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Rethinking Israel

*Studies in the History and Archaeology
of Ancient Israel
in Honor of
Israel Finkelstein*

edited by

ODED LIPSCHITS, YUVAL GADOT, and MATTHEW J. ADAMS

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Rethinking Israel and the Kingdom of Saul

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Introduction

In a series of articles, Israel Finkelstein (2006; 2011a; 2013: 37–61, and cf. Finkelstein and Fantalkin 2012) reconstructed the historical kingdom of Saul in light of archaeological and historical evidence. The main points of his hypothesis are as follows.

1. The topographical list of Shishak mentions a group of toponyms in the region north of Jerusalem and a group of sites along the Jabbok River. Other parts of the highlands—Jerusalem, all the Judean hill country, and northern Samaria—are missing. Accordingly, and since the Egyptian intrusion to the highlands is an exception, it seems that the area north of Jerusalem and around Gibeon was the hub of an emerging *northern* polity that threatened the Egyptian interest.
2. The Benjamin Plateau was densely populated in the Iron I, albeit few sites on the northern border of the region, in the “Gibeon–Bethel Plateau,” were abandoned in the early Iron IIA (second half of the 10th century BCE). This may be the (delayed) result of the Egyptian campaign.
3. The Benjamin Plateau was affiliated with the northern polity (i.e., Israel, and not Judah) until the decline of the Omrides in the second half of the 9th century BCE. Only from that period on did the Davidic kings extend their political hegemony to the regions north of Jerusalem.
4. The Saul cycle in the first book of Samuel preserves memories of a northern polity in the highlands of Benjamin and Ephraim, with its hub in the area of Gibeon/Gibeah, which was also connected to the area of the Jabbok and possibly stretched all the way north to the margins of the Jezreel Valley. These memories correlate both with the archaeological evidence from Benjamin in Iron I–early Iron IIA and with the textual evidence of Shishak’s list. Accordingly, it seems that Shishak’s campaign was aimed at the kingdom of Saul, which was the forerunner of the kingdom of Israel.
5. Following the fall of the northern kingdom in 720 BCE, Israelites who migrated to Judah brought with them adulatory traditions about the Saulide dynasty. Judahite authors incorporated the northern (Saulide) and southern (Davidic) traditions, thus promoting the centrality of Jerusalem and the Davidic dynasty in the life of all Israelites, northerners and southerners alike.

This reconstruction is, indeed, appealing, as it complies with one of the most widely accepted conventions in biblical scholarship, which maintains that the literary traditions about Saul and his kingdom originated in the northern kingdom of

Israel. However, Finkelstein's reconstruction raises some serious archaeological and historical difficulties. It also lacks an adequate discussion of the assumed "northern" literary traditions about Saul. In what follows, I will detail the archaeological and historical difficulties in Finkelstein's reconstruction of Saul's kingdom and, following a brief discussion of the biblical material, I will suggest an alternative view on the question of Saul and the early Israelite monarchy.

I am honored to have been Israel Finkelstein's student, and I am proud to call him today a colleague and a friend. Remarkably, and ever since I was a young student, Israel always encouraged me (and others) to challenge his views and to argue with him. One of the most disputed topics in our long talks was the kingdom of Saul and its historicity, which is the reason I dedicate this study to Israel Finkelstein, knowing that he appreciates a good scholarly debate.

*Benjamin and Its Territorial—Political Affiliation:
An Archaeological Perspective*

Finkelstein's reconstruction of Saul's kingdom is based on the presupposition that the Benjamin Plateau—between Bethel in the north and Jerusalem in the south—was affiliated throughout the second millennium BCE and until the second half of the 9th century with the territory ruled from Shechem (and later, Samaria) in the northern Canaanite hill country. For Finkelstein (1996), the core territory ruled from Jerusalem was restricted to the southern Canaanite hill country (from Jerusalem to Hebron), albeit without the territory of Benjamin. This view, however, is long contested by Na'aman (1992; 1997) who argues that Jerusalem was a rather small polity that ruled the territories in its immediate surroundings. Analyzing the documentary and archaeological evidence of the second millennium BCE, as well as the documentary evidence of the Persian and Hellenistic periods, Na'aman (2009: 216–20) concludes that Benjamin was always included within the territory of Jerusalem.

The problem is that the archaeological evidence from Jerusalem and Benjamin in the Late Bronze Age is too meager to allow any reconstruction of political formations in that region. Such reconstructions are based solely on the textual evidence provided by the letters of the king of Jerusalem found in the el-Amarna archive (Na'aman 2011), which, admittedly, do not provide conclusive information regarding the northern border of Jerusalem at the time (Finkelstein 2011a: 351). On the other hand, Na'aman's (2009: 216–17) archaeological discussion focused on the Iron IIB, when there is no dispute that Benjamin was affiliated with Judah and Jerusalem (cf. Finkelstein 2011a: 350–51). The archaeological evidence of the Iron I–IIA in Benjamin and especially in Jerusalem was overlooked by both scholars.

Attempting to reconstruct the core territory of Jerusalem and its early emergence as a center of territorial polity, I have recently reexamined the archaeological evidence from Benjamin and Jerusalem in the Iron I–IIA (Sergi 2015a; 2017). The point of departure for the discussion was the well-accepted notion that Jerusalem was the seat of local rulers as early as the second millennium BCE (cf. Na'aman 1992; Finkelstein 1993). Yet, monumental architecture in the City of David appeared—for

the first time since the Middle Bronze Age—only in the early Iron Age, with the erection of the “stepped stone structure” on the eastern slopes of the ridge, west of the Gihon Spring.¹ It is almost unanimously agreed that the foundations of this structure were laid in the late 11th or the early 10th century BCE, with the building of the stone terraces on the eastern slopes, above the Gihon Spring.² It seems, however, that the building effort on this spot continued in the 10th and probably also the 9th century BCE, in order to support the slope and to enable building activity on the summit of the ridge (Sergi 2017: 2–4).

