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Abstract: *Contemporary Palestinian archaeology has produced two major threats to traditional interpretations of the history of ancient Israel. The first threat, which derives from scientific discomfort with the exodus story as an explanation for the sudden population expansion in southern Palestine at the beginning of the Iron Age (c. 1200 BCE), has led to a wide variety of theories about how these Israelites could have been drawn from existing populations in the general area. This challenge is answerable in ways that preserve the exodus account, which is fundamental to the Book of Mormon as well as the Bible. The second threat is the glaring mismatch between the biblical glorification of David and Solomon's "empire" and disparagement of the northern kingdom combined with the archaeological finding that the cities of the northern kingdom were far larger and more advanced than Jerusalem and the south. This discrepancy between archaeology and the biblical record provided support for the widely embraced theory that everything from Genesis through Kings had been revised to promote the political and religious preeminence of Judah above the other tribes. This second challenge does fit the archaeology and contemporary textual interpretations. But it also provides stronger grounding for the hypothesis that Nephi's Brass Plates could have been produced by an ancient Manassite scribal school of which he and his father were highly trained members, and which may have been out of sync with the Jewish scribal schools and the elders of Jerusalem.*

In previous papers I have argued that, in the historical and cultural context of late seventh-century BCE Jerusalem, Lehi and Nephi would have been seen as highly trained scribes belonging to a Manassite scribal school,[1] and that the Brass Plates could have been understood as a recent project designed to preserve the Abrahamic/Manassite tradition of

history and scripture in the Egyptian language in the face of the newly undertaken Judahite version (that would eventually result in the Hebrew Bible).[2] Those three papers incorporated numerous relevant findings from modern archaeology, while largely ignoring an important dimension of contemporary archaeological interpretations that would flatly dismiss the Book of Mormon account of the history of ancient Israel. While modern archaeology has not produced a clearly documented or even unified alternative history to the traditional biblical version, it has staked out important claims about the origins of the ethnic people of Israel that directly challenge the perspectives that are fundamental to both the biblical and the Book of Mormon accounts. But all such claims are based on interpretations of artifacts. In this paper I will first discuss those interpretations and their alternatives to demonstrate the continuing plausibility of the Book of Mormon's account of Nephi's Brass Plates. Secondly, I will explore archaeological discoveries in the northern kingdom that possibly support or give helpful insight to my hypothesized Manassite scribal school.

The Archaeological and Historical Perspective on the Twelve Tribes and the Settlement of Israel in the Early Iron Age

The dramatic expansion of archaeological exploration and sophistication over the last two centuries has led to radical rewriting of the history of early Israel that had long been grounded almost exclusively in the biblical text itself. The resulting changed narrative based primarily on archaeological findings has raised deep doubts and even routine denials about the historicity of Abraham and the patriarchs, the centuries of Israelite captivity in Egypt, the exodus, the settlement of Palestine by the twelve tribes of Israel, the dates of the first Israelite monarchy, the priority of the southern kingdom over the northern kingdom, and the ethnic and geographic origins of the people of Israel. These new theories challenge the traditional history and have implications for the formulation of an account of a Manassite scribal tradition connecting Lehi and Nephi with Abraham.[3]

The archaeology of ancient Israel has passed through multiple stages as the methods and sophistication of archaeological science have advanced and matured. William F. Albright had enormous influence in the middle decades of the twentieth century with an approach that exploited the Hebrew Bible as a reliable historical guide to ancient Israel and related polities.[4] But as the discipline became more professionalized and its methods more tested and regularized, Palestinian archaeologists

who focus on ancient Israel were less and less inclined to rely on the Bible for guidance in their historical interpretations. As information from the large numbers of excavations accumulated, archaeologists recognized the importance of starting with the data — the findings of the professionally planned and executed excavations. The histories of Israel being proposed in recent decades take the archaeological findings as the facts that need to be explained as various hypothetical scenarios are advanced to make sense of those facts. Some scholars are more willing than others to look for connections in the Hebrew Bible.

There seems to be an emerging consensus among leading archaeologists and historians that the biblical stories of the patriarchs, the four-century sojourn in Egypt, the exodus, and the settlement of Palestine by the twelve Israelite tribes are not historically reliable but are late (post-exilic) backstories written by creative post-exilic scribes in the late sixth century or even later. Ann Killebrew offered the following as a description of the consensus on the origins of the Israelite people that she thought was developing at the beginning of the twenty-first century:

> Ancient Israel during the Iron I period should be defined as constituted by largely indigenous, tribal, and kinship-based groups, with the additional influx of smaller numbers of members of external groups, whose genealogical affiliations together comprised a "mixed multitude" of peoples. This "mixed multitude" is defined as the inhabitants of the rural Iron I hill country and Transjordanian highland villages and countryside, a population that has been identified by some as the premonarchic "Israelites" or "Proto-Israelites."[5]

The chief vulnerability of the traditional biblical history as understood from studies of the history of the Hebrew language and writing is that at best the biblical texts came from oral traditions that were not written down until sometime after the establishment of a national Hebrew script around 800 BCE. Competing versions of Israel's history and literature emerged from these transcriptions, which in turn were harmonized and edited — again by anonymous scribes — over the next two or three centuries. But no modern scholars claim to have an authoritative written account that goes back to Abraham, or even to Moses. The centuries-long tradition of transcription, editing, and even rewriting of ancient oral traditions provides modern historians with much to be skeptical of. Such late writing or rewriting is notorious for serving the contemporary agendas of the scribes who do that writing.

While the Hebrew Bible still provides a background of historical claims that archaeologists are constantly testing, the accumulating contradictions between biblical history and modern archaeological findings has led many to conclude that the Hebrew Bible is of relatively late composition and cannot be taken as objective history that can explain pre-exilic Palestinian archaeology accurately. Most biblical archaeologists and historians today believe that the Old Testament writers were centuries removed from the hypothesized oral traditions they were relating. Because historical epigraphers today generally believe that the earliest Hebrew script developed after 800 BCE, these same scholars conclude that the Israelites had no documentary connection to those earlier times. As one 2017 summary of archaeological findings begins, "Once the biblical text is eliminated as having little to tell us about the second millennium BCE, we are mainly dependent on archaeology" in reconstructing the history of that period.[6] From this perspective, the peoples and stories from Genesis to David and Solomon are reduced to myths. These oral traditions were transcribed sometime after 800 BCE by anonymous scribes, and the eventual composition of the Hebrew Bible is largely attributed by historians to hypothesized schools of pre- or post-exilic Jewish scribes.[7] As I have explained at length in a companion paper, the 1830 publication of the Book of Mormon, an independent account of pre-exilic Israel claiming a written tradition going all the way back to Abraham, provides a comprehensive resolution to the questions being raised by modern scholars while providing support for a somewhat different version of the biblical history of ancient Israel.[8]

The Restoration to the Rescue

The revelation given to Nephi (1 Nephi 11–14) emphasized how the Nephite record launched by him would provide a much-needed second witness of the New Testament account of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles in the last days. However, it seems he was also told that it would provide a witness of the Old Testament prophets and their writings: "And . . . I beheld other books which came forth by the power of the Lamb . . . unto the convincing of the Gentiles . . . and . . . the Jews that *the records of the prophets* and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true" (1 Nephi 13:39).

The Book of Mormon provides that witness of the Hebrew Bible in two important ways. First, its own record begins with Lehi, one of the unnamed Old Testament prophets who warned Jerusalem of its impending destruction by Babylon, echoing and extending many

of the prophecies and teachings of the Old Testament. Second, that same Nephite record quotes repeatedly from the Brass Plates, another independent Israelite record written in Egyptian and going back to Abraham himself that includes and documents with contemporary accounts the very history and prophecies that are doubted by so many scholars today.[9]

As described by Nephi and his successors, the records in the Brass Plates address the root cause of modern scholarly skepticism directly. The Brass Plates version of Israelite history and prophecies does not depend on an undocumented process wherein oral traditions across many centuries were gradually transcribed and edited as we have in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the Brass Plates of Nephi contained a collection of written prophecies and histories created and maintained by Abraham himself and his posterity in a Josephite/Manassite scribal school across a full millennium using Egyptian language and script.

