Praise for

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel

I had begun to think that there were already too many handbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias of the biblical world on the market for yet another one. But reading through this new volume, superbly planned and organized by Susan Niditch, showed me how wrong I was. There is frankly nothing quite like it. In an exceptionally comprehensive way, it explores what ancient Israel was all about: the varied aspects of its culture and society, the multiple historical contexts in which it existed, and the range of perspectives, literary, archaeological, religious, social scientific, from which modern interpreters must understand it. The volume, thus, is not only a survey of the facts and features of Israel’s history and culture, as is typical of many handbooks. Even more, it is a searching inquiry into how we know what we know or think we know: what are the major issues of interpretation and how to evaluate them. Editor Niditch has not been afraid to encourage differing points of view on these issues and the evidence for them from her contributors, which her cross-referencing throughout helps the reader to appreciate. And the contributors – a well-respected international group from junior to senior scholars – have not been afraid to be provocative in what they have to say. Unquestionably, this volume will become a cornerstone for all future work on the study of ancient Israel.

Peter Machinist, Harvard University
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Notes on Contributors

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I thank the Trustees of Amherst College and Dean Greg S. Call for supporting the production of this volume with a grant from the Faculty Research Award Program. I would also like to thank Stewart Moore for his excellent work as editorial assistant during the preparation of the manuscript. My friend and colleague Peter Machinist was extremely helpful as I compiled the roster of contributors. I also wish to express my appreciation to all the colleagues who contributed essays. I thank them for the quality of their work, for their patience, and for their perseverance. For me, a particularly fruitful and enjoyable part of this project involved the lectures, based on their essays, delivered by contributors in a variety of classroom and public settings at Amherst College. My students over several years benefited greatly from these interactions that deeply enriched our courses and offered contributors an opportunity to give their essays a trial run in front of intelligent and enthusiastic listeners. The responses of these audiences in turn contributed to the final versions of the essays. The lectures were made possible by the Amherst College Willis D. Wood Fund. Finally, I would like to thank Rebecca Harkin, Georgina Coleby, Ben Thatcher, and the other editors at Wiley Blackwell who commissioned and supported our work.
The Companion to Ancient Israel offers a multifaceted entry into ancient Israelite culture. The orientation of the Companion is rooted in several approaches: the history of religion with its interests in worldviews, symbol systems, paradigms, and the benefits of comparative, cross-cultural study; the study of religion as lived, an approach that asks about the everyday lives of ordinary people, the material culture that they shape and experience, and the relationships between individuals and tradition; and cultural studies, with its emphasis on interdisciplinary work and methodological questions about our own assumptions as scholars.

The essays of the Companion are presented in three parts, but each of the chapters relates to others in the volume to reveal a range of perspectives, emphases, and ways of reading that point both to areas of consensus and lively debate within a framework of shared questions and concerns. A first group of articles explores how we know what we know. Authors describe and apply major tools and approaches employed by scholars to contextualize ancient Israel and Judah and to explore the Hebrew Bible, the great anthology of literature integral to issues in Israelite history and culture. Throughout, readers are urged to approach the sources of our knowledge with suspicion, aware of the benefits and limitations of methodological approaches deployed in the study of ancient Israel.

In chapter 1, Elizabeth Bloch-Smith skillfully introduces readers to the modern field of ancient Near Eastern archaeology, its techniques and goals, and its implications for the study of ancient Israel. She reviews the history of the field, drawing an important distinction between “biblical” and “ancient Israel.” Bloch-Smith emphasizes the critical importance of material culture for a full appreciation of Israelite religion, literature, and society even while pointing to the limitations of this evidence and the challenges of interpretation. She judiciously describes developments and debates among scholars.
concerning chronology and other critical issues, providing a thoughtful counterpoint to other essays in this volume such as that of Avraham Faust.

Grappling with issues in ethnography, worldview, and literary form, Song-Mi Suzie Park discusses the peoples surrounding ancient Israel who are described in the Hebrew Bible as playing critical roles in Israelite foundation tales. Park not only reviews what is known and not known about the historical locations, ethnic identity, and cultural orientations of the Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, and others but also explores what terms such as Canaanite and Amorite variously mean in Israelite tradition. She asks how the ancient biblical authors portray neighboring peoples and what these portrayals say about Israelites’ own sense of cultural self-definition contoured either in contrast with or in relation to other groups. In the process, she not only delves into the nature of ancient historiography but also provides an excellent case study in the genesis of cultural memory.

