Strata: Bulletin of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society

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Strata is published annually. To subscribe, please consult the Society’s website at www.aias.org.uk or use the form at the back of this volume.
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Eric Darby’s study of the female pillar figurines of ancient Judah (Judean Pillar Figurines, hereafter JPFs) offers an engaging multi-faceted approach to the topic, which complements and challenges prevalent scholarly trends, particularly since Kletter’s (1996) essential work. This monograph is a publication, with some changes, of Darby’s 2011 PhD dissertation at Duke University, as reflected in copious footnotes and detailed appendices (128 pages): a mine of information which underpins Darby’s study.

The variety of approaches can make the book complex to follow. The journey, however, is well worth the effort as Darby weaves together archaeological and textual data to address the meaning and function of the JPFs. The introductory chapter discusses the category of apotropaic ritual and considers how ritualised activity leaves a trace in the archaeological record. Darby raises important methodological questions on the interpretation of archaeological context, and the use of ethnographic analogy, to present her own approach: a regional focus on Jerusalem, a detailed study of disposal patterns, and consideration of Neo-Assyrian ritual texts. Darby dedicates the second chapter to the history of interpretation of the JPFs. She takes to task the regrettable flattening of the more nuanced interpretations of older works which yields a simplistic understanding of the figurines as goddesses, and as Asherah in particular, despite the lack of clear iconographic or textual associations. She critiques the reading of JPFs in terms of popular versus official religion, often with a facile connection with female religion. Darby further builds her case with an excursus through the figurine rituals in Neo-Assyrian texts (Chapter 3). As she rightly notes, though ‘the Neo-Assyrian texts cannot be used to recreate, *ipso facto*, Judean ritual use of clay figurines’ (p. 96), they can be used to question and appraise assumed meanings and functions.

The next two chapters take an in-depth look at the archaeological contexts of figurines from the southeastern hill of Jerusalem. Darby focused first on Kathleen Kenyon’s (1961–67) excavations (Chapter 4), and tentatively proposes to read Cave I as a linked to pottery production, and the ‘extra-mural’ street as an itinerant pottery market. Darby is right in arguing against the assumption that spaces where figurines were found are cultic. However, Cave I lacks many of the diagnostic elements to clinch its use for pottery production (cf. p. 134–135). Chapter 5 considers the contexts from Yigal Shiloh’s (1978–85) excavations,
Darby’s study shows that the JPFs can be associated with household rather than public spaces, but cannot be connected to one domestic shrine, female activity spaces or other cultic paraphernalia (p. 180). These chapters would have benefitted from plans that show the spatial distribution of figurines in the various areas discussed. Chapter 6 interprets the results of the petrographic study (Ben Shlomo and Darby: 2014) commissioned as part of the PhD project. The study confirms that figurines were produced locally, but were unlikely to be produced by specialised figurine producers (rather than as part of normal pottery production), nor were they produced by regular inhabitants in the home. The figurines are then considered in the regional context (Chapter 7) including Jerusalem, and the sites of Mevesseret, Moza, Ramot, Ramat Rachel, Gibeon and Tell en Nasbeh. Similar to what is known in Jerusalem the JPFs come from domestic contexts, and are not strongly associated with shrines and cultic paraphernalia. The regional picture also confirms the particularities of style typical of the region, such as the pinched heads.

Darby then examines the vocabulary related to clay and potters, as well as idols and idol production in the Hebrew Bible (Chapter 8). Her meticulous study provides a more nuanced picture related to the figurines. She suggests that the prohibitions related to idols may well have not applied to the figurines, and underlines the ability of clay to transmit impurity or holiness. Chapter 9 addresses elements of style and iconography, where the author deconstructs the JPF into its constituent parts and analysis the different elements separately: pillar bases, breasts, and the heads (moulded and handmade), and for each considers stylistic aspects, comparative material, as well as meaning and function, where the discussion of femaleness, protection and healing (p. 328–338) is particularly interesting. Chapter 10 then considers the figurines in their historical context, particularly the impact of Assyria on Judah, and aspects of healing and ritual in the Hebrew Bible.

Finally, Chapter 11 ties in the different elements examined, countering the standard readings of the JPFs as related to major female goddess, female concerns, and popular religion, as opposed to the official elite religion, run by priests in the state temple. She concludes that ‘the figurines in Jerusalem were used for healing and protection by many different people at multiple levels of society’ (p. 406–407). Her study is highly recommended, as it ‘puts to rest some of the oft-repeated but unsupported interpretations of the figurines, and, more importantly, spurs new conversations and questions about one of ancient Israel’s most common ritual objects’ (p. VI). We should look forward to further contributions by Erin Darby taking this conversation forward and widening the approach to include not only the JPFs but also other figurines types which include humans, animals and other objects.

Shortly before his untimely death Hanan Eshel selected the eighteen essays reproduced in this volume to bring together some of his more important studies on the Dead Sea Scrolls. In the last generation Hanan Eshel was certainly one of the most insightful scholars in combining the results of archaeology together with careful readings of ancient manuscripts and other texts to make highly suggestive proposals concerning many of the details of the historical circumstances of the late Second Temple period. It was his ability at making thoroughly plausible connections that was the chief characteristic of his work. This volume arranges the essays in six categories; I will focus on the first of them.

The first group of studies are all concerned with the Damascus Document. The essay that forms Chapter 1 is a classic case of how Eshel worked with Second Temple texts: he commonly would provide a close reading that was highly sensitive to how certain details resonated with Scripture, he would then juxtapose such an understanding with other more or less contemporary texts, and then he would move to some suggestions for a likely historical scenario that might have prompted the writing of the text as it now stands. For him the ‘three nets’ of Belial in CD 4:16–18 are to be expounded in association with Aramaic Levi Document 6:1–3 and in the light of some likely scriptural background are understood as a critique of false prophets that is then applied to the writer’s contemporary Jerusalem priesthood. The three nets thus indicate something of the movement’s dispute with the Jerusalem establishment.

In my view the second essay, ‘The Seventy-Weeks Prophecy in Two Compositions from Qumran,’ is one of the most important in the volume. Eshel has shown how the scriptural Seventy-Weeks prophecy is variously reinterpreted through the assistance of Daniel in two further compositions, the Damascus Document and 4Q390. The enduring significance of this 2007 study lies in the way it provides insightful consideration of varying traditions that provide a focus on second century BCE prophetic fulfilment. Here is a strong argument that