

Israel Without the Bible

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The Bible does not exist. That is correct: The Bible does not exist. Permit me to explain what I mean by that statement with the following background material. For most of the twentieth century there was a general consensus among scholars that the Bible is a reliable guide to the history of ancient Israel. The towering figures in the field, people such as W. F. Albright and Cyrus Gordon in the United States and Benjamin Mazar and Yigael Yadin in Israel, led the way in believing that the Bible reflected true history. In their view, everything from the Patriarchs to Ezra was real.

Cuneiform tablets from Nuzi in Mesopotamia described social and legal practices that paralleled the customs reflected in the book of Genesis, including, for example, the duty of a barren wife to present her husband with a maidservant through whom the man would father children, exactly as Sarah presents Hagar to Abraham, leading to the birth of Ishmael.

Egyptian material demonstrated that the customs reflected in the Joseph story fit perfectly in the environment of the Nile Valley, including the presence of certain key Egyptian words in the story, such as *'abrēk* (אברך), which is derived from Egyptian *ib r-k* (literally “heart to you,” the equivalent of our English phrase “hail to you”), proclaimed by the Egyptian people as the new viceroy Joseph was paraded through the streets (Genesis 41:43).

The story of the Exodus was real. The cities of Pithom and Rameses (Exodus 1:11) were constructed by Rameses II using foreign slaves; and the Merneptah Stele attests to the existence of the people of Israel in the year 1210 B.C.E.

The Conquest was real. Archaeological work at Bethel, Hazor, Lachish, and Tell Beit Mirsim, among others, revealed the destruction of a series of

Canaanite cities in the latter half of the thirteenth century B.C.E., clearly the work of the Israelites.

And if these earlier periods of biblical history were real, then the later material must have reflected true history as well. David and Solomon ruled over a large empire; the kings of Israel and Judah during the divided monarchy did exactly what the book of Kings says they did; the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E., the Babylonians destroyed the southern kingdom in 586 B.C.E., and both Mesopotamian powers exiled the population to the Tigris and Euphrates Valley and beyond; Cyrus the Great, the forward-looking Persian king, allowed the Jews to return in 538 B.C.E., the Second Temple was built, and Ezra and Nehemiah worked to restore Jewish life in Jerusalem at the end of the biblical period. To repeat: everything from Abraham to Ezra was real.¹

This was the consensus concerning the history of ancient Israel. It was "canonized," as it were, in the standard history of the biblical period authored by John Bright, himself a student of Albright. Entitled *A History of Israel*, Bright's work went through three editions between 1959 and 1981,² was widely used on college campuses and in seminaries, and is still in print.³

Today, however, the picture is very different. Why? What happened? Obviously, the pendulum of intellectual trends swings continually. The positive historicism of Albright and his contemporaries gave way, not only in biblical studies, but in the humanities in general, to the relativism, skepticism, and indeed nihilism that now dominates. Chinks in the Albrightian armor were already visible thirty years ago, but the chinks soon became cracks and the cracks developed into full-scale eruptions.

The Conquest affords us the best opportunity to see this process at work. Already in the 1920s, the great German scholar Albrecht Alt had challenged the idea of an Israelite military conquest of the land of Canaan.⁴ According to Alt, there simply was no archaeological evidence to confirm the scenario depicted in the book of Joshua. For every site such as Bethel and Hazor, which clearly were destroyed at the end of the thirteenth century, there were other sites such as Ai and most famously Jericho, which not only show no destruction at this time period, but in fact little or no settlement at all. These findings led Alt to propose an alternative explanation for the emergence of the Israelites in the land of Canaan—what scholars came to call the peaceful infiltration or peaceful settlement model. According to this theory, the main tradition of the Bible is accurate, the Israelites entered the land from the outside, from the desert

fringe region, but there was no military conquest. Instead, one must speak of Israelites entering and peacefully settling open territory. Alt's reconstruction of events, as I said, was but a chink in the Albrightian armor, but it set the stage for more drastic departures.

A third model developed in the 1950s and 1960s, much more radical in its approach. The archaeological evidence now was interpreted to demonstrate that the Israelites did not originate from outside the land, but were in origin Canaanites who had shifted gears. According to this view, Israelite pottery was indistinguishable from Canaanite pottery; Israelite architecture was indistinguishable from Canaanite architecture; Israelite water systems were indistinguishable from Canaanite water systems; and so on. All of this meant that the Israelites *were* Canaanites, most likely former Canaanite rural peasants who had thrown off the yoke of their Canaanite urban overlords. According to this view, class struggle, not religious revolution, is what gave rise to Israel. The arm of Marxism had spread to biblical studies.⁵

As such, so the theory goes, the Israelites had never been to Egypt. The Bible's foundational story about the Israelites as slaves in Egypt is not a reflection of any historical reality, but rather a reflection of the fact that Israel had been slaves in the land of Canaan, slaves to Canaanite urban centers, whose rulers in turn were puppets of the Egyptian empire during the New Kingdom eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties. That is to say, the Israelites were slaves not *in* Egypt, but *to* Egypt.⁶

This theory that the Israelites originated as Canaanites explains why there is so much polytheism present in the Bible's description of the people of Israel. Israel was not a monotheistic or a monolatrous people fighting polytheistic inroads under the influence of their Canaanite neighbors, but rather just another group of Canaanite polytheists, albeit one with a small but vocal and (in the end) successful group of radical thinkers who conceived of the idea of one god.

