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Modern Archaeology and the Brass Plates

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Abstract

Contemporary Palestinian archaeology has produced two major threats to traditional interpretations of the history of ancient Israel. 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. And a 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 provided support for the widely embraced theory that everything from Genesis through Kings has been revised to promote the political and religious preeminence of Judah above the other tribes. The first effort is answerable in ways that preserve the exodus account, which is fundamental to the Book of Mormon as well as the Bible. The second does fit the archaeology and contemporary textual interpretations. 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.

In previous papers I have argued that in the historical and cultural context of late seventh-century BCE Jerusalem (1) Lehi and Nephi would have been seen as highly trained and wealthy scribes belonging to a Manassite scribal school,¹ and that (2) 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

¹ See my working paper, "Lehi and Nephi As Trained Manassite Scribes," 2021.

² See my working papers, "The Brass Plates in Context," 2021 and "An Everlasting Witness: Ancient Writings on Metal," 2021.

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 support or give helpful insight on 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 revolution has raised doubts 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. All of these challenges to the traditional

history 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. Albright had enormous influence in the middle decades of the twentieth century with an approach that exploited the Hebrew Bible as an authoritative 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 were less and less inclined to rely primarily on the Bible for guidance to historical interpretations. As 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 for Israel being proposed in recent decades take the archaeological

³ Mark 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 (1993): 34–53, for the analysis of a pre-eminent European insider on these developments. A more recent documentation and review of this debate can be found in Ann E. Killebrew, “The Emergence of Ancient Israel: The Social Boundaries of a ‘Mixed Multitude’ in Canaan,” in Aren M. Maeir and Pierre de Miroschedji (editors), *I Will Speak the Riddle of Ancient Times: Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 555–572.

⁴ William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, second edition, Doubleday, 1957.

findings as the facts that need to be explained as various hypothetical scenarios are advanced to make sense of those facts. Some are more willing than others to look for connections to 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 come from oral traditions that were not written down until sometime after the establishment of a national Hebrew script around 800 BCE. Inevitably, competing versions emerged from these transcriptions, which in turn were harmonized and edited—again by anonymous scribes—over the next two or three centuries. But no one claims to have an authoritative written account that goes back to Abraham, or even to Moses. And modern historians find ample room for their skepticism to operate when oral traditions are transcribed and then edited or rewritten to create a history going back so many centuries in time. Such late writing or rewriting is notorious for serving the contemporary agendas of the scribes who do the writing.

While the Hebrew Bible still provides a background of historical claims that archaeologists are constantly testing, the accumulating contradictions between biblical history and archaeological findings led many to conclude that the entire text is of relatively late composition and cannot be taken as objective history that can explain pre-exilic Palestinian archaeology accurately. In most cases, Old

⁵ Killebrew, “Mixed Multitudes,” 556–557.

Testament writers were centuries removed from the history they were relating. And they had no documentary connection to those earlier times. As a 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 that perspective, the peoples and stories from Genesis to David and Solomon are reduced to myths. Oral traditions were only transcribed after 800 BCE and the eventual composition of the Hebrew Bible is largely attributed by historians to anonymous post-exilic Jewish scribes.⁷

The Restoration to the rescue

⁶ Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know, and How Do We Know It?* (revised edition), 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*, edited by V. Philips Long (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 346–355, for a strong response to the idea that HB 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,”* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 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* XLVII, no. 3 (1997). For a recent, wide-ranging compilation of theories and evidences for and against the historicity of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, see *Israel’s Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective: Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience*, edited by Thomas E. Levy, Thomas Schneider, and William H. C. Propp, Springer, 2015.