While much of that record was unique, it did include important Old Testament prophecies and histories that witnessed the authenticity, if not the exact wording, of Old Testament traditions. It specifically contained its own version of the five books of Moses, the writings and prophecies of Joseph (not included in the Hebrew Bible), the prophecies of Isaiah, and other prophecies and histories. Importantly, it was written principally in Egyptian, a language and script that was fully available to Abraham, Joseph, and Moses. Further, it was preserved intact in final written form across all those centuries in which the other tribes of Israel are said to have relied on oral Hebrew-language traditions that had to be transcribed and harmonized in the seventh century or even later in Jerusalem.[10]

Additional Support for a Traditional Reading

Noted Old Testament scholar D. N. Freedman notably hypothesized the existence of an authoritative source tradition from which the various versions that were reconciled in the seventh-century scribal schools would have been derived originally, thereby explaining the high levels of coherence between those original accounts. On this theory, that original source would have

> dealt in connected fashion with the principal themes of Israel's early history and prehistory: including the primeval history, patriarchal sagas, the exodus and wanderings, and presumably the settlement in the Promised Land. [It] is no

> longer extant, but what remains of its contents is scattered through the books from Genesis to Joshua.[11]

Nephi's Brass Plates claim a Manassite tradition recorded in Egyptian that seems to fit Freedman's hypothesized original source and that could go a long way to explain the high levels of coherence and credibility that many find in the Hebrew Bible — despite its many recognized problems. This hypothesized Manassite scribal school did not live in a vacuum. Their vernacular language throughout the Iron Age would have been the current version of Hebrew. Though likely a small group living with some social separation from the main Israelite society, they may very well have been sharing oral Hebrew versions of their written Egyptian records with their countrymen over a long period of time. From that perspective, we might see the transcriptions of those oral traditions in seventh-century Jerusalem being only one or two transmission generations away from original written records going back at least to Abraham and much less corrupted in their oral stage than is often claimed.

The Israelite Settlement of Palestine

Once the patriarchs, the sojourn in Egypt, and the exodus had been dismissed as archaeologically and historically indefensible traditions or myths, much of the scholarly world turned to the task of inventing a backstory. That backstory would need to explain the rise of a united nation of Israel in Iron Age Palestine attached to a unique and powerful religious tradition featuring the Yahwism of the Israelite prophets and the origins narrative beginning with Adam and including the patriarchs. While many contemporary historians and archaeologists have engaged themselves in this project, the wide variety of hypothesized histories they have produced emphasize different interpretations of the artifacts and inscriptions available. From my reading of this literature, a consensus theory on the details would still seem to be a distant goal.

The Limitations of Archaeological Science

Fortunately, archaeologists are increasingly cognizant of the limitations of both the methods and the data they use. Initial tendencies to separate into armed camps battling over questions of biblical historicity have mostly been overcome as contemporary conferences usually provide podia for both the conservative and the progressive perspectives.[12] Collaborative approaches seem to be increasing in both frequency and influence, but it must be admitted that the conservatives may have given up more ground than others. At the conclusion of one such conference,

Andrew Sherratt, a prominent British archaeologist, was invited to provide a closing summary:

> I continue to be impressed by how the attempt to provide a detailed timescale for the events of the early first millennium BCE — a period which is illuminated both by written texts but also by a growing archaeological record — is evoking a new sophistication in the way in which we excavate and evaluate the results. Both archaeologists and radiocarbon specialists have been forced to look at the limitations of their methods and find ways of overcoming them. The result is a new sophistication in thinking about procedures, and a new realism which seeks to find explanations for anomalies. It is truly the testing-ground for a new generation of techniques and approaches, which require a sustained attempt to understand the logic of what we do.[13]

Philosophical Reflections on Archaeology and History

Some archaeologists are more philosophically reflective than others and are more able to articulate the limitations of the science and its contributions to history. Some of the most difficult disagreements derive from studies in which archaeologists have thought of their *interpretations of artifacts* as *facts* that refute traditional factual claims. This kind of positivism has led to needless bloodshed in the academic wars and has been appropriately criticized and instructed by a cadre of more thoughtful and philosophically informed archaeologists who understand the philosophy and history of science with its strengths and limitations. What is beyond question in these debates is that the artifacts harvested in archaeological excavations do not explain themselves. They require interpretation. They can only be understood in terms of theories about dating, ancient ethnic groups, and their original purposes or functions in the minds of people from a distant land and time. When such interpretations are misconstrued as facts, all the appropriate tentativeness and uncertainty of the scientific enterprise evaporates.[14]

In my experience, the majority of Palestinian archaeologists today find themselves in a middle ground that appreciates the importance of accepting archaeological evidence and uses it to correct and reinterpret biblical claims, rather than to throw them out altogether. This situation is strengthened given that the pre-exilic seventh century is widely

regarded as the period in which most texts in the Hebrew Bible reached their current forms.

By the 1990s, archaeologists and epigraphers had largely taken over the leadership in the great project of reconstructing the history of Israel and its people, and reliance on biblical histories was pushed aside except in cases where new discoveries seemed to connect with the text in some insightful way. It was not clear how much of the motivation for these developments was based on beliefs about good science and how much stemmed from a determination to eliminate the divine from historical explanation. Modern science had found the principle of naturalism to be an essential methodological rule — scientific explanations cannot appeal to supernatural causes.

This methodological rule has worked well enough in the natural sciences, but in biblical history it has been particularly problematic and divisive. A large share of the scholarly work in biblical history and archaeology has always been motivated and funded because of belief in the Bible as an account of God's covenant people — both on the part of Christians and Jews. In fact, the basic theme of the Old Testament focuses on the Abrahamic Covenant, which exposes to all the world how Yahweh blesses and disciplines his covenant people as appropriate in their joint quest to make that people good — as we see the Lord doing in the New Testament and in the restored Church of Jesus Christ.[15] In the history reported in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is the principal actor from beginning to end. The Bible quotes his words, includes messages sent by his prophets, and tells how he chose and nurtured his people with blessings and with punishments. But if methodological naturalism requires a discounting of Yahweh, Father Abraham, Joseph and the Egyptian captivity, Moses and the Exodus, and Joshua and the settlement of the promised land, believers in the Bible have much less to work with in their research efforts. Those were the stories from the origin myth that explained the existence of Israel as a people, as kindred sharing a common devotion to the true God. But now the biggest question confronting the new history effort was how to account for the people that became Israel in historical times. Who were they and where did they come from at the beginning of the Iron Age? How was their ethnic identity formed?

The Transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age and the Rise of Israel

While some historians of the ancient near east and eastern Mediterranean region have tended to see these centuries as a dark age caused by unrecorded but widespread natural disasters, prominent archaeologist William Dever — and many others following his lead — have argued that it can better be understood as a period of social and economic transition. While the Israelite and Phoenician peoples did contribute to the collapse of the old Bronze Age Canaanite culture and economy, the eventual result was a significant cultural advance which we benefit from to this day. After summarizing the characteristic features and artifacts archaeologists find in these settlements, Dever goes on to explain "that between the late 13th century B.C. and sometime in the mid-11th century B.C., there had occurred such far-reaching socio-economic, technological, and cultural changes in central Palestine that the millennia-old Bronze Age may be said to have given way to a new order, the Iron Age."[16] The northern kingdom of Israel dominated that period.[17]

There has been a lot of academic skepticism about the linkage of these new settlers in the Manasseh hill country to the biblical account of the tribes of Israel coming out of forty years of wandering in the wilderness. For example, against the increasingly influential theorists like Dever who characterize them as derived entirely from already existing populations, Anson Rainey has built on references in that time frame to the *Shashu* to argue for a pastoral people moving in from the southeast Levant, and already speaking Hebrew. Rainey has assembled an argument grounded principally in historical and linguistic evidence.[18] But the matter is far from settled among scholars whose work touches on the question of Israel's origins.