Constructions like the stepped stone structure did not fulfill a mere structural purpose; their public and monumental nature fulfilled a political function as well: large-scale building operations that reshaped the natural landscape are one of the better-known symbols of political power.³ Outwardly, the visibility of public and monumental architecture symbolized the political power and economic wealth of ruling elite (Zuckerman 2007: 4–6); inwardly, by obliging the participation of the lower social classes in the construction of wasteful monuments, they acknowledged their subordinate status and thus reaffirmed the social hierarchy as well as the ruling status of the local elite (Bunimovitz 1992: 225). Hence, monumental architecture was at one and the same time the generator of political hegemony (through the organization and the division of labor) and its most visible symbol. The stepped stone structure, which stood out in the rural landscape surrounding Jerusalem, marked it as a highland stronghold, the seat of local ruling elite (cf. Finkelstein 1992: 207). It seems, therefore, that by the end of the 11th /early 10th century BCE, a centralized political rule was established in Jerusalem, with a developing hierarchical social structure (cf. Bunimovitz 1992: 228–29; Burke 2008: 155–58). The question is, how do we explain the 11th-century BCE sociopolitical change in the status of Jerusalem that found expression in the construction of the stepped stone structure?

Throughout the 14th–12th centuries BCE, Jerusalem ruled over a rather barren land inhabited mainly by pastoral nomads, while to its south there were some sedentary settlements.⁴ Massive sedentarization characterizes the 11th century BCE, when for the first time since the Middle Bronze Age settlements were founded north of Jerusalem, while to its south their number did not increase critically.⁵ Hence, if the stepped stone structure reflects the establishment of political power, it was mainly in order to impose political authority over the settlers north of Jerusalem; they were the only inhabitants who could provide the kings of Jerusalem with

1. Different parts of the stepped stone structure were unearthed by Macalister and Duncan (1926: 52–61), Kenyon (1979: 94–104), Shiloh (1984: 15–17), and E. Mazar (2015: 169–88).

2. A collared-rim jar found *in situ* on a floor of a structure buried immediately below the stone terrace, together with pottery sherds retrieved from within the stone terraces, date its construction to the late Iron I; see Steiner 2001: 24–28, figs. 4.3–4.6, 29–36, fig. 4.16; Cahill 2003: 46–51; Mazar 2006.

3. E.g., Trigger 1990. For examples from the southern Levant, see Bunimovits 1992; Finkelstein 1992: 212–14; Sergi and Gadot 2017.

4. For the region north of Jerusalem, see Finkelstein 1993: 116–23. For the region south of Jerusalem, see the summary in Sergi 2015a: 55–56; 2017: 5–8.

5. For recent discussion of the archaeological evidence from Benjamin in the Iron I–IIA, based on both excavations and surveys, see Sergi 2015a: 55–60; 2017: 8–12.

the required (human and financial) resources, as well as the political motivation, to erect it.

A further look at the settlement pattern clarifies this conclusion: the central Canaanite hill country north of Bethel (Beitīn) was only sparsely inhabited in Iron I and was even less settled in Iron II, while most of the settlements clustered in the region of Shiloh (Ḥirbet Sēylūn), some 18 km north of Bethel.⁶ The hill country south of Jerusalem was also sparsely inhabited, while most of the settlements in the Judean Hill country were clustered in the Hebron / Ras et-Tawil region.⁷ It seems, therefore, that the region between Bethlehem and Jerusalem in the south, to Bethel in the north, was densely inhabited during the Iron I–IIA, while the hill country to its north and to its south remained primarily uninhabited. Jerusalem—at the southern end of this cluster—was the seat of local rulers since the second millennium BCE, and by the late 11th/early 10th century BCE the stepped stone structure differentiated it from the rural settlements in its vicinity. Thus, in the absence of territorial continuity and vis-à-vis the long-standing political status of Jerusalem, it is difficult to believe that Shechem could have established its political hegemony over rural settlements located some 30–40 km to its south, especially when Jerusalem’s political status was reaffirmed with the erection of the stepped stone structure.⁸

It should be concluded, therefore, that by the early 10th century BCE, the Benjamin Plateau was affiliated with the territory ruled from Jerusalem, which probably encompassed the territory between Bethlehem/Beth-zur in the south and Bethel in the north.⁹ The erection of the stepped stone structure therefore marks the early emergence of a polity ruled from Jerusalem, which would further grow to be the kingdom of Judah. Evidently, Benjamin was part of this kingdom from its early beginnings. It is against this background that the abandonment of sites at the Benjamin/Ephraim border in the second half of the 10th century BCE should be explained (Sergi 2015a: 60; 2017: 12): it reflects the shaping of the northern border of Judah vis-à-vis the political-territorial entity that developed simultaneously to its north—the Kingdom of Israel.¹⁰

6. Finkelstein 1988: 185–205 (see especially pp. 186–97, and maps on pp. 187, 189, 191); Finkelstein and Lederman 1997: 949–50.

7. Ofer 1993: 2:115–17, pl. 58: map 13; 1994: 102–5.

8. In light of this, Finkelstein’s (2011a: 356) conclusion that Tell en-Naṣbeh was subject to Shechem, situated some 40 km to its north, and not to Jerusalem, which was only 12 km to its south, should be reconsidered.

