Biblical Archaeology: The Hydra of Palestine’s History

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Abstract: Both Israel Finkelstein and William Dever have allegedly distanced themselves from the kind of “biblical archaeology” of William F. Albright. Their own efforts, however, to relate Palestinian archaeology and biblical narrative not only reflect Albright’s earlier methods, they create a politically oriented incoherence. In three recent works, since the turn of the millennia, Finkelstein uses archaeologically based arguments primarily to resolve problems of biblical interpretation. Dever, who also has published three biblical-archaeological studies since 2001, concentrates, rather, on archaeological issues, while using biblical narrative for his underlying historical context. A discussion of the figures of Solomon and Josiah on the one hand and a discussion of “landscape archaeology” and site classification, on the other hand, illustrate the shortcomings of their methodology.

Keywords: Biblical archaeology – history of Palestine – Canaanite – Israelite – Solomon – Josiah.

Albrightean “Biblical Archaeology”

In a presentation of “expert opinions” in the article “Biblical Archaeology” in Wikipedia, both William Dever and Israel Finkelstein are cited – along with Ze’ev Herzog – as clearly distancing themselves from Albrightean “biblical archaeology”– a theologically apologetic discourse on the use of Palestinian archaeology in support of the historicity of biblical narrative, which, until the mid-1970s, had dominated Old Testament studies. At least, Dever and Finkelstein are
represented as distancing themselves from “biblical archaeology”, insofar as it relates to the stories of the patriarchs, of an exodus from Egypt, a conquest under Joshua and, in the case of Finkelstein and Herzog, a “united monarchy” and a “temple of Solomon”.3 In spite of such alleged distance, however, and in contrast to Herzog and David Ussishkin,4 both Dever and Finkelstein have written extensively over the past fifteen years, within the genre of biblical archaeology and have grounded their presentations on a wide variety of “convergences” and “conjunctures” between archaeology and the Bible, which they believe can be established.5 In fact, they show little hesitation in interpreting the Bible with the help of archaeology or, indeed, archaeology in terms of their understanding of “biblical Israel”.6 Whatever the progress archaeology has made since Albright published his first contributions some ninety years ago7, a methodological distancing of Finkelstein and Dever’s perspectives from the “biblical archaeology” that Albright’s work gave expression to, is hardly apparent. Albright, in fact, points to just such “correspondences” and “conjunctures” as Dever and Finkelstein use, when he defends the thesis that Abraham was a Hapiru caravaneer of the early second millennium.8 Rather than directly identifying Abraham’s activities in the evidence we have of caravan trade, Albright pointed to biblical texts that speak of Abraham as a Hebrew, such as in Genesis 14. On

6. For this concept, see Philip R. Davies, In Search of Ancient Israel (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press 1992), passim.
the basis of such biblical texts, he argued that Abraham was in fact a
caravaneer, that caravaneers in the second millennium were generally
_Hapiru_ and that _Hapiru_ caravan trade was carried out in the period
in which Albright understood the Old Testament to have set Abra-
ham. Finally, his argument was considered confirmed because such
caravaneers visited the places Abraham visits in the Bible and per-
formed the type of actions performed by Abraham (Albright 1968;
Thompson 1974, 53).

Albright ever spoke of an “essential historicity” and allowed for in-
accuracies, discrepancies and anachronisms, as well as the existence
of variable traditions. His eventual history was ever recognised as
probable and in “harmony” with the Bible and archaeology, precisely
as Dever and Finkelstein have understood “convergence” and “con-
juncture”. Also like Albright, Dever and Finkelstein severely reduce
the role of biblical criticism to that of defining an “historical reality”
which they see as implied in biblical narrative. So, for example, we
find Albright arguing that “if the patriarchs are to be seen as leaders
of large tribal groups, then to show that tribal migrations of related
linguistic peoples took place in a way reminiscent of the patriarchal
movements demonstrates the historicity of these narratives and es-
establishes for us the date of the patriarchal period” (Albright 1963,
5; 1968, 56; cf. Thompson 1974, 53). Like Dever and Finkelstein,
Albright also used archaeology to correct the biblical narrative in
constructing his history: most notoriously, in his adjustment of the
“exodus and conquest” period to the Late Bronze/ Iron Age transi-
tion.9 In the closing summary of my evaluation of Albright’s methods
for writing the history of the second millennium (Thompson 1974,
316-321), I drew the following principle:

Because of the limitations of our primary data, particular care
must be taken in the isolation of our material and in its independent
evaluation. Before general conclusions can be drawn encompassing
all available materials, we must be careful that the relationships we
trace between distinct bodies of evidence are themselves concretely
supported by evidence (Thompson 1974, 320).

