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ethnic Israel

Kletter, Raz

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In the Footsteps of Bagira

Ethnicity, archaeology, and 'Iron Age I ethnic Israel'

The present paper focuses on Iron I 'Israel', reviewing recent literature and asking why this topic remains so 'hot' in research.

Introduction

This article, expanding on an earlier work (Kletter 2006), has two aims. The first is to show that the search for ethnicity in archaeology is dependent on the way ethnicity is defined and on written sources. The second is to review studies of Iron Age I 'ethnic Israel'. There is an ongoing, heated debate between 'maximalists' and 'minimalists', trying to prove or refute such identity. Which side in this debate is right?

Ethnicity and archaeology

Definitions of ethnicity

William Dever begins a discussion of Israelite ethnicity with a definition:

Let us begin by defining the phenomenon that we seek to observe, namely ethnicity, or 'peopleness'. By 'ethnic group' I mean (following Barth and others) simply [*sic*] a population that is (1) biologically self-perpetuating; (2) shares a fundamental, recognizable, relatively uniform set of cultural values, including language; (3) constitutes a partly independent 'interaction sphere'; (4) has a membership that defines itself, as well as being defined by others, as a category... and (5) perpetuates its sense of separate identity... (Dever 1993: 23)

Fredrik Barth (1969: 10–11) did indeed mention this definition – though not as his own, but as a *former* definition; one which he strongly rejected a few lines later:

My quarrel is not so much with the substance of these characteristics, though as I shall show we can profit from a certain change of emphasis; my main objection is that such a formulation prevents us from understanding the phenomenon of ethnic groups and their place in human society and culture. This is because it begs all the critical questions... (Barth 1969: 11)

Misunderstanding Barth, following a primordial, pre-Barthian definition, Dever wonders how one can doubt that

we do have a distinct, new ethnic group here. The only question seems to be whether we can label them 'Israelites'... Ethnic 'Israelites' – or better (as hereafter) 'Proto-Israelites' – possessed of an overall material culture that led directly on into the true, full-blown Iron Age culture of the Israelite Monarchy of the 10th century BCE and later. That cultural continuity alone would entitle us to regard these Iron I villagers as the authentic progenitors of later biblical 'Israel', i.e., as presumed 'Proto-Israelites'. (Dever 1993: 23–4)

Is Proto-Israelites a better term than Israelites? We are not dealing with biological evolution whereby Proto-Israelites are mutating into Israelites. Ethnicity does not work backward: ethnic groups are formed at a certain time. They do not evolve from 'Proto-Ethnic' groups that are themselves already ethnic groups. Five years later Dever presents the minimalists as manifestations of the anti-Christ:

A threat to biblical studies, to Syro-Palestinian archaeology, to theoretical and religious studies, to the life of synagogue and church, and even to

the political situation in the Middle East [*sic*].
(Dever 1998: 39)¹

He brings up three Iron Age I sites where ‘archaeological data attest to ethnicity beyond any reasonable doubt’: Gezer, Izbet Sartah, and Ekron, with Canaanite, Proto-Israelite, and Philistine ethnicities, respectively (Dever 1998: 47). While the conclusions may be correct, the arguments are not. The notion that Gezer is Canaanite, or Ekron Philistine, derives from decades of studies based on written sources. The cities and their material cultures were first identified on the basis of written sources; presenting them as independent archaeological examples constitutes circular reasoning.

In yet another paper Dever continues to equate pots and peoples, material cultures and ethnic groups:

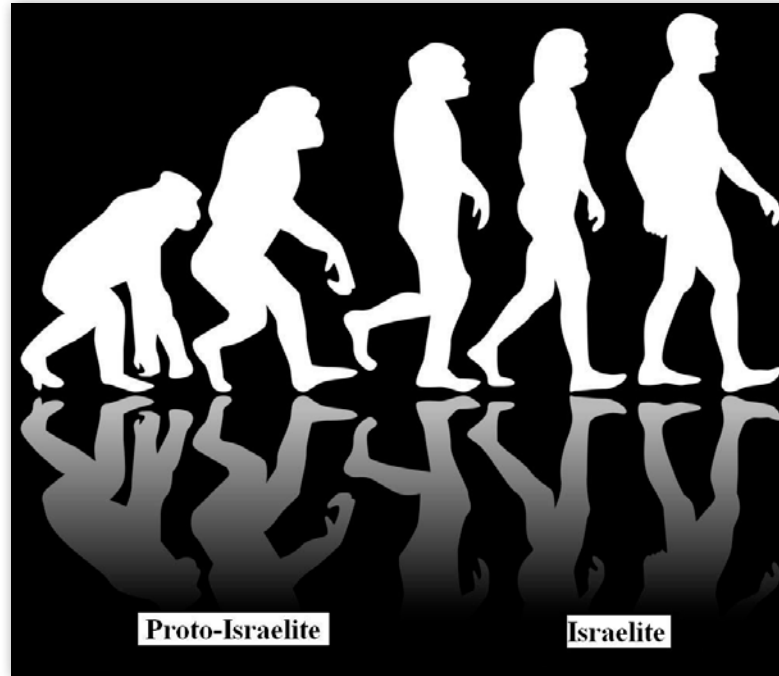
This extensive complex of many types of diverse but related data constitutes what archaeologists call an ‘assemblage.’ And such an assemblage is always assumed to have cultural, and therefore what I would call ‘ethnic,’ significance. (Dever 2007: 49)

An assumed relation becomes a direct equation. Dever blames others for inadequate or unrealistic definitions of ethnicity, and says that he follows Barth:

Much of the current frustration and apparent failure in recognizing ‘ethnicity in the archaeological record’ is due, I believe, to (1) inadequate or unrealistic definitions of ‘ethnicity;’ and (2) the lack of an appropriate analytical methodology, especially in assessing ‘ethnic traits’ in material culture remains. Elsewhere I have drawn on the work of the eminent anthropologist and ethnographer Fredrik Barth (1969) in order to define an ‘ethnic group’ as a population that is (1) biologically self-perpetuating; (2) shares a fundamental, recognizable, relatively uniform set of cultural values ... (Dever 2007: 53)

Yet, in his view Barth’s view is limited – ‘best suited to the analysis of modern, not ancient, cultures’ (Dever 2007: 53 – without bringing any evidence in support of this assertion). For Dever (*ibid.* 53) the primary task remains to find a set of distinctive archaeological ‘ethnic traits’. He presents such a trait-list for ancient

1 Notice the missing ‘other’ here: Islam.



Ethnic groups do not evolve from ‘proto-ethnic’ ethnic groups. One cannot ascribe antiquity to ethnic groups on such basis (adapted from ‘evolution of man’ by architect Hans-Stotijn).

Israel and concludes with accusations against the ‘minimalists’:

The current ideologically driven trend to deny the earliest Israelites their ethnic identity is ominous... . Fortunately, there is ample empirical evidence from archaeology to frustrate this scheme and to discredit its perpetrators. (Dever 2007: 60)

A scientific debate should be argued with logic. Such harsh polemics only discredit the maximalist cause. Dever uses material culture as synonym for ethnicity; he does not follow Barth, but holds a pre-Barthian view.

Barth (1969) turned the understanding of ethnicity upside down. It is not possession of cultural features (language, religion, etc.) that makes social groups distinct, but social interactions between groups that renders the differences visible or meaningful (Malešević 2004: 2–3). Barth saw ethnic groups as units of ascription maintaining dynamic (social, not material) boundaries. Ethnicity is socially constructed (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 7–10). Anthony Smith’s ‘ethno-symbolism’ defines an ethnic community as a group of people who share most of the following:



Chinese shop, San Francisco. Any object can be an Ethnic Marker. Not the price, material, shape, or use matter, but the feelings attached to the object.

- 1) a collective proper name;
- 2) a myth of common ancestry;
- 3) historical memories;
- 4) one or more differentiating elements of common culture;
- 5) an association with a specific homeland (which may be symbolic);
- 6) a sense of solidarity among at least parts of the group. (Smith 1991: 21; cf. Smith 1981: 66; 1986; Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 5-7)

Smith maintains some relation to material culture (point 4 above), but it is of secondary importance. The core of ethnicity lies in shared myths, memories, and associations; that is, *feelings and perceptions*, not material objects. Ethnic groups are a form of imagined community (Anderson 1983). Separating 'us' from 'them' is based on the way a group identifies itself and is identified by others.² Hence, no fixed

2 In this regard, the term 'Proto-Israelite' is meaning-

'trait list' of ethnic markers exists. Anything may be an ethnic marker; what is important is not the object itself (material, size, price), but the feelings attached to it. Each community develops unique and changing markers: certain songs, a decoration on a pot, the way one moves a hand in greeting.

Other definitions of ethnicity maintain no relation to material culture. For example, for Jones an ethnic group is

any group of people who set themselves apart and/or are set apart by others with whom they interact or co-exist on the basis of their perceptions of cultural differentiation and/or common descent. (Jones 1997: xii, cf. 84)³

less: nobody ever used this term for self-definition, or was called by others Proto-Israelite.

3 Jones should have perhaps used 'and' instead of 'and/or'. Without self sense of solidarity or identity there can be no ethnic community (Smith 1981: 68).

John Boardman (2006) believes that ethnicity is a modern construct that should not be applied to ancient periods. However, I follow Smith in that while the use of the term 'ethnicity' is modern, it existed and could be important in ancient periods too.

Can archaeology retrieve ethnicity?

In the wake of Barth, archeologists began to ask whether ethnicity can be identified from material remains. An early study by Kathryn Kamp and Norman Yoffee (1980) is typical: it starts optimistically, but ends up much less so. Kamp and Yoffee call for an 'entirely new approach', which 'focuses on the behaviors that generate differences in the material culture of ethnic groups', using statistics and clusterings of material features. However, they admit in the conclusions that they are not certain 'exactly what types of behavior are most indicative of ethnic identity' and that 'any attempt to distinguish ethnic differences on the basis of these types of patterned behavior is highly speculative and a matter for empirical research' (Kemp and Yoffee 1980: 96–7).

Randall H. McGuire (1982) reaches conclusions about ethnic communities, based on detailed church registers and other records of nineteenth-century AD Virginia. He identifies historically-known ethnic groups in archaeological remains, not *vice versa*.

Geoff Emberling (1997: 305) notes that 'differences in almost any crucial feature can distinguish one ethnic group from another' and that 'material culture can mark salient social identities (at least when we know what to look for)' (*ibid.* 310). How do we know what to look for concerning ethnic groups, unless we have at least a clue from external sources, such as the group's name? Emberling believes that archaeology can detect ethnicity in a certain sample of prehistoric pottery from Mesopotamia; but the case remains inconclusive. Detailed statistics and analyses of context, use and distribution are essential in archaeology; but archaeologists cannot retrieve ethnic feelings and perceptions.