9. A *longue durée* perspective strengthens this conclusion: Bethel was included in the Jerusalemite administrative territory in the Iron IIC (Na’aman 2009: 216–17, with further literature), in the Persian period (Lipschits 2005: 181–84), in the Hellenistic period (1 Macc 9:50–52), and in the Ottoman period (Kark and Oren-Nordheim 2001: 191). Furthermore, Finkelstein (1996: 228) argued that during the Early Bronze III the urban center at et-Tell was competing with Shechem, and following its destruction, the regional political center shifted to Jerusalem. Accordingly, it seems that from the third millennium on Bethel was affiliated with the political-administrative region of Jerusalem.

10. A similar reconstruction was suggested by Finkelstein (1988: 188), who argued that the abandonment of sites in the border areas of Ephraim and Benjamin reflects the schism of the “United Monarchy.”

The formation of the kingdom of Israel, however, should be sought in the northern highlands. Shechem was the traditional political center of the northern highlands, and as documented in the el-Amarna archive, at least one of its rulers, during the 14th century BCE, tried to extend his political hegemony to the northern Jezreel Valley (Finkelstein and Naʾaman 2005). The region of Shechem remained the political hub of a northern polity throughout the Iron Age, even when its urban center shifted to Tirzah (1 Kgs 15:33) and later to Samaria (Finkelstein 2013: 63–113; Sergi and Gadot 2017). It is therefore not surprising, that the historical memory preserved in the book of Kings locates all the early dynasties of Israel in the northern hill country (Jeroboam, Nadab, and the Omrides, cf. 1 Kings 11:26, 15:25, 16:24) or in the eastern sphere of the Jezreel Valley (Baasha, and cf. 1 Kgs 15:27, 33). Accordingly, there is no reason to look for the early emergence of a “northern polity” in the Benjamin Plateau. The settlement pattern, as discussed above, rather indicates the formation of a southern polity, with its center in Jerusalem.

Shishak Campaign and the Affiliation of Benjamin in Historical Perspective

Finkelstein’s (2006: 177–83; 2011a: 353–55) conclusion that Shishak directed his campaign against the kingdom of Saul is based on the fact that Shishak’s list fails to mention any Judahite site (not even Jerusalem), but it does mention sites in Benjamin, the Jezreel Valley, and the Jabbok—regions that according to biblical historiography came under the rule of Saul and his son Ishbaal (1 Sam 11:13–14, 29–31; 2 Sam 2:9) and consequently were integrated (albeit, without the Benjamin Plateau) into the kingdom of Israel.

This historical reconstruction requires the overall modification of the list of Judahite and Israelite kings as presented in the book of Kings, arguing that Saul reigned over Israel in the second half of the 10th century BCE, parallel to Solomon or even to Rehoboam in Judah. Indeed, it is impossible to accurately reconstruct the chronology of the Judahite and Israelite kings in the 10th century BCE (Finkelstein 2006: 173–74), but there is no reason to reject the order of their reigns as presented in Samuel and Kings. Furthermore, Finkelstein presupposes that all the sites mentioned in Shishak’s topographical list (excluding ca. 70 southern, Negebite sites) represent only a single political entity—Israel in its early, formative phases. Indeed, Shishak’s campaign may have been directed against an early Israelite polity (e.g., Naʾaman 1998: 261–62), but this does not explain his arrival at the Benjamin Plateau, situated some distance away from the traditional political centers of Israel in the hill country and even more so from the regions to which the Israelite political hegemony had extended by the late 10th century (the Jezreel Valley).¹¹

On the other hand, a short report about Shishak’s campaign is to be found within the narration of Rehoboam’s reign over Judah in Kings (1 Kgs 14:25–28). The report focuses on the tribute paid by Rehoboam to Shishak, implying that the narrator was not fully aware of the scale and extent of Shishak’s presence in late-10th-century

11. For the expansion of Israel to the northern Valleys in the late 10th/early 9th centuries, see Naʾaman 2007; Finkelstein 2011b.

Canaan (Na'aman 1998: 268–69). In spite of this, the factual nature of the report, which lacks an explicit theological message, attests to an older source from which it was taken: the fact that it knows the name of the Egyptian king, the period in which he reigned, and the fact that the narrator was aware of Shishak's presence in Canaan all indicate that it is a reliable historical report about Rehoboam's subjugation to Shishak.¹² There is not a single reason to doubt that Rehoboam did in fact pay tribute to Shishak, even if Jerusalem is not mentioned in the list. Accordingly, and since the discussion of settlement pattern in these regions (above) indicates that the Benjamin Plateau was affiliated with Jerusalem no later than the early 10th century BCE, it should be concluded that the appearance of the Benjaminite sites in Shishak's list represents the early formative stages of Judah, not Israel. If so, it was the growing political power of Judah, with the imposition of Jerusalemite rule in the central Canaanite hill country that attracted the Egyptian's attention. With these conclusions in mind, I shall now briefly examine the literary traditions about Saul in 1 Samuel.

The Early Saul Traditions in 1 Samuel 9–14, 31

The earliest traditions about Saul are usually identified within the bulk of material in 1 Sam 9:1–10:16, 11, 13–14, 31.¹³ Many of the models suggested for the origin and literary growth of this material are based on the assumption of a long process of writing and editing that involves the reconstruction of several hypothetical stages of composition.¹⁴ The problem is that all these multi-stage reconstructions are highly uncertain (Na'aman 1990: 640–45; Nihan 2006: 92–95) and, consequently, there is hardly any agreement among scholars about the extent and literary growth of the Saul traditions. On the other hand, the importance of such models is that they all demonstrate, with a rather high certainty, that the material embedded in 1 Sam 9–14 is based on early and pre-Deuteronomistic Saul traditions. Hence, because it seems to be impossible to reconstruct it word for word, it may be more expedient to examine the points of agreement regarding its content.