While the revelation given to Nephi emphasized how the Nephite record would provide a much-needed second witness of the New Testament account of Jesus Christ to both Jews and Gentiles in the last days, 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 in two important ways. First, its own record beginning with Lehi, one of the unnamed Old Testament prophets who warned Jerusalem of its impending destruction by Babylon, echoed and extended many of the prophecies and teachings of the Old Testament. And second, that same Nephite record quotes repeatedly from the Brass Plates, another independent Israelite record going back to Abraham himself that includes the very history and prophecies that are exposed to such extensive doubt by scholars today.⁸

As described by Nephi and his successors, the Brass Plates address the root cause of modern scholarly scepticism directly. The Brass Plates version of Israelite

⁸ See my working paper, “The Brass Plates in Context: A Book of Mormon Backstory,” which explores at length both the history and the contents of Nephi’s Brass Plates.

history and prophecies does not depend on an undocumented process wherein oral traditions were gradually transcribed and edited as we have in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the Brass Plates of Nephi were manufactured using a collection of written prophecies and histories created and maintained by Abraham himself and his posterity in one of the Manassite lines across a full millennium.

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 that many scholars today are dismissing as late inventions. It specifically contained some 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. And it was written principally in Egyptian, a language and script that was fully available to Abraham, Joseph, and Moses, and it was preserved intact in final written form across all those centuries in which the other tribes of Israel appear to have relied on oral Hebrew-language traditions that had to be transcribed and harmonized in the seventh century in Jerusalem or even later.

Such a Manassite tradition recorded in Egyptian might go a long way to explain the high levels of coherence and credibility that many find in the Hebrew Bible—in spite of its many recognized problems. This hypothesized Manassite

scribal school did not live in a vacuum. Their vernacular 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 feared.

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, the scholarly world turned to the task of inventing a backstory that would explain the rise of a united nation of Israel in Palestine attached to a unique and powerful religious tradition—the Yahwism of the Israelite prophets.

Fortunately, archaeologists are increasingly cognizant of the limitations of both the methods and the data they use, and 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 radical perspectives, and collaborative approaches seem to be increasing in both frequency and influence. But it would have to be admitted that the conservatives 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.⁹

⁹ 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*, edited by Thomas E. Levy and Thomas Higham, Equinox Publishing, 2005, 444, and extends the

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 all 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.¹⁰

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.

¹⁰ Good discussions of these issues were published in the 1990s. For example, see Diana Vikander Edelman (editor), *Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past* (Sheffield Academic 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

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. And 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, leading archaeologists 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. It was not clear how much of the motivation for these developments was based on beliefs about good science and how much derived 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 divine causes.

This 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

Edinburgh's Iain W. Provan in his essay "Ideologies, Literary and Critical Reflections 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*, edited by V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 161–197.

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 like the Lord.¹¹ But without 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 did not have much to work with in their research efforts. Those were the stories 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 historians of the ANE and eastern Mediterranean region have tended to see

¹¹ 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 *magnus opus*. See Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, volumes 1 and 2, translated by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961 and 1967).

these centuries as a dark age caused by unrecorded but widespread natural disasters, prominent archaeologist William Dever—and many others following him—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,” which over the next four centuries was “dominated by the Israelite state.”¹²

There has been a lot of academic scepticism 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

¹² For a helpful and brief summary of these developments in the larger historical context see William C. Dever, “The Late Bronze—Early Iron I Horizon in Syria-Palestine: Egyptians, Canaanites, ‘Sea Peoples,’ and Proto-Israelites,” in William A. Ward and Martha Sharp Joukowsky, editors, *The Crisis Years: The 12th Century B.C.: From Beyond the Danube to the Tigris*, Kendall/Hunt, 1992, pp. 99–108. 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.

the increasingly influential theorists like Dever that characterize them as derived entirely from already existing populations, Anson Rainey is one who 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.¹³ 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.”¹⁴ He offers an earlier

¹³ See Austin F. Rainey, “Whence Came the Israelites and Their Language?” *Israel Exploration Journal* 57/1 (2007), pp. 41–64, “Redefining Hebrew—A Transjordanian Language,” *Maarav* 14 (2007), pp. 67–81, and “The Northwest Semitic Literary Repertoire and its Acquaintance by Judean Writers,” *Maarav* 15 (2008), pp. 193–205.

¹⁴ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), viii.

