Albertz and Schmitt have worked on the popular/family religion of ancient Israel for many years, a work that culminates in this volume. They also organized related meetings and workshops—I hasten to disclose that I have had the pleasure of participating in one such workshop, held in Münster in 2009.

The aims of this book are “to present a comprehensive picture of family and household religion in ancient Israel and neighboring countries in the 11th–7th centuries BC,” to show that such religion existed, and to discuss how it functioned (xv). The defined time range is slightly awkward, in cutting out part of the Iron 1 period. The book includes eight chapters, two appendices, and five detailed, useful indexes.

In the introduction (1–20) Albertz reviews the history of research, noting three approaches (religio-historical, gender, archaeological). Based on earlier work, he takes for granted the existence of family/household religion in ancient Israel; remaining problems are which model to employ and with how many segments/levels of religion.

Chapter 2 (“Methodological Reflections,” Albertz, 21–56) starts with the “biblical family.” Albertz prefers using “household” or “family household,” which stress co-residency. This leads to the issue of identifying households in material remains, namely, four-room
houses. Anthropological data suggest that most four-room houses fit “nuclear” families, not the biblical “house of the father” (= joint family). There is no evidence for clusters of houses serving joint families (so Stager). The suggestion that families “shifted” between smaller/larger houses when the number of family members varied (Schloen) seems impractical. Albertz adopts Faust’s suggestion that house types reflect differences between rural (larger houses, joint/extended families) and urban (smaller houses, nuclear families) sites.

Even more important, but less discussed, is the definition of the three circles of household religion (45–46): (1) the inner circle concerns rituals inside houses by nuclear families (despite the conclusion that four-room houses served also joint families); (2) the medium circle encompasses rituals near the house by larger (unspecified) families; and (3) the outer circle relates to public rituals in “local, regional, and state sanctuaries.” The circles soon emerge as levels—family, local, state (55)—framing the entire discussion. Yet there is no direct correspondence between participants and the locations of rituals. A family may perform the same ritual (e.g., a short prayer before meal) in different places. A woman may go alone to pray in a city temple, while two to three families could share a ritual gathered in one four-room house.

Albertz chooses the model of “internal religious pluralism” (46–55), which he developed in 1978. Then he suggested similar levels based on the Bible: personal piety = family; local religion = village/town; and official religion = entire people/state.

Chapter 3 (“Elements of Domestic Cult in Ancient Israel,” Schmitt, 57–219) discusses a large number of assumed household cult places, based on two categories of objects. Category A objects are allegedly directly associated with cult (clay figurines, miniature shrines, model furniture, kernoi, libation vessels, tripod cups, altars, amulets, and seals); category B objects (collectibles, chalices, miniatures, lamps, rattles, etc.) bear no intrinsic religious significance but are included to add weight to the analysis (this is questionable). The assumed cult places are described with ample plans and figures.

In chapter 4 (“Typology of Iron Age Cult Places,” 220–44), Schmitt suggests the following typology, based on chapter 3: (Ia) domestic cult in houses; (Ib) domestic shrines; (II) work-related cult places; (III) neighborhood shrines; (IV) places for care of the dead (discussed in ch. 6); (V) local cult: village shrines (Va), open air sanctuaries (Vb), gate sanctuaries (Vc); (VI) palace shrines; (VII) regional sanctuaries (VIIa: open air; VIIb: with shrines/temples); (VIII) supraregional state sanctuaries.

Though chapters 3–4 are impressive, they raise some methodical issues (Schmitt is aware of some at the start of ch. 3 but ignores them later.) No criteria are offered for
inclusion/exclusion of places in chapter 3. If, say, two to three figurine fragments signify a “cult place,” many places were excluded. No definite criteria are offered for each type in chapter 4. The differences are sometimes subtle; for example, adding a bench to a “domestic cult place” turns it into a “domestic shrine.” Differences in numbers of finds may relate to a host of other factors (number of users, levels of wealth of different families, different periods of use, different postdeposition circumstances, and even different methods of excavation). Almost all the category A finds are broken into pieces. This indicates that the places are of deposition, not necessarily of use. The places were disturbed, mixed, hastily left; finds could accumulate over time or fall from upper floors. Most of these places are not “frozen moments of cult.” Let us consider crosses worn on necklaces. A study of such crosses and feelings about them may reveal religious beliefs. Should we interpret fragments of such crosses whenever found as markers of cult? If so, garbage facilities, streets, and public parks are also cult places. We would return to the days when archaeologists saw cult under every green tree.

The evidence of cult for most category A objects is missing or doubtful. They, or some of them, could well be religious objects. However, cult requires an action. Did families conduct rituals with or pray to a figurine fragment or to a broken chalice/goblet that could no longer hold liquid?