Stretching further back in the Bible, if there was no Conquest and there was no Exodus and there was no Slavery, then clearly there was no Patriarchal Period either. Indeed, further investigation into the Genesis narratives claimed that there are closer parallels to the customs reflected in the Abraham and Jacob stories in first-millennium B.C.E. Babylonian legal texts than in the second-millennium documents.⁷ Accordingly, the Genesis tales are the inventions of Jews during the Babylonian exile when such customs were the way of life. And why have patriarchal stories at all? Why have Abraham originating in Mesopotamia and emigrating to Canaan? Because

this was part of early Zionist propaganda to get Jews to leave their homes in comfortable Babylon and to make the long journey to begin a new and arduous life in the land of their forefathers. It is clear from Second Isaiah and Ezra and Nehemiah, and from Babylonian textual remains—I refer here to a set of cuneiform texts known as the Murashu documents, which describe affluent Jewish businessmen in Mesopotamia during this period⁸—that not all Jews wanted to return to Israel. Thus was Abraham invented. He had left his home in Ur for the brave new world of Canaan, and so should you.

I am not done. This approach is only mildly radical. For the approach that I have just outlined at least recognizes that the Israelites, even if they originated as Canaanites, at least existed before 586 B.C.E. First they were organized as tribes, but eventually changed their polity to that of a monarchy. Under David and Solomon they achieved some success, then receded in power to the minor kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The extreme radicals go so far as to deny the existence of Israel and/or Judah before 586. Certainly there never was a David or a Solomon. If after two hundred years of archaeological research, from Napoleon's men discovering the Rosetta Stone in 1799 to the present day, there is not a single shred of evidence that David or Solomon ever existed, then they too must be fictional inventions. The Jews of the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. lived in world empires, under Babylonian and Persian domination, with the former Assyrian empire still a recent memory. The idea of the United Kingdom of David and Solomon ruling over conquered peoples, then, represented an inventive effort to show that the Jews too once had power.

And the most radical reconstruction of all goes even further. According to this extreme view, the Jews originated as a group of Semites in Mesopotamia during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., and were transplanted by the Persians to the land of Canaan to serve them as political stooges, as it were. Once there in the land, Jewish writers created an entire history that had never existed, to create for themselves not only a glorious past but also a connection to the land they lacked. Yes, there actually are scholars who believe this.⁹

To put this in the simplest terms: the paradigm has shifted from a maximalist stance to a minimalist one. A few definitions of these terms: The maximalists hold that since so much of the biblical record has been confirmed by archaeological work and by other sources from the ancient Near East (for example, the aforementioned Merneptah Stele), we can therefore assume even in the absence of any corroborating evidence that the Bible

reflects true history, unless it can be proved otherwise. The minimalist approach is exactly the opposite: Because so much of the biblical record is contradicted by archaeological work and by other sources from the ancient Near East—for example, the lack of any conquest at Jericho and Ai—we must assume that the Bible is literary fiction, unless it can be proved otherwise.

I do not want to give you the impression that there are no maximalists left standing today. Indeed there are, and as you probably have gathered, I situate myself firmly in their camp. I need to add here that representatives of the two schools often do not speak to each other; there is much vitriol and namecalling involved; and yes, modern politics spills over into this debate as well, the denials of scholars notwithstanding. I am not sure that I can quantify the schools, that is, tell you that the majority of biblical scholars today are maximalist or minimalist—I suppose the divide is probably about 50-50—but I can tell you this: there is no doubt that the minimalists are the more vocal, and they are the ones who set the agenda, publish books at a very rapid pace, organize conferences to present their views (especially in Europe), and take advantage of the popular press. The maximalists, in turn, frequently are left to respond to these diatribes, often needing to take time away from their own research to counter the views expressed in the many publications emanating from the pens of minimalist scholars.¹⁰

Given this lack of consensus and avoidance of dialogue, how are we to proceed? I propose to do something new, something which to the best of my knowledge has not been attempted yet. For the purposes of this chapter, let us return to my opening statement: pretend that the Bible does not exist. Let us reconstruct the history of ancient Israel based solely on the information provided by archaeology. This is, after all, the way archaeologists have reconstructed many ancient Near Eastern societies, such as the Sumerians, the Hittites, the Hurrians, the Urartians, the Elamites, and others, about all of whom nothing was known before the twentieth century. If we can do this for all these people, why not for Israel as well? Let us attempt to do so, using both epigraphic remains and material remains. The former refers to inscriptions found in archaeological excavations;¹¹ the latter refers to all other finds, including pottery, artwork, architecture, and animal bones. Only when we are done with this exercise will we bring the Bible back into the picture, to see to what extent the two overlap: the archaeological picture on the one hand, and the history as outlined in the Bible on the other.

We begin with a look at inscriptions from the land of Israel, especially from the central hill country of Canaan, the mountainous area that stretches from the Galilee in the north through Samaria in the center, further south to Jerusalem, and then furthest south to places like Hebron and Arad in southern Judah. I begin with inscriptions because, if a picture is worth a thousand words, an ancient Hebrew inscription is worth a thousand pieces of pottery. With apologies to my archaeologist friends, it is true that we can learn more about ancient history from a single inscription, and even more from a group of inscriptions, than we can from analyzing material remains. So let us start there.