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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:

¹⁵ Ronald Williams, "'A People Come Out of Egypt': An Egyptologist Looks at the Old Testament," *Vetus Testamentum Supplements* 28 (1975), 231-232.

¹⁶ 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.

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.¹⁷

Dever's respect for Israel Finkelstein as a leading archaeologist is evident in his devotion of the majority of this section of his paper to 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. But, 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—and this in spite of 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

¹⁷ 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: 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. 125–127.

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.¹⁸

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 a number of ways that distinctive ancient Israelite ethnicity should be recognized by archaeologists and historians—against the trend of so many

¹⁸ See Karl Eric Knutsson, “Dichotomization and Integration: Aspects of inter-ethnic relations in Southern Ethiopia,” in Fredrik Barth (editor), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1969), 99.

contemporary histories.¹⁹

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."²⁰ 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.²¹

¹⁹ See Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 11.

²⁰ Israel Finkelstein, "Pots and People Revisited: Ethnic Boundaries in the Iron Age I," in Neil Asher Silberman and David Small (editors), *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 230.

²¹ See Ann E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel 1300–1100 B.C.E.* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), especially pp. 184–185 and her article "The Emergence of Ancient Israel: The Social Boundaries of a 'Mixed Multitude' in Canaan," in *I Will Speak the Riddles of Ancient Times (Abiah chidot minei-kedem—Ps 78:2b): Archaeological and Historical Studies in Honor of Amihai Mazar on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday*, edited by P. De Miroschedji

The strongest case for the early existence of an Israelite identity is based on the Merneptah Stele, 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 arose out of a far-away indigenous population in Palestine. As one recent scholar cautiously observes, this stele 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."²² Kletter provides an excellent review of the evidence for and against the existence of an ethnic Israel in earlier times.²³

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. I will mention here four good reasons why it makes sense for Bible believers to hold on to that traditional account.

and A. M. Maeir (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2005).

²² Raz Kletter, "Can a Proto-Israelite Please Stand Up? Notes on the Ethnicity of Iron Age Israel and Judah," in *I Will Speak the Riddle of Ancient Times*, pp. 581–582. Kletter builds on the earlier work of Edelman and others. See D. Edelman, "Ethnicity and Early Israel," in *Ethnicity in the Bible*, edited by M. G. Brett (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 39–53.

²³ See Kletter, "Can a Proto-Israelite Please Stand Up," 573–586.

Historical and Restoration-scripture support for the traditional account of the origin of the twelve tribes of Israel

It cannot be over-emphasized that all the modern accounts 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 reliance on divine intervention in their explanations. The four reasons for resisting those theories listed below are drawn from a longer list that could have been included.

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 advance the exodus account—that rests on repeated and constant divine intervention—without abandoning the principle of naturalism—an indispensable plank in the program 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 activity 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 evidences 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 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.²⁴ Hoffmeier brings his training as an Egyptologist and ANE 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*.²⁵ 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 Israel as an emergent and primarily indigenous population. Fourteen papers were published providing a wide range of reasons to reconsider the new model.²⁶

3. One 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 the covenant as they entered the promised land.²⁷

²⁴ See K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

²⁵ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidences for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) and *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁶ James K. Hoffmeier, Alan r. Millard, and Gary A. Rendsburg (editors), “*Did I Not Bring Israel out of Egypt?*” (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2016).

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

Because it seems to fit the biblical passage 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 in the course of his widely appreciated Manasseh Hill Country survey and came back later to begin excavation. Over a few seasons of work, a realization swept first over the workers, and then Zertal, that the correlation 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.²⁸

Zertal's preliminary scholarly version followed a year later in an academic

²⁸ 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 posted online a clear description of the discovery and the reasons why the most reasonable explanation is to identify it as Joshua's altar. See Zvi Koenigsberg, "Joshua's Altar on Mount Ebal: Israel's Holy Site Before Shiloh," downloaded July 13, 2021 from <https://www.thetorah.com/article/joshuas-altar-on-mount-ebal-israels-holy-site-before-shiloh>.