An important part of this memory relates to Egypt. John R. Huddlestun asks about the significance of biblical references to Egypt for understanding Israelite history and cultural identity. Huddlestun discusses periods and situations in which cultural contact between ancient Egypt and Israel might have been possible, pointing to historical and literary implications, but he is duly cautious about direct literary borrowings and links. Throughout, he pays excellent attention to the comparative method, offering a thoughtful review and critique of the work of previous scholarship, exploring what this work and conclusions drawn from it reveal about the field of biblical studies and the cultural orientations of its contributors. In an essay that shares some interests with those of Park, Faust, and Stavrakopoulou, Huddlestun has us consider what the biblical portrayals of Egypt and Egyptians say about biblical writers, their worldviews and contexts.

In a wide-ranging essay, Steven Weitzman also explores scholarly approaches to the contexts of biblical literature and the significance of certain recurring methodological assumptions. Weitzman is particularly sensitive to the difficulties in matching ancient texts with social, political, and intellectual history – the ambiguities and complexities, the constructions, interpretations, and receptions to which questions about text and context are subject. In particular, he assesses the contributions of ancient Near Eastern comparative studies and archaeology, discussing the New Historicism, postmodernism in various guises, minimalism, and the ways in which attention to collective memory relates to the very nature of tradition as received and worldview in context. His essay reads well in tandem with those of Bloch-Smith, Park, Faust, and Niditch.

Susan Niditch explores the ways in which categories introduced by folklorist Alan Dundes, “texture” (style and use of language), “text” (content), and “context” (social and literary), inform genres within folk groups. She points to interdisciplinary borders where folklore meets biblical form-criticism and contemporary material culture meets ancient Near Eastern archaeology. A discussion of oral and written literature is followed by a set of biblical case studies that underscore the various ways in which awareness of folklore, the field and the international corpus of material studied, deepens and enriches our understanding of ancient Israelite cultures. Her observations concerning oral tradition serve as a counterpoint to those of David M. Carr who seeks to understand how the compositions of the Hebrew Bible emerged and were preserved as written works.
In a sophisticated essay that rejects simplistic views of biblical sources, David M. Carr offers a model for the formation of the Hebrew Bible, seeking to account for doublets, contradictions, and awkwardness in the received, preserved written tradition. Drawing his examples from various ancient Near Eastern and biblical works and focusing on Genesis 1–11, Carr posits the use of specific scribal techniques, such as joining, blending, expanding, and counterwriting. His case studies lead Carr to review and assess the state of source criticism and to carefully draw some wider conclusions about the formation of the Pentateuch and its “multivoiced” quality. Carr’s work is well read in tandem with that of Raymond E. Person, Jr who points to an oral-traditional dynamic in the process of written composition.

Composition also raises questions about the very words chosen by authors, the syntax and style of their language, and a host of other linguistic criteria. Ohad Cohen introduces readers to the ways in which experts in linguistics offer suggestions for the dating, authorship, and context of various biblical compositions. After describing the sort of criteria considered by scholars in the study of ancient Hebrew, Cohen provides useful case studies to explore the ways in which these criteria might be used to situate pieces and portions of biblical literature.

The culture of ancient Israel and Judah is, as emphasized throughout this volume, part of a larger Levantine world, both in regard to the content and nature of the evidence and in regard to the very writing system that has allowed for the preservation of literary evidence. Introducing readers to the variations and developments that occur in writing systems with specific reference to the ancient Near East, Christopher A. Rollston provides an array of key texts, examines the genres of literature produced or preserved in writing, and explores their political, historical, and cultural significance. Rollston discusses the methodological challenges and implications of epigraphic work, pointing to scholarly debates about the chronology and meaning of individual inscriptions. Rollston not only allows readers to think in material terms about the nature of writing in the ancient world to which Israel belonged, but also about who has access to this skill at various levels of expertise.