We have hundreds of very tiny inscriptions from the central hill country in Canaan, most of them seals and bullae—the former are little stone or metal items; the latter are the clay imprints of the seals—giving us hundreds of personal names of people who lived in those hills. Jeffrey Tigay of the University of Pennsylvania wrote a handy little book twenty years ago, in which he collected all these names and classified them by their theophoric elements (that is, the divine names that are included as an element of many ancient personal names).¹² For example, the Egyptian pharaoh Rameses includes the name of the sun-god Ra, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar includes the name of the deity Nabu, and the Carthaginian general Hannibal includes the name of the Canaanite storm-god Baal. When we look at the inscriptions from the central hill country of Canaan, from places such as Samaria, Gibeon, Jerusalem, Lachish, and Arad, we note that by far the commonest element in the personal names is Yah or Yahu, placed at either the beginning or the end of these names. Tigay finds 263 names that have a theophoric element: of these, 213 are Yahwistic, that is, they contain Yah or Yahu at either the beginning or the end of the name; 30 of them are Elohist, that is, they contain El at either the beginning or the end of the name, and 20 of them contain an element that might suggest a pagan deity, such as the Canaanite god Baal or the Egyptian god Horus. There are, of course, plenty of names that do not include any theophoric element, such as Hanan and Natan; these names are of interest, but they do not disclose anything about the deity worshipped by the bearers of these names or by the parents who gave their children these names. (Incidentally, the numbers I am using here reflect only those names found on inscriptions excavated by archaeologists. I do not include names found on materials purchased on the antiquities market, especially in light of recent discussions about the prevalence of forgeries.) To illustrate these data, note such Yahwistic names as Ahiyahu, Amaryahu, Gedalyahu,

Hoshi'yahu, Hananyahu, Yeho'ab, Yeho'az, Yonatan, and so on. Among the names with El, note, for example, Eli'ur, Elyaqim, Elishama', Yishma'el, and so on.¹³ At first we might conclude that these people, whom we have not identified yet, worshipped two gods, one called El and one called Yah or Yahu. But since we know that El is a common Semitic element for "god, deity," we have reason to believe that the people who lived in these mountains considered El and Yah/Yahu to be one and the same.

When we look at inscriptions that provide more information than merely personal names, something interesting happens. Here we see that a fuller form of the name Yah or Yahu appears, in the form YHWH. No vowels are provided, of course, but we posit Yahweh as an educated guess or reconstruction, based on our knowledge of comparative Semitic grammar. What inscriptions am I referring to? First, two silver amulets found in Jerusalem that invoke the god YHWH to bless the bearers of these amulets.¹⁴ Second, references to YHWH in a collection of letters from Lachish, letters mainly of a military nature, describing various preparations and stratagems for war.¹⁵ Third, references to YHWH in a group of texts from Arad, documents mainly of an administrative nature, but with one reference to BYT YHWH as well, referring to a temple, either in Arad itself or in some other location.¹⁶ Moreover, archaeological excavations at Arad revealed a sanctuary site, so that most likely the expression BYT YHWH refers to the local temple.

We also find something quite interesting in several other inscriptions. Blessings from two sites, Khirbet el-Qom in southern Judah and Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the Sinai, refer to YHWH and his Asherah.¹⁷ The latter we recognize as a goddess attested in texts from Ugarit, among the Philistines, and even in Arabia. We register this point in our minds for the moment, as something to ponder in our reconstruction of ancient Israel. For as noted above, until this point we have assumed that the people whose history we are reconstructing worshipped only one God. We also note that YHWH gains two epithets in the Kuntillet Ajrud inscriptions: YHWH TYMN and YHWH ŠMRN. The former clearly means "Yahweh of the Southland," and we propose that in some fashion Yahweh is connected with the desert land, perhaps even the very spot of Kuntillet Ajrud deep in the Sinai desert. The latter is subject to two different interpretations. Like TYMN it could be a place name, identifying Yahweh with a particular locale; or the term could derive from the Semitic root *shin-mem-resh* meaning "to guard," which would, of course, be a most appropriate epithet for a deity.

We still would like to know the identity of these people, and various

clues from different sources point to the answer. The Mesha Stele, a well-known inscription from Moab, across the Jordan River, provides us with the best answer.¹⁸ The king of Moab, named Mesha, claims to have conquered the people of Israel, who were led by their king Omri and his unnamed son, and to have captured cultic objects dedicated to the god YHWH. This text, which makes the explicit connection between the god YHWH and the people Israel, affords us our smoking gun. The people who worship this deity are called Israel.

Other sources, especially Assyrian inscriptions, provide the names of additional kings of Israel. The Kurkh Monolith of Shalmaneser III refers to a king named Ahab the Israelite, who was able to muster 10,000 soldiers and 2,000 chariots in the battle of Qarqar on the Orontes River in northern Syria.¹⁹ We can even date this event to exactly 853 B.C.E. From slightly later in the reign of Shalmaneser III comes the Black Obelisk, which refers to a king named Jehu, son of Omri, paying tribute to Assyria. This too is datable, to the year 841 B.C.E., and the obelisk even gives us a picture of king Jehu and his emissaries.²⁰ We are not able to work out the Israelite dynasty with absolute precision, since we are led to believe that Jehu is the son of Omri and yet we know that Ahab must have preceded Jehu, but for the moment we do not worry about such details.

From about a half-century later, c. 800 B.C.E., we have reference in another Assyrian text to a king named Ia-'a-su the Samarian. The name looks Yahwistic, so we assume that he is an Israelite. His label "the Samarian" immediately brings to mind the term attested at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, YHWH ŠMRN (see above), and we connect the two. We conclude, therefore, that of the two choices indicated earlier, the former was the correct choice—that like TYMN, the word ŠMRN is also a place name. Apparently YHWH, the god of the Israelites, could be called "YHWH of Samaria" by the Israelites themselves; and the king of Israel could be called by the epithet "the Samarian" by the conquering Assyrians. We do not yet know where this place is located, but at least we have made the connection.