journal.²⁹ While there have been several brief reviews—mostly skeptical or dismissive—in academic journals, the only comprehensive academic treatment of this discovery is available since 2012 in the sympathetic and revised Andrews University dissertation of Ralph Hawkins.³⁰

Reviewing the 28 professional archaeologists that had written anything about the Mt. Ebal site, Hawkins found that 21 were willing publicly to call it a cultic site while 7 held out for other possibilities—but without serious, detailed consideration of all the evidence. With two decades of perspective, Hawkins reviewed and analyzed the range of scholarly responses.³¹ 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. The main structure and the surrounding plaza were intact, including numerous artifacts that helped to date and identify cultural types. For example, two Egyptian scarabs led to a dating around

²⁹ 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): 105–165. Zertal eventually published his own personal Hebrew language account of the entire experience from start to finish in A. Zertal, *A Nation is Born: The Altar on Mount Ebal and the Emergence of Israel* (Tel Aviv: Yedioth, 2000). A poorly edited English translation can be found online.

³⁰ See Ralph K. Hawkins, *The Iron Age I Structure on Mt. Ebal: Excavation and Interpretation* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

³¹ Hawkins, *The Iron Age I Structure*, 193–199.

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 with a much more complicated design 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.³²

Skeptical archaeologists have not bothered to take a close look at this site or the published reports, but have relied on their own reputations in pronouncing offhand and dismissive alternative theories. 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 ignored by most of the archaeological community.

³² See Zertal, "Cultic Site on Mount Ebal," 154–158. 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* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), 60–61.

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.³³ 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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ But most of the 75 direct references to Moses cite either the law of Moses or prophecies given by Moses about the future coming of Christ or other future events—none of which prophecies 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.

³³ 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): 131–156.

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

³⁵ Helaman 8: 11–15. Cf. Alma 36:28.

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.³⁶

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

³⁶ 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). For a documentation and exposition of this biblical pattern see Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), especially pp. 23–90.

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].”³⁷ 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.”³⁸ But other principal themes of the historical books in HB 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

³⁷ See Jacob 2:24.

³⁸ 2 Nephi 5:16.

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.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

This southern bias in the Hebrew Bible had its effect on the first generations

³⁹ 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*, Simon and Schuster, 2001. See evidences for the early preeminence of the Josephite tribes in Kristin Weingart, “All These are the Twelve Tribes of Israel,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82, no. 1 (2019): 24–31.

⁴⁰ The huge literature on this subject was well summarized by Steven L. McKenzie in “Deuteronomistic History,” s.v., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* II:160–168 (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

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, which became the permanent capital of the northern kingdom throughout the time of the Omride dynasty and its successors until its destruction by the Assyrians. The 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.⁴¹

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.⁴² Combined with the earlier work at Samaria, Zertal's work has provided an invaluable foundation for all subsequent efforts to

⁴¹ See George Andrew Reisner, Clarence Stanley Fisher, and David Gordon Lyon, "The Israelite Period," *Harvard Excavations at Samaria. 1908–1910*, volume 1, Harvard University Press, 1924, pp. 91–122.

⁴² See the preface in Adam Zertal, *The Manasseh Hill Country Survey: Volume I: The Shechem Syncline*, Brill, 2004 for a background description of this massive project. First published in Hebrew, it is now available in the comprehensive, five-volume, Brill English version.

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 full third of all settlement sites in the new Land of Israel were in the Manasseh area and that it contained fully half of the national population.⁴³

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

⁴³ Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement*, Brill, 1988, 332-333. 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.

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 and the archaeological findings 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.⁴⁴ 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 a majority of Palestinian archaeologists and historians.⁴⁵

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

⁴⁴ See Noel B. Reynolds, “The Brass Plates in Context: A Book of Mormon Backstory,” working paper, May 12, 2021.

