

Josephine Crawley Quinn, *In Search of the Phoenicians*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018. xxvii + 335 pages. ISBN 978-0-691-17527-0 Cloth \$35.00, £27.95

There is not the least doubt that Josephine Crawley Quinn's book is a masterpiece of scholarship at its very best, both in the way that it is written and with respect to the vast and precise documentation that is extremely wide-ranging. The scope of the precious references is as broad as could be, including classical authors, ancient near eastern scholarship, Mediterranean archaeology, numismatics, and modern and contemporary literature in the fields of anthropology and sociology. There is an excellent balance between the primary and secondary sources, and the comprehensive Bibliography vouches for this. The book is also very well produced with very few misprints, such as those on pp. 143 and 145 that readers can spot for themselves, and it is also very well illustrated (with only illustrations 8.5 and 8.6 that perhaps stand in need of further elucidation).

Quinn's basic thesis is that there never was an ethnic group called "Phoenicians" during most of the first millennium BCE before the Imperial Period of Rome. Indeed, the Phoenicians' "own collective identities came, went, and in some cases never rose above the level of their own towns or even families" (p. xv), and we learn that only one person, namely Heliodorus of Emesa in the third or fourth century CE had called himself a "Phoenician". But Quinn will also unmask his political agenda, and on p. 151 she tells us that since Heliodorus had made both possible and impossible claims (such as being a descendant of the sun), we therefore cannot take what he says "as a straightforward statement of ethnic identity" neither for himself nor for his "fictional persona". Indeed, when we say "Phoenicians" we are not referring to ethnicity, because their identity (both in modern times and in antiquity itself) was formed as "a political rather than a personal statement" (p. 204). What we think of as a Phoenician identity was something that had been *created* (p. 200) both in the Roman and in the modern period.

Much labour has gone into this work, and the scholarly world should be most grateful to Quinn. Her train of thought is fine, lucid, and precise, and every statement is backed by the mandatory scholarly references. Quinn also exhibits in general an impeccable logic, and therefore the readers of her book might think that they are obliged in the name of intellectual honesty to endorse all the aforementioned conclusions. However there are some things that somehow need to be qualified, and to do this we need to first see what the basic assumptions of Quinn are—be they conscious or unconscious—and what theoretical school of thought she seems to be following.

Firstly, I would like to point out a general parallelism between Quinn's research on the Phoenicians and that of a small, but vociferous group, of biblical scholars working on "Ancient Israel". Indeed, the very title of Quinn's book echoes that of one by the

late Philip R. Davies.¹ Philip's book had (already in its first edition) created a whole uproar amongst biblical scholars, whose world was divided between the so-called "minimalists" and "maximalists", with the former claiming that there never really was a historical Israel before the fifth/fourth centuries BCE—it had been invented by the biblical writers active in the post-exilic period. The analogies between this stance on Israel and that of Quinn on the Phoenicians are too much to be simply coincidental. However, I am not claiming that Quinn had such biblical research in mind when she wrote her book—the similarities could be simply due to an intellectual attitude that she and Philip shared, and this brings me to the next point.

As already stated, Quinn's logic is generally impeccable. However it seems to me that one of her unstated assumptions is that an ancient text is guilty until proven innocent, and in this manner she has free reign to deconstruct ancient texts and the material evidence retrieved by archaeologists according to a general model that she works with, namely that Phoenician ethnic identity was created for political motives both in antiquity itself and in the modern world. I would for a moment propose a different working hypothesis, namely to view texts as innocent until proven guilty of fabrication, or political motivation, or of not really yielding real historical data. Critical analysis will show whether a text can stand up to scholarly scrutiny or not.