The annals of Assyrian kings from another half-century later inform us that Assyria conquered the land of Omri and deported its people to Assyria. More than a century after Omri ruled, the Assyrians still referred to the country as the land of Omri, so we assume that he must have been quite a powerful king and/or the founder of the Israelite dynasty. Moreover, these texts that describe the deportation of the Israelites to Assyria provide us with the names of still two other kings, Peqah and Hoshea, whom we assume were the last two kings of the kingdom.

Another source provides additional information, though it is very fragmentary. The Aramaic inscription from Tel Dan, found in 1993–94, refers to an individual whose name ends in *-ram* as MLK YSR'L "king of Israel."²¹ We know nothing more about this individual, but at least we have another small puzzle piece with which to contend. We will return to this very important inscription below.

We now bring an additional source into the picture: the Merneptah Stele.²² Merneptah was an important pharaoh of the nineteenth dynasty in Egypt, the son of Rameses II, the most powerful pharaoh in all of Egyptian history. In about 1210 B.C.E., Merneptah claims to have conquered the land of Canaan, with specific reference to three cities and to one people. The three cities are Ashkelon, Gezer, and Yenoam; the one people referred to is Israel. The reference to the *people* of Israel is actually rather unique within the corpus of Egyptian texts, and we are not quite sure what to make of this reference. The best guess is that the Israelites were a people within the general region of Canaan, but without a specific chunk of land unto themselves. Regardless of the exact meaning of the passage in the Merneptah Stele, we are able to conclude that in some fashion the people of Israel existed as a recognized entity as early as the late thirteenth century B.C.E., sufficiently organized into a group that the powerful Egyptians took some notice of them. This is in fact the earliest reference to Israel in the historical record.

There is still more evidence from Egypt that is relevant to our quest to reconstruct Israel in the archaeological record. One of the Pharaohs of the New Kingdom—we are not certain which one—left us two long lists of the places his army visited during its various campaigns. These lists were found at Soleb and Amara, both in far Upper Egypt south of Aswan. Among the places and peoples appearing in these lists are the Shasu of Se'ir and the Shasu of YHWH. "Shasu" is the term the Egyptians used for the bedouin or the pastoralists on the desert fringe, essentially anyone who did not live in the Nile Valley or in urban centers in foreign countries. We have nothing more to say about the word Se'ir, because (remember?) the Bible does not exist, and the term Se'ir, which is to be associated with the land of Edom to the south of Israel, is known only from the Bible. So we have to put that knowledge aside for our present enterprise. The latter term, however, the Shasu of YHWH, piques our interest, for the second term looks like an Egyptian rendering of the name of the god of Israel. We are not quite sure how to correlate the two, for Yahweh is the name of a divinity, and the Shasu of YHWH would suggest a place by that name. That

problem notwithstanding, we incorporate this valuable piece of evidence into our general picture. Given that the Shasu are bedouin or desert-fringe types and given that earlier we saw Yahweh referred to as YHWH TYMN "Yahweh of the Southland," we reach the general conclusion that the people who worshipped Yahweh had some traditional connection to the desert region.

There is still more Egyptian evidence that aids us in our quest. On the walls of the great temple to the god Amun, the famous Karnak temple in Luxor, we find four panels depicting battle scenes. Most of them are very worn, but there is enough there to reach the following conclusions. In the first three panels we see the Egyptian army besieging enemy cities, one of which is clearly identified as Ashkelon.²³ In the fourth panel, we see the Egyptian army attacking a group in the open terrain. Moreover, the portrayal of the subdued people in this scene matches the portrayal of the Shasu well known from other Egyptian artwork. Now earlier we saw in the Merneptah Stele reference to three conquered cities, including Ashkelon, and one conquered people, Israel. And since we have just suggested some connection between Israel and the Shasu, a clearer picture begins to emerge. In its early stages, in the thirteenth century B.C.E., Israel was a pastoralist or bedouin people, identified by the Egyptians as part of the larger Shasu group, resident in the general southland, that is, the vast desert that stretches across Sinai, the Negev, Edom, and northern Arabia. The Merneptah Stele refers to the people of Israel, whom we know from later times worshipped the god Yahweh, identified at times as Yahweh of the Southland; the artwork depicting the battle scenes shows the people of Israel to be Shasu in some general sense, and two Egyptian lists of place names include a reference to the Shasu of YHWH.

We are not quite sure how all of this correlates with the evidence we surveyed earlier, which places Israel in the central hill country of Canaan, but hopefully that missing link will emerge as our project unfolds. For now, though, we have to contend with another problem. At times, it appears that the worship of Yahweh is associated with another political entity, called Judah. What is the evidence for this group? And who are they?

The best evidence comes once more from Assyria. Royal inscriptions from Assyria refer not only to Israel, but to Judah as well. In fact, of the four kings of Judah mentioned in Assyrian annals, three of them have Yahwistic names. The earliest are Azriyau and Yehoahaz from the middle of the eighth century B.C.E., both of whom paid tribute to Assyria; next

comes Hezekiah, whose realm was laid waste by the army of Sennacherib; and finally comes Manasseh in the seventh century B.C.E., the only one of these individuals without a Yahwistic name. The most famous of these Assyrian texts is the Sennacherib prism, which goes on at length about the Assyrian attack on Judah, with specific mention of King Hezekiah.²⁴

At this stage in our investigation, we are not quite sure where this Judah entity is to be located, but somehow it must relate to the better established Israel entity. Fortunately, we find several clues that help us resolve this question. First is a single mention of Judah in one of the Arad ostraca (inscribed potsherds)—in fact the text reads MLK YHD(H), “king of Judah”—and thus we have reason to believe that Judah is found in the southern part of the country.²⁵ Second is the mention of Judah in a burial inscription from a place called Khirbet Bet Lei, about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem, at least according to one opinion—the text is poorly preserved and very difficult to read—again pointing to Judah in the southern part of the country.²⁶ Finally, we confirm our conclusion from later references to the name Judah, dated to the Persian period: we possess about twenty attestations of the term in a series of jar stamps and coins from places like Ramat Rahel and elsewhere, in either the Hebrew form YHDH or the Aramaic form YHD.

