

5-1-1994

Writings from Ancient Israel: A Handbook of Historical and Religious Documents

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Recommended Citation

Teigen, Ragnar C. (1994) "Writings from Ancient Israel: A Handbook of Historical and Religious Documents," *Consensus*: Vol. 20 : Iss. 1 , Article 14.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol20/iss1/14>

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many issues must necessarily be treated very briefly and superficially, but I was repeatedly surprised at how much Fitzmyer does manage to say on a given question in a very short space. On controversial issues he tends to adopt a middle-of-the-road approach but gives enough information to make the reader aware of alternative views (e.g. on marriage, the dating of the site). As a one-volume introduction to the scrolls for the general reader and even for those with some background, this is, in many ways, our best and most affordable resource to date.

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Writings from Ancient Israel

Klass A.D. Smelik

Translated by G.I. Davies

Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991

In his preface (vii–ix), the author proposes to emphasize the historical importance of discoveries relating to texts rather than a focus on epigraphy, as well as giving literal translations to the Hebrew. Chapter 1 contains a number of points: Hebrew writings and language and other matters and relates these to Israel's history, sociology, economics, and religious life. The chapter deals with the history of writing from 3,000 BCE and onward. The author describes the Sumerian language and Cuneiform and their spread to Syria-Palestine. Smelik refers, in one instance, to the Tell El Amarna Letters, the letter from Abdu-Kheba of Jerusalem addressed to Akhenaten. This chapter also treats the Ugaritic alphabet where one Cuneiform sign relates to one alphabet letter (a notable feature in the development of the alphabet). However, it was the proto-Canaanite alphabet that became the forerunner of the Hebrew language.

Ten chapters (18–167) form the body of the book. While each chapter is rich with information, a few examples are noted here. The Mesha Stele (ch. 3) is valuable among other things for the insights it provides on relations between Moab and Israel. The Samaritan Ostraca (ch. 4) are dated to the reign of Joash and Jeroboam II, 794–793 and 773. But they also remind us of Omri (who founded the capital city) and wider backgrounds to Israel's history. The Lachish Ostraca (ch. 9) reflect tensions of the impending Babylonian invasion of the city. The letters are pleas for help. The text about Balaam, Son of Beor (ch. 6), found on pieces of lime plaster at Deir Alla, 1967, is a fascinating discovery. Some connection with the Balaam of Numbers 22–24 suggests the Israelite story used Balaam to defend Israel against hostile neighbors on the east and south. This may date Numbers

22-24 (in part) to the sixth century. The Numbers text then is influenced by the Deir Alla find on Balaam. One other sample is that of Jerusalem discoveries (ch. 5) of the famous Siloam tunnel of Hezekiah and an inscription on the wall of that tunnel. In the final chapter (ch. 10), Yahweh is related to Asherah in inscriptions from Khirbet-el-qom, near Hebron and Kuntillet Ajrud in the Negeb. In the first noted, Asherah appears to be inherent to the worship of Yahweh. Such texts are at least intriguing when compared to the ethical monotheism in Isaiah 44:6 and elsewhere. These are examples of textual information with a bearing on ancient Israelite religion.

The book concludes with an extensive bibliography, general and specific to each chapter. Inscription documents listed in foreign languages may offer a small obstacle, but sufficient works are listed for the English reader.

Writings from Ancient Israel is a concentrated yet lucid handbook, a reference for the pastor's study and students of the Bible in our seminaries and universities.

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Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash

H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger

Translated by Markus Bockmuehl; Foreword by Jacob Neusner
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992

xxii + 472 pp.

Günter Stemberger's thorough revision and update of H.L. Strack's introduction to rabbinic literature is destined to attain the same status as its illustrious predecessor: that of a classic, and a standard in the field. For those unfamiliar with the world of rabbinic scholarship, Stemberger's work will provide the ultimate *vade mecum*. Even for those whose interest in rabbinic writings is more than casual, Stemberger represents *the* point of departure, the port into which all must soon call.

There are several reasons why this is so. The first is the nature of the *Introduction*. It is, in formal terms, simply an extended bibliographic essay. However, the scale on which this task is undertaken is monumental. Second, an ever increasing number of scholars find it necessary to gain some understanding of this literature. The talmudic and midrashic literature is ever more within the purview of Christian as well as Jewish biblical scholars, for instance. As the divisions of labour traditional in biblical studies for the past hundred years break down, a thorough understanding of rabbinic literature will grow in importance. Third, the activity of especially Jacob Neusner, but others as well, has contributed to both a radical reorientation