Siân Jones (1997: 85–92; cf. 1999: 227) tries to solve the problem by using Bourdieu's concept of the *habitus*:

Through the analysis of spatial organization, modes of production, architectural styles and so on, archaeologists can explore the ways in which discursive systems of difference intersect with the values and modes of practice, the *habitus*, which characterized particular historical contexts. (Jones 1997: 230)

However, he fails to show how it can actually retrieve ethnicities by archaeological means. Alexander H. Joffe suggested that there are two ways of progressing:

We can build our understanding of ethnicity from the top down, from texts and 'history'... or from the bottom up, from different types of archaeological evidence. (Joffe 2001: 213)

How can we achieve the latter without the former? As an example, Joffe (2001) interprets pottery assemblages from Tyre, Megiddo, and Lachish along ethnic lines; but, like Dever's example, it is not an archaeological case. In the background 'lurk' historical sources referring to the Phoenicians, Israelites, and Judahites, respectively. They, not the material remains, are the reason why the cities were identified with these peoples.

The conclusion to the first issue raised in this article is that archaeology cannot identify ethnic groups without the help of written sources. Jonathan Hall reached similar conclusions in a study on Greek ethnicity:

It is, therefore, hopeless to believe that archaeological evidence can identify ethnic groups in the past ... [T]he obvious conclusion to be drawn, perhaps unpalatable to some, is that the entire enterprise has little chance of success in situations where the only evidence to hand is archaeological. (Hall 1997: 100)⁴

How do written sources reveal ethnic identities? The question is rather one of interpretation: how do we decide that a certain written source is reliable? This subject, however, lies beyond the scope of the present article.

Ethnic groups and prehistory

If the conclusion that historical sources are needed in order to identify ethnic groups is correct, it follows that we cannot identify ethnic groups in prehistory (before c. 3500 BC).

At a first glance, this seems to contradict prehistorians (e.g., Henry 1995: 2; Bar-Yosef 1991: 383; Simmons 2004) who discuss ethnic groups. However, rather than 'prove' ethnic groups, they speak

4 Later Hall (2002) discussed 'Hellenism' in the Classical period; see also various papers in Tsentskladze 2006.

about material cultures/assemblages in ethnic terms. To some extent it has the effect of making discussions of prehistory reader-friendly. After all, there is no 'prehistoric genre' distinct from historical writing. Prehistorians must present prehistory in terms of history, with peoples as active agents behind the remains.

An interesting paper by Zeev Herzog and Ofer Bar-Yosef (2002) compares ethnicity in the Negev region in prehistory and in the Iron Age. The authors interpret differences in the typology of stone tools as representing 'social entities of some kind', or ethnic groups. For example, the 'Mushabian' and 'Geometric Kebaran' people made certain tools between 14,500–12,800 BP, and were replaced by 'Natufians' who used other types of tools. The 'ethnic labels' are taken from names of sites (material cultures are often named after sites, usually places where they were first defined). The authors are aware that such differences between assemblages can be explained by a host of other reasons (Herzog and Bar-Yosef 2002: 155). Nothing proves that such segments of time/place are evidence of discrete ethnic groups (Pirie 2004).

For later Neolithic remains, Herzog and Bar-Yosef (2002: 156) embrace a non-ethnic explanation, though in their view these remains indicate a much more 'complex social system' in comparison to earlier periods. Did ethnic groups disappear in the Neolithic period? Or perhaps such changes of material culture do not necessarily denote ethnic changes?

Herzog and Bar-Yosef (2002: 170) identify several 'assemblages' in the Iron Age I and think that several ethnic groups existed at this period. In their view, in the era of the United Monarchy (tenth century BC) the Negev people shed their former ethnicities, bonding into one 'new Israelite shared identity'. However, 'this was a short-lived ethnic identity, one that was never defined by name'. Soon it split into the 'national (political and ethnic) states' of Israel and Judah (*ibid.* 172).

Can there be an anonymous ethnic group? How could members or 'others' speak of and conceive of such a group?⁵ That the ethnic groups are not archaeologically 'built-in', but restored from biblical sources, can be seen from changes in Herzog's view once he joins the Low Chronology. The 'hard archaeological data' of the 'new scientific era' of the Low Chron-

5 Mullen (1997: 67) writes: 'though it might seem obvious, the historical mark of all ethnic groups is a collective name'. Compare Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6.

Raz Kletter



Ethnic groups most likely existed in Prehistory, but we cannot fish them out, since we have no written clues. Ice fishing, Pirita River, Estonia.

ology⁶ shows only rural communities in the Negev and a 'desert polity' at Tel Masos in the assumed time of the United Monarchy (Herzog and Singer-Avitz 2004: 232–4, 236). The earlier-mentioned 'Israelite shared identity' of the United Monarchy evaporates. It could not have done so if it was really based on material remains.

It seems that Herzog and Bar-Yosef use two different definitions of ethnicity in the same paper. Concerning prehistory, their so-called 'more loose' definition is primordial or pre-Barthian. Concerning the Iron Age, they reject a primordial definition and use a post-Barthian one. The two views are discrete, and the paper is better read as two separate papers.

Prehistoric material cultures can be identified, but we cannot know whether they represent ethnic groups. There is no reason to doubt the existence of ethnic communities at least in later prehistory. However, we are unable to 'fish them out', because we do not have any written clues – not even a collective name.

Why is Bagira Finnish?

Krista Keltanen has kindly allowed me to reproduce a photo from the Helsinki pet cemetery (see the following page). Imagine an archaeologist – who has absolutely no written data about the Finnish people

6 On the methodological grounds of the 1990s Low Chronology see Kletter 2004. They have not improved since.



Helsinki pet cemetery.

– excavating this place in 3000 AD. Would s/he be able to retrieve Finnish ethnicity from the material remains?