Having now located Judah geographically, we also can learn more about this entity historically. We know from Mesopotamian records that eventually the Assyrian empire declined and was defeated by the new power in that region, the Babylonians. Specific to our quest, the annals of the great Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar inform us that in the seventh year of his reign, corresponding to 598–597 B.C.E., he captured “the city of Judah,” seized its king, and placed a new king on the throne, no doubt one more to his liking who would serve him as a puppet.²⁷ Clearly, “the city of Judah” must refer to the capital of the country, though we are not quite sure where it is located.

We will return to that question in a moment, but first let us discuss in greater detail the Tel Dan inscription, to which we referred earlier. Alongside the reference to the person whose name ends in *-ram* identified as the king of Israel, there is reference to another person whose name ends in *-yahu* identified as the king of the house of David, BYTDWD in the original Aramaic.²⁸ This one presents a real puzzle for a moment, but upon further investigation we recall that Aramaic inscriptions frequently refer to national entities as BYT-something, or BYT-X, one might say. In such

cases, the X element may be a place name or it may refer to the founder of the royal dynasty, at least according to some scholars. Either of these options is possible here—we simply cannot be sure. One scholar, by the way, Andre Lemaire of Paris, believes that he can read the same words BT.DWD “house of David” at the end of the Mesha Stele, but the reading is contested by other scholars; it is simply too difficult to reach a conclusion.²⁹

But since the Tel Dan inscription refers to both a king of Israel, to whom we referred earlier, and a king of the house of David—and since we know that there are two entities involved in Yahweh worship, Israel and Judah—we reach the tentative conclusion that “house of David” relates in some way to the entity known as Judah. Perhaps those scholars who believe that David refers to the founder of a royal dynastic line are correct; perhaps he was the first king of Judah, from whom the others, Hezekiah and so on, are descended.

We still would like to know where “the city of Judah” is located—what place served as the capital of this kingdom? The city that attracts our attention more than any other is Jerusalem. The name appears in Sennacherib’s prism inscription, mentioned earlier, with reference to Hezekiah, and thus it must have been the capital of Judah.³⁰ It is attested in an Aramaic letter from Elephantine in southern Egypt, near present-day Aswan, dated to the late fifth century B.C.E., in which the Jews of that community wrote to the high priest of Jerusalem.³¹ From this we learn that the city served not only as the capital of Judah, but also as the religious center of the country. The name is not well attested in Hebrew inscriptions from the land of Israel itself, but we do have a few references that help. Above we referred to the burial inscription from Khirbet Bet Lei that most likely mentions Judah: the same inscription clearly mentions Jerusalem,³² and a second inscription from the same site does also. Otherwise all that we possess is a single jar stamp from Lachish with the single word Y[R]ŠLM. None of this, of course, helps us locate the city, but here we must allow ourselves a little leeway, and take recognition of the living tradition of the Jews that the city of Jerusalem is located exactly where we know it to be. Indeed, excavations in the City of David section of Jerusalem have revealed prominent buildings, a well-developed water system, and other material remains, all pointing to a major urban center at the site.

To this point we have focused on the inscriptional evidence, which, as I indicated earlier, provides the most important material for the reconstruction of ancient Israelite history, giving us, for example, ample references to the names Israel and Judah, the god Yahweh, various kings, and more, with

only occasional asides to other archaeological finds, such as the architectural remains at Arad and Jerusalem. We now must bring the wealth of other archaeological material into the picture in a more sustained fashion, for only by using *all* the evidence at our disposal will we be able to assemble the clearest picture. Let us start with the most recent period and work backward. As noted above, the Babylonian annals indicate that Nebuchadnezzar conquered the land of Canaan in the early sixth century B.C.E. Does the archaeological record show evidence of this conquest? The answer is clearly yes, as can be seen in such places as Jerusalem, Lachish, and elsewhere. Among the most famous demonstrations of the point appears in Yigal Shiloh's excavation of the City of David, where the burnt debris is clearly dated to the early sixth century B.C.E.

At Lachish we possess not only evidence for the burning of the city by the Babylonians in an archaeological context datable to c. 600 B.C.E., but also inscriptional evidence of prime importance. I refer to the famous Lachish Letters discovered in the 1930s, which I have mentioned until now only in passing.³³ These letters are military missives, small bits of inscribed pottery called ostraca, in which we learn about various attempts to withstand the Babylonian attack, efforts which naturally were desperate and in the end unsuccessful.

If we look at the period about one hundred years earlier, we find Assyrian documentation relating to the attack on Judah in 701 B.C.E. Again we turn our attention to the prism inscription of King Sennacherib, in which he describes how he laid waste to forty-six cities in Judah, and in which he famously boasts that he kept King Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage."³⁴ Interestingly, however, he never boasts of having conquered Jerusalem, the capital city. More famously, we possess the fabulous artwork from the palace walls of Sennacherib's royal abode, which portray the assault and destruction of Lachish and the exile of numerous Judaeans.³⁵ When we look at the archaeological record, we see the destruction of Lachish very clearly, as ably documented by David Ussishkin.