The Missing Egyptian Perspective

We should note with James Hoffmeier that "the 'origins of Israel debate' … has, by and large, been an intramural exercise with biblical historians and biblical/Syro-Palestinian archaeologists leading the way." He further laments that so little attention has been given in this debate to Egyptian materials and acknowledges that "neither have Egyptologists over the last fifty years shown much interest in the Hebraic connection to the Nile Valley."[19] He offers an earlier explanation by Ronald Williams for the absence of Egyptologist involvement:

> By the very nature of their training, Old Testament scholars are more likely to have acquired a first-hand knowledge of the Canaanite and cuneiform sources than they are to have mastered the hieroglyphic and hieratic materials of Egypt. For this reason they have had to depend to a greater degree on secondary sources for the latter. It is not surprising, then, that Israel's heritage from Western Asia … has been more thoroughly investigated. Yet Egypt's legacy is by no means negligible.[20]

The academic battles fought over these questions are far too numerous and complicated to be reviewed here. A 1993 summary and critique of then-current theories is instructive. In his own contribution to this debate, Dever mentioned a half dozen different approaches favorably and then listed or mentioned nine competing theories about the origins of the Israelites, showed their fatal errors or otherwise dismissed them, and offered his own explanation.[21] Dever's theory is worth quoting at length because it underlies so many of the approaches archaeologists and historians are taking to this question today:

> A far more satisfactory explanation of Israelite origins would derive the first generation of frontier homesteaders from the fringes of Late Bronze Age urban Canaanite society (which includes, of course, the Jordan Valley, and even a few known LB II sites on the Transjordanian plateau). Among these people would have been former urbanites and 'Apiru-like people from the countryside but also many farmers and stockbreeders from rural areas who were long familiar with the poor soils, fractured terrain, and unreliable rains of Palestine — in short, experienced agriculturalists. Only by positing such a composite but largely *local* Canaanite background can we account for the unique blend of cultural traits, the "assemblage" that we actually find in the Iron I highland villages. As we stressed above, what is diagnostic is the unique *combination* of traditional LB II characteristics, like typical pottery forms with innovative (though not necessarily exclusive) features like the 'four-room' courtyard house and collar-rim storejars. Not only is the combination of traits in the material culture distinctive, but it is almost perfectly adapted to hill-country agriculture and to the overall conditions of life there. These newcomers to the Central Hills are, then, our 'Proto-Israelites', the ancestors of later Israel.[22]

Dever's respect for Israel Finkelstein as a leading archaeologist is evident in his emphasis in this section of his paper on a refutation of Finkelstein's theory. We learn several things from Dever's overview. First, the common denominator of the current theories was a rejection of the biblical account of twelve Israelite tribes coming out of the wilderness to populate the southern Levant. Second, the explanations offered by the various scholars for the eventual emergence of Israel as a people were widely varied. Third, the general assumption of almost all these Palestinian archaeologist/historians was that the ethnicity of the Israelites could be detected by differences in cultural artifacts — principally pottery and buildings — unearthed, analyzed, and dated by archaeologists. They assumed this despite the classical warnings by ethnologists Fredrik Barth and Karl Knutsson, who explained in 1969:

> Any concept of ethnic group defined on the basis of cultural content… will not suffice as a tool for the analysis of ethnicity in its various interactional contexts. Only when ethnic distinction, stratification, or dichotomization are part of the individual's or group's strategies for preserving or increasing control of resources, social status, or other values is a meaningful interpretation feasible.
>
> Hence ethnicity becomes not one single universally applicable term but rather the representation of a wide range of inter-relations in which the dominant reference is to an ethnic status ascribed on the basis of birth, language, and socialization.[23]

Unfortunately, archaeologists do not have the luxury of interviewing the people they labor to understand, making judgments of ethnicity almost impossible according to contemporary ethnologists. As their studies demonstrate, clearly distinct ethnic groups can inhabit the same geography and share the same basic material culture. Recognizing that "identifying ethnic groups in the archaeological record is notoriously difficult," Avraham Faust mounted a major study in which he proposed several ways that distinctive ancient Israelite ethnicity should be recognized by archaeologists and historians such as pig avoidance, leaving pottery undecorated, avoiding imported pottery, simplicity and egalitarianism in pottery assemblages, the four-room house layout, circumcision of males, and an egalitarian social ethos.[24] We can note in the foregoing quotation from Dever that he compromises the explanation by citing both. The uniformity of the material culture being unearthed is

described as a perfect adaptation to the environment and as a distinctive combination of imported ethnic traits in the same sentence.

In 1997 Israel Finkelstein responded to Dever's 1993 analysis and critique with a more technically developed and thorough treatment of the growing number of proposed explanations for the rise of the people of Israel. Finkelstein also displays a well-informed concern for the problem of determining ethnicity with material cultural markers. His analysis led him to conclude that "the material culture of Palestine in the Iron I is not rich enough to allow the drawing of clear ethnic boundaries. The … only … possible indicator of ethnicity at that period is foodways. … In the case of early Israel, most 'ethnic' features in the material culture … were introduced by the monarchy."[25] Accounting for the ideology and religion that defined Israelite ethnicity continues to be a major stumbling block for all approaches to the writing of Israelite history that begin by rejecting the exodus story.[26]

The strongest extra-biblical case for the early existence of an Israelite identity is based on the Merneptah Stela, an Egyptian inscription that names Israel (presumably as a conquered people) and is dated to c. 1200 BCE. It is hard to see how a pharaoh's scribes could have thought of Israel as a people of any kind two or three centuries before Israel rose out of a far-away indigenous population in Palestine. As one recent scholar cautiously observes, this stela does make it possible to use the designation *Israel* "as long as we remember that it means a group of people and not necessarily an 'ethnie' and that it is difficult to identify this group with specific sites and cultures."[27] Kletter provides an excellent review of the evidence for and against the existence of an ethnic Israel in earlier times.[28]

A quarter of a century later, it is still the case that there is no hard evidence that disproves the traditional biblical account that traces the rise of ethnic Israel to twelve related tribes that returned to Palestine after several centuries in Egyptian captivity. In the next section I will mention here four good reasons why it makes sense for Bible believers to hold on to that traditional account.

Historical Evidence and Restoration-Scripture Support for the Traditional Account of the Origin of the Twelve Tribes of Israel

It cannot be over-emphasized that modern theories of Israelite history that reject the exodus and the settlement of Israel by the twelve tribes are grounded in highly speculative theories that try to make sense of a very limited set of artifacts and that exclude, on methodological principle, any

explanation that relies on divine intervention. I would like to address, in the following sections, four reasons for resisting those theories. The list of reasons could have been longer, but these four suffice for my purposes.

1. Strong Cultural Memories Should not be Discarded Lightly in Scientific Efforts to Explain the Rise of Enduring Ethnic Groups

It is obviously impossible for secular scholarship to treat the exodus account as a genuine historical event — an account that rests on repeated and constant divine intervention — without abandoning the principle of naturalism, an indispensable plank in the approach of modern science. But it is not a light matter to dismiss the cultural memory of an ethnic people that has held so intensely to its origin myth that is replete with cultural, historical, and geographical detail. It is even more problematic to try to replace that origin myth with others for which there is no hard scientific evidence or even clear and detailed agreement among the scientists promoting these alternatives. The casual assertions that later scribes could have made up this myth and sold it so successfully to the Jewish people is not supported with any documented studies or histories of similar scribal achievements. The practical necessity that promotes the methodological naturalistic principle for modern scientific investigations is misunderstood when used as proof that supernatural explanations cannot be correct at the metaphysical level.