The written inscription is the key. It is in the Finnish language:

Our most faithful friend,
member of our family,
and the best mother,
Bagira.

Notice that the name, Bagira, is not a particularly Finnish name; the name alone might mislead our archaeologist. If the inscription can be deciphered, and the language defined, it is a good start. Remove the inscription or make it unreadable – what makes this place a Finnish place?

The plastic bone might come from China; the dog species and dog cloth are not indicative; the certain type of stone can be imported or local, but if local, perhaps it is used for economic or religious reasons, not because of ethnic sensibilities. Maybe the white

wooden lamp is a Finnish ethnic marker? Remember: our archaeologist has no clear concept of Finnish, no map of Finland in mind; only a distribution area of lamps, which cuts the distribution zones of certain finds and matches with others. The archaeologist may see an ‘assemblage’ and label it ‘the white-lamp culture’. We may speak about the people who used white lamps; but we would not know if the physical border of the white-lamp culture match the imaginary boundaries of an otherwise unknown ethnic group.

Ethnicity and archaeology in Iron Age I

To the rescue of ethnic Israel

In the past, many material traits were listed as ‘primordial’ evidence for Iron Age I Israelite ethnic markers: four-room houses, collared-rim jars, certain cooking pots, continuity with later cultures, etc. Marit Skjeggstad (1992) was the first to show that in the post-Barthian world all these traits are inconclusive evidence.

In response, scholars tried to demonstrate proof of an ‘ethnic Iron I Israel’, often by suggesting additional traits (Dever discussed above; Dever 1993: 22*–33*; Finkelstein 1996, 1997; Joffe 1999). Yet, such traits are inadequate for the retrieval of ethnic groups, and at times, these efforts border on the absurd:

Pig taboos are emerging as the main, if not the only avenue that can shed light on ethnic boundaries in the Iron I. (Finkelstein 1996: 206)

A single avenue cannot be the main avenue; the interpretation is based on customs described in biblical sources and is not an independent archaeological case (cf. Harris 1996; Hesse and Wapnish 1997: 238–70). In addition, this is negative evidence. If we interpret lack as ethnic avoidance, we can find ethnic groups everywhere, because material cultures/assemblages are always defined in comparison to others; they *always* lack some traits that other assemblages have.

Some of the above-mentioned traits appear outside areas presumably settled by Israelites; others exist in the Late Bronze Age and are not unique; or may relate to other factors than ethnicity (Lemche 1985; Edelman 1996; Bloch-Smith 2003: 407–11). One clear-cut difference is found in burial customs (Kletter 2002). Yet, nothing shows that this is an ethnic marker (pass Faust 2004; Faust and Bunimovitz 2008: 151). No list of traits can induce ancient Israel to ‘stand up’.

Still, many archaeologists continue to try to

salvage 'ethnic Iron I Israel'. Adam Zertal (1998) defines the problems in terms of whether *ethnoi* existed and whether archaeology can identify them. He presents a list of archaeological 'variables' that in his view are unique to the highland sites, and writes that he uses the term 'elements' 'in respect to population groups until their ethnic identity has been demonstrated' (Zertal 1998: 243; can peoples be 'elements?'). Yet, he immediately states: 'long denied by different scholars, this ethnic identity is suggested here as having been Israelite' (*ibid.* 243). This begs the question whether an ethnic group which Zertal takes for granted actually existed.

Zertal concludes that the results of his surveys and Mount Ebal excavations suggest that 'the newcomers were early Israelites, already aware of their national identity' (*sic*, Zertal 1998: 248). This begs a second question, as to whether archaeology can identify ethnic groups; since the identification of 'Israelites' does not stem from the 'elements' (the surveys and excavations); but from the biblical sources. If like Zertal we accept Joshua 24 as describing accurate Iron Age I reality, we do not need archaeology to 'prove' Israelite ethnicity.

Thomas E. Levy and Augustin F. C. Holl hold a primordial view of ethnicity: they take 'Israelite ethnic identity' for granted, based on 'archaeological research and the work by Biblical historians' (Levy and Holl 2002: 90). The Merneptah Stele alone is considered to be enough to show 'the presence of the Israelite ethnic group in Canaan' (*ibid.* 91).

In a remarkable discussion, Elisabeth Bloch-Smith concludes:

Ironically, it was Israel Finkelstein, now leading a revisionist contingent, who claimed to validate the early dates with archaeological evidence.

In his central highlands survey, Finkelstein identified as 'Israelite' ... hundreds of hamlets and farm-steads ... Nearly two decades later, not a single feature of those settlements may be conclusively identified as exclusively 'Israelite'. (Bloch-Smith 2003: 401–2)

Bloch-Smith (2003: 405) advocates a 'more flexible' definition of ethnicity. She distinguishes Israelites from Philistines: the Israelites sport short beards, abstain from pork, and are circumcised; but these traits are not unique to Israelites and may have been shared by others, such as the Canaanites (*ibid.* 412–23). Still, 'faint traces of the Iron I Israelite *ethnos* are discernible in material remains interpreted in con-

junction with biblical testimony' (*ibid.* 425). This reconstruction is based on the Merneptah Stele and on biblical sources. It is possible, but not conclusive. The biblical sources may project back customs and feelings that did not exist in the Iron Age I. What settles the issue is the attitude one holds towards the written sources, not the various material traits.

