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Review of A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible

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A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible. By MATTHEW SURIANO. Pp. xii + 296. Illustrated. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978 0 19 084473 8. Hardback £71.

‘In the Hebrew Bible, the idea of the afterlife was inscribed on the body’. So argues Matthew Suriano in his 2018 monograph, *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible*. Suriano aims to combine archaeological interpretation of mortuary remains with the study of biblical literature in order to show that the ancient Hebrew ‘conception of death was centered specifically on the treatment of the dead rather than their destiny’ (p. 2). This conception concerned not ‘the migration of an immortal soul to some other-worldly destination’, but rather it looked to bodies, bones, and the achievement of a certain status: ‘the biblical ideal was the status of *ancestor*, which provided the dead with a certain form of immortality’ (p. 2). In other words, if one’s bodily remains have been cared for properly, one thereby achieves the status of ancestor. Within this notion of death as the achievement of a status, Suriano also argues that death is (a) transitional and (b) relational. For ancient Judahites, death is not the all-at-once enterprise we commonly assume today. Rather, death is transitional: it is a process involving phases. Further, death is relational in that the important status—ancestor—‘was conditioned upon how the living interacted with the dead’ (p. 2). One could not achieve this status alone; one had to be treated properly after one’s own death in order to achieve it, and this depended upon one’s community.

Apart from the Prolegomenon and Epilogue, the book is structured in two parts. In part I, ‘The Archaeology of Death in Iron Age Judah’, Suriano argues that Judahite burial practices support the idea that death is a transition resulting in the status of ancestor. Suriano highlights in chapters 1–2 the distinction between primary burials and secondary burials at the Judahite bench

tomb. The bench tomb comprised a bench and an underlying repository space, where the bones of the deceased were eventually placed in aggregate. An individual corpse would lie on the bench until decomposed (primary burial), after which the bones would be placed in the repository (secondary burial). Thus the individual would join with his or her fellow ancestors—and become one of them. Following this, chapter 3 inspects four examples of tomb epigraphs as representative of how Hebrew funerary writings help to preserve the identity of the dead.

In part II, 'Death and the Afterlife in the Hebrew Bible', Suriano turns his attention from archaeological to biblical sources. In chapter 4 he examines texts in which the Hebrew term *נֶפֶשׁ*, traditionally rendered 'soul' or 'self', refers to an individual corpse. According to Suriano, this usage indicates that 'in the care for the dead, the soul is embodied through ritual' (p. 176). An individual that has received proper posthumous care, such as feeding and the recitation of one's name, has been endowed with a 'selfhood' worthy of the term *נֶפֶשׁ*. Chapter 5 contrasts two narratives about death in the Hebrew Bible—those of Joseph and Jezebel—to show how the importance placed on posthumous care of the body indicates the perceived social and moral status of the one who died. Chapter 6 studies the biblical burials of Sarah, Rachel, and the prophet mentioned in 1 Kings 13 and 2 Kings 23 in order to 'illustrate the different ways the afterlife could be embodied in the dead by means of a tomb' (p. 204). Chapter 7 investigates the term 'Sheol' in the Psalms and concludes that it is a 'liminal place, a conceptual boundary between life and death that affects the status of the individual' (pp. 246–7).

Suriano's work is thoroughly researched and thoughtfully communicated. It offers an erudite treatment of several important aspects of death in ancient Israel, and shows exceptional familiarity with Judahite burial practices. The book may be commended for its broad range, as it combines several areas of study not often found together. Further, Suriano is right to frame ancient Hebrew conceptions of death and afterlife primarily in terms of an emphasis on 'functional immortality', an idea the author emphasizes throughout.

My central criticism with the work is simply that the book's title seems somewhat misleading with respect to its contents. The Hebrew Bible does certainly play a role in Suriano's work, but one senses that it is a peripheral role compared to the more central focus on archaeological study. That is all well and good—both

fields are necessary in the study of ancient Israel. It is just that a book's title should not advertise the one and then deliver the other. An ambitious title such as *A History of Death in the Hebrew Bible* implies to this reader something like a chronological journey through all or most of the biblical literature, exploring the concept of death as it appears therein. But that is not what one finds in this book. The biblical texts discussed in the book's second half are important, but only scattershot with respect to the breadth of the topic at hand. There are legions of portrayals and conceptualizations of death in the Hebrew Bible that go unmentioned here, and the list of scriptural references is relatively thin (at least, again, for a book with this title). Suriano's monograph might have been more accurately titled something like, *Interpreting Ancient Judahite Funerary Customs*.

The title aside, this book is an impressive work of scholarship and is highly recommended to those interested in the practices and thought surrounding death in ancient Israel and Judah.

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