2. Not All Competent Scholars Reject the Exodus Account

Scientific attacks on the exodus account have not bothered to respond to the mountains of corroborating evidence for that account that have been assembled by equally competent scholars. The fact that so many of the cultural, historical, and geographical facts that are part of the exodus account have been plausibly documented should reassure believers that the exodus is every bit as reasonable an explanation for the rise of Israel as are the weakly documented alternatives. Two that stand out in this crowded field are the publications of Kenneth A. Kitchen of the University of Liverpool and James K. Hoffmeier of the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Kitchen's *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* takes a serious and expert look at thousands of scriptural claims that have been too casually doubted about the exodus specifically and about other historical or textual issues.[29] Hoffmeier brings his training as an Egyptologist and ancient near east specialist to bear on the exodus explicitly and in great detail in his *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* and in the more recent *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The*

Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition.[30] Hoffmeier and like-minded associates organized a 2014 conference of other recognized scholars who for a variety of reasons share strong reservations about the new model of ancient Israel as an emergent and primarily indigenous population. Fourteen papers were published providing a wide range of reasons to reconsider the new model.[31] In a similar vein, Joshua Berman has taken up the defense of Genesis and Deuteronomy from the perspective of Orthodox Judaism in a way that will provide important insight to Christians as well.[32]

3. One Major Archaeological Discovery may Directly Support the Biblical Account

One very significant archaeological discovery of the 1980s is thought by many to be the very altar that Moses had instructed Joshua to build on Mt. Ebal for the purpose of putting all Israel under covenant as they entered the Promised Land.[33] Because it seems to fit the biblical passages and the known characteristics of such an Israelite sacrificial altar, it has become a pilgrimage site for Jews and Christians — and a bone of contention and aggravation for a scholarly world that determinedly avoids drawing confirming connections between archaeological finds and biblical text.

Haifa University archaeologist Adam Zertal first encountered the Mt. Ebal site during his widely appreciated Manasseh Hill Country survey and came back later to begin excavation. Over several seasons of work, a realization swept first over the workers, and then Zertal, that the correlation of the structure and artifacts they had uncovered with the biblical account of Joshua's altar was extraordinary. The excited claims of many to that effect had instant and extensive impact in the archaeological community and its publics and convinced Zertal to provide a popular account of the discovery before publishing that report in a professional venue.[34]

Zertal's preliminary scholarly version followed a year later in an academic journal.[35] While there have been several brief reviews — mostly skeptical or dismissive — in academic journals, the only comprehensive academic treatment of this discovery has been available since 2012 in the sympathetic and revised Andrews University dissertation of Ralph Hawkins.[36]

Reviewing the 28 professional archaeologists who had written anything about the Mt. Ebal site, Hawkins found that 21 were willing publicly to call it a cultic site while seven held out for other possibilities — but without serious, detailed consideration of all the evidence. With

over two decades of perspective, Hawkins reviewed and analyzed the range of scholarly responses.[37]

The Mt. Ebal site was unique in several ways that provoked questions and doubts for some. When first discovered, the entire site was covered and preserved under a blanket of large stones. That ancient preservation strategy had worked well.[38] The main structure and the surrounding plaza were intact, including numerous artifacts that helped to date and identify cultural types. A voluminous collection of pottery shards fit uniformly into a 13th–12th-century context. And two Egyptian scarabs led to a dating around 1200 BCE. Enormous deposits of ash and animal bones made the sacrificial context undeniable. The placement of an enormous and specially designed altar directly above a much smaller, rustic altar that dated a few decades older, suggested that the small altar could correspond to Joshua's initial effort and that the large altar which appears to share the design of the altar described for Solomon's temple may have been built later to accommodate annual covenant-renewal ceremonies for large assemblies. The entire complex was ritually preserved with the stone blanket about a hundred years after its initial installation when Israel's second cultic center was established at Shiloh.[39]

Skeptical archaeologists do not seem to have taken a close look at this site or the published reports; rather, they have relied on their own reputations in pronouncing dismissive alternative theories. For example, Israel Finkelstein devoted four pages of his 1988 comprehensive study of early Israel to Zertal's account of the Mt. Ebal site.[40] But his history of northern Israel written a quarter century later does not mention Mt. Ebal and presents Shiloh as Israel's earliest cultic site, projecting an interpretive attitude that is widely shared by today's leading archaeologists.[41] But Zertal's connecting of this undisturbed and unique site with the biblical account of Joshua's altar is easily believed by the streams of tourists that visit it each year. It stands as an enduring obstacle to all efforts to disconnect the biblical accounts from the history of Israel and is consistently dismissed or ignored by most of the archaeological community.

After this article was submitted, a potentially significant confirmation of Zertal's interpretation of the Mount Ebal site has appeared in the news but will not be reported in the scientific literature until later in 2022. On March 24, 2022, the Jerusalem Post[42] and other media announced the laboratory assessment of a small, folded lead tablet that was retrieved in a re-sifting of the dirt piles produced during Zertal's excavations almost four decades previously. When examined with x-ray

tomography, a 40-letter text could be read as inscribed on the inside surfaces of the folded lead tablet. The inscription has been translated into 23 English words as a curse text that corresponds to the instruction in Deuteronomy 27:9–26 that the curses should be read from Mount Ebal.

The text elements noted by the team reporting this new discovery can be displayed in chiastic format as follows:

A	Cursed, cursed, cursed
B	Cursed by the God YWHW
C	You will die
D	Cursed
D*	Cursed
C*	You will surely die
B*	Cursed by YWHW
A*	Cursed, cursed, cursed

The analysis of the chemical composition of the lead tablet also confirms Zertal's site dating as it matches the lead being mined in the Aegean area in the 13th–12th-century. The archaic Hebrew lettering challenges the generally accepted conclusion that the Israelites did not have a script for Hebrew writing until around 800 BCE. And the skillfully produced inscriptions on lead render the Book of Mormon accounts of brass plates and other metallic records plausible. A millennium later, the burial of similar curse tablets (*defixiones*) would become a common practice in Greco-Roman cultures.[43]

The archaeological team also reported that approximately 70% of Zertal's original excavated dirt piles remain to be resifted using wet-sifting methods. Further confirmation of Zertal's interpretation of the Mount Ebal site could come as rectangular slabs of plaster found at the site are examined for possible traces of the ancient writing Joshua was commanded to paint on the plastered altar as described in Deuteronomy 27:2–8.

Possibly the most significant implication of the lead tablet reported in the news was its inclusion of two mentions of Yahweh, Israel's God. If confirmed by other epigraphers, this will push datable inscriptional references to Yahweh in Israelite territory back several centuries, dramatically undermining established theories in the history of religion that portray biblical religion as a much later invention.

4. The Brass Plates Emphasized the Exodus Account of God's Deliverance of His Covenant People from Their Enemies and of Moses's Inspired Leadership

Relying on the Brass Plates as their scriptures, Nephite prophets repeatedly invoked the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian captivity as proof of *the goodness of God* who is powerful and faithful to his covenant with his people.[44] Nephi used that ancient story, which even his wicked brothers could not deny, to motivate them powerfully to lend him their labor to build their ship.[45] Centuries later, another prophet Nephi used the same story to remind his people of the great power God gave to Moses at the crossing of the Red Sea and the healing with the brazen serpent.[46] But most of the 75 direct references to Moses in the Nephite record cite either the law of Moses or prophecies given by Moses about the future coming of Christ or other future events — none of which appears in today's Old Testament. A similar account could be given of the numerous references to Joseph of Egypt and his prophecies that can only come from the Brass Plates.