Moving back in time a few decades, we turn our attention to the Assyrian destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel. The annals of Sargon II provide details, including the number of people taken into exile.³⁶ We can confirm that this king's troops marched through Canaan, because fragments of cuneiform texts mentioning this king were found at both Samaria and Ashdod. In addition, the archaeological record shows a dramatic decrease in the population of Galilee and other regions in northern Israel after 721 B.C.E.

Above we noted that we do not know exactly where the city of Samaria is to be found. As already mentioned, we know that YHWH could be referred to as YHWH ŠMRN, and we know that the Assyrians referred to the king of Israel as "the Samarian." Presumably one of the large excavated tells in the northern part of the country provides the location for the city of Samaria, but which one? Three candidates emerge: Hazor in the far north, Megiddo guarding the Jezreel Valley, and Samaria in the central hill country. Large public buildings have been found at all three, but the best candidate of the three to emerge is indeed the city of Samaria in the central hill country. In this location one finds the largest public building in the region, clearly identifiable as a palace. And once again it is inscriptional evidence that seals the case for us. A sizable collection of ostraca was found at the site, which clearly must be a series of tax receipts, recording quantities of wine and oil and other commodities flowing into the city, indicating that Samaria was a government center.

Samaria is our best candidate for the capital city of Israel, but there is something at Hazor and Megiddo that attracts our attention. From a slightly earlier period, from the tenth century B.C.E., these two cities, along with a third city, Gezer, in the region of Judah, have identical city-gate complexes. And it is not only the design of the three city-gate systems that is the same, but perhaps more significantly their dimensions (Figure 1).³⁷

FIGURE 1
*Dimensions of the Three 10th-Century
City-Gate Complexes (in Meters)*

	Megiddo	Hazor	Gezer
Length	20.3	20.3	19.0
Width	17.5	18.0	16.2
Entrance width	4.2	4.2	4.1
Wall width	1.6	1.6	1.6

We conclude that the two kingdoms, Israel and Judah, had close cooperation in the tenth century B.C.E., so much so that three of the largest cities of the two realms used the same Army Corps of Engineers, as it were, to construct their city gates.

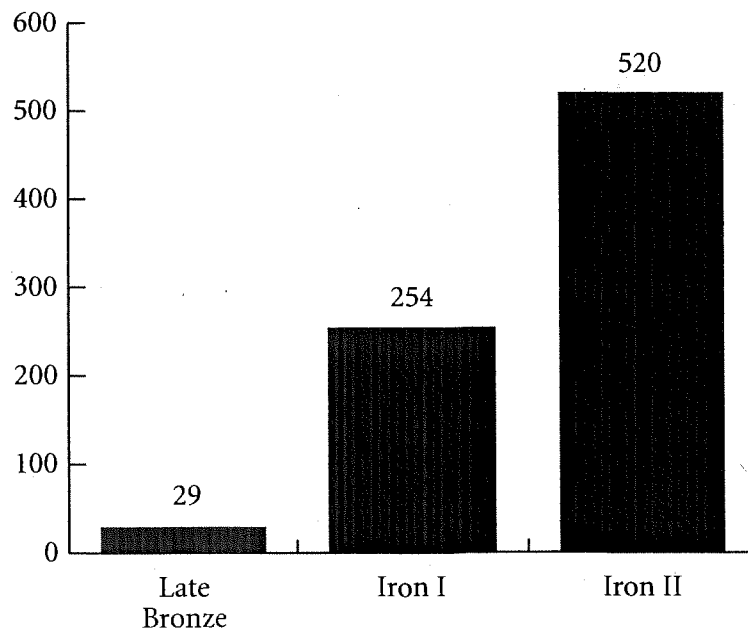
Apart from the Merneptah Stele from c. 1210 B.C.E., the depiction of Shasu-Israelites on the walls of the Karnak temple from the same period, and the references to the Shasu of YHWH from about a century earlier, we possess no further epigraphic or pictorial evidence for Israel from before the tenth century B.C.E. There is, however, archaeological evidence that

speaks to the origins of the people of Israel in the hill country of Canaan. Figure 2, based on the work of Israel Finkelstein, demonstrates that during the Late Bronze Age, that is, before 1200 B.C.E., the central hill country had very few settlements, but that during the Early Iron Age, that is, during the two centuries between 1200 and 1000 B.C.E., there is a burgeoning of settlements in the area.³⁸

We move from 29 settlements in the Late Bronze Age (fifteenth through thirteenth centuries B.C.E.) to 254 settlements in the Iron I period (twelfth and eleventh centuries B.C.E.) to 520 settlements in the Iron II period (tenth through seventh centuries B.C.E.). Clearly, there is a new population emerging in the central hill country during the Iron Age.

Who were they? Can we identify their origins? The answer may be deduced from the nature of these settlements during this period. Archaeologists have noted that these sites are not real villages and certainly not cities, but instead have a specific oval-shaped formation, which leads scholars to call them elliptical sites. Furthermore, the interior of these ovals are empty, devoid of any construction: no houses, no buildings, simply empty. Who could have built settlements such as these? The layout—city planning would be too advanced a term here—reminds one of bedouin tent encampments. The bedouin construct their encampments in this fashion to create a pen or corral for their flocks, especially at night. During the

FIGURE 2
*Number of Settlements in the Central Hill Country during
the Late Bronze Age, Iron I, and Iron II*