Ann E. Killebrew (2005) discussed Egyptians, Canaanites, Israelites and Philistines, from the outset accepting the biblical story about these peoples as distinct ethnic groups and trying to corroborate it by means of pottery: in

a detailed typological and technological analysis of thirteenth–twelfth century C.E. pottery in Canaan, the most ubiquitous archaeological artifact, serves as a case study in the demarcation of social boundaries corresponding to each of these biblical groups ... I conclude that ethnicity in its diverse manifestations can be identified under certain circumstances in the archaeological record. Specifically, during the thirteenth to eleventh centuries B.C.E. it is possible to delineate the social and cultural boundaries of the Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Israelites. (Killebrew 2005: 2)

Killebrew mentions a wide range of schools and methodologies in her introduction (Killebrew 2005: 3–7), but discusses ethnicity only very briefly (*ibid.* 8–10). She places Smith among the primordialists; and, rather than choose one definition, she claims that in her use of the term she uses a 'more fluid middle ground that combines the primordial and circumstantial approaches as a more appropriate approach to ethnicity' (*ibid.* 9). Can these different approaches be merged by a stroke of pen? A 'fluid middle ground' does not exist.

Killebrew gives hardly any discussion of how ethnicity can be retrieved from archaeology. She suggests that there was a return in recent years to recognizing ethnicity in material culture 'in certain instances' (Killebrew 2005: 9). The challenge to the archaeologists is

to attempt to define and delineate case studies in the archaeological record in order to begin to construct paradigms for the interpretation of cultural diversity or uniformity. This book argues that the transition between the Late Bronze II and Iron I periods presents such an opportunity to examine the relationship

between material culture, stylistic diversity, and social and ethnic boundaries. (Killebrew 2005: 9–10)

The wording is beautiful, but the problems remain. If the research question is whether the archaeological record reflects ethnic groups, the latter should not be pre-supposed from written sources. If the aim is to frame paradigms concerning relations between ethnicities mentioned in written sources and archaeology, Iron Age I Palestine – under such a fierce debate – is perhaps not the best test case. Concerning the Canaanites,

the biblical Canaanites were not a cohesive ethnic group bound together by common ideology or ancestry. Both textual and archaeological evidence indicates that they comprised both indigenous peoples and newcomers from a mixed background. (Killebrew 2005: 249)

Leaving aside the question whether ‘biblical Canaanites’ are the same as the LB-Iron I Age people that left material remains, a group of people that are not bound together by ideology cannot be an ethnic group. Killebrew dismisses the category ‘Canaanite’ as a single ethnic group; yet, their breaking apart leaves particles that are all grasped in ethnic terms: the ‘mixed background’ means mixed *ethnic* background. Ethnicity is grasped as a basic commodity, so a person who lost his ethnic identity must immediately acquire another. As for Israel,

it is difficult to pinpoint a moment or even a general period when biblical Israel can be identified historically or archaeologically; however, the biblical account of the period of the judges is broadly reflected in the archaeology of twelfth- and eleventh-century Canaan. (Killebrew 2005: 250)

The combination of the rich thirteenth–eleventh century archaeological record, considered in its textual and biblical contexts, provides a large body of diverse and largely complementary primary data for reconstructing the biblical world (*ibid.* 251).

The biblical texts set the agenda. If the biblical account of the judges is seen as historically reliable, we do not need archaeology to identify ethnic Israel. Notice the tension: first (p. 250) the biblical account of the

Judges is presented as explaining the archaeological record; but then (p. 251) the ‘primary’ archaeological sources enable a reconstruction of the biblical world.

Avi Faust’s (2006) book on Israel’s ethnogenesis locates it without doubt in the early Iron Age I. In the introduction Faust (2006: 4) follows Dever’s ‘New Biblical Archaeology’, giving ‘equal weight to both types of data’, biblical and archaeological. He wants to examine the archaeological record ‘by itself’ in an ‘agenda uninfluenced by the written sources’ (*ibid.* 5). The trouble is that Faust follows the understanding of Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager for these written sources:

For our purposes, then, it matters little whether the biblical accounts are ‘true’ in the positivist sense of some historians and biblical writers It is enough to know that the ancient Israelites believed them to be so. (King and Stager 2001:7, quoted in Faust 2006: 6)

This begs the question, for it presupposes that the biblical accounts existed in the Iron Age I for the Israelites to believe in them. Faust thinks that the post-Barthian attitude of archaeologists, who think that it is difficult or impossible to identify ethnicity from archaeology, has been refuted:

In most cases, clear relationships exist between material culture and ethnicity and can be identified, however complicated they may be (McGuire 1982; Kemp and Yoffee 1980; Emberling 1997; and others; see also Howard 1996: 239–40). (Faust 2006: 14, cf. Faust 2010: 62)

In part 1 above I reviewed almost all the papers quoted here by Faust. Their authors followed Barth, stressed how difficult it is to find ethnicity, and did not manage to retrieve it from material finds. Faust (2006: 16) understands that artifacts do not necessarily carry ‘ethnic importance’ themselves, but believes that it is ‘the use made of these artifacts that is potentially important’. Not true; it is not the use, but *the feelings* attached to the artifacts. Take as an example two skirts: one decorated by flowers lacking ethnic meaning, the second by geometric designs that carry ethnic meaning. The mode of use of both can be identical. Even if the ‘ethnic’ dress was used less often, on special occasions only, it could be kept longer. The post-deposition (after use) deterioration of skirts is affected by many factors, unrelated to ethnicity. Hence, comparing the wear and tear of the

skirts would not constitute evidence of ethnicity. The mode of use would not reveal the special feelings that were attached to only one of the two skirts.

Faust writes:

Some claim that ethnicity is modern, and that there were no ethnicities in the past (based on works such as Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). This view, which is based on studies of modern nationalism, seems unfounded (e.g., Hall 1997; Smith 1986...). (Faust 2006: 14n4 = Faust 2010: 58n4)

Had Faust actually read Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson, he would have known that they discussed nationalism, not ethnicity. Anderson does not discuss ethnicity at all in his 1983 seminal book; the word 'ethnicity' hardly appears in it. Gellner's work is among those which *founded* studies of modern nationalism, rather than 'being based' on them.