The Nephite prophets' commitment to the Brass Plates account of Moses and his role in delivering captive Israel from Egypt, leading Israel through forty years in the wilderness to their promised land, and in receiving God's law for the Israelites constitutes a systematic and embedded stratum in the Book of Mormon text that goes well beyond the textual references to Moses mentioned to this point. Nephi's Small Plates set the pattern. Following the model of earlier (and later) Israelite prophets who are presented in the Bible as Moses-like in some respects as a way of certifying their prophetic *bona fides*, Nephi presents both his father Lehi and himself implicitly as Moses figures, leading their chosen people to a promised land.[47]

The Book of Mormon and the Origins of the People of Israel

The four points listed above are not meant to provide an exhaustive exposition of the ways in which the exodus account in the Bible and necessarily in the Brass Plates is woven into the text of the Book of Mormon. Much more could be said about that. But it should be clear at this point that possibly even more strongly than the Bible, the Book of Mormon writers were committed to the exodus account — which for them came from the Brass Plates and its continuous Egyptian-language record that went back not only to Moses, but also to Joseph and his great grandfather Abraham.

But the Nephite record is not equally committed to the version of Israel's history after the exodus that is presented in the Hebrew Bible. David and Solomon are not glorified the way they are in the Hebrew Bible but are mentioned principally to make the point that their practice of maintaining "many wives and concubines" was "abominable before [the Lord]" (Jacob 2:24). Having grown up in Jerusalem, Solomon's temple provided the pattern Nephi used in building the first Nephite temple — "save it were not built of so many precious things" (2 Nephi 5:16). But other principal themes of the historical books in the Hebrew Bible that promote the political and religious claims of the Judahites do not appear to be part of the Nephite prophetic tradition that draws on the Brass Plates.

Archaeology and Biblical History of the Two Kingdoms

It must also be noted that one of the major developments in archaeological interpretations of the history of Israel and its people strengthens the grounding for the hypothesis of a distinct Manassite scribal school in the north that eventually produced the Brass Plates that played such a critical role in the Book of Mormon.

The Emerging Focus of Archaeologists on Ancient Manasseh

Notwithstanding the fact that Joshua's original allocation of lands to the twelve tribes blatantly favored Manasseh and Ephraim with the largest and most central region and with the custody and guardianship of the principal sacred shrines associated with the patriarchs, the historical books of the Hebrew Bible largely ignore the Josephites and feature a Judahite account focused principally on David, Solomon, and Jerusalem.[48] This way of reading the Old Testament was introduced principally by Martin Noth and by mid-twentieth century became the consensus interpretation — labeling Genesis through 2 Kings as the Deuteronomistic History.[49]

This southern bias in the Hebrew Bible had its effect on the first generations of archaeologists. 1 Kings 16:23–24 reports that Omri, a war leader chosen by the northern tribes to be king of Israel, ruled for six years from Tirzah before moving his capital to the stone hilltop in nearby Samaria. This new city became the permanent capital of the northern kingdom (Israel) throughout the time of the Omride dynasty and its successors until its destruction by the Assyrians. The early Harvard excavations of Samaria, the ancient capital of the northern kingdom, had unexpectedly uncovered a city dominated by a temple

and palace complex that exceeded by far anything found in Jerusalem, the famed capital of David and Solomon and their United Kingdom and of the Judahite kings that followed in their stead after their kingdoms separated.[50]

It was almost 1980 when Israeli archaeologist Adam Zertal recognized that very little serious archaeological survey of the countryside of ancient Manasseh had been done. He assembled a team that would produce a detailed survey of that entire area over the next two decades.[51] Combined with the earlier work at Samaria, Zertal's work has provided an invaluable foundation for all subsequent efforts to understand the history of ancient Manasseh. The settlement pattern found in Zertal's survey of the Manasseh hill country was widely interpreted to support the biblical account of Israelite occupation. Centuries of declining population were dramatically reversed, and small agricultural settlements pushed up from the lowlands into the hill country, a large share of which located on virgin soil. These settlements persisted in smaller or larger groupings of the "four-room houses" associated with the Israelite settlement until the rise of the United Monarchy and the shift toward urbanization — also marking the transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age c. 1200 BCE. Using Zertal's survey findings and other studies, Finkelstein estimated that a third of all settlement sites in the new Land of Israel were in the Manasseh area and that it contained half of the national population.[52]

The Lost Kingdom

The great puzzle that emerged in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Palestinian archaeology was the mismatch between the biblical account of the United Kingdom established by David and Solomon and the archaeological findings. The field work showed that neither Jerusalem nor the land and cities of Judah were more than small rural places in the tenth and ninth centuries. Archaeology could not back up the stories of Solomonic empire and splendor.

Meanwhile, the northern kingdom *did* take off in the ninth century and became both an economic and political regional power throughout the reign of the Omride kings, who received no positive press in the Bible. King Omri, who some speculate may even have been a Philistine, established his new capital named Samaria just northwest of Shechem, and it became the greatest city in all of Israel. His dynasty is known in the Bible for its Baal worship and the marriage of his son and successor Ahab to the Philistine Baal worshiper Jezebel — all of which attracted appropriate censure from northern prophets. But the archaeologists and

historians began to wonder how the biblical stories of empire and glory got switched from Manasseh to Judah.

The Deuteronomistic History

Much of textual biblical studies in the twentieth century was influenced by the additional discovery that the biblical history itself had been reworked by one or more late seventh- and possibly sixth-century editors as propaganda for Josiah as restorer of the ancient Davidic dynasty. These "Deuteronomists" have been discussed in more detail in a previous article.[53] But this reading of Israelite history clicked for leading Israeli archaeologist Israel Finkelstein in the 1990s as a possible explanation for the disconnect archaeologists were finding between the Bible and the data from their excavations. The marriage of the Deuteronomistic History and Palestinian archaeology that he published with coauthor Neil Silberman in 2001 introduced the basic paradigm now used by most Palestinian archaeologists and historians today.[54]

Archaeological Revisions of Biblical Chronology

Finkelstein soon realized that the biblical account and its correlation with the archaeological record would make more sense if the story of the United Monarchy traditionally believed to belong to the late eleventh century BCE were moved down to the early ninth century. "From this point of view, the northern kingdom of Israel would emerge as the first real, full blown state in Iron Age Palestine."[55] He proposed this "low chronology," and it has since been adopted by most Palestinian archaeologists.[56] Lester Grabbe's monumental work on the chronology of ancient Israel applauds this move and sees it solving many problems as it "changes the entire understanding of the emergence of the Israelite state."[57] It shifts the big change and the rise of the United Monarchy from 1000 to 900 BCE or later. In the north "this transformation brought significant growth in the number and size of sites and expansion into new frontiers and niches." But "the southern highlands were only sparsely settled."[58] While the north was thriving, "the kingdom of David and Solomon would have been a chiefdom or early state but without monumental construction or advanced administration."[59] As Finkelstein sums up,

> from the archaeological perspective, the line between the Iron I and the Iron II, characterized by the appearance of monumental building activity, growing evidence for writing, a shift to mass production of pottery, and a growing wave of

> settlement in the highlands, should be put in the early ninth century rather than c. 1000 BCE.[60]

In a 2005 update on the new dating paradigm, Finkelstein listed nine long-standing contradictions between archaeology and biblical history that his new chronology had solved and concluded:

> The only disadvantage of the Low Chronology — at least for some — is that it pulls the carpet from under the biblical image of a great Solomonic United Monarchy and puts the spotlight on Northern Kingdom of the Omride Dynasty [ninth century] as the real first prosperous state of early Israel.[61]

