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Review: Bedouin Culture in the Bible

Edward L. Greenstein August 13, 2020 3 Comments 19575 views Share



Bedouin Culture in the Bible

By Clinton Bailey
(New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2018), 278 pp., 28 b/w illus., \$55.00 (hardcover)
Reviewed by [Edward L. Greenstein](#)



There is a long history of scholarship that attributes the origins of the Hebrews to a nomadic lifestyle and that explains manifold biblical norms and literary features as direct reflections of such a society. Roland de Vaux's classic *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (1961) is chock full of comparisons to Arab and Bedouin cultures. In 1975, Morris S. Seale, a Christian missionary in Syria and Lebanon and an Arabist, published his book *The Desert Bible: Nomadic Tribal Culture and Old Testament Interpretation*, where he sought to explicate biblical practices, passages, and terms on the basis of Arabian culture. We are now presented with a somewhat similar but more copiously referenced treatment by Clinton Bailey, an American Israeli who has for several decades lived with Bedouin, studied their culture, and published on their literature, law, and lore.

It is Bailey's thesis that nomadic culture exerted a decisive influence on Israelite culture and thereby on biblical literature from the earliest periods and throughout their development. He traces the lifestyles of the Bedouin of today to the barely known, apparently nomadic or semi-nomadic Levantine peoples of the third and second millennia B.C.E., the Shasu and the Martu. As evidence of such influence, Bailey points to the Israelites' contacts with the Midianites, whom he sees as nomads. Like some earlier scholars, Bailey credits Moses's Midianite father-in-law, Jethro or Reuel, with no less than the worship of Yahweh and the idea of liberating the Hebrew slaves from Egypt. Although an increasing number of scholars—including myself—have come to regard Israel as an outgrowth of Canaanite civilization, Bailey advances a view harking back to the 19th century, holding that to understand the ancient Hebrews, one needs to study the nomadic Arabs.

Most of Bailey's book delineates aspects of modern Bedouin culture that, he contends, throw light on the ancient Hebrew ethos. Bailey even suggests that the Israelites depicted in the Bible may have been Bedouin or of nomadic background. To be sure, one is impressed by the many ways in which the biblical milieu seems to be of a piece with that of the Bedouin. One could say that, to take ourselves out of our Western frames of thought and to assimilate historical biblical frames of thought, we could hardly do better than to immerse ourselves in the world evoked in Bailey's book.

Bailey describes and explains Bedouin practices, values, and sensibilities with unusual empathy. Although some of his explanations of ancient Hebrew manners and customs from the present-day Bedouin experience sound outlandish but plausible, others are either erroneous or improbable.

The concept of vengeance is an example of the former. In one of the most intriguing suggestions in the book, Bailey interprets the biblical law of *talion* ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth") not as a license to get even but rather as a constraint on excess: You may take an eye for an eye, but no more than that.

The latter group includes a discussion of the Hebrew word for tribal chieftain (*nasi*). Based on ancient Semitic parallels, it means someone who has been "elevated," a high-up, possibly even someone "carried aloft." Bailey, however, pressing as ever for a Bedouin connection, interprets it against form as an active verb—someone who "carries" the needs of his clan in his cloak.

When Deuteronomy 6:9 and 11:20 enjoin the Israelites to "write (the divine teachings) on the doorposts of (their) house and on (their) gates," following a well-attested ancient Near Eastern method of proclamation, the educational purpose is plain: "recite (the divine teachings) to your children" (6:7) and "teach them to your children" (11:19). Bailey, however, goes far afield in comparing the Bedouin practice of daubing sacrificial blood on the entrance to their tents for the sake of divine blessing. The correspondence is superficial: writing on a doorpost here, daubing blood on a tent-flap there. A more obvious parallel to the Bedouin custom is the ritual of the Hebrews smearing the blood of the paschal lamb on the doorposts of their houses during the tenth plague in Egypt (Exodus 12:21–23), where the explicit purpose is to ward off the spiritual being enacting the plague. Here the functions as well as the form are alike: ritual blood defends against the demonic.