It is almost unanimously agreed that the beginning of the Saul story may be found in 1 Sam 9:1–10:16, in the legendary tale about the young Benjaminite, the son of a wealthy patriarchal and rural elite, who went to look for his father's asses.

12. The note opens with a formula (1 Kgs 14:25) depicting invasion, using the verb “went up,” which is quite common in Kings (1 Kgs 20:1, 22:29; 2 Kgs 14:11; 16:5; 17:5; 18:9, 13; 24:1; for discussion, see Sergi 2015a: 60; 2017: 12). In only two cases does this formula contain a specific date: in that of Shishak's campaign and in that of the Sennacherib campaign (2 Kgs 18:13). This is yet another indication of the old source from which this information was taken; see Gray 1970: 344; Ahlström 1993: 15; Na'aman 1998: 269; Schipper 1999: 124–25.

13. Many scholars seem to agree that the Samuel traditions in 1 Sam 1–4, at least in some earlier form, were an integral part of the early Saul traditions, while chs. 5–8 are considered to stem from different sources (the so called Ark Narrative in 1 Sam 5–6) or to represent the work of later editors (e.g., Deuteronomistic redactions in 1 Sam 7–8). For further discussion, see: McCarter 1980b: 26–27; Na'aman 1990; White 2000; 2006; Kratz 2005: 171–74; Dietrich 2007: 271–74.

14. Many of these works are referred to throughout the article. Of the extensive literature on the subject, it is important to note the following recent studies of the early Saul traditions: Campbell 2003: 128–33; Kratz 2005: 171–74; Dietrich 2007: 268–91; Keiser 2010; 2011; Bezzel 2015.

On his way he met the man of God, who told him that he is about to perform a great deed.¹⁵ Since Wellhausen (1889: 240–43), it has been accepted that this story continues in 1 Sam 11:1–15 (excluding 1 Sam 10:17–27 as a secondary, exilic or even post-exilic expansion) where the words of the man of God are realized:¹⁶ Saul led a successful military campaign to Jabesh-gilead and liberated the Jabeshites from Ammonite subjugation.¹⁷ One point of dispute is whether the successful battle against the Ammonites led to Saul's coronation in the Gilgal in 1 Sam 11:15 (e.g., Schmidt 1970: 79–80; Na'aman 1990: 642–43; Keiser 2010: 538–40) or whether the note about the coronation was only later added to the original narrative (e.g., Bezzel 2015: 196–97, 200–201). I opt for the former, not only because it makes the perfect conclusion to the heroic tale of the young Benjaminite but also because Saul's kingship is anticipated already in the story of his meeting with the man of God: as argued by Edelman (1990: 208–14; 2011), asses were conceived as a royal animal (cf. 1 Kgs 1:33, 39) and Saul's search for them imply his search for kingship.

The coronation in Gilgal places Saul in the geographical and political point of departure for the stories of Saul and Jonathan's wars with the Philistines in 1 Sam 13–14. These stories presuppose Saul's kingship and should be regarded as the direct continuation of 1 Sam 11:1–15 (Na'aman 1990: 645–49). They form a collection of anecdotes and heroic tales that were weaved together, because they share the theme of war with the Philistines (Stoebe 1973: 63–64, 240–62; McCarter 1980b: 26–27; Stolz 1981: 82–83).¹⁸ Whether they were based on a few distinct narratives that were the sources for later redactor/s (e.g., Jobling 1976; Stolz 1981: 87–96; Kaiser 2011: 1–6) or on one or two specific tales that were consequently expanded (Campbell 2003: 134–50; Bezzel 2015: 208–28),¹⁹ it is mostly agreed that they belong to the early layer of the Saul traditions.²⁰

15. The reconstructions of the original core and literary growth of the story in 1 Sam 9:1–10:16 are mostly based on the work of Schmidt (1970: 58–102); see, for instance: Stolz 1981: 62–70; Campbell 2003: 106–8; Klein 2008: 80–94; Dietrich 2008: 288–400; Bezzel 2015: 149–79. For other reconstructions, assuming a more unified narrative with only minor redactional interventions, see, for instance: McCarter 1980b: 166–88; Na'aman 1990; Auld 2011: 98–111.

16. E.g., Schmidt 1970: 79–80; McCarter 1980b: 26–27, 184–88, 194–96, 205–7; Stolz 1981: 19–20; Na'aman 1990: 644; Campbell 2003: 88–89, 115–16, 128–29; Kratz 2005: 171–72; Klein 2008: 103–5; Keiser 2010: 533–38; Bezzel 2015: 151–79, 196–204; and cf. Stolz 1981: 73–77.

17. Yet, some scholars argue that the original continuation of the story in 1 Sam 9:1–10:16 was in the stories about the wars of Saul and Jonathan with the Philistines in 1 Sam 13–14 (e.g., Stoebe 1973: 64–66; Dietrich 2007: 268–69; Auld 2011: 126; Fischer 2006). Indeed, the story of Saul's meeting with the man of God anticipates the wars with the Philistines (1 Sam 10:5a). However, 1 Sam 13–14 already presupposes the kingship of Saul, who is enthroned over Israel only as a result of his victory over the Ammonites.

18. There is a scholarly consensus, however, that the rejection of Saul in 1 Sam 13:7b–15 and the story of the altar in 1 Sam 14:32–35 are secondary expansions; see, for instance: Wellhausen 1889: 240–46; McCarter 1980b: 230; Stolz 1981: 82; Campbell 2003: 110–15; Klein 2008: 95–109, 126–27, 134; Auld 2011: 115–16; Keiser 2011: 1–6, 9–11; Bezzel 2015: 214, with further literature.