Finkelstein's Low Chronology has facilitated a productive reconciliation of Palestinian archaeology with the generally accepted view of Bible scholars that the Deuteronomistic History (Genesis through 2 Kings) may not be a fully accurate account of the history of Israel and that it may be substantially distorted by the redactors' determination to exalt Judah over Ephraim and Manasseh. Even more recently, Finkelstein has filled in a detailed account of the rise of polities in the north from the end of the twelfth century that culminated in the mid-ninth century Omride Dynasty, which provide the best candidates for the original united kingdom that would have born the name of Israel.[62]

It should be noted that there are many distinguished historians and archaeologists that are not yet ready to adopt the revisionist interpretations of the archaeology advanced by Finkelstein and others.[63] While Finkelstein's model does not threaten the backstory proposed for the Brass Plates, it has caused deep concern for scholars who take a less flexible approach in their defense of the exact wording of the Old Testament histories. For example, Steven Ortiz of the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has published a detailed study of the pottery and dating theories for a selection of archaeological sites that may call Finkelstein's chronology into question.[64]

Josephite Scribes Relocated to Jerusalem

The Assyrian conquest of Israel in 722 BCE had driven thousands of refugees of Manasseh, Ephraim, and other northern tribes south to Jerusalem. The second invasion by Sennacherib after 701 drove additional elites from the Judean hill country towns into the capital during the late eighth and early seventh centuries. The city's estimated population of 1000 exploded to about 15,000.[65] It is generally assumed that these refugee groups consisted mostly of elites possessed of wealth

or valuable skills, who would have been prime targets for deportation — and not the peasants who could be safely ignored by the invaders. The excavations of the 1970s proved that dramatic urban expansion was occurring in Jerusalem before the end of the eighth century on the southwestern hill and that it continued in the seventh century — leading to the construction of a new defensive wall.[66]

Finkelstein provides a succinct summary of the archaeological and historical findings that support his radically new interpretation explaining why Judah only became a full-blown state in the mid-eighth century BCE:

> Within a few decades in the ninth century, Jerusalem in particular and Judah in general went through a significant transformation, from an Amarna-type dimorphic entity to the first steps toward full statehood. This transitional phase in the history of Judah, the missing link that I was looking for, was achieved under Omride dominance. According to this scenario, Judah as an early state is an outcome of Omride political and economic ambitions. In the period of the dynasty of Jehu, especially in the days of Joash and Jeroboam II, Judah continued to live in the shadow of Israel. But it now had the necessary infrastructure to make the big leap forward in the second half of the eighth century BCE. This last step to full statehood came with the destruction of Israel and the incorporation of Judah into the Assyrian world system.[67]

Lehi's Family in Jerusalem

Presumably, Lehi's immediate ancestors would have been part of that first flight of refugees that settled the west ridge of an expanding Jerusalem.[68] In that way, educated and wealthy elites from Samaria were able to avoid deportation to Mesopotamia. Jerusalem and Samaria (modern Nablus) are only about 40 miles apart. As Finkelstein concluded:

> The results of the archaeological surveys and information about the places where the Assyrians settled deportees from Mesopotamia seem to indicate that the Israelite refugees who settled in Judah originated mainly from southern Samaria.[69]

Rethinking Israelite History with a Dominant Northern Kingdom

Archaeologists have speculated on how our understanding of the period of the so-called "divided monarchy" might be much different had the

northern kingdom's own history survived to enable a comparison of that perspective with the obviously biased view that comes from the books of Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles in our Hebrew Bible:

> It is only natural to assume that there were northern prophets … who were closer to the royal institutions in Samaria. … Had Israel survived, we might have received a parallel, competing, and very different history. But with the Assyrian destruction of Samaria and the dismantling of its institutions of royal power, any such competing histories were silenced. Though prophets and priests from the north very likely joined the flow of refugees to find shelter in the cities and towns of Judah, biblical history would henceforth be written by the winners — or at least the survivors — and it would be fashioned exclusively according to the late Judahite Deuteronomistic beliefs.[70]

The Brass Plates are described in such a way by the Nephites that they could easily preserve the northern traditions of prophecy and history that Finkelstein was hypothesizing.

Conclusions

The evolution of Palestinian archeology and history has produced two major thrusts that are of key relevance for the hypothesis describing how the Brass Plates could have been produced by a Manassite scribal school before the end of the seventh century in Jerusalem. On the one hand, the methodological naturalism shared by all modern sciences has pushed most leading archaeologists to replace the biblical account, which describes the twelve tribes of Israel coming out of the wilderness as an already formed ethnic entity and settling what would become ancient Israel. That move is still lacking in solid evidence and has been plausibly challenged on multiple grounds. On the other hand, the discovery that the northern kingdom was always dominant and more economically and culturally developed than Judah helps explain how it could have provided a safe haven over centuries for a highly developed Manassite scribal school descended from Joseph and effective down to the time of Lehi and Nephi, who were among its most accomplished members.

In addition, this paper offers four different kinds of evidence or arguments showing why it is too soon for believers in the biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent settlement of Israel in its promised land to be losing confidence in this Israelite origin

myth. First, a large contingent of qualified scholars have identified extensive corroborating evidence for biblical descriptions of the Exodus and the settlement. Second, skeptical scholars have not come to any real consensus on an alternative theory. Third, those skeptics have not undertaken as yet a serious discussion of the massive and intact Mt. Ebal altar site that seems to correlate so easily to the biblical account. Finally, Restoration scripture repeatedly invokes the Exodus story from its Manassite record, the Brass Plates, to teach the Nephites the importance of relying always on the Lord and their covenant relationship with him.

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Endnotes

1 See Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi as Trained Manassite Scribes," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 50 (2022): 161–215, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/lehi-and-nephi-as-trained-manassite-scribes/.

2 See Noel B. Reynolds, "A Backstory for the Brass Plates," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*, forthcoming; and Noel B. Reynolds, "An Everlasting Witness: Ancient Writings on Metal" (working paper, *BYU Faculty Publications*, August 17, 2021, https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/5379/).

3 Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1995), 1–7, provides a helpful account of the continuing evolution of scholarly approaches to Israel's history through the twentieth century. See also Rolf Rendtorff, "The Paradigm is Changing: Hopes—and Fears," *Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (1993): 34–53, for the analysis of a pre-eminent European insider on these developments. A more recent documentation and review of this evolving debate about the origins of ancient Israel can be found in Ann E. Killebrew, "The Emergence of Ancient Israel: The Social Boundaries of a 'Mixed Multitude' in Canaan,"

in *"I Will Speak the Riddle of Ancient Times": Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. Aren M. Maeir and Pierre de Miroschedji (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 2: 555–72.

4 William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 1957).

5 Killebrew, "Emergence of Ancient Israel," 556–57.

6 Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do We Know It?*, revised ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 70. See Siegfried Herrmann, "The Devaluation of the Old Testament as a Historical Source: Notes on a Problem in the History of Ideas," in *Israel's Past in Present Research: Essays on Ancient Israelite Historiography*, ed. V. Philips Long (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 346–55, for a strong response to the idea that the Hebrew Bible itself can be ignored in any historical approach.