Faust discusses the same traits we mentioned earlier and tries to add more, but none is conclusive. His additions are of the 'negative evidence' type. Instead of saying that item X is not found in a certain material culture, he tells us that item X was avoided because it was an ethnic marker. There is no proof for this, but Faust is convinced. Faust (2006: 143–6) sees the Iron Age I Philistines as largely responsible for Israel's ethnogenesis – this is entirely based on the biblical sources, which present the Philistines as Israel's enemies, not on material traits. Faust (*ibid.* 148) posits that the some Israelite ethnic markers appeared even *before* the struggle against the Philistines had started. Everything is thrown in to salvage Iron Age I ethnic Israel, even Bourdieu's habitus (*ibid.* 152–3).

A telling short chapter in Faust's book concerns Transjordan. The problem: the Iron Age I material culture in Jordan's highlands is almost identical to that in Palestine's highlands. Faust cannot find evidence that he can interpret as ethnic markers. The Bible posits that several ethnic groups (Israelites, Ammonites, Moabites) lived in Transjordan at that time. Furthermore, later Iron Age II kingdoms established by people that have the same ethnic names show continuities in material culture with the Iron Age I. Faust suggests that some of the similarity is 'false', but

even after this kind of evidence is eliminated [*sic*], we still face many genuine similarities. ... Therefore, our next undertaking is to show that the notion that these similarities can be

used to disprove the ethnic label of the villages of Cisjordan [= ethnic Israel] is wrong. (Faust 2006: 222)

Notice the peculiar wording: is the term Israel just a 'label' or is there substance to it? Faust argues that there were Israelites in Transjordan at the time – taken from biblical sources of course – so some of the similarities can be explained by Israelite owners (Faust 2006: 222–3). This will not do, for the similarities appear in many places and items; they cannot be ascribed only to one region settled only by Israelites. Faust (*ibid.* 224) explains them as 'differences in ethnic boundary maintenance': the boundaries between Israelites and Philistines/Canaanites were 'sharp', but those in Transjordan were 'fluid':

In the light of the unclear boundaries in Transjordan in the Iron Age I ... and the fluidity in identity that is expected to have existed, it is possible ... that there were people who were Israelite or in the process of becoming so, but due to various reasons their descendents in the Iron Age II became Ammonite, Moabite, etc. This is particularly plausible considering that most of the distributional problems [*sic*] are dated to the Iron I. (Faust 2006: 224)

One must notice the 'trick' being used here to save ethnic Israel. Faust speaks about unclear or fluid ethnic boundaries as if ethnic boundaries exist; but in fact, he can show none according to his system (his various missing material traits). He equates ethnic boundaries and borders of material assemblages to such a degree that he automatically interprets the lack of different assemblages as proof for lack of different ethnic boundaries/groups. While lack of different material traits does not automatically rule out different ethnic groups, 'fluidity in identity' and 'unclear ethnic boundaries' must be interpreted as a lack of distinct ethnic groups. If one follows Barth – rather than just pay lip service to him – one cannot believe that an ethnic group exists without ethnic boundaries. When Faust cannot find Israelites, Ammonites, and Moabites in Iron Age I Transjordan, he 'circumcises' all the people living there as ethnic Israelites. Each must hold a valid ethnic identity; but to save 'ethnic Israel' all must become Israelite. So according to Faust – this he does not write explicitly – there were no ethnic Ammonites or ethnic Moabites in the Iron Age I (pass what the Bible says). Their ethnicity is sacrificed on the altar of ethnic Israel.

This cannot save ethnic Israel, for why assume an Israelite label for the whole lot? They could as well be Ammonites, or people in the process of becoming Ammonites, which later, due to 'various reasons', became partly Israelite. Tellingly, Faust never considers such a possibility. Other people are only fodder for Israel; he cannot imagine them on equal terms.

Faust (2010) repeats Faust (2006); but now the scholars who hold different views are accused of 'skepticism':

So what went wrong? Clearly, the present skeptical approach is unwarranted Clearly, the skeptical stance is based on very shaky methodological foundations (Faust 2010: 62).

Indeed, a number of more anthropological or anthropologically oriented studies conducted recently (Levy and Holl 2002; Dever 2003; Bloch-Smith 2003; Miller 2004; Killebrew 2005; Dever 2006) identify ancient Israel archaeologically, and will, in my opinion, change what seems currently a 'skeptical' discourse (Faust 2010: 64).

For Faust, a skeptical position on 'early ethnic Israel' is an abomination. One must not pass such an accusation in silence. If scientists were to address the world uncritically, there would be no scientific enquiry. Scientists must be skeptical. Faust's accusation is not only methodologically shaky, it is unscientific.

This review of 'saving ethnic Israel' is not exhaustive. The other side of the coin exists too – papers that deny it at all costs. They suffer from similar shortcomings. I would mention here one example. Nils Anfinset (2003) denies that there was an Iron I 'ethnic Israel', but believes that ethnicity can be identified in prehistory: maybe the 'ethnic labels' are missing, but we can identify 'social dynamics and interaction' (Anfinset 2003: 56). The problem is not the labels, but how to get the ethnicity from archaeological 'dynamics' and 'interactions'. As long as it is not explicitly shown, these words remain empty *jargon*. Anfinset (*ibid.* 60) finds 'a wide range of ethnic identities' in the Chalcolithic period. Perhaps so; but the question must be posited: if such flimsy archaeological 'traits' are sufficient to show the existence of several ethnic groups in the fourth Millennium BC, on what grounds is Iron Age I ethnic Israel denied?