19. For an approach viewing the stories in 1 Sam 13–14 as a more unified literary work, see: McCarter 1980b: 224–52; Na'aman 1990: 645–47. Stolz (1981: 83) pointed out that even if 1 Sam 13–14 is a collection of older narratives, in its current form it is too complicated to permit accurate reconstruct its sources/redactions.

20. E.g., Stoebe 1973: 64–66; McCarter 1980b: 26–27; Na'aman 1990: 645–47; White 2000, 2006; Kratz 2005: 171–74; Fischer 2006; Dietrich 2007: 268–69; Auld 2011: 126.

Eventually, it is in the battle with the Philistines on Mount Gilboa that Saul and his sons found their deaths: according to the report in 1 Sam 31:1–13, the victorious Philistines pinned the bodies of Saul and his sons to the walls of Beth-shean, but the Jabeshites, in a bold action, rescued the bodies, brought them to Jabesh-gilead, burned them, buried the bones, and mourned seven days. The question is, of course, whether the report about Saul's death in the Gilboa was part of the early Saul traditions. Indeed, some scholars have excluded it, arguing that the bulk of early Saul traditions is embedded only within 1 Sam 1–14, probably with an ending in 1 Sam 14:46–52 (White 2000; Kratz 2005: 171–74 and cf. Bezzel 2013; 2015: 115–48). However, the war with the Philistines, the basic theme in 1 Sam 13–14, is also the basic theme of 1 Sam 31. Neither narrative mentions David and instead both focus on Saul and his sons. Furthermore, this report brings the early Saul traditions to their perfect literary conclusion: Saul came to the throne by rescuing the people of Jabesh-gilead, and when he died, they repaid him by salvaging his body (Wright 2014: 67). Hence, there is no reason to assume that the report about the death and burial of Saul and his sons in 1 Sam 31:1–13 was somehow distinct from the stories about the wars of Saul and Jonathan with the Philistines in 1 Sam 13–14.²¹ Accordingly, the entire theme of wars with the Philistines may be counted with the early Saul traditions. What we have here, therefore, is a collection of an early narrative embedded within 1 Sam 9–14, 31, telling the story of the rise and fall of a heroic king (Edelman 1990; 2011).

It is almost taken for granted that the early Saul traditions as sketched above are of northern Israelite origin and that they were brought to Judah following the fall of Samaria in 720 BCE.²² This presupposition is mainly based on the fact that the narrative presents Saul in a positive light and that David has no role in it. However, that David has no role in the stories of Saul's early career is self-evident, since the stories about David's rise (1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5) explicitly acknowledge Saul's kingship while arguing that David was his legitimate heir.²³ On the other hand, the

21. Bezzel (2015: 229–34) has convincingly demonstrated the many literary connections that bind 1 Sam 13–14 with 1 Sam 31, although he argued that the theme of war with the Philistines in 1 Sam 1–4, 13–14, and 31 should be considered as a late Judahite expansion of the old Israelite Saul traditions (which is to be found in 1 Sam 9–10:16, 11, 14:46–51), dated by him to after the fall of Samaria in 720 BCE (see also Bezzel 2015: 179–94). However, these stories hardly reflect any of the geographical, political, or religious realia of the late 8th and the 7th centuries but rather that of the 10th–9th centuries BCE (below). Thus, they seem to be much earlier than assumed by Bezzel, and if so, they may be counted with the early Saul traditions.

22. Schmidt 1970: 79–80; Grønbaek 1974: 267–69; Dieterich and Münger 2003; Kratz 2005: 177; Dietrich 2007: 268–74; Keiser 2010; Finkelstein 2011: 361–66; Wright 2014: 66–79; Bezzel 2015: 228–31.

23. The material in 1 Sam 15/16–2 Sam 5/8, which is often termed the "History of David's Rise," includes many different narrative strands that were quite loosely redacted together by a pre-Deuteronomistic scribe (namely, before they were integrated into the books of Samuel), even if the content, extent, and intention of this composition are disputed. For further discussion and for different reconstructions of the sources and redactions within this composition, see, for instance, Weiser 1966; Grønbaek 1971; Stolz 1981: 17–18; Kratz 2005: 177–81. Veijola (1975) assigned the composition of the History of David's Rise to the Deuteronomistic scribes (and cf. Van Seters 2009); however, this view never has gained much scholarly consensus (Dietrich 2007: 245–46). For a critical review of past research, see Dietrich and Naumann 2000; Dietrich 2007: 240–55.

portrayal of the tragic end of the House of Saul (1 Sam 31: 1–13) is the catalyst enabling David to reclaim his kingship over all Israel (2 Sam 5:1–3, and esp. v. 2; and cf. Grønbaek 1974: 262). Thus, as was demonstrated by Bezzel (2015: 229–34), the theme of the wars with the Philistines in 1 Sam 13–14, 31 actually prepares the scene for David's rise and thus anticipates the stories in 1 Sam 16–2 Sam 5. If so, the early Saul traditions were composed and redacted while already anticipating David and, accordingly, it is unreasonable to assume that they stem from two different kingdoms.

