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Norman K. Gottwald. *The Politics of Ancient Israel*. Library of Ancient Israel. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001. Pp. 366 + xviii. \$46.95 (Cloth).

[1] Readers who are familiar with the debate in Old Testament studies between the minimalists and the maximalists have come to expect extreme positions to be set forth in current Old Testament literature. Most are also familiar with authors who offer the following nostrum: "The Bible has it wrong and the greatest archaeologists of the twentieth century missed the point, but this book has all the answers." All parties should welcome this contribution from Professor Gottwald, because *The Politics of Ancient Israel* avoids such pretensions and offers instead a fine example of balance. He does not skirt the difficulties found in the biblical text, and yet neither does he make a god out of archaeology. "Those who naively assume that 'the hard facts' of archaeology are more easily and definitively demonstrated than the obscurities of biblical texts will necessarily be disappointed by the 'subjective' element in archaeological interpretation" (186). Judicious use of source material is the strength of the book, and Gottwald has chosen material that must be considered regardless of whether one agrees with his specific interpretation of it.

[2] The title of the first chapter indicates the caution with which Gottwald approaches his subject: "Introducing Ancient Israelite Politics as an Interpretive Minefield." Although he makes a strong case for a new paradigm in approaching biblical political "history," Gottwald's caution is evident: "Although a dominant reading of history may appear self-evident, a careful examination of its claims will expose traces of self-contradiction, arbitrariness, and insufficiency" (6). True to his own caution, Gottwald avoids excessive claims for his views, while setting them in the context of well-argued possibilities.

[3] After discussing the conceptualization of politics in ancient cultures (chapter 2), Gottwald turns to an examination of "Israelite Politics According to the Hebrew Bible" (chapter 3), and argues for the inclusion of points of view taken from non-elite groups in biblical society by demonstrating how the official doctrine of Israel's leaders was not accepted and practiced by all segments of the population. Gottwald is concerned to give appropriate consideration to the views of people without formal power, and his investigation

into some of their alternative viewpoints illuminates the background of important biblical materials like prophetic denunciations preached against those who practiced an alternate form of Yahwism, and priestly concerns about the centrality of Jerusalem. Gottwald also offers his opinion about how politics became centralized in biblical texts, and how political power was gained and retained by national leaders. Methods of administration fall into this category as well, and Gottwald explains ways in which official biblical political theory interacted with other centers of power: Assyrian, neo-Babylonian, Persian and Hellenistic.

[4] Chapter 4 includes Gottwald's assessment of the term "state" in its ancient near eastern matrix. By comparison with numerous states outside Israel, Gottwald argues that both Israel and Judah qualify for the term, a position often summarily denied in recent scholarly literature, the major reason given being the smallness of Jerusalem and the insignificant population of early Iron Age Canaan. But size alone is not an adequate indicator of whether statehood has been achieved, as Gottwald shows. Even on a small scale, a state may be formed whenever people centralize leadership, promote literacy, underwrite domestic production of goods and services, become involved in foreign trade, and make tentative moves in the direction of a doctrine of the transfer of power. Additionally, a "state" must develop judicial institutions, and must articulate an ideology that defines citizenship and fundamental beliefs (religious, political, economic, "historical") for the group. Seen through the lens provided by Gottwald, and against the dismissive claims of minimalist writers like Thompson, Lemche and others, both the united monarchy of David and Solomon, and the separate groups that became Israel and Judah at the death of Solomon must be regarded as states. To buttress his position Gottwald makes judicious use of archaeological and epigraphic evidence, precisely the kind of evidence that the minimalists dismiss. With respect to the arguments commonly made about tenth century Jerusalem (whether it was merely an insignificant village or could have been a state capital), Gottwald correctly concludes that "the paucity of archaeological data does not count decisively one way or another." Why? "Given subsequent destruction and rebuilding in Jerusalem, it is not surprising that there are no archives or royal buildings surviving from the tenth century B.C.E." (182). Although Gottwald is not concerned to have archaeology "prove" the Bible, he remains open to the use of both disciplines together, each helping to interpret and contextualize the other. To this end, his brief survey of Israelite and Judahite archaeological data (186-204) is a model of balance and moderation.

[5] Chapter 5 is by far the most rewarding chapter for this reviewer, for here Gottwald models what he calls "critically imagining the politics of ancient Israel." Drawing upon many of the definitions and examples found in the first four chapters, Gottwald turns to one of the most basic questions in biblical interpretation. He argues that the written materials of the Bible include pre-state traditions that were taken over at least partially into the longer narrative sections of what became the Bible. He further affirms that the early monarchy played a positive role in the creation of the foundation myths of Scripture known in conventional terms as "J" and "E", respectively from Judah and Israel. But he is also aware that the Josianic efforts to reform and expand the state of Judah provided the impetus for the creation of new materials that could explain the fall of the state even when one so pious as Josiah initiated sweeping reform measures, including the attempt to weld Israel and Judah once again into a single united monarchy. For this reviewer, such a position is far more

defensible than the assumption that nothing important was written until late Persian or even Hellenistic times. Gottwald's view allows for the growth of biblical traditions internally, and takes seriously the traditions themselves, not in a mechanistic or inerrantist sense, but via a balanced and nuanced ("critically imagining") perspective.

[6] This is a book that needed to be written. Gottwald is the scholar with the stature and credentials to have authored it. Readers looking for balance and moderation will find here a useful and informative tool with which to investigate an important area of biblical interpretation.

Charles David Isbell, Louisiana State University