In my review of the 2001 publications of Dever and Finkelstein and
Silberman, I pointed out that Dever’s arguments, supporting the “re-
ality” of the Bible’s view of ancient Israel (Dever 2001, 239) suffered
from a failure to understand the complexity of both biblical compo-

9. William F. Albright, “The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archae-
ology”, _BASOR_ 74 (1939), 11-23; John J. Bimson, _Redating the Exodus and Con-
quest_, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 5 (Sheffield:
sition and ethnicity.10 It is, therefore with gratitude that I view De-
ver’s return to the question of the convergence of his archaeological
research regarding the 8th century and alleged biblical associations. It
is wholly on the basis of such associations that his continued use of
an Albrightean “biblical archaeology” seeks legitimacy. I agree with
his statement “that the information from archaeological and material
sources is now our primary source for writing history” not the biblia-
tical texts” (Dever 2003, 71). I also agree with him that “Joshua-Kings
cannot be read uncritically as a satisfactory history, but neither can
they be discarded as lacking any credible historical information” (De-
ver 2003, 226). What I do find missing, however – and here Dever
stands in contrast to Finkelstein – is the lack of critical respect for the
integrity of a reading of texts on their terms, whether they are biblical
or ancient Near Eastern.11

Dever and Finkelstein’s continued efforts to take the middle ground
in the “minimalist-maximalist” debate echo Roland de Vaux’s earlier
effort to find a balance in the mid-twentieth century debate between
American and German versions of “biblical archaeology”.12 The de-
bate engaged Albright on the one hand, along with John Bright and
George Ernest Wright, who used their archaeological research as a
means of historicizing the biblical narrative,13 and, on the other hand,
most European scholars and, especially, Albrecht Alt and Martin
Noth.14 De Vaux’s historical constructions chose the center between
the German and American sides of the debate, typically focusing on

10. Thomas L. Thompson, “Methods and Results: A Review of Two Recent Publica-
Stelet”, *Ahab Agonistes: The Rise and Fall of the Omri Dynasty*, ed. Lester L. Grabbe
(London: T&T Clark 2007), 236-292; *Biblical Narrative and Palestine’s History: Ch-
anging Perspectives* 2 (Sheffield: Equinox 2013).
12. Roland de Vaux, “Method in the Study of Early Hebrew History”, *The Bible
and Modern Scholarship*, ed. James Phillip Hyatt (New York: Abingdon 1966), 15-
29; “On Right and Wrong Uses of Archaeology”, *Near Eastern Archaeology in the
Twentieth Century in Honor of Nelson Glueck*, ed. James A. Sanders (New York:
Doubleday 1970), 64-80.
13. William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period From Abraham to Ezr* (New York:
Harper 1963); John Bright, *Early Israel in Recent History Writing* (London: SCM
Press 1956); George Ernest Wright, *God Who Acts: Biblical Theology as Recital,
*Palästina-Jahrbuch* 35 (1939), 126-175; Martin Noth, *Das System der Zwölf Stämme
Israels* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer 1930); *Geschichte Israels* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck
und Ruprecht 1950); Thomas L. Thompson, “Martin Noth and the History of Is-
rael”, *The History of Israel’s Traditions: The Heritage of Martin Noth*, ed. Steven L.
a limited, but “essential historicity” of theologically defined “events”, not least the Exodus and the Davidic covenant.15

Central to understanding Dever and Finkelstein’s need to find a biblical component in their historical interpretation has been the challenge to the project of “biblical archaeology” by three books in 1991 and 1992, which launched the “minimalist-maximalist” debate and came to dominate the field through the following decade.

