This truly excellent volume under review is a pleasure to read—and a fine exemplar of how one can and should combine the study and analyses of archaeological finds, social theory, biblical texts, and ancient Near Eastern studies in general. Based on a PhD dissertation written at Penn State, the author should be congratulated for doing a great job—and his teachers and mentors (including the late Brian Hesse)—should be applauded for enabling such excellent research to form under their aegis.

The excavations directed by Avraham Biran z”l at Tel Dan have provided some of the most important finds available for Near Eastern archaeology in the last half century. Unfortunately, despite the many years that have passed since the commencement and end of his excavations, much of the basic data on the excavations has yet to be published. While we are fortunate to have reports on some of the finds (and a general summary by Biran [1994] from several years ago), the lack of a comprehensive report on the Iron Age remains, in particular on the remains from Area T—the cultic center—is a major lacuna in the archaeology of the Iron Age Levant. While we eagerly await the promised publication of these finds, the volume under review (and a companion volume: Davis 2013) is an important addition to our knowledge of the site and the Iron Age cultic area. While far from being an official and extensive report, the author was given access to
much of the materials, discussed them in detail with the researchers working on the publication, and included in this volume the study of the fauna from the cultic center that will be part of the final report. Thus while not providing a lot of the “basic data” on the excavations (which will be provided in the final report), the author does add substantial information, analyses, and insights on the finds from Area T at Dan.

In general, Greer aims to analyze the animal bones found in Area T and attempt to understand their significance within the context of the other finds from this area and in comparison to other archaeological data (from Dan and other sites), possibly relevant biblical texts, and texts and other data from a wide range of ancient Near Eastern sources. In particular, he attempts to study the evidence for feasts at this site, its relationship to biblical and ancient Near Eastern cult, possible reconstruction of the development and procedures of the cult and cult-related feasts conducted on the site, and the place of this within the context of what is known about the Israelite kingdom in the tenth, ninth, and eighth centuries BCE.

After chapter 1 (1–6) introduces the importance of feasts in social contexts, which serves as the basic theoretical basis for the discussion of the role of feasts at Dan, chapter 2 (7–41) discusses the biblical evidence for cult in the northern, Israelite kingdom during the Iron II. In this section Greer provides a sophisticated and up-to-date analysis of the relevant texts and touches upon many, if not most, of the relevant issues.

In chapter 3 (43–96) Greer provides the basic archaeological data on which the study is based. On the one hand, he provides a basic introduction to the materials that are used—including the limited information on the architectural, stratigraphic, and ceramic finds due to the fact that this not a final report. As Greer was given access to much of the excavation data and seems to have had full cooperation with those in charge of the publication, the summaries are quite robust and do provide a very nice picture of the development of the cultic center during the various phases of the Iron II. It should be noted that Greer (46) supports the higher dating of the various stages of Area T, as opposed to a lower dating suggested by Arie (2008). Undoubtedly, the most important part of this chapter is the detailed data and analyses of the faunal finds from Area T—both as to division between strata, contextual analyses, and breakdown of species, ages, gender, cut marks, and other data. This enables Greer to suggest various activity locations in the different parts of Area T, defining areas of public consumption, priestly activities, and the like. As in many such discussions, the question of the presence/absence of pig bones is relevant here as well, and Greer notes the negligible amounts (60). Among the interesting points that he notes are clear differentiation between left and right animal bones in different part of the cultic area, perhaps evidence of public and priestly
consumption (66–67; see also 102–4), and apparent evidence of the collection of animal skins, in particular those of lions and bears (94–96).

Chapter 4 (97–123) attempts to synthesize the evidence for sacred feasts at Israelite Dan. Greer seeks to demonstrate that various elements seen in the archaeological evidence, in the faunal remains but also in other cultic facets, fits in well with the biblical evidence of the character of the Israelite cult in general and that in Dan in particular. Although he admits that much of the cultic activities evidenced at Dan might be seen in other Iron Age cultures, the overall evidence, explicit and implicit, supports identifying the site as an Israelite cultic center (not an Aramean one, for example). A very interesting point is his suggestion that there is a basic architectural similarity between the overall plan of the Dan cultic area and that of the depiction of the temple in Jerusalem in 1 Kings. In addition, his suggested re-creation of the process of ritual offering (“syntax of offering,” 116–18) is fascinating and quite convincing.

Chapter 5 (125–137) summarizes the main points of the study, stressing what Greer sees as its main contributions. In particular, he stresses that a Yahwistic character is seen in this cultic center. In addition, he suggests that one can identify a clear development in the cult at the site from the early Iron IIA until the late eighth century BCE, most likely reflecting the development of Israelite society and cultic norms—and apparently reflected in the biblical texts as well.

The volume ends with an appendix with selected illustrations of the main forms of cooking pots in the various phases of Area T, in an attempt to support the excavators’ chronological framework for the various strata. I wonder whether this selective and limited presentation is in fact was needed.

Overall, as noted above, I believe that this is an excellent volume and an exceptionally important addition to the burgeoning field of study of Iron Age Levantine cult, social and cultic feasting, and various other facets. Until the appearance of the final publication on the cultic area at Dan, this will serve as a basic text for its study; following the appearance of the final publication, I have no doubt that this volume will continue to be of importance, due to its thorough and innovative research.

References

Arie, E. 2008. Reconsidering the Iron Age II Strata at Tel Dan: Archaeological and Historical Implications. Tel Aviv 35:6–64.