Moreover, the early Saul traditions in 1 Sam 9–14, 31 hardly reflect any of the geographical or political reality of the kingdom of Israel. To begin with, the geographical scope of the early Saul traditions is restricted to the area north of Jerusalem, in the Benjamin region, and the southernmost parts of the Ephraim hill country, with only one excursion to Gilead. The entire hill country north of Bethel, which was the heart of the kingdom of Israel, is completely absent. Nothing in these stories even implies a north Israelite perspective: the main political centers of Israel (Shechem, Tirzah, Samaria); the importance of the cult place in Bethel; the Israelite royal cities in the northern valleys; or the Israelite cult centers in Gilead, most notably Penuel, which was attributed to the founder of the Israelite monarchy (1 Kgs 12:25)—all are completely absent from the narrative (cf. Na'aman 2009: 346–48).²⁴ Furthermore, there is not even a hint of Israelite history—its involvement with northern Levantine polities, the fierce relations with Aram-Damascus, or its constant effort (and success) to expand northward. Because the interest of the early Saul narrative is restricted to the region north of Jerusalem and focused on the Philistine enemies residing in the Shephelah, it is better to assume that it represents a Judahite, not Israelite, point of view.

Saul's military excursion to the Gilead is often viewed as a reflection of Israelite territorial and political interest in the region (e.g., Dietrich and Münger 2003: 41–46; Finkelstein 2006: 178–80; 2011a: 353–55; Wright 2014: 66–74). Indeed, at least some parts of Gilead were affiliated with Israel for certain periods during the 9th and 8th centuries BCE.²⁵ However, as far as we can judge, Israelite interest in Gilead was mainly focused on the Jabbok outlet (which was on the route to Shechem; and cf. 1 Kgs 12:25). This region and the sites located along it—Penuel, Mahanaim, and Succoth—play a prominent role in what is often viewed as Israelite literature: the pre-Priestly Jacob cycle, considered by many to be the origin myth of the northern Israelite kingdom (e.g., de-Pury 2006; Hutton 2006; Blum 2012; Finkelstein and Römer 2014; Sergi 2016), attributes the foundation of these sites to the eponymic ancestor of Israel; they are also important for the story of Gideon's pursuit of the Midianites (Judg 8:4–21), which is considered to be a part of an Israelite collection of heroic stories (Groß 2009: 367–89, 473–74, with further literature).²⁶

24. Mahanaim is mentioned as the capital of Saul's heir, Ishbaal (2 Sam 3:8), but this is not part of the so called early Saul traditions but, rather, part of what is assumed to be a Judahite composition; see also Na'aman 2009: 347–48.

25. For a discussion of the political affiliation of the Gilead in the 9th and 8th centuries BCE, see Sergi 2016: 333–37.

26. For a discussion of the place of the Jabbok outlet in Judg 8:4–21, see Sergi 2016: 346–49.

None of these sites, so prominent in Israelite literature, is mentioned in the early Saul traditions. In fact, Saul goes to war in Jabesh-gilead,²⁷ a toponym mainly referred to in the narratives related to Saul (1 Sam 11:1, 3, 5, 9–11, 31:13; 2 Sam 2:4–5, 21:12, and cf. 1 Chr 10:12).²⁸ Jabesh-gilead is never mentioned in any relation to Israel (contra Auld 2011: 121, who calls it an “Israelite city”), not even in the town list of the northern tribes. Furthermore, as Wright (2014: 66–68) correctly observed, cremation is not an Israelite practice, and by ascribing it to the people of Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam 31:12) the author probably intended to mark them as non-Israelites (cf. Edelman 1984; Na’aman 2015). Thus, the role of Gilead and its residents in the early Saul traditions could hardly reflect the Israelite point of view.

The geopolitical picture that arises from these stories seems to better reflect a Judahite point of view: Saul’s sphere of influence was restricted to the central Canaanite hill country, but it was transgressed by the Philistines, who were the inhabitants of the west (1 Samuel 13:20, 14:31). The Philistines are depicted as warriors who raided and plundered rural society in the Benjamin region; they seem to be wealthier (mastering specialized production; cf. 1 Sam 13:19–22) and are considered the stronger, aggressive side in the conflict (1 Sam 13:5–6, 17–18; 14). The Israelites, on the other hand, are depicted as a rural society, residing in the hill country and its foothills, dependent on Philistine metal production, and in need of defending themselves from Philistine aggressiveness. These characteristics draw the line between the more urban societies of southwestern Canaan and the rural societies of the Benjamin–Jerusalem region in the eastern fringe prior to the Iron IIB and probably even prior to the fall of Gath in the last third of the 9th century BCE.²⁹

Furthermore, the limited geographical scope of these stories is telling: 1 Sam 13–14 contains a detailed topographical description of a small territory north of Jerusalem. Clearly, its authors were well acquainted with the Benjamin region, while the lower regions of Canaan—the northern valleys or the Shephelah (west of Judah)—were less known to them, as may also be deduced from the odd appearance of the Philistines in the Jezreel Valley (1 Sam 31:1, 10). While the archaeological phenomenon of the Philistines is mostly restricted to southwest Canaan in the Iron I (e.g., Maeir, Hitchcock, and Horwitz 2013), the Jezreel Valley during this period and before it came under Israelite rule (cf. Sergi and Gadot 2017) maintained its former (Late Bronze Age) social and political structure of city-states and palace economy (Finkelstein 2013: 27–36). There is no reason to assume that the local towns in the Jezreel Valley were somehow affiliated with the Philistines, as suggested by Dieterich and Münger (2003: 48). Finkelstein’s (2006: 182–83) suggestion that the memory of the Philistines in the Jezreel Valley (and especially in Beth-shean) reflects Egyptian rule during the Late Bronze Age is similarly improbable. As far as we can judge, the pre-Israelite Jezreel Valley was conceived in Israelite historical memory as Canaanite (cf. Judg 4–5) and not as Philistine or Egyptian. Clearly, the

27. Identified at Tell el-Maqlüb; see Noth 1953; Gaß 2005: 504–9, with earlier literature.

28. Jabesh-gilead is also mentioned in the story of the Outrage at Gibeah (Judg 21), which is dated to the late, post-exilic Period (Groß 2009: 821–22, with previous literature).