7 One of the most complete and straightforward statements of this perspective, framed as a critique of more traditional approaches to biblical history, can be found in Philip R. Davies, *In Search of "Ancient Israel": A Study in Biblical Origins*, 2nd ed. (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1992). For one strong response, see Avi Hurvitz, "The Historical Quest For 'Ancient Israel' and the Linguistic Evidence of the Hebrew Bible: Some Methodological Observations," *Vetus Testamentum* 47, no. 3 (July 1997): 301–15. For a recent, wide-ranging compilation of theories and evidences for and against the historicity of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, see Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp, eds., *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience* (New York: Springer Cham, 2015). See especially chapter 2: Manfred Bietak, "On the Historicity of the Exodus: What Egyptology Today Can Contribute to Assessing the Biblical Account of the Sojourn in Egypt," 17–38. A recent comprehensive study of the date of the exodus concludes with a minor modification of the Albright/Kitchen theory—1267 BCE plus or minus 15 years makes the biblical account consistent with 150 synchronisms, which are dates that have been drawn from letters and treaties from the ancient near east. See also David A. Falk, "Computer Analytics in Chronology

Testing and Its Implications for the Date of the Exodus," in *"An Excellent Fortress for His Armies, a Refuge for the People": Egyptological, Archaeological, and Biblical Studies in Honor of James K. Hoffmeier*, ed. Richard E. Averbeck and K. Lawson Younger Jr. (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 99–111. A potential challenge to the consensus around a ninth century formulation of the alphabetic Hebrew script has now been reported in the news as described below in the discussion of historical evidence. It consists of an inscription on lead in archaic Hebrew that is firmly dated to the 13th–12th centuries that was found buried in a cultic site on Mount Ebal near Shechem.

8 Reynolds, "Backstory for the Brass Plates."

9 See the argument presented in Reynolds, "Lehi and Nephi," and Reynolds, "Backstory for the Brass Plates."

10 These descriptive facts and hypotheses about the Brass Plates are presented and explained in Reynolds, "Backstory for the Brass Plates."

11 David Noel Freedman, *Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman*, vol. 1: *History and Religion*, ed. John R. Huddleston (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 103–104.

12 In today's world, it is an unfortunate possibility to see the usage of terms such as "conservative" and "progressive" or "liberal" as purely political in nature. In biblical studies, the difference between "conservative" and "progressive" approaches is not political so much as it is ideological. Those who see the Bible as a secular and purely human document (a "progressive" perspective) have historically been at odds with those who value it as a record with divine value (a "conservative" perspective). The conflict between the two paradigms is widely recognized and acknowledged in academia.

13 The quotation is taken from the concluding remarks offered by Andrew Sherratt, "The View from Mount Nebo," in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science*, ed. Thomas E. Levy and Thomas Higham (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Publishing, 2005), 444, and extends the concerns about interpretations of the Israelite record in its first centuries down to the time of the

exile. For a well-informed and comprehensive review of these developments over time see Grabbe, *Ancient Israel,* 3–38.

14 Good discussions of these issues were published in the 1990s. For example, see Diana Vikander Edelman, ed., *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1991), in which the editor has both challenged and invited responses from a range of archaeologists. Another excellent and seasoned response comes from University of Edinburgh's Iain W. Provan in his essay "Ideologies, Literary and Critical: Reflections on Recent Writing on the History of Israel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 114, no. 4 (1995): 585–606. See also Provan's more systematic treatment of the issue and response to his critics in his "In the Stable with the Dwarves: Testimony, Interpretation, Faith, and the History of Israel," in *Windows Into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of "Biblical Israel*," ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 161–97.

15 This way of reading the Hebrew Bible was successfully established among textual scholars by Walther Eichrodt with the English translation of the sixth edition of his magnum opus. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1961 and 1967).

16 William G. Dever, "The Late Bronze—Early Iron I Horizon in Syria-Palestine: Egyptians, Canaanites, 'Sea Peoples,' and Proto-Israelites," in *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.: From Beyond the Danube to the Tigris*, ed. William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 104.

17 For a helpful and brief summary of these developments in the larger historical context see Dever, "The Late Bronze—Early Iron I." The universal four-room architecture in these settlements is analyzed in depth by Lawrence E. Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Early Israel," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 260 (1985): 1–35.

18 See Anson F. Rainey, "Whence Came the Israelites and Their Language" *Israel Exploration Journal* 57, no. 1 (2007): 41–64; Anson F. Rainey, "Redefining Hebrew–A Transjordanian Language," *Maarav* 14, no. 2 (2007): 67–81; and Anson F. Rainey, "The Northwest Semitic Literary Repertoire and Its Acquaintance by Judean Writers," *Maarav* 15, no. 2 (2008): 193–205.

19 James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), viii.

20 R. J. Williams, "'A People Come Out of Egypt': An Egyptologist Looks at the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 28 (1975): 231–32.

21 See William G. Dever, "Cultural Continuity, Ethnicity in the Archaeological Record, and the Question of Israelite Origins," *Eretz-Israel: Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* (1993): 26–31.

22 Dever, "Cultural Continuity," 31. A more recent attempt to interpret the limited available evidence with a similar developmental approach can be found in Robert B. Coote and Keith W. Whitelam, *The Emergence of Early Israel in Historical Perspective* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010). These authors also argue that the accumulating archaeological evidence undermines the decades-long practice echoed above by Dever of linking certain pottery and house styles to one ethnic group such as Israelites or proto-Israelites. See pp. 125–27.

23 See Karl Eric Knutsson, "Dichotomization and Integration: Aspects of inter-ethnic relations in Southern Ethiopia," in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, ed. Fredrik Barth (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1969), 99.

24 See Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2014), 33-107.

25 Israel Finkelstein, "Pots and People Revisited: Ethnic Boundaries in the Iron Age I," in *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, ed. Neil Asher Silberman and David Small (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 230.

26 See Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel ca. 1300–1100 B.C.E.* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), especially 184–85, and Killebrew, "Emergence of Ancient Israel."

27 Raz Kletter, "Can a Proto-Israelite Please Stand Up: Notes on the Ethnicity of Iron Age Israel and Judah," in *"I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times: Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. A.

M. Maeir and P. de Miroschedji (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 2: 581–82. Kletter builds on the earlier work of Edelman and others. See Diana Edelman, "Ethnicity and Early Israel," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark G. Brett (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1996), 39–53.

28 See Kletter, "Proto-Israelite," 573–86.

29 See K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003). Also see Kitchen's two-page treatment of "The Exodus of the Hebrews," and the seamless way in which he integrates the biblical account of the exodus into his outstanding history of the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II. See K. A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II, King of Egypt* (Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 70–71.

30 Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, and James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

31 James K. Hoffmeier, Alan R. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg, eds., *"Did I Not Bring Israel out of Egypt?": Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

32 See Joshua Berman, *Ani Maamin: Biblical Criticism, Historical Truth, and the Thirteen Principles of Faith* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2020).

33 See Deuteronomy 26:16–27:8 and Joshua 8:30–35.

34 The public discussion soon led to a preliminary popular account in BAR, a step which annoyed the professional archaeological brotherhood immensely and which Zertal reportedly came to regret having shared. See Adam Zertal, "Has Joshua's Altar Been Found on Mt. Ebal?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 11, no. 1 (1985): 26–43. Zvi Koenigsberg, a member of Zertal's excavation team, has published a detailed account of the discovery and the reasons why the most reasonable explanation is to identify it as Joshua's altar. See Zvi Koenigsberg, *The Lost Temple of Israel* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015).

35 Adam Zertal, "An Early Iron Age Cultic Site on Mount Ebal: Excavation Seasons 1982–1987: Preliminary Report," *Tel Aviv* 13–14, no. 2 (1986–1987): 105–65. Zertal eventually (2000) published his own personal Hebrew-language account of the

entire experience from start to finish. Since his passing in 2015, that monograph has been translated into English by Jonathan Liberzon and published in a second edition as A. Zertal, *A Nation is Born: The Altar on Mount Ebal and the Birth of Israel* (Haifa: The Samaria and Jordan Rift Valley Survey Association, 2018).

36 See Ralph K. Hawkins, *The Iron Age I Structure on Mt. Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

37 Hawkins, *Iron Age I Structure*, 193–99.

38 Zertal found support for this interpretation of the stone blanket layer as a ritual burial of the site in David Ussishkin, "The Syro-Hittite Ritual Burial of Monuments," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 29, no. 2 (April 1970): 124–28.