More people in the same boat

The Israelites are in the same boat as other people whose ethnicity seems to be on the verge of capsiz-

ing. One example is the Canaanites (Lemche 1991; Lemche 1998: 19–24; Kempinski 1992–3), another is Iron Age I Philistines (Bauer 1998, Sherratt 1998, Lemche 2012). Here too scholars leap to the rescue (Barako 2000, Wolinski 2010, Faust and Lev-Tov 2011, Faust 2014). Taking as an example a paper of Avi Faust and Justin Lev-Tov, they claim that they can identify Philistine ethnicity from material culture. They find Philistine ethnic markers, which disappear in the Iron Age IIA, and interpret this as a change in the 'Philistine process of boundary maintenance'. In the Iron Age I the Philistines fought for hegemony with the 'new Israelite ethnos'; but in the Iron Age II they were weakened by Israel so their 'ethnic negotiation' changed:

Due to various processes of boundary maintenance, the Philistines maintained high ethnic boundaries with their neighbours for at least 150–200 years [in the Iron Age I], before (quite suddenly) losing most of their unique traits in the tenth century BC (Faust and Lev-Tov 2011: 13).

The new state [*sic*] in the highlands . . . was probably (if we accept the biblical story in its general outlines) responsible for their [the Philistines'] decline (*ibid.* 25).

It is clear that their main enemy, which significantly influenced their material symbols during most of the Iron Age I, was the Israelite population of the highlands (*ibid.* 27).

Faust and Lev Tov take their ethnic groups from the biblical story, which they follow. They even take 'states' for granted (cf. Kletter 2004: 16–31). They use Barth's vocabulary, but their concept is anything but Barthian: everything is an easily identified ethnic marker and ethnic boundaries equal borders of material assemblages. Yet their scenario runs contrary to the fact that secure ethnic groups have less need for stressing ethnic boundaries. Groups stress their imaginary boundaries when weak and facing threats (Smith 1981: 74–8). Declining or weak ethnic groups do not go and 'rapidly de-emphasize' their ethnic symbols (pass Faust and Lev-Tov 2011: 27).⁷

7 For other problems in the Iron I–IIa transition in Philistia see Maeir *et al.* 2013.

The ethnic glass

The historical sources concerning the Iron I Israelites are inconclusive. The biblical description of 'ethnic Israel' for this period could be a projection emanating from a later period. The only relevant extra-biblical source is the Merneptah Stele (Kitchen 1994; Edelman 1996; Sparks 1998: 95–109; Rainey 2001), which mentions peoples called 'Israel'. Some scholars read this as a city/area instead; Jezreel. This is not convincing, since Jezreel does not appear in extra-biblical sources (Williamson 1991: 72), and there was no city at the time – only a handful of Late Bronze Age sherds were found at the site (Ussishkin and Woodhead 1992: 49; the identification of the site as Jezreel is secure).

The Merneptah Stele proves that Israel was at least an ethnic category (that is, 'human populations whom at least some outsiders consider to constitute a separate cultural and historical grouping. But the populations so designated may have had little self-awareness') (Smith 1991: 20–1). Thus, the 'ethnic glass' is half full. Only the lack of indicative written

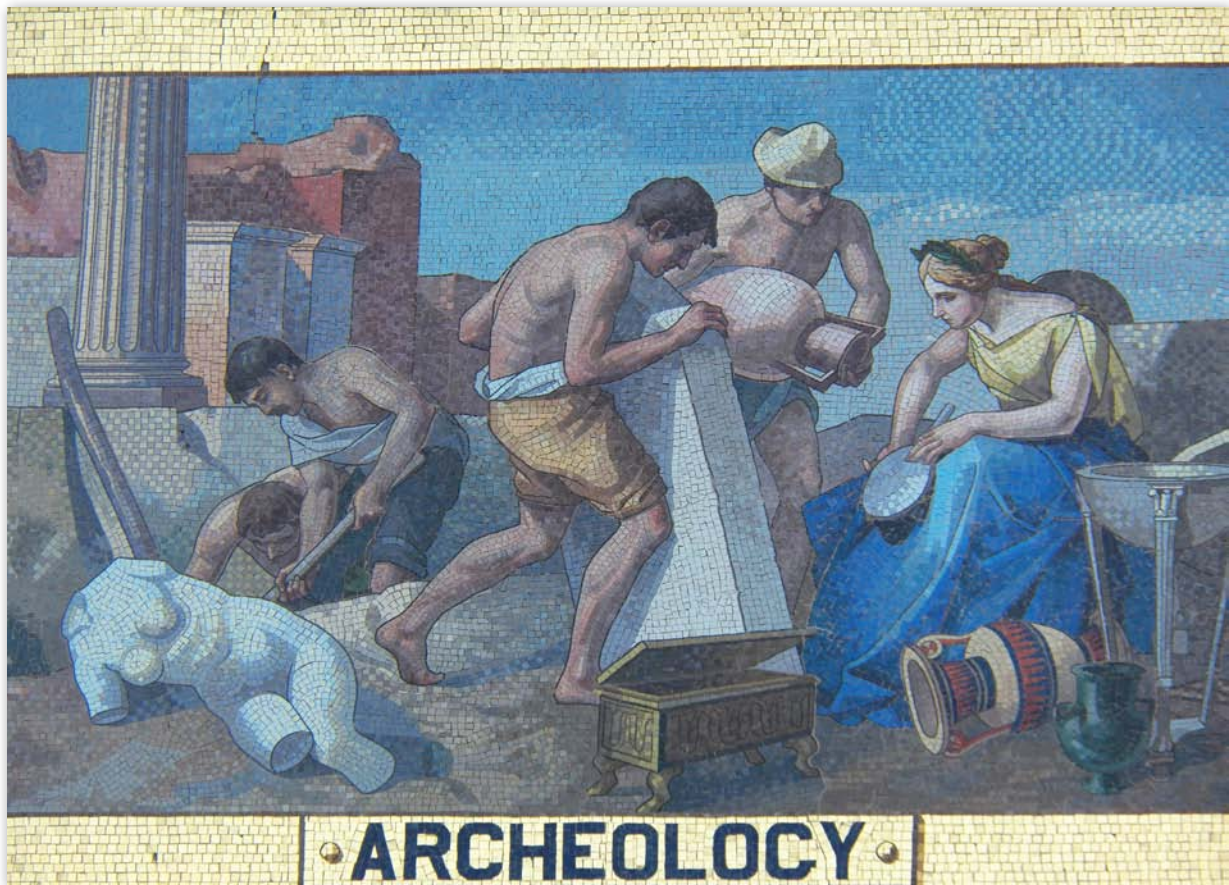
sources precludes us from deciding the issue – and it can go either way.