Neither a scholar of the Bible nor the ancient Near East, Bailey tends to make speculative historical claims in arguing for a nomadic background for biblical Israel. Nevertheless, his book is elegant, illustrated with photos (mostly his own), and highly suggestive. It provides valuable insight into some, if not all, of the ideas and practices found throughout the Hebrew Bible. Above all, the ethnography of the Bedouin the book provides is authoritative and fascinating.

Edward L. Greenstein is Professor Emeritus of Biblical Studies at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. A prolific author in biblical and ancient Near Eastern studies, he has recently published *Job: A New Translation*, with Yale University Press.

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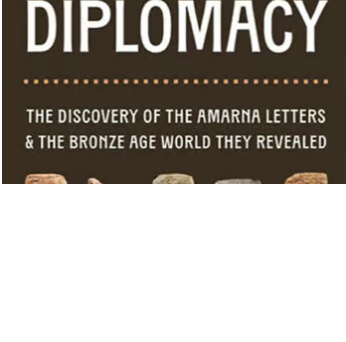
[How Desert Culture Helps Us Understand The Bible: Bedouin law explains several actions by biblical actors](#) by Clinton Bailey. When Abraham sends his concubine Hagar and their son Ishmael into the "wilderness of Beersheba" (Genesis 21:14), he hangs from Hagar's shoulder "a skin of water." In Sinai and the Negev, Bedouin shepherdesses today still carry to pasture the same type of container, made from the skin of a butchered goat, because its porosity helps to retain the coolness of the water under the hot sun.

[Ancient Burial Customs Preserved in Jericho Hills: Illegal Bedouin digging leads to discovery of enormous cemetery in Judean wilderness.](#) by Rachel Hachlili. It seldom rains in the Judean wilderness; this climatic condition accounts for the preservation of some rare Jewish coffins recently discovered in the hills overlooking Jericho. These coffins are made of wood, are painted, and date to the late Hasmonean period (first century B.C.) continuing into Herod's reign until 6 A.D. when his son, Archelaus was deposed. They are among the few Jewish wooden coffins ever discovered, and they provide important new insights into burial customs of the time.

[How the Dead Sea Scrolls Were Found](#) by Harry Thomas Frank. The most sensational archaeological discovery of the last half century was made entirely by accident. On a morning in the winter of 1946–1947 three shepherds of the Ta'amireh tribe of Bedouin watched their nimble-footed goats skip across the cliffs just north of an old ruin on the northwest shore of the Dead Sea The ruin, known as the City of Salt is mentioned in the Old Testament (Joshua 15:62), and from time to time archaeologists had shown interest. But from the middle of the nineteenth century, when they first worked in the area, until those days in winter, they had said that there was not much at that desolate site. Possibly it was a minor Roman fort. Perhaps, some of the more fanciful said, it was even Gomorrah!



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August 13, 2020 at 11:55 am
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- Jonathan Laden** says:
August 13, 2020 at 2:29 pm
I have adjusted the subhead to reduce confusion, but rest assured, the full article in BAS Library does include the reactions to the rape of Dinah.
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- Jonathan Ploni** says:
August 14, 2020 at 8:39 am
To the editors of BAR:
As a tour guide in Israel and Sinai for many years and having read Clinton Bailey's "Bedouin Culture in the Bible," I was particularly impressed by the authenticity of Bailey's examples from traditional Bedouin life, his explanations for their genesis, and the precise background of the Bedouin-biblical parallels he presents. Unfortunately, citation of these numerous parallels was surprisingly slight in the review of this book written by Prof. Ed Greenstein, in BARFALL2020, because they are unique assets for our understanding of the Hebrew Bible.
Yours truly, Jonathan Ploni
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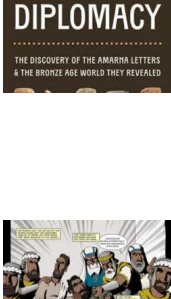
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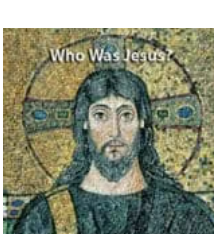
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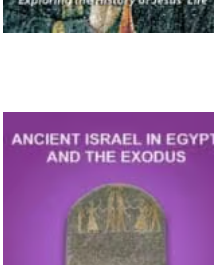
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