The first work was a short monograph on the Canaanites by Niels Peter Lemche.16 Although the first published and the more immediately relevant of the three to the current discussion, it was less noticed even as it clearly underlined the political dynamic in the misuse of biblical names as historical. The name “Canaanite” personifies an ancient geographical term, but, in the Bible, evokes a people: the bearers of values, identity and heritage. Biblical “Israelite” and “Canaanite” present a dichotomous pair with an effective literary function, essential to the inauthoctonous trope which defines the “promised land” as Eretz Israel. Israelites stand opposed to the indigenous people of the land, whose ancestor, Canaan, is marked by Noah’s curse. As Canaan becomes Eretz Israel, Canaanites epitomize the dispossessed. The politics of Israeli archaeology’s early decision to use “Canaanite” and “Israelite” as period markers did not only identify the heritage of an Iron Age Eretz Israel as Israeli. It offered Palestinians the heritage of the Bronze Age and marked them as a people without a heritage in the land: the heirs of a literary, divinely blessed, genocide and historiographic disaster! If the “Canaanites”, however, in fact, were neither a nation nor a people, but simply any who lived in the land, once called Canaan, Israelites, too, would be, historically, no more than those who lived in the central highlands. The origin of this region’s settlements were not related to either the settlement of Judah or its future Jews. So simple was the “minimalist-maximalist” debate.

My own monograph, on the possible historical context for the concept of an Israelite people,17 drew four conclusions, expanding Lemche’s argument: 1) The biblical narratives about Israel – from the Patriarchs of Genesis to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nabuchadnezzar – were not historical accounts of the past, but literary and

theological fictions. 2) The origins of Israel were related to the new Iron I settlements of the central highlands, which, in the ninth century, BCE, developed a small highland patronate bearing the name Bit Humri/Israel. 3) The formation of this polity in the central highlands, following a recovery from the climate-driven desedentarization of the highlands in the Late Bronze Age, was both much earlier and without any direct relationship to the comparable but later recovery and return to sedentary settlement in the southern highlands in the course of the tenth and ninth centuries, BCE. This region and the Transjordan highlands of Edom also developed the small patronage kingdoms of Judah and Edom, closely associated to the Assyrian development of the overland trade network. 4) The biblical understanding of Israel as an ethnicity was to be dated to the Persian Period at the earliest and should be understood as an utopian trope of biblical literature.

Closely related to my monograph was Philip Davies’ very important essay, which distinguished three different functions of the name “Israel”: 1) “Israel” of biblical narrative: the figure of the patriarch and father of 12 sons, themselves the fathers of twelve tribes, who were brought from Egypt by Moses and whose sons conquered the “promised land”. This was the Israel led by Joshua and the Judges and which formed the legendary kingdoms of Saul, David and Solomon: an Israel which Yahweh had destined for disaster at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians. 2) The second Israel is “ancient Israel”: a construct of scholars. This Israel is hypothetical and theoretical: a modern understanding, a narrative, ideally based on evidence. 3) His third “Israel” is often confused with the other Israels. It is the Israel of the real past, one that no longer exists.

This exposure of the fictive foundations of Israeli heritage politics, so central to “biblical archaeology”, fed the heated polemics of scholarly discourse. The late 1980s and early 1990s also witnessed the closure of the fifteen years discourse over the historicity of biblical origin stories. Both Israeli and European scholars came to understand Israel’s historical origins in the Iron I settlements of the central

highlands and as culturally rooted in the Bronze Age. The related acceptance of the legendary character of biblical narrative by many archaeologists in Tel Aviv still fuels the intense debate between the archaeological faculties from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem over the dating of early Iron Age pottery, which might be related to events of the tenth century, BCE and is, therefore, central to any argument in favor of the historicity of the United Monarchy. The use of the chronology of the Hebrew Bible, however, given its roots in the allegorical chronology of the medieval Masoretes, exposes an incoherence in the ideology of much Israeli archaeology.

Although the old arguments of “biblical archaeology” had fully collapsed, since the turn of the millennia, two competitive efforts have sought to salvage the remnants of its “ancient Israel”. In a concerted effort to maintain some form of “biblical archaeology”, Dever and Finkelstein have each published three books, adding six new heads to our scholarly Hydra at great cost in methodological transparency (Dever 2001; 2003; 2012; Finkelstein & Silbermann 2001; 2006; Finkelstein 2013).

While Finkelstein uses archaeology in an effort to solve problems of biblical interpretation, Dever centers his historical contributions primarily in archaeological issues, but ever in support of a history of biblical Israel. While one is never in doubt of the technical progress of this old-new “biblical archaeology” since Albright had dominated the field for a period of fifty years, one may doubt this new wave of a biblical, ethnocentric archaeology is any more critical.

