Miller, Robert D., II

*Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the Twelfth and Eleventh Centuries B.C.*

The Bible in Its World


Pekka Pitkänen

University of Gloucestershire

Cheltenham, U.K. GL51 3LG

This book is an outgrowth of the author’s Ph.D. thesis. The author starts by making some short comments about identifying early Israel in chapter 1, defining his use of the term “Israel” as referring “to a sociocultural polity and not to a geographic region” (1). Miller also suggests that the object of the study can be called Israel by virtue of the Iron I highlanders, whatever they called themselves, being the predecessors of Iron II Israel and by the attestation of the name Israel in the Merneptah Stela (2).

In chapter 2 Miller briefly discusses writing about Israel’s history. He notes that his study proceeds from an anthropological starting point (3), then states that his intention is to build one possible analytical model as a basis for further testing and critique (1–2). The author also defends his use of extrapolation “from other periods and regions far afield” (2) as something that is useful even if there are limits and as something that is done rather naturally in other contexts as well (2–3).

In chapter 3 Miller presents the complex chiefdom model, pointing out that anthropologists usually mean by a chiefdom “a society with ascribed rather than achieved rank” (6). In addition, “a chiefdom is a society where there is no specialized administrative control apparatus and legal system” (7). Simple chiefdoms have “only one level of control above the kin level” (7), whereas complex chiefdoms have “intermediate level or levels of
‘subchiefs’ between the paramount and the people” (8). Miller also notes in passing, evidently based on the anthropological literature he has interacted with, that it is complex chiefdoms that develop into states rather than simple chiefdoms (8). He then describes the dynamics of chiefdoms, such as power and its legitimation, distribution of goods and wealth, and conduct of responsibilities for trade and tribute (8-13). Miller also briefly defends the applicability of the model across various cultures and societies (13–14).

Chapter 4 considers how the complex chiefdom model could be applied to the Iron I highlands. Miller first delimits the geographical scope of the highlands, in essence keeping to the usual areas, not including areas south of Jerusalem, Galilee, and areas around Tel Hefer and Tel Zeror, while at the same time noting that the borders are difficult to define in precise terms (15–17). Miller then points out that archaeologists have suggested mortuary evidence, residential evidence, settlement hierarchy, availability of resources for sustenance, clues about conscript labor via monumental architecture or the like, and evidence of warfare as possible archaeological correlates for the complex chiefdom model (17-20). He adds a further consideration, regional analysis, which can provide insight into societal organization (20). After mentioning a so-called Gravity Model, which estimates how goods move between the differing social strata of a complex chiefdom, and noting its difference with the so-called Central Place Theory (20–21), Miller notes that the model can also be applied diachronically. However, he then points out a number of practical problems in applying the model, such as limits in survey coverage (22–23). Miller describes various difficulties with estimating site size (23–25), suggesting that classes can be set up for Iron I data via an examination of single-period Iron I sites and a critical look of excavated sites (26), and sets four classes (with one of them dividing into two). After offering his reasons for not following the newly suggested dating scheme by Finkelstein but relying on traditional dating, Miller notes that, for the purposes of the study, he considers all Iron I sites as contemporaneous, without attempting to date them more precisely within the period (26–27). Finally, he considers the possibility of residuality, or the attestation of material in periods later than expected, as a possible problem to archaeological conclusions (27–28).

Chapter 5 then applies the model to data in the highlands. For Miller, “the map of the Iron I highland settlement reveals six distinct zones of occupation” (29). These are reinforced by the application of the Gravity Model, and Miller presents the results in a diagram form and discusses them in detail (29–30). Miller then draws so-called Theissen polygons, which “on principle define economic territories by associating villages with centers by proximity, with boundaries being buffer areas of sparse villages” (36–37), presents the results in diagram form with discussion (36–40), and notes that the results fit with natural boundaries and with the Gravity Model (37). Based on mathematical calculations, Miller concludes that Tel el-Farah and Tel Balatah fit with a chiefdom
model. Of the remaining four systems, the case of Khirbet Seilun is somewhat unclear, and Tel Dothan fits the Central Place model, but the bimodal distribution of goods (based on a set of curves drawn based on a number of dwellings against the number of sites for each system separately; figures on 41–44) speaks against statehood for both of these sites. The system of Khirbet Tibneh is too small in size to be a state. The Attil system is not bimodal, suggesting that it is not ranked. Miller then draws in evidence based on the distribution of material culture, the highland economy in terms of twenty-two suggested regions, temporal changes in settlement patterns, mortuary evidence, and other archaeological correlates (41–80). Having gone through this analysis and correlated it with the results from the gravity model, he concludes that, based on all the available evidence, one can tentatively suggest that “Tel Balatah, ‘Benjamin’, and likely Khirbet Seilun were complex chiefdoms but that the systems to the north are questionable” (82).