All of the questions about form and function, context and comparison that occupy authors in Part I of the Companion remain relevant in Part II dealing with political history. Developments in scholarly approaches will be especially striking to those who were introduced to the history of ancient Israel via works of the mid-twentieth century when venerable scholars such as John Bright could virtually visualize Abraham and his family as they traveled the steppe, donkeys in tow. Instead, Avraham Faust approaches this early period by examining the ways in which evidence of material culture reveals means of defining one’s own group over against neighboring groups. In the process, he provides an overview of directions and variations in the field of archaeology as it has influenced biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies and hotly debated questions concerning Israelite origins. Faust examines critically what is meant by ethnicity and offers a chronology and a cultural map for the historical emergence of Israel as a people and a form of self-definition. His work reprises some of the themes explored by Park in her socioliterary approach. Similarly, Brad E. Kelle explores the complex intersection between legend, history, propaganda, and historiography in discussing the period of the early kings as described in the Hebrew Scriptures and as elucidated by extrabiblical evidence,
archaeological, epigraphic, and literary. He points to various “reading frames” employed by modern interpreters and to the possible social contexts, worldviews, and motivations that may have informed the work of ancient composers, all of which relate to particular and often contrasting views of an early monarchy. Also employing biblical, archaeological, and extrabiblical written sources, J. J. M. Roberts points to the challenges of historical reconstruction and the inner tensions and contradictions in available material, asking how we know what we know and why the information is preserved by various sources in a particular way. His work, like that of Brad E. Kelle, thus not only provides a valuable background essay for the study of Israelite and Judean history, but also a useful model in historical methodology.

Similarly, Charles E. Carter grapples with various and contrasting reconstructions of the neo-Babylonian and Persian periods with special interest in the ways in which scholars employ and assess archaeological data. He too points to the challenges faced by historians, and offers judicious suggestions for the demography of Persian-period Judea. He points to ways in which details concerning the size and distribution of population and other information, gleaned from concrete evidence of material culture, relate to biblical authors’ portrayals of exile, return, and daily life experienced under colonialist control in Israel, Judah, and the Diaspora. His essay beautifully relates conceptually to chapters by Smith, Collins, Lewis, and Eskenazi while grappling with many of the issues in archaeology and interpretation discussed by Bloch-Smith, Schloen, and Faust. Finally, Matthew J. Goff describes the political and cultural history of the Hellenistic period, exploring key events and turning points, issues relating to Israel and Diaspora, to the Maccabean revolt, and to manifestations of an apocalyptic worldview. He explores how extant literature reflects and helped to shape varieties of Jewish identity, and he allows for creativity and complexity in Jewish encounters with Hellenistic settings and ideas.

Part III of the Companion delves into critical themes in ancient Israelite cultures. Readers will notice the ways in which contributors creatively draw upon the various methodologies explored by earlier essays, often applying an interdisciplinary and comparative approach to the theme they present. Essays by Neal Walls and Mark S. Smith deal with representations of God and the gods.

Neal Walls describes the rich mythological matrix to which belong representations of deities in the ancient Levant. His work in comparative religion and comparative literature underscores not only similarities in language, imagery, and narrative medium employed by Israelite and neighboring authors to express essentials of worldview but also points to important variations between the literary inventions of various contributors, revealing their unique and culturally specific orientations. The essay thus joins that of Park to explore ways in which groups define the self and the other through creative media, in this case through stories about the gods. Walls points not only to a range of views expressed by Yahwists concerning the gods and the God of Israel, but also traces developments over time. Attuned to ways in which the literary evidence reveals both shared traditions and lively diversity in critical aspects of culture and belief, this essay anticipates studies by Greenstein and Lewis dealing with verbal and visual art and beautifully transitions to issues in monotheism discussed by Mark S. Smith.

Mark S. Smith explores ideas concerning a singular god that reflect and inform both modern theological perspectives and the very definitions of monotheism that emerge
from or are imposed upon ancient texts. Smith places the development of monotheism in a sociohistorical framework and within a history of ideas, drawing comparisons with developing worldviews of Israel’s neighbors as they relate to divinity. Key background events include the rise of empires in the ancient Near East and the trauma of Assyrian and Babylonian conquests which focus attention on individual human responsibility and the unique role of a single national god within the larger universe.

