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Avraham Faust. *The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II.* Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012. xviii + 328 pp. $49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57506-179-5.

William Schniedewind. *A Social History of Hebrew; Its Origins through the Rabbinic Period.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013. 280 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-17668-1.

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Nationalism in Iron Age II

Avraham Faust and William Schniedewind intervene in the long debate about the antiquity of nations, bringing epigraphy, potsherds, and three thousand-year-old kitchen middens to the table. I focus here on their attempts to tease ethnicity and the role of the state in producing nationalism out of the buried rubble of the eleventh through sixth centuries BCE in the Levant.

At the heart of Faustâs argument in *The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II*, are the four-room foundations of the distinctively Israelite housing type that first appeared in the hill country of Judea at the end of the eleventh century BCE, which is to say, just after the Eastern Mediterranean economic and political collapse associated with the âsea peoples.â

Faust writes within an increasingly sophisticated tradition of the archaeological study of ethnicity. James Deetz set a new standard for such work in his dig at âParting Ways,â an African American hamlet in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Deetz showed that although the African American houses were similar in materials and faÃ§ade to nearby Yankee housing, the ethnicity of the inhabitants was detectable in the African origin of the âshotgunâ floor plan, and also in the kitchen middens. Whereas neighboring Yankee farmers butchered animals by sawing bones, black farmers butchered by chopping bones. Like Deetz, Furst works with architecture, bones, and pottery, showing that Israelite sites are deficient in pig bones, and prefer unadorned pottery.

Faust interprets the four-room houses of Israelite villages in the hill country of Judea and Samaria as reflecting a ethos of egalitarianism. Although rooms in the houses are often subdivided to hold nuclear units within the patrilineal family, all spaces are entered directly from a central courtyard, unlike the larger houses of neighboring

cultures where each room is entered from the next in a hierarchy of space. Houses in Israelite villages, moreover, are of roughly equal size, and, unlike agricultural estates of the period, they lack not only single-room dwellings but public or administrative buildings. This, along with communal cisterns and agricultural production facilities (terraces, olive oil presses, granaries, and wine cellars) and shared defensive walls, is taken by Furst and others to indicate that land was owned by descent groups and managed by family elders in an ideologically egalitarian social system.

Faust is quick to point out that an egalitarian ideology is not to be equated with economic equality; some plainly dressed Quakers were very wealthy indeed, and Saudi kings are buried in plain graves emblematic of Islamâs egalitarian ideology. Faust presents compelling evidence that Israel suffered from the extreme economic inequality found in all agrarian societies. But Faust also presents novel evidence for what appears to be the impact of an egalitarian rhetoric of brotherhood.

The city gate as a Levantine place of justice, punishment, worship, and commerce predates the Israelites. But by the ninth or eighth century kings of Israel and Judea appear to had found a way to use the gates to simultaneously display royal power, bind the people into a sense of brotherhood, and provide support for the poor. Adjacent to the gates in Israelite cites are large, long, pillared public buildings that have defied persuasive explanation by the archaeologists who uncovered them. These pillared buildings are neither fortifications nor palaces; they show no evidence of use as storehouses or stables. The remnants they do contain are the kind of cooking pots and trash found in very modest homes. Faust proposes the pillared buildings uncovered at the city gates as the explanation for a large set of otherwise puzzling biblical texts admonishing Israelites to deliver tithes to their brethren at the gates. They were, he argues, a sort of royal almshouse exhibiting the kingâs care for the lame, orphaned, and widowed, inspiring Israelites to enact brotherhood by feeding and clothing the poor. This was hardly a safety net on the level of the Swedish welfare system, but if Faust is correct, it is a striking physical instantiation of an ideology of community and mutual obligation not unlike Benedict Andersonâs âdeep, horizontal comradeship.â[1]

Elsewhere Faustâs evidence highlights similarities between modern and ancient patterns of conquest and cultural assimilation. In the period of Israelite/Judean monarchy, impoverished Judea was solidly Israelite, but the wealthy cities of the northern kingdom and its fertile lowlands retained a Canaanite population. By Faustâs reckoning, Israelite culture did not reach the hill country of Samaria until a century or so after it appeared in Judea. Faust teases out the ethnic mix of the northern countryside in the ninth and eighth centuries, finding Canaanites (pig bones, nuclear families, fancy pottery) living in tiny houses in unwalled farming settlements that also feature large buildings, and speculates that here Canaanite peasants continued their familiar lifeways under new owners. In the northern cities, Israelites in four-room houses occupied the prestige neighborhoods, adjacent to a still substantial Canaanite middling class that was showing signs of gradual assimilation to Israelite culture.

Faustâs findings do not support anything like Israelite triumphalism. In cities both north and south the Israelite pattern of extended families occupying four-room houses broke down as cities grew; he reasons that only the comfortably middle class could afford an urban four-room house. Characteristic Israelite walled villages of large, egalitarian, four-room houses continued to dominate the Judean landscape until the Babylonian conquest of 586 BCE. But in Judean cities the nonwealthy lived in tiny dwellings wedged onto leftover sites, and left little in the way of ethnic markers for archaeologists to publish.