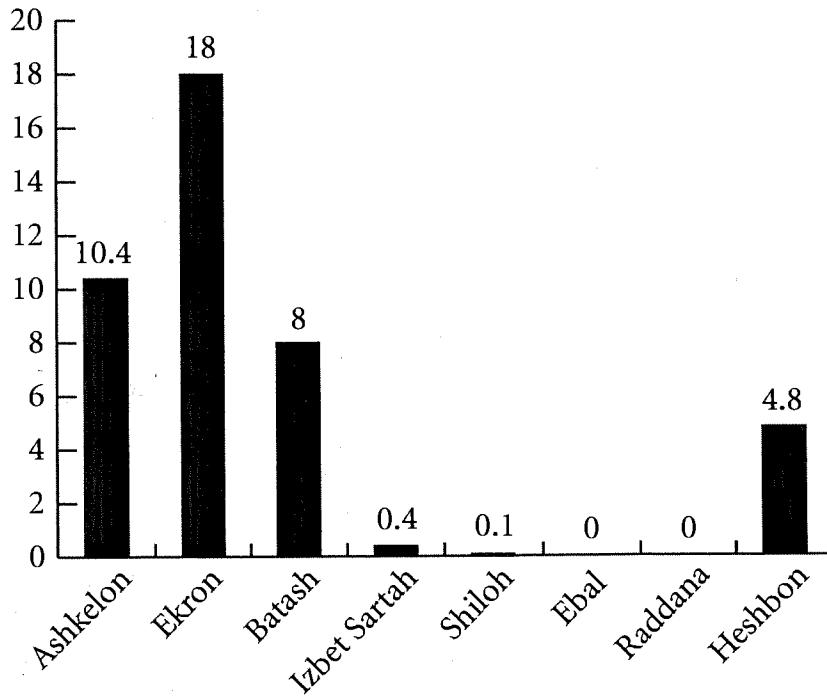
day, the sheep and goats are led to pasture by a team of shepherds, but at night only one or two shepherds are needed to guard an entire flock penned in by the surrounding tents. The elliptical sites in the central hill country presumably are of the same type, representing the sedentarization of pastoral nomads who have come off the desert fringe and have settled in the region.³⁹

The overall picture forthcoming from this line of research provides the missing link, as it were, between two parts of our puzzle. Earlier we concluded, based mainly on Egyptian evidence, that in its early stages Israel was a pastoralist or bedouin people, identified by the Egyptians as part of the larger Shasu group. At a later stage we see recognizably Israelite names—that is, personal names reflecting worship of Yahweh—abundant in the central hill country of Canaan. These elliptical sites provide the bridge: the earlier Israelite pastoralists must have settled in the region, built settlements reminiscent of their desert-fringe origins, and only later developed villages and eventually cities in the central hill country. At some point, these pastoralists, who presumably were organized in a tribal system, must have moved to a new form of government, a monarchy—or to be more specific, two monarchies: one called Israel in the north, and one called Judah in the south.

There is one more item of interest here, and that is the analysis of the animal remains from the archaeological sites in the central hill country. Archaeologists today catalogue everything they find: the obvious things such as pottery, and such less obvious things as the animals' bones unearthed. An analysis of the animal bones found at these presumably Israelite sites reveals something very striking: the total absence or near total absence of any pig bones (see Figure 3).⁴⁰ This fact is especially remarkable in comparison with other sites in the general region. Sites on the coast (Ashkelon, Ekron, and Batash), which we can identify with the Philistines in the historical record, show pig bones accounting for between 8 and 18 percent of the total animal bones unearthed; and Heshbon in Transjordan, which we assume to be a Moabite site given its proximity to Dibon, the site at which the Mesha Stele was found, has about 5 percent pig bones. In light of these neighboring sites, the lack of pig bones in the central hill country sites (Izbet Sartah, Shiloh, Ebal, and Raddana) is truly astounding.

To summarize in chronological order: Israel begins as a Shasu or bedouin-type people, referred to for the first time in an Egyptian text, the Merneptah Stele. In time, the people move into the central hill country

FIGURE 3
*Percentage of Pig Bones Found at Selected Archaeological Sites
 in Israel (Including One Site in Jordan)*



of Canaan. The first settlements there are of an elliptical type, suggesting their desert origins; we also note that these people abstained from eating pig. As time passed, the Israelites must have shifted from a tribal lifestyle to a monarchy; in fact, we have evidence of two monarchies, one in the south called Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem, whose royal line seems to have descended from the founding dynast named David, and one in the north called Israel, with its capital in Samaria, whose royal line seems to have descended from the founding dynast named Omri. The worship of the deity named YHWH shines through at every instance, in both of these kingdoms, though we also have one piece of evidence from each kingdom for a consort goddess named Asherah. The two kingdoms fought on the same side, apparently, in the middle of the ninth century B.C.E., against the kingdom of Aram to the north, as evidenced in the Tel Dan inscription. Slightly more than a century later, toward the end of the eighth century, the Assyrians arrived in the land, destroying the northern kingdom and attacking the southern kingdom as well. And a bit more than a century after that, in the early sixth century B.C.E., the Babylonians in turn unleashed their army in Canaan, which led to the destruction of Judah in general and the city of Jerusalem in particular.

If we lay the Bible on top of this evidence, the match is truly remarkable. The only aspect of the Bible's tale that is not clearly recognizable in the picture we have presented is the United Monarchy under David and Solomon.⁴¹ This is not to say that that element of the Bible's narrative is fictional. Quite the contrary: since so much else of the biblical material is confirmed by our exercise, we have every reason to believe that the descriptions of David and Solomon in the books of Samuel and Kings also reflect actual history. In fact, one crucial text from the Bible illustrates this more than any other: 1 Kings 9:15, which informs us that Solomon built the three cities of Gezer, Házor, and Megiddo. When we recall that it is specifically these three cities whose triple gates match so perfectly, all dated to the tenth century, it becomes nearly impossible to harbor any doubt about the historicity of the biblical material.