An Old-New Biblical Archaeology: Israel Finkelstein

Finkelstein’s perspective of “biblical archaeology” owes much to Roland de Vaux’s ethnocentric exaggeration of Israel’s role. With de

Vaux, Finkelstein largely neglects a sustained construction of non-Israelite Iron Age Palestine, even while acknowledging, e.g., the Phoenician orientation of coastal Palestine from Acco to Tantura, the Aramean cultural links of the eastern Galilee and northern Jordan rift, including Beth Shan, Tel Kinneret, Dan and much of northern Transjordan. Finkelstein also draws on the Mesha stele to view 9th century Moab in competition with Bit Humri/Israel and the Arameans of Damascus for Megiddo, Ta’anek and the control of the Jezreel. They are disputed territories, but hardly Israel.23 Yet, in unequivocal terms, Finkelstein alleges an unparalleled greatness for Israel (Finkelstein 2012, passim), however much one must doubt that its borders would differ much from the limited region of the highlands, which are defined by known “Israelite” forts (Dever 2012, 89-97); that is, the highland region north of Ramat Rahel and al-Khirbe and South of Tel Jezreel.

Also echoing de Vaux, Finkelstein’s three volumes deal primarily with defending the historical quality of the Bible’s legendary figures and narratives, an orientation, which creates an absurd, politically oriented history. Archaeology is used not to write history or show that the biblical narratives were accurate history, but to show that such legends might reflect historical events and contexts, which might yet be reconstructed with archaeology’s help (Finkelstein & Silberman 2006; Finkelstein 2013). Archaeology, for Finkelstein, also offers a key to understanding unhistorical biblical legends, as, for example, in his arguments that the greatness of Samaria and Bit Humri be understood as the historical reality which lay behind a Judean writer’s competitive effort to create a narrative of David and Solomon, within Jerusalem’s legend of a “United Monarchy”. Similarly, the biblical narrative about David and his band of outlaws finds its historical, literary context in the eighth century, BCE; much as the story of Saul’s reign discloses Israel’s historical political origins, before Samaria was built (Finkelstein 2013, esp. chapters 2-3)!

Central to Finkelstein’s project is the assumption that the core of the “Deuteronomistic History” had been written within that narrative’s historicized story of a Josianic religious reform (Finkelstein & Silberman 2001, 14). This circular argument claims that the story of Josiah’s centralizing reform is evidence for itself (cf. Thompson

Finkelstein, otherwise, identifies a narrative implying a supersessionist ideology, viewing Jerusalem as the cultic center of biblical Israel, but offers neither evidence nor argument for its historicity or his dating of the story (Finkelstein 2007; 2012). Given its primary orientation in form criticism, this discourse hardly deals adequately with the literary complexity of such heroic chain-narratives, among which Samuel-Kings finds its home.

Alternative interpretations are readily available among biblical scholars: not least the recent study of Louis Jonker. Alternatively, one could consider Gary Knopper’s theory of an implicit claim of ideological priority in Samaria’s earlier temple, from at least the 5th century, BCE. Unlike Finkelstein’s Josiah story, the priority of the Samaritan temple has the merit of supporting archaeological evidence. Finkelstein claims that Jerusalem’s expansion to its western hill sometime in the 7th century is explained by the evocation of a mass exodus of refugees from the siege and fall of Samaria in the fourth quarter of the eighth century. As a biblical scholar, I always wonder – when I consider Finkelstein’s tireless pressing of this bibli-cally oriented claim – why such refugees would have sought or found security among the most treacherous of their enemies!

One can hardly miss the deeply ironic contrast, which Finkelstein and Silberman sketch between the limited archaeological-historical evidence for a Judean monarchy before the eighth century and the biblical story of the united kingdom of David and Solomon. One

must, however, point out that the narrative of Kings, which is
launched by the tragic story of Solomon’s hubris, lays its primary
plotline within the theme of unity vs. division. The theme of great-
ness is not so much engaged in David’s story as in the tragic story of
Solomon’s rise and fall. The David story follows far more the plot-
line and themes of the king’s rise to power, particularly the motif
of “past suffering” as stereotypically found in the “testimony of the
good king” (Thompson 2007, 260-262). The discrepancy with which
Finkelstein is most preoccupied is that which is apparent in compar-
ing the limited evidence of settlement in the Judean highlands during
the 10th and early 9th centuries, BCE, with the hundreds of highland
settlements, which supported the early patronage kingdom of Bit
Humri (Especially Finkelstein 1988, 47-53 and 89-91; cf. Thompson
1992, 288-292 and 221-239, respectively). Given such a contrast in
our historical record, how can one but entertain an ironic reversal of
the Bible’s supersessionism?