The Israelite ethnic footprint found in farming villages and in the regionsâ growing cities is also seen in the string of fortifications marking the border of Judea, a petty, hill-country kingdom that survived the Assyrian conquests of the Northern Israelite kingdom and of the Philistine cities in 722 BCE. Although demonstrably occupied by Judeans, these fortified cities and outposts speak to more than ethnic identity; they demonstrate the power of kings ruling from Jerusalem. A supporting body of evidence found in Raz Kletterâs 1998 study *Economic Keystones: The Weight System of the Kingdom of Judah* demonstrates that Judean kings were able to standardize commercial weights across the length and breadth of their kingdom–unusual in a polity of that period, even a small one.

Here Faust joins a group of scholars that includes Steven Grosby and Aviel Roshwald in arguing that patterns of nation formation visible in Europe in the modern period, can already be seen in the archaeological record of ancient Judea where a centralizing monarchy drew on pre-existing ethnicity to create a national identity using such now-familiar tools as monumental architecture, uniform codes of law, and campaigns to standardize and centralize worship. If promoted by a king who wanted

the populace to enthusiastically mobilize soldiers and resources, this enactment of an eighth-century version of nationalism makes functional sense, whether it was undertaken for purposes of increasing royal power, expanding the borders, or defending the kingdom.

In his 2014 book *David King of Israel, and Caleb in Biblical Memory,* Bible critic Jacob L. Wright continues Grosbyâs argument, using the Caleb, David, and Saul stories to postulate that royal scribes deliberately braided the histories' powerful local tribes and chieftains into a national chronicle. In Wrightâs telling, war commemoration texts and hero stories preserved in the Bible once served as tools of nation creation on behalf of Israelite kings who had replaced Israelâs traditional citizen militia with a paid, professional army, and needed to recruit popular support from disparate tribes–tribes that were rapidly losing both political power and property to the newly powerful, centralized monarchy.

And yet the most compelling evidence that a centralized monarchy willed an Israelite nation into existence may lie neither in the stones nor in the text, but in the history of the Hebrew language itself. William Schniedewindâs *A Social History of Hebrew: Its Origins through the Rabbinic Period*, is fascinating reading for anyone seeking to understand how national identities are created. In his 2004 book, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel*, Schniedewind argued that Israelites had become, by the period of the late Judean dynasty (722-586 BCE) the first people to experience literacy that extended into the working classes. He brings evidence of farm hands and craftsmen able to produce crude texts, and the possibility that texts were read aloud to villagers. Israelite seal impressions demonstrate that in sharp contrast with the neighbors–even such wealthy neighbors as Phoenician city-states–Israelite warehouse workers could read labels marked only with letters, and simple potters could write their names. In *Social History of Hebrew*, Schniedewind calls the literacy of working class Israelites âdemocratization.â Call it what you will, it was an entirely a new thing in the world, and it fits with the egalitarian ethos of ancient Israel and with the spirit of biblical nationalism.

Schniedewind traces the origin and development of Hebrew as the language of a particular people self-consciously separating itself from speakers of other northwest Semitic dialects by creating a national language, masterfully drawing evidence both from archaeologically recovered texts and the Bible. His work continues after the Babylonian exile, looking, as the title says, at issues of Hebrew and identity through the rabbinic period. But he begins far earlier, with the acts of men struggling to achieve sovereignty, even to build small empires of their own, in the space opened by temporary retreat of the great recurring empires, Egypt and Mesopotamia.

The Hebrew alphabet and language did not emerge alone. Moabite, Ammonite, and Aramaic were also formalized as distinctive, written, West Semitic languages in the late ninth century. The most relevant single piece of evidence is the Mesha stele of ~840 BCE in which Mesha, king of Moab (trans-Jordan), describes his victory over Omri, king of Israel. The stele is remarkable because it is written not in the cuneiform used by previous royal inscriptions, but in a new, vernacular, Moabite alphabet. Steven Grosby has described contemporary nation formation in Aram (Syria), where people shared a culture, regional gods and temples, and the new, common, written language of Aramaic in a situation not unlike that of Greek city-states a few centuries later. The tribes and city-states of Aram sometimes fought to conquer one another, at other times uniting in military coalitions. Their rhetoric could rise to Herodotus-like talk of uniting âall Aram,â much as the Bible speaks of âall Israel.â Schniedewind points out that Moab forsook popular pan-Semitic deities in favor of Chemosh, god of âhis land,â a move paralleled by both Israel and Edom (south of the Dead Sea). Schniedewind shows how the use of new, personal names incorporating the name of the national god both dates and proves the event. (For example, the *-iah* in Isaiah means âYahweh saves.â)

Using language as evidence, Schniedewind argues that a ânotion of national identityâ can be seen to have emerged by the late ninth or early eighth century. In his view, âalthough the term nationalism is typically applied to the study of modern history, the categories that typify nationalism–including language–were also operative in antiquity,â and the people of the ancient Near East were aware of the differences in âreligion, territory, history, culture, and languageâ that comprise national identity (pp. 92-93). For Schneidewind, the most readily traced aspects of Iron Age âpolitical nationalismâ include âtemple, territory, kingship, and the army,â but, âcalendar, law, and language are also visibleâ (p. 93).

Adding to that, Faust argues that the stones themselves speak, that architecture, pottery, and kitchen scraps join Schniedewindâs evidence for the intentional creation of a new language to show ethnicity and centralized kingship combining to produce a new, Israelite nationhood in Iron Age Judea.

Note

[1]. Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983), 7.

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