29. For the destruction of Gath, identified in Tell es-Şafi, see Maeir 2012: 26–49, and cf. 1 Kgs 12:17–18; Amos 6:2.

author of the Saul story was not well acquainted with the political or social composition of the pre-Israelite Jezreel Valley. The Philistines, on the other hand, were the arch-enemy of the kingdom of Judah, as is also clear from the important role they play in the stories about the early Davidic monarchy (Sergi 2015b: 64–75). Indeed, throughout the formative period of the Judahite monarchy, Gath was the strongest polity to its west (Sergi 2013; Lehmann and Niemann 2014). Only a narrator from Jerusalem, being remote from the Jezreel Valley, would assume that Saul met in the Jezreel Valley the same enemies he met in Benjamin—namely, the Philistines.

Finally, from an archaeological point of view, the inhabitants of the Benjamin region were affiliated with the Jerusalemite political hegemony as early as the 10th century BCE. Thus, if the memory of a Benjaminite hero would have been kept and recorded somewhere, it would have been in the scribal school of Jerusalem. This is also the best explanation for the complete absence of any trace of Israelite geography, politics, or concerns within these early traditions, which rather reflect the political realia, problems, and interests of Judah. I would like therefore to conclude this section by citing Naʾaman's (2009: 346–48) words on the matter:

[T]he stories about Saul and his house are no less Judahite than those about David and his house, at least in the sense that both Benjamin and Judah were part and parcel of the kingdom of Judah in the monarchical period, and the story cycles that describe their history were composed by scribes in the court of Jerusalem.

And yet, Judah and Jerusalem are not mentioned in the early Saul traditions, which present Saul as the first king of the Israelites (especially in 1 Sam 13–14). Could it be that the memory of an Israelite king was preserved in Jerusalem?

Saul and David, Kings of Israel: An Alternative View

The stories of Saul's wars with the Philistines in 1 Sam 13–14 presuppose his kingship over Israel or, at the least, commemorate him as Israel's military leader and liberator (cf. 1 Sam 11:15, 14:47). The name Israel is mentioned 14 times in 1 Sam 13–14; in most of these cases, it clearly refers to a group of people and not to a territorial polity. The text identifies the Israelites as a composite of clan/tribal society settled in the Benjamin Plateau and in the southern Ephraim hill country (1 Sam 13:4–6, 20, 14:22–24), between Gibeah in the south (or even Bethlehem, cf. 1 Sam 17:2) and Bethel in the north. A similar conception of Israel—as a group of people and not as a territorial polity—may also be argued for the stories about David's service in Saul's court (Willi-Plein 2004: 163–68).

This calls for a clear distinction between "Israelites"—a term that identifies a group of people by some level of collective identity ascribed to them—and Israel as a political-territorial designation given to an Iron II polity. The need for such a distinction is raised also by historical sources in which the term Israel is utilized both to denote a group of people (the Merenptah Stele) and to designate a territorial polity (Mesha Inscription, Tel Dan Stele).³⁰ As a territorial polity, the kingdom of Israel

30. Similar ambivalent use may also be argued for the term "Aram" (Sergi and de Hulster 2016).

encompassed vast territories; in addition to its core territory in the highlands of Samaria, in some periods it also included the northern valleys (Jezreel, Beth-Shean, Jordan, and the Hula Valleys), the lower Galilee, and parts of Transjordan. These regions inhabited divergent groups that came under centralized rule of the kings in Samaria (Fleming 2012: 28–90; Finkelstein 2013: 109–12). “Israelites” were, therefore, only one component of the inhabitants living in the kingdom of Israel, and accordingly, there is also no reason to assume that all Israelites lived only within the territorial borders of the kingdom named Israel.

Being a Benjaminite (1 Sam 9:1), Saul was also considered an Israelite, and thus the early Saul traditions are telling the story of the rise and fall of a Benjaminite leader who came to rule his kinsmen, the Israelites, north of Jerusalem. While there is hardly any dispute that Saul was an Israelite, David is often seen as a Judahite. Of course, the House of David was the ruling dynasty of Judah, whose royal seat was in Jerusalem; this, however, does not mean that David himself was a Judahite. Many references in the book of Samuel utilize the name Judah to designate a group of people living mainly in the Judean hill country (and perhaps also in its desert fringe), with their political center in Hebron.³¹ On the other hand, the territorial polity that came to be known as Judah emerged in southern Canaan during the 9th century BCE (Sergi 2013; Na’aman 2013), and besides the core territory of the “Judahites” in the Judean hill country, the kingdom of Judah also included the Benjamin Plateau, the Shephelah (formerly, Philistine land), and the Beer-sheba and Arad Valleys. Apparently, Judahites were only one group, and probably not even the largest one, among many that came under Davidic rule.