The discussion of the places follows excavation reports. An example is Lachish L49 (123): only Aharoni (1975) is quoted. The radically different interpretation of Ussishkin (2003) is not mentioned (see also Zuckerman 2012).

The chronological terms (Iron 2a, 2b, 2c) used are not specified, and archaeologists use such terms differently. Presumably “Iron 2a” here encompasses the tenth–ninth centuries BCE. The high/low chronologies are not mentioned. There is no reason to discuss them, but one must follow one chronology consistently, which is not the case here. The dates are taken from excavation reports as is. If the American Megiddo reports label a locus ninth century, it is slotted as Iron 2a. A Locus labeled eighth century in Finkelstein’s Megiddo reports becomes Iron 2b. Yet, the two loci may belong to the same level and date, the differences being only the chronological systems employed. The same applies to the eleventh–tenth centuries (Iron 1/2a). This renders the conclusions doubtful.

A full, numbered catalogue would afford easy cross-references. Also, chapter 3 and its related tables do not state the types of chapter 4, making it difficult to check the data for each type. Since some cases (III, VI, VII, VIII) include a few examples each, one hesitates to define them as “types.” We read that the “Type VI palace shrines that would have served administrative and military elites appear generally to have had features similar to domestic shrines, although in this case serving the realms of official religion” (239). Yet
this type has one sole example. What is a “supraregional state sanctuary” (type VIII)? It is taken from the biblical theologies concerning Jerusalem, Dan, and Bethel. Yet, these are city temples (for some reason the book uses “villages” when cities are discussed). At least the Jerusalem temple was also a palace-temple, part of a royal complex. What is the justification for seeing the Ekron temples, which are comparable (except in details) to many ancient Near Eastern city-temples, as “supraregional state temples”? What state, which supraregion?

In chapter 5 (“Personal Names and Family Religion,” Albertz, 245–386), 675 Hebrew names documenting 2,922 individuals are meticulously discussed and compared with biblical names and smaller groups of seal names from neighboring areas. This is a major work. Albertz rightly rejects the view that names were a “fashion”: they were significant and given with thought. He discusses problems (date, forgeries) and (following Noth) defines six general groups of names: thanksgiving, confession, praise, equating names, birth names, and secular (unfortunate term) names. The last show no connection to religion and are not discussed further. Based on a former (1978) work, Albertz finds that “official” traditions (= biblical ideologies; e.g., exodus, conquest, Sinai) are not mentioned (362). This is interpreted as a major difference between official and household religions.

One wonders if these biblical traditions had really been the official religion of Iron Age Israel/Judah or ideologies held by certain groups in certain periods for certain audiences. Perhaps we should not speak of official religion in this regard at all (see Goudme 2010). A second question is what one can expect from short personal names. Albertz looks for verbal forms (e.g., “lead out,” as in the exodus from Egypt). Their lack is a negative, inconclusive evidence. How far do short personal names reflect complex ideologies in other religions?

The main challenge is deciphering the names. Given the aims of the book, Albertz finds meanings that fit “household” religion. His reading is judicious and possible but not the only viable one. Take the large group of “birth names” (28.4 percent of all names). Albertz reads almost all of them in the past tense and hence as reflecting events related to birth. For example, יְהוֹ הֶבֶנָה is read “Yhwh has created [the child]” (278). However, it is possible to read many names in as imperative/passive (“Yhwh [please] create!”), therefore, pertaining to the future well-being of the child. Future (e.g., יְמָלַאִי, יְמָלַא, יְמָלַה) and passive (e.g.,hydr, ymdh, ywlh) forms are sometimes implied but read by Albertz as past (“has asked,” “has saved”). Albertz finds in the Bible “birth” connotations for related verbs, for example, to ask for a child. However, many verbs have other connotations (e.g., “to ask for/in God”). One may read “Yhwh has spoken [a birth oracle]” (274) but also “Yhwh will speak [for the child].” In other groups, with names not supposedly birth-related, Albertz accepts present/passive readings: אֱלֹהִים “El rules”; יְרוּשָׁלַיִם “worship Yhwh!”
“praise El/god!” (327–29). Even if we read them in the past tense (“has given,” etc.), such names can express general feelings of gratitude without implying any involved cultic ritual.

Rates of infertility were not greater than in our age, so most names were given in second, third, and later births by parents free from this worry. Infant death rates were higher but accepted as natural and “compensated” by higher birth rates per woman. Names were probably given in a joyful moment after a successful birth (247). Were mothers thinking then about traumatic past events? Possibly, but why not assume that they tried to ensure a good future life for the child by giving a name that served as a good omen?