The Way with Kings

I have previously argued that the biblical narrative of the Books of Sa-
muel and Kings is not an historiography (Thompson 1992, 372-382),
nor relating an understanding of any real past, which archaeologists
might find useful for their historical reconstructions.29 Here, I wish
only to take up the issue of a single motif of that great biblical chain-
narrative; namely, the motif of greatness. It is not a motif, which
relates to an actually historical, past greatness of any king or polity,
whether of Samaria or Jerusalem. This greatness has rather a literary
and narrative function, within the tragedy, which is at the heart of
this chain narrative. Finkelstein’s efforts to see this striking motif as
a reflection of Israel’s alleged, historic greatness, in an imagined past
of the Omride dynasty, is without the slightest foundation within a
narrative world where this greatness functions as a measure of failure.
The theme of Solomon’s greatness is far from the world of Bit Humri
or, indeed, any historical world other than intellectual history. It is a
greatness which supports a narrative theme with its trajectory aimed
towards the story’s closure in the story of Jerusalem’s destruction in
2 Kings. Finkeslstein’s failure to examine the literary functions of
the greatness of David and Solomon and their United Monarchy,

29. Thomas L. Thompson, The Bible in History: How Writers Create a Past (London:
Jonathan Cape 1999).
seriously undermines his proposal of a biblical archaeological convergence of evidence. Solomon’s greatness and wisdom becomes dominant already in the subtle, ironic tale, opening his story in 1 Kings 3, and it is a greatness which prepares for an even greater fall from grace. Yahweh, pleased with Solomon’s love for him, which reciprocates the love Yahweh had expressed for Solomon at his birth (1 Kings 3:3; cf. 2 Sam 12:24-25), appears to the king in a dream. A classic folktale is opened by the divine offer of a gift, limited only by the limitations of its recipient: “Ask what(ever); it will be given you” (1 Kings 3:5)! Such a story hardly ever ends well. Here, it follows the stereotypical pattern of initial success and reward, uncontrolled hubris and fall from grace. In response to Yahweh’s fate-determining question, an answer of brilliant wisdom opens the door to greatness. With humility, Solomon acknowledges that Yahweh has already given him his role as David’s heir over a great and numberless people. He, therefore, asks for “an understanding heart to govern Yahweh’s people, one discerning between good and evil” (1 Kings 3:6-9). Yahweh grants the wish, as he had promised. Solomon’s wise and discerning heart is marked by a three-fold leitmotif of the greater story, as Solomon, like Hezekiah and Josiah, takes on the role of the good king of legend (Thompson 1997): “as none has been before or any after will be” (1 Kings 3:12; cf. 2 Kings 18:5; 23:25). With his wish granted, however, the real test of the story, even of his wisdom and discernment, is immediately opened: “I give you also what you have not asked, both riches and honor, that no other king will compare with you…. ” A brief illustrating tale of Solomon’s wisdom follows as his judgment of the two harlots, with but a single child, living, brings all Israel to “wonder at the divine wisdom that was in him to render justice” (1 Kings 3:16-28).

However, even such a demonstration of Solomon’s greatness is set under severe stress by the narrative’s greater ploy. Already at the end of Samuel’s rule as judge over Israel in 1 Samuel 8, the people had asked for a king, that they might be “like all the nations”. Although this request implicitly rejects Yahweh as their true king, Yahweh grants the request and orders Samuel to “show them the ways of the king”: a stereotyped description of the arbitrary and unjust rule of royal patrons, which also informs many of the stories of 1-2 Kings. This warning to the people is already foreshadowed by Deuteronomy 17:14-20, the so-called “law of the king”, so essential to understanding Solomon’s narrative. For our purposes, the following excerpt should suffice: “He must not return to Egypt to multiply horses for himself . . . not multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor greatly multiply for himself silver and gold”. Fulfillment comes in 1 Kings 10-11. The whole world sought the good king’s presence
and brought gifts. The women Solomon collected from foreign nations, “who turned his heart away” numbered 700. Silver became as common as Jerusalem’s stones and, in a single year, he acquired a fateful 666 talents of gold! Solomon brought horses from Egypt: 1400 chariot and 12,000 horse: fabulous numbers for any ancient army. Surely, too, we must add, it is from this exuberant story line and from the equally fabulous Assyrian references to 2,000 chariots and 10,000 soldiers, so legendarily sent by Ahab to the battle of Qarqar in 853 BCE, that Finkelstein and Silberman owe their belief in Bit Humri’s allegedly historical greatness!30