In the final section Miller offers a Gravity Model based analysis of the boundaries of the highland settlement, concluding that “the ethnic distinction of the highland settlement, which has been supported in Chapter 1 by the Mernepthah Stele and the continuity with Iron II archaeologically … is further supported by economic reasons” (90).

Chapter 6 discusses the use of ancient Near Eastern sources for the highland settlement, noting the usual uncertainties as reflected in the academic discussion (91–96). Miller then continues to chapter 7, where he quickly sketches the social situation and history of the highlands based on the preceding discussions (97–103).

In chapter 8, in order to find out “where and how a memory of the past would have been preserved” (104), Miller looks for possible processes of textualization of the Hebrew Bible, together with possible analogies from the surrounding areas as they relate to the highland complex chiefdoms. He notes that Iron I Moab would be a possible analogy, but no useful inscriptions have been found (108). Miller author then considers possible analogies from farther afield, such as Samoa, Cuna native Americans, and Tahiti, as well as some of the ideas in biblical studies about oral tradition, noting the “insurmountable” difficulties in the process of reconstructing a suitable model for textualization (110).

In chapter 9, after some methodological considerations about history writing in interaction with the previous chapter, Miller compares several biblical examples with the reconstructions presented in his study, including Judg 20 and Gibeon, Gibeah, and the rise of Saul, Shiloh, Shechem (especially in relation to Judg 9), the custom of priests in 1 Sam 2:13–16, and the related punishment on Eli. Overall, these cautiously affirm the basic validity of the biblical text, even though there can also be differences, and these considerations may produce some interpretations of the biblical material that are different from the traditional ones. The author then rounds off the discussion in chapter 10 with a few cautious remarks about fitting together textual and archaeological material and the
relative tentativeness of conclusions (125–26). An appendix of Iron I sites used in the figures in the book, a bibliography, and a general index conclude the book.

As a whole, the book is fairly short: the main text ends on page 126. In my view, the archaeological discussion is the main strength of the book. I think Miller has collated a good array of archaeological material in a very competent manner, and the discussion of a number of methodological problems relating to archaeology is very helpful. The way the complex chiefdom model has been built in the book is also interesting and has clearly been done in an analytic and systematic manner, considering many possible limitations to its validity. The sequencing and overall presentation of the book is logical and well conceived. As for areas where there could be improvement, while conciseness can often be a strength, I felt that Miller could have explained some of the issues more fully; in particular, it would have been helpful to have a fuller explanation of the theoretical basis of the chiefdom related models (esp. 20, 40; Gravity, and Central Place) and why it can be thought that these particular models can be extrapolated to the Israelite situation, especially since most readers would not be expected to be familiar with the models. As the models have a mathematical aspect, full details could have been presented for the interested reader at least in the footnotes. In this respect, I was also left wondering how exactly the Theissen polygon boundaries are determined (37) and how they come to correspond with topographic boundaries, including mountains. In some other places as well Miller could have been a bit more full in explaining the issues, especially when a number of the readers might not be directly familiar with this particular subject matter. (I wonder if the original thesis explained matters more fully.) As for minor typographical deficiencies, some books mentioned in the text were not listed in the bibliography (e.g., 17). An alphabetical list of sites in addition to the numbered list on pages 127–36 would also make for easier cross-referencing with the text.

I am personally unconvinced of the validity of the chieftain model in all its aspects, based on the presentation. In addition to missing more explanation and justification of the models utilized, I note that a feature such as having a ruler in control of the trade (10) is, for example, attested in the story of Wenamun (see the request for authorization by the ruler of Byblos), and having the best of goods (10) is attested in the Solomon narrative and is probably a standard human trait. Consequently, these features should not be taken as exclusive for chiefdoms. Similarly, features such as chieftain’s relation to his god (13) can be compared to the pharaoh’s relation to a god, which certainly gave him sacred legitimacy in Egypt, but clear similarities also exist elsewhere in the ancient Near East (cf., e.g., the well-known Apology of Hattusilis in Anatolia), and the narratives about David and Solomon could also be mentioned. These are, of course, not the only issues to determine the model, and they may even be relatively minor issues. But, and as already mentioned above, I also think that, from the standpoint of methodology, the question of
the applicability of the model across various cultures and situations would demand still further investigation.

As Miller himself acknowledges, the archaeological data is not plentiful enough to make clear conclusions about various aspects of the model(s) used. Having said this and the criticisms above, I found interesting the ideas that/how bigger sites would/could dominate smaller sites, the possible hierarchical layers of power that can be identified, and possible social and societal interactions. I also think that building the model as Miller has done has been a worthwhile effort, even if the question of whether and to what extent the model is representative of ancient reality is not all that certain. This is altogether a worthwhile book in opening a discussion for reconstructing societal structures based on settlement patterns in the Israelite highlands in interaction with theories that try to estimate societal structures and interactions through a complex chiefdom model.