Conclusions

This article follows Barth and Smith in rejecting a primordial definition of ethnicity, but acknowledges that, as one way of separating 'us' from 'them', ethnicity has existed since ancient periods. The core of ethnicity does not reside in material objects, but in feelings and perceptions – how a group defines itself and is defined by others. Archaeology cannot retrieve ethnic groups from the archaeological record alone. Written sources are required, and our appreciation of their historicity determines our conclusions about ethnic groups much more than the appearance, or lack, of any material traits.

The 'minimalists' made a viable contribution, making us aware that there is no proof for the existence of an Iron Age I ethnic Israel. However, their tendency for interpreting this as proof that such an entity could not exist at all is not justified. The empty

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Mosaic, Leland Stanford Junior Museum, Stanford University, c. 1903–5. Archaeology today is much more than treasure hunting, but it alone cannot retrieve ethnic groups.

half of the glass is composed of negative evidence: one cannot prove the existence of Iron Age I 'ethnic Israel', as the texts are not conclusive; but in a similar way, one cannot disprove it. Few written sources exist for many periods and people, and particularly for Palestine in the Iron Age I. Hence, new written sources may change the picture and fill (or empty) the ethnic glass. At present, it remains an open question.

Some 'maximalists', unaware that the glass is only half empty, have hastened to save Iron Age I 'ethnic Israel' from extinction. As the interpretation of the relevant written sources was debated, they have looked for archaeological support. Archeologists work with assemblages/material cultures; but there is no direct road that leads from the physical borders of distribution of material remains to the dynamic boundaries of ethnic groups.

In this article we did not discuss ethnicity in the Bible. Some have suggested that biblical books were formed as ethnic myths after the Iron Age; others have found earlier origins.⁸ It should be pointed out that the Iron Age II kingdoms of Israel and Judah existed for a long time. Such kingdoms formed imagined communities and could not exist without an ideology separating 'us' from 'them' (cf. Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 35: 'it is primarily the political community ... that inspires the belief in common ethnicity'; Malešević 2004: 4). We do not know how the people of Israel or Judah named themselves and not every person was necessarily conscious of having an ethnic identity. Yet, these kingdoms were likely formed of ethnic groups (of course, they could include more than one such group), even if we cannot fully prove this.

Why is there no respite from papers that strive to prove – or disprove – ethnic Iron Age I Israel? Why does the possible demise of other ancient ethnic groups not seem a great loss, unlike that of ethnic Israel? For example, Dever (1998: 39) writes that those who deny ancient Israel threaten 'the political situation in the Middle East'. Herzog and Bar-Yosef (2002: 164) say that the 'most crucial ethnic identification in the archaeology of Israel' is that of the Israelites. Apparently, present-day ideologies lead the debate. Finding ancient ethnic Israel is perceived as proving something about the Bible and/or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, just as, in an opposite way, it can be seen to be denying it. This hints that

8 Mullen 1997, Sparks 1998; unavailable to me at present are Nestor 2010, Crouch 2014.

both sides to this debate hold mistaken perceptions of ethnicity, perhaps influenced by its extensive role in the modern world. Ethnic groups are not morally better than other types of human communities. Ethnic consciousness does not necessarily make one a better person. Whether Iron Age I Israelites were 'only people' or an ethnic community, should not be the yardstick with which we measure our ideals and norms today.⁹ ■

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Dr **Raz Kletter** (PhD 1995, Tel Aviv University) is Docent for Near Eastern Archaeology at the University of Helsinki. He did his post-doc at the University of Oxford (1996) and worked at the Israel Antiquities Authority as a deputy of the Finds Department (1990–5); senior excavating archaeologist (1997–2002), and head of the SPR Unit (2002–7). He has directed and published excavations from a variety of periods and regions in Israel and lectured in several universities. His main fields of study are Near Eastern Archaeology (Bronze/Iron Ages), religion and cult, ancient economy, and history of archaeology. His publications include *The Judean Pillar Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah* (Tempus Reparatum, 1996), *Economic Keystones: The Weight System of the Kingdom of Judah* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) and *Just Past? The Making of Israeli Archaeology* (Equinox, 2006). Email: kletterr(at)gmail.com



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9 A study by Brody and King (2013: 4) reached my attention too late to be discussed; it does not change the general conclusions.

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