⁴⁵ 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: Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel*, Society of Biblical Literature, 2013.

would emerge as the first real, full blown state in Iron Age Palestine.”⁴⁶ He proposed this “low chronology,” and it has since been adopted by most Palestinian archaeologists.⁴⁷ 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.”⁴⁸ It shifts the big change and the rise of the United Monarchy from 1000 to 900 BCE. 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.”⁴⁹ 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.”⁵⁰ As Finkelstein sums up,

⁴⁶ See 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.”

⁴⁷ In Ze’ev Herzog and Lily Singer-Avitz, “Redefining the Centre: The Emergence of State in Judah,” *Tel Aviv* 31, no. 2 (2004): 209–244, 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.

⁴⁸ Grabbe, *Ancient Israel*, 83.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *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

from the archaeological perspective, the line between the Iron I and 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.⁵¹

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.⁵²

Finkelstein’s Low Chronology has facilitated a productive reconciliation of Palestinian archaeology with the generally accepted view of Bible scholars that the

Yosef Garfinkel and Madeleine Mumcuoglu, “The Temple of Solomon in Iron Age Context,” *Religions*, online publication 15 March 2019 at <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/3/198>, accessed July 8, 2021.

⁵¹ Finkelstein, “Archaeology of the United Monarchy,” 185.

⁵² Israel Finkelstein, “A Low Chronology Update: Archaeology, history and bible,” in *The Bible and Radiocarbon Dating: Archaeology, Text and Science*, edited by Thomas E. Levy and Thomas Higham, Equinox Publishing, 2005, 39.

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.⁵³

It should be noted that there are a number of distinguished historians and archaeologists that are not yet ready to adopt the revisionist interpretations of the archaeology advanced by Finkelstein and others.⁵⁴ 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 the pottery and dating theories for a selection of archaeological sites that calls Finkelstein's chronology

⁵³ Israel Finkelstein, "First Israel, Core Israel, United (Northern) Israel," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 82 (2019), 9–12.

⁵⁴ 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 Yairah Amit, Ehud Ben Zvi, Israel Finkelstein, and Oded Lipschits (editors), *Essays on Ancient Israel in its Near Eastern Context*, Eisenbrauns, 2006, pp. 255–272.

into question.⁵⁵

Josephite scribes relocated to Jerusalem

The Assyrian conquest of Israel in 722 BCE and the reinvigoration of its destruction and displacement of peoples by Sennacherib after 701 BCE had driven thousands of refugees of Manasseh, Ephraim, and other northern tribes south and the population of the Judean hill country to Jerusalem during the late eighth and early seventh centuries as the city's estimated population of 1000 exploded to about 15,000.⁵⁶ It is generally assumed that these refugee groups consisted mostly of elites possessed of wealth or valuable skills, who would have been prime targets

⁵⁵ 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 Riddle of Ancient Times,"* 587–611.

⁵⁶ 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 their *The Bible Unearthed*, pp. 243 ff. These updated numbers are much higher than the original archaeologist's estimates of a fourfold expansion as reported in Magen Broshi's "The Expansion of Jerusalem in the Reigns of Hezekiah and Manasseh," *Israel Exploration Journal* 24 (1974): 21–26. Nadav Na'aman's attack on 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, in which he relied primarily on the biblical text, was answered immediately by Finkelstein using the archaeological evidence in "The Settlement History of Jerusalem in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries BC," *Revue Biblique* 115, no. 4 (Octobre 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."

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.⁵⁷

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

⁵⁷ See the detailed and beautifully illustrated account of the Jerusalem excavations by Broshi's colleague: Nahman Avigad, *Discovering Jerusalem*, Thomas Nelson, 1980, p. 31.

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.⁵⁸

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.⁵⁹ 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

⁵⁸ Israel Finkelstein, "The Rise of Jerusalem and Judah: The Missing Link," *Levant* 33, no. 1 (2001): 111.

⁵⁹ See the extensive background provided by Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, 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, Penn State University Press, 2006, 291–349.

southern Samaria.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Finkelstein, “Settlement History of Jerusalem,” 515.

⁶¹ Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed*, 223.

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 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 for 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.