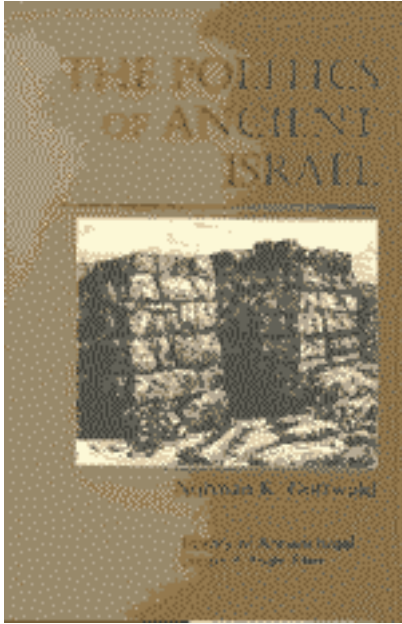


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Gottwald, Norman K.

The Politics of Ancient Israel

Library of Ancient Israel

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This volume presents, in an introductory and easily accessible manner, the results of the author's many years of sociological studies concerned with the governing structures of ancient Judah and Israel. The work begins with a short presentation of the problems of sociological approaches to biblical texts. The following chapter is a survey of biblical narratives presenting the origins of Israelite society, its monarchies, and the postexilic Persian and Hellenistic periods. Then the work offers a short survey of the greater ancient Near Eastern governmental ideologies, forms, and contexts for ancient Judah and Israel mostly as they appeared under their monarchies and within the Persian Empire. It should be noted immediately that the historical divisions of political social structures in the Hebrew Bible and in ancient Judah as "tribal, monarchic, and colonial" are modern designations imposed on the text, not categories within the Bible, as argued here (20).

The introduction is a superb, concise statement of fundamental problems faced by anyone wishing to deal sociologically with the Hebrew Bible. The difficulties related to the complicated nature of selecting sociological models and interpreting ancient cultures through them is well presented. Instead of the familiar method of choosing a single theory and comparing, or imposing, it on the biblical material, numerous varying hypotheses are enumerated as possible windows into the ancient world. The conscious biases of the author are spelled out in some detail. Nonetheless, the utility of sociological

models for biblical studies is optimistically advocated; the problems inherent in the construction and use of such models, very central in current sociological debates, is lightly noted as opposed to the emphasis placed on prejudicial approaches by biblical scholars. The author's own nostalgic notion of the egalitarian "noble savage" tribal period for ancient Israel remains, despite astute observations that the reconstruction of premonarchical Israel is extremely problematic. For the most part the book is successful in stripping the theological underpinnings of the texts so that theories based on materialist ideology can determine motives and power relations reflected in the texts. "Theology," of course, is dismissed as "ideology" and reflects no reality save self-aggrandizement. The Bible's theological bias is replaced with the author's: Assyrians are imperialists, but Judah and Israel expand; Egypt, Assyria, and Hellenic states have hegemony, but Judah has a culture; small and rural are good, while large and urban are bad (this reflecting biblical bias); authoritarian ideology is evil, but social freedom is good (this rejecting biblical bias).

The chapter attempting to display the politics as presented in the Bible devolves rapidly into a commentary on the politics in the Hebrew Bible. Since politics is not the interest of the texts themselves, this is not too surprising; however, it is odd that this chapter does not actually present the biblical positions. Often the volume reflects Jewish and Christian traditions: David comes out looking quite good in this work, Ahab pretty bad. At other times the explicit judgments of the biblical texts are overthrown: Athaliah is presumed to have been a good ruler in every sense, her memory besmirched by authors with an agenda (77–78); Solomon is presumed to have been a tyrant (33, 50–52). On the whole, however, the historical accuracy of the biblical narratives is assumed, if not their assessments. If one takes seriously the author's admonition to "handle with care" (32), this chapter provides a number of useful insights for beginners in political, sociological, and historical studies of ancient Israel.

When the wider ancient Near East is presented in chapter 4, the level of critical insight drops. This is necessary, given the vast sweep of covering the politics of Egypt and Mesopotamia through three millennia in forty-five pages. However, there is no quarter given for these "other" peoples: Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, Persia, and the Hellenistic states are "bad"; their ideology is self-serving of the highest levels of society. In short, there are better sources for the politics of these ancient peoples. One aspect presented in this chapter that is central for understanding the politics of biblical texts is the observation that the claim to "participatory government" in the documents of these empires was a fraud (at least as we define the term); the use of phrases in the Bible such as "people of the land" or "all the people/Judeans/Israelites" are of the same political origin and should be treated in the same fashion (Gottwald wants to take these biblical phrases literally at some times and as hyperbole at others [228, 232]).

When the reconstruction of the politics of Judah and Israel is provided, a careful reading of selected biblical texts is combined with several sociological models and a restricted number of political theories. In this chapter prestate Israel is swiftly dealt with solely as a literary construct, the reality behind these stories being now difficult to unravel. By far the most significant section of the chapter deals with monarchy. These narratives are dealt with to a large extent through the joint lenses of “center and periphery” and “power and resistance.” The united and divided monarchies are shown to fit into the wider world of their times in form and function; that they did not differ much from each other or from the states around them is well argued. On the other hand, the reliability of the historical basis of these narratives is almost always assumed, with literary concerns lightly considered. Turning to the “colonial” period, there appears to be much of the current trend for “colonial and postcolonial studies” and not much consideration of ethnic identity within an actual empire, making this a fairly weak segment. To be fair, there is not much in the biblical text to work from with Persia, but the Hellenistic states are presented in a fairly shallow manner. There is not much that one could not argue with in the entire chapter, but that is hardly the point. Almost without exception, the arguments made can be defended from the material at hand. As an introductory textbook to the study of politics in ancient Judah and Israel, this provides a wonderful starting point and can readily be recommended.