Nowhere in the book of Samuel is David identified as a Judahite. Quite the contrary, in 1 Sam 17:12, it is stated that his family originated from an Ephrathite clan (thus, Israelite) that settled in the region of Bethlehem. In a recent study, Na’aman (2014) contested the common view that interprets the name “Ephrath” as a synonym of “Bethlehem” and demonstrated that, according to the biblical literature, the Ephrathites’ settlements were not restricted to the Ephraim hill country, and clans affiliated with Ephraim also settled in Manasseh and the Judean highlands. In view of the fact that the entire region south and north of Jerusalem—between Bethlehem and Bethel—was the home for a dense cluster of settlements whose inhabitants (or certain portions of them) are identified as Israelites (1 Sam 13–14), it is not surprising that some of the people south of Jerusalem would also be considered Israelites (1 Sam 17:2). In fact, David is explicitly identified as Israelite three times (1 Sam 18:18, 27:12; 2 Sam 5:1; and cf. Grønbaek 1971: 173–74; Willi-Plein 2004: 165). Assuming an Israelite origin for David may also explain why his coronation over the people of Judah (2 Sam 2:1–4) is not taken for granted: David not only inquired of YHWH before advancing to Hebron (an action that was taken only before battles; cf. 1 Sam 23:2, 4; 30:8; 2 Sam 5:19, 23–24), prior to his arrival he “bribed” the Judahite leaders, sending them booty he took from the Amalekites (1 Sam 30:26). His coronation over Israel, on the other hand (2 Sam 5:1–3), seems to be much more natural, as the Israelites themselves declared David their king on

31. E.g., 1 Sam 11:8; 15:4; 17:52; 18:16; 2 Sam 2:4; 11:11; 12:8; 19:15–17, 41–44; 20:2, 4, 5.

account of his being their kinsman and on the account of his previous service in the court of Saul, the former king of the Israelites (2 Sam 5:1–2). It may therefore be concluded that both David and Saul originated from clans affiliated with Israel that settled north (Benjaminite clans) and south (Ephrathite clans) of Jerusalem.

From an archaeological point of view, by the early 10th century BCE, the entire region from Bethlehem in the south to Bethel in the north, which probably was the home to different clan and tribal identities such as Benjaminites and Ephrathites (who were also considered Israelite) but also Judahites and Jebusites (Na'aman 2015), came under the political hegemony of the rulers of Jerusalem. Since most of the residents in this region were explicitly considered Israelites (1 Sam 13–14), there should be little surprise that the ruling dynasty in Jerusalem, most likely the Davidic dynasty, was considered Israelite as well, even if the people of Judah gave their name to the territorial polity created much later, mainly during the 9th century BCE.

To sum up this point, both Saul and David were considered Israelites, in the sense that they both stemmed from the Ephrathite and Benjaminite clans that settled in the region between Bethlehem in the south and Bethel in the north. Yet, in retrospect, both should also be seen as Judahites, in the sense that they were commemorated in the court of Jerusalem, where the Davidic kings ruled the kingdom of Judah.

Summary and Conclusions

Finkelstein's hypothesis about Saul and the early formation of the kingdom of Israel is based on two presuppositions: that the Benjamin Plateau was affiliated with the Kingdom of Israel (until the second half of the 9th century BCE); and that the literary traditions about Saul originated in Israel. However, as was demonstrated in this study, the Benjamin Plateau came under the political hegemony of Jerusalem in the early 10th century at the latest. Early stages of state formation in the region reflect, therefore, the formation of a Jerusalemite polity that should be seen as the forerunner of the kingdom of Judah, not Israel. That Shishak's campaign was directed also at the Benjamin Plateau was probably the result of the growing political power of Jerusalem. That is, it is the early stages of state formation in Judah that attracted Egyptian attention, as is also evidenced in the short factual report depicting Rehoboam's subjugation to Shishak (1 Kgs 14:25–28). Saul, evidently, should not be related to the kingdom of Israel or to Shishak's campaign.

As for the literary point of view, the early Saul traditions (1 Sam 9–14, 31) completely ignore Israel's main political or cultic centers and hardly reflect its political history or territorial aspirations; their restricted geographical scope (to the regions north of Jerusalem) and the political realia they portray seem to better reflect the geopolitical status of Judah vis-à-vis its western neighbors in the early monarchic period. In light of this, and since Benjamin was affiliated with Jerusalem as early as the 10th century BCE, it is more reasonable to assume that the early Saul traditions were composed, redacted, and preserved in Jerusalem. Saul was therefore not less Judahite than David, at least in the sense that the early traditions about both kings were commemorated in the court of Jerusalem.

What may we then conclude regarding the historicity of Saul's kingdom and the early formation of a Jerusalemite polity? In 1 Samuel, the name "Israel" hardly refers to the territorial polity formed in north Canaan in the early 9th century BCE but rather to a composite of clans and tribes that settled in Jerusalem, Benjamin, and southern Ephraim hill country. The stories about Saul (and David) portray the attempt of two local leaders to establish dynastic monarchy over a group of people identified by the authors as Israelites. Their story is therefore the story of the rise of Israelite monarchy, even if the political entity related to David was consequently known as Judah.

Indeed the early Saul traditions are, to a large extent, legendary, and there can be little doubt that they were composed much later than the events they depict. Thus, these stories cannot be read as an accurate documentation of historical events. Still, they are well acquainted with the geopolitical realia of Judah and Jerusalem in the 10th–9th centuries BCE and, accordingly, they may preserve some general knowledge of past events related to the establishment of dynastic monarchy in Jerusalem: both Saul and David are portrayed as newly-formed ruling elite, rising to power among their own kinsmen, the so called "Israelites," by means of agricultural wealth, military skills, and familial relationships. This depiction correlates well with the way we understand the social evolution that generated state formation in the Iron Age Levant (Sergi and de Hulster 2016, with further literature). In this regard, the early traditions about Saul and David preserve the memory of a struggle for power in the early monarchic period: the rise of dynastic monarchy in Jerusalem was the result of a struggle between two Israelite ruling families engaged in an attempt to establish their political hegemony over their own Israelite kinsmen settled in the regions north and south of Jerusalem.

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