



# ‘When Map Becomes Territory’: Finding Ancient Israel in the Modern Age



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## Opinion

If the problem with Syro-Palestinian archaeology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was subsuming archaeological artifacts to the biblical record, then the problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is locating “Israel” in the bones and shards of the past. What was a century of “Bible and spade” has now become “flag and spade” in certain sectors of archaeology in the Southern Levant. In short, shouldn’t we define “Israel” whenever we use this term? Up to this point, I have seen many utilize this word-as a construct-but no one, to my knowledge, offers any substantive definition [1].

From Aharoni to Zertal, from Faust [2] to Finkelstein many Israeli archaeologists have, in their final analyses, given lip service to archaeological findings, or worse, skewed their interpretations because of an overarching ideology, in particular, “Israel” the modern nation-state. In other words, reading modern day “Israel” back into ancient artifacts. My argument here is not whether these archaeologists are intentional in their misreading, but rather, I want to argue that any line of critical thinking begins with solid and self-aware critical theory. Just as Syro-Palestinian archaeology as a science has challenged most interpretations put forth in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, now a new corrective analysis is needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century regarding theory and method of interpretation [3].

Therefore, I begin with a quote from Jonathan Z. Smith, one of the fathers of critical theory in the study of religion [4]. Smith reminds all of us, biblical scholars, purveyors of religion and ideology, archaeologists, and anthropologists that every act of interpretation brings to every table “preinterpretative decisions and operations”. The first job of the student-researcher is self-critical awareness, and secondly towards the goal of scientific objectivity in the utilization of theory and method-accurate theory and rigorous methodology. Otherwise we end up finding what we are looking for and touting tautologies-nothing more. Smith rightly reminds us that all critical inquiry begins with something very simple but oh so difficult: definitions, defining our terms, as we seek to slay the a priori “preinterpretative” dragons [5].

Thus, for example, if we name something “Israel” every time, then we are going to find “Israel” every time, but centrally, not based on archaeology, but on ideology, or even worse, theology. Let me illustrate in brief fashion by observing one of the most

important books expounding Syro-Palestinian archaeology written by one of the best archaeologists: *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, Israel Finkelstein [6]. Finkelstein begins by noting the promises and controversies, not surrounding the artifacts per se, but rather the Settlement. And note the use of caps in Settlement.

“The Settlement of the Israelites in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, and their transformation from a society of isolated tribes into an organized kingdom, is one of the most exciting, inspiring, and at the same time controversial chapters in the history of the Land of Israel.” Once again, note the use of capital letters in Settlement and Land. We are predisposed, and if not, we are being predisposed to a way of thinking. Finkelstein rightly recounts that we are in a much better position to understand the history of the central highlands in the southern Levant because of the wealth of new artifacts and their information. “Archaeological activities have expanded and are now at the crux of research on Israelite Settlement (for the use of the term ‘Israelite’ in the book see Chapter 2).”

From this statement we see that the author understands the importance of defining the most important term in his treatise, “Israel.” And so, in Chapter 2 he proceeds to define Israel. But before we get there, right at the end of Chapter 1, Finkelstein promises “Our attention will consequently be focused upon direct evidence from the regions of Israelite Settlement.” What is this “direct evidence,” and how will it play out in determining the so-called Israel settlement period? But sticking to the point of this article, what methodology does Finkelstein use to interpret his data? What is his overarching theory of inquiry? He has already begun with a defined “Israel” and a determined, capitalized Israelite Settlement.

“Accordingly, an Israelite during the Iron 1 period was anyone whose descendants-as early as the days of Shiloh (first half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE) or as late as the beginning of the Monarchy-described themselves as Israelites.” The most significant problem with these criteria is the fact that we have nothing-no artifact from this time that would meet the needs of critical inquiry. As we notice, Finkelstein will rely primarily on the biblical record

even though it is written and redacted by Judahites some 700 years later. Nor do we have anything extra biblical. We have the Merneptah Stele signifying "Israel" (ca 1206 BCE) and the Mesha Stone referring to Israel in the Omride Dynasty (ca 850 BCE). Otherwise complete silence and absence of data. Later, in Iron 2A in the central highlands and elsewhere (Negev) we do find inscriptional (Kuntillet Arjud) and historical (Assyrian annals) evidence of Israel, although Israel is not named but Samaria is.