But, apart from the tragedy of kingship’s failure and the division of his kingdom at his death, what of the specific test of Solomon’s wisdom and discernment in 1 Kings 3 and the trajectory his story sets for the greater story? His wisdom and discernment seems, in fact, confirmed in Solomon’s second prayer, in spite of its evocation of the coming exile. In fact, Solomon sees this as inescapable “because all men sin” and, therefore, in the coming crisis of Yahweh’s justice, are fit for destruction. However, exactly “because all men sin”, it is left to Yahweh, once again, to take on the task of changing! Following the plot of Isaiah, the punishment cannot belong to the sinner, who cannot bear it. Rather, the solution must lie with Yahweh to learn compassion and forgiveness of his people and their sin (1 K 8:46-53). This story of Solomon in Kings, which anchors the plotline for the greater story, hardly implies the existence of a Judean supersessionism as Finkelstein assumes. Nor, indeed, is there any historical evidence for a Judean competition with Samaria’s past, any more than there is historical evidence for a context for the composition of 2 Kings within any historical religious revivals attributed to Hezekiah or Josiah, any more than of other, similar reforms attributed to Asah (1 Kings 15:9-24) and Jehoash (2 Kings 12:1-21). Judea does not supersede Samaria in any way, in Kings’ narrative, but rather shares Samaria’s rejection by Yahweh and follows Samaria into exile.

The lost tribe of Judah

Both Finkelstein and Dever follow 2 Kings 17 and close ancient Israel and Samaria’s history with Bit Humri’s transformation into the Assyrian province of Samerina. The people of Samaria, however, in fact,

continued in the land. They watered their plants, picked their olives, pressed their grapes and worshipped their god. When we consider the disaster that overfell Samaria, I believe we need to think again about the most effective of propaganda: histories hidden and ignored. Certainly, the silencing of the non-Jewish history of the central highlands is a most serious distortion of a biblically based history. Just as important is the distortion supported by the failure to consider the seriousness of the great demographic disaster, which befell Judah at the hands of Sennacherib, two decades after Samaria’s fall! Judah hardly recovered and itself might be appropriately marked with the figure of a “lost tribe”.

For Finkelstein, who presents his historical construction in a continuous narrative, the silencing of Samaria’s future allows him to shift his focus to what he asserts is the context of his history. Finkelstein shifts from an archaeologically driven historical mode to biblical theology, where he had addressed the question of the authenticity of a Jewish narrative. His domain question had been how 2 Kings understands Judah’s common ground or unity with Israel, given the separate and distinctive origin histories, which Finkelstein has constructed? While the introductory function of Genesis might have helped him answer this as a literary question, with reference to the stories, which present Judah as the son of Jacob-Israel, the issue for Finkelstein was to understand the legendary narrative of a United Monarchy, in support of the role of Judaism as Israel’s surviving remnant. Within that ideology, there is in Israel today, no political room for a post 722 BCE Israel (Hjelm forthcoming). Finkelstein has fallen victim to his own strategy of ethnocentrism; for he has created his historical narrative as a theological justification for modern, secular Israel’s archaeological project!

I believe, moreover, that both Finkelstein and Dever have great trouble in continuing their historical narratives about the central hills after 722 BCE. Their commitment to a biblical resonance for their archaeology also commits them to a biblical strategy in their history

31. Ingrid Hjelm, “Lost and Found? A Non-Jewish Israel from the Merneptah Stele to the Byzantine Period”, History, Archaeology and the Bible Forty Years after Historicity, Changing Perspectives 6, CIS, Hjelm & Thompson, forthcoming.
and a transference of Israel’s destiny from a no-longer existent biblical Samaria to Jerusalem. Finkelstein’s compelling need to draw on refugees from the “northern kingdom” to explain Jerusalem’s expansion in the first half of the seventh century veils this theological assumption more than it unveils a past. There is no historical need for making this decision! There already exists, ready at hand and fully attested by both archaeology and Assyrian texts and monumental art, an even greater, massive, refugee-creating, demographic disaster to fuel Jerusalem’s expansion; namely, the catastrophic destruction which befell Lachish and Judah in 701 BCE at the hands of Sennacherib (Grabbe 2003; Thompson 2013, 77-88). The villages and towns of Jerusalem’s hinterland were lost and their patronage was transferred to loyal Assyrian clients on the coastal plain, or destroyed and their inhabitants deported.