Articles by Steven A. Geller, Robert R. Wilson, and John J. Collins deal with the mediation between the God of Israel and human beings. Steven Geller’s study of priests and ritual operates on diachronic and synchronic levels, as he analyzes critical founding myths and the institutions they describe, including the priesthood itself. On the one hand, he is interested in what characterizes and holds together the priestly narrative that plays such a dominant role in the Pentateuch, for example, unifying motifs such as light and blood and narrative patterns associating holiness with danger. He is also interested in the disparate threads of tradition combined to emphasize such motifs and form these narrative patterns. Geller thus ranges from legal and ritual materials to the origin myths that serve as their framework, exploring the heroic characters who star in these myths, providing models for priestly roles as intermediaries in lived religion, real or imagined.

With a carefully articulated comparative approach, Robert R. Wilson introduces readers to prophecy as presented in Hebrew Bible, its functions, forms, and means of transmission. Drawing upon relevant ancient Near Eastern and international material, Wilson explores the roles of prophecy and prophets in ancient Israelite culture, attuned to the sociological frameworks in which prophets operated and the anthropological models that help to make sense of the phenomenon.

Sharing Wilson’s interest in form and function, John J. Collins’s study of apocalypticism attends to matters of genre and context. His analysis of apocalypticism deals with critical questions in the sociological study of religion concerning worldview and social movements. For Collins, the key to understanding this material is context, for example in regards to Daniel, persecutions under the colonialist rule of the Seleucid monarch Antiochus the Fourth. He engages with and assesses traits typical of apocalyptic orientations. In this way he provides insight into the particular sort of mediation between God and human and the particular relationship to history envisioned in apocalyptic works.

A second set of essays in Part III of the *Companion* deals with forms of social interaction. In a thoughtful piece, Francesca Stavrakopoulou questions the methodological assumptions that have informed the study of “household” religion and related terminology, for example “family religion,” “popular religion,” “women’s religion.” Rejecting simple dichotomies sometimes drawn between sacred and profane, popular and elite, Stavrakopoulou complicates matters, exploring the complex nature of the ancient sources themselves and the theoretical paradigms applied to the study of “household religion.” She notes that such paradigms are too often influenced by normative attitudes and Western orientations. Concentrating on the setting of home and tomb and on practices related to these spaces and to the body, Stavrakopoulou explores the material dimensions of ancient Israelite religion and the ways in which religion is constructed and lived in social contexts.

Another aspect of social context concerns education and the transmission of knowledge in a culture that valorizes oral communication. Raymond F. Person, Jr considers
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the role of families and elites, scribal guilds and the state, and the educative function of liturgy, recitation, and festival contexts. He points to connections between education and gender roles, and emphasizes the ongoing importance of kinship and “family households” in ancient Israelite self-definition. Taking account of the social, economic, and ecological environments that influence the form and function of education, he points to ways in which memorization allows for multiformity and creativity in the transmission of tradition and reinforcement of cultural values.

With an approach that is both social scientific and humanistic, T. M. Lemos also explores kinship and community in ancient Israel. Like the essays by Park and Faust, this chapter evidences a deep interest in questions of cultural identity. Grappling with the terminology of kinship, Lemos explores the ways in which kinship, community, and society are understood and experienced in key periods of the social and political history of Israel and Judah and points to the ways in which the social landscape changes over time in response to changing political realities and how these changes are reflected in our sources. Like Francesca Stavrakopoulou, she makes readers aware of the methodological difficulties faced in such reconstructions of ancient history. Some particularly interesting threads in the essay deal with views of kinship and community in the Diaspora following the Babylonian conquest, attitudes to intermarriage in late biblical times, and the importance of wars in social change.

Bernard M. Levinson and Tina M. Sherman explore law and legal traditions in ancient Israel with attention to context on various levels: social, historical, narrative, and cross-cultural. Working comparatively within the biblical tradition and the wider world of the Levant, Levinson and Sherman raise questions about the relationship between extant biblical texts, as composed and framed, and actual ways of life, political institutions, and social bodies, noting that the understanding and application of law may have differed across segments of Israelite society. They explore the development of legal traditions over time, pointing to ways in which material has been reappropriated and altered, reflecting differing worldviews. Their study of law and legal traditions relates to and interweaves with many chapters of this volume including those concerned with kinship, priestly literature, economic life, and women’s lives.

