘the early traditions about Saul and David preserve the memory of a struggle for power in the early monarchic period’ (p. 83).

Wolfgang Oswald (Tübingen) also looks at Saul and David in the light of history. After three Tel Aviv archaeologists, here we have a contribution from a biblist suggesting some settings for the Saul-David narrative (1 *Sam* 9 – 2 *Sam* 5). This narrative seeks to justify David’s rule and the Davidic dynasty, which suggests that its legitimacy was contested. Oswald seeks socio-historical settings in which such antagonism might have existed. Again, it is the long struggle between Israel and Judah for Benjamin’s territorial affiliation that provides several possible historical settings. The next two essays move on to look at this ambiguity of Benjamin with reference to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Joachim Krause of Tübingen considers the biblical figure of Rehoboam (2 *Chron* 10–11; 1 *Kgs* 12, 14), first king of Judah, against the background of the military campaign of the Egyptian king Shoshenq I (mid-tenth century BCE). With the stronger northern kingdom of Israel preoccupied with the Egyptians and the necessity for the weaker Judah to fortify itself, Krause suggests that Judah under Rehoboam seized the contested territory of Benjamin (p. 127).

Kristin Weingart of Munich University analyses the Northern Kingdom under Jeroboam I at the same period, in particular a puzzling detail in

1 *Kings* 11:29-32. As symbol of the twelve tribes divided into two kingdoms, the prophet Ahijah the Shilonite tears his garment into twelve, giving *ten* pieces to Jeroboam, future king of Israel. Yet, he speaks of only *one* tribe left for the Davidic dynasty 'and for the sake of Jerusalem', which is Judah. What happened to the other tribe? Could this folklore reflect the ambiguity of Benjamin? Weingart investigates with particular attention to the 'pragmatics of the narrative' (p. 135). The Benjamin under discussion, as Finkelstein clarifies, has been 'the flat highland plateau between Jerusalem and Bethel' (p. 33 n. 1), the contested socio-identity of which means that this zone cannot be fully aligned with the territory of the biblical tribe. This disjunction is the subject of the last two essays. Oded Lipschits (Tel Aviv) considers Benjamin's biblical territory to be a post-exilic 'aggregation of two distinct historical and geopolitical units' (p. 5) serving to promote the Davidic dynasty at the expense of Saul. Erhard Blum of Tübingen, on the other hand, is optimistic that the biblical picture of tribal society *did* resemble Iron Age Israel's socio-political structures. He refers to research on genealogies in tribal societies (pp. 203–06) and epigraphical evidence for the tribes of Manasseh (pp. 207–10) (eighth century) and Gad (210–13) (ninth century BCE).

This is an excellent and highly researched collection of essays bringing related disciplines into conversation, which is essential if any biblical exegesis is to be anchored in reality. Each paper is highly referenced with substantial bibliographies indicating how the conversation has led to this point. It is not, however, a book for beginners but rather a contribution to an ongoing scholarly debate which has been underway almost since archaeology emerged as a discipline in the nineteenth century CE. I would highly recommend these essays, but the non-specialist may want to read the biblical passages under discussion first (a practice to be endorsed anyway) and take note of the bibliographies for further reading in order to navigate the debate.

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Why did the Christian Apologists in the second century appeal to Jewish scriptures when they wanted to persuade Graeco-Roman audiences that