Although Lachish was rebuilt by the mid-seventh century and there was considerable demographic recovery, especially in the South, Jerusalem, even with its estimated growth to some 10,000, hardly became a “great city”. It was never more than a large provincial town on the fringe of empire. The campaigns of Nabuchadnezzar in the sixth century brought disaster once again, destroying Jerusalem and decimating most of Judah. Once more, much of the population was deported and towns and villages of the region were left in ruins. Though Jerusalem, with much of the Persian province of Yahud, was destined to lay in ruins for some centuries, the destruction of the Edomite capital of Bosrah at the hands of Nabonidus, the last of the Babylonian kings, did bring the heartland of Judah, together with Edom and the Negev, into a coherent cultural whole (Thompson 2011; 2013A; 2013B). In the Persian period, most of this region – the province of Idumea – was centered in Lachish, whose recovery positioned it as the dominant power of the southern hills until late in the 2nd century, BCE.

An Old-New Biblical Archaeology: William Dever

In contrast to Finkelstein, Dever has little interest in interpreting the Bible in using archaeology to understand the literary or fictive qualities of biblical narrative. Rather and much like his teacher George Ernest Wright, Dever is interested in understanding archaeological remains and in constructing a history based in archaeology. In his own words, he is a “minimalist” in his approach to writing the history of Palestine. Yet, with regard to the Bible’s perspective of the past,
which hardly converges with the archaeological and historical record, Dever often maintains an openness to what he sees as the biblical perspective of the past. This is most notable in his understanding of the inautochthonous settlement of the land and the historicity of the United Monarchy. In this respect, he can maintain the “biblical archaeological” contrast between a “Canaanite” Bronze Age and an “Israelite” Iron Age and, holding his option for a biblical perspective, he allows for the historicity of the so-called united monarchy. His interests are not specifically in problems of biblical interpretation and he is primarily preoccupied, especially during the past decade, with archaeological interests, especially small finds, reflecting Palestine’s subaltern heritage. In this respect, he returns to a long neglected but important aspect of archaeological research, which had flourished apart from the biblically oriented histories of Israel. This tradition of scholarship can be epitomized by Kurt Galling’s Biblisches Reallexikon, the fully revised second edition by his students, edited by Helga Weippert, and her more thoroughly representative Handbuch der Archäologie.

Landscape Archaeology

While Dever supports his discussion with reference to some more modern perspectives, used widely in archaeology today, he is not always convincing. His understanding, for example, of the rich variety of ecological contexts in Palestine’s many small regions, is limited to references to his personal experiences in the village of Deir Samit, near Hebron. This has led him, unfortunately, to speak of Palestine’s agriculture comprehensively as a “subsistence economy” (Dever 2012, 237-239). One might, however, doubt that even Deir Samit’s agricultural economy of the early 1970s is to be properly described as a “subsistence economy”, though the region is arid and its agri-

35. For the “time of the divided monarchy”, see Dever (2001), 159-244; and for the “eighth century” Dever (2012), 142-206.
culture relatively poor. Landscape studies are useful, in fact, because different regions reflect different economies and we can certainly not assume that Palestinian agriculture is represented as a whole by Deir Samit’s! Regional economies vary in Palestine quite specifically because the landscape changes. Consider, for example the differences in the agriculture of Deir Samit to what we find in the Northern Negev, the southern Shephelah, the highlands of the Western Galilee, the northern Jordan Rift, the coastal plain or some 20 other regions with considerably different landscapes, each with their distinct economies and, therefore, different histories. The landscape of Deir Samit reflects but one of Palestine’s many ecologically variable forms of a Mediterranean economy. These different regions are rooted variously in sheep and goat herding, fruits and olives, grain and field crops. Palestine’s is not a subsistence economy, but a trade-oriented, agricultural and herding economy (Thompson 1992, 141-146). Leaving Deir Samit, Dever also argues that some regions of the lowland valleys and coastal plains were not open to agriculture in much of the Iron Age because of malaria-infested swamps (Dever 2012, 38-46). However, the technology used in agriculture varies not only according to Palestine’s different regional landscapes, but also according to its different periods. Archaeological surveys have shown that already in the Early Bronze Age irrigation farming through relatively simple irrigation and drainage systems was widespread in the lowlands of the North and had opened large areas to settlement, which, without such systems, could easily be subject to swamp formation and malarial infestation. This was most notable in the densely populated and stable Beth Shan and Northern Jordan valleys (Thompson 1979, 25-29).

Cities and Nation States?