Focusing on the lives of women in ancient Israel, Carol Meyers examines in a sophisticated way textual, archaeological, and ethnographic sources. Taking account of the Tendenz of various biblical works, she notes that the Bible is a creation, in its current form, of male elites, even while the corpus may well reflect women’s stories and concerns. Offhand references to material culture and daily life in biblical sources also reveal the possible realities of women’s lives in various settings and periods. Meyers’ work complements the essays on methodology and cultural reconstruction contributed to this volume by fellow archaeologists Elizabeth Bloch-Smith and Avraham Faust. Like Francesca Stavrakopoulou, Meyers points to the complex threads in women’s religion in which public and private, official and unofficial overlap and interplay. Themes emphasized by Meyers include women’s roles in education, the significance of female alliances, and women’s economic activities and contributions.

With an explicit interest in the relevance of archaeological evidence for understanding economic realities and shifts in the Iron Age kingdoms of Israel and Judah, J. David Schloen offers a masterful overview of ancient Israelite history and historiography.
Working comparatively, he introduces readers to concepts in the field of economics that have been applied to preindustrial societies. He points to modes of economic integration, for example “reciprocity,” “market exchange,” “redistribution,” and “householding,” and explores how these concepts may apply to ancient Israel and Judah. Throughout, he takes account of the tendentiousness of sources, the fragmentary nature of evidence, and scholars’ tendencies to employ anachronistic models. His work relates well to many chapters in this volume concerned with archaeology, social history, and the methodological challenges posed by evidence.

A final set of essays addresses artistic expression. With literary sensitivity and deep interest in the comparative study of ancient Near Eastern literatures, Edward L. Greenstein explores the ways in which ancient authors employed “artful language,” paying special attention to the function of pieces of verbal art and pointing to their aesthetic and practical cultural roles. He also examines how composers of literature in their own cultural contexts defined various literary forms. Such forms may be distinguished not only by particulars of style, structure, content, or function but also, for example, by the presence of musical accompaniment. Greenstein underscores the importance of varieties of repetition in these literatures. Noting that “words have a mystique” in traditional cultures, he explores the worldviews behind the aesthetics, the relationship between authors and audiences, and the spectrum from oral to written styles. His essay relates well to chapters by Person, Weitzman, and Niditch in asking questions about the relationship between medium, meaning, and context and joins those of Huddlestun, Smith, walls, and others in its attention to the interrelationships between cultures of the ancient Levant.

In her essay on Persian-period literature, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi thoughtfully analyzes the varied works in the portion of the Hebrew Bible called the Writings or Ketuvim. Attuned to matters of tradition and genre, Eskenazi points to the concerns and contexts that may explain the flowering of literature in this formative period and to ways in which these diverse writings reflect and helped to shape aspects of Jewish culture and identity. She suggests that the works provide a coping mechanism in a time of loss (e.g. Lamentations) and a source of renewal (e.g. Ezra-Nehemiah) and points to certain recurring features: the portrayal of daily life; the description of individual experience in the context of community identity; and the authors’ interest in writing itself.

Benjamin G. Wright III explores the diverse corpus of Jewish Hellenistic literature, much of which was written by Greek-speaking Jews. A particularly informative set of writings in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic was preserved or composed by members of the Qumran community who took up self-imposed exile by the Dead Sea in the second century BCE. Wright describes how these various writings emerge in particular sociohistorical settings, reflecting and shaping different worldviews that all find a place under the “large tent” of Judaism. Wright pays special attention to matters of genre by setting up five categories of writings, each of which relates in a particular way to the inherited tradition and the earlier corpus of literature preserved in the Hebrew Bible.

Moving from verbal to nonverbal art, Theodore J. Lewis discusses ways in which Yahwistic divinity was imagined and represented. With a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, attention to questions of worldview, and engagement with questions concerning cultural representation and the inventiveness of human imagination, Lewis’s
essay relates well to many of the essays in the *Companion* volume. Areas explored include the links between written and visual representations of divinity, the ways in which attitudes to representation reflect the orientations of particular biblical writers, and the degree to which abstraction plays a role in representations of divinity.

Taken as a whole, these essays offer a fresh and creative analysis of critical and interrelated topics in the study of ancient Israel. They serve as an exciting window on contemporary dialog concerning the nature of ancient Israelite culture, its multiplicity, its complex relationships to the surrounding Levantine world, its literary and material aspects, and the challenges faced in describing and understanding this ancient culture in its vibrant, experienced, and situated forms.
Part I

Methodology: Questions, Concepts, Approaches, and Tools
A

Contextualizing Israelite Culture