For the remainder of his book, Finkelstein will marshal numerous and important newly discovered artifacts-material culture and architecture-but when it comes to interpreting those data points does he go too far? Even with everything that he brings forth, can we assert anything more than the reality that these high mountain dwellers (12<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries) were individuals of "polymorphous" cultures, to use Lemche's term? At least until we have more data? [7].

But there is a more insistent error here in my estimation. It goes back to what I mentioned in the beginning. When we depart from theory and method in our investigations we are left with ideology and theology. Finkelstein the archaeologist (and many others) doesn't seem to have a problem with this. "The starting point of a discussion about the characteristics of Israelite Settlement sites is the historical biblical text (the only source available), which specifies the location of the Israelite population at the end of the period of the Judges and at the beginning of the Monarchy." The biblical text is not a critical text. This text is theology, not history. That does not mean the biblical text is not historical, but it is not history and cannot exist outside the purview of critical theory and analysis. Later, in Finkelstein's important work we can argue about Israelite identity in relation to artifacts such as collared rim jars (they occur elsewhere) and the four-room house (they occur elsewhere also probably reflecting economy, not ethnicity). But now, in the beginning, we are told that these mountain dwellers were Israelite despite the lack of clear evidence. And why? Because the biblical record is our primary source. This is even more problematic than the argument over collared-rim jars, four-room houses, or in Faust's thinking, the practice of circumcision. This is a deficiency in critical inquiry. This is not archaeology, or anthropology-this is theology driving a theological agenda.

In these works, in this type of "archaeology," we do not find answers but rather agendas. Our job as archaeologists, as readers

of cultures, interpreters of ages, our job demands that we define our terms based on evidentiary evidence and not wishful ideologies and textual theologies. When Finkelstein discovers Israel before he locates Israel, then his enterprise is a failed enterprise not because his archaeology is suspect but because his hermeneutics is predetermined and thus predetermined. Everything we study, every artifact and stratigraphy, is Israel already, and they are Israel because they are Israel. Archaeology collapses into theology, and theology descends into tautology. May we become more "adept in the hermeneutics of suspicion."

### References

1. With rare exception of the Copenhagen School N.P. Lemche (1985) *Early Israel: Anthropological and Historical Studies on the Israelite Society Before the Monarchy*. Ancient Israel: A New History of Israel. Lemche offers some of the best critique and holds that "Israelite" was merely Canaanite, and most importantly, the concepts of "Israel" or "Jewish" are concepts that evolve post facto the historical realities and are definitions given from 500 BCE onward. I would argue that the Judahite interpretation of these concepts should be pushed to 300 BCE and onward, Leiden, Netherlands.
2. Faust is the most egregious offender when it comes to archaeology of Israel (2006) Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion, and Resistance*. In the end, his study is neither Israel and his anthropological treatment of "ethnogenesis" is superficial and misguided but more of this in a forthcoming article, London, UK.
3. See Michael J Thompson (2017) *What is Critical Theory*. In: *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, Michael J Thompson (Eds.), Palgrave Macmillan, New York, USA, p. 1-14.
4. Jonathan Z Smith (2013) *Introduction: Approaching the College Classroom in On Teaching Religion*. Christopher I Lehrich (Eds.), Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, p. 3.
5. Smith (2013) Further, Smith reminds us that we need to have clarity on the roles of definitions-taxonomy and that we must utilize the building blocks of argument: definitions, data, classifications, and explanations in all our academic inquiries. p. 11-19.
6. Israel Finkelstein (1988) *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*. Israel Exploration Society, Jerusalem, Israel.
7. Finkelstein makes an important statement (concession?) on this point: 'Israelite' is used therefore in this book, when discussing the Iron 1 period, as no more than a terminus technique for 'hill people in a process of settling down. But this is too cavalier considering hundreds of other statements and interpretive decisions made by the author. Just a few paragraphs before, he states that "Israelite" is reserved for those (including descendants) who would "describe" themselves as Israelite. This only leaves us with the biblical text-not archaeology.



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