The City in Ancient Israel

Volkmar Fritz. 197 pp., 60 figures. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995; US$25.00 (paper).

Fritz’s The City in Ancient Israel is divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 offers a historical preamble. Chapters 2 and 3 cover Early Bronze and Middle-Late Bronze cities. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the cities of Iron Age I-II. Chapter 6 covers capital cities and residencies; chapter 7 treats city fortifications, houses, palaces, and cultic areas; chapter 8 deals with water supply systems. Chapter 9 covers “Economy and Administration.” Chapter 10 discusses the daily life of the people. The strengths of the work are the judicious (though too brief) reviews of the stratigraphy and architecture of the sites discussed and the efforts made to delineate settlement types and the settlement character of each period. There are useful indexes for biblical citations, sites, and authors. Although there is no bibliography, the footnotes contain many useful citations, especially to Fritz’s numerous contributions on ancient settlements. Most of the text figures are line drawings, generally of good quality, and illustrate the discussion well.

This work, however, suffers from several deficiencies. The most serious weakness is its lack of an introduction. An introduction sets out the author’s purpose, methods, limits, key terms, and intended audience. The reader may then judge the success of the book on the basis of these stated goals. Since there is no introduction, aspects of Fritz’s work are unclear. For example, Fritz does not define such concepts as “city” or “Israel.” Is a city a settlement of a particular size; is it one which contains certain institutions which other types of settlements do not possess? If size is not the criterion, why are sites such as Kuntillet ’Ajrud left out? What are the borders of “Israel”: those of the modern political state, or of the ancient kingdom? If the focus is on the Iron Age state(s), why are there two chapters on the Early Bronze and Middle-Late Bronze Ages? Who is this book intended for: undergraduate, graduate, or post-graduate students or interested lay readers?

Fritz only hints at the understanding of cities operative in this book. He suggests four reasons for the establishment of cities under the Monarchy: the new self-confidence of the state, defense against external enemies, as centers of the new administration, and as centers for the growing population (pp. 13–14). “Thus the process of urbanization which had its new beginnings around the year 1000,” he adds, “is the result of political change, and not the consequence of social development.” The first reason, self-confidence, is an untestable hypothesis, and reason four, population growth, seems more of a social, than political, reason for cities.

The purpose for the inclusion of chapter 2 on the Early Bronze Age is unclear as Fritz sees no connection of the third-millennium cities with those of the Middle Bronze Age. Chapter 3 focuses on the development of Megiddo and the nature of Middle-Late Bronze fortifications. The discussion of Canaanite settlements that continued into Iron I and new Philistine settlements should have been placed in chapter 4 where it could have flowed into a comparison with the Iron I highland settlements.

Chapters 4 and 5 are the most successful in presenting information. The treatment of each site begins with the site’s identification and its pre-Iron Age development. Then follows an evaluation of the site’s architecture and a note on its function. However, it is unclear how sites were selected for discussion; for example, why Beth-Shemesh with its confused stratigraphy, and not Timnah?

Chapter 4 concludes with a discussion of village types and house forms. Chapter five ends with a review of the two city types found in Iron Age II: the Residential City and the City with (at least some) Administrative or Military Function (two of Fritz’s three types are only variants of the Administrative type). Lacking is a recognition that there were other types of Iron II settlements (e.g., fortresses and cult sites) and that there are regional patterns to the distribution of these sites.

The brevity of the author’s treatments relieves many controversial topics to sources in his footnotes; for example, the function of the Megiddo “stabiles,” which he asserts are barracks (p. 142, nn. 11–13). His treatment of Mizpeh is flawed because he had access only to the inadequate 1400 plan in the site report. Even though no Iron Age potter’s workshops are known, their kilns are; at Tell en-Nasbeh, a large kiln was found just outside the casemate-like wall. On the other hand, Fritz does a good job showing the Late Bronze antecedents to some Iron Age