39 See Zertal, "Cultic Site on Mount Ebal," 154–58. A dominant view of Bible scholars has recognized an annual covenant renewal festival at Shechem in the earliest period, then at some point at Gilgal and Bethel, but "for most of the amphictyonic period . . . the central sanctuary seems to have been located at Shiloh" until it was broken up by the Philistines in 1050 BCE. See E. W. Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 1967), 60–61.

40 Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), 82–85. This is the published version of his dissertation and brings together a broad survey of the archaeological evidence for the chronology and extent of the original settlement. His later publications incorporate additional evidence from more recent excavations, but this first book laid down the pattern of the approach that has characterized his illustrious career.

41 Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013).

42 Adam Eliyahu Berkowitz, "'Curse' Text on Ancient Amulet Could Change Way Scholars Read Bible," *Jerusalem Post*, March 24, 2022 (updated March 25, 2022), https://www.jpost.com/christianworld/article-702243.

43 Wikipedia, s.v. "Curse tablet," last modified April 19, 2022, 11:18 UTC, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curse_tablet.

44 This is not a trite truism in the Nephite text (or in the Hebrew Bible) but is rather a fundamental principle of Nephite theology. This is explained in Noel B. Reynolds, "The 'Goodness of God' and his Children as a Fundamental Theological Concept in the Book of Mormon," *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 46 (2021): 131–56, https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/the-goodness-of-god-and-his-children-as-a-fundamental-theological-concept-in-the-book-of-mormon/.

45 1 Nephi 17:23–34. Cf. 1 Nephi 5:14–15, 1 Nephi 19:10, 2 Nephi 3:4, 2 Nephi 9–10, 2 Nephi 25:20, Mosiah 7:19, and Mosiah 12:34.

46 Helaman 8: 11–15. Cf. Alma 36:28.

47 This interpretation is developed in detail in Noel B. Reynolds, "The Israelite Background of Moses Typology in the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (2005): 5–23. For a documentation and exposition of this biblical pattern see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), especially 23–90.

48 This thesis was introduced powerfully in Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Free Press, 2001). See evidence for the early preeminence of the Josephite tribes in Kristin Weingart, "'All These are the Twelve Tribes of Israel': The Origins of Israel's Kinship Identity," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82, no. 1 (2019): 24–31.

49 The third German edition of Noth's 1943 original is now widely available in an English translation as Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History* (Sheffield, UK: JSOT Press, 1981). The huge literature on this subject was well summarized by Steven L. McKenzie in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "Deuteronomistic History" (New York: Doubleday, 1992): 2:160–68.

50 See George Andrew Reisner, Clarence Stanley Fisher, and David Gordon Lyon, "The Israelite Period," in *Harvard Excavations at Samaria, 1908–1910*, vol. 1, *Text* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2020), 91–122.

51 See the preface in Adam Zertal, *The Manasseh Hill Country Survey,* vol. 1, *The Shechem Syncline* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2004) for

a background description of this massive project. First published in Hebrew, it is now available in the comprehensive, five-volume, English-language version.

52 Finkelstein, *Israelite Settlement*, 332–33.

53 See Reynolds, "Backstory for the Brass Plates."

54 Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*. Finkelstein used this new paradigm to gather and present all the archaeological data on the northern kingdom in a more technical book: Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom*. For an excellent summary, review, and critique of Finkelstein's challenging new paradigm for the early history of the kingdom of Israel, see Daniel Pioske, "Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel*," *Review of Biblical Literature* 10 (February 2014).

55 Israel Finkelstein, "The Archaeology of the United Monarchy: An Alternative View," *Levant* 28 (1996): 185. This article presents the basic archaeological discoveries and reasoning that support Finkelstein's "low chronology."

56 In Ze'ev Herzog and Lily Singer-Avitz, "Redefining the Centre: The Emergence of State in Judah," *Tel Aviv* 31, no. 2 (2004): 209–44, we see "hard archaeological data" used to demonstrate that "the process of state formation in Judah was not a unidirectional evolution from tribal community to state society" (p. 236) in support of the low chronology.

57 Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 83.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid., 84. No trace of Solomon's temple has been found, and political conditions prevent any excavation at the presumed location. Nephi clearly refers to that temple as a model for his first temple in the City of Nephi (2 Nephi 5:16). Growing skepticism among contemporary archaeologists about the existence of a Solomonic temple in early Jerusalem has been partially addressed by the discovery of other Israelite temples from that time frame. See Yosef Garfinkel and Madeleine Mumcuoglu, "The Temple of Solomon in Iron Age Context," *Religions* 10, no. 3 (March 2019): 198, https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/3/198.

60 Finkelstein, "United Monarchy," 185.

61 Israel Finkelstein, "A Low Chronology Update: Archaeology, History and Bible," in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science*, ed. Thomas E. Levy and Thomas Higham (Oxford and New York: Routledge, 2014), 39.

62 Israel Finkelstein, "First Israel, Core Israel, United (Northern) Israel," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82, no. 1 (2019): 9–12.

63 A good review, summary, and defense of the traditional interpretation in light of current archaeological finds is available in Amihai Mazar, "Jerusalem in the 10th Century B.C.E.: The Glass Half Full," in *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context: A Tribute to Nadav Na'aman*, ed. Yairah Amit, Ehud Ben Zvi, Israel Finkelstein, and Oded Lipschits (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 255–72.

64 See Steven M. Ortiz, "Does the 'Low Chronology' Work? A Case Study of Tell Qasile X, Tel Gezer X, and Lachish V," in *"'I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times': Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*," (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 2: 587–611.

65 Archaeologists now believe that Jerusalem and Judea were quite small in population and not yet well developed in governmental institutions before receiving waves of refugees from Samaria about the time of the Assyrian conquest in 722 BCE. Jerusalem's population increased exponentially and began from that point to develop more advanced social, political, and religious institutions. See the summary descriptions offered by Finkelstein and Silberman in *The Bible Unearthed*, 243ff. These updated numbers are much higher than the original archaeologist's estimates of a fourfold expansion as reported in Magen Broshi, "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974): 21–26. Nadav Na'aman attacked Finkelstein and Silberman's account in "When and How Did Jerusalem Become a Great City? The Rise of Jerusalem as Judah's Premier City in the Eighth-Seventh Centuries B.C.E.," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 347 (2007): 21–56. Na'aman's attack, in which he relied primarily on the biblical text, was answered immediately by Finkelstein using archaeological evidence. See Israel Finkelstein, "The Settlement History of Jerusalem in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries BC," *Revue Biblique* 115, no. 4 (October 2008): 499–515. See the earlier and meticulously detailed summary of this history

that integrates all the archaeological and textual evidence available in Baruch Halpern, "Jerusalem and the Lineages in the Seventh Century BCE: Kinship and the Rise of Individual Moral Liability," in *Law and Ideology in Monarchic Israel*, ed. Baruch Halpern and Deborah W. Hobson (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991): 11–107.

66 See the detailed and beautifully illustrated account of the Jerusalem excavations by Broshi's colleague: Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1980), 31.

67 Israel Finkelstein, "The Rise of Jerusalem and Judah: The Missing Link," *Levant* 33, no. 1 (2001): 111.

68 See the extensive background provided by Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds., *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 81–130. An alternative interpretation of the refugee flight from the north argues that they came to Bethel and that Bethel was incorporated into Judah with Assyrian approval because of the Judahite monarchy's support for Assyria in the seventh century. See Ernst Axel Knauf, "Bethel: The Israelite Impact on Judean Language and Literature," in *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period*, edited by Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2006), 291–349.

69 Finkelstein, "Settlement History of Jerusalem," 515.

70 Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 223.