Thirdly, the foregoing stance is linked with Quinn's endorsement of modern scholarship on ethnicity, identity, and DNA research. This is all superb and praiseworthy—indeed, it is a must. However, it would be good to remember that our modern theories might *not* be *completely* applicable to antiquity. Thus, for example, it is now a commonplace for biblical scholars that in the hill country of Palestine between c.1200 and c.1000 BCE various groups of people eventually formed a new society, when from a loose confederation of tribes of various ethnic backgrounds they became a monarchy, and that this society had a sense of group identity, namely Israel, which later viewed itself as an ethnic group. In the same manner, although the evidence shows that the Phoenicians' identity was basically linked to the individual city-states that they hailed from, this does not negate the fact that they could also have had a sense of an overall Phoenician identity. We do not have unambiguous direct evidence for this, but as Quinn herself notes more than once, the absence of evidence is not tantamount to evidence of absence (p. xxiii). She reminds us that in antiquity there was evidence of a concept of the Phoenicians as a group, but that, contrary to the case of the Greeks, this concept was external to the Phoenicians themselves (p. xxi). Quinn hypothesizes that we have no Phoenician literature supporting such a concept, precisely because they had no "shared identity" (p. xxiv). This seems to be a circular argument.

If we keep the aforementioned points in mind, we are allowed to ask ourselves whether things are wholly as Quinn makes them out to be. Owing to limitations of

¹ Philip R. Davies, *In Search of 'Ancient Israel': a Study in Biblical Origins*, 2nd edn., Edinburgh: T & T Clark (imprint of Bloomsbury), 2015.

space, I have to restrict myself to very few examples and I am doing this out of great respect for her work and for herself, as well as to comply with her own statement that in this book she is presenting “a set of hypotheses, inviting debate and dissent” (p. xxvii). On p. xxiv Quinn writes: “This book is not about the lack of evidence for Phoenician identity; it is about what we can do with that fact”, and she upholds Ernest Renan’s claim that a nation is a “construct” rather than a “natural fact” (p. 8). This is all fine, but the fact that the Phoenicians did not have a nation state as understood in modern times, does not mean that they had no self-identity at all that went beyond that of their family ties and/or of the city-state to which they belonged. I say this because Quinn herself does adduce evidence that could at least hint at such a type of self-identity. But when faced with more than one possible reading of the evidence, in each case she opts for the interpretation that supports her basic tenet. The following examples will illustrate this point.

Quinn refers to the manner of relaying “ethnic adjectives” in Phoenician via what is known to scholars as the gentilic –y (*yôdh*) and she appeals to the fact that this final –y (pronounced –i) is “usually” spelled out where such adjectives are concerned (p. 32). In view of this, Quinn parses ’Š KN’N (if this were the correct reading that the scribe had in mind, since she actually prefers to read ’Š KN’L), found in a third-second-century BCE Punic inscription, as a construct case, namely “a man of Canaan” and reads the text “as a simple claim about geographical origins rather than a declaration of personal identity: the man or his father was from Canaan” (p. 33). There are two problems with such an analysis. Firstly, as Quinn herself states, the gentilic –y need not in fact be always registered graphically. So given how Phoenician-Punic was written, ’Š KN’N could very well stand for ’Š KN’NY and rendered as “a Canaanite man”. Secondly, the construct case is often used in West Semitic languages to make up for the lack of adjectives; thus, for example, “a mountain of holiness” stands for “a holy mountain” and by the same token “a man of Canaan” could very easily stand for “a Canaanite man”. In fact, in Phoenician to say that a man originates from Canaan is to say that he is Canaanite, irrespective of what our modern notions of nation statehood and ethnic identity are. Indeed, “the *nisbe* is used primarily to form a gentilic from a place-name”.² It is clear that for the Phoenicians *geographical origins* were tantamount to *group identity*.

Another instance when Quinn opts for an interpretation of the evidence that best fits her above-mentioned basic tenet is when she refers to Cicero who in his speech to the Senate in 56 BCE includes the *Poeni* under the *gentes nationesque*. She says that it is not that certain that by *Poeni* Cicero was here “thinking specifically of the Carthaginians” (p. 57), but she does not tell us who she believes Cicero was thinking of and neither does she justify her claim.

Quinn also deconstructs Josephus’ claim that Tyre had archives going back to the time of kings Hiram of Tyre and Solomon of Jerusalem. She reminds us that

² Charles R. Krahmalkov, *A Phoenician-Punic Grammar*, Leiden: Brill, 2001, p. 149.