We began with the extreme statement that the Bible does not exist. Now that we have brought the Bible back into the picture here at the end of this enterprise, we may alter that comment and proclaim that cause for doubting the historicity of the Bible does not exist.⁴² The minimalist agenda is simply that—an agenda—unsupported by facts, driven by ideology alone, and not to be countenanced.

NOTES

1. See, for example (and note the title of the book), the brief treatment by W. F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963). See the next two footnotes for a more comprehensive survey of ancient Israelite history.

2. J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959; second edition 1972; third edition 1981).

3. Bright, *History of Israel*; the most recent (fourth) edition (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2000) includes an Introduction and Appendix by W. P. Brown.

4. A. Alt, *Die Landnahme der Israeliten in Palästina* (Leipzig: Reformationsprogramm der Universität, 1925). An English version appeared in a collection of Alt's essays decades later: "The Settlement of the Israelites in Palestine," in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 133–169.

5. The two names most commonly connected with the Peasant Revolt theory are G. Mendenhall, "The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine," *Biblical Archaeologist* 25 (1962): 66–87; and N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979).

6. For a recent statement, see S. D. Sperling, *The Original Torah* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 41–60, especially the statements on pp. 54 and 57, with the prepositions “in” and “to” in italics, exactly as I have reproduced them here.

7. T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974); and J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975).

8. M. W. Stolper, “Murashu, Archive of,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4 (1992), 927–928, especially 928.

9. The scholars most associated with this view are N.-P. Lemche, *The Israelites in History and Tradition* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1998); and T. L. Thompson, *The Mythic Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

10. For more detailed accounts of the current debate between the maximalists and the minimalists, with a critique of the latter, see the two recent books by W. G. Dever: *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); and *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).

11. The best collection of ancient inscriptions available in English translation is W. W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture*, 3 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997–2002), to be cited hereafter as COS. This work includes the entirety of the ancient Near East—that is, material not only from ancient Israel and its immediate environs, but from Egypt, Assyria, and Babylonia as well. In the remaining portion of this essay, I provide references to COS in the footnotes, to allow the reader to peruse the texts in English, along with the scholarly comments from the contributors to the three-volume set. If I do not cite COS, then the text under discussion simply is not included in this work, usually because the inscription is of a very minor nature. For the texts in the original Hebrew (and Moabite), including excellent photographs, see S. Ahituv, *Ha-ketav veva-Miktav* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 2005).

12. J. H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1986).

13. For a sampling of seals and bullae, see COS vol. 2, 197–201.

14. COS vol. 2, 221.

15. COS vol. 3, 78–81.

16. COS vol. 3, 81–86 (for the reference to BYT YHWH, see Arad letter no. 18, p. 84).

17. COS vol. 2, 171–172.

18. COS vol. 2, 137–138.

19. COS vol. 2, –261–264 (with specific mention of Ahab on p. 263).

20. Notwithstanding the well-deserved fame of this artifact, on prominent display in the British Museum, it was not included in COS because it is mainly visual, with only brief captions accompanying the pictures.

21. COS vol. 2, 161–162, especially 162.
22. COS vol. 2, 40–41 (only the portion of the inscription that mentions Israel is included).
23. These very important panels remain *in situ* at the Temple of Karnak in Luxor. Once more we are dealing with artwork, with only a few captions, and thus COS does not contain this evidence.
24. COS vol. 2, 302–303.
25. COS vol. 3, 85 (Arad letter no. 40).
26. COS vol. 2, 179–180.
27. COS vol. 1, 467–468, especially 468.
28. COS vol. 2, 161–162, especially 162.
29. Thus, for example, the translation in COS vol. 2, 137–138 (see the end of the text on 138) does not include the words “house of David.”
30. COS vol. 2, 302–303, in particular 303.
31. COS vol. 3, 128.
32. COS vol. 2, 180.
33. COS vol. 3, 78–81.
34. COS vol. 2, 303.
35. These magnificent panels are also on prominent display in the British Museum, where a separate room is dedicated to them.
36. COS vol. 2, 293–298, with the most detailed passages, including the number of people taken into exile (27,280 in one version, 27,290 in the other), on 295–296.
37. Data taken from W. G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990), 106 (for the layout of these gates, see p. 105).
38. I. Finkelstein, “The Rise of Early Israel: Archaeology and Long-Term History,” in S. Ahituv and E. D. Oren, eds., *The Origin of Early Israel—Current Debate* (Beer-Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 1998), 7–64. Finkelstein’s chart, on which Figure 2 is based, appears on p. 21.
39. I. Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988). Line drawings of elliptical sites and photographs of bedouin encampments may be found on pp. 239–246.
40. Chart based on Finkelstein, “The Rise of Early Israel,” 20.
41. I exclude from this statement the material in the book of Genesis, which describes the comings and goings of a family, not a nation. The historicity of these narratives needs to be judged on a separate basis. For my most recent statement on the patriarchal stories, see G. A. Rendsburg, “The Genesis of the Bible,” in *The Blanche and Irving Laurie Chair in Jewish History*, Separatum published by the Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey (2005), 11–30; available online at <http://jewishstudies.rutgers.edu/faculty/grendsborg/genesis.pdf>.
42. I realize that I have not dealt here with certain issues, most importantly the

Exodus and other matters related to earliest Israel. For a detailed treatment, see G. A. Rendsburg, "The Early History of Israel," in *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday*, ed. G. D. Young, M. W. Chavalas, and R. E. Averbeck (Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 1997), 433-453.

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