Albertz has performed a remarkable study, but one doubts whether private names are a good source for “household” religion. The three “smiths” from World War I Mariampol, Lithuania, may serve as an example. The German forces found there three families, Schmidt, Kowalski, and Kusnjetzow, meaning “smith” in German, Polish, and Russian, respectively. The Germans asked about identity and were displeased to discover what seemed to them incredible: “All three [had] distanced themselves from their national identity…. Mr. Schmidt, who on top of everything else carries the [German] given name Heinrich, professes himself an incarnate nationalistic Pole. Mr. Kowalski as a thorough Russian and the apparently Muscovite Mr. Kusnjetzow as a genuine German” (Liulevicius 2000, 34).

Chapter 5 ends in a review of iconographic motifs on seals (367–86). One conclusion is that “iconographic evidence in total is nevertheless of no great use in considering personal and familial piety” (385). Yet, other general conclusions pertain to both official and household religions: “in short, the official Judean religion and the personal-and-family-religion complex coincide in their use of Yhwh symbols such as the winged-sun-disc and beetle as well as in the use of symbols representing protective spirits such as the seraphim. However, they differ in that private seals were dominated more by general apotropaic and protective symbols while official (or royal) Judean iconography tended to employ either solar symbolism or symbols expressing power and strength, both of which accorded with Assyrian and Babylonian conventions” (386). I prefer the first conclusion. It is far from certain that seal motifs can represent faithfully “household” religion. These may be private seals, but they belong to the elite—the very group that invents and sustains the so-called official religion.

It is important to note that the discussion of the seal names is based on the biblical sources. Time and again the religious meanings are deciphered first based on the Bible, and only then seal names are interpreted accordingly: distress of infertility (269), prayers
and vows for infertility/childbirth (271), birth oracles (273), conception/pregnancy (275),
creation and birth (277), confinement during pregnancy (281), and so on.

Anyone who wants to see what household religion could be should read chapter 6 (“Rites
of Family and Household Religion,” 387–428). It, too, is based completely on the Bible
(and some other written sources). The seal names, the iconography, and all the assumed
cult places have almost nothing to add. Of course, one may doubt the liberal use of the
Bible as evidence for Iron Age religion, but scholars cannot sit idle until better sources are
found (so the issue is not “using the Bible,” only how it is used). A written word may be
worth a thousand pictures. I see no reason for pessimism concerning this fact.

In chapter 7 (“Care of the Dead in the Context of Household and Family Religion,” 429–
73) Schmitt discusses, inter alia, the status, mourning, burial, and commemoration of the
dead. Schmitt does not see “cult of the dead” everywhere (in fact not at all), for good
reason, and his discussion of the biblical sources is excellent. Yet, there is a contradiction
here. In chapters 3–4 the presence of even one or two objects was taken as evidence of
cult. The same objects, often in greater numbers and more complete, appear in tombs. If
these tombs are not “cult places,” why maintain that four-room houses are?

On page 430 “modern anthropology” is mentioned, but the last study referred to is from
1988. The discussion of the tombs is based almost exclusively on Bloch-Smith (1992),
ignoring related problems (Kletter 2002) and newer studies that show that zoomorphic
vessels are not so limited in distribution (453; Yezerski 2009) or that burial customs
throughout the Iron 2 period are not “egalitarian” (454; see Faust 2008). Schmitt
mentions one mask from Hazor as evidence of divination. More masks have been found
since in Israel/Judah (not all published), although none in a tomb, and masks have many
meanings other than divination (Kletter 2007). Schmitt interprets Jerusalem Cave I as a
site of ritual commemoration for the dead, based mainly on the category A objects.
Samaria E207 is added, though not a cave. The Cave 1 “ritual” objects are broken. This
cave was predominantly a storage place, with objects disposed rather than used inside it.
It could not serve the “medium” circle, lacking space to accommodate any large group of
people.

Both authors interpret the Judean pillar figurines as ancestor figurines. There is no reason
to see them as “fertility” figurines (463), however, and the notion that their breasts are
exaggerated (291) is an unfortunate heritage of a few (unrepresentative) examples from
the Jerusalem Museum shown in one photo. The authors see these figurines as “votive
figurines” (in the general sense of “gift to a deity”). This must be a mistake. Votive acts
could be performed in homes, for example, incense offering—the incense is given to the
deity as it goes up in smoke. However, votive objects such as figurines require an act of
giving, that is, a physical transfer to the deity’s domain. In practice it means dedicating outside the family house. Whether the object is taken to a city temple, open-air shrine, or some other abode of the deity is immaterial, but it cannot be given to the deity and yet kept on at home as private property. With a few objects, one could surmise that a few donors did not manage to give the votives before the houses were destroyed. However, we are dealing with many objects from “private” houses, so (if we accept that this location is meaningful) they cannot be votive figurines.

In sum, Albertz and Schmitt deserve much praise. Any criticism above is evidence of the wide array of issues and problems raised and discussed in this book and of its considerable interest. It is a valuable and welcome addition useful to each archaeologist or historian who studies the religion(s) of Iron Age Israel and Judah.

REFERENCES