Dever’s classification and typology for eighth century sites is also problematic. His distinction between capital cities, first tier administrative centers, district capitals and tier 2 cities and urban centers, suffers from two problems. His designation of a “city” (Dever 2012, 106-141) is used for sites with an estimated population of as few as 300 (Tall as-Saba’) to perhaps 5000 (Tall al-Qadi), with no other “city” larger than 3000. Apart from Tall al Qadi, Dever’s “cities” average a population of little more than 1500. He acknowledges, howe-

ver, that field archaeology of ancient Near Eastern sites otherwise has used an estimated population of 20,000 before speaking of a “city”!

The second difficulty is rooted in his identification of Samaria and Jerusalem (for which he gives no 8th century population estimate) as “capital cities” and all other sites as “subordinate cities”. The classification is entirely biblical and rooted in a biblical perception of eighth century Palestine! Gaza, Ashqalon, Lachish, Shechem, Megiddo, Tell al-Qadi, Gezer, Ekron, Bosra and yet other sites, have histories as regionally dominant patronates from at least as early as the Exegregation Texts and there is no archaeological evidence that this pattern of Palestinian polity was significantly different in Dever’s eighth century!

It becomes clear that Dever’s analysis hinges on his understanding of Israel as a divided nation state governing the whole of Eretz Israel. Why does he understand that Tall al-Qadi is a city subordinate to Samaria, when in the 9th century it appears – at least if the Aramaic byydw inscription is both genuine and to be read as Dever does – that this town, along with Tel Kinnereth, was a client of Aram’s patronage? Why does he see Megiddo as subordinate to Samaria? It, along with Tell el Qadi, is beyond the “border” established by the “Israelite” fort at Tel Jezreel and both sites fall to the Assyrians when Damascus falls. Is Tell Gezer a subordinate administrative or regional center of a national state? Is it, in its own right, a regionally dominant patronate, controlling the northern Shephelah, which may have been a client of first Samaria in the eighth century and, then – as Samaria quarreled with the Assyrians – have transferred its patronage to Jerusalem? If Dever is correct about Gezer’s becoming a Judean city after 722 BCE, such a shift reflects a governing polity of patronage rather than that of a national state. Apart from the biblical narratives, Palestine’s Bronze Age polity – structured according to small, regionally dominant towns – has a continuous history through the Iron Age and survives at least into the Hellenistic period. If we consider all of Palestine in our description of the Iron Age, the structures of patronage, we see so clearly in the Amarna letters, are fully appropriate to the Iron Age.

Dever’s interpretation of archaeological remains, echoing Albright’s “biblical archaeology” as it does, interprets historical realia through an ethnocentric, biblical perspective. For example, he understands the song about “Israel” in the final stanza of the Merneptah stele’s victory song over Lybia, as confirmation of a biblical origin story by marking the transition from a Canaanite Bronze Age to an Israelite Iron Age (Dever 2001, 118-120). Interpreting the Merneptah inscription’s description of four towns (“… plundered is Gaza … carried off
is Ashkelon, bound is Gezer, Yenoam is as one not existing…”⁴⁰ as implying that the town of Gezer had been captured in an Egyptian military campaign under Merneptah, Dever dates this destruction with the destruction of Gezer Stratum XV (1210 BCE), unfortunately depending entirely on an uncertain biblical and archaeological convergence. That is, his interpretation of the reference to Gezer in Merneptah’s poem is merged with his understanding of Gezer’s stratum XV and then used to support the date for the transition from the Bronze to the Iron Age.

In the poetic representation of the Merneptah stela, however, the four Palestinian towns mentioned refer to towns under Egyptian control, which reflect the peace which the Libyan victory has created. Gezer, as one of the children of Khurru, plays the role of Israel’s lost seed (allegorically representing the fertility of the land), but is understood by Dever to represent the dying Late Bronze, “Canaanite” society. The figure of “Israel” bears the allegorical role of the former husband (patron) of Khurru (the land). The name of Israel bears, perhaps, the appropriate pun reflected in this name: “Israel”/Jezreel, which, however, Dever insists refers – not to the father of such “Canaanite” towns, but to the proto-Israelites of the early Iron I period highlands, casting an historical trajectory forward, towards the biblical legends of Omri, Israel’s future patron. Dever’s interpretation involves a tendentious misreading of the closure of an ancient Egyptian victory song: a victory not over Palestine, but over Libya. This allegorical closure celebrates Egypt’s peace and patronage, a characteristic that radically effects its meaning (Thompson 2007, 274-276).