Menander of Ephesus and Dios had translated these archives, and then she goes on to conclude that “his [Josephus’] information about them [the archives] *may* [my italics] in fact be solely from these writers and is *not therefore necessarily* [my italics] reliable” (n. 110, p. 231). This largely theoretical scenario leads Quinn to add that “if Phoenician literature itself did not exist”, then we would have a clear difference between the Phoenicians’ attitude to identity compared to that of the Greeks and the Hebrews (p. 61). These hypothetical claims have to be read in the light of the *fact* that we do have direct evidence of Phoenician archives as evidenced by the finds at Idalion (n. 110, p. 231).

The foregoing examples lead me to think that Quinn waters down quite heftily the (admittedly very little) evidence that there is from antiquity that could go towards supporting the fact that the Phoenicians did have a self-awareness of themselves as belonging to a group of people that went beyond their family circle and/or the city-state to which they belonged. There are in fact two important pieces of evidence from the Gospels that point in this direction and that Quinn does not discuss. The gospel of Mark narrates a story of when Jesus was operating in the area of Tyre and Sidon where he healed the daughter of a foreign woman. This story is also relayed in the gospel of Matthew, where, in 15.22, we read that the woman in question was a Canaanite (*chanania*). In Mark’s version of the story we learn, in 7.26, of two highly interesting things about this same woman: that she was Greek (*ellenis*), which in the context means a gentile woman, namely non-Jewish; and specifically that she was Syrophoenician (*surophoïnikissa*) with respect to origin/descent/birth/nation/tribe/population (*tō genei*).

Why does Matthew call the woman “a Canaanite” whilst Mark says that she was “Syrophoenician”? This is so owing to the well-known fact that Matthew’s target audience was Jews, who had converted to Christianity, whereas Mark wrote his gospel for gentiles who were imbued with Graeco-Roman culture. This simple fact shows that what the West Semites (*of which both the Phoenicians and the Jews formed part*) called in their West Semitic tongue ‘Canaanite’, the Greeks tagged as ‘Phoenician’. In what sense was the foreign woman “Syrophoenician *tō genei*”? As Louw and Nida state: “It may be difficult in some languages to clearly distinguish between culture and race as in Mk 7.26. Sometimes this difference can be indicated by saying ‘the woman lived like a Greek, but she was Syrophoenician’ or ‘... her parents were from Syrophoenicia’.”³ The latter option is better in view of what was mentioned above regarding ethnic adjectives.

So did imperial Rome and the modern world invent (out of political motives) the Phoenicians? In view of the fact that on p. 16 Quinn has a section titled “Inventing the Phoenicians”, whereas on p. 200 she clearly implies that Phoenician identity has been created, I would distinguish between inventing the Phoenicians and creating

³ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: based on Semantic Domains*, vol. 1, 2nd edn., New York: United Bible Societies, 1989, p. 112.

them. Indeed, “‘creation’ fits a range of situations, from *creatio ex nihilo* to the reworking of an event into a relatively faithful narrative by the historian who is interested in depicting the past as he or she perceives it.”⁴ It is true that the Greeks coined the name ‘Phoenicians’, and that it was Imperial Rome and the modern world that respectively turned them into an ethnic entity that went beyond their restricted family and city-state circle, and that made them in the image of a modern nation state. However, this does not mean that we are dealing with an invention. On the contrary, the above-mentioned remarks indicate that those people inhabiting the land of Canaan (with its fluctuating borders in different historical periods) did have a perception of themselves as Canaanites besides having an even stronger self-identity based on their family and city-state circle. All this (as Quinn correctly shows) has nothing to do with race and ethnicity being linked to blood and DNA—the contemporary notion of ethnic self-identity is different to that held by the inhabitants of the Levant in the first millennium BCE. The Greeks called this group of Canaanites “Phoenicians”, and Imperial Rome transformed them into a much larger entity, paving the way for modern Europeans to make them in their own image and likeness, namely a nation state. Quinn has shown that many had a share in all this, including Lebanon, Great Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and England. The evidence that she marshals and evaluates shows beyond reasonable doubt that we created (however, not *ex nihilo*) the Phoenicians according to our own political image and likeness, but not that we invented them.

Quinn has produced a classic, and this brief review cannot do justice to her monumental work. The critical points mentioned above are meant as an appreciation of a book that should find a place in every library and on the shelf of all scholars interested in antiquity, especially in the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean. It will be discussed for a long time to come since its riches are innumerable.

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⁴ Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 218.